

AEU NT Member Bulletin 5/2020

3 April 2020

Special bulletin – update #5 on COVID-19

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Latest update on COVID-19

The Full-Time Officers took part in meetings of the School Operations Advisory Group again this week. This group consists of the Chief Executive, the Deputy CE and other senior DoE officers, the Commissioner for Public Employment, a ministerial liaison officer, the AEU NT, NTPA and COGSO. The intention is to give key stakeholders such as our union greater involvement in school operations decisions until further notice. At the AEU NT's suggestion, this group will now meet weekly until further notice.

The main topics of discussion this week were the upcoming professional development days, arrangements for Term 2 and the new restrictions in remote communities. We provide more detail on these matters below. Last week, members from 86 sub-branches took part in online updates hosted by the FTOs. These have been invaluable for sharing the latest information and answering your questions, and we intend to continue with them in Term 2.

Thank you to all members who have asked questions, raised concerns and provided suggestions, whether individually, through your sub-branch or via regional videoconferencing meetings. All such queries are being responded to by our office and, where appropriate, directed to the Department or relevant authority.

Professional development days and Term 2

The focus of next week's professional development days is to plan at the local level based on your context what mode(s) of learning will be most appropriate for Term 2, whilst recognising that this will largely depend on the health advice as to whether it is safe for schools to remain open. The Department is planning based on three main scenarios, ranging from schools operating as normal through to a situation where schools are closed and all staff and students are at home. In the event of full or partial school closures, the expected mode of delivery will be influenced by factors such as stage of schooling, socio-economic issues – for example, how many students have computers and wi-fi at home?

All schools and students are being provided with resource packs based on their student cohort. Where technology and context allows, there may be provision for accessing resources in digital form, with [many resources now available online](#).

Schools may use the provided materials or use/develop their own materials and resources, or a combination of both. Clearly, managing teacher workload is an important issue in a mixed mode of delivery. Clearly in the current environment every effort must be made to reduce workload and stress, and the AEU NT will continue to emphasise this point.

Further discussions will need to take place on matters such as student assessment and reporting.

Remote community restrictions

We finally received some clarity this week on restrictions applying to members in remote communities. The NT Government has [published advice which includes an education-specific fact sheet](#). All members should read this carefully and apply for a permit immediately.

Under the new restrictions, remote school-based staff are considered essential workers and thus have an exemption on restrictions but each individual must apply for a permit and expectation is that travel out of restricted communities will only occur for genuinely essential purposes (e.g. accessing medical care). The exemption does not apply to your dependants.

Effectively, the current arrangements mean that remote staff must stay put for now. We know this is causing a lot of anxiety, particularly about obtaining food and other vital supplies. DoE is establishing a logistics team to work on supply chain issues with other agencies to ensure communities remain supplied with food and other essentials. The FTOs will continue to seek information on how this process will operate to ensure that members' basic needs are met.

In recognition of the loss of freedom of movement over school holidays and beyond, OCPE and DoE have commenced discussions with AEU NT regarding compensation for remote staff. The FTOs have put forward a number of proposals based on consultation with remote-based members of Executive – these include things like an additional monetary bonus, renewal of all contracts, offers of permanency and closing remote schools a week early at the end of the year.

We acknowledge that there are still many unanswered questions at this stage arising from these restrictions. We further recognise the current situation is extremely onerous and is not sustainable for any extended period. We will continue in discussions and negotiations with OCPE and DoE with the aim of bringing some relief as soon as possible. Further updates to follow.

Vulnerable worker provisions

The office continues to receive many queries from members regarding who is potentially eligible to work from home under the “vulnerable worker” provisions introduced across the public sector. OCPE have issued the following definition of vulnerable employees to HR practitioners and senior managers. Vulnerable employees include:

- staff with compromised immune systems (such as people who have cancer);
- staff with chronic medical conditions;
- staff who are pregnant;
- staff over the age of 60, particularly when combined with a chronic medical condition;
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff, particularly over the age of 50; and
- staff with vulnerable people living in their household.

The AEU NT offers the following practical advice to follow if you wish to progress a working from home request:

- 1) Seek specific medical advice about your health and COVID-19. Get something in writing.
- 2) Arrange to meet your line manager to develop a Personal Action Plan.
- 3) Options should include working from home, changing workplaces or establishing an isolated workstation within your workplace (noting that home is considered by the OCPE the place where you go after your normal working day).
- 4) The plan may take effect immediately or when there is a change in the health advice situation.

Be aware that OCPE have issued a set of proformas you will be asked to engage with. These can be found at <https://ocpe.nt.gov.au/working-from-home>.

We have had a few members seek assistance after their workplace managers have not effectively engaged in the above steps. These are being resolved with the Department.

School hygiene and cleaning

As of this week, additional funding is being provided for cleaning via grants to schools. This can support the employment of additional cleaning staff or extra hours for existing cleaners. That should be relatively straightforward in urban and regional settings, however utilising the grant might be quite difficult in many remote community schools.

The Department have issued a fact sheet giving practical advice on cleaning as well as a cleaning task list with performance standards. There is also an email address for queries and problems relating to supply of cleaning products and related WHS and hygiene issues: pandemic.doe@nt.gov.au.

The key message is that high touch surfaces are to be cleaned twice daily, once whilst school is open and once after school is closed. Additional protocols are being observed for special education environments, with additional grant loadings available.

Join the AEU

We ask members to be pro-active in encouraging all eligible non-members in your workplace to join the AEU NT – this includes not only classroom and senior teachers, but principals, trade trainers, counsellors, classroom support staff and school council employees involved in education provision. This will make our union even stronger. New members can sign up online by visiting <https://aeunt.org.au/membership/>.

Please let us know ASAP if your workplace, contact details or income have changed

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