

## How schools are scrubbing up

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With best-practice hygiene measures important during the Coronavirus pandemic, school cleaners at the very forefront of the battle against the spread of the virus in schools have secured significant guarantees from the NSW Government to maintain their vital work.

United Workers Union, the cleaners union, has welcomed the Government's increased funding to boost cleaning services in government buildings and schools during this critical time, by employing hundreds of new cleaners.

United Workers Union spokesperson Georgia Potter Butler said: "The crucial role of cleaners has finally been recognised and boosted in government buildings, schools, TAFEs and prisons across the state.

"Our clear message to the government after eight years of cuts to cleaning budgets under the Whole of Government cleaning contract is that this increase to the workforce needs to be permanent.

"At the beginning of this crisis the United Workers Union, teachers, parents and the school community called out for extra cleaning in schools because there is recognition that our cleaning workforce that had been cut and cut, over and over again, could not deliver clean enough schools."

As COVID-19 began to gain momentum in NSW in mid-March, Premier Gladys Berejiklian made numerous announcements relating to the operation of schools during the crisis, including making \$250 million available for an "enhanced cleaning" program in schools.

But the cleaners were left in the dark. In a statement on 19 March the United Workers Union called the package "too little too late" and that it "does not repair eight years of cost savings and cuts to cleaning hours by this Government".

At the time Ms Potter Butler said: "The NSW Government and cleaning contractors have not increased cleaning hours at schools, provided extra personal protective equipment (PPE) to cleaners, changed [cleaning] chemicals ... or provided the union with any information about what is happening during Coronavirus-related shutdowns."

It prompted Acting President of the Secondary Principals Council Craig Petersen to say: "Every principal was expecting extra cleaning but school cleaners have not been told anything at all, so there has been a serious communication breakdown somewhere."

Finally, pressure on the Government from the United Workers Union membership paid off, resulting in vital wins for 7000 cleaners in 2300 NSW schools announced on 23 March.



For the next three months, NSW school cleaners have been given guaranteed regular cleaning shifts and more hours for enhanced cleaning at each school, meaning an extra 25 per cent on top of their usual cleaning hours, paid at double time.

Before the government move, many teachers told Federation they had taken on the task of sanitising their setting, especially high school teachers who were cleaning surfaces between classes, and were buying hand sanitiser for the classroom. The product had previously not been allowed in schools because of its alcohol content and flammability.

The United Workers Union met with Federation during its campaign to seek commonality in its approach as teachers had been expressing concerns about sanitation during the crisis.

As part of the agreement, schools have been informed they will receive an enhanced daily clean, which focuses on hard surfaces that are regularly touched (i.e. hand rails, light switches, door handles) and ensuring desks, tables and chairs are wiped down every day using commercial 2-in-1 detergent/disinfectant.

Enhanced cleaning can be done during school time, or before or after normal shifts, or as required by the principal according to the school setting.

Cleaners at TAFE colleges will be able to work an extra 45 per cent of their normal hours but at their usual pay rate.

In both instances, regardless of whether the sites are operational, cleaners are to continue cleaning, as they would typically conduct during vacation breaks.

Ms Potter Butler said the union would be seeking the continuation of the working arrangements after the COVID-19 emergency is over.

“If an extra 25 per cent of cleaning hours is what it takes to keep our schools bug free then we will be arguing that this requirement should continue and become the norm,” she said.

“The funding announced by the Premier is an opportunity to right wrongs, fix up the cleaning of our schools and bring respect back to our school cleaners — not just as a band-aid solution during the Coronavirus but ongoing.

“It can’t be a temporary solution to a problem that has been a long time coming.”

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