

## Negotiating a crisis of pandemic proportions



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As schools returned at the beginning of this year, we wondered how so many of our teachers and public school and TAFE communities would ever recover from the summer they had just endured.

While many were still suffering through the effects of an extensive drought, the bushfires then ravaged NSW. This left hundreds of our teachers and communities grappling with loss, grief, heightened anxiety and exhaustion, coupled with anger at our politicians' failure again to heed the repeated warnings of a climate emergency. School and TAFE communities were, as always, front and centre of such devastation.

We had no idea what was coming.

As the school year commenced and the coronavirus began to take hold in China, teachers who had been travelling over the break began to feel the impact. They were directed onto special leave to ensure their contact with their school communities was minimised. Anxiety began to grow.



Within the first week of school, Federation members began to raise concerns about increasing levels of racism experienced in some schools, emanating from parents and students alike, predominantly against teachers and other students from Asian backgrounds.

Immediately, these matters were raised with the Department, asserting that school communities must be provided with strong advice and clear messages on how to address these situations in their communities and reminding schools of their policy obligations around anti-racism and the need to protect against prejudice.

The Department was quick to respond in this instance, communicating immediately with principals as well as Anti-Racism Contact Officers. Unfortunately, racism has continued as an underlying toxic theme throughout this crisis.

By Thursday 5 March, the first positive case in our public schools was reported, just the 25<sup>th</sup> person in NSW to have contracted the virus.

As we looked to the rest of the world, the predictions were dire. Federation immediately sought and commenced discussions with the Department, on the security of the short- and long-term livelihoods of our casual teacher members.

Federation negotiations resulted in guaranteed employment for casual teachers. This package has given

guaranteed employment to more than 6000 casual teachers per day, when cancellation rates for casuals were 500 per day in the last few weeks of term 1.

This was closely followed by intense negotiations to transition our public schools to an emergency mode of operations, placing our members' health, safety and industrial and professional rights at the centre of all we did.

Over the next fortnight, as cases in NSW rose exponentially, our members began to feel the strain of the pressure being placed on them by the expectations of state and federal governments, their employer, health authorities and the general public — all the while worrying about their own situations with their families, friends, colleagues and students like all other members of the community.

Federation turned its attention to the unfolding health and safety risks in schools — too many teachers and students on site, with unsatisfactory conditions at our schools exposed for all to see. Our principals and teachers experience this on a daily basis, with not enough basic supplies for decent hygiene and the issue of school cleaning — then, at just two minutes per classroom — laid bare the inadequacy and inequity of a privatised contract model.

This was just the beginning.

The Department did not come to Federation seeking advice on the concerns of our members. It was Federation's constant and direct representations to the Department's senior officials, such as the NSW Minister for Education and the Premier, that demanded matters our members were consistently raising be addressed and rectified at a systematic level.

There has been no section of our membership that was not represented, from the smallest of school communities and unique specialist settings, to our largest metropolitan high schools and everything in between.

From every individual case, to all categories of employment at central, state and national levels, Federation has put members' needs across health, safety and professional and industrial rights first. The students we teach have always been central to our deliberations and focus.

Paramount to the circumstances of this pandemic, for which there is no rule book, was to ensure that teachers have the resources, skills, support and conditions required to teach, and that students have the resources, infrastructure and support required to learn.

The following was delivered for our members as a result of the work conducted by Federation:

- the immediate implementation of flexible workplace arrangements for high-risk category teachers, including pregnant teachers, those over 65 and those living with people in a high-risk category
- the re-booking of casual teachers whose working days had been cancelled due to the postponement of colleagues' professional learning commitments and other activities
- a commitment from the Department to continue to employ casual teachers and enhance their employment opportunities
- the accommodation of changed leave patterns for permanent teachers, and the resulting increased employment for casuals and temporaries
- a commitment to honour current temporary engagements and extend, where possible, definitions around work to be undertaken and hours required during flexible workplace arrangements
- a transition to "emergency school operations", with rosters and minimal supervision to ensure social distancing
- the provision of personal protective equipment (PPE) to SSPs and support units
- a hold on current staffing levels, including temporary teachers, for Distance Education settings and Intensive English Centres until the end of term 2
- additional resources in schools to enhance cleaning
- case-managed casual and temporary teacher leave, including special leave, payments, entitlements and engagement matters
- interventions for swim-scheme teachers
- increased Employee Assistance Program services, to reduce waiting times for teachers
- extended "interim" approval for casual and temporary teachers, until January 2021
- securing payment of Saturday school casual and temporary teachers and executives

- risk assessments and changed operations for boarding schools
- interventions for our Education Training Units to facilitate smoother operations during this time
- individual negotiations on EPAC matters
- pauses on Improvement Programs
- a halt to any changes to current PDF processes in this new teaching and learning environment
- requirements for the use of technology when undertaking remote learning
- a focus on the workload of principals and teachers
- reductions in class sizes to take into account physical distancing.

Many of our members were at breaking point, and this journey had just begun.

Federation saturated the media, from the smallest of regional outlets to multiple national broadcasters, ensuring the voice and needs of the profession and public school principal and teacher members was heard in the debate, and that continuing pressure was placed on governments and politicians alike.

Federation continued to work with other public sector unions on work health and safety matters, with weekly and sometimes daily meetings with other AEU branches, daily and often hourly contact with deputy secretaries of the Department, the Secretary, the Minister, the Premier, Chief Medical Officers of NSW and, at a national level, with federal Education Minister Dan Tehan.

The situation continued to snowball as daily case numbers began to peak and our schools, principals, teachers and students were caught between extraordinary contradictions, political announcements and interference, media commentary, conflicting medical and scientific advice, community apprehension and, of course, the frequent requirement to pivot our modes of operation to meet the changing circumstances, all the while our schools remained open.

Over the next four-and-a-half weeks there would be 13 school communities affected by positive cases found within the school gates. The final case for term 1 forced the closure of the school for the last 2 days of the term, and forced some of our teachers and students into isolation.

During the term break — and I recognise what an oxymoron that is — principals and teachers were left gasping for air, trying to upskill themselves (in many cases to new and unfamiliar technology platforms), plan and prepare resources for their students for remote learning and reorganise their well-known operations in schools. This was all done while worrying about their students who had limited or no access to technology platforms, Year 12 students and the most vulnerable among their kids.

The term break was also littered with political announcements and media critique on how schools were to operate from term 2, and the opinions on whether schools were safe for kids (ignoring the role of teachers as adults), inequities for our students and the tried and tested teacher bashing — such an obvious strategy when politicians are feeling the heat.

It was never going to be pretty!

Public schools were told to design their own timetables to suit their local contexts and find solutions to the almost impossible problems put before them — classic Local Schools, Local Decisions devolution of responsibility.

Principals and many teachers sprang into action during the break, trying to reconcile bringing 25 per cent of their students back to face-to-face teaching per day, while accommodating siblings, focussing on the needs of Year 12 students, keeping their vulnerable teachers at home, continuing to deliver remote learning to the other 75 per cent of students, incorporating AHPPC guidelines on distancing and the implementation of smaller class sizes as well as a host of other measures around their schools.

Federation's strategy to shower our members with the acknowledgement, value and respect they deserved, and would need, the night before the commencement of term 2 culminated in the successful social media campaign #teachersrock. For so many principal and teacher members returning to Staff Development Day in term 2, the exhaustion had already taken hold.

It is not over yet.

As our public school principal and teacher members await the next announcement about further returns of

face-to-face teaching and what will now obviously be a great leap across previously slated but now unimplemented phases, we brace ourselves.

Federation has demanded from the beginning of this crisis that the Department must take back the central control of schools, the very antitheses of Local Schools, Local Decisions. This has been a successful strategy in many areas including the almost central daily communication and directions from the Department, numbering well over 40 pieces of advice with additional livestreams.

It has seen the Department take central responsibility for supporting schools and advice in the areas of curriculum, assessment and reporting, technology, professional learning, central hygiene and sanitation supplies, cleaning of schools, staffing decisions, funding of the casual teacher package and many other day-to-day operations, albeit with messages often contradictory and confusing. Forcing the system to respond as a system has been critical in trying to maximise stability and minimise conflict during this crisis. It will not be forgotten.

There will undoubtedly be further challenges as the rest of term 2 unfolds, many that Federation anticipates in the areas of ongoing health and safety, the monitoring and reviewing of workload impacts, fiscal pressure on school budgets, staffing and the heightened focus on the needs of our students. There will be others, emerging as they have day by day, as this pandemic affects all our members and the broader public school communities.

What is certain, however, and has not wavered during this unprecedented time, has been the professionalism and dedication of our members to their students, and the support of your union to fight for members' rights and our public education communities.

As this journey continues, so will the challenges we endure. We stand together, a strong collective, the voices of more than 61,000 public education teachers.