

COVID recovery: consult us, don't insult us

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No one wants kids back in the classroom more than teachers – except for their parents, of course – and such a return must be undertaken when it is safe to do so and in full consultation with the profession.

It has been a matter of contention and a mark of sheer disregard for teachers, that the NSW Government and Department of Education continue to make decisions and set agendas for schools during the pandemic without one iota of consultation with teachers or principals.

I made this clear in my evidence last month to the parliamentary inquiry into the NSW Government's management of the COVID-19 pandemic, management that has been, at best, inconsistent and, at worst, bloody minded.

As a profession, teachers have always said that, in the context of the pandemic, we will observe the expert health advice and we will always seek the consistent application of that advice across all settings in affected communities.

We have always said that what we will do, and how we will contribute, will be informed by the need to put the health and safety of our students, the teaching service and our families first.

To that end, I put on Hansard how shocked teachers were to learn through the media, on the evening of 27 July, of the Government's decision to announce what has now proven to be a clearly premature, ill-conceived return of year 12 on 16 August.

Through persistent representations by Federation, the Government backed down on that decision.

The ill-timed return defied logic, it certainly defied all the health advice, and it was made without any prior consultation with the profession.

For this Government, consider yourself “consulted” if a directive is handed down from on high an hour before the Premier's 11am COVID press conference.

Teachers were shocked and appalled because only a few days earlier the Premier had announced a “national emergency” against a backdrop of ever-increasing cases, and very disturbingly many of these cases were young people. At the time, 27 per cent of all infections were among people under the age of 19.

I also made it clear to the inquiry how disgusted teachers were at the comments by Education Minister Sarah Mitchell, who said: “I find it disappointing that organisations who should put the interests of students first are effectively lobbying for the HSC cohort in Greater Sydney to stay at home and missing out on the opportunity of face-to-face teaching.”



I put it on the record that such a statement offended us to the core. We became teachers because of our belief in the transformative power of education and what it means to each child, family and their communities.

I also strongly questioned the Department's decision to hire a consultant from KPMG to design a back-to-school road map for NSW.

It beggars belief that this approach was taken when the experience and expertise lies within; teachers might know a thing or two, or three, about how a school is run and the best way to manage such a return.

Our teachers and principals – not an HR consultant with military qualifications and no experience in schools – are in the best position to navigate the intricate operations, the complexities of running a school, and therefore how a return would be managed.

The Public Accountability Committee also asked Federation about the digital divide exposed by the pandemic. I said there are many assumptions made about remote learning; the assumption that students have access to multiple devices, internet access and that they have space in their home for remote teaching and learning.

Regrettably, that is not the lived experience of many students, some of whom do not even have a desk to work at in their homes. While many students have access to multiple devices and various platforms, a lot do not.

That is why in so many locations across NSW, teachers are photocopying reams of paper and stuffing envelopes to dispatch either through the post, deliver to a community centre or they are driving the streets delivering material for our kids.

That is the level of commitment by our teachers and principals, who are striving to provide some level of educational continuity for students for as long as this emergency requires.

There is no rulebook, there is no blueprint for a way out of this pandemic.

However, Federation has stated repeatedly that the union and our teachers have indicated a willingness to work constructively with the Government on the necessary roadmap for return, in one form or another, of our students when it is safe to do so.