

Unions back teacher job mandate in Victoria

Education

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Eve Findling, 12, has her vaccination at the Heidelberg Repatriation Hospital in Melbourne. PHOTO: EDDIE JIM

Unions have swung their support behind Victoria's teacher vaccine mandate, after the state announced a \$190 million ventilation and air-monitoring program, as well as mandatory vaccination for the state's 109,000 teachers.

Education Minister James Merlino announced the mandate as part of the program to get children back in classes in term four that will include buying 51,000 air purifiers from South Korean consumer electronics giant Samsung. These will be for public and low-fee independent schools and will be airfreighted to Australia.

The state is providing a further \$60 million in grants of up to \$25,000 for shade sails to enable more outdoor learning.

As part of a multi-layered "Swiss cheese model" to limit infection, Victoria is also trialling home rapid antigen testing ahead of expected approval by the Therapeutics Goods Authority.

"Keeping symptomatic kids out of class until tested and negative will be critical, regardless of vaccination status," Chief Health Officer Professor Brett Sutton said.

"This will be especially true in our hotspot areas of Metro Melbourne."

He said there had been an unbelievable uptake among children 12 and over, but that household members of students should also be vaccinated.

According to the Melbourne Institute, one in 10 cases of COVID-19 in Australia are found in children under the age of 10, and 47 per cent of adult cases have been linked to schools and childcare centres.

In its latest research report, the Melbourne Institute found significant hesitancy among women.

"Among the unvaccinated, more women than men, by approximately 13 percentage points, are unsure or not willing to receive the COVID-19 vaccine," the institute said.

"Nearly 24 per cent of women are vaccine hesitant."

The research also found that parents were 5 to 8 percentage points less likely to have been vaccinated than people without children.

The push to reopen schools came as Victoria recorded 628 cases, pushing up the seven-day growth average and leaving epidemiologists still unsure when the state's cases will peak. The Burnet Institute is forecasting an initial peak of 1960 in late October.

As expected, Victoria has joined NSW in requiring a vaccination mandate for teachers and support staff, after Professor Sutton advised vaccination will be made a requirement of work for staff in all government and non-government schools and early childhood centres.

"In order to work, all staff in schools and early childhood services will be required to have a first dose by 18 October . . . with full vaccination required by 29 November unless a medical exemption applies," Mr Merlino said.

All government school staff will be granted a half day of paid time off to get their vaccination.

The vaccination mandate is expected to precede a broader mandate for all frontline state public servants to be vaccinated.

The mandate is being supported by the main school teacher unions.

"The union's position continues to be that our members and the community should follow the public health advice in relation to COVID-19 safety measures, vaccination requirements and the safe return to on-site learning," Meredith Peace, the president of the state branch of the Australian Education Union, said on behalf of public school teacher members.

The Independent Education Union said it was highly likely that a mandatory vaccination directive by an employer would be upheld by the courts as lawful and reasonable.

"Our primary concern is the health, safety and wellbeing of our members and we have consistently advised them to follow the official health advice," said the general secretary for the union, Deb James.