

2022_01_24 QLD Schools

24 January 2022

Letter from CEO Steiner Education Australia to Queensland school communities

Dear Steiner school community

I am writing to you as term 1 is fast approaching, and for many parents there is great anticipation and nervousness regarding children returning to school at the beginning of February. This is also a time where Steiner schools continue to work tirelessly to ensure schools are covid safe for all. I would like to outline Steiner Education Australia activities to support schools during this time of uncertainty in schools particularly in light of the Qld Public Health Order which mandates vaccinations for all staff who work at a school and also concerns that parents may face in relation to student vaccinations.

Background

Steiner Education Australia (SEA) is the peak national body comprising 50 Member schools and 16 Associate Members across Australia. Steiner Education Australia supports, advocates, promotes and represents the free and healthy development of Steiner education in contemporary, diverse contexts. There are nearly 10,000 students in Steiner schools in all States and Territories of Australia. There are 5 Steiner schools in Queensland and at least two new Steiner schools which will be commencing during 2022.

Steiner Education Australia advocacy is directed towards protecting and strengthening Steiner education. We have successfully developed the only government recognised Steiner curriculum in the world; in a year when it becomes mandatory for schools to deliver NAPLAN via an online platform, SEA has successfully advocated for the continuation of NAPLAN paper testing for years 3 and 5 in Steiner schools for those parents who wish their children to participate in NAPLAN. This advocacy has supported the ongoing integrity of the Steiner curriculum.

Steiner Education Australia activities during covid

SEA supports public health and the national effort to tackle the spread of Covid 19. To date Steiner schools have been fully compliant with public health orders issued during this time.

Whilst we support efforts to manage Covid 19, we had concerns about mandatory vaccination particularly in terms of the significant impact it would have on staffing shortages in Steiner schools. SEA sent a letter to both NSW and Victorian Education Ministers asking for consideration of alternative methods to ensure the safety of Steiner schools.

Whilst we remain confident the NSW and Victorian Governments listened to our arguments, ultimately, they did not agree. Due to certainty of the same outcome in Queensland, we did not pursue the same course, instead continued our focus on supporting schools during these difficult times.

The Public Health Order which mandates vaccinations is a Queensland government mandate and not a rule made up by individual schools. Individual schools have no option but to comply. Failure to comply with a PHO is a criminal offence, involves significant financial penalties, could expose

individual schools to extended liability in the event of a COVID situation and invalidate school insurance policies and school registration.

There is a considerable burden on schools to implement the public health order. Many teachers and parents have their own views which range from supporting vaccinations, to objecting to the mandatory nature of this order, to strong opposition to vaccinations. School leadership teams and staff in Steiner schools are working tirelessly to find a way to reconcile the PHO, with which they must comply, with the diverse views within their school communities.

SEA has been supporting individual Steiner schools as well as supporting sessions where Queensland Steiner schools participate in ongoing dialogue and practical sharing. As a community of Steiner schools, the Queensland schools are strong, and supportive of each other.

How parents can support

Parents can support schools by understanding that schools must comply with mandatory vaccination orders. If parents remain concerned about mandatory vaccination for school staff, they can best support schools by voicing their concerns to local members of parliament and directly to the Department of Health. The Queensland Human Rights Commission also has information which may help:

<https://www.qhrc.qld.gov.au/your-rights/covid-19-and-human-rights>

While Steiner schools, like most schools, find the government response to covid, including mandatory vaccinations and mask wearing for staff in schools frustrating to navigate, the clear purpose and focus of the school is education and the care of students' growth and development. Similarly, the focus of SEA is on supporting schools. Our focus and the focus of schools does not involve entering into vaccination debates.

Many of our teachers, staff and parents will have their own views and they must rely on those to make their own choices. These views are personal and while respected, should not be interpreted as a change in each school's decision to comply with the laws of their state.

Schools will clearly communicate covid safe measures to their communities to ensure schools are safe when children return to school. Both SEA and ISQ continue to support schools in developing those measures.

Student vaccination

There is parent anxiety in some school communities that school student covid vaccination will become compulsory with some parents concerned that children will be vaccinated at school without parent consent. Firstly, there has been no talk or indication from government that student covid vaccination will become compulsory.

Secondly, the rumours and claims (mainly emanating from social media sites) that somehow children will be forcibly vaccinated at school without parent consent are completely false and baseless. If there was to be an immunisation clinic at a school for those parents wishing their children to be vaccinated, it requires the full agreement and participation of the school. If a school decides to run an immunisation clinic, parents need to be given detailed information and will be asked for their informed consent for their child to be vaccinated. As part of a school community which respects diversity it is ever more important to be mindful of speaking to students about rumours of forced vaccination, which creates anxiety when rumours are passed on to others.

Parents often choose Steiner schools for the strong sense of community and belonging. Throughout the Covid 19 pandemic, Steiner schools have stood out in their care for students and their families. We have many school stories during this period on our SEA website and I encourage parents to view these to appreciate the breadth and depth of our Steiner school movement. For example, <https://www.steinereducation.edu.au/latest-news/page/5>.

In times of challenge especially, it is the way we work together which is such an important part of the education itself. Steiner schools value the diversity within our communities and all schools are dedicated to ensuring the wellbeing and safety of all as they bring communities together in navigating a way through. It is wonderful to see Steiner school leaders and staff leading by example, maintaining equanimity, and supporting communities to rise above opinion and judgement in favour of care and respect for one another, notwithstanding the emotive issues.

SEA will continue to support schools in these endeavours as they stay focussed on their educational mission and work through the ever-changing requirements of our times.

Warm regards

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads 'Virginia Moller'.

Dr Virginia Moller
CEO