

'Superspreader' event

Move by Education Ministry a breach of protocol, says Singh

CAUTIONARY

The Fiji Teachers' Union (FTU) has repeatedly asked public authorities to enter discussions to ensure safe practices around student worksheets. And it has called on educators to get vaccinated against COVID-19.

In a letter to Education Ministry permanent secretary Dr. Anjeela Jokhan on Friday.

Mr Singh said the union had received numerous complaints from members in containment areas about the high probability of exposure to infection from the physical distribution of hard copies of

worksheets.

"The collection of hard copies by parents and students, and then returning the same to schools on a weekly basis will mass movement of thousands of parents and students," he said in the letter.

"We believe this is a direct breach of MoH (Ministry of Health) advice to

minimise movement.

"As Dr Fong (Health Ministry permanent secretary) and his team repeatedly emphasise 'if you move, the virus moves'," he added.

"Considering that the Central Division is widely and densely infested with the infection, this exercise could turn into another

'superspreader' if we fail to take necessary precaution."

Mr Singh also said the worksheet themselves could very well be conveyers of the virus.

He suggested that for schools in the containment areas online mode be used to disseminate worksheets and if there

were no other options then government agencies such as the National Disaster Management Office, police and Republic of Fiji Military Forces could assist.

Questions sent to Education Ministry permanent secretary Ms Jokhan on Friday and again yesterday on the issue remain unanswered.

Fiji: Education union raises concerns about threat to health of teachers and students

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The Fiji Teachers' Union (FTU) has repeatedly asked public authorities to enter discussions to ensure safe practices around student worksheets. And it has called on educators to get vaccinated against COVID-19.

The handling and movement of students' worksheets is causing concern among educators in Fiji. On 15 July, the FTU issued a statement outlining the increased COVID-19 risk to teachers as a vast majority of students require hard copies of the worksheets.

"The distribution, collection, and marking [of worksheets] means movement of a large number of parents and teachers," said FTU General Secretary Agni Deo Singh. "The worksheets are being handled by various persons before being returned to the teachers for marking. This mode will have to continue for several months, we believe."

Raising concern with no result

Earlier in July, Singh raised his concerns in an article published in the national daily newspaper, The Fiji Times. On 6 July, he wrote that the practice of schools organising for parents to pick up hard copies of worksheets was setting the stage for "a COVID-19 super spreader episode". He also reiterated this concern in a letter to the Education Ministry's Permanent Secretary, Dr. Anjeela Jokhan, on 2 July. No reply has been received to his letter so far.

Singh said the FTU had received numerous complaints from members in lockdown areas about the high probability of exposure to infection from the physical distribution of hard copies of worksheets.

“The collection of hard copies by parents and students, and then returning them to schools on a weekly basis, will induce a mass movement of thousands of parents and students,” he said in the letter.

The union also wrote to the Health Permanent Secretary, Dr. James Fong, seeking clarification and advice on how this process could be handled safely. A response has yet to be received.

The FTU’s request to the Education Ministry to seek aid from other Government agencies to assist in the distribution and collection of worksheets has not been considered, Singh highlighted.

He added that FTU fully supports the call made by the National Secretary of the Fiji Trade Union Congress to enter into social dialogue through the [Tripartite Mechanism](#).

Vaccination of teachers

While FTU is encouraging all its members to get vaccinated, it has denounced the fact that the Government “is blackmailing civil servants by suddenly stopping their pay for not having taken their first jab. This could have been handled in a much better manner if all stakeholders were engaged from the beginning.”

FTU sources have confirmed that 9,119 out of 13,200 teachers have received their first vaccination.

For Singh, “the extent to which the virus has spread leaves us no option. We urge those who are not vaccinated yet to do so.

“The bottom line is we must not risk our lives and those of our loved ones. And unfortunately, in this instance, it is also a bread-and-butter issue,” he noted.