

NSW govt promises heater timetable soon

Adam Bennett and Isabel Hayes

August 12, 2010

AAP

The NSW government has promised parents they will soon know when unflued heaters will be removed from the state's classrooms, after coming under fire for releasing a priority list of just 101 schools.

NSW Education Minister Verity Firth on Thursday announced that 101 state schools would have 2738 heaters replaced by next winter, at a cost of \$15 million.

While Ms Firth was just fulfilling a previous commitment targeting schools in the state's coldest areas, parents and the state opposition were angered to find the wider replacement program had not been finalised.

Ms Firth ran into trouble two weeks ago when she announced without cabinet approval that the state would remove all 55,000 unflued heaters in 2100 state schools.

An angry Premier Kristina Keneally gave the minister a fortnight to deliver a fully costed proposal to her colleagues - a process Ms Firth on Thursday said had yet to be determined.

Acting Premier Carmel Tebbutt stepped in to reassure parents concerned about the delay, saying a plan would be brought to cabinet "in the very near future".

"We've always made it clear that our priority is for students in the coldest climates because it is much more difficult for those schools to comply with the operating requirements," Ms Tebbutt said.

"The minister will bring forward a proposal to cabinet with the timeframe and I expect that will be coming in the very near future."

Community group Campaign Opposing Unflued Gas Heating (COUGH) accused the government of sitting on the announcement.

"Thousands of children living in very cold parts of the state may have their health compromised by the failure of the NSW government to remove unflued gas heaters from all schools," COUGH spokesman Richard Kalina said.

"Why is cabinet continuing to sit on announcing the timeline for a statewide removal?"

Parents would be disappointed only 101 of the state's 2100 public schools had been slated to have their unflued gas heaters removed, the opposition said.

"I don't think anybody could have believed they had a complete plan to take to cabinet, and that's proved to be exactly the case," opposition education spokesman Adrian Piccoli said.

"Kristina Keneally and the education minister promised they would have a plan to replace all of these unflued gas heaters.

"Clearly today's announcement of 101 schools is nowhere near the promise they made two weeks ago."

The 101 schools on the government's priority list are located in the colder climate areas such as the Southern Highlands, Central Highlands and Blue Mountains.

A Woolcock Institute report found in July that unflued heaters increased minor respiratory problems in some children, and recommended they be replaced.

<http://www.watoday.com.au/breaking-news-national/nsw-govt-promises-heater-timetable-soon-20100812-120sv.html>