Australian school system in chaos after coronavirus semi-closures

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State and territory governments across Australia have defied Prime Minister Scott Morrison's demand that schools remain open as usual, and instead announced partial closures through pupil-free days.

Chaos and confusion are widespread. The Victorian and Australian Capital Territory (ACT) governments first announced that they would move to limit the number of children going to school by having this week pupil-free ahead of the two-week Easter holiday. Exceptions were made, however, for those parents and caregivers who could not mind their children at home. Attendance has varied between schools, ranging from zero to dozens of students.

In New South Wales (NSW), Australia's most populous state and the worst affected by COVID-19, Liberal Premier Gladys Berejiklian announced Monday that schools would remain open but parents should not send their children if that was possible. Very low numbers of students reportedly attended Sydney schools this week, though in parts of regional NSW, nearly 60 percent attendance rates were reported.

In the last two days, the governments of Queensland, Western Australia (WA), South Australia (SA), Tasmania, and the Northern Territory have issued similar announcements. In WA and SA pupil-free days will not begin to April 3, meaning teachers will continue to work under unsafe conditions for the next week. Some state governments have announced that the second term of the academic year will resume with on-line classes.

In every area, there is no consistent communication or practice. Several state governments have declared that schools will remain available for "essential workers"—defining this as health, other emergency, and grocery store workers—while Morrison earlier declared that everyone with a job was an "essential worker."

Private schools are being left to make their own decisions. Due to privatisation measures promoted by successive Labor and Liberal governments over decades, Australia has one of the highest rates of non-public school attendance among the advanced capitalist countries. Forty percent of high school students now attend private schools.

The Catholic system has followed the lead of the public system with pupil-free days, while many wealthy independent schools closed their doors two weeks ago.

The private schools will demand even more public funding as a result of the crisis. The Association of Independent Schools in NSW told the *Australian Financial Review* this week that "COVID-19 coming on top of the bushfires has hit parents' ability to pay [tuition fees]."

Nearly 100,000 teachers and support staff work in private schools. Their jobs will be threatened if significant numbers of students shift back into the already overloaded public school system.

The state and territory government half-measures in the schools follow growing demands by epidemiologists and medical professionals for a suspension of the education system, as part of a wider lockdown to contain the coronavirus.

Professor Raina MacIntyre, head of the University of New South Wales' Biosecurity Program and a member of the federal government's coronavirus expert advisory panel, told 2GB Radio: "I think it's risky to be keeping schools open. I don't understand why there was so much reluctance to close the schools."

MacIntyre explained that at least 80 percent of people had to remain in their homes in order for a lockdown "to have any impact on the epidemic curve, and if you don't, it's just going to keep increasing." She added that "it's pretty much unachievable with keeping schools open."

Morrison's insistence that schools remain open reflected economic, not health, considerations. The prime minister is willing to risk the lives of hundreds of

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thousands of people in order to protect the ability of the corporations to extract profits from the workforce.

The entire political establishment has nothing but callous contempt for the wellbeing of the working class. This finds sharp expression in the situation confronting teachers and school staff. After weeks of being told to carry on as normal, working in schools lacking basic sanitation supplies and in overcrowded classrooms in which it was impossible to maintain the "social distancing" measures being applied everywhere else, many teachers and other school workers are still being asked to report to work.

Workloads have been ramped up with preparations for on-line learning. Many teachers are being asked to spend considerable time outside regular working hours learning new technologies and uploading planning documents and other resources.

The rushed shift to on-line learning has potentially wide-ranging consequences that teachers have been given no time to consider and discuss.

Edu-businesses are poised to reap enormous profits. Their services are for the most part very pedagogically narrow, often featuring worksheet and flashcard-type activities, and multiple choice quizzes.

The on-line learning technologies have not been developed on the basis of progressive pedagogies, promoting inquiry learning that builds on children's knowledge and engagement in the world, together with authentic literacy and numeracy experiences. What is being pushed, instead, follows the regressive and authoritarian forms of teaching that have been promoted alongside NAPLAN standardised testing.

Many working-class children will struggle to access the new internet-based resources. David Spriggs of not-for-profit social enterprise group Infoxchange told ABC News that there are more than 2.5 million Australian who do not have a home connection to the internet. "And beyond that there is a much bigger group who don't have the digital skills to interact effectively online," he added.

There are already discussions in some independent schools that online learning will require less staff. Classes could be combined and teachers would be required to take on extra online classes of colleagues who are absent.

The Australian Education Union and other state teacher unions have done nothing to protect the safety of their members.

In defiance of growing teachers' demands for a rapid closure of schools, the unions have refused to call for the suspension of the school term. The AEU bureaucracy instead collaborated with Morrison in keeping the schools open, maintaining that the only issues it wanted to "negotiate" was supplies of toilet paper and cleaning materials, as well as "working from home" options for school staff that were elderly, pregnant or immune compromised.

AEU Federal President Correna Haythorpe met with Morrison on Wednesday. The prime minister afterwards heaped praise on the unions. "We are working with the national education union," he explained. "We will be having further discussions with them to work through these issues. I thank them for their cooperation today and the very good spirit that they and many other unions around the country are working together with us."

Ordinary teachers have responded with fury to the unions' collaboration with the government.

The Committee for Public Education issued a statement on March 18 demanding the closure of the schools and the formation of Action Committees of school staff, developing the widest democratic discussion on the necessary measures to protect the health and wellbeing of education workers and students.

The CFPE reiterates this call, following the partial suspension of school provisions, recognising that the defence of teachers' interests, and of the public education system as a whole, requires the development of new forms of organisation, independent of the unions.

We urge teachers and education workers to contact us:

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