

South Australian teacher speaks out against governments keeping schools open

Sue Phillips
3 April 2020

Across Australia, teachers have been demanding the closure of schools, passing resolutions, initiating petitions and threatening strikes and walk-outs because of the worsening COVID-19 pandemic.

The teacher trade unions have refused to take any action. Instead they are working closely with the federal, state and territory governments to keep schools open as much as possible despite the clear dangers to education workers, students and parents of infections spreading in classrooms and school playgrounds.

Last week, the state Liberal Party government in South Australia (SA) announced that schools would continue to remain open. From April 6 to 9, schools would be “pupil-free” leading into the end of the term break. This was supposed to allow time for teaching staff to prepare online learning.

On Monday, the state government announced the closure of all schools, early childhood facilities and out-of-school services in the Barossa Valley, a key tourist and wine-producing region in SA. The decision was made after a cluster of 34 coronavirus cases was identified in the region.

Earlier, Cedar College, a private Christian school in the northern suburbs of Adelaide, the state capital, announced its closure in a letter to parents on Saturday. The principal described the move as a “precautionary measure” after a family member of a non-teaching employee tested positive to COVID-19.

On March 16, a meeting of over 40 staff was held at an Adelaide secondary school. They passed a resolution that described the appalling and inadequate conditions at the school, and called for a series of measures to protect staff and students, including immediate action to close schools.

Sue Phillips, national convenor of the Committee for Public Education (CFPE), interviewed a long-standing teacher at the school. Concerned about victimisation, the teacher will be known as Julie in this interview.

Sue Phillips: Can you tell me about the situation in your school?

Julie: We had an email two weeks ago telling us that we needed to clean our classrooms when we got to school on Monday morning with our students because there wouldn't be any cleaning over the weekend. Driving to work that day the state premier was on the radio, saying the lack of hand sanitiser situation had been resolved and was to be delivered to staff and all students that day. I finally received one tiny sanitiser last Friday, not bigger than a pen. This was for my entire class!

SP: What is the discussion among teachers?

Julie: Teachers are very stressed by not knowing what's going on. They're trying to reassure students and keep them calm. Teachers have their own families with children. They're trying to balance: When do I take my own child out of school? Who's going to look after my child if I stay at school? People who live with or care for vulnerable people or older parents are really stressed as the numbers of COVID-19 cases are increasing.

Students are being pulled out of school by their families, and there is an increasing demand to deliver online learning. We can't deliver a program for learning in the classroom and online learning. We're just one person! We can only do one job at a time. Our school has made it clear to parents that if they choose to remove their child from school, that's fine, but they can't expect the teacher to deliver an online learning program because they're still employed to teach in the classroom.

SP: The federal Liberal-National government continues to insist that schools should remain open. What do you think about that?

Julie: I think that is a decision made by people who have absolutely no idea about what happens in a school, and have no desire to listen to those who do. They don't give us the resources, the capacity, to do it safely. And we are at the point where student and staff safety is being compromised by keeping schools open in the current manner.

SP: Prime Minister Scott Morrison told a press conference that parents should keep their children at school because this would “save lives.” What do you think about that?

Julie: I can't believe he can say that. Every time he opens his mouth and talks about schools, he completely contradicts the reasons he gives for why schools should stay open. It's like he imagines that when students and staff walk into a school they're in this little disinfected bubble. He either thinks we are completely stupid and that we're buying it, or he is stupid. The public is getting really sick of hearing this garbage.

The World Health Organisation says that the way to control this is to test, test, test. The reality is that there is a shortage of the product needed to test. In that case, then isolate people as much as possible. You can't be saying, we can't test people, we are going to ration tests, but schools are perfectly safe. We have no idea which person in the school could be carrying the virus. And governments overwhelmingly tell us that young people are really great at having the virus, but not having symptoms, and then passing it on.

SP: Are you fearful for your student's health and yours?

Julie: Yes. I regularly send children home who are unwell. I'm not concerned for my own wellbeing but it's the people I could give it to. I've got vulnerable people in my household.

I stopped at the shops on the way home the other night. I was standing in the line, people were just chatting, and talking about the impact this was having on their employment. They all looked at me, and I said: "I'm a teacher." They all took two steps backward. One of the women said: "Oh, sorry. That wasn't very nice was it?" You could tell, the general public thinks that teachers sit in a viral incubator: The same for nurses, doctors and other health professionals.

SP: Can you comment on the Morrison government providing bailouts to business but at the same time giving nothing for schools and only minimal funding for the health services?

Julie: I've gone through the cycle of anger, and I'm almost in despair now. I just think: Yep, \$100,000 if you keep employing staff in a small business but no hand sanitisers for the schools. Or, we're still going to make you have 27 students in your class, and oh, sorry about the social distancing thing, but you'll be right. However, we're going to close Bondi Beach because too many people are on it. And we're going to talk to the country as if we are all little children, and we've been very naughty and had gatherings. But go on teachers, keep working.

SP: The Morrison government is following governments internationally. Donald Trump, Boris Johnson and Emmanuel Macron are all providing massive corporate bailouts. What do you think?

Julie: It means governments that have been elected are totally invested in capitalism. They believe the only way we can maintain our society is through economic means. It has to be a make-money situation for humanity to survive. The governments think if some people have to be sacrificed for that purpose, it's for the good of the greater community. Well it's not for the good of the hundreds of thousands of kids and staff who go to school every day and millions of others everywhere.

SP: The union branch at your school passed a resolution describing the impact on students and staff, and calling for a series of actions.

Julie: Yes, I thought we shouldn't be mucking around negotiating better cleaning arrangements. We need to be saying it is time to close the schools. Correna Haythorpe, federal president of the Australian Education Union, has just put a new thing on the union's Facebook page, saying to the federal and state governments, you need to be clear and consistent and you need to give clear guidelines. My comment was: "No, we need to stop asking the governments what they are going to do for us, and start telling them what they have to do for us."

The union talks about health and safety. That's a really easy thing for them to talk loudly about, when they really don't have any jurisdiction over health and safety. They are just sitting there, waiting for the government to tell them what they're going to do.

I think I've had a misguided belief that I could rely on my union.

SP: What do you think of the CFPE statement calling for the formation of workplace action committees, democratic organisations independent of employers, governments and unions?

Julie: Yes, I agree but it's hard because people are scared. They

don't know what to do and how to act. I am hopeful that in the end—when this is all finished—there will be enough anger left over and people will say: We need to do things differently. We can't find ourselves in this position again. We know what needs to be done. We can't allow ourselves to be dictated to by chief executives and politicians who have never been teachers, who have probably never been in public schools but tell us how it should be done.

We need to listen out for like-minded people and encourage them to be more assertive and outspoken about their beliefs and to form a collective with those people. People are looking for alternatives.

My father was a teenager during the Second World War. He grew up in the Netherlands, so they were pretty hard hit. And he said the feeling he senses now in the community is exactly the same as he had around him at the start of World War II. No one knows the answer, everyone is looking for someone to blame. Everyone is trying to work out how it got this bad so quickly and why didn't we notice this? This was the pervasive feeling then and now.

This Sunday, April 5, at 12 p.m. Australian Eastern Standard Time, the Committee for Public Education is holding an online meeting entitled, "The COVID-19 pandemic: The political issues confronting educators."

The CFPE urges teachers, school staff, academics, kindergarten and childcare workers, and students to attend and discuss the dangerous conditions they confront and the policies required to defend the health and well-being of all.

To participate, download the GoTo Meeting app now, then on the day of the meeting click here.

Alternatively, you can participate by calling +61 2 9087 3604, you will need the access code:368-799-509.

Teachers and education workers can contact the CFPE via email or via our Facebook page. The CFPE Twitter account is @CFPE_Australia.



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