

New Zealand school at centre of escalating COVID-19 outbreak

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In New Zealand, as of April 6, there were 1,106 confirmed and probable cases of the COVID-19 virus, with the number of cases rising every day.

Announcing a four-week lockdown on March 26, Prime Minister Ardern warned: “If community transmission takes off in New Zealand the number of cases will double every five days. If that happens unchecked, our health system will be inundated, and tens of thousands New Zealanders will die.”

In fact, the lockdown, particularly the closure of schools, should have happened much sooner. It was only announced after significant pressure from nurses, healthcare workers, teachers and other workers, including two widely supported petitions circulated by doctors.

The largest cluster of COVID-19 cases being tracked is at an Auckland girls’ school, Marist College, in the suburb of Mount Albert. The Catholic school now has 72 confirmed cases, having escalated from 47 over recent days. The entire school of 750 students plus staff and parents has been classed as “close contacts.” The *New Zealand Herald* described the college’s experience as a “nightmare.”

On April 2, several primary school children from the nearby Marist School were reported to have tested positive for COVID-19, likely from contact with family members at the college. There have been unsubstantiated warnings of an “explosion” of cases among students from Lynfield College and Mt Albert Grammar who share the same school buses as Marist students.

In the face of warnings by the World Health Organisation that all countries should carry out mass testing of anyone who may have been exposed to the virus, the response of NZ’s Labour Party-led government was slow and inadequate. Initially, only

two laboratories were supplying 500 tests per week. The tests were rationed with priority given to people with “severe” symptoms and returning from overseas.

Despite the government’s own COVID-19 alert system requiring early “intensive testing” there have been reports of symptomatic individuals being denied tests. Only on March 31, a week into the lockdown and with over 700 confirmed cases, the government finally broadened testing criteria. There are now over 3,000 being conducted per day. Just under 40,000 tests have so far been done in a country with a population of five million.

The outbreak at Marist College emerged under these conditions. There were two possible sources of infection. The first was a teacher who fell ill in mid-March and took sick leave. Despite exhibiting COVID-19 symptoms she was unable to access a test without a doctor’s referral because she had neither been overseas nor had contact with anyone recently returned.

The teacher was swabbed on March 19 and three days later the school informed parents, initially by text message, of the positive test and declared the school would be closed—but only for three days.

By March 24, there were three confirmed cases of COVID-19 at the school, with all staff and students considered “close contacts.” Principal Raechelle Taulu told the *Herald* the most likely point of transmission was the staffroom, which was a “very small space” with a “lot of people”. By March 25, a day before the nationwide lockdown, there were five cases, including the principal.

The Marist teacher had also recently attended a conference for Catholic schools in the Auckland Central region. Officials determined that the teacher was not infectious while at the conference. However,

they have been unable to discover where the teacher had picked up her infection.

The second case involved a parent, Muliaga Brown, who has a daughter at the college. He told the media from hospital on April 1 that despite being severely ill for a week, he was twice denied testing over a four-day period because he didn't meet the criteria. Brown had begun feeling ill the week after he hosted an evening event at the college, which went ahead the day after the teacher was tested and was known by the school's management to be at risk.

On his attempts to access a test, Brown told the *Herald*: "I had fever, body aches, could barely get out of bed—I knew something was not right. I even mentioned my daughter went to Marist, but was again told I didn't meet the criteria." Despite subsequently self-isolating, Brown could have already been carrying the infection when he attended the function, and passed it on while he was asymptomatic.

The college continued to operate as normal throughout this period. A cultural night was held on March 14 and a parent and family meeting on March 18. The next day, the government banned gatherings of more than 100 people at indoor events, but this did not apply to schools, universities or other educational institutes.

The government kept schools open, despite mounting evidence of the dangers. Logan Park High School in Dunedin was closed for three days from March 18, after a pupil tested positive, along with his father who had been overseas. The Ministry of Health advised the school it could reopen as long as "close contacts" of the student self-isolated.

The teacher unions demanded the schools remain open, until the imminent lockdown finally forced the issue. In a YouTube video on March 19, Post Primary Teachers Association (PPTA) Vice-President Melanie Webber absurdly declared, "schools are safe places." She echoed the government's self-serving argument that closures would cause "widespread disruption to the community."

In a PPTA members' Facebook group another union official denounced calls for a strike as "alarmist language." The unions' position prompted angry comments including: "Where is the union on this? Not representing their members that's for sure... Are we all expendable?"

Two days before the national lockdown was announced, the Teachers Council—the state-backed body that oversees teacher registration and performance—issued an open letter calling for all schools and early childhood centres to be shut forthwith. Labour's Education Minister Chris Hipkins responded that there was "no need to change course."

The teacher unions again fell into line with the Ardern government and denounced the call. Liam Rutherford, president of the NZ Educational Institute, said the primary union supported the Ministry of Education's plan to close schools "only when cases of coronavirus were found." PPTA President Jack Boyle said while provision should be made for teachers to teach online from home, schools must remain "open for instruction."

Sections of business and the political establishment are already clamoring for the lockdown to be ended, forcing working people to risk their lives and health to defend the capitalist economy. Taking its cue from US President Trump, the *Sunday Star Times* demanded to know on its April 5 front page: "When will this end, and could the solution be worse than the disease?"

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