

Australian government demands staged reopening of the school system

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The Australian government is pressing for schools across the country to reopen, as part of a wider move to lift social distancing and other restrictions put in place for the coronavirus pandemic.

Federal Education Minister Dan Tehan last week sent a letter to organisations representing private schools, threatening to cut their funding if they fail to re-open and provide some in-person classroom learning. Tehan cited his powers under the Australian Education Act to impose conditions on schools' funding when he believes them to be "in the public interest."

A condition of the public funding of the private school system, Tehan insisted, was that from the commencement of term two, private schools were to "provide a physical classroom environment for the children of parents who choose to access it."

Over the last four decades, successive Liberal and Labor governments have poured vast sums of public money into private schools, including the most elite, where annual tuition fees per student are more than \$40,000. As a result, Australia has one of the most unequal school systems among the advanced capitalist countries, with more than 40 percent of secondary students attending private schools.

Several of these schools unilaterally shut their doors during the early stages of the coronavirus pandemic, while public schools continued to function as usual, with no additional protections put in place to ensure the safety of school staff and students.

From the first outbreak of COVID-19 infections in Australia, the Liberal-National government of Prime Minister Scott Morrison insisted that schools remain open. This was initially justified on the pretext that children would be safer in schools than moving through the community. The real agenda, however, was to ensure there was minimal disruption to corporate operations. Open schools are seen as an essential aspect of

maintaining the workforce in place, delivering continuing profits for business.

The government is now pressing the state governments, which are responsible for running the different public-school systems in the country, to return to normal operations.

This is despite the fact that the coronavirus pandemic is yet to be defeated, and no public schools are equipped with proper personal protective equipment (PPE), thermometers and COVID-19 testing facilities. The ruling elite's indifference to the safety of educators and other school workers is on display across the country.

In Victoria, Australia's second most populous state, the state Labor government has directed schools to reopen for term two this week, despite Premier Daniel Andrews on Sunday extending the coronavirus state of emergency until May 11. The Labor government has insisted that students who can remain at home must do so, with public school teachers expected to provide online learning provisions.

Under the Victorian education department's "Transition to Flexible and Remote Learning" memo circulated to teachers and endorsed by the Australian Education Union, principals have been directed to "consult with staff to identify those willing and able to work on-site, either on an ongoing or rostered basis." Where on-site learning is provided, "hand sanitiser will be available at the entry points to classrooms" and physical distancing implemented "where feasible," with a class size ratio of 1 teacher to 10 students.

Teacher guidelines are to "avoid sharing office space," use "hygiene supplies and practice good hand washing and cough-sneeze hygiene," keep windows open, and practice physical distancing.

In addition, school bus services in rural and regional centres are to continue for students attending schools, including the continuation of the Students with

Disabilities Transport Program. Bus operators are to ensure “high touch surfaces are regularly disinfected.”

These are all grossly inadequate measures to ensure school staff safety. To the extent that any schools are required to remain open to allow health, emergency, and other essential workers with children to continue working, the sites should function as high-risk, mass testing zones. Proper PPE ought to be provided. All children and staff should have their temperature taken multiple times a day, with immediate coronavirus tests available. Instead of this, however, in Victoria and across Australia, it is largely being left to individual teachers to work out their own safety precautions.

In the Northern Territory (NT), Chief Minister Michael Gunner announced on April 8 that the territory’s schools would “open as normal” in term two, which is scheduled to commence on 20 April. Education Minister Selena Uibo insisted that attendance was compulsory, though parents and caregivers will have the option of educating their children from home.

The NT population is especially vulnerable with about 30 percent of its inhabitants indigenous. Tens of thousands of Aborigines suffer horrendous poverty and are unable to access decent housing, education, transport, safe drinking water and other basic social needs. Fifty percent of adult Aboriginal Australians suffer from major chronic diseases, and one in eight live in overcrowded housing. An outbreak of the virus would devastate Aboriginal communities.

Other states and territories have also announced preparations for online learning provisions for term two, with all or some schools remaining open for children of parents who have to work and for vulnerable children. The second term commences on April 20 in Queensland, April 27 in New South Wales and South Australia, April 28 in Western Australia, Tasmania, and Australian Capital Territory.

The Australian Education Union (AEU) and other state teacher unions have done nothing to protect the safety of their members. The focus of the unions is on collaborating with the federal and state governments, and on ensuring that widespread teacher hostility to unsafe working conditions does not erupt.

To the extent that the teacher unions have any concerns about what is happening, it is that governments are not working closely enough with them. In the Northern Territory, for example, the AEU bureaucracy complained that the government was “failing to consult” with it. In Victoria, the AEU have fully endorsed the state

government’s totally inadequate measures for on-site learning insisting that teachers must carefully read the department’s provisions with educators expected to sign off on them in every school.

In New South Wales, Australia’s most populous state, NSW Teachers Federation President Angelo Gavrielatos broadcast his cooperation. “We need a staggered return to work,” he said. “Teachers are awaiting advice on lifting restrictions.” Gavrielatos outlined his suggestion that face-to-face teaching start with Year 12 and Kindergarten, with other years phased in over subsequent weeks.

Gavrielatos added that there needed to be an “orderly transition” for schools. The union chief means a return to business as usual without any opposition emerging from teachers and education workers, who remain alarmed and outraged over the demands for a return to work when no serious measures have been put in place to ensure their safety.

Teacher opposition continues to develop, with widespread discussion continuing online via social media platforms. There have been calls to resign from the unions, and organise walkouts or other industrial action. The most conscious opposition has been organised by the Committee for Public Education’s (CFPE), which organised a successful online meeting on April 5.

As schools return in term two, the CFPE again calls for the establishment of Action Committees in schools and working-class communities. These need to develop the widest discussion among school staff and other workers, including cleaners, bus drivers and health workers, on the necessary measures to develop a scientifically- and medically-based long term plan for the education system, with the guiding principle being that human life takes priority over corporate profit.

Teachers and education workers can contact the CFPE via email at cfpe.aus@gmail.com or via our Facebook page: www.facebook.com/commforpubliceducation

The CFPE Twitter account is https://twitter.com/CFPE_Australia



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