

Australian schools reopening as spearhead of “back to work” campaign

Sue Phillips, Oscar Grenfell
29 April 2020

A meeting of the “national cabinet,” composed of the federal government and state and territory leaders, last Friday intensified a campaign to bully educators to return to face-to-face teaching in overcrowded schools, despite the health dangers posed by the coronavirus pandemic.

Reversing previous government policy, Prime Minister Scott Morrison declared it was not “appropriate or required” for teachers and pupils to follow social distancing guidelines. These state that individuals must stay 1.5 metres from one another and there must be at least four square metres per person during indoor gatherings.

Morrison’s assertion, for which there is no reliable evidence, has been endorsed by state and territory premiers and chief ministers across the country, Labor and Liberal-National alike. All view the full reopening of the schools as the necessary precondition for herding workers back into workplaces, to ensure the resumed flow of corporate profits.

The Australian Broadcasting Corporation’s “Q&A” program on Monday night showcased the cynical tactics being used in this campaign. Federal Education Minister Dan Tehan, the country’s deputy chief medical officer Nick Coatsworth and New South Wales (NSW) education department chief Mark Scott insisted that fears over safety in the schools were irrational.

They repeated government talking points about the impact of lockdown measures on children’s education, in a bid to emotionally blackmail teachers. The speakers pointed to the difficulties impoverished children have engaging in online learning, without mentioning that the pro-business policies of all governments have created the social crisis in working class areas.

Coatsworth claimed that research showed there was little risk of COVID-19 outbreaks in schools. When a questioner noted that one of the largest clusters in New Zealand had been at Auckland’s Marist College, where as many as 90 students and teachers were infected, the medical official professed ignorance.

In other words, the “evidence” is selected and tailored to justify a predetermined political agenda. This was underscored by Coatsworth and Tehan’s promotion of a NSW Health study, recently presented to the federal government.

Conducted under the auspices of the National Centre for Immunisation Research and Surveillance, the study purportedly investigated 18 cases of COVID-19 found across 15 NSW schools between mid-March and early-April.

Aside from the fact that it has not been peer reviewed, the report is based on a highly dubious methodology. It claims that the 18

cases did not result in substantial transmission.

For much of the period covered by the study, however, NSW schools had either partially or completely halted face-to-face teaching. Many parents had removed their children from schools even before the NSW government’s tardy announcement in late March that only the children of essential workers, and those regarded as vulnerable, should be in physical attendance.

Writing in the *Australian*, Peter Van Onsolen estimates that “somewhere between a third and a quarter of all students weren’t attending the schools under investigation.” In other words, the research “proves” that coronavirus outbreaks are unlikely when many students are not at school!

To the extent that students and teachers were physically present, they were instructed to practise social distancing. The research, however, is being used to justify the abolition of all social distancing requirements.

The authorities are playing Russian Roulette with the health and lives of students and teachers, many of whom are in age groups most susceptible to falling gravely ill after a COVID-19 infection.

There is no evidence that children and young people are not at risk from the virus. A day after the “Q&A” episode, Britain’s National Health Service issued a warning that a new condition in children could be related to COVID-19. It came after at least eight children were hospitalised with severe inflammations. Some tested positive for the coronavirus.

Despite this, governments are seeking to steamroll all opposition. This morning, federal minister Tehan announced that independent and Catholic schools will be eligible for an additional \$3.3 billion of government funding. In an act of economic blackmail, the package is tied to the schools meeting a strict timeline of being completely open for face-to-face teaching by the end of May or early June.

After widespread concern among teachers and parents, a number of private schools closed prior to any government directives, and some have threatened to remain shut for the foreseeable future. Because of the vast inequities in the school system and extensive government funding to private schools, they are far better equipped to provide online teaching than their public counterparts.

The transparent purpose of Tehan’s announcement is to ensure all the parents of private school students are able to return to work, in line with the premature reopening of large sections of retail, industry and business.

State and territory governments are already forcing teachers back

into classrooms with the crucial assistance of the trade unions.

Last week, **Northern Territory** schools went back, with Labor Party Chief Minister Michael Gunner insisting that school attendance is compulsory for almost all students.

The move has provoked substantial opposition. More than 50 percent of 1,000 territory teachers recently surveyed said they had no faith in the territory government to consider their health, and over 60 percent said they felt unsafe.

The Australian Education Union (AEU) merely complained that the government had not consulted it.

In **Queensland**, schools reopened last week, with most students and teachers working from home and on-site teaching available for children of essential workers. On the first day back, 1.8 million students attempted to log onto the Department of Education's online learning portal, causing it to crash within the first half hour.

The state Labor government has begun lifting lockdown measures and said it will "reassess" school arrangements on May 15. Government ministers have hinted that they will seek to soon enforce face-to-face teaching via a "staged" resumption.

Western Australian schools returned this week, with Labor Premier Mark McGowan touting a "soft opening" involving in-person attendance by year 11 and 12 pupils. He reiterated the federal government's lies, declaring that the risk of transmission in schools is "very low."

WA educators are faced with a mounting workload. In addition to the demands of face-to-face teaching and preparing online learning, teachers are expected to provide materials for students who cannot access the internet.

Fearing teacher walkouts, the State School Teachers Union of Western Australia (SSTUWA) bought a full-page advertisement in the *West Australian* newspaper, appealing to parents to keep their students at home. The SSTUWA, like its counterparts across the country, has sought to stymie any unified struggle by teachers against the government's measures.

Last week, the Liberal government in **South Australia** revised its stance on the COVID-19 threat. Just days before the end of the holiday break, Education Minister Rick Persse issued a letter stating that schools and pre-schools were low-risk environments.

These assurances provoked widespread anger. In early April, an AEU survey of 1,400 teachers revealed the appalling conditions in the state's schools. Seventy-one percent reported that students were not social distancing, 53 percent said their school's daily cleaning regime was insufficient and 46 percent did not have access to sanitising products.

Tasmanian schools returned this week, with the state government encouraging students to learn from home, but with schools open for the children of essential workers. Schools in the North West Region will be shut until at least May 4 due to a major COVID-19 outbreak.

The Australian Capital Territory government opened schools, with most teaching taking place via remote learning.

New South Wales schools resumed today after two pupil-free days. NSW has the highest number of deaths and positive cases of COVID-19. The Liberal-National government is proposing a "staggered return" throughout term 2, to be completed by the start of term 3. On May 11, all students will be required to attend school

one day a week.

A Department of Education statement on April 21 demonstrates that the NSW government is anticipating coronavirus outbreaks. It asserts that the staged resumption will allow for the rapid identification of "new spikes in transmission if they occur."

Like all the unions, the NSW Teachers Federation has fully cooperated with the governments, offering advice for what its president, Angelo Gavrielatos, described several weeks ago as an "orderly transition to the re-opening of schools."

Gavrielatos and the state government had a minor falling out, after the government rejected his proposal for classroom teaching to be initially limited to year 12 and kindergarten students. The Teachers Federation's sole concern is containing the opposition of teachers.

Victoria, the second largest populous state, was the first to reopen on April 14, after the term break. For now, the majority of teachers and students have been encouraged to work from home. On site learning is available for students of essential workers and students described as vulnerable. Only a small minority of students have returned to schools, with small numbers of volunteer staff on site.

The AEU's Victorian branch has endorsed the state Labor government's totally inadequate measures for on-site learning. A recent union up-date, titled "Your union is working for you during the COVID-19 pandemic," praised the work of teachers on-site and sought to justify the increasing workload.

Premier Daniel Andrews's government plans to end its "state of emergency" on May 11, paving the way for an expansion of classroom teaching.

Since the pandemic erupted, the Committee for Public Education (CFPE) has fought to mobilise teachers, parents and students against the stepped-up attacks on educators. It has called for the formation of Action Committees at all schools, to coordinate an industrial and political struggle against the premature re-openings and in defence of the health, safety and social rights of all teachers.

We encourage educators to contact the CFPE by email at cfpe.aus@gmail.com or on our Facebook page: www.facebook.com/commforpubliceducation/. The CFPE Twitter account is https://twitter.com/CFPE_Australia.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact