

# West Australian principal stood down for warning of coronavirus dangers in schools

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A West Australian principal was stood down by the state's education department before the scheduled resumption of classes on April 29, after informing parents that her school was not prepared for a mass influx of students amid the ongoing coronavirus pandemic.

The disciplinary action, overseen by the state Labor government, is a warning of the repressive measures being taken to force teachers and students back to schools, despite concerns over health and safety. Governments across the country, and the corporate elite, view the reopening of schools as the essential precondition to herding workers back onto the job, as COVID-19 continues to circulate.

Bronwyn White is the principal of Halls Head secondary college near Mandurah, south of Perth. She had written a four-page letter to parents, outlining a detailed three-week plan to gradually reintegrate students to "ensure a safe learning environment for all."

White pointed to the dangers of a full return to classes at the beginning of the term, noting: "We cannot adequately apply physical distancing and safety requirements if we have the entire College community recommencing Week 1. We simply do not have the physical space required with 1,450 students."

The principal reported a "short supply" of "critical cleaning products," with an order placed by the school not likely to arrive in time.

White said face-to-face teaching would be available from week one for all children of essential workers. Year 11 and 12 students would be encouraged to attend in week two and three, after the school had arranged extra spaces to allow for social distancing. Years 7–10 would continue online learning until week three, when all measures would be reassessed.

The education department's immediate response was to take disciplinary action, standing White down, appointing an acting replacement and ordering an investigation. White was instructed to write a letter apologising for the previous correspondence and retracting her statements.

The bullying coincided with an escalation of the national drive to reopen schools. This is why, despite the relatively tepid character of White's proposals, the state government immediately jumped on her.

A week earlier, the "national cabinet" of the federal Liberal-National Coalition government and the state and territory government leaders reversed its previous policy and declared that social distancing measures in schools were no longer "required or appropriate."

WA Labor Premier Mark McGowan dropped earlier calls for a "soft opening" of schools, demanding a hasty reintroduction of face-to-face teaching.

White's letter articulated broad opposition among teachers, school officials and parents. Thousands came to her defence, signing an online petition titled "Reinstate Ms Bronwyn White to her position at Halls Head Community College" on change.org. There are currently more than 4,200 comments voicing support for the principal.

One states: "[S]he called for the sensible thing to be done. No one should have to risk fatal illness just so you can say you were the first to have schools back in classrooms. People's lives are far more important than you or your state's reputation."

Another supporter wrote: "She's absolutely done the right thing in expressing her concerns for lack of supplies and appropriate distancing concerns to actually help keep the students and teachers safe. She cannot be reprimanded for her very valid safety concerns! Right speech, which is her duty of care, should be

validated!!”

By contrast, the State Schools Teachers Union of West Australia (SSTUWA) has said virtually nothing. Its president Pat Byrne said the union would “provide advice” to White. In other words, it accepts the entire framework of the disciplinary proceedings and will seek to demobilise the widespread support for the victimised principal.

This is of a piece with the role of the education trade unions throughout the country in collaborating with governments to ensure the reopening of the schools.

At the end of term one, parents in WA withdrew children from schools en masse, fearing that schools lacked the resources to protect their children. Absenteeism at some schools reportedly averaged about 73 percent. Teachers, aware of inadequate resources and lack of safety, threatened walkouts.

One teacher, interviewed anonymously in the *West Australian*, explained: “I walked away today because we are being socially irresponsible allowing that large groups of people come together and then disperse into the greater community. This is a recipe for disaster. Many children are asymptomatic carriers of this disease, which means that they can easily infect others without knowing that they even have this disease.”

Despite the McGowan government announcing a fund of just \$43 million to supposedly enhance safety and cleaning regimes in schools during the holiday break, teachers continued to express opposition on social media and in daily newspapers.

In a bid to contain this opposition, the SSTUWA bought a full-page advertisement in the *West Australian*, days before schools were scheduled to resume, appealing to parents to keep students at home. This was a desperate attempt to defuse anger among teachers over the union’s refusal to mount any struggle, and to shift responsibility for the school reopenings onto individual parents, instead of the state Labor government.

In an indication of ongoing opposition, a third of teachers who responded to a union survey this week said they did not feel safe at school. Attendance rates are reportedly around 60 percent.

Despite this, McGowan’s government, with the assistance of the unions, is pressing ahead. It announced a population study, testing students and staff in just 80 schools for COVID-19. In other words,

teacher and students will be used as guinea pigs to alert the government to spikes of the virus.

McGowan continues to claim that schools are safe. These assertions are not backed by any evidence. They are contradicted by a large cluster at a school in Auckland, New Zealand and recent research from France indicating that mass transmission is possible among pupils in schools.

The disciplinary action against White is a warning of the draconian measures that inevitably accompany this dangerous agenda. The logic of the government attacks on educators was spelt out by Andrew Laming, a federal government MP. He claimed without any proof that some principals were seeking to bully essential workers into keeping their children at home, and called for the police to be involved in such supposed cases.

Teachers must carefully examine the experiences through which they are passing. They demonstrate that the defence of White, and the struggle for a safe working environment, requires a political fight against the Labor and Coalition governments and the unions.

The positive response from parents and teachers to White’s honest, principled and thoughtful stand demonstrates that there is a basis for mass independent action by educators and the general school community.

The Committee for Public Education (CFPE) calls on teachers to take the next step by organising Action Committees at each school to coordinate a genuine industrial and political offensive against the dangerous school reopenings and to ensure the health and safety of all educators, students and the working people as a whole.

*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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