

Australian governments reopen schools despite studies warning of COVID-19 danger

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The federal Liberal-National government launched a revealing public attack on the Victorian state Labor government last Sunday for allegedly not moving fast enough to reopen public schools.

Federal Education Minister Dan Tehan told the Australian Broadcasting Corporation's "Insiders" television program on Sunday morning that Victorian Premier Daniel Andrews had taken a "sledgehammer" to the state's schools and was guilty of a "failure of leadership" on reopening schools.

Within hours, Tehan issued a statement retracting his accusations, claiming that personal "frustration" had "led me to overstep the mark in questioning Premier Andrews' leadership on this matter." Clearly, however, Tehan would not have made his original remarks unless they were part of a calculated operation by Prime Minister Scott Morrison's government.

Just days earlier, the Morrison government had ramped-up the pressure for a return to full classroom teaching by trying to bribe private schools with early payments of \$3.3 billion in funding, but only if they got at least half their students physically back in class within a month.

Both the funding "offer" and the Tehan interview on "Insiders" represent an escalation of a drive on behalf of big business, which is demanding that students return to classrooms so that their parents can be returned to workplaces. This is an increasingly naked offensive, intent on restoring the generation of profits, regardless of the danger of a second COVID-19 wave of infection.

Andrews was the nominal victim of the vehement attack—for not yet setting a deadline for pushing teachers and students back into classrooms in Victoria. But the real target is the resistance of teachers and parents, and working-class people more broadly, to being pushed back into unsafe workplace conditions for the benefit of the corporate elite.

Confronted by widespread social media outrage over his

comments, Tehan may have felt compelled to withdraw them for now, but the federal government is continuing to demand the full reopening of classrooms nationally.

Unnamed "senior federal government sources" yesterday told the *Age* and *Sydney Morning Herald* they had no problem with Tehan's criticisms of the Victorian government but said his personal attack on Andrews went too far. They said the incident would not stop Morrison from continuing to "encourage" Victoria to reopen its schools.

In reality, the state Labor government is already trying to impose that outcome on teachers, with the support of the Australian Education Union. Andrews plans to end the "state of emergency" on May 11, paving the way for an expansion of classroom teaching.

An hour after Tehan's remarks, the concerns of teachers and parents were vindicated. Victorian Health Minister Jenny Mikakos revealed a Melbourne primary school had been closed after a teacher tested positive to COVID-19. She said Meadowglen Primary School in the northern suburb of Epping would be shut down for cleaning for three days.

Yesterday, the Liberal-National state government in neighbouring New South Wales (NSW) was likewise forced to temporarily close a primary school at Warragamba in Sydney's western suburbs after a seven-year-old boy had tested positive for the virus over the weekend.

"This is likely to occur more as schools go back," NSW Premier Gladys Berejiklian said. Nonetheless, she reiterated that students across the state would begin to return to school from next week.

These school outbreaks were part of a wider spike over the weekend, including another 19 cases linked to a Melbourne meat-processing plant, bringing that cluster's total to 34, and a 15th death at a Sydney aged care facility, taking the national death toll to 97.

Despite these dangers, governments, both Liberal-National and Labor, are suppressing opposition by teachers and parents who rightly remained concerned that a premature return to classroom teaching could trigger new COVID-19 outbreaks.

Labor governments are helping lead the charge to reopen classrooms. Labor governments in Western Australia (WA) and the Northern Territory tried last week to get all students back into classrooms, together with South Australia's Liberal government. Yesterday, Queensland's Labor government announced that students would be called back to classes from next week.

Purporting to act on medical advice, the "national cabinet" of federal, state and territory governments last week suddenly reversed its previous requirement for social distancing measures to be adhered inside schools.

But the claim that children are not high COVID-19 transmitters flies in the face of studies recently published in France and Germany. They show that children are just as likely as adults to contract the disease and that they can transmit the virus to others, making schools possible hotspots for further coronavirus clusters.

A Pasteur Institute study of a high school inside a large cluster in the Oise region of France involved 661 participants including pupils, teachers, cleaning staff, parents and siblings. It found an infection attack rate of 25.9 percent; 40.9 percent in pupils and teachers; and 10.9 percent for parents and siblings. This was far higher than the 3 percent positive antibody presence in the region.

The German study, which was published as a preprint that has not yet been peer reviewed, screened nearly 60,000 patients for COVID-19, of whom nearly 4,000 tested positive. When the team compared the viral load across age groups, they found similar levels throughout, ranging from one to 10 years to 91 to 100 years.

The authors concluded that because asymptomatic children are not coughing they would be less infectious, but that this may be offset by the close physical contact between school students. They stated: "Based on these results, we have to caution against an unlimited re-opening of schools and kindergartens in the present situation. Children may be as infectious as adults."

To justify their push, Australia's governments cited a much smaller NSW study, not peer-reviewed, that had obvious statistical deficiencies. It looked at just 19 COVID-19 cases across 15 schools, all occurring while students were advised to stay home and distancing was in place. It also covered part of the mid-term school holidays.

On the basis of misleading information, teachers, parents and students are being made guinea pigs for a potential disaster. They are being pressured back into classrooms, even without elementary protections such as social distancing, temperature checks, hand sanitizer and face masks.

In WA, where the state Labor government last week suspended a school principal for warning parents that her school was not safely prepared for an immediate return to classrooms, a State School Teachers Union survey of 2,000 teachers upon the return to school last week found 18 percent did not have adequate hand sanitiser in their classrooms.

Meanwhile, the risks were underscored when one of New Zealand's worst outbreaks—94 cases at Marist College, a Catholic girls' school in Auckland—worsened. A new case was linked to the cluster last week, despite a near five-week lockdown, forcing the abandonment of a plan to reopen the school this week. Staff and students have now been offered "vouchers" for COVID-19 tests.

The Committee for Public Education (CFPE) 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 and parents 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.



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