

“The idea of school and teaching right now fills me with anxiety, dread and stress... it usually fuels me with joy, excitement and happiness”

Australian teachers speak out about unsafe schools and excessive workloads

Sue Phillips
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Schools are re-opening across Australia following a relentless campaign by the Morrison government, including its extraordinary claims that social distancing in schools is not “required and inappropriate.”

Australian teachers’ unions, in collaboration with state and territory governments, Liberal-National and Labor alike, have endorsed the school re-openings and suggested various measures to ensure an “orderly transition.” Like the return-to-work agendas being pushed by governments around the world, this has nothing to do with the education and well-being of students. Its purpose is to impose a full resumption of all workplaces and corporate profit-making.

Teachers have voiced their anger about the government indifference to the health and safety of teachers and students and the lack of protective measures in schools. Teachers have signed petitions, threatened walkouts, resignations from the union, passed resolutions and taken to social media to voice their opposition. Yesterday a survey of 10,000 New South Wales (NSW) teachers revealed that fewer than one in four felt safe working at schools at the end of term one and 60 percent reported high levels of anxiety about returning to work.

The Committee for Public Education was sent the following comment from a South Australian (SA) teacher about the new working conditions at her school.

After being driven to exhaustion at the end of term one, producing online learning ready for week one this term, imagine our despair when we were advised on the Thursday before term two commenced that no, actually we will be going back to business as usual, fully open on day one!

School is safe! decreed the Prime Minister, who up until May 11 wasn’t sending his own children to school. Social distancing? Not necessary in school. You teach 17-year olds? Still ok! But no, of course they can’t stay at school after the bell as a group—that would be dangerous. Except of course unless it’s an official learning program run after hours, then it is safe.

Playground? Safe between 8.30 a.m. and 3.30 p.m. but not if used by the public outside of school hours. And outside of school hours not safe for anyone.

Can I see my grandchildren? No, absolutely not! Unless of course you happen to be their teacher, then yes, totally safe. But only between 8.30 a.m. and 3.30p.m and only on school grounds.

Can my daughter have a birthday party at home with 10 friends? Nope. But she can celebrate with her 25 friends at school. And they wonder why we’re confused, angry and reluctant to obey.

The Premier of SA, the Minister for Education and chief executive of the Department all got plenty of airplay encouraging parents to send their children to school on mass on Monday because schools are proven to be safe.

Meanwhile, they were hiding a report by our independent health and research facility SAHMRI (South Australian Health and Medical Research Institute) that says it’s way too early to make this claim. Apparently, the real scientists say there’s not enough data yet to make assertions about how safe schools are.

Week 1 was a nightmare. We didn’t know which students were coming on which days. We “babysat” large groups of students (no social distancing here) while they attempted to complete the online learning tasks. We asked

the students to bring in the hard-copy work we sent home to them in the holidays but about a third of them hadn't received it yet. So, we printed it all again. Most of us gave up and tried to teach something meaningful and relevant utilising our expertise in face to face teaching skills. But!! We still had to guarantee online learning for the first two weeks because that's what we promised the families of SA. Never mind what school staff were promised.

Week 2 at our school saw a return to over 90 percent attendance. The Premier, the Minister and the Chief again used their airplay time to let everyone know it was all back to normal. No more online learning after week two unless your child has to stay away for some (?) reason.

Note the subtle shift—we didn't have to provide online learning to every absent student four weeks ago. But our school has other ideas. It likes the idea of providing face to face AND online learning simultaneously. We have a plan to implement about half of our curriculum in dual online and face to face modes by week 5.

When concerns were raised about workload, we were told to use the online lessons in our face to face classes. Seriously, have these people ever actually taught a class?

This reminded me about a friend's daughter who lives in the UK. Having only completed year 12 in Australia, she found herself working in a school (pre Covid-19) that has trouble finding teachers. Her job, with no qualifications in teaching or education at all, was to supervise a class of students who work through lessons that have been prepared by a teacher who is not actually present. Perhaps that's the way we are heading. After all, it would be much cheaper to have me write formulaic lessons for 100 students from my home and pay someone a lot less per hour to watch students complete them.

I wonder how long it will take the Edu-business companies to realise they can't afford to keep offering free online education platforms. That they'll wait until millions of students are entrenched in their platform, when thousands of teachers have uploaded complete units of curriculum and then they'll start charging schools to use their services.

Another angry teacher voiced her concerns about impossible new workloads on a primary-school teachers' Facebook page. Her comments have received over 100 replies and likes from other teachers and widely shared.

I lost it. Lost my passion, love, motivation, drive to teach. I am exhausted. I am burnt out. I can't even cry anymore, I am exhausted from crying, I have no more energy to spend on tears. The idea of school and teaching right now fills me with anxiety, dread and stress... it

usually fuels me with joy, excitement and happiness.

Surely, we can do better than this. Yes, I know a lot of it is due to COVID-19. But the reality is, when school goes back to normal, I worry I will still feel the same way, because many issues will still be there.

I am sick of spending so much of my home life working. Missing time with my own children while I'm tapping away on my laptop. Time I can never get back. I am very, very resentful for that fact. I would love a 9–5 job, where I can walk out of the door, go home and be a mum and wife, and not think about work until I walk back in the door the next day.

With Covid-19 I am supervising students learning at school for most of the day, even though they are doing online work, they still require active supervision, they are still learning how to use a computer. I am then coming home after school to start round 2, to check in and support my students who are learning online at home, because I literally don't have enough time in the school day to go through their learning. Then after checking home schooling, it's round 3, responding to emails, planning etc., feel like every waking minute of my life is consumed by teaching at the moment.

Every time I open the news there are negative comments about teachers... Staff morale is so low, so sad it just adds layers to the gloominess surrounding me. School is not a nice place to be. Am I alone in feeling like this? Should I just throw it all in?

I just wish teaching could feel the way it used to. Without all the red tape, compliance (tokenistic) paperwork and documentation, pressure, stress and not to mention the ever-increasing behavioural issues with students.

Teaching was once a well-respected profession, it was rewarding and we had freedom, flexibility and were trusted as professionals to do our job. We collected data too, to inform our teaching though, not to serve as a tool to rank performances and compete against other schools. Will it ever be like this again?

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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