

Australian governments fully reopen schools despite intense opposition

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23 May 2020

New South Wales (NSW) Liberal Party Premier Gladys Berejiklian this week suddenly directed all public school students in Australia's most populous state to return to the classroom full-time from next Monday, drastically accelerating a previous timeline of July.

To coerce parents, Berejiklian and her ministers declared that they must send their children back to their schools or they would be breaking the law, even though it would be "common" for classes to be temporarily "shut down" because of the ongoing coronavirus pandemic.

This edict places the state in the forefront of the drive by governments, so far led by Labor Party governments in Western Australia and the Northern Territory to reopen all schools so that parents can be pushed backed into unsafe workplaces as well, for the sake of corporate profit.

Berejiklian bluntly insisted that potentially deadly COVID-19 infections had to be accepted. "It will be common for schools to be shut down temporarily, for a specific area to be on high alert, for a particular school to take extra measures if there's a community breakout in that community with cases, and we just have to accept that," she said.

Ramping up the pressure for a return to full classroom teaching, the federal Liberal-National government last month tried to bribe private schools with early payments of \$3.3 billion in funding if they got at least half their students physically back in class within a month.

At the same time, the national cabinet of federal, state and territory leaders declared, in a reversal of previous government policy, that it was "not appropriate or required" for teachers and students to follow social-distancing guidelines.

Last month, the NSW government announced students would make a staggered return from May 11. Barely one week into the phased return, in which students were to attend one day a week, Berejiklian touted it as a "success" and claimed it demonstrated schools were ready for a full return.

"The health advice is very clear, a return to full-time face-to-face teaching is safe," Berejiklian claimed, ignoring all the global evidence to the contrary, including student deaths in the US. A recent French study found that coronavirus antibodies were eight times more prevalent within a local school, than in the broader area where a cluster occurred, and a German survey revealed that infection rates were similar across all age groups of the population, including children.

A very small, non-peer-reviewed study, often cited as proof of the safety of schools, was conducted in NSW schools when the majority of schools had drastically reduced student numbers or ended face-to-face teaching entirely. And one of the largest clusters in New Zealand has been at the Marist College of Auckland, where over 90 people have been infected.

The claims that schools are safe also fly in the face of emerging reports of a new COVID-19-linked inflammatory illness in children, described as similar to Kawasaki disease, in the US, the UK, France and Spain.

Berejiklian's announcement came as Australia reported its highest number of new COVID-19 cases in almost a month, a result of restrictions being lifted across the states and territories. Thirty cases were reported the previous Friday, including outbreaks at McDonald's restaurants and a meat-processing facility, which are still spreading.

The danger of sending up to a million children back full-time is compounded by the public transport crisis

in Sydney and across the state. In a bid to avoid COVID-19 outbreaks on public transport, as occurred in New York and London, social-distancing measures have been put in place, limiting trains and buses to less than 20 percent of their usual capacity.

NSW authorities have urged commuters to avoid the peak hours—an impossible request for most, including students. Students who do not travel on dedicated school buses—which will not have social-distancing measures and will therefore be packed—have been advised to walk to school or be dropped off by parents.

The absurdity of allowing 30 or more children in a classroom while only 12 people are allowed on a public bus has fueled the opposition of teachers and parents to the reopening of schools.

Commenting on social media, parent Valerie wrote: “COVID-19 has a two week incubation period. We’ve only just hit two weeks of children starting to attend one day a week. We have no idea how that one day a week has affected infection spread and you’re increasing to full-time. There is always a lag time. This isn’t looking at what’s best for students and teachers.”

Another, Deepthi, posted: “Cleaning the school premises? Our kids were not provided sanitiser, no social distancing can be maintained in washrooms. As of now they are carrying their own, some are too young to carry any.” Gwen wrote: “This is a nightmare. My daughter is asking why she’s allowed to maybe end up sick when I’ve kept her safe for the last few months.”

Josh added: “No families, teachers or principals have been consulted. Disgraceful. Disrespectful. Disgusting.” Erin wrote: “I’m angry over this. Where is the medical data showing the effects of phase 1? ... I feel for all teachers and support staff being thrust into this human experiment. This government makes me sick.”

A teacher commented: “Fantastic idea, let’s not wait until two weeks after easing restrictions to see what happens, just send all the kids back. If kids and teachers get sick, who cares? The economy is more important.”

Another commented: “Teachers last to be advised. No additional cleaning, no additional precautions for vulnerable teachers and students, no additional funding, continual curriculum interference from politicians and bureaucrats with zero qualifications, every increasing mindless audits and accreditation ... back to business as usual.”

Jasmine posted: “So what changed so dramatically overnight to make such a massive change to the plan? And to go from flexible, cautious, staged to making threats and demands?”

A survey carried out on over 10,000 NSW public school teachers over April and May had found fewer than one in four felt safe working at the school site and only 13 percent were happy to continue working in direct contact with children and colleagues. Common concerns were overcrowded classrooms and the lack of sanitation equipment.

The government has been able to proceed with its agenda only due to backing from the education unions. The NSW Teachers Federation (NSWTF), like its interstate counterparts, has worked to prevent the development of a unified struggle against the re-openings. NSWTF president Angelo Gavrielatos offered the government advice on an “orderly transition to the re-opening of schools,” without consulting the teachers the union falsely claims to represent.

Apart from a complaint that “learning about things through the media is downright disrespectful,” the NSWTF has voiced no opposition to the full reopening of schools and simply passed on state government directives to school staff.

This demonstrates the need for teachers to take matters into their own hands. Throughout the pandemic, the Committee for Public Education has called for the formation of Action Committees of teachers and parents at all schools, to coordinate an industrial and political struggle in defence of the health, safety and social rights of all educators.

We encourage those who agree with this perspective to contact the CFPE Facebook page or its Twitter account, [@CFPE_Australia](#), or email the SEP at sep@sep.org.au.



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