

Australian schools affected by new coronavirus clusters

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The reopening of schools in Australia's two most populous states, New South Wales (NSW) and Victoria, has coincided with multiple children testing positive for coronavirus. The infections have exposed state and federal government claims, both Labor and Liberal, that teachers, staff and children are safe to return to school amid the COVID-19 pandemic.

In NSW, with only a week's notice, the Liberal government of Premier Gladys Berejiklian ordered the full reopening of the schools on May 25. Just one day later, two schools in Sydney had to be closed, Moriah College and Waverley College, after students, one in Year 5 and another in Year 7, tested positive. The schools were closed for several days while they were cleaned. Children who had been in close proximity to the infected were advised to self isolate, and many families took their children to get tested. There was no identified spread of the virus from the two confirmed cases.

The two private schools are located very close together in Sydney's eastern suburbs, near Bondi beach, which emerged as one of the coronavirus hotspots at the peak of the initial wave of infections in late March. How the students were infected, and whether there was a connection between the two cases, remains unknown.

In what has emerged as a repeated pattern, the media initially reported the Sydney school infections but then quickly dropped coverage, with no follow up investigative reporting.

NSW Education Minister Sarah Mitchell insisted that despite the new infections, the government had "made the right call" in reopening schools. She added that there "will be occasions [when] we do have a positive case that affects a school community," declaring this was "something we're going to have to live with."

The same disregard for public health and safety has been demonstrated by the state Labor government in Victoria. On May 25, schools reopened for students in Years Prep-2 and 11-12, ahead of a full reopening next Tuesday. As in NSW, the rushed return to the classroom has triggered coronavirus infections.

In the working class Melbourne suburb of Keilor Downs, a cluster of at least 13 cases has resulted in the temporary closure of three schools.

Keilor Downs College closed last week after a student tested positive, reportedly through a known source. A teacher had earlier tested positive, though had reportedly been working from home and had not had physical contact with the school. St Albans Secondary College and Taylor Lakes Secondary College were also affected, with 80 students from the three public high schools told to self-isolate.

A younger relative of the infected student later also tested positive, resulting in the closure of Holy Eucharist Primary School in St Albans and the quarantining of a Year 2 class and the teacher. The young student had reportedly been asymptomatic before being tested, underscoring the likelihood of ongoing community transmission that is not being detected by the targeted testing system in place.

In a separate case reported yesterday, a kindergarten teacher from Macleod Preschool, in Melbourne's north-east, tested positive. The kindergarten was closed for "deep cleaning." Health officials reported that at least 12 children and 8 staff were considered close contacts of the infected teacher.

As in NSW, the state Labor government has insisted that school staff need to accept that continued outbreaks of infections are inevitable. Victorian Education Minister James Merlino declared last week: "There is no doubt, there will be outbreaks... we will deal with

them on a school-by-school basis.”

The rushed reopening of the schools in the midst of the pandemic is grossly irresponsible. Government assurances of school staff and child safety are outright lies. Scientists are still learning about the coronavirus, including how it affects children. It is well documented that COVID-19 disproportionately affects older people, but doctors internationally are only beginning to explore the painful and potentially fatal symptoms in a minority of cases that trigger what has been called paediatric inflammatory multi-system syndrome, resembling Kawasaki Disease.

Moreover, there are conflicting scientific studies concerning the question of whether the coronavirus is less transmissible through young children. Christian Drosten, virologist at Berlin’s Charite hospital, explained in late April that evidence indicated that “viral loads in the very young do not differ significantly from those of adults ... children may be as infectious as adults.” The study that Drosten led concluded: “Based on these results, we have to caution against an unlimited reopening of schools and kindergartens in the present situation.”

The rushed reopening of the schools in Australia has nothing to do with an objective, scientific evaluation of the real risks confronting teachers and school staff, students and families. Rather it forms the spearhead of the ruling elite’s drive to fully reopen the economy for big business and finance capital, eliminating social distancing and lockdown measures that impinged on the generation of profit. Prime Minister Scott Morrison, supported by the Labor Party through the national cabinet, has insisted that there will be no plan to eliminate coronavirus because it would be too costly.

The Australian Education Union and other teacher unions, including the NSW Teachers’ Federation, are complicit. The bureaucracies have endorsed the rushed reopening of the schools, playing a crucial role in suppressing teacher concerns and opposition by agreeing with and amplifying the official rationales for a return to face-to-face teaching.

Teachers are being given contradictory and impossible to implement advice. Morrison has repeatedly declared that social distancing is not necessary or advisable within schools, but at the same time, half of the federal government’s glossy poster for school teachers is devoted to advice on how to maintain

social distancing measures.

One of these states: “Maintain smaller classes.” As though class sizes are determined by teachers! No funding or other measures necessary to reduce class sizes have been put in place, such as strict class caps and the hiring of tens of thousands of additional teachers across the country.

Teachers and school staff cannot allow themselves and their students to be used as guinea pigs in a dangerous social experiment.

The Committee for Public Education (CFPE) published a statement on May 28 opposing the reopening of school systems in states and territories where there is community transmission of COVID-19—currently New South Wales (NSW) and Victoria—and calling for the formation of safety action committees to protect the safety and wellbeing of students and staff threatened by the coronavirus pandemic.

This remains an urgent requirement. All teachers and school staff looking to develop this discussion should contact the CFPE.

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