

Anger grows as Australian state Labor government sends teachers and senior students back to school in Melbourne

Patrick Kelly
14 July 2020

Despite the continued coronavirus resurgence across the state, the state Labor Party government in Victoria decreed on Sunday the return of teachers and senior students to schools after a holiday break, directly endangering their health.

The government announced only a limited resumption of remote learning from home for other school students in Melbourne. Far from protecting teachers, school staff and students, the announcement represents another half measure that will result in further preventable COVID-19 cases.

Year 11 and 12 students have been told to return to classrooms, as have Year 10 students doing senior subjects for the Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning (VCAL) or Victorian Certificate of Education (VCE). In addition, students in many of the state's 108 specialist schools—for children with additional needs such as autism and physical and intellectual disabilities—must return to classrooms.

Also able to return are students in mainstream schools who are deemed vulnerable or who have any kind of disability, including those who receive no additional funding or support. This applies to tens of thousands of children.

The government has said teachers must work from their schools, even when they deliver remote teaching. This contradicts the wider official lockdown recommendation that everyone who can work from home should do so.

Principals have the authority to allow certain teachers to work off-site, but the stated “default setting” is for all teachers to work from school. Among other significant implications, this will mean that teachers' children will join those compelled to attend their own

schools each day.

In addition to all these students, official guidelines state that children whose parents or caregivers cannot work from home should go to school. This applies not just for essential workers, for example in the hospitals and healthcare industry, but for workers in every sector. Throughout the pandemic, the priority for every level of government, Labor and Liberal-National, has been to ensure that big business can operate as closely to normal as possible, maintaining profits.

The sweeping return to school represents a threat to public safety. Previous official claims that schools are safe, and that children are less vulnerable to coronavirus infection and also less contagious, have been further exposed during the latest infection surge.

The largest single cluster in Melbourne is at Al-Taqwa College, in the working-class western suburb of Truganina, where 144 infections have been registered among teachers and students. The school is just one of dozens of high schools, primary schools, and kindergartens that have been closed temporarily in recent weeks after having confirmed coronavirus cases.

There are 127,000 Years 11 and 12 students in Victoria, with the large majority in Melbourne. As a result of the government's decision, about 100,000 young adults will be travelling through the city every morning and afternoon, some catching crowded trains, trams and buses, on which wearing masks has not been made compulsory. Their teachers are likewise being put in danger, especially the numerous teaching and school staff who have, or their family members have, related medical risk factors.

Teachers are permitted to wear masks in their classrooms, but are not being encouraged to do so and

are not being provided with this personal protective equipment. Speaking alongside Labor Premier Daniel Andrews last Sunday, Chief Health Officer Brett Sutton declared: “Teaching is pretty tough with a mask on, they require those facial expressions, they need to be heard clearly.”

Teachers in specialist schools have been made especially vulnerable. Some students with significant disabilities have difficulty with behavioural issues including spitting, and others need assistance going to the toilet. A petition urging the government to afford equal health rights for staff and students in specialist schools has more than 4,200 signatures.

Andrews provoked outrage among many teachers when he said that keeping these schools open was aimed at providing parents with “respite.” Teachers are not respite workers, yet are being forced to play this role as a result of chronic and ongoing funding shortages for children with disabilities. One teacher posted a video, asking the government: “Why are our rights, and the rights of these students to their health and safety, being put at risk? Why are they seen as less valuable than the rights of parents to have a break from their kids? Why are we seen as collateral damage for getting the economy going again?”

Anger is evident across the teaching profession. There has been no clear explanation from the government as to why it is demanding teachers work on site, rather than from home, as occurred during the first lockdown period, in late April and early May. It appears to serve firstly as a disciplinary mechanism—allowing principals to surveil staff more effectively than if they were working from home—and secondly to ensure there are enough teachers to cope with the large numbers of students exempt from the home study recommendation.

Teachers have expressed their opposition on social media. One wrote: “My school is in Keilor Downs [one of the worst affected suburbs] and was closed before the end of term 2 due to a child testing positive for COVID-19. We have a number of families in the school area testing positive. I do not live in Keilor Downs. Tell me why I have to go into work at a school that is in a ‘hot spot’ zone potentially putting myself and my family at risk?”

Another added: “If you can work from home, you must work from home, unless you’re a teacher! In that

case, sit in an office with five other people and do exactly the same thing you could do from home! Where’s the union? Do we have a union?”

The Australian Education Union (AEU) is, in fact, collaborating with the government’s push to open the schools. From the beginning of the pandemic, the bureaucracy has functioned as the government’s eager partner. The AEU has relayed every edict and worked to defuse teacher opposition.

Union officials played an important role in preparing for the announcement that teachers would have to endanger their safety by working from school, even when their students were learning from home. Last Thursday, after this measure had been proposed by the state’s Principals Association, AEU Victorian deputy president Justin Mullaly offered his endorsement. “If it can be done safely and reasonably I think there is a benefit to staff working together,” he told the *Age*.

Teachers need to organise independently to defend their safety and that of their students and families. The Committee for Public Education (CFPE) has urged educators and school staff to form safety action committees in every school, developing the widest discussion on the necessary measures that must be taken.

The CFPE has demanded that Melbourne’s school system be closed and a raft of related emergency measures implemented to support the wellbeing of all school staff, students and their families (see: “Organise teachers, parents and school staff committees to oppose reckless school reopening in Melbourne!”).

The CFPE encourages all teachers, school staff, and affected students and families to participate in our online public forum, being held this Saturday, July 18, at 4 p.m. (AEST). The details are available here.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact