

# Australian teachers and school staff condemn return to classrooms in Victoria

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Teachers and educators this week spoke to the Committee for Public Education (CFPE) about their concerns over the limited lockdown of the Australian state of Victoria, after a spike in COVID-19 transmissions in metropolitan Melbourne, the state capital.

This week in Melbourne, on the orders of the state Labor Party government, term 3 began. All teachers have been instructed to return to the schools, along with year 10, 11 and 12 pupils studying Victorian Certificate of Education (VCE) subjects and students at specialised schools, directly threatening their health and that of their families.

Students from years prep to year 10 are to return to remote learning after a 5-day extended term break, but official guidelines state that children whose parents or caregivers cannot work from home should go to school. All other schools across the state, in regional and rural areas, opened with face-to-face teaching.

The resumption, supported by the Australian Education Union (AEU) and other trade unions, is occurring in the face of widespread opposition from teachers, education support staff and parents.

Premier Daniel Andrews and his government have ordered the reopening despite infections forcing the temporary closure of more than 35 schools in recent weeks for “deep cleaning” and a still-growing cluster of confirmed infections at one school that is approaching 150 teachers, students and family members.

Teachers can face disciplinary action for speaking out, so their remarks are anonymous.

**A primary teacher in Melbourne:** “The conversations with teachers I am having is they do not want to go back onsite. There is no-one really fighting for teachers and students. It is awful. The union are just another group of minions to the government and department conglomerate.

“My sister-in law said to me the other day that prior to the holidays the education support staff at her school were

told that they had to view a webinar from the [Education] Department.

“There was a nurse on the webinar purporting that student-to-student levels of transmission was a fallacy and student-to-teacher transmission is ‘not going to happen.’ She said: ‘Schools are a safe place.’ She said we should feel ‘confident’ going into schools. That is scientific nonsense. I know that, after 38 years of teaching kids, whatever the kids have, I have caught and vice a versa. Putting that out there is like trying to brainwash people that schools are a safe place.

“This is the same message we got from the government and the premier. The reality and the data show the opposite. I am surprised that the number of schools with outbreaks is not publicised. Why isn’t the media not putting that out there?

“Meredith Peace, the president of the AEU, was on television the other night and she was toeing the ministry line that ‘schools will be safe, everything is in hand, we are prepared for what is coming.’ We teachers are the bunnies in the frontline...

“Even before this pandemic our schools were in a terrible state anyway with the lack of proper cleaning. We do have guidelines on health and safety but the physical resources are lacking. When they say there has been intense cleaning and we are getting ready for this next wave, I don’t believe any of that. I know what it looks like on the ground. There are not the dollars to make it work and we don’t have the cleaning personnel.

“I am glad we are in lockdown and we need to keep it on for a longer time now. Get everyone back remote learning and put a lid on it. Otherwise it will skyrocket. I applaud the families that keep their kids at home... It is all about the bottom line, the dollar. I feel this is like a world war we are facing; people are dying. Our priority should be lives, safety and health.”

**A secondary school education support staff member:**

“I’m concerned about the return to school as we don’t know if all students have been tested for coronavirus. We had a case at our school and we also have students living in areas where coronavirus is rife. Students don’t socially distance and we can’t encourage them to do that.

“This week students are expected to sit exams in overcrowded classes and there will be pressure on them to do what the school wants. Up until last week the AEU hasn’t sent us any information regarding the return to work situation. I haven’t seen any updates from our rep from our school either. We are expected to comply with whatever the government tells us to do, even though we are in a hot spot and our school and another close by had students who were infected with the virus.”

**A year 11/12 teacher:** “The fact is young people are just as likely to contract the coronavirus as anyone else. The students I teach are 17- to 18-year-olds. I’ve never understood how as a teacher it is OK to walk into a classroom full of older students, but if I walk supermarket or catch a tram, I should be wearing a mask...

“It’s so contradictory. Universities have gone remote, yet they say that teachers and students have to go back to school. The AEU has not looked at the hard facts of how coronavirus is caught. They know that students transmit and they are quite happy to see their members on the front line in dangerous conditions.”

**A secondary school teacher in neighbouring New South Wales:** “I’ve been speaking to teachers and parents in New South Wales about the numbers of schools closed in Victoria. It should be headline news. Teachers don’t know this. The union says nothing here! We have the right to be informed. We are risking our health and are like lambs to the slaughter.

“Every day we are told different ‘facts’ about the virus. Last week the ABC [Australian Broadcasting Corporation] reported that people’s sneezes can generate microscopic droplets which can circulate through air conditioning vents. We were told back on March the virus was not airborne. The surge in Melbourne apparently made that advice no longer tenable. Another ‘fact’ blown away is the claim schools are safe. In this pandemic those disseminating the news have less and less credibility.”

**Victorian primary teacher:** “I am really worried... There could potentially be lots of kids back next week... A huge number of teachers and a substantial number of students will be forced to move through the community and work in unsafe conditions. I feel like we are being used as glorified baby sitters. We are being told we need to provide ‘respite’ for families with children with

disabilities.

“The health chief officer has admitted that there has been transmission in schools, yet the government and the mainstream media are not telling us the actual numbers of closures. Families are being lulled back with a false sense of security...

“I am sick of the economy being put before lives. I was annoyed to hear Andrews say that staff will return next week, as it is better for our wellbeing. I was even more annoyed reading an article where a senior AEU executive, Justin Mullaly, was calling for staff to work on site without offering a choice or even an option for staff with exceptional circumstances. Nobody asked my opinion, no one is consulting with staff.”

“The WSWs and CFPE are the only groups to be actively campaigning for the safety of staff and students. I endorse their suggestion of forming safety committees in every school. It is up to us to fight for our right to a safe workplace. We need to demand that all students learn from home and that teachers teach from home. We proved that we can do it. It’s time to put safety first.”

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.

*The authors also recommend:*

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