

Dozens of Australian schools shut down after coronavirus outbreaks

Patrick Kelly
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Just one week after the state Labor government in Victoria reopened schools for the beginning of term three, dozens of campuses have been forced to close after teachers and students became infected with coronavirus.

According to a public list compiled by the Department of Education, 49 primary and secondary schools in Victoria have closed. Almost all of these are in Melbourne, Australia's coronavirus epicentre.

Teachers on social media have reported that other schools have been affected without being publicly identified, leaving the real tally unknown. According to the *Age*, since the initial phase of the pandemic in mid-March, 91 Victorian schools have closed after confirmed or suspected COVID-19 cases.

The worst affected remains Al-Taqwa College in the western working class suburb of Truganina, with 183 confirmed cases among staff and students.

Several schools have also shut down in Sydney, the latest being Georges River Grammar School in Georges Hall. One student tested positive, while another 18 students and 4 staff are identified as close contacts.

The situation is an indictment of state and federal governments, and the teacher unions, which agreed to the schools reopening and have worked to defuse escalating opposition and anger among school staff.

Schools in Victoria were reopened last Monday, amid record levels of daily coronavirus cases. Year 11 and 12 students are continuing as usual, together with Year 10 students doing senior subjects. This cohort alone totals more than 100,000 young people. Every morning and afternoon, many of these are catching public transport across the city.

At school there has been no reduction in class sizes, so between 20 and 30 young adults spend the day in a room together. Wearing a mask or face covering when

in public is now compulsory in Melbourne, but teachers have been advised not to wear one while teaching.

Students from Foundation to Year 10 have been asked to do remote learning from home, though there are many exemptions, including for children whose parents cannot work from home.

Teachers have been told that they are expected to work from school, even if all of their students are learning from home. Individual principals have the discretion to allow or refuse teacher requests to work from home. This includes those who have pre-existing medical conditions, are pregnant, approaching retirement age, or who are otherwise especially vulnerable to COVID-19. Those forced to attend school are sharing staff room spaces, bathrooms, and are also compelled to attend multiple staff meetings each week.

Workloads have escalated for many high school teachers, with some forced to prepare both classroom lessons for Year 11 and 12 students and also online sessions for younger students.

A chaotic situation has emerged where there are very different conditions enforced in neighbouring schools.

According to a July 21 report in the *Age*, at Melbourne High School, a selective-entry boys' school in South Yarra, health and safety representatives issued a cease-work order before the start of third term. This was on the basis that, "It would be an immediate threat to the health and safety of all staff if they were to comply with the direction to attend the workplace." After a meeting involving WorkSafe and the education department officials, the principal decided there would be classroom teaching for two days a week.

Specialist schools for children with significant disabilities also remain open. Teachers in these schools are especially vulnerable, with many of their students unable to understand and comply with social

distancing.

One teacher on social media wrote: “Many at the special school where I work have had to use their personal leave to go get tested for COVID19 because our students with special needs are sneezing and coughing all over us!”

Teachers, school staff, and students are having their health and safety recklessly endangered.

Previous claims that children were somehow immune to coronavirus, or at least significantly less susceptible, have been exposed by scientific research. While most children who contract COVID-19 suffer fewer extreme symptoms than older adults, a significant minority develop a potentially fatal condition called multisystem inflammatory syndrome in children (MIS-C).

In addition, a major research report issued earlier this month by a team with the Korea Centres for Disease Control and Prevention concluded that children and adolescents aged 10 and over were just as capable of infecting others as are adults.

The priority of state and federal governments is not public health, but the needs of big business. Keeping the schools open is regarded as a central aspect of the wider reopening of the economy and the continued provision of an exploitable workforce.

The teacher unions—the New South Wales Teachers Federation and the Australian Education Union—are playing a central role, collaborating with governments and education departments against teachers and school staff.

The AEU’s Victorian branch issued a statement on Friday that encouraged education department officials to adopt a “flexible approach” and “allow schools to make suitable arrangements ... includ[ing] remote learning on set days or for set students.”

The union’s Facebook page is filled with anxious and angry teacher comments—the bureaucracy’s only advice is for teachers to themselves develop a whole staff plan involving some working from home and then submit that for their principal to consider. In other words, teachers have been abandoned and kept isolated from one another.

Union officials previously supported making teachers work from school, with deputy president Justin Mullaly telling the *Age*: “I think there is a benefit to staff working together.”

In the event that teachers and school staff begin to die

from COVID-19 that is contracted in the schools, the union bureaucracy will have blood on its hands.

Teachers and school staff need to organise safety action committees, independently of the unions, developing the widest discussion on the necessary measures that must be taken.

The Committee for Public Education (CFPE) has spearheaded the campaign for the formation of these committees, and has called for the immediate suspension of the school system in areas where there is coronavirus community transmission.

This emergency step ought to be accompanied by a range of accompanying measures to support the financial, psychological, and educational needs of all school staff, students and their families.

The author also recommends:

Organise teachers, parents and school staff committees to oppose reckless school reopening in Melbourne!

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