

Australia: Rising number of COVID-19 infections in Sydney schools

Oscar Grenfell
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An increasing number of schools in New South Wales (NSW), Australia's most populous state, have been forced to temporarily close over the past several weeks, following the confirmation of coronavirus infections among students, educators and staff.

The school clusters are one expression of broader community transmission of the virus within NSW where daily cases have remained in the low double-digits for the past month, but could rapidly rise as they did last month in the neighbouring state of Victoria.

The infections point to the dangerous character of the pro-business lifting of COVID-19 restrictions that began in late April. This included the full reopening of schools—even though they are proven potential centres of the coronavirus—as part of a drive to force workers back to their places of employment to generate corporate profits.

According to media reports on the weekend, at least 17 NSW schools were temporarily shuttered over the previous three weeks, with the majority in Sydney, the state's capital.

The figure is continuing to rise. This morning, Parramatta Public School, in working class western Sydney, was closed after an infection was confirmed among its primary-aged students. The school's 1,000 pupils, along with all staff, have been instructed to self-isolate.

Further schools affected over the past week include Bonnyrigg Heights Public School, in another western suburb, and Our Lady of Mercy College, also in Parramatta. The latter will be closed for the next two weeks with all students returning to online learning because the source of the infection is unknown.

Other school closures are also linked to cases whose origin has yet to be determined. Tangara School for Girls in the northern Sydney suburb of Cherrybrook is the largest school cluster with at least 17 confirmed infections, including among students, teachers and staff.

Media commentary has focused on the possibility of extra-curricular activities at the Catholic college playing a role in the spread. Health authorities are investigating that possibility, but have not confirmed that a Bible and study retreat was a factor in the outbreak. School representatives have said that no camps have been held since March.

Despite this lack of evidence, NSW Premier Gladys Berejiklian has blamed out-of-school activities involving students and teachers. She said yesterday that events such as excursions pose a high risk of students "mingling."

This is a diversion. Social distancing and other basic safety measures have been discouraged inside schools and are actually impossible. Thousands of students are confined throughout the day in close quarters, along with teachers, some of whom are particularly vulnerable to COVID-19. Health authorities have been compelled to admit that older students are as likely to contract and transmit the virus as any other age group.

When the full resumption of face-to-face teaching was announced in May it provoked widespread opposition among parents and educators. Thousands signed a petition initiated by a western Sydney worker against students being used as "guinea pigs" for the broader reopening of the economy.

The reopening has been able to proceed only because of the enforcement role of the education unions, including the NSW Teachers Federation. They welcomed the return to classrooms, even offering to provide the state Liberal-National government with a "timeline" for a staged resumption of face-to-face teaching.

Pointing to the dangerous inadequacy of safety measures, the Independent Education Union, covering non-government schools, belatedly issued a call today for mandatory face mask wearing in all educational buildings.

The school clusters which have occurred in the north, west and southwest of Sydney as well as on the NSW south coast, point to the likelihood of wider transmission

of the virus than is being registered in the official figures.

Kristine Macartney, director of the National Centre for Immunisation Research and Surveillance, told the media: "Schools are probably acting as the tip of the iceberg." The outbreaks indicated "there is some community transmission now in NSW which is going undetected."

Other experts have called for the re-imposition of restrictions. Alexandra Martiniuk, an adjunct professor of epidemiology at the University of Sydney, told the *Guardian* the state government should consider the closure of all bars and restaurants until local transmission was contained.

Currently bars, restaurants and gyms are open throughout the state, with minimal safety measures. Large venues are allowed to have as many as 300 patrons on their premises at any time, while up to 10,000 spectators are permitted to attend football matches. This makes contact tracing extremely difficult.

Berejiklian has ruled out the reimposition of any lockdown measures regardless of the spread of the virus. Revealing the subordination of public health to the dictates of the corporate elite, she said last month that new restrictions would have a negative impact on "business confidence."

There are clear dangers that the pandemic will spiral out of control in NSW as it has in Victoria. In that state authorities resisted calls for lockdown measures for weeks as daily cases in the double-digits were reported throughout the latter half of June. As infections skyrocketed limited restrictions were put in place in Melbourne in early July, but schools and most workplaces remained open.

In the space of several weeks after the beginning of Term three last month, over 90 Victorian schools were forced to close as a result of coronavirus infections. Only when it imposed "Stage Four" restrictions on August 2 did the state Labor government shutter Melbourne classrooms and return students and teachers to online learning.

By that stage daily infections had soared to a record 725. Under the "Stage Four" measures Victorian cases are continuing to be between 300 and 400 most days. Hospitalisations have skyrocketed from fewer than 50 a month ago to more than 650.

The death rate is growing dramatically. Twenty-one fatalities were announced today, the highest daily figure yet, following 38 deaths over the previous two days. Almost 60 people have lost their lives in just three days. By contrast, Victoria recorded fewer than 20 deaths

during the first four months of the pandemic. The state's cumulative death toll now stands at 267.

The tragic losses are expected to mount with roughly 1,800 cases in aged-care facilities throughout the state. This morning, a shocking report in the *Australian* alleged that the Victorian Department of Health and Human Services has been refusing to admit many COVID-19 infected aged-care residents to hospital, leaving them at extreme risk of succumbing to the virus.

Instead, the sick residents, mostly elderly, have been left in under-staffed facilities as the coronavirus sweeps through them. Some have been heavily sedated in what is effectively palliative care.

The fact that victims of the pandemic are being left to die is the most graphic expression of the criminal response of the state and federal governments to the public health emergency. It demonstrates, once again, that the most basic social needs of the population, including to life itself, are incompatible with a society dominated by the profit interests of a corporate oligarchy.

The Committee for Public Education (CFPE), which has fought against the reckless school reopenings and for the development of rank-and-file safety committees among teachers and educators, can be contacted here:

Email: cfpe.aus@gmail.com

Facebook: www.facebook.com/commforpubliceducation

Twitter: [@CFPE_Australia](https://twitter.com/CFPE_Australia)



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