

Australia: New COVID-19 infections follow reopening of Melbourne schools

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Less than two weeks after the state Labor government in Victoria reopened schools, as part of a broader pro-business drive to lift coronavirus restrictions, multiple students have tested positive for the virus.

Three schools in Melbourne's northern suburbs have been closed due to the outbreak—East Preston Islamic College, Croxton School in Northcote, and Dallas Brooks Community Primary School in Dallas. In the two former schools, every student and connected family has been advised to be tested for the virus, regardless of symptoms.

The cluster was first detected when a Year 5 student at East Preston Islamic College attended his school last Monday and Tuesday, before testing positive. Another student, and a parent connected to the school, also returned positive tests last week, while another three cases connected with the school were among the 7 infections reported on Saturday.

About 800 people have been given mandatory orders to self-isolate in their homes for two weeks. What the government is describing as a “testing blitz” is underway in six suburbs—Roxburgh Park, Dallas, Broadmeadows, Preston, East Preston and West Heidelberg. These are all working class suburbs, and include large sections of deliberately run-down public housing.

The latest infections follow the pattern evident during the earlier peaks of the pandemic in Melbourne—with working class communities the most vulnerable and worst affected.

Overcrowded public housing, inadequate public services, and casualised and low wage workplaces have combined to make coronavirus a socially unequal threat. The latest school infections have triggered a delay in the further lifting of lockdown restrictions, with the state Labor government fearful of the reaction within the working class to a third wave of infections, again triggered by premature pro-business reopening measures.

The latest school closures follow two other positive

coronavirus cases affecting school students, reported on October 12—a Year 12 student attending Nazareth College in Noble Park, and a student at St Columba's Primary School in Elwood.

The infection clusters underscore the dangers of reopening schools amid continued community transmission of COVID-19, and expose the failure of the Australian Education Union to take any measures whatsoever to defend the health and safety of teachers and school staff.

Melbourne's lockdown has been among the longest imposed internationally. It was required after the state Labor government of Premier Daniel Andrews last May prematurely lifted the initial restrictions that effectively suppressed the first wave of infections.

Andrews, like every state and federal leader, Labor and Liberal, refused to commit to eliminating coronavirus infections, on the basis that this would be too costly for business. An ensuing “second wave” in June and July threatened to trigger the collapse of Victoria's underfunded and largely privatised hospital and health system.

With rolling daily new cases averaging around five, restrictions are again being lifted, with the government insisting that an ongoing “safe” level of infections can be traced and managed. The Andrews government had said it would accelerate the lifting of restrictions on Saturday, but postponed this for 1-2 days because of the new school clusters.

As large gatherings are still prohibited, including for social and family events, and restrictions still in place for the retail and hospitality sectors, schools are serving as effective guinea pigs, testing the impact of the lifting of social distancing requirements.

Throughout the pandemic, the state and federal governments have refused to invest the necessary public money to support the working class. Ordinary people have

been largely left to fend for themselves, amid the difficult restrictions, with little or no financial supports, grossly inadequate mental health and other support services, and none of the emergency measures required to assist the most vulnerable layers of society.

This official neglect has also marked the schools' reopening in Melbourne. It is largely up to individual principals to manage daily operations, with significant differences between neighbouring schools concerning matters such as staggered start and finish times for different grade levels, temperature checks, separation of classes in the yard during breaks, and enforcement of social distancing measures and online meetings within the school, including among staff.

Unnecessary face-to-face meetings continue to be held, risking workers' lives. These include meetings for school reviews, which involve Department of Education officials scrutinising schools' standardised test data and checking for compliance with various edicts. These reviews have been deemed an "essential" function.

The working class can have no confidence whatsoever in official assurances that a "safe" level of continued coronavirus infection can be managed. The pandemic has revealed the impact of the protracted pro-business drive by successive Labor and Liberal governments, at the federal and state level, to privatise public services, promote "user pays" models, and underfund basic social infrastructure.

According to an ABC News report on Saturday, the East Preston Islamic College cluster was caused by inadequate information provided to affected families by the Victorian government's Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS).

The Year 5 student who attended school for two days, while potentially infectious, did so after his family received a letter explaining that the child's two siblings, who had earlier tested positive, could end their isolation after being cleared to do so. The letter failed to make plain that the other child had to remain at home. The immigrant family does not speak English as their first language, yet the ABC reported that it was "not clear" whether any translation services had been used.

In addition, the child's school received no notification from health authorities about the case.

Catherine Orr, a doctor who has treated dozens of coronavirus patients from immigrant communities, told the ABC that she had never seen the DHHS use translation services when communicating information about complex quarantine requirements. "Not one of

those 100 [positive cases] who I've treated have had an interpreter," she explained. "They never got an SMS or letter in any other language than English. The [DHHS] certificate to release people from isolation is in English."

International experience underscores the dangers involved in opening schools amid the pandemic. They can function as vectors for spreading the virus. In Britain, a survey released at the beginning of October reported that 45 percent of all positive cases were in educational settings, across kindergartens, schools and universities. Numerous teachers and educators are among those who have been killed and seriously affected by COVID-19 around the world.

Despite the dangers, the Australian Education Union continues to function as the government's accomplice. Throughout the pandemic, the union has insisted that teachers cannot question or challenge any aspect of the government's shifting positions on opening the schools or organising remote learning from home. The AEU bureaucracy has echoed every official pronouncement, while working to keep teachers and school staff in the dark as to what is happening in school systems internationally.

The last AEU (Victoria) members' bulletin, sent on Thursday, did not once mention the coronavirus.

Teachers and school staff need to take matters into their own hands and organise rank and file safety committees in every school and educational institution. These need to organise proper enforcement of basic safety precautions within schools, so long as they remain open, while preparing to take the necessary industrial action to demand the renewed suspension of face to face teaching, in the event of wider community transmission of COVID-19.

Teachers must also organise independently of the AEU and the trade unions to demand for all children and their families the proper, fully funded provision of computers and high speed internet access, food distribution, mental health care, and additional educational and well-being support services.



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