

# Australia: Melbourne schools to reopen amid COVID-19 lockdown, threatening teacher, student safety

Patrick Kelly  
3 June 2021

In a reckless move that needlessly threatens the safety of teachers, school workers and students, the Victorian state Labor government announced Wednesday that Melbourne high schools will reopen for Year 11 and 12 students from next week.

This follows a week-long closure of most schools that was imposed as part of an initially planned seven-day lockdown triggered by community transmission of the dangerous COVID-19 Kappa variant. Today authorities reported they had detected the even more contagious Delta variant. The lockdown has been extended for another seven days, but with a series of relaxed restrictions, including the reopening of schools for senior students in Melbourne and the resumption of all schools face-to-face teaching in regional Victoria.

These moves contradict public health science. There are more than 360 exposure sites across Melbourne, and thousands of people are self-isolating. Each day new confirmed COVID-19 infections are being reported. While numbers remain relatively low, Australian and international experience has demonstrated how quickly unchecked exponential growth in case numbers can trigger a public health crisis.

Earlier today, Victoria's Chief Health Officer Brett Sutton acknowledged that the recently detected Delta variant, which is largely responsible for the humanitarian catastrophe in India, may cause "greater illness in children, as well as greater increase transmissibility in children—we have concerns for that reason."

The Labor government is nevertheless proceeding with its plan to instruct approximately 100,000 children and young adults to discontinue online learning and

instead travel into school, with many commuting long distances on overcrowded public transport. As many as 30 or more students will work all day with their teachers in small, poorly ventilated rooms.

Many students are also casual workers in the supermarkets and fast food outlets that have remained open during the lockdown. In the course of a short shift, they may have come into close contact with hundreds of people.

Schools are among the latest infection sites, including Willmott Park Primary School in Craigieburn, Mercy College, Methodist Ladies College and North Melbourne Primary School. At the latter school, two positive cases attended the campus. More than 300 close contacts, teachers and students are now in mandatory 14-day isolation.

Last year during Melbourne's pandemic, several schools emerged as epicentres of transmission, such as Al-Taqwa College in Truganina. Numerous international studies have shown that schools function as vectors when they are left open amid widespread community transmission of COVID-19.

The Victorian government has justified the reopening on the basis that it ensures a "level playing field" between senior students in Melbourne and in regional Victoria. Acting Premier James Merlino has claimed it would be unfair for some students to be in lockdown while others to benefit from face-to-face teaching.

This argument points to the reactionary nature of the high stakes competitive exam entry system for access to university and other tertiary courses. It is also absurd on its face. If there were to be a noticeable difference in the end of year academic results between those Year 12 students who had or had not been in lockdown for an

extra week, then scores could be scaled to ensure equivalence.

In reality, the schools' reopening has nothing to do with "fairness" for students and instead forms part of the Labor government's concessions to corporate demands for an end to lockdown.

The government is walking a political tightrope. On the one hand it knows that an explosion of COVID-19 infections would immediately threaten to collapse the health system, as nearly occurred last year at the height of the "second wave," and at the same time would trigger explosive hostility within the working class. On the other hand, the government is attempting to meet corporate demands for the rapid lifting of every restriction that impinges on the accumulation of profit.

The Australian Education Union (AEU) is complicit in the government's reopening of the schools. It has said nothing whatsoever about the development. This silence points to its culpability, and is consistent with its record throughout the pandemic as a collaborator with the government against the interests of teachers and school workers. At the height of the pandemic in Victoria last year, the union insisted that teachers could take no action to protect their safety and had no choice but to follow the government's instructions.

Anger is building among teachers. Several teachers left critical comments on the AEU's Facebook page. One wrote: "What is the union doing about staff being made to teach in person while the whole city is in lockdown? Nothing, like it always does."

Another wrote: "STRIKE!! Sounds like education staff are expendable."

One teacher in a public high school in Melbourne's western suburbs told the *World Socialist Web Site*: "Footscray is one of the biggest hotspots around. There are people walking past each other and catching COVID. There are mystery cases that are likely to be aerosol driven.

"If you look at other countries, the virus has spread so fast. Students have jobs at Highpoint [shopping centre], at Footscray market and other places. Why didn't the teachers get vaccinated before this? Or childcare workers or health workers? It's so ridiculous."

Vaccines continue to be accessible only for those over 40, or in frontline health and aged-care roles, though even in these categories access to vaccine appointments is difficult.

Younger teachers and school workers are being exposed without any adequate protections. Victoria's Deputy Chief Health Officer Allen Cheng explained earlier this week that problems in the "supply chain" meant that there was a "constrained supply" of vaccines. "We are making do with what we have got at the moment," he said.

Among the teachers and staff endangered are those working in special schools, which have been kept open throughout the latest lockdown. These schools are especially risky because many students with disabilities have difficulties with toileting, personal hygiene and maintaining social distancing. During last year's lockdown, special schools were initially suspended together with other schools, but parents struggling to care for their children at home successfully lobbied the government to have their schools exempted from closure.

Teachers and school staff in special schools have been left to care for the most vulnerable young people with inadequate support and no hazard or bonus pay.

Also affected by the lockdown are thousands of casual teachers and school workers. These educators lose two weeks of income, at a time in the school year when their services are usually in peak demand. Only some will be eligible for the federal government's poverty-level offer of a "disaster payment" of up to \$500 per week. The AEU has again done nothing to defend casual teachers and school workers, making no public statement on the matter.

Only the Committee For Public Education (CFPE) has sought to organise coordinated action in defence of the health and safety of teachers, students and school workers through the formation of rank-and-file safety committees in schools.

The CFPE can be contacted at:

Email: [cfpe.aus@gmail.com](mailto:cfpe.aus@gmail.com)

Facebook:

[www.facebook.com/commforpubliceducation](https://www.facebook.com/commforpubliceducation)

Twitter: @CFPE\_Australia



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](https://wsws.org/contact)**