

Australian state government pushing for school reopening despite Sydney COVID-19 crisis

Erika Zimmer
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New South Wales (NSW) Premier Gladys Berejiklian last Wednesday announced that schools in Sydney would begin their first week of Term 3, beginning today, with mostly online learning.

The measure comes amid a worsening COVID-19 Delta variant outbreak and was revealed as part of a one-week extension to the previous two-week semi-lockdown of Greater Sydney, covering approximately five million people.

The Berejiklian government clearly did not want to suspend normal school operations, despite the serious health risks in doing so during the rapid growth of multiple coronavirus infection clusters.

The so-called lockdown itself is inadequate and was belatedly imposed. For more than a week, Berejiklian resisted calls by medical experts for the introduction of emergency measures, allowing the virus to spread across the Sydney area with hundreds of venues on the coronavirus hotspots list. Non-essential workplaces remain open, including every variety of retail store. The interests of big business remain prioritised over public health.

This week's suspension of normal school operations is also of a limited character. Senior Year 12 students completing practical assignments for their final year examinations will be allowed to attend school for in-person learning. Schools remain open to children not just of genuinely essential workers but to any parents unable to work from home, including those now working in obviously non-essential retail shops. Some government messaging has been broader, with schools declared "open for families who need it."

The suspension of normal school operations was triggered by the ongoing growth of daily infection numbers. From a single case registered on June 16, there are now 678 locally acquired COVID-19 infections. A record 112 were announced this morning, with warnings that tallies in the multiple hundreds could be recorded in the coming days.

Berejiklian last week outlined that a week of online

learning was required "to stop literally hundreds of thousands of adults moving around and interacting with each other inadvertently as they drop kids off and pick kids up."

There is no doubt that the government's move was motivated by fears of triggering further opposition among teachers and school staff, potentially including industrial action outside the control of the teachers' unions.

Throughout the pandemic, teachers in Australia and internationally have been regarded by governments and the corporate elite as sacrificial lambs, functioning as child-minders to allow working class parents to attend their workplace and keep profits flowing. Working in run-down crowded classrooms and offices where social distancing is impossible, usually without adequate protective equipment, teachers have been compelled to risk their own health with the possibility of spreading infection to their families.

Sydney teachers' anger over the possibility of being forced back into the classroom amid a growing pandemic was expressed on social media.

Many highlighted the unvaccinated nature of most of the teaching workforce. Unlike in other countries, teachers have no priority status. The only school staff vaccinated are those eligible under restricted categories, including those over 40 years. However, nearly half, 47 percent, of teachers are under 40. A lot of those in their 40s have in addition been forced to schedule very delayed vaccinations; many Sydney teachers booked in May but are now waiting until September for their first dose.

One teacher posted online, "What are you [the union] going to do about it?... I can't actually tell you what you've done for me during this pandemic. Why are you only calling for vaccines now? Giving big speeches about how we are overworked, underpaid and undervalued isn't enough. Hinting towards a strike, not enough. Where is the actual action?"

Another wrote, "With the current stringent lockdown about not mixing with extended family, how on earth could

teachers be expected to attend school, unvaccinated, to look after kids from essential services? Why don't we ever hear the teachers' federation represent us at the press conference. The message is everyone needs to protect themselves, stay indoors with only their household residents except teachers who are sacrificed. Why hasn't the union told the department that all teachers need priority vaccination? I will not be renewing my membership."

The NSW Teachers Federation, together with other teachers' unions, welcomed the return to classrooms in 2020 after the first wave of infections. Throughout the pandemic, the unions have relayed official advice to school workers, and insisted that nothing could be done but to follow official directives.

NSW Education Minister Sarah Mitchell recently told the *Sunrise* television news show that she had been in discussion with the teachers' unions over recent weeks and could "guarantee" that remote learning would only be for this week, even if the lockdown is extended further.

This boast underscores the union's crucial role in policing any dangerous return to school order while community transmission of COVID-19 continues.

Berejiklian has insisted that the short-term remote learning decision had nothing to do with safety within schools. She repeatedly asserted, "Schools are a safe place."

This is a patent lie. Over the 18 months of the COVID-19 pandemic, many international studies have contradicted claims that the virus poses minimal risks to staff and to children. Schools have in fact been major vectors for transmission.

In October 2020, a major Israeli health ministry study found children were more likely to contract the virus than adults and could pass it on to others. The Delta variant is even more threatening for children and young adults. In the UK, Public Health England reported in the week ending June 27, 15,000 children tested positive for COVID-19 and 24,000 were absent suspected of being infected by the virus. In Indonesia, by the end of last month, 250,000 children had been infected, representing 12.6 percent of the country's total cases.

The risk is not only of death but of debilitating long-term physical and psychological symptoms. Again, there is evidence that the Delta variant is riskier for young people. British investigations suggest that about 15 percent of COVID-19 survivors aged between 12-16 are suffering the effects of post-acute COVID-19 or "long COVID."

In NSW over the past month, despite the two-week mid-year break, six Sydney schools registered positive cases of COVID-19. Moreover, of the over 600 local cases reported since June 16, many are of school age. Of the 16 people currently receiving intensive care treatment, one is a

teenager.

The government's lie that schools are safe is driven by a concern to limit the suspension of face to face teaching, paving the way for the dragooning of unvaccinated teachers and students back into overcrowded schools while widespread community transmission of the disease continues.

Those affected will primarily be working class schools and their communities. Infections are currently highest in south-west and outer Sydney where public schools have long been underfunded and overcrowded. Elite private schools will no doubt use their vast resources to make their own arrangements. One such school, St Joseph's College, was recently exposed for having organised the vaccinations of 163 senior students, despite them not being eligible under current criteria.

NSW Health Minister Brad Hazzard attempted to dismiss this episode, angrily snapping during one press conference, "There was a mistake—move on!"

Teachers and school staff need to take matters into their own hands, for the sake of their safety and that of their families and students. Schools cannot be allowed to resume normal operations amid a dangerous pandemic! 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, independent of the unions.

This is now more urgent than ever, and we encourage teachers and school staff to contact the CFPE to discuss the necessary actions.

Email: cfpe.aus@gmail.com

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