

# Australia: NSW government plans full school reopening as state's hospitals on the verge of breakdown

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On Friday, the New South Wales (NSW) Liberal-National Coalition government outlined a plan for the full resumption of face-to-face teaching in schools, even as the state's coronavirus outbreak sets new records for infections and hospitalisations multiple times every week, and there are growing warnings that the healthcare system is on the brink of a collapse.

The school reopening drive is the spearhead of a campaign for the lifting of inadequate lockdown measures and restrictions in October, once adult vaccination rates reach 70 percent.

The state Coalition government, with the backing of Prime Minister Scott Morrison, is insisting that whatever the level of infections and deaths, it is now time to “live with the virus,” and accept its indefinite circulation, so that full corporate profit-making activities can resume. Classroom teaching is essential to this, as a mechanism for forcing all parents back to their places of employment.

Last Thursday, NSW surpassed 1,000 daily infections, the first time the four-digit mark had been reached by any Australian jurisdiction during the pandemic. NSW Premier Gladys Berejiklian marked the occasion by announcing the easing of restrictions, with permission given for fully-vaccinated people to gather in groups of five, if they live outside of “hotspot” areas in the working-class western and south-western suburbs of Sydney.

On Sunday, cases exceeded 1,200 and this morning, they reached a new record high of 1,290, meaning the state remains on track to register multiple thousands of infections each day by the end of September. At the press conferences revealing the infection figures, Berejiklian insists that the case numbers are all but irrelevant, and “congratulates” the state on the previous day's vaccination doses.

The school reopening will inevitably result in an even greater surge, as hundreds of thousands of teachers and students are forced into overcrowded classrooms that will function as incubators for the virus.

Already, with most pupils learning from home, a third of all cases have occurred among those under the age of 19. With infections since the outbreak began on June 16 reaching 20,000 today, this equates to more than 6,500 children and teenagers

being stricken by a potentially-deadly disease.

Most schools have been open throughout the pandemic at limited capacity, with a smaller number of teachers than usual attending to the children of essential workers. Even with the number of staff and pupils a fraction of the normal total, dozens of schools have been forced to shut after infections were detected, including four in Sydney today alone.

In the US, the full reopening of schools had led to a massive increase in child infections and hospital admissions, with roughly 2,000 children in paediatric units throughout the country. Experts have warned that children who do not become grievously-ill can still suffer the debilitating effects of long-COVID, as well as cognitive declines associated with infection that have been registered in Britain and elsewhere.

Announcing the plan on Friday, NSW Education Minister Sarah Mitchell dismissed the obvious dangers, declaring that she was “excited” for the reopening, which would proceed in a “safe and reasonable way” and provide children and teenagers with “light at the end of the tunnel.” Year 12 students, the oldest cohort, along with kindergarten and year 1 pupils, the youngest, are to fully return to the classrooms on October 25. They will be followed by year 2, 6 and 11 students on November 1, and all other cohorts on November 8.

Vaccination for teachers has been declared mandatory, while 12–15-year-olds are now eligible for inoculation, along with those over 16. Ongoing supply issues with Pfizer, the only vaccine that can be administered to those under 18, mean that many will not be inoculated by the time of the reopening. There is no vaccine for children under 12.

The plan has provoked widespread opposition from educators, parents and students, including year 12 pupils who earlier this month launched a series of petitions campaigning against the forced return. On social media, there are hundreds of comments, warning of the risks and condemning the government.

The education unions, however, have already signalled that they will try and ride roughshod over the opposition. NSW Teachers' Federation President Angelo Gavrielatos told the media that the union “cautiously welcomed” the school

reopening announcement. “The road map is something that we would aspire to ... ultimately we want students to return to face-to-face teaching and learning,” he said.

The drive to end lockdowns is proceeding as the hospital system is already reaching breaking point with the current level of infections, forcing Westmead and Blacktown Hospitals to activate emergency plans last week and to pause COVID admissions.

There are now 840 COVID-19 cases admitted to NSW hospitals, with 137 people in intensive care units (ICUs), 48 of whom require ventilation. The figures have more than doubled in a fortnight. On August 15, there were just 381 COVID-19 cases admitted to hospital, with 62 people in ICUs, 24 of whom were on ventilators.

Health workers in Sydney are increasingly speaking out on the dire conditions they confront. In an interview with the *Sydney Morning Herald*, Michelle Rosentreter, a senior ICU nurse at a major metropolitan hospital, said she and her colleagues were “exhausted. Last night was brutal. We literally hit capacity ... Just holding on. None of us have ever faced anything like it. Nothing in our studies ever prepared us for this, and not even the most experienced of us have ever seen anything like it.”

Rosentreter explained that the patients were “air-hungry, starving for breath,” and that even to turn them over required at least six staff members. Nurses were frequently working 12- or 14-hour shifts, instead of 8, because there were simply not enough staff.

“We have been trying to warn the government for a year. We need more nurses! They boast about the ventilators they’ve now got, but ventilators without nurses are useless,” she said.

Asked if her hospital could cope, were infections to rise from 1,000 per day to 1,500, Rosentreter replied: “I can honestly say we can’t. We are at breaking point right now.” With any increase in cases, she stated, “We will risk looking like the catastrophes from overseas.”

The interviewer, Peter Fitzsimmons raised the prospect of COVID patients dying in hospital parking lots, as seen during the humanitarian catastrophe in India last April. Rosentreter responded: “I don’t have a crystal ball. But I have no confidence we are not going to see similar scenes.”

Today, Nine Media published an anonymous article, with the chilling conclusion: “We have been repeatedly reassured the health system will cope. As an experienced respiratory doctor at a major western Sydney hospital, I disagree, and so do many of my colleagues. We believe it likely that projected patient numbers will soon be overwhelming. Tragically, their ranks will include many frontline health workers such as paramedics and nurses. From Westmead to Liverpool and Blacktown, ambulances now routinely line up in hospital carparks, unable to discharge their patients.”

The doctor noted a major shortage of COVID-safe wards throughout the system. There was no central coordination or

planning by NSW Health to develop COVID-safe wards, nor even to distribute the soaring number of patients based on available resources.

This morning, Premier Berejiklian responded to the warnings, by again noting that the health system is “under strain.” She predicted that October would be the “worst month” for the hospitals, but insisted that her government would proceed with a reopening of the economy then regardless. Asked if the resumption of face-to-face teaching would lead to an increase in infections and hence hospitalisations, Berejiklian made the extraordinary statement that “The hospitalisation rate does not necessarily relate to transmission,” a claim refuted by all experiences over the past 18 months.

The NSW government is asserting that the state has the necessary resources to cope with any surge in hospital admissions. The state’s currently staffed and open 863 ICU beds are already at 60 percent or more capacity, with COVID patients accounting for 14 percent.

The government, however, has touted an additional 2,015 beds and ventilators, it claims were acquired last year. Over the weekend, however, the *Saturday Paper* revealed that in a secret document prepared for national cabinet, the government admitted that “additional nursing staff resources available for bedside ICU care” amounted to just 328. They could staff only 164 beds more than those that currently exist.

In other words, the government is lying and preparing the conditions for an unprecedented crisis that will see COVID patients denied medical care, even if it results in their death. With the Victorian hospital system holding even fewer ICU resources, amid a rapid Delta outbreak in that state, the imminent danger is of national catastrophe, similar to those that have befallen the hospital systems in countries such as Italy, India and in parts of the United States.



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