

New Zealand early childhood teacher denounces lack of COVID-19 protections

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The *World Socialist Web Site* received the following letter from an early childhood teacher in New Zealand, highlighting the significant risks that COVID-19 will spread in early childhood centres due to a rush to reopen before the country has stamped out the virus, and a lack of protections for staff and children.

New Zealand is experiencing a large outbreak of the Delta variant, which has infected more than 600 people, including 75 children aged under 10 and six infants. The virus has spread like wildfire with the reopening of schools in the US and other countries, and many teachers have become sick and died.

Apart from Auckland, which remains in a strict “level 4” lockdown, Jacinda Ardern’s Labour Party-led government has decided that as of today the majority of the country will move to a less stringent “level 3” lockdown. Childcare centres and schools can partially reopen at “level 3” so that more people can return to work.

The letter has been edited for length.

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In the latest Early Learning Bulletin sent out on August 29, Secretary for Education Iona Holsted explains the Ministry of Education’s (MOE) advice for the operation of early childhood services within Alert Level 3.

We are advised that “bubbles [class sizes] should be no more than 10 tamariki [children], and staff with higher risk of severe illness from COVID-19 can be onsite if they are fully vaccinated.” It is added that public health officials “have advised against the use of face coverings for a range of reasons, most particularly because face coverings that are handled incorrectly or are moved around can present a greater risk than no covering.”

The bulletin flagrantly disregards the health and safety of early childhood teachers and children. Stating

that staff with a higher risk of severe illness can be onsite if fully vaccinated will give employers a free pass to pressure teachers with health conditions back into the workplace. While vaccination can reduce the possibility of becoming infected with the Delta variant, it does not guarantee that a fully vaccinated person will not contract the virus and experience debilitating, and possibly ongoing adverse effects to their health. For immunocompromised members of our communities this risk is even greater, but this is a risk that the Ministry of Health (MOH) and the MOE are willing to unleash upon health-compromised early childhood educators.

The decision not to make masks mandatory for adults in early childhood settings directly contradicts advice provided by the MOH, which says: “It is highly recommended that you wear a mask or face covering in closed spaces where physical distancing is not always possible and contact with other people outside your bubble may occur.”

Physical distancing is simply impossible when working with young children. When returning to work at Level 3, all teachers will be in close contact with people outside of their household bubbles, yet the MOH and MOE find this to be an acceptable risk for teachers and children.

For businesses operating in Level 3, the government’s COVID-19 website says: “You legally must wear a face covering if you are a customer or an employee involving customer contact at a business or service operating at Alert Level 3.” This is because at “Alert Level 3 the risk of COVID-19 being present in the community is higher.” People are also required to wear a mask on public transport, taxis, when visiting healthcare facilities, making deliveries, in supermarkets, pharmacies and takeaways, courts and government agencies.

Unfortunately, for teachers these requirements do not apply. In the current Delta environment, this risk to our teachers and children under level 3 is unacceptable.

Teachers are advised that, “At Alert Level 3, most children and young people will continue to learn from home, however schools and early learning services are open for all children and young people whose parents or carers need to go to work and there is no one at home to supervise them.” The bulletin incorrectly states that there is no limitation on specifically who can work under Alert Level 3. In fact, the government’s COVID-19 website states under Level 3 “businesses that require close physical contact cannot open.”

The bulletin refers to a guidance document from the MOE, which places responsibility for preventing the possible spread of infection entirely on the centre owners, leaders, and staff. It makes the ludicrous suggestion that centres can “create new practices that meet or exceed the Ministry of Health guideline.” Centre leaders are also informed that WorkSafe “requires that before you reopen, persons conducting a business ... should **self-assess** their ability to **operate safely** at Alert Level 3.”

Given that the Delta variant is a highly infectious airborne strain of COVID-19 and staff are required to work in close contact with people outside of their family bubble without mandatory masking, leaders who “self-assess” with honesty must certainly conclude that they are unable to “operate safely” at Alert Level 3.

There are multiple sections of the document devoted to instructions for cleaning of resources and surfaces. The amount of cleaning will undoubtedly require that an additional staff member be present at each centre, thus putting another worker at unnecessary risk. While hand washing and surface disinfecting are important measures, there is no mention of the facts around the airborne spread of the virus. Instead, there is impractical and contradictory advice on ventilation. Centres must keep a minimum temperature of 18 degrees, while also being advised to open windows and doors to allow for proper ventilation. This is going to be a hard balance to achieve in winter.

Another preposterous suggestion is to install partitions which “do not need to be at ceiling height but would ideally be at adult head height or at a minimum the head height of a child. There should be no gaps that children could pass toys through or otherwise

physically connect with other bubbles.” Just how does the Ministry suggest teachers prevent infected air passing between these partitions?

As a teacher faced with returning to work under these conditions, I readily admit to a feeling of extreme fear and trepidation within this new Delta environment. Whilst today, numbers have dropped, there are still locations of interest [where infection may have occurred] outside of Auckland in close proximity to my workplace. I am very fortunate that my employer has allowed open discussion and free airing of concerns in our discussions around returning work. I have made the decision that until case numbers continue to fall, and no cases become apparent south of Auckland, I will not go to work. I do not know whether I will get paid or not during this time, making my financial situation uncertain.

Unfortunately, it is without doubt that having an understanding leader and employer is not the case for thousands of teachers around the country. The Ministries of Education and Health, and our government have once again allowed the teachers and children of this country to become the sacrificial lambs in their drive to drop levels as quickly as possible and get the economy up and running.



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