

Australia: NSW teachers speak out against dangerous school reopening plan

Our reporters
7 September 2021

There is widespread anger among teachers and students towards the New South Wales (NSW) Liberal-National government's drive for a full reopening of schools next month, as a COVID outbreak in the state continues to spiral out of control.

The plan for a resumption of in-person teaching was made public in late August, as the state surpassed one thousand daily infections. Case numbers are continuing to grow, while hospitalisations and intensive care admissions have surged over the past fortnight, sparking warnings from nurses and doctors that the healthcare system is on the brink of collapse.

Premier Gladys Berejiklian told the media the full resumption of in-person teaching would begin on October 25, with the return of the youngest cohort, Kindergarten and Year 1, and the oldest, Year 12, to the classrooms.

The final year Higher School Certificate (HSC) examination has been used by the government as a spearhead for the dangerous reopenings. Since August 16, Year 12 students outside the worst affected local government areas in Sydney have been able to attend their schools for up to two hours a day, four days a week. HSC exams are to begin on November 9, a delay of just two weeks compared with the schedule prepared before the outbreak.

Years 2, 6 and 11 will return on November 1, with the rest of students resuming classes on November 8.

Attempting to pre-empt objections to its reckless plan, the government has stated that online learning will continue in council areas "of concern" where case numbers are high.

However, the directive that no school can refuse to accept students who wish to attend and the two hours per day allotment for Year 12 students has already resulted in over a hundred schools in the state being closed due to virus outbreaks since limited lockdown measures were introduced in late June.

The government has sought to cover this up, declaring that for privacy reasons, school outbreaks will not be publicly-listed.

Mandatory vaccinations will be a condition of employment for teachers from November 8. Given the shambolic character of the rollout, however, it is likely that many educators will not be fully-inoculated by that point. Those who are still face the risk of infection and serious illness.

Roughly a third of all infections during the outbreak have been among children and teenagers. Those under 12 are not eligible for any vaccination, while the 12-16 cohort has only recently been approved for inoculation, meaning the vast majority will not have had even a single dose when the reopening begins. The resumption of in-person teaching, which is part of a broader drive to end lockdowns and force the population to "live with" the deadly virus, threatens a catastrophe along the lines of the situation in the US, where hospital paediatric units are full and educators are dying.

The NSW Teachers Federation (NSWTF), working in lockstep with the state government, has "cautiously welcomed" the government's return to face-to-face teaching plan. Like all of the unions, it is acting as a police force to suppress opposition to the profit-driven endangerment of the workers it falsely claims to represent.

The WSWWS spoke to several teachers about the return to school plan.

Stephanie, a primary school teacher in one of the local government areas in Sydney experiencing high infection rates said:

"It's crazy. It's putting young children in a very dangerous situation and we are going to see deaths. My colleagues are very worried, especially those who have children themselves. Some teachers can't be vaccinated for medical reasons and they are worried they will pass it on to their families. It's very worrying and all for only four weeks of the school year.

"Most of the kids in my area live in high rise apartments, with many of the parents working close by at the Flemington markets. They come from India, Vietnam and other countries where they have seen their families pass away. I don't think they will let their children return to school. Most of them won't let their children out of their apartments. At our school we have multi-generational families and we have cases of whole families who have become infected."

David, a high school teacher who has taught for many years in regional towns with large Aboriginal populations in the state's west, commented:

"The risk for indigenous Australians is huge. Look what happened with the funeral in Wilcannia. One hundred people travelled from Broken Hill, Cobar and Dubbo to that funeral. It

was prior to lockdown so it was within health guidelines. Around 40 contracted the virus. That's nearly a fifty percent strike rate. Aboriginal people should have been vaccinated as a priority, certainly before the politicians. It is well known that the family is the mortar that holds Aboriginal people together. They see-off their loved ones, they don't let them pass without protocols, without having the family celebrate their lives. They can't be denied that. Everything else has been taken away from them.

"I think there is a hidden agenda behind Gladys Berejiklian's plan to open schools and that is to open the economy. What has taken place in Sydney is lockdown lite. It's what you have when you're not having a lockdown."

Nicole, who teaches casually in a NSW country town, said:

"Teachers were already overworked before COVID hit. Then they had to turn on a dime and learn how to develop online lessons. In my school this also meant developing booklets because our kids often had no access to the internet on their farms. Mobile phone access is limited and expensive, and for those who are online, it's slow satellite internet.

"I was brought up in Merrylands [a western Sydney suburb with high infection rates] and have many friends there. Their grandchildren may not return to school. Unvaccinated kids and COVID are a real fear among their families. They don't care if the kids don't get it badly, they don't want their kids exposed and ill and bringing it home.

"I think the research is very clear. Schools should be properly ventilated with filters that exclude COVID. Too many rooms open onto corridors and have little access to fresh air. Social distancing is impossible. I have seen the extra cleaning...it is laughable. Masks are also an issue. My throat was dry and sore after trying to teach all day. I think it's a perfect storm, a recipe for a Delta disaster. Into the fray we send our youngest.

"I attended the Committee for Public Education on-line meeting last week, 'Oppose school re-openings and form rank and file committees' and voted for the resolution that was moved. I loved its strength, how it included all educators and how it is doing what our union is not."

Matthew, a teacher in regional NSW, stated:

"Even with high vaccination rates, it is mathematically certain that COVID-19 will keep spreading if public health measures are relaxed. Reopening schools before transmission of COVID-19 has ceased will very likely cause the deaths of children, a population that is highly susceptible to the Delta strain.

"Teachers must oppose this by forming rank-and -file safety committees independent of the unions, who have at every stage endorsed the government's agenda. We must not allow governments here, or anywhere, to gamble with the lives of children for financial gain."

Frances, a secondary teacher in Sydney, said:

"Daily we hear of the disastrous and deadly results of school reopenings in countries around the world. For example, it was

reported that nearly 30,000 children in Florida tested positive for COVID-19 in one week after the schools reopened. And yet, the media, the government and the unions continue to spruik the lie that schools are safe.

"Last year, after the first wave of COVID-19, the NSWTF opened the way for a return to classrooms with its suggestion that students return in stages, the first to be Year 12 and Kindergarten. Now, with the doubly infectious Delta variant, the same roadmap to return to schools is being used.

"The call by the Committee for Public Education for teachers to take matters into their own hands and form rank-and-file safety committees is also doubly urgent."

Katie, a teacher at an independent school in Sydney's inner-west, stated:

"I am appalled at the decision of the Berejiklian government to reopen schools under conditions where there is such high community transmission of the COVID virus. The infection rate in Sydney has grown to over 1000 a day, with hundreds being hospitalised. Delta is so contagious, especially amongst young children yet they are forcing Kindergarten and the infant grades back into schools where they have no protection.

"Children under 12 can't be vaccinated, so they are really the most vulnerable of the student cohort. In NSW, over 3000 children between 0-9 years of age have tested positive to Covid! Sending teachers and children back into schools under these conditions amounts to social murder. The union covering our staff, the Independent Education Union, is doing nothing to fight this. I agree with the demand of the CFPE for the formation of a rank-and-file safety committee, 'No return to school in any area where there is COVID-19 community transmission.'"

The CFPE, a group of rank-and-file educators fighting against the dangerous reopening and for the safety of teachers, school staff and students, can be contacted here:

Email: cfpe.aus@gmail.com

Facebook: www.facebook.com/commforpubliceducation

Twitter: @CFPE_Australia



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact