Reopening of New Zealand schools outside Auckland risks spread of COVID-19

Tom Peters
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New Zealand's biggest city, Auckland, remains in a relatively strict "level 4" lockdown, aimed at suppressing an outbreak of the Delta variant of COVID-19. Another 33 cases were reported yesterday, bringing the total to 954 detected since the first person tested positive on August 17.

Although the lockdown appears to be working, significant risks remain, particularly after the Labour Party-led government lifted the lockdown outside of Auckland on September 8, allowing the vast majority of businesses and all schools to reopen. "Level 2" restrictions are in force—including limits on gathering sizes, physical distancing, and mandatory masks in shops and public transport—but these do not apply in schools.

Although almost all known cases are in Auckland, 17 have been detected in Wellington. Moreover, the boundary between Auckland and the rest of the country is crossed by thousands of people every day, mainly truck drivers, raising the risk that the virus could spread.

The reopening of schools and early childhood centres, in the rest of the country, with no restrictions, poses major risks to teachers, students and the wider population. Auckland's Marist College was central to the initial COVID-19 outbreak last year. A cluster in February 2021 was linked to Papatoetoe High School. At least 13 schools have been linked to the present Delta outbreak and 379 cases, nearly 40 percent of the total, are in people aged 0-19.

Internationally, schools are playing a central role in the spread of the more infectious Delta variant. In the US and UK, where governments have reopened schools with COVID-19 present in the community, cases have exploded. Thousands of people are becoming sick and dying as a result of these criminal policies, driven by the demands of big business, which views lockdowns as an intolerable hindrance to profit-making.

New Zealand has so far not experienced mass deaths during the pandemic, and the government says it is still committed to an elimination policy: using lockdowns and other public health measures to bring case numbers down to zero.

However, public health experts have criticised the latest decisions on schools. University of Otago epidemiologist Michael Baker has repeatedly called for masks to be mandatory at least in secondary schools at level 2. "One infected person in a classroom would infect everyone," he told *Stuff* on August 30.

In a September 10 blog post, Baker and fellow public health experts Dr Amanda Kvalsvig, Dr Jin Russell, Dr Jennifer Summers, Dr Leah Grout, Dr Julie Bennett and Professor Nick Wilson warned that "children are returning to in-person learning with little or no protection against the potential spread of Covid-19 infection in schools."

In addition to masking, they called for improved ventilation, noting: "New Zealand's cold, damp, indoor environments were a major public health concern long before this pandemic… An Auckland based study reported three out of six classrooms had very poor ventilation."

The experts wrote that "the risk [of infection] is particularly high while most of New Zealand's children are unvaccinated." Children aged above 12 only recently became eligible for vaccination, and those under 12 are still ineligible. About a third of the eligible population has received both doses of the Pfizer vaccine, and teachers were not made a priority for vaccination until this month.

The government's official COVID-19 website states: "Face coverings in schools and tertiary education

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facilities for those aged 12 and over is strongly encouraged, but it is not a requirement." Masks are also not required on school buses.

The Post-Primary Teachers' Association (PPTA) and NZEI Te Riu Roa—the two teacher unions—have raised no objections to these policies. Like the unions internationally, they are acting as enforcers for reopening schools and removing restrictions.

A teacher, who spoke to the *World Socialist Web Site* on condition of anonymity, said if a Delta case hit a school, the outcome would be "worse" than last year's outbreak. While schools had good contact tracing systems, he said, "that doesn't account for what happens outside of school, in people's homes, which is where the virus is spreading the most right now." Safety protections in schools were "very weak, they're not safe places to be."

The teacher estimated that "about a quarter of the staff" at his school were wearing masks. "It's very rare to see a student with a mask. Without a mandate, there is intense peer pressure among students not to wear a mask. From what I've seen on social media, different schools have very different ways of interpreting the recommendations. Some people are commenting that their school isn't doing anything, at other sites it sounds like everyone's wearing a mask."

For ventilation, teachers are encouraged to open windows, but this has to be balanced with the need for classrooms to be at a reasonable temperature—not an easy task in many schools. New Zealand is just beginning to emerge from winter.

The teacher said the unions had not pushed back against the lack of restrictions in schools, including on gathering sizes. The PPTA website states that in general "indoor gatherings cannot exceed 50 people," but this "does not apply" to schools.

He said it was also impossible to socially distance inside classrooms, adding: "I don't see any reason why the staff meetings we are having are not conducted online." He felt that there was a level of "complacency" outside of Auckland, "a sense that it can't happen here," and "very little awareness" of the fact that schools have become the main vector for transmission of the virus overseas.

He also felt that "we should still be doing online teaching. As long as there's unknowns in Auckland, there's unknowns across the country, and as long as there are people who have permission to travel to and from Auckland, there's a risk. This is a very infectious disease, capable of getting out of control fast."

Like capitalist governments everywhere, the Ardern government is under pressure to reopen as quickly as possible. It announced yesterday that it intends to ease the lockdown in Auckland in a week, depending on the number of new cases, which would mean at least the partial reopening of schools. Epidemiologist Rod Jackson told Radio NZ this was "probably not" long enough to stamp out the outbreak, and suggested it could take two weeks. The unions have raised no objection to the plan.

The unions' support for the government's reopening plans reinforces the need for new organisations. Rank-and-file committees should be formed in every school—involving teachers, school staff, parents and students—to oppose the premature reopening of schools in Auckland and demand the closure of schools nationwide until the outbreak is eliminated. No expense can be spared to implement science-based public health policies, to protect the lives and wellbeing of school staff, children and their families.

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