

New Zealand expert highlights dangers of reopening early childhood centres during COVID-19 outbreak

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There is widespread concern among teachers and parents about the New Zealand government's decision to reopen early childhood education centres (ECEs) during the present outbreak of COVID-19.

Nearly 1,000 cases of the highly-infectious Delta variant of the coronavirus have been detected since a nationwide lockdown began on August 18. Although about half of these have recovered, more cases are being found every day.

Almost all the infections are in New Zealand's largest city, Auckland, which remains in a strict "level 4" lockdown, with schools, ECEs and the vast majority of businesses closed. The rest of the country is now operating with virtually no restrictions in schools and ECEs.

Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern's Labour Party-led government is planning to ease the Auckland lockdown to "level 3" on September 22, depending on new case numbers. This would mean the partial reopening of ECEs and schools to allow a greater number of people to return to work, despite the danger that the virus may still be circulating.

Early this month the *World Socialist Web Site* published a letter from an ECE teacher opposing the rush to reopen and warning that it was impossible for centres to operate safely while the virus is present in the community. Many similar comments are being shared by teachers on social media. Experts have also raised concerns about the reopening of schools without any precautions. By contrast, the NZEI Te Riu Roa union, like its counterparts internationally, is supporting the government's policies.

In the US, Europe and elsewhere, the reopening of schools with Delta present in the community has led to

a major surge in hospitalisations and deaths. There have also been numerous outbreaks in preschools and kindergartens internationally. The long-term effects of the virus on children who become sick are still not well-known, but more children are becoming sick around the world.

Public health expert Dr. Mike Bedford, who has spoken out publicly against opening ECEs at alert level 3, recently spoke to the WSWs about his concerns. Bedford has spent decades researching conditions in the sector and has provided advice to government departments, as well as holding hundreds of workshops and lectures for ECE teachers. He has personally investigated about 50 infectious disease outbreaks in ECEs and has visited around 700 centres, some multiple times.

He explained: "In the last decade almost all the work I've done in the sector has been voluntary. We have no government agency that pays for this work. Part of the background to the current problem is that neither the Ministry of Education (MoE) nor the Ministry of Health have ever had a single full-time national position focused on the health and wellbeing of children in early care and education."

Last year, after the initial COVID-19 outbreak in New Zealand, Bedford said the MoE "tried to play down the risk with young children, almost as if it didn't exist. They would make statements like: 'It doesn't affect children in the same way as adults,' which was true. But it was not true to suggest that they couldn't contract and transmit COVID-19, even at that stage."

With the Delta variant, children are more vulnerable and more likely to transmit the virus. In the present

outbreak in New Zealand, several infant children have been infected, and 16.7 percent of all cases are among children aged 0–9. No one under 12 is yet able to be vaccinated.

Bedford said NZ’s level 4 lockdowns meant the virus had so far not been detected in ECEs, but this could change if the centres reopen because they “are great for the dissemination of infections across surfaces, through the air, because of the age of children, and also the crowded conditions.” Diseases like RSV (respiratory syncytial virus), rotavirus and norovirus “take down early childhood centres on a regular basis and get disseminated out to communities.”

The MoE website currently states: “The Ministry of Health has advised that it is safe for early learning staff to return to work at Alert Level 3.” Bedford said he had specifically asked the MoE not to make such statements, which were “blatantly false... because you categorically cannot operate safely in a level 3 environment with community transmission.”

When Bedford asked the MoE for details about the advice provided by the Ministry of Health, instead of simply answering, the MoE treated the question as an Official Information Act request, which allows it 20 days to answer. Bedford said this was “appalling behaviour... in the middle of an emergency” and with ECEs preparing to reopen soon.

Bedford encouraged ECEs to declare an emergency closure (known as EC) if they are told to reopen at level 3. The MoE has given no assurance that centres which refuse to reopen because of safety concerns will continue to receive funding. Bedford said the ministry was engaging in “unreasonable coercive behaviour.”

The risk posed by COVID-19 is made worse by “very poor” regulations in the ECE sector.

For centres to reopen at level 3, the MoE has increased the mandatory minimum indoor floor space from 2.5 square metres per child to 3 square metres. Bedford noted that this “would still be regarded as illegal overcrowding in Australia and other jurisdictions... The Australian standard is 3.25 clear floor space,” free from furniture and fixtures. In 2019, he compared New Zealand with other jurisdictions and found that NZ ranked 29th out of 34 countries with floor space requirements available online.

While many centres are run by owners and managers who are genuinely concerned with children’s wellbeing

and “will not countenance operating at minimum standards,” Bedford said others are run as businesses whose main priority is money.

He said the MoE’s licensing system is “stacked with perverse incentives” and “you can make a lot of money if you are prepared to go to minimum standards,” including by cramming as many children as possible into a centre. “It’s exactly the same principle as chicken farming,” he added.

The MoE has repeatedly stated that 98 percent of ECEs comply with regulations, but Bedford said there is nothing to back this claim up. Ministry officials have been forced to clarify that the figure only referred to the fact that there were 2 percent of centres on provisional licenses. “It’s the equivalent of saying that if you haven’t had your driver’s license suspended, you comply with all the road rules,” he said.

The ministry “do not check ratios [of staff], they do not check space per child, they do not check qualifications distribution across rooms... They also don’t monitor environmental conditions like temperature and ventilation. All of that is normally only done at the licensing stage, they do a one-off check and that’s it.”

Bedford’s own research in 2017 found that almost half the ECEs in the Hutt Valley, near Wellington, failed to meet the minimum indoor space requirements. In addition, 90 percent did not meet the minimum temperature standard, which was just 16 degrees Celsius (the requirement was increased to 18 degrees this year—60.8 Fahrenheit to 64.4 Fahrenheit). Viruses, including COVID-19, survive longer in colder temperatures.

The evidence clearly demonstrates the recklessness of the government’s current plans for reopening in Auckland. The WSWS urges early childcare workers, parents and all working people to build workplace and neighbourhood safety committees to oppose the drive to reopen before the current outbreak has been completely suppressed. Contact us today to discuss this perspective.



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