

Australian state government bars COVID-related school closures despite escalating infections

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The state Labor Party government in Victoria has instructed schools to cease closing for full quarantine periods when positive COVID-19 infections are detected among students or school staff. Under new guidelines, the Department of Education “*may* instruct the school to close for an initial period of up to 24 hours to allow for identification and notification of primary close contacts” (emphasis added).

These guidelines, issued on October 22, form part of the government’s push to condition the population to accept widespread COVID infections, including among children and young people.

Prior to Premier Daniel Andrews’ announcement on September 1, that his government was not aiming to eliminate community transmission, and that it was necessary to “live with the virus,” affected schools were closed for two weeks. Students and staff within those schools were advised to self-isolate over this time to avoid spreading infections. This mostly affected a limited number of students, whose parents were emergency workers and who were supervised at schools by a skeleton staff.

Now every effort is being made to block school closures and limit the number of student and staff close contacts required to self-isolate, regardless of the risk this creates for further infection spread. According to the Department of Education’s policy, when a case is detected in a school, those required to quarantine as close contacts are only those who spent at least *two hours* in the same room as the infected person. This disregards scientific knowledge of the Delta variant, which can spread through aerosol transmission with only fleeting contact, in a matter of seconds.

The state government reopened the schools on a staggered basis this term, beginning with senior high school students, from October 4. Other year levels have since returned to face-to-face learning for part of the school week, while every year level returns on a full-time basis from this Monday.

Even before the full resumption of in-person teaching, the school reopening drive has triggered numerous mass infection threats.

These were both entirely predictable, and preventable

consequences, of opening up schools amid record daily infections, still nearly 2,000 every day in Victoria. The Committee for Public Education (CFPE) has been the sole organisation that has collated and made public the daily tallies of schools affected by COVID outbreaks. The state government and the teacher unions have deliberately concealed this information.

The CFPE has tallied a total of 328 schools closed in Victoria over the past four weeks, since the beginning of term. This is not an exhaustive list, because it primarily consists of difficult-to-access data from the Department of Education, as well as information from social media and other sources, including teacher and parent reports to the CFPE. No official data is available for COVID-affected private schools. Given that nearly 40 percent of students attend private schools, the total number of affected schools is undoubtedly much higher.

In neighbouring New South Wales (NSW), where the Liberal-National state government has adopted a similar “let it rip” COVID agenda, the CFPE has tallied at least 154 schools closed, because of coronavirus outbreaks in Term 4. This follows at least 216 school closures in Term 3.

Refusal by public authorities to publish comprehensive accounts of COVID-related school closures is just one expression of the extraordinary censorship that has accompanied the reopening drive. Basic public health data is being kept secret—including the number of infected teachers and school workers, and the source of those infections.

Both epidemiological science and international experience with the pandemic underscore the criminal recklessness of the bipartisan drive to keep schools open, amid ongoing transmission of the virus.

Throughout Australia, governments are acting at the behest of big business and finance capital. Like their international counterparts, the corporate elite is determined to eliminate all health restrictions that impinge on profit accumulation. The campaign to return children to classrooms, regardless of the danger, is necessary to dragoon all workers back into their workplaces.

Numerous studies have exposed the lie that children and

young adults are not at risk from the virus. In Britain, where the Tory government of Prime Minister Boris Johnson spearheaded the homicidal “herd immunity” strategy of encouraging unchecked infections, COVID is spreading among children at staggering levels. One in 33 primary age children and one in 12 secondary pupils are currently infected.

The UK this week recorded its 100th child death from the virus, with 13 of these recorded in the seven weeks since schools reopened. Each death represents a terrible tragedy for the affected families and communities. Countless thousands more families confront the largely unknown, potentially lifelong, health dangers of long COVID, with children at risk of debilitating respiratory and neurological issues.

Widespread concern over the situation among parents, students, teachers and school workers, in Victoria and NSW, has seen the CFPE’s daily tallies of school closures viewed online this month by tens of thousands of people. The circulation of this material has cut across a media blackout on the issue, which formed part of an ongoing ideological campaign to portray the junking of lockdowns and related health restrictions, including online learning for school students, as a joyous occasion.

Numerous teachers and parents have contacted the CFPE expressing their opposition to the reopening drive.

One parent wrote: “I’ve been following your school closure posts which have been extremely helpful, thanks so much for providing. I am exceedingly alarmed however that schools are now in many instances not closing in Victoria in response to positive COVID cases and that we now have no idea which schools are affected. As a parent of unvaccinated under 12s attending school in regional Vic, this greatly concerns me, as I have no way of attempting to judge how prevalent COVID is in our local schools, which is vital information that I use in assisting me to decide whether or not to permit my children to attend school each day... Our school has no CO2 detectors, no air filtration systems, no classes conducted outdoors, and the only external door to my child’s classroom is currently broken and the windows do not open, so there is no external ventilation.”

Only last week did outlets, including the *Age*, *Guardian* and *Herald Sun*, report on the number of school closures, utilising the CFPE’s figures, although the latter publication alone acknowledged this.

Supposed mitigation efforts in the schools amount to little more than ineffective fig leaves.

In NSW, as one person wrote to the CFPE: “Education Minister Sarah Mitchell contemptuously told teachers to take their students outside, sit them under a tree and read them a book. Teachers responded by saying their school had no trees, no grass and were often over-crowded. Another posted [that] “my school grounds were designed for 400 students, and now has 1,300 enrolled.”

In Victoria, government boasts about a COVID-safe return to

school have likewise been exposed. Education Minister James Merlino announced last month that 51,000 air purifiers would be purchased for schools. The Australian Broadcasting Corporation reported this week that just 3,600 of these, or 7 percent, are currently operational. Numerous schools, including those in the working-class suburbs worst affected by COVID, have reopened without a single purifier.

Air circulation in many public schools is abysmal. Some feature only a limited number of windows able to be opened, and some of these only by a small crack. Many classrooms also have no overhead fans. Others rely on air conditioning systems that recycle air within rooms. Teachers have been advised that these cannot be used due to the danger of aerosol spread. This will create intolerable conditions within classrooms, on the numerous hot days that will come with summer.

State and federal governments are only able to proceed with their reopening drive because of the active collaboration and support they receive from the trade unions.

The teacher unions’ *modus operandi* is consistent across the states: say as little publicly as possible and post nothing on social media, in order to block teachers from discussing their thoughts and experiences. They present COVID safety as a matter for individual schools and teachers, and attempt to silence people opposing the reopenings, above all teacher-members of the CFPE. Behind the scenes, the Australian Education Union and NSW Teachers Federation are actively working with governments to enforce the reopening drive.

The CFPE is urging teachers and school staff to form rank-and-file safety committees in every school, independent of the unions. These committees need to develop the widest public discussion on the situation in schools, based on the most accurate scientific research and the full release of all relevant public health data, including the number of school infections. On this basis, the committees can collectively develop the necessary measures to protect the health and safety of teachers, school workers and students, potentially including industrial action and strikes.

The CFPE urges all working people to contact and join us—report on the situation in your schools, alert others to the dangers confronting students and staff, and join the discussion on the necessary collective response.

Contact us here:

Email: cfpe.aus@gmail.com

Facebook: www.facebook.com/commforpubliceducation

Twitter: [@CFPE_Australia](https://twitter.com/CFPE_Australia)



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

[wsws.org/contact](https://www.wsws.org/contact)