

# COVID-19 spreads through New Zealand schools and childcare centres

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In New Zealand, COVID-19 has spread into well over 130 schools and early childhood education centres (ECEs) since the outbreak of the highly infectious Delta variant began in August.

The figure was only revealed by the Ministry of Education (MOE) on December 2, with a spokesperson telling the *New Zealand Herald* that 56 ECEs and 75 schools in Auckland have experienced positive cases among staff or students. The vast majority of affected ECEs and several of the schools have not been publicly named.

Not included in the MOE figures are more than 15 affected schools outside of Auckland, including in Bay of Plenty, Waikato, New Plymouth, Rotorua, Northland and Nelson. Every week there are multiple new reports of cases in schools.

The trade unions, NZEI Te Riu Roa and the Post-Primary Teachers' Association, have not published any reports about which schools and ECEs have had cases of coronavirus. While keeping such information from teachers and parents, they have worked closely with the Labour government to enforce its reopening policies.

Auckland is the centre of New Zealand's outbreak, with about 6,000 active cases of COVID-19. There are more than 300 additional cases spread across other parts of the country. Cases have shot up since the Labour Party-led government abandoned its previous elimination strategy more than two months ago, and began to reopen ECEs, schools and businesses in Auckland.

On December 3, the New Zealand government lifted what remained of the lockdown in Auckland, allowing all businesses and public buildings to reopen.

The MOE's belatedly released and incomplete figures expose the false claims, made by the government and the media, that reopening education

during the outbreak can be done safely. Several news reports quote a standardized email that schools are sending to parents with the reassuring message: "Based on international and local evidence and experience, the risk of COVID-19 transmission within school settings is considered low."

In fact, the evidence shows the exact opposite. Schools are hotbeds for the spread of COVID-19 among children, staff, their families and the wider community, especially under conditions where no one under 12 can be vaccinated.

In the UK, the reopening of schools has produced a disaster: 115 children have died from COVID-19 and 77,000 aged 2 to 16 have suffered from the debilitating condition known as Long COVID, including 14,000 who have had symptoms for longer than 12 months. In the US, by the end of November, 23,000 children had been hospitalized and more than 700 had died.

Reports from South Africa indicate that the new Omicron variant is disproportionately infecting children, with a concerning increase in hospitalisations for those under five years old.

There are few mitigation measures in New Zealand schools. While teachers must be vaccinated, there is no such requirement for eligible students or parents. Currently in Auckland, masks are only mandatory for students above Year 4, while for much of the rest of the country, masks are not required.

Children under 12 cannot be vaccinated. Nationwide, about 74 percent of the population is fully vaccinated, 88 percent of eligible people. This leaves about a million people unvaccinated.

A teacher in Gisborne told the WSWs that she was concerned that the MOE had downplayed "the effect that Covid can have on a child and a [childcare] centre." She said parents able to stay home should be

told that they “must have their children at home.” The Tairāwhiti region that includes Gisborne has a vaccination rate of 67 percent (80 percent of those eligible), one of the lowest in the country.

The MOE says that going forward, under the new so-called “traffic light” public health framework, schools are unlikely to close if they get cases of COVID-19. According to a list shared in the Teachers Advocacy Group (TAG) on Facebook, out of 38 schools and ECEs where students or staff tested positive during November, 22 remained open and 16 were closed temporarily (usually just for a few days).

The TAG is a forum, independent of the unions, for ECE teachers, parents and supporters to share information and raise concerns. One member recently thanked the TAG for publicising positive cases in schools, saying it was “one of the reasons why I didn’t send my child back to school.” Had they done so, “I would be isolating right now because one of the cases is in his class.”

Another teacher contacted the group saying that she was refusing to go back to work until there was more clarity. Her child had recently become severely ill with a different virus and she was unwilling to “take any chances.”

TAG founder, researcher and teacher Susan Bates, sent the WSWS some findings from a recent survey she conducted on Facebook, which attracted 446 responses from ECE teachers:

Nearly half, 49 percent, did not feel safe in their workplace, a further 16 percent were unsure, leaving just 35 percent who felt safe.

60 percent said they had no input into their service’s COVID response and protocols.

Only 47 percent felt that enough information had been provided to them; 31 percent said not enough had been provided, and 22 percent were unsure.

Asked if they were aware which of their centre’s families were most at risk from COVID, 53 percent said yes and 47 percent were not aware.

Only 18 percent said that their centre had an air filter, one of the recommended mitigations for COVID-19, and 27 percent didn’t know.

67 percent of respondents said most activities with children could be conducted outdoors, which reduces the risk of transmission, but 33 percent said this was not possible at their centre.

One respondent commented in their survey: “I’m very disappointed with the decisions of the government and my employer, putting business before health and safety.” The person said that parents were not being told of positive cases in ECEs and had “a false belief of safety.”

Another comment stated: “No one listens to [ECE] teachers or cares about the risks to us or the children and [the authorities] are hiding ECE COVID cases.” A further respondent criticised the “vague and often very late announcements” about the protocols for ECEs, which was contributing to parents becoming stressed and hostile.

One respondent called for government funding for centres to have air filters and ventilation. The government announced only last week that it was ordering air purifiers and carbon dioxide monitors for schools, but it is not clear if these will be available for ECEs.

Schools are due to close at the end of next week for the summer holidays. In the meantime, with the full support of the pro-capitalist trade unions, the government is determined to keep them open, placing children at risk so that their parents can keep working, generating profits for the ruling class. Over the holidays, the virus will spread further as families travel around the country.

To stop this unfolding public health disaster, teachers, school staff and parents must take matters into their own hands. The WSWS calls for the formation of rank-and-file safety committees in every school, ECE and workplace, to fight for the closure of all schools and businesses in areas with COVID-19, and for a properly resourced elimination strategy to reduce case numbers to zero.

We also call on teachers and parents to register to participate in the WSWS Global Workers’ Inquest into the COVID-19 Pandemic, which will expose the government policies that have allowed the coronavirus to spread internationally, and what must be done to stop the pandemic.



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