

# Omicron cases exacerbate COVID-19 crisis in Australian schools

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The recent detection of the highly transmissible Omicron COVID-19 variant in at least two Sydney schools underscores the growing danger of the virus spreading in the schools.

Authorities yesterday reported a total of 34 Omicron cases have been detected. The real number is undoubtedly higher. Health officials are concerned that as many as 140 people attending a boat party on Sydney Harbour may have been infected in the potentially first “super spreader” Omicron event in the country.

Among the confirmed cases, 20 are linked to two Sydney schools, Regents Park Christian School and St Peter Chanel Catholic Primary School, both in Regents Park, a working class western suburb.

Scientists are still determining the extent to which the Omicron variant is more infectious and potentially more dangerous. Initial reports from southern Africa, however, are alarming, including on the potential impact on young children. South African authorities have tallied a higher rate of hospitalisation of children, including those under 5 years of age, than at any other stage of the global pandemic.

The situation is an indictment of the entire Australian political establishment—Liberal, Labor, and Greens. The Liberal-National state government in New South Wales (NSW) and Labor state government in Victoria rushed to reopen the schools in Sydney and Melbourne in early October. This was a central aspect of the ruling elite’s drive to permanently junk lockdown measures and other health restrictions impinging on the interests of big business and finance capital.

Despite the spread of Omicron in Sydney, and potentially in other cities, state governments are keeping the schools open with less than two weeks before the scheduled end of term. This includes the Victorian capital, Melbourne, where two suspected Omicron cases contacted in the community were reported this morning. Only private schools, including the Catholic sector and some elite institutions, have moved to end face-to-face teaching this year, leaving the largely working class student body in the public school system at

risk in the coming days.

This decision has a provocative character, making clear the bipartisan determination to proceed with the “reopening” plan regardless of the dangers inflicted on ordinary people.

A critical role is being played by the teacher unions. The Australian Education Union (AEU), Independent Education Union (IEU) and NSW Teachers Federation (NSWTF) have consciously covered up the data on school closures and infection rates and have blocked every effort of teachers and school workers to defend their safety and that of their students in the face of efforts to keep classrooms open.

NSWTF president Angelo Gavrielatos recently admitted that he knew of at least 500 schools in NSW that have had infections. Carol Matthews from the Independent Education Union (IEU) admitted that she knew of a cluster of 80 cases associated with an early learning centre in NSW. At the same time, both unions have refused to publish the full data they have access to.

At a strike rally held last Tuesday when 50,000 teachers stopped work to demand adequate wages and conditions, none of the union bureaucrats once mentioned COVID.

Likewise in Victoria, the AEU bureaucracy has collaborated with the schools’ reopening. Daily case numbers in the state are above 1,000 and each day sees around 8-12 deaths, with the media barely reporting this toll any more. Last month, a child under 10 died of the virus in the state. This tragedy represents the youngest death from COVID to occur in Australia and the third of three under-20 year olds killed since the outbreak of the Delta variant began last June.

Educational settings far outstrip any other sector in Victoria as the source of COVID clusters (where there are more than 10 connected cases) of infection. More than 140 educational settings have been listed as clusters, associated with almost 3,000 cases. The worst cluster so far reported was at Morwell Park Primary School, in the regional working class centre of Latrobe Valley, which has 400 students. The school registered 80 COVID cases among teachers and staff.

With vaccination not yet available in Australia for children under 12, the number of cases in this age group continues to grow, both numerically and as a proportion of total infections. Since the beginning of November, children under 10 have represented more than a quarter of all new cases.

In Australia just under 30,000 children under the age of 10 have been diagnosed with COVID-19 and another just over 30,000 aged between 10 and 19. This represents 30 percent of all cases. Currently between 5 and 6 percent of children in Australia with COVID-19 are hospitalised. Early last month there had been ten children under 10 years of age, and another 28 between the ages of 10-19, admitted to intensive care in NSW. An age breakdown of hospitalisations in Victoria has not been made readily available.

Modelling for NSW by OzSAGE, a group of epidemiologists and medical experts, predicts a ten-fold increase in infections in NSW by June 2022 if mitigation strategies are dropped and under 12s are not vaccinated.

Both the NSW and Victorian government have instituted measures that deliberately conceal the real impact of the pandemic on children. Mitigations, including contact tracing and isolation, are being watered down in order to keep schools open despite the obvious risks. The responsibility for contact tracing in schools is no longer conducted by the relevant health departments but by the schools themselves.

The “national cabinet” is using dubious Doherty Institute modelling to adopt a “test to stay” strategy that ensures children remain in schools, while accepting a high probability of significant clusters resulting from a single case in a school. The Doherty modelling predicts clusters of more than 50 infections from one infection in a school 20 percent of the time, confirming international evidence that schools act as vectors for the virus, with unvaccinated children spreading the disease into their families and communities.

The Victorian government’s “test to stay” regime means that contacts with an infected person in an educational environment only have to isolate until they receive a negative PCR test result before returning to school. Rapid antigen testing is then supposed to be conducted daily by parents for the following week and results reported to the school. The families and households of an “education contact” do not need to isolate at all. The same guidelines have now been implemented by the NSW government.

Both states are also using partial closures, where only those in a single year or class group are classified as contacts and the rest of the school remains operational. In practice this means schools will see repeated infections taking place. Even with the stronger measures that were in place during October and early November, more than 500 schools have

closed in NSW and more than 800 in Victoria.

One-third of the school closures in NSW have occurred in the seven most impoverished local government areas in Sydney and almost half of school closures have been in working class regional areas, including those with a high indigenous population.

In Ivanhoe, a small town in far west NSW, the local school was closed for two weeks, with more than 5 percent of the community recorded as active cases and almost all of the population in isolation. In the regional town of Albury, there have been at least 25 school closures due to COVID in the last five weeks of the school term.

The federal and state governments, as well as the media and the unions, are consciously concealing the real impact of COVID on children and schools.

There is clear medical evidence on the risks posed to children including the long term effects on their health. International experiences confirm that children die from COVID-19 and thousands of children suffer long term effects. In the United States, 636 children have died, in the United Kingdom, 110.

Parents and teachers, and the entire working class, need to take up the fight against the murderous policy of herd immunity and “living with the virus.” What is needed is a global movement of workers and young people, parents and teachers fighting for a scientific response aimed at ending the pandemic by eliminating the virus.

This perspective is fought for by the Committee for Public Education. It is holding an online public meeting this Saturday at 2 p.m. (AEDT), titled “COVID-19 spreads through Australian schools: Lives before profit! Stop the pandemic!” Register in advance here.



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