

Parents in Australia expose COVID-19 school clusters

The Committee for Public Education
29 December 2021

The school year in Australia ended this month amid a surge in COVID school infections and clusters. In the two most populous states, New South Wales (NSW) and Victoria, the 10-week term 4 saw the most serious outbreaks. There were more than 920 school closures or partial closures in Victoria and more than 550 in New South Wales.

Despite these alarming figures, and with the education sector surpassing pandemic infections in any other workplaces, both the state and federal governments backed by the teacher trade unions continued to claim that schools were safe.

As governments nationally adopted the policy of “living with the virus” and lifted basic health restrictions, many schools suffered clusters of COVID-19 infection. This was particularly severe in primary schools, with children under 12 years old unvaccinated.

Nevertheless, Liberal-National and Labor Party governments alike, with the support of the Australian Education Union and the NSW Teachers Federation, insisted that schools remain open throughout term 4 and proceed with end-of-year activities, such as graduation ceremonies, concerts and school camps, resulting in further infections.

The governments’ aim was to provide a façade of supposed “normality,” aiming to disguise the reality of infections spreading through schools. In addition to keeping staff and parents in the dark about growing clusters, some school administrations threatened education staff demanding they remain silent about infections.

On December 18, the *Age* newspaper in Melbourne reported that students in two primary schools were in isolation on the eve of Christmas after attending a camp in South Gippsland that later became Victoria’s biggest

single active COVID-19 outbreak. Already by then there were 47 cases of COVID-19 linked to the camp, with a further 54 connected to children from two Melbourne primary schools—Brunswick North West and Armadale. Other school camp outbreaks have since been reported.

Similar outbreaks have occurred in NSW, with incidences posted on teachers’ Facebook pages. At Ponds High School, 15 teachers and 75 students were infected after a school formal.

One of the largest clusters during term 4 was at Morwell Park Primary School. Morwell is a working-class community in the La Trobe Valley, 150 kilometres east of Melbourne. At the beginning of October, Premier Daniel Andrews’s Labor government began lifting lockdown restrictions and reopening schools across the state, despite record infections in Melbourne.

Within days, infections began spreading into regional towns such as Morwell. In just 48 hours, 15 people in the community tested positive, with one of the first infections detected at Morwell Park Primary in the first week of the term. The infections continued throughout the term, peaking at 80 in a school population of 400.

The Committee for Public Education (CFPE), whose members have been independently gathering and publishing daily updates of school infections and clusters, received the following comments from two parents.

A Morwell Park parent, who wished to remain anonymous, explained that both her children suffer from a rare health condition. As a result, her children have only attended one day of school since the end of term 3. “I am so concerned that with their conditions, the positive cases and their lack of vaccination have put them at extreme risk,” she said.

Despite her children's serious health conditions, obtaining exemptions not to attend school proved problematic. "I have found it difficult getting a doctor locally to take up my concerns. The transient nature of doctors into and out of town has been difficult. I eventually got my children into surgery at [Melbourne's] Royal Children's Hospital, where they have now had an improved outcome, but remain at severe risk."

While no exemption was granted, the school principal, understanding the children's health issues, accepted a medical letter and allowed the children to access schooling online. This remained problematic, however, as teachers had to juggle their classes as well as provide work for her children.

She added: "Since the start of term 4, there have been infected kids showing signs of COVID-19 for the whole morning in my daughter's grade 1 class, but they were left in the school until lunchtime. The school hasn't informed me of close-contact status... There have been cases in prep to grade 5, but grade 6 students were still required to attend.

"The school isn't communicating how many parents are not sending their children to school. I feel isolated due to making the decision not to send my kids to school. All the while, cases are continuing to grow, but I'm told everything is fine!

"I think we should stay shut. Wouldn't it be better to get on top of this virus?... I really am quite concerned about this new variant now. Everything has opened up and we're told everything is OK, but it's not!

"I've been told I'm playing with my children's mental health. I don't want to keep them at home, it's not something I want to do, but we can't just simply fix someone who gets COVID. There is the possibility of Long COVID!

"The huge rise in cases is alarming and I am stressed the government has announced there will be no more lockdowns. People are thinking it is going to disappear, but it is not. Look at what is happening overseas. I want a six-month lockdown to go 'into the red' to get on top of it and come out in a positive way."

The opportunity to relate her concerns to the CFPE "has been great." She explained: "I've been told I'm over-reacting, so I'm grateful to have the opportunity to explain this predicament and be finally listened to. Thank you."

Another parent, from Castlemaine, a regional town north of Melbourne, pointed to a growing school cluster in her community, just one of many school outbreaks undisclosed by the state government's Department of Education and Health and Human Services (DHHS) throughout the term.

Her message, sent at the end of term 4, stated: "Our school's now evolving into a major cluster. Estimated 20+ and growing. Interestingly zero acknowledgement in even local media. Not yet listed under DHHS clusters even though >10 cases confirmed yesterday.

"EVERY student and staff now have to isolate and undergo PCR. Multiple local testing clinics have closed due to exceeding capacity.

"We received correspondence from school saying it won't be listed as 'closed' officially due to happening on last day of term. The DHHS yet again concealing transmission and letting it silently spread. Absolutely disgusting.

"The school is doing its best to support and notify everyone involved. This is the Department of Education failing rather than the school. I am so devastated to the extent to which we've been abandoned by the Victorian government."

To take forward the fight to expose the official coverups and disastrous government responses to the pandemic, participants in an online public meeting called by the CFPE this month unanimously voted for a resolution endorsing the Global Workers' Inquest into the COVID-19 Pandemic.



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