

New Zealand government to reopen schools despite Omicron threat

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With New Zealand's new school term beginning in under three weeks, the Labour-Green Party government has declared that it wants students back in class full-time this year—even as the highly virulent COVID-19 Omicron variant threatens to sweep into the country.

Last week over 90 Omicron cases were detected at the border, with three cases entering the country. There were 64 new border-related COVID-19 cases in MIQ (Managed Isolation and Quarantine) during the weekend, bringing the total to 227.

With escalating numbers of returnees to New Zealand testing positive, there are fears of an imminent Omicron outbreak in the community. Epidemiologist Michael Baker called the variant a “huge threat” and said it was not a matter of if there was an outbreak, but when.

Baker further warned that New Zealand is not ready for Omicron and the country needed “time to prepare.” The government's three-tier “traffic light” COVID-19 management system, which replaced lockdowns in December, “isn't going to help us a great deal with Omicron,” he told Newstalk ZB, and a return to localised lockdowns should be considered.

Despite such warnings, Education and COVID-19 Response Minister Chris Hipkins told the *New Zealand Herald* that in 2022, he wants “stability and full attendance” at schools, with “disruptive measures” such as alternating days on-site only used at local level in case of an outbreak. He anticipated a “high threshold” would be required before officials considered closing a school. “A couple of cases generally wouldn't be enough to trigger it,” Hipkins declared.

The government is seeking to suppress any repeat of the resistance that emerged among teachers and parents late last year. COVID-19 spread into well over 130 schools and early childhood education centres (ECEs)

after the outbreak in August of the Delta variant. According to the Teachers Advocacy Group, out of 38 schools and ECEs where students or staff tested positive in November, 22 had remained open and 16 were closed for just a few days.

The Ministry of Education (MoE), supported by the teacher unions, the Post Primary Teachers Association and the NZ Educational Institute, declared at the time that under the government's so-called “traffic light” framework, which replaced generalised lockdowns in December, schools were unlikely to fully close even with cases of COVID-19.

The MoE posted a standardized email last term, circulated among parents, declaring: “Based on international and local evidence and experience, the risk of COVID-19 transmission within school settings is considered low.” This is a blatant lie. Schools, including in Auckland, became hotbeds for the spread of COVID-19 among children, staff, their families and the wider community,

As the new school year looms, Hipkins is claiming that vaccination is sufficient to justify re-openings. From January 1 all staff must have been double-vaccinated while vaccination rates for secondary school students are expected to hit 90 percent before the start of term. Pfizer's vaccine for children aged 5-11 will be available from January 17, with 476,000 eligible.

Feigning concern for the welfare of students, Hipkins claimed getting them back to school would help remedy issues like the so-called “digital divide,” which he claimed was made worse by COVID. Teachers had found hybrid learning was “almost impossible,” Hipkins added. His focus would be on “wellbeing” by ensuring students were attending school and engaged. “We certainly wouldn't want them to lose any more in-person learning time,” Hipkins declared.

In reality, the problems associated with online learning were the product of the government's failure to provide sufficient resources to students and staff.

Public health measures will be in place, the minister said, with indoor masking and cohorting—that is, limiting mixing between class groups. In fact, it is impossible for hundreds of students and staff to meet elementary social distancing and other necessary guidelines. According to David Welch from Auckland University, a massive strengthening of protective measures, including upgrades to ventilation in schools and workplaces is immediately required.

Hipkins is openly embracing the homicidal policy demanded by ruling elites internationally of “herd immunity,” telling the *Herald* the “best scenario” for New Zealand is “COVID mutating over time to become more transmissible but much less severe.” Last month he flatly stated; “We are moving to a different space now, where we are going to have COVID-19 in the community.”

The government's policy to let the virus spread is being strongly criticised by scientific experts. Baker warned that every government agency needs to immediately prepare for Omicron, including measures “to reduce the risk in schools [and] manage infection in children.” That could mean “closing classes or whole schools for short periods,” as well as frequent rapid antigen tests for students and teachers and indoor masks for kids as young as 5.

In overseas countries, schools were forced to close because many teachers were off sick, Baker warned. Under Labour's current policy, he noted, even in an Omicron outbreak under the “red light” settings schools are still required to remain open. Steps need to be taken before the virulent variant enters, so that classrooms “don't just turn into an endless series of super-spreading events,” Baker said.

Particularly in Europe and North America, the highly infectious Omicron variant is forcing many schools to shut down as it spreads quickly among teachers and students. The reopening of schools is producing a disaster as governments are determined to keep them running, placing children at risk so that their parents can keep working, generating profits for the economic and financial elite.

Determined resistance is erupting internationally as teachers, students and parents unite to oppose the

homicidal agenda. A wave of class struggles has already erupted. Thousands of teachers across the United States are currently staging sickouts in defiance of the unsafe reopening of schools.

Teachers staged walkouts last week in Chicago, Oakland, and San Francisco, to fight for a switch to fully remote learning in order to stop viral transmission. Chicago's Democratic Party Mayor Lori Lightfoot has effectively locked teachers out in response.

The Educators Rank-and-File-Safety Committee in the UK has called an emergency meeting Tuesday to discuss a fightback against the rampant spread of COVID-19 throughout British schools. Teachers in Australia face the same struggle, as record cases of Omicron escalate daily.

To stop an unfolding public health disaster, teachers, school staff and parents in New Zealand must take matters into their own hands and oppose the Ardern government's agenda. The Socialist Equality Group (NZ) 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 non-essential businesses in areas with COVID-19, and for an elimination strategy to reduce case numbers to zero.

This must be part of an international campaign. We 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 globally, and what must be done to stop the pandemic.



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