

Australian state and federal governments confirm school reopening plan amid record COVID infections

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Australia's so-called National Cabinet, comprising Prime Minister Scott Morrison and state and territory leaders, met yesterday and confirmed there will be no alteration to existing plans to reopen schools across the country in the next two to three weeks.

The meeting was held amid the deadliest week of the pandemic. There have been 398 deaths across the country in the past seven days, an all-time high. Daily fatality records have been broken twice, with an unprecedented 80 casualties reported today. The hospitals in virtually every state are in breakdown, with Victoria this week declaring a "code brown" for the first time in its history, signifying that demand exceeds capacity throughout the entire hospital system.

Under these conditions, the National Cabinet did not discuss a single measure to bolster the hospitals or reduce transmission. Every policy on the table, above all the school reopenings, was instead premised on even greater transmission, meaning more infections, illness and deaths.

Not all of the states have yet finalised the details of their school reopening policies, but the outlines are clear. Every state government, Labor or Liberal, is refusing to organise remote learning to protect the health and safety of students, teachers, and school workers.

In Queensland there will be a two-week delay to the start of term, likewise for some year levels in South Australia, while everywhere else the academic year will begin as scheduled. Across the country, a significant minority of 12–16-year-olds remain unvaccinated, around a quarter.

For 5–11-year-olds, they only became eligible to be vaccinated on January 10. About 1 in 5 within this age group will have received a single jab by the time schools are reopened, and none will have received the necessary double dose.

In every state, both Labor and Liberal administrations have failed to invest in even basic mitigation measures. Few classrooms will be equipped with air filtration systems. Many rooms, especially in overcrowded working-class public schools, will lack any means of ventilation whatsoever.

Chief medical officer Paul Kelly, speaking alongside

Morrison after the National Cabinet meeting, yesterday acknowledged that reopening the schools would increase COVID infections. "Having children back in the class will increase the movement around our cities," he stated. "Every January there is a drop in the mixing and the number of contacts that people have outside their households. So we do expect that will increase that transmission potential, as we call it, will increase as schools go back." He added: "There are trade-offs today in terms of transmission."

Kelly said that modelling has been carried out on the likely impact of this additional transmission potential, but refused to publicly release it, in keeping with the increasing secrecy with which every level of government is handling COVID data.

While the political establishment is pursuing its "let it rip" pandemic policy, working people have done everything possible to act responsibly and minimise transmission. The media has spoken of a "shadow lockdown," with travel movement data indicating that people are staying at home—avoiding unnecessary shopping, travel, and interactions with other households—at a level comparable to those during lockdown periods in 2020–21.

One of the government's calculations behind the school reopening drive is to smash the "shadow lockdown" on behalf of the retail, hospitality and entertainment industries.

Morrison yesterday continued to bluntly emphasise that the overriding reason that schools had to be forced open was to ensure that workers remained in their workplaces.

"If schools aren't open," the prime minister declared, "we could see the peak furloughing of our workforce go from 10 percent to 15 percent, which would have a devastating effect on our economy." Morrison made this point multiple times in the press conference, adding, for example, that he was determined to continue "keeping the economy functioning by keeping the schools open."

For "the economy," Morrison is more accurately understood as referring to the interests of the major corporations and finance capital. The schools' reopening drive represents a class war measure.

State and federal governments continue to advance the

propaganda line that Omicron is a “mild” virus and that children are unaffected, despite the mountain of international evidence exposing these lies. In the United States, to take just one example, last week alone nearly one million children were infected with COVID, a new record high. Over the same seven-day period, nearly 2,000 more children were hospitalised with the virus. Children are dying every day. The potentially life-long impact of long COVID, which studies suggest may affect around 10 percent of children, remains largely unknown but the condition has already produced large numbers of chronic physiological and neurological health conditions.

Teachers and school workers are also on the front line in Australia. Mass infection is being deliberately planned and no provision whatsoever is being made for vulnerable educators, such as those who are near retirement age or have underlying health conditions.

Teachers will be at risk from the grossly inadequate close contact quarantine guidelines. Kelly yesterday acknowledged that 21 days quarantine for people who test positive would be required to guarantee there was no risk of infection spread—but he was immediately interrupted by Morrison, who said, “We’re not doing that. Just to be clear.”

Close contacts must quarantine for just seven days, with this duration determined not by medical and epidemiological science but by business-workforce priorities.

Based on the scientific understanding of COVID-19 as a virulent airborne pathogen, anyone who shares the same air space as an infected person, even for the shortest period of time, ought to be regarded as a close contact. But this is not the case. Stipulations vary between states, but most require two or more hours of close, indoor interaction to warrant close contact classification. In an extraordinary move yesterday, the Tasmanian state government announced that no student would be deemed a close contact unless at least five other students in their classroom tested positive over a seven-day period.

According to Channel Nine News, authorities anticipate that up to 20 percent of teachers will be off sick with COVID at any given time this term. State governments are dragooning a reserve teaching workforce to cover the anticipated casualties. In New South Wales (NSW), for example, 1,000 final-year university students and retired principals will reportedly be hired, while Department of Education bureaucrats have been warned they may be called on to work in classrooms.

Several state governments, reportedly including NSW and Victoria, are planning on having students take rapid antigen tests (RAT) up to twice a week. Morrison yesterday said that the federal government would split the cost with state governments implementing such measures. It remains to be seen whether this will be possible, given the chronic national shortage of RAT supplies and that testing every student twice a week would require millions of additional tests.

Regardless, the measure will not ensure student safety. Rapid tests are very unreliable. South Australian Premier Steven

Marshall said that his government would not be implementing this so-called surveillance testing, on the basis of health authorities’ advice. “It is going to give a lot of false negatives, which in many ways is going to give people a false sense of security they don’t have the disease,” he stated.

This false sense of security is precisely why the federal government, together with the NSW and Victorian state governments and the Australian Education Union, are promoting RATs for students.

Morrison was asked yesterday why he was funding the measure if public health authorities had not recommended it. He replied that state governments had “other policy purposes.” Paul Kelly spelled out the meaning of this when he said the aim was “giving confidence, to get kids back to school and teachers into the classroom.”

Teachers, school workers, students, parents and the working class as a whole must urgently mobilise to oppose the dangerous reopening of the schools. Fully funded and resourced remote learning must be demanded, as part of a suite of emergency measures, including the suspension of non-essential economic activity and guaranteed income support for all workers and small business owners. This necessary fight must be developed independently of the teacher unions, which are collaborating with state governments to reopen the schools, and centre on the building of rank-and-file safety committees in every school and community.

The Committee for Public Education (CFPE) alone advances this political perspective, and we urge all working people and youth to attend our online public meeting, “No to Australian school reopenings amid record COVID infections! Educators, students, parents—join the fight for rank-and-file safety committees!” It will be held online on January 23 at 11 a.m. (AEDT) and we encourage people to register in advance.

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