

Australian school guidelines detail dangerous COVID-19 conditions

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Ahead of tomorrow's reopening of schools in New South Wales (NSW) and Victoria, to be followed by other states over the next fortnight, school guidelines for managing COVID-19 infections have been issued to principals and teachers.

The documents underscore the unsafe conditions that await school workers and students—unless opposed, the return to face-to-face teaching will inflict entirely preventable mass infection and serious illness and death.

Most of the key details have previously been announced by the state Liberal government in NSW and its Labor counterpart in Victoria. The two administrations, governing the worst COVID-affected states, have worked closely together to devise near-identical school reopening plans. NSW Premier Dominic Perrottet and Labor Premier Daniel Andrews have agreed there will be no consideration of any delay to the beginning of the school year, and under no circumstances will there be state-wide returns to remote learning.

Under conditions where tens of thousands of positive COVID cases are being reported daily, and countless more are going undetected and unreported, reopening schools is an inherently dangerous measure. There is no way that 20 to 30 or more students, plus their teacher and education aides, can spend most of the day within an enclosed room without large-scale spread of the virus.

State governments across the country are nevertheless boasting of their “COVID safe” plans for the schools. The centrepiece of this in NSW and Victoria is the promotion of rapid antigen tests (RATs) to be used twice a week by students and staff, and daily for those in special schools. Governments and the teacher unions have promoted the provision of RATs as a significant step towards minimising in-school COVID infections. In reality, however, the measure is primarily aimed at creating the illusion of safety in order to get school staff and families through the school gates at the start of term.

The clearest indication of this is the four week limit that has been imposed for the provision of RATs. After the first

month, COVID infections will continue but state governments hope that by then sufficient numbers of people will be acclimatised to regular mass COVID outbreaks.

Even within the first four weeks of term, the twice weekly testing of students is entirely voluntary for families to administer, with schools having no ability to require a negative test as a condition of entry to the school. For those who do test positive, isolation is required for just seven days. Epidemiologists know that in order to prevent asymptomatic people spreading the virus, isolation of 14–21 days is required. The shortened period now in operation is dictated not by medical science but by the drive to minimise worker shortages, both within schools and across the economy.

Both students and school workers who contract COVID are expected to return after seven days, without requiring any form of negative test.

There is no provision whatsoever for positive cases detected within a classroom to trigger quarantining and contact tracing for that person's close contacts. Students and teachers are expected to keep turning up to their classrooms until they test positive.

An unmitigated disaster is unfolding. Authorities anticipate that up to 20 percent of teachers will be off work with COVID at any point this term. International experience points to the likely impact on students—in the American city of Los Angeles, to take just one example, one quarter of all school students were absent last week due to the pandemic, a staggering average of 107,000 students each day.

The Victorian school operations guide advises principals to cover staff absences by first using “normal available staffing arrangements,” adding: “Where necessary as a temporary measure, classes can by [sic] combined in a large space—for example, a hall, where supervision requirements can be maintained by teachers and support staff.”

Combining multiple classes within shared indoor spaces will further exacerbate the risk of infection. This recommendation also exposes the lie that the return to school has anything to do with children's learning—there will be little or no teaching carried out within crowded halls.

Staff can also be covered by teachers who ought to be isolating as close contacts of a COVID infected person, but who are now eligible for a so-called critical worker exemption. This means that the teacher needs to isolate at home, not going grocery shopping or seeing friends or family, except in order to work in school. Underscoring the risk this poses to the entire community, the Victorian operations guide advised that when travelling to school, those given critical worker exempt status “should, where possible, avoid public transport.”

Several of the mitigation measures in place have numerous loopholes. Mask wearing is only required in NSW for those in Year 7 and above and in Victoria for Year 3 and above. Any parent or caregiver, however, can gain an exemption for their child merely by claiming one in writing, without any corroborating medical evidence required.

Authorities are exerting enormous pressure on both principals and parents. Principals can switch to “short term” remote learning only in the event that the school workforce collapses *and* that they receive both endorsement from the Department of Health and approval from the Department of Education’s regional director. Principals are being discouraged from permitting any staff, even those with serious underlying health problems, from working remotely. The *World Socialist Web Site* knows of at least one case in which a principal dismissed a doctor’s certificate recommending remote work for one severely immunocompromised teacher, and insisted they either attend school or use up their personal leave entitlements.

Parents and families are being denied the right to temporarily keep their children at home, including those with serious underlying health issues. The Victorian Department of Education has issued schools with numerous internal documents and letter templates aimed at coaxing reluctant families into the schools. The recommended “key talking points” include, “we’re excited to welcome your child back into the classroom,” and “being at school is critical for your child’s learning and for their mental, physical, and social wellbeing.”

State and federal governments are only able to proceed with the school reopening drive because of the lockstep support being provided by the Australian Education Union (AEU) and its state affiliates.

AEU Victorian President Meredith Peace spoke on ABC Radio (Australian Broadcasting Corporation) yesterday. Sounding indistinguishable from a government spokesperson, she declared: “I think the measures are reasonable, I think they do place health and safety at the forefront. But we have to recognise, as exists in the broader community, there is risk regardless of the measures that have been put in place, and this plan, from our perspective, does

put those health and safety issues at the forefront.”

The ABC, like every section of the establishment media, has promoted the lie that reopening the schools is both safe and necessary. The AEU president’s statements, however, proved even too much for her interviewer who responded, “You’ve said that [this is] putting health and safety first, although isn’t part of the plan really lowering the health and safety threshold, for example, teachers who are close contacts are still going to be able to work?”

Peace claimed she disagreed with that specific measure—though the union is doing nothing to oppose it.

The Committee for Public Education is the only organisation fighting to halt the dangerous drive to reopen the schools. Its latest statement, issued yesterday, explained: “The CFPE issues an urgent appeal to all educators, students, parents, and working people—action must be taken prior to the emergence of mass COVID outbreaks in the schools! This includes taking strike action to force an immediate return to remote learning. [...] In this third year of the global pandemic, a rational and scientifically based approach to the virus is more urgent than ever. The protection of human life and safety must take unconditional priority over all corporate-financial interests. The CFPE recognises that the only viable strategy is to work towards the elimination of the virus through the adoption of the necessary measures as advised by leading epidemiologists and scientists.”

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