

Teachers denounce forced reopening of Australian schools amid COVID explosion

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31 January 2022

Today and tomorrow, students and teachers are returning to in-person classes in Australia's most populous-states New South Wales (NSW) and Victoria, despite the highest infection and death rates since the pandemic began.

Other states are proceeding with the school reopenings over the coming weeks. This includes a staggered return in South Australia from Wednesday, after the Australian Education Union subverted a two-thirds vote by teachers for strike action on that day. In NSW, Victoria and every other state, the unions are functioning as enforcers of the resumption, without even pretending to give their members a say.

Omicron is continuing to result in tens of thousands of infections every day, a direct result of the "live with the virus" program of every government. The reopening of the schools will lead to a further surge in deaths, which have exceeded 1,500 this month, compared with around 2,200 in the previous two years.

The mass hostility to this program is finding stark expression among teachers and educators, who are on the frontlines of the homicidal and profit-driven pandemic policies. Several spoke to the Committee for Public Education (CFPE), a rank-and-file teachers' group fighting against the reopening, the past week.

Diane is a relief teacher in Adelaide, South Australia. Last year, she taught at a range of schools, including some small country schools with a total of only 30 or 40 students, and a large public school with several hundred pupils. Most of the schools where she relieved were in low socio-economic areas, where students often suffered from a variety of behavioral problems and special needs. Some class sizes were up to 30 students.

Diane said: "I feel very nervous about going back. COVID is going to spread through schools pretty quickly. But I have little choice in the matter because of money. I also have a six-month-old baby at home. All I can think

about is, 'If I go to work and pick up this virus and bring it home and she catches it, is she going to be, OK?' But we can't afford for me not to work. My partner does not earn enough to support us both and his other two children.

"The rules they are putting in place are what I call 'loosey goosey.' They are not even mandating masks; they are just saying that 'We suggest masks' for Years 3 and above. And they are telling teachers, 'We would like you to wear masks in the classroom, but you don't have to.'

"The government in South Australia acted against medical advice to reopen the borders. The health system here was not prepared for this. They keep saying the daily numbers are going down, we've passed the peak, but you can't say we've reached the peak before schools are reopened.

"We know what's going to happen. How anyone could deny this is beyond me. They say: 'But it didn't spread last year.' Well, 1) we didn't have the same case numbers last year, 2) the borders were closed so we were able to keep things under control when we did have outbreaks, and 3) no other variant of the virus was targeting children anywhere near as much as Omicron. Why are we not taking the avenues that we have available to us to avoid opening schools as much as we can?

"It is not like we are in the 60s and 70s where there were no computers, no internet. We have access to this technology that would save so many people and so many kids from getting sick, and God forbid, from anything worse, and we are just completely ignoring that. It might only take a few months; it might even be less. Why are we avoiding using what we have at our disposal to stop this becoming an absolute disaster?

"They are doing this because if they don't reopen schools parents are going to have to stay home to look after their kids, so there is more expense to the government to support these parents to be staying home

with their children. It all comes down to lining the pockets of the rich no matter how much we suffer.

“I haven’t joined the teachers’ union; I don’t see them benefiting us at all. They tell us to strike, and then we strike, and get nowhere with it. We need organisations that are going to listen to teachers and support us. An organisation that will benefit us is what is needed. The union is not doing that. So, what’s the next step? That is a matter for teachers coming together and doing that. The hard part is getting that to happen. But there are many teachers who are not impressed with the government’s scenario, there is going to be opposition for sure.”

Michelle is a secondary teacher in Melbourne, Victoria. She told the CFPE: “I’ve taken this term off because I was terrified about getting COVID and then not recovering. I am nearly 70, and you go to hospital and you are then put in ICU... I know it’s fair, but they would look after the young people first. They have made it quite clear that there aren’t enough ventilators to go around. I am a bit scared of that. I still feel really lively, I feel very healthy, and I want to continue that way.

“I’m still pretty energetic, and I didn’t want to give up work. I liked my classes, and I liked spreading the environmental message and the equity and fairness message at school. It made me feel as if I was helping the community in some way. I want to keep on living and going to hospital would not be good for me.”

Barbara is an education support worker in Melbourne: “Education support staff were back on Monday [24 January] and we have heard nothing. No one has any idea about what will happen. Our bosses, the union, and the government haven’t provided us with any information. It’s not safe especially for primary school kids and they are really stressed. They don’t want to bring coronavirus home to their families. They’ve only had one dose of vaccination, if that, and it is not enough. The AEU [Australian Education Union] has done nothing. They don’t publish data on the number of infections at all.

“I wasn’t surprised when the Andrews government changed its tune. Governments are not run by politicians but by advocates for big business. The lobbyists for business were desperate for a resumption of work. These policies are criminal. They tell people it’s fine and it’s not. I know with the air filters that the government has said are coming, it will work out that there are about 10 for each school. That will not do anything.

“They tell people it’s fine and it’s not. I know many people now who know someone who has died of COVID.”

Pam, a teacher in Melbourne, commented: “It is COVID roulette for teachers. Is the plan that we take classes, catch COVID from a student or colleague, take a rapid antigen test (RAT) at home (whenever they arrive), isolate for seven days if positive and when it has worked through the whole school population everything will be fine? And just hope that no one gets really sick? Is it OK to make people sick as part of their job?”

Kim is an education assistant at a special needs school in New South Wales enrolling children from 4-12 years. She is a mother of two teenagers.

“The way the government is dealing with the virus doesn’t give me any feelings of safety about returning to school. The whole thing is chaotic. They are changing the rules to suit their agenda and not caring about how it might affect people. Now they are saying it’s okay to get the booster shots after three months, before that you were told you had to wait six months. Then they changed about the close contact rules. The whole thing is scary.

“The situation in my special needs school in 2020 and 2021 was really hard for all of us because not only did we have to keep our own hygiene up but the kids’ hygiene as well. We had to tell them to wash their hands, to keep them clean because they touch everything and they eat everything, they put everything into their mouths. We tried our best to keep things clean and sanitise, but we were always worried that anything could happen to us. Luckily our school didn’t have any real problems or cases and it was managed well.

“In 2021 when we had 600 people in the state who contracted the virus, we went into lockdown, but now we are around the 30,000 mark every day! There is now this scary idea that everyone is going to get the virus one way or another, so let’s just do it! Everything has changed since [NSW Premier Dominic] Perrottet opened up after December 15.

“It was more controlled before, with shops checking people’s vaccination status and QR codes. People were more aware of where hotspots were. Now there’s nothing of that. The RATs are not even free, and they are not accurate. Now they are using them as the main way of keeping schools ‘safe.’ There must be a different way of dealing with the pandemic.”



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