

# Mass school reopenings in Australia amid record COVID deaths

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Hundreds of thousands of students and teachers are being forced into schools in Australia this week. Children are returning in Victoria, the second-most populous state, today. In New South Wales (NSW), with the greatest number of people and COVID infections, teachers have a “pupil free day” to try to prepare dilapidated classrooms for the influx tomorrow.

Media commentators and several medical experts who have volunteered to take on the role of government propagandists continue to falsely claim that the return is motivated by concern for children’s mental health and their learning.

But the mask has largely come off. Unlike in previous waves, government leaders admit there will be mass infections in the schools. Modelling from both states, leaked to the media, indicates that as many as 20 percent of teachers could be off sick at any one time. A replacement workforce numbering in the thousands has been assembled, including vulnerable retired teachers and unqualified university students who are to function essentially as child minders amid school outbreaks.

Governments, when they lifted all restrictions last month, and proclaimed the need to “live with the virus,” invoked high vaccination rates as their justification, ignoring warnings from epidemiologists that inoculation, as critical as it is, cannot end the illness and death. But now, they are sending children into crowded classrooms when fewer than 40 percent of 5–11-year-olds have had even a single vaccine dose.

The real agenda was spelled out earlier this month by Prime Minister Scott Morrison, who declared: “It is absolutely essential for schools to go back, safely, and to remain safely open if we are not to see any further exacerbation of the workforce challenges we are currently facing... Schools open means shops open.”

In other words, the resumption of in-person learning is the spearhead of a campaign to force broad sections of the working class back to places of employment, in order to generate profits. The aim is to break what the corporate press

has labelled a “shadow lockdown”—the attempts of ordinary people to protect their health, amid the open adoption of “let it rip” policies by the governments.

Together with Morrison and his Liberal-National colleague NSW Premier Dominic Perrottet, the Labor Party’s Victorian Premier Daniel Andrews is spearheading this charge.

Andrews, who previously identified himself with public health measures, is providing essential political cover for the two widely-despised right-wing politicians. He is collaborating on a daily basis with Perrottet, among the most zealous proponents of “herd immunity” in Australian politics, including through private text messages and phone calls.

In both states, there will be no contact-tracing in the schools. This will serve to hide outbreaks, ensure that the schools remain open and limit the liability of the governments when teachers and children become grievously-ill or die as a result of in-school transmission.

The Committee for Public Education (CFPE) last night issued an appeal for teachers and parents to inform it of school outbreaks. Last term, the group of rank-and-file educators helped to expose transmission at over 920 schools in Victoria and more than 550 in NSW, cutting across a coverup by the governments, education departments and teacher unions.

Those outbreaks were primarily of the Delta strain. Amid a COVID explosion driven by Omicron, there have been over 2.1 million confirmed infections in Australia this month, compared with several hundred thousand in the first two years of the pandemic. With rampant untracked transmission, some epidemiologists estimate that as many as 25 percent of the population could have caught the virus in NSW and Victoria.

This vast spread has occurred with the schools largely shut for the summer holiday. According to the partial listing of infections on official websites, this month at least 104,829 children aged 0-9 have caught the virus, as well as 155,882 aged 10–19. These unprecedented figures will surge further.

In the US, with the schools reopened, over a million child infections are being recorded each week. Omicron, which appears to have a more severe reaction in children than some previous variants, has resulted in record pediatric hospitalisations there.

A hint of what is to come was provided in a number of Twitter posts last night. In NSW and Victoria, students are supposed to have two non-mandatory rapid antigen tests a week for the first four weeks of term. The measure is already a shambles and will do nothing to halt transmission, instead providing a false veneer of safety.

Nevertheless, multiple parents posted pictures of their children's positive tests, taken the night before classes return.

In Australia, there have been 1,501 deaths in January, compared with 2,253 in the previous 24 months. Three of the victims were aged 0–9. Responding to over 50 COVID deaths in his state yesterday, Perrottet declared: "This is the new world. We expect those numbers to stay pretty consistent."

This homicidal profit-driven agenda, and the school reopening, is encountering growing opposition, including from teachers and parents. A survey by The Parenthood group earlier this month found two-thirds of parents did not think it was safe to send children back to schools as scheduled.

A meeting of the NSW Parents and Citizens Association last Tuesday night had a record attendance of almost 2,000. Numerous parents voiced their fears in the chat. The consensus was that "reassurances" from the education department were "vague" and inadequate.

Among teachers, there is widespread hostility, reflected in interviews published on the WSWS today.

The teacher unions are playing the central role in enforcing the dangerous reopening, as they have during every previous wave. In Victoria, the state branch of the Australian Education Union (AEU) signed off on the reopening plans, including the end of contact-tracing and of closures during mass outbreaks. "I think the measures are reasonable, I think they do place health and safety at the forefront," AEU Victoria president Meredith Peace claimed, prompting surprise even from her Australian Broadcasting Corporation interviewer.

In NSW, the Teachers Federation mumbled about its "concerns" over aspects of the return, including the absence of a mask mandate for primary school children. But the union would only "closely monitor the effectiveness of the risk mitigation strategies" in the words of its president Angelo Gavrielatos.

The reopenings in NSW and Victoria are serving as a model for every state. Labor and Liberal, all the

governments are planning a return in the coming weeks, which the teacher unions' support.

In South Australia, the only state where the unions called a ballot, two thirds of teachers voted for a strike against reopening. The state AEU leadership rushed through another vote to "postpone" the strike days later, while saying there were "many unresolved issues that will have to be addressed at the local level," when the staggered reopening begins on Wednesday.

The role of the unions is not an aberration. It flows from their character as a corporatised arm of the governments and education departments. The unions serve the interests of their privileged executives, who invariably make six figures a year, and have presided over one sell-out enterprise agreement after another, making the conditions of public school teachers intolerable, even prior to the pandemic.

The school reopenings mark a new stage in the ruling elite's campaign to "normalise" indefinite mass infection, sickness and death, to ensure an "economic recovery" that will extend only to corporate profits.

In the schools, students, parents and teachers should unite in rank-and-file committees, independent of the unions, to protect their health and lives. A campaign must be mounted, including of industrial action, to close the schools and force a return to online learning, before tens of thousands of teachers, children and their relatives are struck down by a potentially deadly virus. Online learning must be accompanied by full income compensation for all affected parents.

The official endangerment of children and teachers, who perform one of the most critical roles in society, is an issue for the entire working class.

The fight against reopenings should be the spearhead of a broader fight for a repudiation of the "let it rip" policies and the adoption of a scientifically-grounded public health program aimed at the elimination of the virus. The experiences of the past month and more demonstrate that such a struggle can go forward only if it is directed against the entire political establishment, including the unions, and the capitalist system, which subordinates everything to the profit interests of the corporate elite.

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