

COVID outbreaks hit more than 380 schools in Victoria, Australia in two days

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It has taken a day for the dire consequences of the mass reopening of Australia's schools to become apparent. Amid an unprecedented surge of the virus across the country, the schools are already functioning as vectors for a further spread of COVID, the week that in-person teaching has resumed after the summer holidays.

This morning, the *Herald Sun* reported that COVID outbreaks have been detected at 120 schools in Victoria, the second-most populous state. An education department spokesman confirmed that there were more than 150 infections, comprising "about 101 students and about 55 staff."

Those numbers were superseded tonight, with a breaking tweet from Channel 7 reporter Sharnelle Vella: "State Government has confirmed 682 students and 63 staff returned a positive test between 4pm Monday and 4pm Tuesday. The cases are spread across more than 380 schools but all of them remain open."

The figures are staggering. Students only returned to most Victorian schools Monday with others coming back yesterday. At some schools, the full return is taking place today.

Vella and the *Herald Sun* have not yet clarified the breakdown, but it appears likely that all or most of the affected institutions are government schools. According to government websites, there are a little over 1,500 of them in Victoria.

In other words, it is possible that COVID outbreaks have been detected at more than 25 percent of public schools in the first couple of days students were in the classrooms.

There are few details in the *Herald Sun* article. It reports, however, that the highest number of affected schools were in the Bayside area of southern Melbourne, with 21 hit by confirmed infections.

The large concentration points to the danger of super-clusters emerging, involving linked infections across multiple schools. Bayside comprises relatively affluent suburbs. It is possible that the high number reflects more effective testing operations than in the chronically under-resourced public schools of Melbourne's working class north and west.

The Committee for Public Education (CFPE), a rank-and-file teachers' group, is fighting to mobilise widespread opposition to the dangerous reopening and to force a return to online learning. It has exposed the class character of the school

resumption, which is aimed solely at ensuring that parents are forced back to their workplaces.

As part of its struggle, the CFPE exposed more than 1,450 school outbreaks in NSW and Victoria last term. It issued an appeal on Sunday for parents, educators and students to provide it with reports of school clusters this term as well.

Among others, the CFPE has been informed of confirmed cases at the private Xavier College Kew and in the public sector, Fairhills High School, Brunswick Secondary School, Pender's Grove Primary, Hoppers Crossing Secondary College and Doncaster Primary School, all in Melbourne.

In an indication of the geographical spread, infections have also been reported at FCJ College, a Catholic school in the regional Victorian town of Benalla, Kurnai College in the industrial area of the Latrobe Valley, Highton Primary School in Geelong, Red Cliffs East Primary in the north-west of the state and at Castlemaine North Primary near Bendigo.

Other Victorian school cases are being reported to the CFPE at a rapidly increasing rate.

In NSW, no comparable reports have yet emerged of the scale of infections, but there is no reason to believe that the situation would be any different than in Victoria. The CFPE is beginning to receive multiple reports of outbreaks in Sydney and elsewhere in the state.

The Victorian outbreaks point to the scale of the school infections and the perspective of governments. They know that the mass reopening, amid the rampant spread of Omicron, will most likely result in transmission at every single school.

This was all but confirmed by the Victorian Labor government's education minister James Merlino. He responded to the report of more than a hundred school outbreaks in a day, not as though it were a calamity, but rather as if all was going to plan.

"We know that there will be an increase, as you have a million students going back at school with all the teachers and all the staff," Merlino said. Even the *Herald Sun* noted the discordant impression of his remarks, commenting: "Despite the cases alarming some parents, a hopeful Deputy Premier James Merlino said the numbers proved the system was working as it was detecting the cases that would otherwise be covert."

Merlino was touting the use of rapid antigen tests (RATs), a centrepiece of near-identical reopening plans in NSW and Victoria. Students are given two a week. But the cosmetic character of the program, aimed at providing a false sense of safety, is demonstrated by the facts that the tests will only be provided for the first four weeks of term, they are not mandatory and are to be self-administered by parents and students themselves.

In comments to the CFPE, teachers and parents have given a sense of the disastrous conditions.

One wrote: “Notified of 2 year levels being affected being year 7 and 9. No specifics of classes. Told to monitor for symptoms.” Another said their school was also hit with infections: “Not much detail provided. Students in grade 6 and 2 mentioned. Today was the first day back and the notification was sent around 9.20am so I am assuming that these kids did not attend school at all - but it's incredibly unclear!”

A third stated that their independent school had “opened up for face-to-face classes on January 18 with no RATs. On the 24th our class was notified that a student had been in class while infectious and to observe for symptoms! Still no RATs as of today. Many students in different classes now isolating. Confidence of parents plummeting. Communication and planning from school limited/poor.”

Dr Shane Huntington, who is based in Melbourne and heads the Little Big Steps children's charity, posted on Twitter: “My son's primary school score: 9 cases detected on day 2 across 7 classes (4 year levels). All 9 in class all day Monday. 1 in 5 classes known to be exposed.”

Asked in a reply whether the school would be shut, Huntington stated: “No, they don't isolate anymore. We just hope for the best now.”

In both NSW and Victoria, there are provisions to force teachers likely exposed to the virus to remain at school. But as the experience recounted by Huntington makes clear, in practice, virtually everyone in a school will be exposed when cases occur. The governments have insisted that they will remain open.

In both states, they have begun to assemble a replacement workforce of retired educators and university students in anticipation that as many as 20 percent of teachers could be off with COVID at any one time.

The immense dangers were underscored by the announcement this morning that a child under ten had died in Queensland, where the schools are to reopen next week. Three children in that demographic died last month. The national infection tally of all children, while the schools were closed in January, well exceeded 250,000.

The teacher unions are playing the key role in enforcing this mass endangerment of children for corporate profit.

In Victoria, the Australian Education Union (AEU) explicitly signed off on the school reopening plan. It has posted nothing about the infections of the past two days on its Facebook page,

instead promoting interviews with authors and book reviews. In one, an Australian novelist in San Francisco “tells us all about her return to school—embracing the simple, sublime moments amid the overwhelming reality of seeing ‘so much face!’ after months of masks and isolation.”

In the US, more than a million children are being infected every week, and pediatric hospitalisations for COVID are at record highs. But for the AEU bureaucrats and their literary friend, all is “sublime.”

In NSW, the Teachers' Federation quibbled with aspects of the return plan, but has done nothing to prevent its members being herded into unsafe classrooms.

Its president, Angelo Gavrielatos, declared in a statement to members that the government and the education department “would be well served by giving meaningful upfront acknowledgement of your efforts, and the fact that there is no other industry that requires one to go to work in restricted, often poorly ventilated spaces (aka classrooms) with up to 30 people, while navigating a worksite crammed with hundreds and, in some cases, thousands of people.”

In other words, the authorities should say some nice things to teachers, as they send them into battle to face a deadly virus.

In South Australia, the state AEU leadership is enforcing the reopening, having bureaucratically annulled a vote by two-thirds of teachers to strike.

The situation confronting teachers, students and parents is already intolerable and will become more so. As the CFPE has insisted, action must be taken to force the closure of the schools, amid mass transmission, with full compensation for affected parents and a turn to high-quality online learning.

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