

Thousands of students and teachers infected during first week of Australian schools

Oscar Grenfell
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It has taken five days or less for the government and media lies used to justify the reopening of Australian schools to be exposed. The pious statements about children's mental health and the importance of their learning have given way to the reality: an already underfunded public school system rendered completely dysfunctional as thousands of students and teachers are infected with a potentially-deadly virus and hundreds of thousands more are exposed.

In New South Wales (NSW), the country's most populous state, the majority of students only returned to classrooms last Tuesday. In three days, from Tuesday to Thursday, 2,417 students tested positive for the virus, together with 617 teachers and staff. The confirmed cases spanned 438 schools. It is not known how many are public and how many private.

In Victoria, many students reentered schools on Monday, though some went back later in the week. There, the figures reported during the day Friday were 2,900 students infected and 410 staff.

In line with near-identical reopening plans adopted by the NSW Liberal government and its Labor counterpart in Victoria, not a single school has closed as a result of the transmission.

Government leaders and education bureaucrats in both states earlier expressed a great deal of concern about the wellbeing of students.

Contrary to all previous experience, holidaying students were supposedly pining for a return to their classrooms. Online learning, which has been successfully rolled out on a number of occasions over the past two years, despite the refusal of governments to invest the necessary resources, was presented as the greatest evil.

However, the very same politicians and state authorities, together with a motley crew of psychologists, right-wing epidemiologists and media commentators who function as their propagandists, have responded to the mass infections of the past week with a shrug or less. Some are even ghoulishly celebrating the spread of the virus.

NSW education minister Sarah Mitchell declared: "I'm so

pleased with how this first week has gone... I really couldn't have wished for a better start to the school year."

Similar comments were made by Victorian education minister James Merlino. An unnamed state education department representative told the *Age* yesterday, "Detecting coronavirus cases through our school rapid testing program shows that our program is working..." Schools were purportedly "managing their outbreaks really well."

The response points to the underlying agenda of the reopening: to further normalise the spread of the virus for the foreseeable future, and to get the economy, and big business profits, moving, with millions of students in schools and their parents on the job.

The official responses are also part of a new propaganda line, even more cynical than the last. The thrust of it is that masses of children were infected over the holidays, as a result of the "let it rip" government policies, so 6,000 or more cases a week in the two largest states are no big deal.

As the unnamed Victorian bureaucrat told the *Age*, "[T]hese cases are an extremely low proportion of the total."

This appears to be why the governments and education departments, which jealously guarded school infection numbers as a state secret in term four, are volunteering them in the first week of 2022. There were more than 250,000 infections among children aged under 19 in January, during the school holidays, the majority of them in NSW and Victoria. The suggestion is that cases are no higher now than then, and may even be lower.

This line, however, is entirely based on the "testing regime" which government ministers are touting. Examined in any detail, though, it becomes clear that the confirmed cases are likely just a fraction of the real number. Each week, for the first four weeks of term only, students are provided with two rapid antigen tests (RATs). Far less reliable than PCR tests, they are to be administered by children themselves or their parents, and are not mandatory. In other words, there is no indication how many tests are actually being carried out, and whether they have been done correctly.

If it is the case that 438 NSW schools have been hit with infections, and assuming a conservative average of 400 staff and students at each, that would mean 175,200 educators and children were exposed in three days. If each of those have three family members at home, the figure blows out to over half a million.

The dubious official numbers underscore the critical work of the Committee for Public Education (CFPE), a rank-and-file teachers group fighting to mobilise opposition to the reopening. As it did last term, it is soliciting reports on infections from students, teachers and parents.

In the first week back, 110 separate reports were sent through: 50.6 percent from Victoria, 48.3 percent from NSW and a handful from the Australian Capital Territory. Indicating that the reopenings are an issue for the entire working class, 83.1 percent have been from parents and 6.7 percent from teachers, though that category is growing rapidly. The CFPE is today publishing a full listing of affected schools it has been notified of on Facebook.

Numbers of those writing in have also provided short comments. A parent wrote: “This is madness. I feel so angry that kids and teachers (and their families) are being exposed to Covid. We are a very vulnerable family with two severely immunocompromised members, and feel that we are ‘expendable,’ and that we don’t matter.”

A teacher explained: “We have had positive cases since day 1—teachers and students. Some are only being picked up due to RAT tests and are asymptomatic—meaning that they are at school contagious—not to mention the reliability of RAT tests. As a teacher I hate the thought that I am in a room with kids who struggle to keep masks up and that I am literally exposed every day and taking it home to my family. It is like we don’t matter.”

This is the new stage of the criminal pandemic policies of governments and the entire political establishment. As COVID is once more allowed to rip through aged care facilities, killing more than 500 last month, children are being deliberately endangered. The slogan of the Liberals and Labor alike could be “Cull the elderly, infect the children, keep workers on the job no matter what.”

The same goes for the unions, which the CFPE has correctly described as an industrial and political police force that advances the interests of a corrupt and privileged bureaucracy, tied to capitalism and governments. Any suggestion that this was an exaggeration should have been dispelled by the experience of the past week.

Having signed off on the reopening, the education unions are saying literally nothing about the mass infection of their members and children, nor the likelihood that this will result in some going to hospital and others to their grave. The unions, like the governments, cover up the dangers of Long

COVID, including for children, and suppress discussion about the mass illness and death accompanying the school reopenings in the US, Britain and elsewhere.

In Victoria, the Australian Education Union (AEU) responded to the reopening by unilaterally cancelling limited work bans that had been endorsed by the overwhelming majority of its membership. Then yesterday, it announced, through the corporate media, that it had struck yet another sell-out industrial agreement with the state Labor government, which will lock in a pay “increase” of 2 percent per annum, far below the rate of inflation, and do nothing to address workloads and onerous conditions, much less the threat of infection.

In NSW, the Teachers’ Federation has abandoned any pretense of doing anything for its members. Its president, Angelo Gavrielatos, has pledged only to “monitor” the consequences of the reopening. Whether he will do this in the union’s plush office or remotely from his living room is not known.

In South Australia, the state AEU leadership bureaucratically prevented a one-day strike last Wednesday, endorsed by two-thirds of teachers. It claimed great “progress” in backroom talks with the state Liberal government. The consequence is that in three days, 150 support staff and 200 teachers were infected. The education department, notwithstanding the “progress,” is sending staff aggressive letters warning them against taking any action to protect their safety.

The same scenario is set to play out in every other state and territory.

There is no democracy, much less fight, in the unions. They are an arm of government. The situation in the schools is intolerable and will only become worse, above all on the health front, but also in terms of learning and mental health.

Teachers, parents and students must take matters into their own hands. Rank-and-file committees need to be established, to coordinate a unified fight for the shutdown of the schools and an immediate return to online learning, with full compensation for affected parents and a massive expansion of funding for public education.

Contact the CFPE today:

Email: cfpe.aus@gmail.com

Facebook: www.facebook.com/commforpubliceducation

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