

# Students and parents speak out over Australian school reopenings

Our reporters  
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This week, millions of students and teachers began returning to classrooms across Australia amid escalating infection and death rates from the highly-contagious Omicron variant.

According to most recent figures 2,417 students and 617 educators in New South Wales were infected, along with 2,900 children and 410 staff in Victoria. In South Australia, where classes only resumed on Wednesday, 200 teachers and 150 education support staff tested positive. No figures on student infections have been released.

In Melbourne, the Victorian state capital, International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) members spoke with **Joel** and **Andy**, two Year 12 students, outside Princes Hill Secondary College in the city's inner north.

Andy said, "It's a lot more motivating to actually go to school but on the other hand, I do think that the school should be a lot more open about the cases." Joel agreed and said that the school needed to be transparent about close contacts and other issues.

"They haven't been very precise with any of that information. It'd be better if Year 10s, 11s and 12s could come to school and were given rapid antigen tests with it enforced twice a week—which they haven't. They tell us to do it [a RAT] twice a week but they haven't checked. If they actually introduced that it would be a better alternative," Joel said.

"Obviously, it's hard learning from home but that's partially because of the way that they handled it. The engagement with a lot of the students, including myself, was lacking and so it was really hard to learn," he added.

Both students said that masks were meant to be worn but this was not enforced and there was no social-distancing. They were unsure if the school even

checked whether students were vaccinated. "It's different to a café where you have to check in and show your double-vaxxed certificate. There's none of that," Andy said.

Andy told IYSSE campaigners that the school needs to be "more open, and not just about COVID cases." Students were also in the dark about how the pandemic was going to affect their grades and assessments.

Asked why they thought schools were being reopened, Andy said, "You can never tell with the government because they're so deceptive. With the COVID disaster payments, they gave out millions [of dollars] to all the big companies and now they're asking for it back. But the government knows it's harder to go after the big companies, so they're asking for money back from individuals and small businesses. This is wrong. We needed this COVID money just to stay afloat."

Andy and Joel agreed with IYSSE campaigners when they explained the necessity for eliminating the virus through lockdowns and public health measures. "I don't want to get COVID because I don't want to be missing out on school and I don't want to spread it to others. We should minimise that at all costs and obviously shutting schools down would be the best way of doing that but we're also worried about passing Year 12," Joel said.

"I see both perspectives [on lockdowns]. I have an elderly grandma, so if I were to get sick that would be really bad but I also feel like I need to be in person to get good marks," Andy said.

"At the end of the day, it's the government's fault that we're in this situation in the first place. They're the ones that are responsible for it and should clean up their mess," Joel said.

**Lubna Aziz**, an aged care worker, spoke with WSW

reporters after dropping her son at Arthur Phillip High School in Parramatta, a major centre of Western Sydney.

“It’s not right that the prime minister said to send the kids to school. Under five-year-old kids have no vaccination so it is totally risky to send them back,” she said.

“A job is not important because if a job is gone you can apply for a second one. If you lose your kid’s life they don’t come back, so think about it for the children’s lives. First save the children’s lives, then it’s business or jobs. I can understand the situation [for business] but kids are more important because this is the Australian future,” Aziz said.

“I don’t agree with the prime minister on close contacts and that you don’t have to call the health department. This is making it worse because people are infected and are still going to shopping centres and giving it to other people. If you have COVID you should stay isolated for seven days if vaccinated, and if not vaccinated you should stay 14 days at home. If you go about then you should be fined. People will then understand, and then you can control the virus. If the government doesn’t take strict action people do not care. Some people are sick but are still going to work,” she added.

“I saw on the news that the government are giving \$500 to primary school kids. Why? They are the same as high school kids. This is to force the parents to send the kids to school, possibly without vaccination.

“My son is going to school but has a medical condition. He has a kidney transfer so imagine if he caught COVID. I’ve already sacrificed—I donated my kidney to him—so why would I put his life at risk? If kids are fully vaccinated then you could send them to school. If kids are not fully vaccinated they should stay home and take online classes,” she said.

Aziz spoke about the difficult situation facing aged care workers and their low wages. “Imagine how you would feel if there was an outbreak in aged care and you are working 12 hours per day for a full shift from 7 a.m. to 7 p.m. You could endanger your family and yourself through your work and the \$400 bonus [just promised by the Australian government] is not enough for the aged care workers.

“All the staff are working very hard as a team. Imagine you’re wearing gloves, gown, shield and

mask. How would you feel? I have only one kidney and I need water but when I’m at work I can’t drink enough water because I can’t take off the mask all the time and then go back to my shift. I can only drink a bit of water when I have a break.

“It’s not enough to give \$400 this month or \$400 next month and they should give it to all the staff members. Last time they gave a bonus it was just to a few people, like the personal carers, but all staff should get it. It doesn’t matter if they’re catering, cleaning or the care staff, they’re all doing hard work,” Aziz added.



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