

More than 300 children infected on first day back at school in Australian state of Queensland

Our reporters
8 February 2022

On Monday, the first day that the Labor Party government in the Australian state of Queensland reopened the primary and secondary schools this year, 313 children were officially reported to be infected by COVID-19, and 11 were in hospital. On Tuesday, another 534 were infected, as detected by PCR tests alone.

These infections were predictable and predicted. Premier Anastacia Palaszczuk's government sent teachers, staff and students back into classrooms under unsafe conditions, declaring that it would lead to further COVID-19 outbreaks and hospitalisations.

Last week, the government's Chief Health Officer John Gerrard said it was "inevitable" the virus would spread through schools. On Monday, he added that infections would also result among families, including grandparents, who were most likely to end up in hospital.

Gerrard claimed that the unprecedented wave of infection driven by the Omicron variant had "peaked" in Queensland. Yet he also predicted that one-third of Queenslanders will be infected by the end of the month, and the other two-thirds in the following months.

The Labor government has only been able to proceed because it has the complete support of the Queensland Teachers Union (QTU). The union sent its members a "news flash" on January 25 saying it knew they "are committed to ensuring that 2022 is a success."

Fearing opposition, the union has called no meetings or ballots to permit teachers and school staff members to voice their concerns or disagreement with the unsafe return to face-to-face classes.

That allowed more than half a million government school students to be sent back to classrooms on Monday, thus completing the return to in-person teaching by all the state and territory governments, both Labor and Liberal-National.

Queensland's school protocols are even more dangerous than those in other states. Until March 4, masks are mandatory for high school students and "highly recommended" for children in years three to six. But these rules are essentially meaningless because students can remove their masks when they are seated in class and teachers can take off their masks while giving instructions.

No infection testing is organised or required. Parents are not even being given unreliable rapid antigen tests (RATs) to screen their children for COVID-19. No audit of classroom ventilation has been conducted. Air purifiers may be provided if windows cannot open or air conditioners and fans are deemed inadequate.

When students or teachers fall ill, they are sent home to take a RAT, and isolate for seven days if they test positive. On Friday, Deputy Premier Steven Miles said 250,000 RATs would be delivered to schools over the weekend for that purpose. That is only one per two students! Schools reported critical shortages on Monday.

To head off resistance among teachers, parents and students, the Palaszczuk government had delayed the reopening by two weeks, and said it would use the fortnight to prepare a safe return.

Yet, as of Sunday, only 38.77 percent of Queensland children aged 5 to 11 had received their first dose of a vaccine. More than 350,000 remain unvaccinated. And as of February 6, only 39 percent of the state's population aged 16 and over had received the third dose of a vaccine, which is essential to reduce the risk of serious illness from the highly-infectious Omicron mutation.

Deaths from COVID are running at record levels in the state, as a direct result of the Palaszczuk government reopening the state's borders on December 13 and dismantling most safety measures. This is part of the

profit-driven “let it rip” program orchestrated by the bipartisan “national cabinet.”

The state’s COVID death toll stood at 308 by Monday, yet there were virtually no lives lost in 2020 and 2021. During those two years the Palaszczuk government postured as a defender of people’s lives, introduced basic protections and won an election to retain office on that basis in October 2020.

On Monday Palaszczuk said the state was “coming down off the peak” with 663 cases in public hospitals and 43 in intensive care units (ICUs). But the statistics released the same day showed there were 701 COVID patients in public hospitals, and 45 in ICU. There were also 12 deaths, more than 5,100 new cases and 45,000 active cases.

Palaszczuk declared: “Kids are returning to school. People are coming back to work.” That disclosed the real agenda behind the reopening: to get workers back into workplaces in order to generate revenues and profits for employers.

The QTU, which covers about 48,000 state school principals and teachers, backed the return to classrooms even before the government released its reopening plan. The union’s January 25 “news flash” to its members began: “Welcome back to Term 1!”

Concern is high among health experts. Professor Lidia Morawska, director of Queensland University of Technology’s International Laboratory for Air Quality and Health, told the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) she “can’t quite understand” why the government’s back-to-school plan allows teachers to remove their masks to teach, and children to remove them when they are seated.

As an airborne disease, COVID was “potentially very transmissible” in classrooms, Morawska said. “We are talking about a group of people—let’s say, 20 to 30 kids in a classroom. Classrooms could be small, and ventilation may not be up to standard. So this creates situations in which the transmissibility of the virals will be quite high.”

Morawska is a member of the OzSage network of independent health experts, which recommends all children in school wear N95 or other properly fitted respirators, such as child-size KF94 respirators, instead of leaky cloth or surgical masks, and that schools use carbon dioxide monitors to assess and monitor ventilation.

Concern is also high among parents, students and school staff members. A TAFE security guard told the WSWS that only about a quarter of teachers and students had attended classes on the first day, indicating the levels of

apprehension, especially among mature-aged students who were the most conscious of the dangers involved.

Confining students in small spaces in schools was dangerous, he said, adding that infections already had become common in the surrounding community, just north of Brisbane. That was most frequent among young people aged 18 to 28. He personally knew “a lot of people” who were getting ill.

The security worker said the situation was “alarming,” especially with the governments now planning to open the international borders, as well as state borders.

Brisbane parent Brooke Mott, who has multiple sclerosis, told the ABC she was nervous about sending her two children, Zara and Levi, to school. “I feel like we’ve just been completely forgotten about to be honest,” she said. “I just feel blindsided. What are we supposed to do? How do we stay safe?”

Carmel Walton, a secondary school teacher in Noosaville, told the ABC that the mask protocol “seems completely pointless” because “as any teacher knows, the students are seated for the majority of the time in the classroom ... so there’s no mandatory masks happening at all.”

Similar alarm is being voiced on Twitter by many parents and teachers in Queensland. We urge them to contact the WSWS and the Committee for Public Education to report infections in schools and to discuss the fight for rank-and-file safety committees, independent of the unions, and the preparation of industrial action to suspend face-to-face teaching in dangerous conditions.

Email: cfpe.aus@gmail.com

Facebook: www.facebook.com/commforpubliceducation

Twitter: @CFPE_Australia



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact