

Australian teacher speaks out against reckless reopening of schools

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In the two-and-a-half weeks since the national return to face-to-face teaching began, schools across the country have served as vectors for the further spread of the virus, continuing the two-month surge of the highly-infectious Omicron variant.

Tens of thousands of educators and children have been infected. The Australian Broadcasting Corporation reported this morning that in the past week alone, more than 10,000 students and teachers and school staff tested positive in Victoria, the country's second-largest state. On Friday, the WSWs reported that there had been over 13,000 confirmed school infections in Victoria during the previous fortnight.

Most states and territories are not releasing the full figures. Those that are provided are likely a gross underestimation. In Victoria and New South Wales, the respective Labor and Liberal-National governments instituted a testing regime based on rapid antigen tests (RATs). Students are provided two of these less reliable tests a week, which are voluntary and are to be self-administered by children and their parents.

Limited reports out of the other states and territories indicate widespread transmission in schools there as well.

The Committee for Public Education (CFPE) has posted a survey on social media to gather data and comments from parents and educators on infections in schools nationally.

The reporting of school infections is left up to each individual school, and therefore there are many inconsistencies. Some schools are following department guidelines and reporting on a daily basis. Others are ignoring guidelines and providing no information to school staff and the community, leaving news of infections to spread by unreliable word of mouth.

In opposition to the reckless statements from government officials claiming the RAT testing regime is making schools safe, educators have been raising the alarm and exposing the terrible reality.

A recent comment from an educator sent to the CFPE stated that his school had made an executive decision not to inform parents of cases despite clusters of infections among students within single classes and numbers of teachers contracting the virus. He believes the lack of transparency by the school has led to complacency among staff, students and parents, with even limited safety precautions going by the wayside.

The Australian Education Union and the other teacher unions

supported the forced reopening. They have said virtually nothing about the mass infections and have sought to suppress discussion among their members about the school COVID crisis.

Last week **Evie, an educator from Melbourne** contacted the CFPE to speak about her concerns about the school reopenings and the role of the teacher unions.

CFPE: What do you think about the reopening of the schools while there are mass Omicron infections?

Evie: The reopening during an unprecedented wave of very high Omicron community transmission is totally reckless. It puts teachers and students in an untenable position. It has already been shown in the US that teachers are one of the professions most affected by COVID and Long COVID after health care workers. We are emulating this terrible example.

CFPE: How has this affected you and your family?

Evie: For the first time the holiday break was a really anxious time. Omicron cases surged against a backdrop of massive testing queues. Family gatherings were avoided. [Victorian Labor] Premier Daniel Andrews announced that schools would reopen as normal. He wanted "every student back in the classroom day one, term one," but admitted "there will be a bit of strain because teachers are not immune from this virus."

To cover furloughing teachers, they plan to call in retirees and final year graduates. The twice-weekly inaccurate RATs for students and staff only alert post-infection and are voluntary. It's just window dressing.

The chorus of lies from "experts" pontificating about how the reopening is motivated by concern for adolescent mental health ignores the fact that many young people are very anxious about the return to COVID-soup classrooms. We all know that the centrepiece of the reopening, RATs, are weak against an invisible virus. Children rightly fear the risk of infecting their parents, grandparents and carers.

CFPE: What do you think about the role of the union claiming the schools are safe?

Evie: I was gobsmacked at the role the union played in supporting the government in the rush to reopen schools. It was very sad for the profession and I felt a real loss of solidarity. January was uneasy, we knew what was coming. I was baffled at the union's eerie silence. It was becoming clear we were

going to be thrown under a bus.

I searched in vain the union's Twitter page for opposition to the relentless push for face-to-face COVID classrooms. Instead there were puff pieces on the AEU Facebook from a teacher in San Francisco describing the "sublime moments" in "post-COVID school life" of "seeing so much face" after months of masks and isolation.

The union's irrelevance is writ large. It's a no-brainer that people are walking away. Do you think schools are safe? Should we return to remote learning as we did previously? It's a lie that schools are safe.

We have to rid the world of the virus permanently, but the media never raises this because the measures required would impact on profits. Tweaking the existing system with CO2 monitors and HEPA filters helps. But here's an opportunity to restructure society for high quality remote learning. The pandemic has taught us that learning doesn't have to be face-to-face. Doggedly clinging to a nineteenth century education model that is no longer of benefit to society is unhealthy.

CFPE: Under Department of Education guidelines educators may be exempted from working face-to-face if they have specific health conditions that make them immunocompromised. Are you aware of this?

Evie: The definition of the "immunocompromised" is very narrow and is defined to ensure there'll be minimal disruption or expense to the education department and business. The consequence of denying teachers the right to work from home is that they are risking their own health and the health of their family as the virus spreads. But instead of resisting business' siren call to "open up" at all costs, we're supposed to go along with the "one-size-fits-all" model.

To drive it home, we're repeatedly told schools are safe, in spite of ample evidence to the contrary from overseas. This, along with the mantra that the only real learning is done face-to-face and that student mental health is at risk without face-to-face is never challenged.

Cherry-picked studies ignore evidence of the physical and mental health risks of COVID and are a thinly-veiled attempt to blindside us to allow the scrapping of the last COVID protections; ones that proved to work only a short time ago. Teachers must be sacrificed to the "let it rip" corporate crowd's babysitting demands.

CFPE: Did the AEU inform you that in the 2017 union agreement, under clauses related to infectious diseases, teachers could access leave on full pay without using medical leave or other leave entitlements?

Evie: I asked the union for advice on leave due to health concerns surrounding the return to face-to-face and was not told about the possibility of accessing leave on full pay. They advised that I was to use personal, medical leave if the principal didn't agree to remote work. So, if you're not prepared to risk your health at work, tough. Don't have enough leave to support yourself? Tough. But there is a provision for this. Why did the

union lie?

CFPE: How do you see your future when you have family members that are vulnerable?

Evie: I will most likely walk away from teaching permanently.

CFPE: Were you aware that teachers and students in the US, France, Austria, Greece and elsewhere have been taking strike action, engaging in walk-outs, protests and occupations over COVID in the schools?

Evie: Not at all. The controlled media seem far more obsessed with promoting alt-right anti-vaxxers and libertarians, really anyone who will undermine the sensible majority who want to eliminate this horrible virus.

CFPE: What do you think of the latest union agreement on wages and conditions signed off by the union with the Andrews Labor government this month?

Evie: The agreement is pathetic. There is no mention of the urgent need to challenge the forced, unsafe return to face-to-face. How can the union have no empathy? The vaunted pay rise is peanuts. The one-and-a-half-hour reduction of face-to-face teaching is token; it'll quickly be taken up by other duties. We lose the Professional Practice days of one a term. These agreements contain rubbery language that's easily diluted. The union is about self-glorification and they work to suppress dissent.

CFPE: What do you think about the call by the CFPE for teachers to form rank-and-file safety committees, made of teachers, parents and students, independent of the unions and employers, putting lives before profit?

Evie: Teachers must take matters into our own hands. We are tired, but no one else is going to help us. It will take courage, but it is worth fighting for.

Contact the CFPE today:

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