

Australia: 46-year-old teacher in NSW dies from COVID

Meg Bourne
23 February 2022

On February 16, a teacher in country New South Wales (NSW) died after testing positive to COVID just two days earlier. She perished at home, alone, isolating in a studio space separated from her husband and two children.

Michelle Hayes, who taught at Bowral Public School, in the state's Southern Highlands, was just 46-years-old. Her husband, Ben, also works at the school. The family of four only moved back to NSW in January after living and working on Norfolk Island for 12 years.

Speaking to the *Australian* newspaper, Haye's brother-in-law Will Young said, "my heart is with her family, beginning with her forever-smitten husband Ben and two wonderful children Harry and Matilda. Her love for them was boundless and clear."

Messages of support flowed in following the news of her death, describing her as a dedicated and passionate teacher. One person wrote: "We are all completely heartbroken. Michelle was one of the special ones. Her pedagogy was exemplary, her warmth, kindness and integrity evident in every interaction, and her commitment to living a full life with love at the centre inspiring. She will be so deeply missed."

In a Facebook post made soon after her death, her husband Ben warned "For those who think that Covid isn't dangerous—try losing the love of your life in under 48 hours from a positive test result."

Hayes' death is not only an immense tragedy, it is a crime.

It has not been publicly revealed where she contracted COVID, or whether that is known. Australian governments, including in NSW, have lifted almost all safety restrictions, ended contact-tracing and allowed the virus to spread freely, meaning it is often not known where transmission occurs.

There is every likelihood, however, that Hayes contracted the virus at school. She had been working at the school for the two weeks prior to her death. As a relief teacher Hayes would have worked with many different classes at the school each of those weeks.

The NSW government reopened the schools at the beginning of term one, in late January, despite

unprecedented Omicron transmission. The Victorian Labor government adopted an identical mass reopening plan, while other states and territories followed suit, with a full return to in-person teaching concluding earlier this month.

Prior to the reopening and since, the Committee for Public Education (CFPE), a rank-and-file teachers' group, warned that the return to in-person teaching, amid unchecked community transmission, would lead to mass school outbreaks. These would inevitably result in severe illnesses and deaths.

The CFPE drew attention to the statements of Prime Minister Scott Morrison in the lead-up to the resumption. Spelling out the intent of all the governments, including those led by Labor, Morrison insisted that the schools had to be reopened, because if they were not, it would add to "workforce absenteeism." In other words, in-person teaching was solely aimed at forcing parents back into their workplaces, to ensure a full resumption of corporate activities.

The teacher unions have functioned as the police force of this agenda. In Victoria, the Australian Education Union branch explicitly endorsed that state's reopening plan. The NSW Teachers' Federation (NSWTF), made some vague statements of concern, but its president Angelo Gavrielatos signed-off, declaring only that he would "closely monitor" the situation.

The unions thus enforced and facilitated the forced march of hundreds of thousands of children and teachers into COVID-infested classrooms. No less than the CFPE, they knew that this would result in fatalities and dire illness. But the unions function as an arm of government management. They defend the profit system, are closely tied to the Labor Party, advance the interests of a privileged executive and are hostile to any independent movement of educators.

If Hayes did contract the virus in school, it is no exaggeration to state that the NSWTF sent her to her death.

Tens of thousands of her colleagues are also at risk.

In figures released last week it was revealed that more than 20,000 school students and more than 500 educators in NSW

had tested positive to COVID in the first two weeks of school alone. In Victoria 18,875 students and almost 2,000 teachers tested positive in the same time period. No information about what schools are being impacted is being published. Schools have been left with the responsibility of deciding how much information to give to staff and parents about case numbers.

The CFPE is collecting information from parents, teachers and students about COVID cases in schools. Our survey has revealed that there are large clusters developing at schools around the country. Both the Health Department and the Department of Education are suppressing almost all the information about COVID in schools.

Last week it was revealed by concerned parents that Carlingford West Public School in Sydney had more than 200 cases in a school with little over 700 pupils. In the regional towns of Albury and Wodonga on the NSW and Victorian border, several schools have reported large clusters developing with two having more than 50 students and staff contract COVID in the first weeks of the term. In the regional centre of Bathurst at least one school has more than 100 infections among staff and students.

In the regional town of Shepparton in Victoria, Verney Road School has returned to remote learning temporarily after 20 percent of its students and staff tested positive for the virus. The school caters for students with disabilities across all year levels. Despite the state Labor government's decree that schools remain open, the return to remote learning appears to be due to the insistence of the school executive staff who have acted to protect staff and students alike from a mass outbreak at the school.

The situation in Australia mirrors developments around the world. In the United States more than 1300 children and 530 teachers have died of COVID according to the official statistics. In the United Kingdom 150 children and 570 educators have died. Research has shown that around 10 percent of all those who contract the virus suffer from the debilitating effects of Long COVID. The symptoms of Long COVID include chronic fatigue, joint pain and complex neurological problems.

The NSWTF does not appear to have even mentioned Hayes' death. Along with the Australian Education Union, it says nothing about the mass transmission in schools, participating in the cover-up along with the governments and education departments.

Next Monday, the NSW government is ending even token mitigations in schools, including a limited mask mandate and nominal restrictions on intermingling between students in different year levels. NSWTF president Angelo Gavrielatos has again mumbled about his "concerns," but has made clear the union will do nothing about them.

The real position of the NSWTF, as a partner of the government, was made clear the same week of Hayes' death. It announced that it had banned any, even limited industrial action by its members for the remainder of term one, in an ongoing industrial dispute driven by the government's drive to slash pay and its refusal to address intolerable conditions, including massive workloads and understaffing.

In Victoria, the Australian Education Union (AEU) is collaborating closely with the state Labor government. Having enforced the return to in-person teaching, the union has struck a deal for a new enterprise agreement that includes real wage cuts and entrenches the unbearable workplace conditions. When its members have denounced the deal as a sell-out and called for a no vote on the AEU Victoria Facebook page, the bureaucrats have simply deleted their comments in the manner of police censors.

The unions are not workers' organisations. They are anti-democratic, bureaucratic shells, operated in the interests of a privileged executive, whose interests are diametrically opposed to those of educators. The unions are willing, not only to attack the pay and conditions of their members, but to inflict illness and death upon them in the interests of corporate profit.

As the CFPE has insisted, teachers and staff must take matters into their own hands, through the formation of rank-and-file committees. These must unify educators, parents and students, in a fight for a return to remote learning, while there is widespread COVID transmission. Otherwise, there will be many more deaths. And they must prepare a political and industrial fight to defeat the union sell-out deals, and to fight for a high-quality, fully-funded public education system.

Teachers, school staff, parents and students can inform the CFPE of school infections and outbreaks using this anonymous survey.

To contact the CFPE and join its fight:

Email: cfpe.aus@gmail.com

Facebook: [facebook.com/commforpubliceducation](https://www.facebook.com/commforpubliceducation)

Twitter: [@CFPE_Australia](https://twitter.com/CFPE_Australia)



To contact the WSW and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

[wsws.org/contact](https://www.wsws.org/contact)