

COVID clusters grow at Australian schools as Omicron BA.2 surges

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Aided and abetted by the teacher unions, Australian governments, both federal and state, are covering up the spread of COVID throughout the school system. Case numbers among those under 19 years of age are growing rapidly in Australia, with a surge in cases from the new Omicron BA.2 variant which is becoming the dominant strain across the country.

In the past seven days, for instance, there have been more than 20,000 confirmed infections of 0–9-year-olds and over 34,000 amongst 10–19-year-olds in New South Wales (NSW), representing roughly a third of the total new cases. In Victoria, there are over 71,000 active cases of 0–9-year-olds and almost 100,000 among those aged 10 to 19.

In Queensland between 1,000 and 2,000 young people have tested positive every day since the end of February. Queensland has also released data confirming that between December and February 1, some 136 children were hospitalised for COVID with 23 children being treated in Intensive Care Units.

Buried at the end of a report issued by NSW Health earlier this month, some aggregated data was made available about COVID in schools.

In the four-week period between January 30 (the first day of school in NSW) and February 26, around 92,000 school aged children reported a positive COVID test. Almost 60,000 of those reported were from a rapid antigen test (RAT). The report stated that in the first four weeks of school, approximately 2,000 schools each week had students attending who had registered a positive RAT.

Case numbers among school aged children have more than doubled since the end of February. It is hardly surprising that large clusters of cases in schools have developed across the country.

For example, in NSW, Castle Hill High School, Cherrybrook Technology High School and St Ignatius College are reporting case numbers of over 500 students and teachers. In the regional centres of Albury, Bathurst, Orange and Queanbeyan, schools have experienced a surge in cases. A small primary school in the Blue Mountains west of Sydney had 100 children absent from class on one day earlier this month out of a school population of 221.

In Shepparton, a regional town in Victoria, both the local high school and primary schools have had large numbers of students

and staff impacted. One example is Verney Road school, which caters for students with complex and sometimes multiple disabilities. The school has 136 students and 100 staff, and recently recorded 50 positive cases, 20 percent of the school community. In defiance of the Victorian government, the school principal, Angela Buxton fought to have the school return to remote learning in order to protect her staff and students.

In Queensland, several schools, including the Marist College in Ashgrove and Brisbane Girls Grammar have reported more than 200 infections of staff and students.

Parents in Western Australia have also begun reporting substantial clusters. That includes more than 90 infections at the South Coast Baptist College Waikiki and over 90 cases at Byford Secondary College. In that state, the Labor government abandoned a “strong suppression” strategy that had kept case numbers low throughout the entire pandemic earlier this month.

In the second half of 2021, Australian federal and state governments fully embraced the “let it rip” policy. Teachers and students were forced back to face-to-face learning. Both the Liberal-National Coalition and Labor parties declared that schools would remain open regardless of increased community spread of the virus. Schools had to be open so parents could be forced back into workplaces and profits made.

In a revealing speech to the Committee for Economic Development of Australia (CEDA), Dominic Perrottet, the Liberal Party premier of NSW, revealed the extent of the political collusion between himself and Victorian Labor Premier Daniel Andrews.

Speaking in late February, Perrottet openly admitted that mitigation measures accompanying this year’s school reopenings in late January and early February were not based on public health. Instead, the introduction of limited RAT testing in the initial phases of term, and recommendations that older students wear masks, were a political manoeuvre to “instill confidence” and damp down concerns that there would be major school outbreaks.

This confirms what the Committee for Public Education (CFPE) warned in January, as the drive back to classrooms was being laid out. In a statement, the CFPE warned that, “the surveillance-testing program is not about preventing the spread

of the disease, but about creating a false sense of security for teachers and parents.”

The teacher unions, including the New South Wales Teachers Federation (NSWTF) and the Australian Education Union (AEU), have worked hand in glove with the governments to suppress opposition among teachers. When both the Andrews and Perrottet governments announced near-identical reopening plans, the unions endorsed them.

Responding to the latest surge in cases, NSWTF President Angelo Gavrielatos said that “health advice should prevail” and “there should have been a steady graduated lifting of the risk mitigation strategies in order to monitor how each mitigation strategy was impacting our schools.”

In other words, Gavrielatos supports the reopening and the overturning of mitigation. His quibbles are solely with the tempo, and express union fears that the mounting opposition among teachers and parents could get out of the NSWTF’s control.

Despite the surge in cases, all mitigation measures have been removed, including surveillance testing, contact tracing, mask mandates and quarantine rules for contacts. Information about the infection rates in schools has been suppressed with only a few stories being reported in the mainstream media.

In the first two weeks of the school year both the NSW and Victorian governments released classroom case numbers to the media. No information was provided about the schools impacted. Since then the data has not been made publicly available.

In 2021, CFPE made the decision to collect information about COVID impacts in schools to help provide parents, teachers and workers with the truth and a means to expose the government-union cover-up of COVID transmission schools. While the CFPE data only captures a snapshot of the broader situation, it paints a devastating picture of the situation in schools.

Parents and teachers have reported that sometimes more than two-thirds of children in a year group have been diagnosed with COVID. In a South Australian primary school, 80 percent of the youngest children tested positive for COVID. Many schools have received notifications of infections in the schools almost every day since late January. The CFPE has been told that some schools are providing a small amount of information about infections in the schools to parents and teachers while others have absolutely no information.

One teacher reported, “We have large numbers of students infected, staff (including myself) who have been infected at school, and the only reporting is the standard form letter stating that ‘someone with COVID has been on site in xyz year levels.’ Reality is that by day 10 of school, up to 75 percent of some grades were directly impacted—one grade has had more than 20 absent students who are either infected or household contacts. A significant cluster is growing, and NOTHING is being done about it. Parents are not being given the opportunity

to make accurate judgements based on actual risk.”

Overwhelmingly respondents have expressed deep concerns and anger at what is being allowed to happen in schools. One parent wrote, “I am scared for my family members going into a school environment where many students have not been vaccinated and COVID is rampant.”

Many have expressed a desire to return to remote learning, with one writing, “Please just lock us down, homeschool until numbers drop again, this is insane.” Another said, “We need to go back to home schooling... this is awful, every day there’s more msg’s saying there’s more covid cases present at the school and to monitor our kids... I am a single mother of three kids, 2 with disability and that go to this school.”

Amid a broader surge of the BA.2 variant, more infectious and lethal than the original strain of Omicron, governments, with the support of unions, are doing everything they can to ensure that children remain in classrooms and parents at work to ensure the unfettered flow of profits to big business.

This week, as NSW infections reached highs not seen since the Omicron tsunami of December–January, the state government released “updated” guidelines for schools. Essentially, nothing has changed. Schools will be provided with limited supplies of RAT tests, and indoor mask recommendations in classrooms “may be” reinstated in areas with high levels of transmission.

In South Australia, the state authorities have declared that whole school classes would be sent home if ten or more of their students test positive for the virus. The measure is premised on a continuation of mass transmission and is aimed at ensuring that schools remain open no matter what.

As the CFPE has insisted, the fight for the safety of teachers, students and parents requires a political fight against all of the governments, education departments and teachers’ unions. The struggle for a return to remote learning must be linked to a fight for repudiation of the profit-driven “let it rip” policies, which guarantee a continuation of mass infection, illness and death and the emergence of new COVID variants.



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