

COVID-19 infection spread in Australian schools exacerbates staffing crisis

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Large numbers of Australian schools are facing an unprecedented staffing crisis as the COVID-19 pandemic continues to sweep through classrooms. The decades-long crisis in public education is now reaching a breaking point.

In January, state and federal governments insisted that schools be reopened for face-to-face teaching and that there would be no return to remote learning, regardless of the infection rate. The “let it rip” policies adopted by both Labor and Liberal-National Coalition governments across the country reflected the demands of big business and finance capital for an end to all restrictions that impinged on their profits, with schools required to be open so that parents could be forced back to their workplaces.

Even minimal mitigation measures in most states were removed, including the lifting of many mask mandates and the downgrading of close contact rules. By late February, COVID cases had once again begun to surge under the influence of the BA.2 variant. Schools were acting as vectors for the rapid spread of the virus—case numbers soared among children and teenagers, and thousands of teachers have been infected.

New South Wales (NSW) is the worst affected state, both in terms of infection rates and the ensuing staffing crisis. More than 117,000 NSW children aged between 10 and 19 have reported a positive test in just the last month. In addition, over 74, 000 children under 10 were infected.

In the final week of the school term earlier this month, 20 percent of school-aged children were absent from their classroom due to a COVID-19 infection or exposure. More than 20 schools across the state had directed students to learn from home due to teachers either being sick or self-isolating and because

replacement staff could not be found.

The Independent Education Union (IEU), which covers staff in non-government schools, reported: “The teacher shortage in schools throughout NSW and the ACT has intensified to breaking point, with one Sydney Catholic secondary school, Brigidine College, having closed for the entire week because so many staff and students are off sick with COVID or isolating because of it.”

In the Australian Capital Territory (ACT) in the second last week of term, 1,040 cases of COVID-19 were reported in 114 of the territory’s 137 schools. Parents and carers of students at Calwell High School received an email notifying them that students in Years 7 and 8 would go to remote learning for the last week of the term.

Teachers at Queanbeyan High School in southern NSW walked off the job last month, protesting ongoing staff shortages. The school of around 500 students made headlines the previous week when its principal told parents that students in Years 7 to 10 would only be able to attend in-person classes for three days a week due to chronic teacher shortages.

Queanbeyan High School is not an isolated case. Last week it was reported that more than 1,400 class periods at a high school in the regional town of Dubbo have been affected by staff shortages in the last ten weeks. Students have been forced to spend classes on the school oval, with two or three teachers supervising.

Several teachers have contacted the Committee for Public Education (CFPE) to report the dire situation in their schools.

One wrote: “Our school has approximately 600 students whose parents’ income is one of the lowest in the state. Student enrolment is about 40 percent Aboriginal. So far in Term 1, we have had 766 merged

or uncovered one-hour classes. In 2021 we had 849 total. Currently we have between 6-8 classes combined in the school hall with minimal supervision. Often kids come to school to spend four out of five classes in minimal supervision. It is the staffing shortage, and it is biting hard.”

Another said that at her school, each day an average of eight students were away with COVID-19 in every class. She related that the school had organised a Year 7 field trip, and that every student on the trip subsequently tested positive. The teacher told the CFPE, “I can’t see an end to the pandemic because a new variant will come through. When you are in a tiny room with 27 children how is this going to stop?”

Two teachers at different schools reported that due to staff shortages over a hundred children were placed in the school hall with minimal supervision.

The situation is deteriorating across Australia. In Western Australia (WA), whose state government had pursued an effective COVID suppression policy until the beginning of 2022, there have been almost 18,000 positive tests in children under 10, and 23,500 in 10-19 year olds. Of the state’s 1,100 schools, 1,045 have reported positive cases since the start of the year, and more than 5,000 staff have had COVID.

In Tasmania, 30 percent of children aged between 5-11 have tested positive for the virus. This is alongside 16.7 percent of children in the 0-4 age group, 25.1 percent aged 12-15, and 26.9 percent of those 16-19. Information about the number of teachers affected is not available.

Queensland schools are also facing critical staff shortages as COVID-19 cases rise among students and staff. Last month it was reported that 1 in 50 children in schools had tested positive for COVID. The latest case numbers indicate that 118,000 young people under the age of 20 have contracted the virus this year.

Widespread staff shortages are the product of not just the COVID-19 pandemic—they emerge from decades of funding cuts and neglect by both Labor and the Liberal-National Coalition governments at the federal and state levels. A recent report estimates the cumulative underfunding of public schools from 2019 to 2029 will amount to about \$21 billion.

At the start of 2022, some 2,383 permanent positions remained unfilled in NSW alone, almost double the 1,250 teacher vacancies public schools in the state

faced at the start of 2021. Over the past month, teachers in public schools in metropolitan and country areas have staged protest actions against understaffing and worsening workloads.

Since the beginning of the pandemic, the teacher unions in every state have worked with governments to herd teachers back into classrooms packed with mostly unvaccinated children. When teachers have tried to raise their concerns in meetings and on social media, the unions have worked to suppress the discussion and censor dissenting voices. Their chief concern is that the disastrous situation confronting public schools threatens to get out of their control.

Even when the unions raise limited concerns about staff shortages, COVID is not mentioned.

Angelo Gavrielatos, the president of the New South Wales Teachers Federation, recently tweeted: “If you know the cause of the #teachershortage - uncompetitive pay and crippling workloads - by definition you know the solution.” A teacher replied: “Skilled professionals entitled to a safe workplace. 1000s of teachers infected at school Term 1. Many infected twice in 1 term. Recurring illness, long term disability & death will be the eventual result of virus that causes brain shrinkage & organ damage.”

The Committee for Public Education has alone fought for the continued suspension of face-to-face teaching amid dangerously high levels of COVID community transmission. Teachers ought to form rank-and-file committees in every school and community, independent of the teacher unions, and strike out a new road to defend the health and safety of teachers and students and develop the necessary political fight for decent wages, working conditions, and funding for the public education system. Only a unified struggle of the working class can halt the murderous “let it rip” policies and fight for the necessary elimination of COVID.

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