

COVID-19 driven staff shortages fuel crisis in Australian schools

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COVID is continuing to cause havoc in Australian schools, belying state and federal government claims that the pandemic is over.

Schools across the country are reporting chronic daily teacher shortages due to illness. This is seeing classes being combined or cancelled, executive staff covering classes, and year groups being returned to remote learning for all or part of the school week.

Mitigation measures such as mask mandates, contact tracing and isolation periods for close contacts have been junked across the country. Masks are no longer mandated at schools for either staff or students, and close contacts of confirmed cases no longer need to isolate.

Under education department directives, schools have also resumed camps, assemblies and other forms of mass congregations. Around the country, hundreds, and in some cases, more than a thousand young people and staff are regularly packed into poorly ventilated halls. Parents are reporting on social media that numerous school camps have ended up as super spreader events.

Infection rates and deaths were relatively low in Australia before late 2021 and early 2022. Under pressure from teachers, school workers and parents, state governments responded to earlier surges in the pandemic by having schools function via remote learning as an important mitigation measure.

The emergence of the Omicron variant was falsely presented as a “mild” variety of COVID, and over the December-January summer school holiday state and federal governments, Labor and Liberal alike, worked with the teacher unions to enforce the reopening of schools regardless of infection rates.

On January 13, then Prime Minister Scott Morrison explained the pro-business calculations behind the reopening drive: “If schools don’t open, then that can

add an additional five percent to the absenteeism in the workforce,” he declared. “So it is absolutely essential for schools to go back safely and to remain safely open if we are not to see any further exacerbation of the workforce challenges we’re currently facing. So schools open means shops open... That’s what schools open means, and it’s very important they go back.”

In the subsequent six months, the outcome has been mass infection, illness, and death. Out of Australia’s population of nearly 26 million people, 7.7 million cases have been officially confirmed. Of the 9,200 confirmed deaths due to COVID, the vast majority, around 7,000, occurred in 2022. Daily per capita COVID deaths in Australia are now the third highest in the world for countries with populations greater than 10 million.

An Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) report released in May provided a snapshot into the effect of COVID on families. One-third of Australian households with children under 18 reported their child’s attendance at school was affected by COVID. A significant proportion of households, 12 percent, reported that they were unwilling to send their children to school or preschool due to COVID.

The extent of the crisis is being covered over both by the government and the unions. One teacher reported to the World Socialist Web Site that primary school principals in New South Wales (NSW) schools have been threatened by the education department with disciplinary action if they talk to the media about cohorts of students required to study from home, or the number of classes collapsed due to staff shortages. Schools are reporting staff absences of up to 40 percent on any one day, many due to COVID infections.

One teacher, on condition of anonymity, reported to the Committee for Public Education (CFPE) that

“COVID is rampant in our school ... we are now finally getting SOME of the COVID numbers, but these are not the real numbers of the COVID spread, especially as sibling groups are not actively testing—‘so never get covid.’ The reality is, a lot of the VCE (final year) students are reluctant to report their results (even when positive) to the school as it means that they are unable to attend school.”

One principal from a regional school in NSW revealed the difficulties that he and his staff were facing. He wrote a letter to the parents at his school outlining what it would be doing to mitigate against the teacher shortage, including collapsing classes, having students under minimal supervision in the playground and getting unqualified staff to supervise some classes.

The Department of Education rewrote his letter, deleting almost all of his temporary arrangements. In an interview with the ABC’s “Background Briefing,” he said that he had refused to send the redrafted letter to parents, as it was “just outright lying to parents.” He added, ‘People need to know that there is a real issue, and this is not something just to be swept under the carpet.’

The principal expressed his frustration: “I love my job. Absolutely love it... But work is really, really hard. And I don’t mind working hard when you get outcomes, but when you work your backside off and the people around you are doing the same and the kids are still missing out...”

Teacher shortages were a huge problem before COVID, but the pandemic has led the system to a breaking point. An article recently published by Monash academics found that 59 percent of teachers surveyed were planning to leave the profession. The reasons given by teachers included “heavy workloads, health and wellbeing concerns for teachers and the status of the profession.”

Epidemiologists are warning that the BA.4 and BA.5 are set to become the dominant variants in Australia, which will lead to another surge in infections. Of serious concern is a recent study from Japan, which found that the BA.4 and BA.5 subvariants are not only more pathogenic but also have the ability to evade existing immune responses from both prior infection and vaccination.

In May this year, Ozsage, a multi-disciplinary network of Australian experts, warned that COVID was

now the leading cause of death in Australia. Professor Nancy Baxter explained, “On average some 50 people a day are dying from COVID. That’s one person every 30 minutes. We will see tens of thousands more suffering from long COVID. Our health systems, schools and businesses are already struggling and the situation will get a lot worse if we do not act.”

The diagnosis of Long Covid covers a raft of symptoms that last well occur after even mild infection from the virus. It includes significant damage to many of the body’s major organs including the brain. Several studies have found that 10 percent or more of people who are infected with the virus will suffer from some form of Long Covid. This includes countless children now contracting the virus in their classrooms.

The mass exposure of children to these dangers is an indictment of the state and federal governments, Labor and Liberal alike, the teacher unions and the capitalist system they defend. It underscores the need for educators to establish their own rank-and-file committees, independent of the unions, to fight for measures aimed at eliminating transmission, including a return to online learning.

The fight against the “let it rip” COVID policies is a key component of the struggle against wage cuts, unbearable conditions and the chronic under-funding of public education.

We encourage teachers, staff, parents and students to contact the CFPE today:

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