Australian schools in crisis after governments reject basic COVID-19 safety measures

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The resumption of schooling in Australia after the mid-year break has seen a further escalation in COVID-19 infections, with governments refusing outright to implement basic mitigation strategies, including mask mandates.

No state or federal government, Labor or Liberal, has mandated mask wearing, including in schools. Earlier this month it emerged that the Victorian Labor government had rejected official advice that it do so, issued by its own chief health officer, Ben Cowie.

In a statement that explained nothing, Victorian Health Minister Mary-Anne Thomas said on July 12 that "the chief health officer has provided his advice and I have accepted his advice, except that I have chosen not to extend mandates for mask wearing in some of the settings that were recommended to me." Thomas said that she made the decision after discussion with "industry," i.e., big business.

A farcical situation has emerged within the state's school system, following the July 18 issuing of a co-signed letter from the heads of the Department of Education, the Catholic Education sector, and Independent Schools (Victoria). This outlined that wearing masks for all school staff and students aged eight and over was an "expectation," yet not a requirement, with no penalties or consequences for non-compliance.

Similarly in Queensland, Labor Premier Anastasia Palaszczuk has said she "strongly encourages" mask wearing in schools but would not make this a requirement due to respect for "personal responsibility."

Labor Prime Minister Anthony Albanese was asked on July 20 why he rejected mask mandates. He absurdly replied: "One [factor] is mental health considerations… the imposition of controls on people's behaviours has an impact on people's health. And particularly young people, we're seeing a really problematic increase in incidents of severe consequences when it comes to young people's health, but others as well."

There is no evidence whatsoever of any adverse mental health effects from being required to wear masks in schools and other indoor areas. Albanese's comments are cover for the real agenda of the entire political establishment—refusing to enact any basic safety measures that potentially impinge on the accumulation of profit by corporate and finance capital.

Numerous epidemiologists and medical professionals have issued public statements of concern and opposition to the lifting of virtually all public health measures.

University of Melbourne Epidemiologist professor Nancy Baxter told the *Age* on July 11 that schools were helping drive COVID-19 transmission. "I don't think it's going to be better [than term 2] in fact, I think it's going to be worse," she said. "I think people should prepare themselves for there being closures and [teacher] shortages."

That is now happening across Australia. Accurate and up to do date data on the situation in the schools is not being publicly released—this is part of official efforts to downplay the disaster that has emerged. Numerous local reports have nevertheless emerged of schools having to switch back to remote and online learning due to widespread staff illness.

For example, in the last two weeks reports emerged of one working class school in the western suburbs of Melbourne, Manor Lakes P-12 College, that had 60–70 of its 320 staff absent with illness. This forced the cancellation and merging of multiple senior classes.

There is a nation-wide shortage of relief teachers,

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resulting in sick teachers going unreplaced and their students often supervised together in large groups in halls.

In New South Wales, the state Liberal government of Premier Dominic Perrotet is reportedly preparing to fast-track university students into classrooms. The *Australian* reported on July 21: "University students would assist teachers in classrooms just six months into an education degree, under radical reforms to plug the national shortage of school teachers."

The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke with several public school teachers on conditions in their workplaces.

A primary school teacher in a northern working class suburb of Melbourne said: "The department notice that there was an 'expectation' for children over 8 to wear masks was ridiculous. Many staff aren't wearing masks, thinking that there isn't a requirement to do so, so kids aren't wearing them either. The wearing of masks needs to be mandated! We continue to see increased transmission with increased disruptions over what we already have."

A secondary school teacher from a Victorian regional school reported: "We continue to have considerable staff and students absent with the virus. In the first week back in Term 3, there have been 73 year VCE [senior student] classes cancelled. A single ES [education support] member has had to supervise in excess of 120 students, amounting to a baby-sitting exercise.

"Some staff and fewer students are using masks, even though we have experienced a huge growth of the virus. Unless mandated, without masks, we will continue to see students and staff getting third and fourth doses of COVID."

Another secondary school teacher in Melbourne said: "Even though the letter [recommending mask wearing] has gone home, there is no uptake from the kids.

"Student illnesses are still occurring and classes are severely disrupted. The pressure to catch up on work and assessments from students being away is insane. This has been the hardest six months of teaching I've ever had. I hate what is going on and now dread going into work."

An entirely preventable spate of serious illnesses and deaths are now emerging. On July 24, a girl died of COVID-19, just two weeks before her second birthday. The death again exposed the lie that young people are unaffected by the virus.

The tragic loss is part of the worst spate of mass COVID deaths in Australia to date. In the seven-days including 30 July, 535 coronavirus fatalities were recorded, an average of more than 76 every day, up from around 40 a month ago. Yesterday's 157 deaths were comfortably the highest reported on any day of the pandemic.

The wave of mass infection has broader implications. Several studies have found that 10–20 percent of people who are infected with the virus may suffer some form of Long COVID. This includes countless children now contracting the virus in their classrooms.

Across Australia, the Australian Education Union and its state affiliates are working as the active accomplices of state and federal governments. Throughout the pandemic, the unions have insisted that teachers and school workers comply with every official edict, and take no independent measures whatsoever to protect their safety and that of their students.

The Committee for Public Education (CFPE) advances an alternative to this program, which amounts to complicity in the murder of teachers and students. It fights for the establishment of rank-and-file committees at all schools, completely independent of the unions, as the basis for a movement of teachers, education staff and parents.

Such a struggle must be based on the fight against the official "let it rip" coronavirus program, based on subordinating health to profit. Schools must be closed and online learning resumed, with a massive increase in funding to public education, as part of a series of scientifically-grounded measures to eliminate transmission and end the pandemic.

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