

“Deep cleaning” in Australian schools: Image and reality

By Carolyn Kennett
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A growing number of temporary school closures are taking place in Australia because of COVID-19 infections among teachers and/or students. In the state of Victoria, 32 schools have been closed for “deep cleaning” since the return of all students just over two weeks ago, including 22 schools since last Friday.

Despite the concerns of parents and teachers about the safety of returning to crowded classrooms where social distancing is almost impossible to practice, the federal and state governments, both Liberal-National and Labor, have pushed teachers and children back into classrooms as part of the drive by big business to get workers back inside workplaces.

Governments promised thoroughly cleaned classrooms, including desks, chairs and other classroom furniture. The reality is that school cleaners have neither the resources nor hours to conduct the cleaning that is needed.

Instead a propaganda campaign is being waged via videos and media releases where some high contact areas are being cleaned regularly using casual untrained labour, while the vast bulk of necessary cleaning is simply not being done.

Governments are claiming that where outbreaks have occurred, before reopening the school, “all surfaces, furniture and equipment will be disinfected with hospital-grade disinfectant as part of the deep clean.”

Yet the longest time that schools seem to close for cleaning is three days, and this is not even enough time for students or teachers to be tested for COVID-19 and get their results back.

There is no clear definition of “deep cleaning,” although various websites say it is different from everyday sanitation because it involves tasks and activities of cleaning and disinfecting that need effort, time and the right techniques and products.

Cleaners themselves, as well as teachers and parents, are deeply sceptical of the promises of deep cleaning. The large cleaning companies involved are hiring inexperienced and untrained casual cleaners. The WSWS interviewed Tom, who was employed as a casual by one of the four companies contracted to clean government schools in New South Wales (NSW).

Tom spent seven hours each day working in two schools. His main job was to clean door handles, railings and high contact surfaces in bathrooms. He was not allocated time to clean desks, equipment inside classrooms or playground equipment. For some time he was the only additional cleaner hired for the “day shift” at a high school with more than 1,000 students.

One Melbourne cleaner told a daily newspaper: “We don’t have enough equipment like proper cloths and dusters. We don’t have enough to make sure it’s safe. The disinfectant that we are using, we run out quickly. We are not given enough gloves or cloths. We aren’t given masks.”

A survey of 500 cleaners found that 90 percent had to rush essential cleaning in order to complete their jobs, 80 percent lacked essential equipment, 74 percent lacked correct personal protective equipment (PPE) and 70 percent had not received face-to-face training.

Epping Boys High School in Sydney was one of the first schools to be closed due to a COVID-19 infection. Following the closure, cleaners at the school revealed that due to the understaffing they were only able to clear rubbish on some days, rather than to do detailed cleaning. The cleaners were denied their requests for PPE, including face masks and extra hand washing supplies.

One teacher commented on Facebook: “Wiping over the door handles in the middle of the day is hardly inspiring confidence. Imagine how many cleaners and

how many additional hours would actually be needed to clean 21 classrooms, computer labs, libraries, staff rooms, toilets etc.”

In many schools, teachers and students are expected to clean the desks and equipment in their own classrooms.

Teachers are worried about the extra burden being placed on cleaning staff. One teacher posted on Facebook: “Our school cleaner, who used to work from 2 until 6, is now onsite before we come out for recess at 11 and was still there when I left at 5.30 yesterday. She does five hours at another school before coming to us... These are people who are doing a hard, physical job for long, long hours at the moment, with no end in sight. It isn't sustainable, but they know it will be their fault when this fails.”

Another teacher said: “The cleaner at one of the schools I'm at is doing 12-hour days and they have only managed to get one extra person. ‘Deep cleaning’ isn't happening, as they physically can't do it.”

For all the government promises, inadequate funding has been provided. In Victoria, just \$45 million has been allocated for “enhanced cleaning” of state schools. In NSW, only \$250 million has been allocated for cleaning and hygiene products for public facilities, including schools, Technical and Further Education Colleges and all forms of public transport.

The NSW Department of Education website claims: “Good personal hygiene, including regular hand washing, cleaning and disinfecting and the use of personal protective equipment are vigorously applied across all schools.” But each school has received on average just four bars of soap and about 10 ml of hand sanitiser per student.

Earlier in the year, when COVID-19 infection numbers started to grow, many teachers reported that their schools had no soap available in student bathrooms and hand sanitiser was non-existent unless teachers and students provided it themselves. Teachers were told not to use PPE while at school.

By contrast, private schools have received significant additional financial support from the federal government during the pandemic. As small to medium size businesses, they were able to access payments of up to \$100,000 each to assist with cash flow. In addition, the federal government provided them with \$10 million for hygiene products and extra cleaning

services.

One teacher noted: “Private sector schools have large teams of cleaners working before the school day, during, and after. Quick responses to requests, high-touch areas cleaned frequently with strong anti-bacterial cleaner, all on top of the usual daily mopping and vacuuming etc.” In public schools, daily mopping and vacuuming is a rarity. The Victorian government guidelines provide for only weekly or twice-weekly cleaning, and daily mopping is only scheduled in bathrooms, canteens and sick bays.

The pandemic has highlighted the under-funding of every sphere of education, including the cleaning of schools. The degradation of cleaning in educational facilities through the privatisation of these services points to the incompatibility of the capitalist profit system with the provision of basic human needs—in this case, the hygiene standards necessary to protect the lives and health of teachers, students and parents.

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