

Kids have had enough and should be in school

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Kids have had enough and should be in school



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WRITE this article, not as a Treasurer, not as a politician, but as a parent. A father who has spent more days away from home than at home over the course of Covid-19.

A father who cannot claim to have carried the burden of homeschooling, or indeed of working from home.

Those challenges have been met by my amazing wife, who like millions of other Victorians, has not complained, has followed the rules, and has made the best of a difficult situation.

But I write because like so many parents, I am concerned about the impact school closures are having on our children.

As the Prime Minister said this week: "Kids have lost enough time out of school over the course of the last 18 months. It is very important we get those kids back to school as soon as possible."

No one is denying the threat posed by Covid but there is also a premium on the wellbeing of our children and keeping them where possible in the classroom, learning and interacting with teachers and classmates.

Victoria's situation is like no other across the country. Some of the state's one million schoolkids

have been subject to remote learning for a total of more than 22 weeks. That is the equivalent of more than half the academic year.

In the Northern Territory, the schools haven't closed during Covid, in South Australia only for a week, and in NSW for about 30 days.

As professors Fiona Russell and Sharon Goldfeld of the Murdoch Children's Research Institute wrote recently, "school closures matter for children".

They point to Victorian data from the Royal Children's Hospital National Child Health Poll that 51 per cent of Victorian parents "reported a negative impact of remote learning on their children's mental health".

The impact on Victorian kids from last year's lockdown was nearly double the average seen across the rest of the country.

In a significant report of nearly 100 pages in length, Professor Goldfeld, Professor Russell and other academics from the University of Melbourne point to a possible traffic light system for our schools based on the geographical nature of clusters, community transmission and vaccination.

Professor Russell said recently: "In terms of blanket closure of all schools in Victoria, I cannot understand why that is happening at all. We cannot just keep doing this, locking them down all the time. It may seem a little thing and that children are resilient, well they're not. It's very anxiety provoking. And it is the most disadvantaged children and families that are worst affected."

Closing schools is seeing many

kids fall behind in their learning.

This is acknowledged by the state government, which has deployed nearly 6000 tutors across 1800 schools to help what it estimates to be 200,000 kids needing catch-up support.

As a primary school teacher in Melbourne's west said: "We've got quite a number of grade 1 students who can't count to 20." Some "didn't know any letters, they weren't on a reading level and couldn't recognise words."

But it's going to be the mental health impacts that are more difficult to deal with.

Melbourne GP Stacey Harris, who works with many children, talks about the "suicide, depression and anxiety" being caused by lockdowns and the need to medicate kids as young as 12 with antidepressants.

Harris also said among young girls "eating disorders have just ramped up".

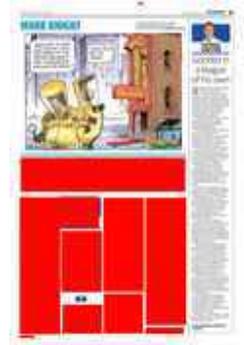
"I'd see one patient every three months before Covid and lockdown ... then it jumped to one a week. I know a paediatrician who was seeing three to five per month; post lockdown that has gone to five to seven cases a week," she said.

It is heartbreaking.

As a nation, Australia has done so well confronting Covid.

Whether it be health workers on the front line, teachers adapting to the virtual classroom or parents juggling their many responsibilities, each have been magnificent.

It is through their efforts and those of their 25 million-plus Australians that we have avoided on the health and economic front the fate of so many other nations.



But Covid is likely to remain with us for some time, with new outbreaks and sadly further lockdowns impossible to rule out.

This is why it's even more important that going forward, we do all we can to keep our schools open as their closure should only be a last resort.

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