A quarter of all schools in Bradford, England set to close

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The Labour Party-controlled Bradford council in Yorkshire is proposing to close 70 of its 264 schools. This decision follows a Central Government Audit Commission report, which showed the city to be either below average or at the bottom on a range of national indicators.

These included:

• The lowest spending per primary-age and secondary-age pupil of any of the country's 36 Metropolitan councils.

• The second lowest 11-year-old education test standards in English, math and science.

• One of the slowest rates for processing statements of special educational needs, i.e., reports on children underachieving at school.

• A higher than average number of primary school classes of 30 or more pupils.

The council intends to amalgamate infant and junior schools, claiming this will enable it to utilise educational resources more effectively. Its meeting last March 24 voted 52 to 14 to carry out the proposals and began a "period of consultation" that ended on May 29. During this time the council sought to play schools off against one another. After compiling an initial list of closure targets, it reprieved some at the expense of others not originally selected.

A final decision will be made by the full council on July 14 and then sent on to the central government's Department of Education and Employment for final consideration. It is clear the government will push through the scheme. Education Minister Stephen Byers met with the five Labour Members of Parliament in Bradford to give his full support to the proposals. This has proceeded despite the opposition of many parents and teachers, who have carried out protest lobbies and demonstrations and held a series of meetings at the affected schools.

Bradford has a population of 340,000 and high levels of deprivation. Until last year it received an EEC grant for regional aid. Its schools have been starved of cash for years. Net expenditure on education—estimated at £209 million for 1996/97—has not changed in seven years, despite increases in pupil numbers. Some 150 teaching jobs have been lost in the last four years through early retirement incentives. Standards of school buildings have also fallen. Ninety-eight of Bradford's schools are more than 100 years old and there are 500 "temporary" classrooms in schools across the city, half of which are over 20 years old.

The city has an immigrant population of around 14 percent, mainly from the Indian subcontinent. Yet the council recently cut Section 11 funding —additional tuition for children who speak English as their second language—by £800,000. In total 20 teachers and 20 administrative posts were lost through the cuts.

The targeted schools are to close over a three-year period from 1999 to 2002. Class sizes will rise as a consequence. Teaching unions have complained that many of the proposed replacement schools will be unacceptably large (630 plus pupils for primary schools and 1,500 plus for the secondary schools). Many children will have to travel long distances to attend the nearest school.

The council has not yet made any written guarantee that there will be no compulsory job losses. Teachers will be forced to compete against one another for jobs in the newly reorganised schools. In addition some caretakers face losing their homes along with their jobs, as they live on site.

The local National Union of Teachers has not opposed the closures on principle. A spokesman said that if the union had been consulted, the closures could

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have been made on a more rational basis.

The proposed reorganisation will cost an estimated £100 million. The council is reportedly seeking “innovative funding schemes”. It has already expressed interest in bidding to become part of the Central Government’s Education Action Zones (EAZ) scheme, to be jointly run by business representatives and Local Education Authorities. The EAZ’s will rely heavily on business funding and are a significant move towards the privatisation of public education.

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