

Parents and teachers denounce NZ school closure

A New Zealand correspondent
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The New Zealand Labour Party's spokesman on education was jeered last week by angry parents and students at a public meeting called to protest the imminent closure of Petone College, a secondary school in a working class neighbourhood near Wellington.

The meeting attracted over 600 people, filling the Lower Hutt town hall. It was organised by the school's board of trustees, after an announcement by Wyatt Creech, Minister of Education in the National Party-NZ First coalition government, that he is likely to close the school at the end of the year due to declining student numbers.

The move has provoked an outcry from the local community. Petone College is well known for its special programs for students with disabilities and its community education facility, which offers night classes to adults.

The Labour Party spokesman, Trevor Mallard, made it clear he would not fight to keep the school open. Mallard, the local MP and shadow Minister of Education, argued the school could not offer a 'quality' education with fewer than 400 students, claiming that this restricts the courses and options available to students.

He said he would only support the schools' survival if it could recruit a significant third-form intake for next year. This is impossible given the announcement that the school is likely to close. Parents, who have no guarantee that the school will be open, are already being forced to enrol their children elsewhere.

Many speakers from the floor challenged Mallard, with several saying they had in the past either supported or worked for the Labour Party during elections. They told Mallard they would no longer support him if he failed to fight for the school.

The one person who came to his defence was a local National Party MP, Joy McLaughlin, who revealed that she and Mallard had made a prior agreement that the fate of the school would not be made a 'political issue'. McLaughlin is also committed to the school's closure, claiming that the Hutt Valley area has too many schools.

Petone College is the victim of the policies of successive governments, which began with Labour's so-called 'Tomorrow's Schools' program in the 1980's. It fragmented the public education system by removing responsibility for administration, and increasingly funding, from government and turning it over to school boards.

With the subsequent removal of home zones (geographic boundaries within which schools drew their students) by the National Party government, schools were pitted against each other in a battle for survival. Those able to gather the best resources, collect substantial fees from parents and gain the most favourable publicity through the publication of exam results in media 'league tables', have prospered at the expense of poorer schools.

Far from there being too many schools in the Hutt Valley area, Hutt Valley High nearby is overflowing with nearly 2,000 students on a site designed for far fewer, while Petone College has seen its enrolment drop from 900 in the late 1980's to its current level of 230.

It is ironic that Petone College is facing closure, having for some years dedicated itself to the government's program of educational competition. In the early 1990s a new principal was appointed who introduced right-wing management techniques, purportedly in order to 'raise standards'. Several layers of experienced staff either resigned or were forced out

-- a total of 34 teachers over four years -- and replaced by younger teachers.

The school moved heavily into business sponsorship schemes, setting up well-publicised 'business partnerships' with Dulux Paints, Lever Rexona, Saturn TV and the Pak n Save retail chain. Despite all these moves, the school roll continued to fall. It still could not compete with wealthier schools.

Inevitably, the schools that suffer most under this system are those in working class areas. They are hit by a cycle of decline, in which lower levels of funding leads to fewer students, less staff and dwindling resources. By contrast, increased funding has gone to private schools over recent years.

Petone is the second school currently earmarked for closure, with the government clearly preparing to close more. In the southern city of Invercargill, two schools are already in the process of being shut, to be replaced by a single school in 1999.

The secondary teachers' union, the Post Primary Teachers Association, is mounting no defence of teachers' jobs in the threatened schools. The staffs are being kept isolated while their positions are abolished through the Ministry of Education's 'redeployment' process.

At Invercargill the displaced teachers are being forced to reapply for half the positions. When pressed at union meetings to explain why no national campaign has been launched against the closures, PPTA executive members have said these are purely 'local issues'.

While the public meeting over the Petone closure demonstrated the willingness of working class people to defend their public school, and also indicated their particular anger over Labour's betrayal, clearly missing was any political program or leadership under which to fight. No resolutions were presented for the meeting to discuss.

Representatives from all the main political parties spoke. MPs from the opposition Alliance party made vague gestures of 'support' for the school without producing any firm commitment to defend public education, as did the PPTA president, Martin Cooney.

The chairman of the school board of trustees, Peter Love, a local Maori leader, indicated that he is behind a likely preparation of a 'defence' of the school through a Treaty of Waitangi claim. The basis of such a claim is that as the school has a high Maori roll, its closure

could be declared a 'racist' act in breach of the treaty.

Such a move counterposes the continued existence of one school against another, on the basis of the racial and ethnic makeup of the student body. It is essentially divisive and does not provide any basis for a unified fight for the right of all students to a high quality, free public education.

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