

# Police raids and surveillance cameras in Australian schools

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Recent events in two Australian states have served to highlight the connection between the ongoing assault on public education and growing attacks on the democratic rights of students, parents and teachers.

On one side of the country, police in Western Australia have randomly targetted rural and suburban schools, using police sniffer dogs to raid student lockers and school bags. According to a police spokesperson, the raids were carried out with the intent of uncovering weapons and evidence of drug use and trafficking. Primary school children as young as 10 have been detained in their classrooms while their lockers and belongings were searched.

In one case, police raided two schools and a nearby house in Manjimup, a rural town east of the state's capital city. The police strip-searched eight students aged between 14 and 16. In another incident, a sniffer dog allegedly mauled a student during a drug search.

The police raids are taking place amid growing opposition from parents and students to cutbacks to public education by the state's Liberal Party government led by Premier Richard Court.

In July, Education Minister Colin Barnett announced the closure of five secondary schools: Scarborough, Hollywood, Swanbourne, Kewdale, and Oakford. At Hollywood Senior High, more than 70 students staged a walkout to protest the closure announcement while parents and students at Kewdale and City Beach Senior High are threatening to boycott the plans to amalgamate the two schools.

A similar process is underway on the other side of the continent in the state of Victoria. Eighty schools have installed surveillance camera systems over the last year to monitor students and staff. Police drug raids have taken place at another six schools, most recently in Tallangatta, a rural town.

Surveillance cameras were first installed in 1997 at Melbourne's Glen Eira Secondary College on the pretext of combatting drug use. A total of 17 students were expelled or suspended following unsubstantiated allegations of heroin use in the student amenities. The media and tabloid press seized on the cases and went out of their way to 'prove' their guilt despite the lack of evidence.

The real aim of the cameras and the allegations was to get rid of so-called difficult students who were regarded as an impediment to boosting the image of the school, attracting more students and more funds.

A year later the Department of Education gave school principals a carte blanche to install cameras virtually anywhere. Operational 24 hours a day, the surveillance cameras are now permitted in outside areas, corridors, locker rooms and student areas. Even more sinister is the go-ahead for cameras to monitor student/staff work performance and private areas.

This repressive atmosphere is being created alongside a massive assault on public education. Since coming to office, the Liberal Party government in Victoria has shut down more than 400 schools, eliminated 9,000 teaching jobs and slashed youth oriented programs.

To legitimise their actions, officials in Victoria regurgitate the same arguments as their Western Australian counterparts. Spokesmen for the Education Department, the Principals Association and Education Minister, along with the police chiefs have demanded a 'crack down' on 'rampant' vandalism, anti-social behaviour and drug abuse among youth.

In Western Australia, a police inspector claimed that the growing presence of police in schools would prevent 'the schools from looking like America'. In the United States, metal detectors, police and security guards are common place in a public school system that

is disintegrating from a chronic lack of funds, especially in working class neighbourhoods.

With police raids and surveillance cameras, are Australian schools any different?

Successive Labor and Liberal governments have slashed education budgets, dismantled youth training programs, eliminated student allowances, closed hundreds of schools and retrenched teachers and academics.

To destroy the right to a proper education, a climate of fear and intimidation has to be created in the schools. Hence the unstated official youth policy is to stifle criticism, oppose dissent and protests, and cultivate passivity, subservience and a general acceptance of the status quo.

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