

"Disposable students" removed from schools in Australia

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Despite serious objections from parents' groups and civil liberties organisations, the Carr Labor Party government in New South Wales is presiding over the suspension of tens of thousands of school students a year under harsh discipline procedures.

Soon after assuming office in 1996 Premier Bob Carr's government formulated new rules described by the Parents and Citizens Association as "draconian and punitive" and a means of dumping "disposable students". In a joint report, the Australian Law Reform Commission and the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission identified the growth in school suspensions as "the most serious injustice facing school children". The government's policy proved so blatantly unjust that it provoked repeated challenges to the state Supreme Court and the Ombudsman's office against the decisions of school principals that were found to have breached the rules of natural justice.

New 1999 discipline guidelines, while couched in terms of "procedural fairness" insisted upon by the Ombudsman, grant principals unprecedented powers to suspend, exclude or expel students. Previously a principal had to obtain the approval of a senior departmental officer before a student could be expelled. Under the new rules, the high rate of school suspensions will remain and probably increase.

Since the early 1990s short suspensions (up to four school days) have more than doubled—from 16,670 in 1993 to 32,796 last year. Long suspensions (up to 20 days) more than trebled—from 1,747 in 1993 to 5,396 in 1998. On average, of the 760,000 students attending government schools in New South Wales, about 1 in 20 are suspended annually. Every day, hundreds of students are being removed.

Even these figures are misleading. In the first place, students in working class and immigrant areas are far more likely to be suspended—in fact, four times more likely. Campbelltown and Mt Druitt High Schools, located in working class suburbs in Sydney's west, had the highest number of suspensions last year, 2,441 and 1,623 respectively. Suspension rates for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students are also four times the state average. In other words, each year one in five students in the most vulnerable categories are being suspended.

These official rates are almost certainly understated. Youth

welfare groups report that some students are encouraged by the school executives to "stay away" from school and are simply recorded as truants until their names are struck from the school records, not even numbering among those officially counted as excluded. A pilot study conducted by the Youth Action and Policy Association, examining the school dismissal experiences of 25 young people in the predominately migrant Sydney suburb of Fairfield, found that eight claimed to have been expelled from schools in 1995 when according to official figures, no students were expelled in that year.

Expulsion and suspension are among seven different methods by which a student's education can be terminated or disrupted in New South Wales. The categories are expulsion, short suspension, long suspension, in-school suspension, exclusion, declaration of place vacant, and partial enrolment. It is clear that through these methods, thousands of young people are being deprived, either totally or partially, of the fundamental right to education.

The figures suggest a growing crisis in the schools with major implications for children. On behalf of the government, the Education Department is doing its best to shroud these deteriorating conditions. It refuses to give a detailed breakdown of the reasons for suspending students. However, in one typical western suburbs high school, 41 percent of short suspensions in 1997 and 1998 were for violence, 33 percent for non-violent misbehaviour, 8 percent for damage to property or theft, 4 percent for drug-related offences and 13 percent for "other" reasons.

Education authorities have only published statistics for assaults reported to the police. They increased from 585 in 1995 to 848 in 1996 and 1,089 in 1997—a rise of 91 percent. This indicates a rising level of tension in the schools. At the same time, these serious violent incidents are only a fraction, one in 37, of the suspensions. Clearly, suspensions are being imposed in response to wider problems and for other reasons.

A decade ago, school discipline policies emphasised student welfare and the school's pastoral care role. Government guidelines required schools to have a range of mandatory alternatives to suspension. That is, suspension was to be the last, not the first, response to incidents. This shift has been driven by underlying processes throughout the public education

system.

Faced with ever declining funds, schools, except in wealthy areas, are unable to provide a decent education. For example, in one area of funding alone, the federal government's Enrolment Benchmark Adjustment scheme will cut \$7 million from the state's public schools this year despite an increase in student numbers of 33,321.

Schools now have to find their own methods of raising money. Marketing the school, attracting sponsorship for corporations, or generating fees from "clients" able to pay, means projecting a desirable ethos, based on high academic results. With schools operating more and more like small businesses, their budgetary expenses are calculated not only on the level of student enrolment and staffing but on minimising per "unit" cost. As one estimate stated, "Our difficulty is resourcing...if you are running a Year 9 class in history or geography, it costs you about \$3.40 per student period to run it, if you are running a year 11 and 12 in one of the vocational education programs it would cost you about \$28.30 per student period to run." [1] Such calculations give some indication of the financial pressures on schools to favour those "clients" who bring the greatest return for the least investment.

Summing up the changes in the way schools operate, a federal government inquiry into truancy and exclusions of young people stated: "The new competitive school is not in business to meet the needs of those experiencing the most problems." [2] In fact, school principals, empowered to act as both prosecutor and judge in determining disciplinary outcomes, are under budgetary pressure to suspend or exclude those students who require the most help. The same parliamentary inquiry was told that: "Changes in discipline regulations which give individual school principals the power to expel have exacerbated the tendency to discard students who present difficulties, or who could be seen to detract from the image of a school..." [3]

Centrally-funded services directed at supporting students in most need are being withdrawn. School programs oriented towards equity and student welfare are being run down or eliminated outright. Funding for the Disadvantaged Schools Program, set up in the mid-1970s by the federal government to lessen the gap between rich and poor schools, has been frozen. The other major national program dealing with student welfare, the Students at Risk program, targeting students likely to drop out of school, had its funding successively reduced from 1994 on and was completely axed in 1996. Giving an official stamp of approval to this process, the NSW Director-General of School Education stated in a widely publicised comment: "Schools are not welfare agencies".

The teachers' trade union, the NSW Teachers Federation, has also facilitated this turn. In 1995 it agreed to trade off school support services as part of a pay deal with the Labor government. Today it is opposing the changes to discipline rules demanded by the Ombudsman and is calling for each

school's right to automatically suspend to be widened.

The stock official response to symptoms of growing social problems is to step up repressive measures. The Carr government declared in the recent state election campaign that it would harden its stance against students. Its new student discipline policy, entitled "Respect and Responsibility—Labor's Good Discipline and Anti-Truancy Plan," includes such measures as setting up mobile teams of "behavioural specialists" targetting schools and students deemed to have discipline problems. Police have been given new powers to apprehend youth not attending school. Schools have been instructed to set up Crime Prevention workshops together with local police.

Media reporting generally dovetails with the government's "get tough" approach. Rising suspension rates are sensationalised as a response to increasingly violent students, enabling the government to proceed with its hardline approach.

Notes

1. Victorian Association of State School Principals, Transcript pp 575-577 cited in House of Representatives Standing Committee on Employment, Education and Training *Report of the Inquiry into Truancy and Exclusion of Children and Young People from School* AGPS Canberra 1996 Page 40
2. House of Representatives Standing Committee on Employment, Education and Training *Report of the Inquiry into Truancy and Exclusion of Children and Young People from School* AGPS Canberra 1996 Page 39
3. Australian Council of State School Organisations Inc. Submission, p 655 cited in House of Representatives Standing Committee on Employment, Education and Training *Report of the Inquiry into Truancy and Exclusion of Children and Young People from School* AGPS Canberra 1996 Page 40



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