

Tens of thousands of Australian students affected by school closure plan

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Thousands of angry parents, students and teachers have attended locally organised meetings in the past two weeks to protest a New South Wales (NSW) state government plan to close up to 10 public schools in Sydney. In addition to the closures the Labor government led by Premier Bob Carr intends to turn other comprehensive coeducational high schools into junior, single sex schools, senior colleges and specialist or “alternative” schools.

The closures and amalgamations will hasten the demise of the comprehensive high school system in Sydney's public education sector and deepen the divide between the type of education available to the wealthy and that provided for working-class students.

The government's plans, which directly affect around 45,000 students, include:

- The sale of five high schools, Marrickville, Maroubra, Vaucluse, Hunters Hill and Chatswood High Schools and three primary schools at Waterloo, Redfern and Erskineville.

- The amalgamation of schools in Sydney's inner west into a cluster, with Balmain High School becoming a junior school for girls, Leichhardt High School a junior school for boys, and Glebe High School opening as a senior college.

- Transforming Malvina High School in Sydney's north-west into a specialist information technology school geared to meet the needs of local industry.

- “At risk” Aboriginal students from Cleveland High School in central Sydney being relocated to a “special school” at Wingara Secondary College in the industrial suburb of Alexandria.

The scheme is aimed at further undermining public education in favour of a market-driven “user pays” system. Education is allocated 20 percent less of the state's budget than it was twenty years ago, and increasing onus is being placed on each school to manage its own dwindling finances. In 1997, education's share of the budget was 25.7 percent, dropping to 24.4 percent in 1998 and 23 percent in

1999-2000.

Public school teacher numbers have also been cut. Before 1985, the allocation of teaching staff was based on the recognition that certain students needed a higher teacher ratio than others. Schools catering to migrant, Aboriginal and lower socio-economic areas, for example, attracted a greater staffing entitlement than selective high schools. But a recent report on secondary staffing from 1985 to 2000 demonstrates that hundreds of teaching jobs have been lost through changes to the staffing formula. In addition, thousands of disabled students have been integrated into mainstream schools without any extra funding provision.

The outcome is that public schools are floundering as they attempt to do the impossible. At the same time, federal and state governments have promoted the private schools by providing them with generous government subsidies, granted without any regard to their size or curriculum. Currently 75 percent of private schools' direct funding comes from public money, 20 percent of which is provided by the state government.

Inevitably, enrolments in public schools have declined, now at an historical low of 69 percent of all Australian students. Some of the Sydney schools targeted for closure have been hit hard. Chatswood High, for instance, had 855 students in 1991 but now has 582. Hunters Hill High's enrolments have dropped from 786 in 1991 to 424 while Maroubra High's have plummeted from 611 to 234.

The government's announcement of the closures, along with Education Minister John Aquilina's blunt statement that they were “not negotiable,” was calculated to have a definite effect: to give parents an unmistakable signal that they should remove their children from the targeted schools if they want educational stability. The anticipated further drop in numbers will give the government's position added credibility. As one senior student remarked at a meeting of 500 people protesting the closure of Hunters Hill High earlier this week, her class would be forced to complete their high school education surrounded by an empty school.

“Building the Future”

Under the cynical banner of “reforming,” “overhauling,” “upgrading,” “improving” or “revitalising” public schools, the Carr government is trying to coerce parents into concluding that their best option is to enrol their children in the private school system. Turning reality on its head, the school closures plan is called “Building the Future,” portrayed in the media as the government's “fightback” against declining public school enrolments and its effort to “lure” students back into public schools. Not even the slightest attempt has been made to call to account those responsible for the drift away from the public system. Nor has there been any mention of the 54 private schools in NSW with fewer than 100 students, the nine private schools in the inner-city area alone with less than 400 students and the one with only 62 that are all receiving hefty government subsidies with no threat of closure. Nothing is said about declining resources or any of the other problems facing public schools.

The government is well aware that, as a result of the closures, many students will have to travel large distances, creating another incentive for parents to opt for a local private school. Moreover, as public schools become increasingly geared to teaching the skills and programs required by employers, parents wanting their children to have an all round general education will be forced to turn to the private schools. Indeed, according to recent reports, Catholic schools, the poorest sector of the private school system, are currently in the process of converting their specialist schools into comprehensive co-educational facilities.

Carr's plan will also accelerate competition between schools. Aquilina has refused to rule out further closures, so many school communities will be propelled into a dog-eat-dog struggle for funding to keep student numbers up. Already a great deal of school activity and resources—the battery of tests, the emphasis on school uniforms, school refurbishments etc—are aimed at generating a desirable image to attract enrolments away from other schools. Under the latest proposal, certain schools will benefit if others are sold, putting pressure on some school communities to support the closures. The sale of Hunters Hill High alone—a “developer's dream” on harbour foreshores—is calculated to net around \$55 million, some of which will be used to finance amalgamations and refurbishments. In Sydney's inner-west, Dulwich Hill High School is supposed to gain from the sell-off of nearby Marrickville High to the tune of \$9 million, and Tempe Languages High School has been promised money for an “upgrade” and “increased support for gifted and talented classes.”

But despite its carefully worked out strategy, the government appears to have been caught unawares by the

depth of opposition to its planned cuts from students, teachers and parents. Packed meetings have overwhelmingly brushed aside arguments about falling enrolments, angrily confronting education officials and demanding greater government funding. Resolutions at meetings have called for strike action, demolition bans and joint action by the communities involved.

At the Marrickville High meeting, where hundreds crowded the school hall, the principal was barely able to contain angry outbursts directed at official speakers. A period of question time was ruled out of order.

Deputy president of the NSW Teachers Federation, Maree O'Halloran delivered a few ritualistic lines claiming to support the protest. Her lack of anything meaningful to say was not surprising. The ink was hardly dry on a teachers' award implemented by the union last year, which overturned fundamental working conditions in the name of “adapting to the competitive environment” facing public schools.

Since 1997 the NSW Teachers Federation has played a key role in allowing the government to amalgamate several schools in Sydney's western suburbs and in the regional centre of Dubbo. After teachers at Bidwill High in western Sydney called a public meeting in December 1997, at which 300 parents and students angrily denounced the government's plans, further public meetings were promptly shut down. The union organised no campaigns to oppose the cutbacks, working to keep teachers at each of the targeted schools isolated from each other. At the same time, the Carr government held so-called “consultative meetings” designed to convince parents and students that no alternative existed to the closure plans.

The only alternative to the government's agenda of creeping privatisation is a perspective based upon an entirely different set of social priorities: that the educational needs of ordinary students take precedence over budgetary concerns, and that a massive injection of funds be implemented to bring every public school up to the standard of the finest private facility.



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