

Australia: Sydney schools to close despite widespread opposition

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Ignoring months of protests from parents, students and teachers, the New South Wales government announced on June 14 that it would push ahead with the closure of nine public schools and the amalgamation of others. Virtually all of the measures contained in the original controversial plan announced in March have remained unchanged.

Three high schools in the Sydney suburbs of Maroubra, Vacluse and Hunters Hill are to be shut by the end of next year, along with primary schools in Erskineville, Redfern, Waterloo and Alexandria in central Sydney. Leichhardt, Balmain and Glebe high schools in Sydney's inner west are to be amalgamated into a Sydney Secondary College, offering junior secondary school education with a separate senior college for students in years 11-12.

The closure of Marrickville High School has been put on hold for three months but the school will be forced to compete with neighbouring Dulwich Hill High to determine which school will remain open. Chatswood High School's site is to be sold and the school relocated to the Ku-ring-gai Campus of the University of Technology.

Elements of the government's original plan have been reshuffled. The mainly Aboriginal students at inner-city Cleveland High School were to be dispersed and the school transformed into a primary school, replacing those at Alexandria, Erskineville, Redfern and Waterloo. Under the revised plan, Cleveland High's students are to be joined by the primary students from the four schools in a redeveloped "community" primary to Year 12 school. Its location has not yet been finalised.

The Labor government, with the support of the media, claimed that the closures and amalgamations were made inevitable because of declining enrolments.

But falling student numbers are a product of the policies of state and federal governments, which have boosted funding for private schools at the expense of public education. The schools least able to compete for students are those in working class suburbs that lack resources, have difficulty retaining experienced staff and have no means for raising extra funds.

In its May budget, the NSW government increased direct funding to private schools by 4 percent to \$498.7 million as compared to a rise of 2.8 per cent for public schools—an amount that hardly matches inflation. In addition to state government funding, private schools, which enrol 31 percent of all students, will receive \$3.6 billion this year from the federal government as compared to just \$2 billion for public schools, which cater for the remaining 69 percent of students.

Comments from teachers and parents indicate that the government's "consultative" process with local communities has been widely regarded as a farce. The process began with education minister, John Aquilina, announcing that his plans were "not negotiable". It ended with the government dismissing the 1,400 submissions and letters sent to the education department opposing the plan and turning down calls for an extended 12-month consultation period.

According to a report in the *Daily Telegraph*, Hunters Hill High school, which the government hopes to sell for over \$55 million, has lodged a complaint with the NSW ombudsman over the so-called consultative process. Parents have condemned the government for failing to carry out a proper demographic study and point to the fact that the school had a 40 percent increase in Year 7 enrolments this year.

NSW Premier Bob Carr argued that there was no alternative to the planned closures because enrolments at the targetted schools were so low that students had

only restricted subject choices. Yet the same rules do not apply to state funding for private education. Over 122 private schools in the state, heavily publicly funded, have so few students that they are categorised as restricted curricula schools.

One parent wrote in a letter to the *Sydney Morning Herald*: “If Mr Carr wants to stem the flow of students to private schools in the inner west, why doesn’t he ask parents why they don’t choose their local State high school? I have. Their answer is almost always resources. They think their children will have a better education outcome in a better-resourced school. They see that their local State school has suffered years of financial neglect. The schools lack basic resources such as textbooks and parent organisations have to raise funds constantly to supplement the scarce resources provided by government.”

Teachers at Maroubra High stopped work for an hour and joined a delegation of students and parents rallying outside the premier’s local electoral office after last month’s announcement. At the end of June, over 200 students from Maroubra, Hunters Hill, Marrickville and other high schools across Sydney marched on Parliament House, the education department and the premier’s office in protest over the government measures.

Maroubra High School Parents and Citizens president, Sandy Mathias told the WSWs: “The government’s plan was not about public education but about property and money. I really think they knew what they were going to do before this ‘Building the Future’ plan came out. Maybe they’re trying to abolish public education altogether. My eyes have been opened up in a lot of areas. People have shown great spirit in defending, not only our school, but also other schools. Bob Carr doesn’t give a stuff. He is our local member and we marched to his office. The only thing he said to the media afterwards was that he was happy to put up with a minor embarrassment in his electorate. They’re closing our schools, our hospitals. Soon we’ll have nothing.”

In stark contrast to this deep-seated community opposition, the NSW Teachers Federation has not even issued a statement condemning the government announcement. Since 1997, the Carr government has been able to carry through school closures and amalgamations at an increasing rate with the union

leaders keeping teachers in the targetted schools isolated from each other and mounting no campaign to oppose the government cutbacks.

Over the last four years, school closures and amalgamations have taken place in Sydney at Riverstone, Mt Druitt and in the Georges River area and also in the country regions of Dubbo, Newcastle and the North and Central Coast. Furthermore, while the Sydney school closures have attracted widespread publicity, the teachers’ union journal has recently reported, with no further comment, that “consultative” processes are well under way between the education department and public schools in the towns of Orange, Moree, Inverell and Wialda, in western and north western NSW.



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