Report highlights deterioration of Australian public schools

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A year-long inquiry into public education in New South Wales (NSW) has concluded that successive state and federal governments have severely eroded public education and provided substantial funding increases to private schools, which mostly cater to the wealthiest families, producing a "dramatic" socio-economic divide.

According to the report, spending on government schools in NSW, Australia's most populous state, is well below the national average. Education funding for the whole country now ranks toward the bottom of industrialised economies—22nd among 29 OECD countries.

"The Provision of Public Education in New South Wales" inquiry was sponsored by the NSW Teachers Federation and headed by retired social work professor Tony Vinson. It found that government school students faced disadvantage from kindergarten to the final years of schooling. Levels of pre-school funding were "lamentable," with Australia spending 0.1 percent of GDP compared to Denmark's 1.1 percent. The number of students reaching Year 12 ranked in the bottom half of OECD countries—17th out of 29—with the retention rate in NSW lower than those in comparable states such as Victoria and Queensland.

The report warned that these trends were worsening. "Australia appears to be the only OECD country in which school participation rates have been falling in the 1990s." Moreover, Australia had among the highest rates in the industrialised world of young people aged 15 to 19 considered "at risk," that is, not in full-time education and not in full-time employment. Australia ranked 14th out of 19 countries, trailing Spain and Mexico.

In NSW, education spending plunged from one-third to one-fifth of the state budget in 12 years. The result was that primary school students received $500 less per student than the national average, while secondary students received $400 less. Other statistics, not mentioned by Vinson, show that the budget share has continued to decline under Premier Bob Carr's Labor government since 1995, falling from 25.7 percent of the budget in 1997-98 to 22 percent in 2001-02.

This gap is even greater in working class areas, where a far higher proportion of students need extra help. Over the past five years, government schools have seen a three-fold increase in students with physical or mental disabilities, following the introduction of integration policies. These students are heavily concentrated in the poorer districts of Sydney, the state capital. In Fairfield, Granville, Liverpool and Mt Druitt, 63 out of 180 schools have more than 20 disabled students. In the better-off areas of northern Sydney, only two of the 212 government schools have similar levels.

Migrant children needing English language assistance are also concentrated in the working class suburbs of Granville, Fairfield, Bankstown and Liverpool. Since 1993 there has been a 16 percent increase in the number of students requiring language assistance but no increase in the number of specialist teachers. As a result, more than 30 percent of immigrant students in NSW government schools are not having their language needs met.

The report documented a range of mechanisms by which state and federal governments have systematically pumped money into private schools, which "operate at levels of recurrent expenditure more than double that of many government schools". At the federal level, funding for private schools would rise by 128 percent in real terms between 1995-96 and 2005-06.

Inequities were "being exacerbated rather than ameliorated." Nearly 40 percent of students from the wealthiest 10 percent of families now attend private schools, compared to less than 10 percent of the students from the poorest 50 percent of families.

Vinson concluded that the state's public school system had come to a crossroad. Without additional funding, it would be "confirmed in the role of being a residual system for those who cannot afford something better."

In a thinly veiled reference to the policies of Carr's government, which are dominated by "law and order" measures, Vinson contrasted the state's growing imprisonment rate, up by 64 percent over the past 20 years, with the cuts to school funding over the same period. For the cost of keeping one person in prison, seven or eight senior high school students could be educated, Vinson estimated. Within three years, there would be one prison inmate for every six students completing high school.

However, after focusing attention on the school system's grave crisis, Vinson challenged none of the underlying policies responsible for causing it. He recommended an additional $318 million funding in the next state budget, just to bring NSW up to the national average. But this sum would not even begin to restore the funding that schools have lost—close to $1 billion over the past two decades—let alone provide public students with the high quality education they deserve.

Vinson called for class sizes in the first three years of schooling to be no larger than 20, a measure he costed at $47 million. "Disadvantaged" students would get an extra $11 million, including $6 million for additional English language teachers, and $15 million would be spent on integrating students with special needs, employing 100 additional support teachers. Country schools would receive an additional $10 million.

Vinson proposed "tapering" government support for private schools to help pay for his proposals. At the same time, he made clear his acceptance of the nostrums of "choice" and "competition," which are used to justify the pouring of funds into private schools. "It is the inquiry's view, and that of others, that school differentiation and choice are permanent features of the educational landscape."

Several of Vinson's proposals dovetail with the Carr government's agenda of blaming students and teachers for the problems in schools. He nominated student behaviour as a major difficulty, urging the government to spend an additional $60 million over four years on student welfare and discipline measures.

Vinson also echoed a call for the establishment of a teachers' institute to enforce teaching standards and outlined mechanisms to make individual teachers more accountable for their students' test results made by a recent government-commissioned report. This would be a step closer to

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imposing performance-related pay; a system already introduced in Victoria, New Zealand and Britain. Vinson proposed an immediate 5 percent pay rise for teachers—a suggestion that Carr and Education Minister John Watkins swiftly dismissed out of hand.

The contrast between the depth of the education crisis that Vinson describes and the paucity of his recommendations points to the purpose of his report. The Teachers Federation initiated the inquiry under conditions in which the Carr government confronted widespread hostility among parents, teachers and students.

Under-funded schools have increasingly prevailed upon parents to help pay for basic educational needs, including teachers' salaries. Student suspension and truancy rates have risen to record levels. Public schools, particularly those in working class and rural areas, face severe teacher shortages.

Government school enrolments have reached historic lows, with one in every three high school students in NSW attending a private school. Growing numbers of parents conclude that unless they enroll their children in a private school, they have no hope of obtaining an adequate education.

Under the pretext of responding to falling enrolments, the Carr government began carrying out school amalgamations and closures. Public anger reached boiling point when, in March 2001, it announced plans to close up to 10 schools in Sydney.

At the same time, the union leaders faced seething discontent among teachers. After years of allowing teachers' conditions to deteriorate together with the school system, the union was further discredited by its role in a bitter year-long industrial dispute in 2000-2001. With the union's support, the government imposed a new award, requiring teachers to work more "flexibly." The agreement extended the school day, making it possible for Year 11 and Year 12 teachers to be directed to start work at 7.30 am or work up to 5.30 pm. It introduced fixed term or contract teachers, and made teachers "portable"—that is, they could be directed to work at a number of schools.

Initially, the government attempted to implement the award by communicating with teachers directly, sidelining the union. However, the conditions so outraged teachers that they mounted the biggest education protest rally for more than a decade. It took the union the better part of a year to wear down their anger and push through the government's main demands.

Pressure mounted on the union leadership to oppose further school amalgamations. When the government announced its latest closures, the union launched the Vinson inquiry, urging teachers, parents and students to take their complaints to it. The union promoted the illusion that the inquiry could lead to a reversal of the long-running hemorrhaging of public education.

The union reportedly poured $900,000 into the review, billing it as the first comprehensive examination of the state's education for 40 years. It also co-opted the state's peak parent body, the Federation of Parents and Citizens Associations, which contributed $25,000. By involving the Parents and Citizens, the union sought to patch up a rift that had emerged after the parents' organisation criticised it for accepting the new teachers' award.

Vinson was appointed in an effort to give the inquiry some credibility. He is known as a social reformer, particularly for his past criticism of brutal prison conditions. A previous state Labor government led by Neville Wran, appointed Vinson to administer the prison system between 1979 and 1981. He also chaired a federal inquiry into health and social services and recently published a study on social disadvantage and inequality.

Vinson visited more than 100 schools across the state, held public meetings and hearings and received some 760 written submissions from organisations and individuals. Many of the submissions strongly condemned the conditions in schools and damned the governments responsible for them, providing further evidence of widespread discontent.

Initially, the government kept the inquiry at arm's length, making no public comment. Last November, however, there was a noticeable turn. Education Minister John Aquilina was dumped after he had been caught out falsely alleging that a student in Sydney's working-class western suburbs had plotted a massacre in the style of the Columbine High School tragedy. Carr, also implicated in the affair, appointed Watkins, who has since developed an alliance with Vinson, welcoming some of his recommendations.

Nevertheless, nothing of substance has changed. Funding for three new prisons headed the latest NSW state budget, which allocated a minuscule $5 million for a pilot project in 2002-2003 to "examine the educational effects on infants of smaller class sizes". With a state election looming in March, the government also announced a slight increase in funding, seeking to defuse education as a poll issue. Included was a tiny $1.5 million extra for special education, well short of the $7.6 million that Vinson recommended.

Apart from joining the Liberal Party opposition in flatly ruling out Vinson's proposals to reduce government subsidies to private schools, Carr has remained silent on the inquiry's findings.

Even so, the union has stepped up its efforts to promote the inquiry's outcome. On its web site, union president Maree O'Halloran declared: "The Vinson Team's product has been magnificent." She told a public education dinner: "The Vinson Inquiry is providing a decade-long plan for the future of our children and public education."

Together with the Parents and Citizens and other education associations, the union has urged teachers and parents to use the Vinson report as "ammunition" to lobby politicians from all parties in the lead up to the March election. According to O'Halloran: "The major political parties will be finalising their election policy and commitments in the next month. Now is the time to lobby for our united demands."

The union is endeavouring to direct teachers and parents back into the arms of the very political parties and political system that have been responsible for the dramatic erosion of public education over two decades. For all the claims that Vinson's recommendations provide a blueprint for the future, his report is simply being used as fodder for yet another fruitless and disorienting election lobbying campaign.

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