Australian state government launches new wave of school closures

Will Marshall
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Over the past year, the Labor government in the Australian state of Victoria has surreptitiously launched a major program of school closures and amalgamations. Premier Steve Bracks' government has been trying to keep parents and teachers in the dark while it continues the assault begun under previous Labor and Liberal state governments.

Within the next few years, about 16 primary and secondary schools face closure, with at least 13 regions discussing mergers. In regional Victoria, schools will be amalgamated in Bendigo, Wodonga, Echuca, Geelong, Colac and Maryborough.

Schools in major working class areas of Melbourne, including Broadmeadows, Monash, Altona, Laverton, St Albans, Dandenong and Heidelberg, could be amalgamated or shut down, ostensibly due to dwindling enrolments. At Broadmeadows, for instance, eight primary schools and one secondary school could close out of 17 and kindergartens would also merge with primary schools. The plans under discussion include one super-size campus with four schools at the Hillcrest Secondary College site.

This information has only leaked out bit by bit. From the beginning of 2005, the education department held meetings in various districts around the state. Principals were left in no doubt that smaller rural schools in particular would face pressure to amalgamate. By gradually releasing fragmented details of supposedly "local community" decisions throughout the year, the Bracks government prevented unified opposition to its program. It was not until last November that the Melbourne *Age* revealed the overall scale of the amalgamations.

In order to wear down resistance, the amalgamations will take several years to complete. For instance, building the new schools in Bendigo may not start until 2009. But, as the *Age* reported last July, the agenda is to "dramatically change the shape of Victorian education".

Education Minister Lynne Kosky claimed at that time that her plans were "about doing things better for kids. It isn't about saving money at all". Precisely the same claim was made by previous Labor and Liberal governments as they downsized public education.

In 1989, Labor Premier Joan Kirner candidly stated: "We got off on the wrong foot last time by talking about school re-organisation in economic terms". This was the prelude to closing 100 schools through what was termed "District Provision"—a program that tied funding to enrolment numbers and forced schools to compete with nearby schools to survive. Kirner's continual refrain was that small schools were unable to offer an adequate curriculum.

From 1992, the Liberal government of Premier Jeff Kennett accelerated Kirner's program through "Quality Provision," which delivered a massive $350 million cut to the education budget, closed 350 schools and removed 9,000 teachers. Kennett's education minister Don Hayward also claimed that the key objective was "to ensure access to a broad quality curriculum for all students".

Howard Kelly, an education consultant involved in mergers under both Kirner and Kennett, reappeared in February last year to declare that the new plans would provide better "breadth and depth" for students. But no one answers the obvious question: if two waves of amalgamations have only intensified the running down of public education and the boosting of private schools, how will another round benefit students?

The Productivity Commission's annual report on government services in 2002-2003 showed that Victoria spent at least 10 percent less per student than

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every other Australian state. Victoria undercut neighbouring New South Wales by 16 percent.

As a result, Victoria has led the way in students shifting to private schools, as parents felt compelled to pay to ensure that their children have an adequate education. Australian Bureau of Statistics data shows that Victorian state secondary schools' enrolment share declined from 69 percent to 60 percent over the past 20 years, while state primary schools fell from 72 percent to 69 percent. Nationally, the figures are three percentage points higher.

In working class communities, the decline has been exacerbated by low retention rates. In Broadmeadows for instance, only 30 percent of students stay in school until Year 12, well below the state average of about 75 percent. Under-funding substantially drives the dropout rate. Broadmeadows students in Years 11 and 12 are not offered courses in music, art, accounting, economics and politics.

Aided by the media, the Bracks government claims that local communities are demanding the amalgamations. The mergers were planned long in advance, however, and the government is actively pushing parents into the process—providing funds and hiring advisors to recommend mergers to schools and parents.

Moreover, parents face no real choice. The poor conditions in schools ensure that they opt for amalgamations. The bleak alternative is a war of attrition, with the government holding the purse strings.

Last November, the government unveiled a "Capital Investment and Access Planning Policy" under which schools requiring money for capital works must first submit plans of how they will lift student results. Any school that does not have growing enrolments and improving results will operate under a cloud of uncertainty.

This will lead to more student departures and a decline in funds. As the head of the principals' association Andrew Blair stated: "The sting in the tail will be the conversations about merging or sharing resources... Those schools who refuse to have those conversations will be left alone by the department. They won't get capital funding and they will become the victims of market forces."

Again, Bracks is emulating Kennett. In 1996 a leaked memo from the education department entitled "Increasing Educational Opportunities Through School Restructure" showed how the Kennett government dealt with recalcitrant schools: "Identified schools will also be accorded the lowest priority for discretionary major maintenance and refurbishment funds."

In purely financial terms, small schools are more costly for governments to maintain. Every school, small or large, has fixed operating costs, including principals' and office workers' salaries, building maintenance and facilities such as water, sewerage, electricity, and phone bills.

The Labor government intends to enhance its powers by establishing a Qualifications and Registration Authority to audit schools' curricula, enrolments, staff qualifications and student welfare policies. Schools unable to meet benchmarks would face closure.

The Australian Education Union (AEU), the teachers union, has been fully complicit in the Bracks government's machinations. Lending credibility to the claim that the amalgamations are a community inspired project, AEU president Mary Bluett stated in February that the union supported a review of schools provided there was local input. The union's main concern is to shore up its position as the government's junior partner as it was during Kirner's period in office.

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