

Australia: State Labor government slashes education funding for the most needy

Will Marshall, Socialist Equality Party candidate for Broadmeadows
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The Labor government in Victoria has long made claims to be reversing the attacks on education carried out by its predecessor, the right-wing Liberal Kennett government. The reality is that it has continued along precisely the same lines.

One of Premier Steve Bracks's most ruthless decisions has been to cut education programs that support society's neediest. His government has changed the criteria for those receiving disability funding, making the standards so onerous that thousands in dire need receive no assistance whatsoever.

Last year, 6,760 students with language disorders in government schools received professional help. This year, only 208 students qualified. In other words, 6,550 children were struck off the list.

A language disorder is an inability or difficulty with processing speech or expressing oneself. The disorder can range from minor cases to children being unable to use speech or language at all. Once a child confronts difficulties in expressing or understanding ideas it dramatically impacts on all aspects of their life, as well as their cognitive and motor development.

According to Speech Pathology Australia, the funding for children with severe language disorders was slashed from over \$50 million in 2005 to just \$3 million this year. Speech Pathology president Trish Bradd, commented: "Minimising funding for an individual who needs this support has major implications for the child's ability to participate fully in activities central to classroom based learning. This can have life-long learning and social effects."

If a society is judged by the way it treats the most vulnerable and needy, then the Labor government stands condemned. While imposing budget cuts that will tragically impact on children, it is giving massive

handouts to business. State Treasurer John Brumby, my Labor opponent in Broadmeadows, recently boasted that the government has introduced "tax cuts worth \$4 billion—cutting business costs and making Victoria a more attractive place to invest".

Brumby claims he is carrying out policies that will keep Victoria on side with the money markets. The same is true at the federal level where the Howard government has continually cut taxes to the corporate elite at the expense of the working class.

The Bracks government initially moved to tighten disability eligibility requirements during 2005. At the beginning of that year, after a public outcry about cuts to disability services, Bracks claimed he had restored funding and pledged: "No student who receives money currently will be disadvantaged". This was another empty promise.

Under the new Language Disorder Program introduced in 2005, schools received an overall amount for students, rather than individualised funding. A survey of 98 primary schools showed that the allocation per student fell by \$921. This program involves training classroom teachers to deliver language disorder programs. This may produce acceptable results in less severe cases but cannot provide seriously affected children with the support they need.

This year, the cuts deepened massively. Children with language disorders now only qualify for assistance if they are statistically three standard deviations below the norm, rather than two standard deviations. In layman's terms, only the bottom 0.15 percent of students qualify, instead of the previous 2.5 percent.

Under the new formula, students must also demonstrate a "Critical Education Need" (CEN)—as well as a language disorder, a student must have a severe behavioural, safety or health problem. Only

children with visual impairment or a physical disability are not required to show an additional CEN.

According to the Education Department, 23,083 students were in school disability and language disorder programs last year, representing an increase of 74 percent compared with 2000. But this figure vastly underestimates the real level of need. As Professor Frank Oberklaid, director of the Royal Childrens Hospital Centre for Community Child Health, said: “There would be many, many more than 23,000 that would benefit from some additional help in the classroom.” In fact, many academics suggest that 10 percent of students would benefit from extra professional assistance.

It should come as no surprise that the teachers’ union, the Australian Education Union, has sprung to the government’s defence. AEU spokesman Peter Steele claimed in 2005: “The tendency is for people to paint a picture, if you like, of a child with a more severe disability to get more funds”. The union joined a government Working Party to determine the 2006 funding arrangements.

The AEU has helped enforce all the government’s major initiatives—such as performance-based pay for teachers, the *Blueprint for Education* funding benchmarks, and school closures—which have deepened the imposition of “user pays” and “free market” measures, forcing more and more parents to pay for private schooling in the hope of getting a decent education for their children. The union’s only concern has been to entrench itself as a partner in running the education system.

As a teacher and the SEP candidate for Broadmeadows, I unequivocally oppose the cuts to language disorder programs and all the other measures taken by the Bracks government that have starved public schools of funds. Education is a fundamental right, and central to any genuine social equality. Free and open access to first-class education must be guaranteed to all young people, from pre-school to tertiary studies. Billions should be poured into ensuring that the best facilities and latest technologies are available to all, including those with special needs.

The resources for this exist, but social wealth is increasingly funnelled into the pockets of the privileged few. That is why the present social order has to be completely reorganised along socialist lines so that

education and other human needs are the critical priorities, not corporate profit. The SEP is standing in Broadmeadows in order to develop the struggle for a new mass movement of the working class based on a socialist program.



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