

Australian state election: Major parties ignore public school decay

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Every media poll shows that education is a key concern among voters in the March 24 New South Wales state election. Parents, teachers and students have faced years of neglect and decline in the government school system, especially in working class areas, while every year millions more dollars have been poured into wealthier private schools.

The response of both Labor Premier Morris Iemma and his Liberal counterpart, Peter Debnam, to conditions in the state's 2,200 public schools can only be described as contemptuous.

At his election launch last month, Iemma promised to spend \$280 million over four years to repair decrepit school halls, gymnasiums and toilet blocks. His government's own Auditor-General had reported that insufficient funding over the past 10 years had resulted in a \$116 million backlog in school maintenance.

Parent and teacher groups slammed the government for re-announcing funds previously pledged and pointed out that such maintenance was a basic government responsibility and should not be announced as election promises. Public Schools Principals Forum chair, Cheryl McBride, told the media: "It's just ridiculous. We shouldn't be talking about toilets in an election campaign, but we are."

By contrast, both the federal and state governments have spent lavishly on private and religious schools, placing mounting pressure on parents to pay hefty fees in the hope of securing a decent education for their children. Federally, the Howard government allocates an estimated \$4,515 per private school student annually compared to \$1,050 for public school students. On top of that, the NSW Labor government spends some \$750 million each year funding or subsidising private schools.

One statistic sums up the imbalance. According to the

NSW Public Education Alliance's Dr Lyndsey Connors, private schools in the state spend \$2,109 per student per year on outdoor facilities and capital works, five times as much as public schools.

Iemma and his predecessor, Bob Carr, have cynically used the funding inequity to demand that local schools "compete" with private schools, and each other, to attract enrolments. This has only widened the gap between better-off areas, where parents can afford to donate the money and time needed to improve facilities and staffing levels, and schools in poorer areas, where parents cannot.

According to a recent *Sydney Morning Herald* article, public schools in wealthy Sydney suburbs such as Turramurra, Pymble and Wahroonga are beginning to "claw back" students. But in working class suburbs, schools are continuing to be run-down, closed and amalgamated.

In the name of "competition," Labor has also demanded increased workloads from public school teachers. In 2000, the Carr government, assisted by the teachers' union, the NSW Teachers Federation, foisted on teachers a new award which had as its centrepiece the need for public schools to "compete for enrolments with private schools in the education marketplace". For example, teachers can now be rostered to start classes as early as 7.30 a.m. or finish later, up to 5 p.m.

One result of the deteriorating conditions has been a high drop-out rate among teachers in government schools—17 percent resign in their first five years in the classroom. Education Minister Carmel Tebbutt's response is an election promise that new teachers will be gradually released from face-to-face teaching for one hour a week; a pledge the Liberal opposition immediately doubled.

These promises will not reverse the high attrition rate,

which can be directly attributed to the Labor government's program, policed by the Teachers Federation. Elected in 1995, Carr continued the historic assault on public education initiated by the previous Liberal government, under which thousands of teachers' jobs were eliminated and "global budgeting" was introduced to make individual schools responsible for making ends meet.

The Labor government insisted that any pay rises for teachers had to be paid for by teachers themselves, through trading off working conditions or increasing workloads.

The push to make schools compete is exacting a growing toll on students and teachers alike. Schools must focus on test scores, marketing "academic success" as a sales pitch. School curricula are being distorted, with teachers under pressure to confine lessons to "teaching to the test". Moreover, the process inevitably damages many students' self-esteem, with those in the "bottom" 70 percent often regarding themselves as failures.

In this pressure-cooker environment, student mental health and behavioural problems are appearing more frequently and at younger age levels, testing teachers' expertise, resources and emotional resilience. At the same time, students' welfare needs, and "at risk" students, are less and less regarded as a school's "core business". The ratio of student counsellors to students continues to fall, from one counsellor to every 1,000 students to 1:1,200 over the past four years.

The Labor government has responded by stepping up punitive measures against "problem" students. It has strengthened school principals' powers to suspend or expel students and expanded the network of "suspension centres" where students are excluded from mainstream schools. Some 35 "behaviour schools" and 40 "tutorial centres" are due to be opened by the end of this year, located predominantly in working-class and country areas.

As for the Liberal Party, its election web site lists no substantial education policies, and any pledges it makes are premised on slashing up to 20,000 public sector jobs, many of which would be in education. The Greens claim to oppose the decline of public education but are committed to the return of the Labor government and support the underlying pro-market and "business friendly" economic program that underpins Labor's

education outlook.

In opposition to all those who enforce the dictates of the corporate elite and the private profit system, the Socialist Equality Party calls for a fundamental redirection of social wealth to pour billions into providing free, first-class public education at all levels—kindergarten, primary, secondary and tertiary.

Public funding of private, for-profit and religious schools must be abolished. Every local public school must be equipped with the same cutting-edge facilities—from advanced computers to cultural resources and sporting fields—that expensive private schools currently enjoy.

The SEP insists that education is a basic right. Every student must be given the opportunity and encouragement to fully develop his or her talents and capabilities, whether academic, artistic, technical or sporting. The pursuit of higher or technical education must be available to any young person at no charge, including overseas students.

Such policies are incompatible with a social and economic order driven by the profit motive. Only through the development of an independent political movement of the working class, armed with a socialist perspective—i.e., one that places the interests and needs of the vast majority over the profits of the privileged few—can they be met. This is the perspective being advanced by the SEP in the course of the NSW election campaign.



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