

Australia: 25 years of Labor-Liberal “reform” wreaks havoc on public schools

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A University of Melbourne study provides a graphic picture of the impact of government policy on public schools during the past quarter century.

The research, entitled “School Reform and Inequality in Urban Australia,” by Associate Professor of Education Stephen Lamb, shows how educational inequality has markedly increased as a result of the market-based “reforms” imposed by both Labor and Liberal governments at state and federal level.

Lamb concludes: “At the end of 25 years of reform, schools in the poorer areas of Melbourne had become residualised and were a shadow of their former selves. They had become ‘sink’ schools, denuded of student numbers and resources, and, thanks to these changes, repositories of academic failure.”

Although Lamb focusses on the state of Victoria, he notes that his findings are applicable across Australia. He traces the evolution of government schools from the 1980s until 2004, demonstrating how under-funding and the introduction of “school choice” have depleted those in poorer areas.

During the 1980s, enrolments in lower Socio-Economic Status (SES) schools in Victoria declined markedly. Mean enrolments in the bottom quintile (20 percent) of schools slumped from 665 in 1980 to 491 by 1991. But in the higher SES schools, the mean size jumped by almost 120 students to over 700.

The decline in student numbers in these poorer schools was largely due to the state Labor government’s easing of school zoning restrictions. Schools were opened up to parental or “school choice,” pitting them against each other in the struggle for student numbers and funding. The policy was justified on the basis that these measures would lead to improved student outcomes. In reality, it triggered a flight of students to better-off schools.

Having allowed schools in working class areas to decay, the government then declared that smaller schools were inefficient. Labor Premier Joan Kirner launched a program known as District Provision, which closed secondary and primary schools, using the pretext that the smaller schools could not give students a wide enough curriculum choice. Lamb points out that between 1986 and 1994, 306 Victorian schools were closed.

Because of the closures, school enrolments increased across the SES divide. This process accelerated when Liberal Premier Jeff Kennett took office in 1992. His government carried out an onslaught on public education, closing hundreds of schools. As a result, 20 percent of teachers left the state education system.

After a decade of declining enrolments, schools in working class areas began to see their enrolments increase, largely due to Kirner’s rationalisation program. From 1991 to 1993, the mean number of students attending low SES schools increased from 491 to 735; about a 50 percent increase.

In the wealthier areas, student numbers also increased, but at a less rapid rate. Wealthier schools could “cherry pick” students likely to succeed academically or otherwise enhance the school’s reputation, rather than simply take more students to lift funding levels.

The Kennett government’s “Schools of the Future” program intensified this market-based approach. Schools became increasingly reliant on locally-raised funds. Not surprisingly, those in more affluent areas benefited, since they could raise substantially more funds than their poorer counterparts. Once again, there was a flight of students to wealthier neighbourhoods.

In 1993, mean school enrolments in low SES areas stood at 735. By 2004, this had fallen to 610, despite an

increase in the school age population. Schools in high SES areas, however, experienced substantial growth, lifting the mean student number by 232 to exceed 1,000.

By 2004, schools in wealthier areas commanded vastly superior resources and were almost 1.8 times the size of those in low SES suburbs.

The polarisation of public schools has been accompanied by the promotion of private schools. While high SES schools increased their intakes, the percentage of students attending government secondary schools as a whole fell from 68.5 percent in 1984 to 60 percent by 2004.

Federal spending on private schools rose by 147 percent between 1995 and 2004, while government schools received only a 70 percent increase. Lamb points out that the increased funding for private schools far outstripped the rise in student numbers going to this sector.

The declining number of government schools opened the way for the private sector to move in. At the same time, the federal government changed its regulations to allow new private schools to receive government funding, regardless of existing government schooling in the area.

By 2004, the mean enrolment at low SES schools stood at 500 below that of schools in the middle and higher SES locations. Lamb makes the point that larger schools, with economies of scale, require less funding per student than smaller schools. Partly for this reason, larger schools have tended to produce better results, and governments have been able to scale back spending under the banner of being providers of better education.

The flight from working class areas consists disproportionately of students from more academically advanced backgrounds. According to Lamb's research, every fifth student living in a low SES suburb travelled to a school in a different region and the majority of these students attended schools in high or middle SES suburbs. The General Achievement Score for such students was more than half a standard deviation above the mean score of students remaining in their local areas.

As a result, the public system has become "residualised". In grossly under-funded poorer schools, there is a higher proportion of students with serious social, language and other problems, requiring greater

resources and classroom teaching time.

The Calwell electorate, based on Broadmeadows and other working class suburbs in Melbourne's north, is a case in point. Nearly half the secondary schools are in the lowest 20 percent of the state in VCE (Year 12) achievement. Almost 40 percent of primary schools are in the lowest 20 percent of the standard reading benchmarks. The Year 12 retention rate stands at 25 percent, considerably below the state average.

As expected, the state Labor government's solution to what amounts to virtual educational apartheid is another round of mergers and closures. Under the cynically titled "Broadmeadows regeneration project", 17 schools will be merged/closed to become four large schools. Under-funding and under-resourcing is set to continue unabated, but on a larger scale.

And the same thing is occurring around Australia. Results from the *Program for International Student Assessment* show that Australia, along with the US and Britain, has one of the most polarised education systems in the world, meaning that social background largely determines educational outcomes.

Lamb's research points to two inter-connected processes: the growing inequality in public schools is part of the widening gulf between a wealthy elite and the working class. At the same time, parents are being pressured into concluding that they must pay private fees to ensure a decent education for their children.

The Socialist Equality Party insists that, in direct opposition to the bipartisan consensus on "user pays", every child has the basic democratic right to the highest quality education. We therefore insist that billions of dollars be poured into public education at every level to guarantee that every young person—regardless of their family's social status or financial means—has access to free, first-class kindergartens, schools, colleges and universities.

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