

Major crisis in Australian public school infrastructure

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According to recent research, Australian public schools will need to cater for hundreds of thousands more students over the next decade, while media reports indicate that many schools are already “bursting at the seams.”

In 2015, the Australian Centre for Educational Research (ACER) warned that new public schools would need to be built for an estimated 400,000 additional students during the next decade. In response to the findings, ACER’s chief executive at the time, Geoffrey Newcombe, warned: “If we don’t start to invest more in infrastructure in schools, then we’ll be teaching children sitting under trees.”

In early 2016, public policy think tank, the Grattan Institute, increased this already astounding projection to 650,000. Its research found that in order to accommodate the increased numbers, from 400 to 750 new schools would need to be built over the next 10 years, costing \$A6–11 billion. Among these would be around 250–500 primary schools.

Unsustainable overcrowding is already well underway. Many schools are either full or well over capacity, particularly in the state capital cities, Melbourne, Sydney and Brisbane. Students in some schools are using the floor, corridors and balconies during classes, while at others, start times and lunch breaks are being staggered. On Sydney’s lower north shore, students at one public primary school attend classes in portable classrooms erected at the local high school.

In New South Wales (NSW), figures released by a state parliamentary inquiry in August 2016 reveal that more than one third of schools are full, while 8 percent are “stretched beyond their limits.” In Sydney’s inner west, half of its 30 schools are already full or over-capacity.

In Melbourne’s rapidly growing outer suburbs, schools are also facing surging student numbers. The student population at Alamanda College in Point Cook, which teaches Kindergarten to Year 9, has increased by 500 percent in three years. The school runs on four timetables, with staggered break times to ensure students have enough space in the playground.

North Melbourne Public School, in the inner city, has reportedly provided students with “lap desks,” along with pre-recorded lessons, in one double classroom, with four classes being conducted at the same time.

A recent report on the Australian Broadcasting Corporation’s radio Background Briefing program indicated that inner city schools were “jam-packed” due to the surge in new apartments accommodating the larger numbers of families wanting to live close to the city and to their workplaces.

The crisis in public school infrastructure has been decades in the making. It is a direct consequence of two and a half decades of ruthless cost cutting by Labor and Liberal governments, both state and federal, resulting in the closure of hundreds of public, government-funded schools across the country. Most severely affected have been schools in the states of Victoria, NSW, South Australia and Tasmania.

In Victoria, the Steve Bracks and John Brumby Labor governments shut down or merged 150 schools from 1999 to 2010. Prior to that, between 1992 and 1999, the Kennett Liberal government closed more than 300, meaning that in just under two decades, more than 450 Victorian schools were forced to shut their doors.

In NSW, the Greiner Liberal government closed 8 primary schools in northern Sydney in the early 1990s, with the sites being “snapped up” by local private schools. Then, despite data showing that school enrolments had risen by 60 percent between 2003 and

2008, the state Labor government began closing schools in 2008–09, in Sydney’s popular inner west. Principals, parents and teachers accused it of bullying or bribing them into accepting these closures or amalgamations.

Between 2009 and early 2016, according to the NSW Teachers Federation, 57 schools were shut down in smaller regional towns, by both Labor and Liberal state governments. The scale of popular opposition forced the holding of a public inquiry, which found that the governments had not, in fact, “consulted” with local school “stakeholders,” as they had claimed, but had made the closure decisions unilaterally, and well in advance.

Many of the closed school sites were sold off to private developers or property investors, with state governments amassing tens, even hundreds of millions of dollars out of the deals.

Recently, the NSW Liberal government blamed the current infrastructure crisis on a “historic lack of planning.” While that is no doubt an element, an analysis of the closures during the past decades reveals a conscious and deliberate political strategy, on the part of all state governments, to de-fund, run down and eventually sell off public schools, thereby forcing parents to send their children into the private school sector, which is far better funded through both government and private sources.

Unable to ignore growing community anger about the school overcrowding crisis, the NSW Liberal government announced last week that it would allocate \$4.2 billion from its state budget to build and upgrade 120 schools over the next four years. Boasting that this would be “the biggest NSW government investment in education infrastructure in history,” the government listed its intended new projects. Out of more than 150, just 30 are proposals for new schools. The rest will involve upgrades or expansions of existing schools “to provide additional new teaching spaces.” Considering the Grattan Institute’s estimation of a minimum requirement of 213 new public schools in NSW over the next 10 years, this is worse than inadequate.

Moreover, no mention has been made of, or funding allocated to, the extra staffing and resources that will be needed to adequately support students and teaching staff in these new spaces.

To what extent private funding will be involved in the

construction and maintenance of these projects has not been revealed. In Victoria, where the privatisation agenda is most advanced, the state government has just announced that 15 new government schools will be built under “Public Private Partnerships (PPPs)” across the state in the next two years. The private sector will be contracted for 25 years to finance, design, construct and maintain these schools. This is part of a plan, not to improve the public education system, but to increasingly hand it over to the profit-making private sector, a plan that has already been exposed as a failure in the US and the UK, and antithetical to the educational needs of students and teachers. This agenda has been carried out with the full support of the education unions.

As for the federal government, its latest education budget, known as Gonski 2.0, has just been passed by the federal parliament. Touted as a mechanism for creating “needs-based funding” and “equity” in Australian schools, in reality it will play a central role in furthering the privatisation agenda. Australia already has one of the highest number in the world of school students attending private schools—now at 40 percent, compared to 9 percent of school students in the US and around 7 percent in the UK.

Overall, Gonski 2.0 will deliver increased public funding to private schools, and even less to public schools than the first “Gonski” budget did. The outcome will be ever greater inequities in the country’s increasingly dysfunctional public school system.



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