

Australia: New “learning precinct” ties public schools to business

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In a precedent-setting move that will undermine both public schools and their teaching staff, the state Labor government in Victoria is amalgamating several public schools in Melbourne’s inner-west, under the banner of the “Footscray Learning Precinct.”

The “national first” is aimed at directly tying every level of education, from kindergarten to university, to the needs of businesses and corporations.

This agenda is proceeding behind the backs of ordinary teachers, students and families in the area. Sham “community consultation” events have been held, including “pop-up” stalls in local shopping centres. Meanwhile, behind the scenes, everything is being worked out by the state government, in collusion with the Australian Education Union, on the basis of the pro-business conclusions of the “Review into Government School Funding,” issued by former Premier Steve Bracks in December 2015.

The Victorian government has already spent \$15 million on initial planning for the development of three northern, central and southern “hubs” of the Footscray Learning Precinct.

According to the publicly announced proposals, several schools in Footscray will be effectively merged across several campuses over the next three years. Footscray City College, now a Year 7–12 school, will be redeveloped as a senior Year 10–12 school. The Gilmore College for Girls, currently a girls-only Year 7–12 school, will be effectively shut down, with the site and facilities used for a new co-educational Year 7–9 school. Another, smaller, multi-storey Year 7–9 high school is planned for construction on a small plot of land in the area. Footscray City Primary School will be expanded, and a new kindergarten centre opened nearby.

Victoria University is a prominent part of the proposed Learning Precinct” and will supposedly help establish a new Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) Learning Centre, available for use by schools in the precinct. The advance of STEM is connected to the promotion of new tech industries in Melbourne’s inner-west, as well as the wider agenda of developing new military technologies.

How much of these plans eventuate remains to be seen. Many details of the project remain open to revision, and, crucially, the government is yet to invest the necessary infrastructure funding. A change in government at the next state election, or a stepped up austerity drive by the current administration, could trigger the scrapping of the entire scheme.

The state Labor government is nevertheless making grandiose claims about the Footscray project. Education Minister James

Merlino declared earlier this year: “The Learning Precinct is an Australian-first that will transform education in the inner-west ... giving families access to a first-class education from early childhood to university.”

In reality, the government’s perspective has very little to do with the quality of education being provided to children. Its primary concern is the quality of its relationship with the financial and corporate elites.

This was made clear last April, in the “Footscray Learning Precinct Feasibility Report” prepared for the government by the Aurecon transnational corporate consulting firm. The report is saturated in business jargon, reflecting the underlying agenda. It outlined how the government and local council could “maximise the return on investment of all assets [i.e., schools]” by “making better use of existing and under-utilised sites.”

“Maximising returns” is code for failing to invest the necessary public money into constructing the new schools required in the rapidly growing area.

Severe shortages of public school places are already emerging, and forecast to rapidly worsen in the next years. The government’s own feasibility report for the precinct found that Footscray is set to “experience a population boom in the next 25 years,” increasing from 17,000 to 46,000. This 170 percent population growth is lower than the forecast rise in the number of school-aged children in the area, with a *266 percent increase* in the number of 5–11 year-olds anticipated over the same period.

In Footscray, as across Australia, state and federal governments have deliberately done nothing to plan, develop and construct the necessary new public schools to meet population growth (see: “Major crisis in Australian public school infrastructure”). This failure in public policy has become another mechanism for promoting the expansion of the private school system.

In Melbourne’s inner-west, existing schools will be crammed with ever-greater numbers of students. The one new school planned for Footscray, a Year 7–9 school on Pilgrim Street, will be a so-called “vertical school.” Rather than invest the necessary resources to purchase adequate land for the new school, the government has commissioned the construction of a multi-level tower, with students denied access to adequate open-air playing and physical exercise areas.

The Aurecon report’s conclusions detail the longer term calculations of the business world, beyond its immediate budget concerns.

Parts of western Melbourne have been devastated by deindustrialisation in recent decades, with the pending shut down of the car industry set to further exacerbate unemployment and poverty. While tens of thousands of working-class families in these areas have been abandoned and thrown onto the unemployment scrapheap, the Footscray Learning Precinct is being geared towards providing new opportunities for a select layer of the children of a new upper-middle class in Melbourne's gentrifying inner-west.

The state government has outlined a perspective of establishing the inner-west as a new centre for the technology and tertiary education industries. The architectural firm responsible for the new infrastructure in the "Learning Precinct," claimed that the aim was to "transform Footscray from an industrial city to a knowledge city."

The Footscray Learning Precinct Feasibility Report underscored the way in which public education will be narrowed to the immediate needs of big business.

The document emphasised that the new precinct would "create greater alignment between the skills demanded by employers and those taught in education and training," with a "high technology focus." It would allow for greater curriculum specialisation, "based around future industry and employment demands." This would, the report concluded, "deliver a community service that meets community and industry needs that may not be commercially viable using other private provider models."

The learning model will focus on the "collection and sharing of student data" with literacy and numeracy being "enhanced across all curriculum areas." In other words, the agenda will involve an even greater focus on NAPLAN standardised test results.

Such a regressive, profit-driven model for school education runs directly counter to the democratic conception that all children have the right to an all-rounded, high quality, intellectual, physical and cultural education.

Another report, "A Future Focused Learning Framework for the Footscray Learning Precinct," commissioned by the government, detailed the pressures that will face teachers who work there. It showcased the work of education academic, Yong Zhao, and his concept of an "Entrepreneurial Mindset." Yong, who addressed a "Pedagogy Working Group" convened by the government for the Footscray Learning Precinct, has elsewhere explained that an "Entrepreneurial Mindset" should be taught in schools because "massive changes brought about by population growth, technology, and globalisation not only demand but also create opportunities for 'mass entrepreneurship.'"

The state Labor government's plans for the precinct make clear that any barriers to an extension of the corporate reach into public schools in the area will be torn down.

The Feasibility Report insisted that the "private sector and organisations that have not historically been considered as partners for education organisations must be considered" in order to "forge greater integration of educational services and facilities, and build a culture of collaboration in the community." It explained that the Precinct would provide the opportunity to "support strategic alliances and partnerships between Maribyrnong City Council, Victoria University, education providers, communities and

businesses [to] support schools, with resources to increase services delivered 'inside the school gate.'"

These measures are aimed at making Footscray public school students and teachers the guinea pigs for a wider restructuring of the education system.

The education agenda underlying the new Learning Precinct was detailed in the Bracks review into school funding. This major document, endorsed by the state government and the Australian Education Union, recommended that a new "Learning Partnerships Challenge Fund" be created to "encourage and enable collaboration between schools, other service providers and business, in areas of shared interest." Bracks added that the government had already "made it easier for businesses to support and make donations to Victorian Government schools," but complained that existing policies were too "restrictive in the government sector, making it difficult for partnerships to strategically engage with education authorities."

While classroom teachers across multiple Footscray schools have been kept in the dark about their local Learning Precinct, the Australian Education Union has been integrated into the project's development from the very beginning. Union bureaucrats were among the first to be officially consulted when the Learning Precinct plan was first unveiled.

The ramping up of the Footscray school amalgamations comes just months after the union rammed through a new Enterprise Bargaining Agreement covering Victorian public school teachers. After refusing to hold a single mass meeting, while at the same time orchestrating a campaign of lies and censorship promoting its deal with the government, the union imposed an agreement that not only worsened teaching conditions, but explicitly endorsed further pro-business "education reform."

The Footscray Learning Precinct provides a foretaste of the further government assault on the public education system that is being actively prepared.



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