

The advent of “pop-up” schools in Australia: Yet another assault on public education

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Australian state governments have responded to the increasingly serious public school infrastructure crisis by launching “pop-up” public schools. These are based on the relatively new model of local “pop-up” designer label stores, located in recently vacated retail premises and featuring the cheapest possible infrastructure and staffing. This is commensurate with their goal: holding mega sales to quickly shift excess stock at extremely cheap prices.

The very name, not to speak of its origins, underscores the contemptuous attitude of the political establishment towards the democratic right of public school students to a high quality, fully-resourced education. That would include, at the minimum, adequate numbers of classrooms located in safe, well-designed and constructed buildings, as well as all the amenities for play, sports and creative pursuits that every child requires.

“Pop-up” schools, on the contrary are becoming yet another means of pressuring parents to send their children to expensive private schools, thus expanding the private system at the direct expense of public education. They are temporary, consist of cheap “demountable” classrooms, which are easily dismantled and moved, and often located in areas where there are no facilities for children to play.

Over the past three decades, hundreds of public schools across the country have been shut down, while funds have been showered onto the private sector. The result has been one of the most privatised and unequal school systems in the world.

The shift towards private school enrolments has declined, however, in the past three years, partly due to the skyrocketing of private school fees.

This has led to a major and ever-burgeoning public school infrastructure crisis. According to the Grattan Institute, a public policy think tank, an estimated 650,000 students will enrol in public schools nationally during the next decade, requiring the construction of between 400 and 750 new schools, at a cost of \$6 to \$11 billion.

Overcrowding is a severe problem, particularly in Sydney and Melbourne, the main metropolitan cities. At Willoughby Public School, a few kilometres from Sydney’s central business district, more than 2,000 students share a site with the high school, on an area designed to accommodate 450 students. Last month, hundreds of students arrived for the first day of the school year to find there were not enough classrooms available. At Bondi Beach Public School, in Sydney’s east, two classes were held in the school’s library and learning centre. Parents and Citizens (P&C) president Rob Keldoulis complained that the student overflow meant that the rest of the school was unable to access computers or the full catalogue of books.

At Carlingford West Public School, in Sydney’s north-west, six classes were held in the school hall, the library or in shared classrooms. The vice-president of the school’s P&C told the media, “A lot of the kids haven’t been able to start their educational programs because they’re crammed into one area or they’ve been sitting in the library for the past week.”

Schools are attempting to cope by rostering playground use, since there is insufficient space for all students to play at the same time, while libraries and storage rooms are being utilised as classrooms. Some schools have just one toilet for up to 60 students.

Documents obtained under Freedom of Information laws reveal that one in ten public school classrooms in New South Wales (NSW), Australia’s most populous state, is now a “demountable.” And their numbers have escalated by 17 percent in the past two years. According to one parent, “Children are now spending their childhoods in tin boxes, which cover playgrounds so overcrowded that active play is an impossibility.”

NSW now has 4,665 demountable classrooms in its 2,211 schools, with those in the state’s working-class areas twice as likely to have them.

Maria Rallas, P&C president of Canterbury Public School, a Sydney suburb with a high immigrant and working-class population, told the media that her school's three demountable classrooms took up "precious playground space." "Year by year, children at our school are losing space for physical play, which is vital for helping combat childhood obesity. The students are devastated whenever they see a new one arrive, as they are always placed in a prime position of our paddock, on flat and level ground ... where soccer games would normally take place at lunchtime."

In its response to the infrastructure crisis, the NSW Liberal government has announced it will allocate \$4.2 billion to launch "the biggest school building program in the state's history," with plans to build schools to "last 100 years or more" and benefit "generations to come."

In reality, the government is responding to its own wilful neglect in typical knee-jerk fashion. Its agenda has very little to do with developing the quality of the public education that it provides to its public students.

Last month, at the beginning of the school year, NSW Education Minister Rob Stokes launched a "pop-up" school in Ultimo, an inner-city Sydney suburb, claiming this was a "clever, innovative solution" and that "more were likely."

"We're going to require a few temporary schools in different locations," Stokes told the media. Accompanying him, Premier Gladys Berejiklian cynically claimed, "Children will be running around the park, running around the classroom."

The construction of a new, desperately needed Ultimo Public School is projected to take two years. During that time, according to Elizabeth Elenius from Pymont Action Incorporated, students in years 3 to 6 at the temporary "pop up" site have been rationed to two, 40-minute sessions on grassed areas per week. Younger children will be confined to the timber decking area, which connects the classrooms and is unsuitable for running.

The current Ultimo Public School has 360 students. It is due to be replaced in 2020 by a high-rise school, projected to enrol 800 students. In the two year interim, children will attend the "pop up" school.

Bernadette, a parent, spoke to the WSWs about her concerns. "So far as I can see, a "pop up" school is simply a fancy, perky phrase to make it not sound like demountable classrooms," she said. "In reality, that is what the "pop up" school is. Ultimo Public School was perhaps the newest school in Sydney. It had recently been

redeveloped, because it was full.

"While it was being redeveloped, our kids were being bussed to another primary school, to camp in their car park. This proved a major disaster. Our kids were arriving in time for morning tea and leaving in the afternoon break. They lost half their school day to travelling, and sweltered in badly resourced hot boxes. They arrived home completely exhausted. The school was full as soon as it reopened."

Asked what she thought of the "consultancy process," Bernadette explained that those participating in the consultancy groups "were told they could not share their meeting discussions with the parents, because they were 'commercial-in-confidence.' I believe they had to sign documents to that effect. Effectively, the only opportunity to ask specific questions was at the Parent and Citizen meetings which, during the last year or so, were only held during the day." This meant that the majority of parents could not attend these meetings, even if they had wanted to.

Referring to the contaminated soil on which the "pop-up" school had been built, where elevated concentrations of lead and polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons had been found, Bernadette said, "So far as I can tell they just covered it up with some topsoil and no monitoring is planned."

She concluded: "History is now going to repeat itself. It will be necessary to redevelop or build a new school in the area almost as soon as this new build is completed. Even if the proposed school had the capacity for 800 students, which it doesn't, that would not be enough to meet community needs. It is not big enough and cannot be big enough without a bigger site. Our area has the densest population in Australia, and many more developments are under construction locally. The situation is clear in the population statistics and has been for decades. I am not sure if this is a result of corrupt behaviour or gross incompetence, or the situation is being wilfully ignored for political reasons, to try and force kids into the private sector."



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