

Audit report highlights public school building crisis in Australia's largest state

James Adler
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The auditor-general of New South Wales (NSW), Australia's most populous state, has revealed that the state Liberal-National government's \$6.7 billion budget for school infrastructure over the next four years will not be enough to accommodate the growing number of students past 2023.

The report, issued in April, provides an insight into the decades-long process in which NSW and federal governments have deliberately rundown public schools, while pouring billions of dollars into private education.

It reveals an ageing, cramped, and outdated public-school system with 34,000 classrooms in a state deemed unfit for purpose, and over half of buildings more than 40-years-old.

The report indicates the future impact of this systematic neglect. It estimates that by 2039, the state government will need to build 7,200 new learning spaces for an additional 180,000 students to meet the demands of swelling populations in suburban areas.

This crisis is not confined to NSW. The Australian Centre for Educational Research (ACER) warned in 2015 of the need for schools nationally to accommodate a further 400,000 students over the following 10 years.

In 2017, the NSW government created School Infrastructure NSW (SINSW) to deliver 123 new schools announced that year. In 2018, the government announced "the biggest school building program in the state's history," promising schools that would "last 100 years or more."

In practice, however, the response has been to build temporary "pop-up" schools in areas of Sydney as a stopgap measure until new schools are constructed.

Fort Street Public School was one such school, temporarily relocated in 2018 to a public space next to the Wentworth Park greyhound track in Sydney's inner-

city suburb of Ultimo. Construction of the temporary site continued despite the discovery of lead contamination at the location.

In its 2019–20 budget, the state government rejected funding for 18 of 31 of SINSW's prioritised projects and announced 27 projects of its own. In the 2020–21 budget, it only funded 2 of the 20 projects for which SINSW requested funding.

The federal Rudd-Gillard Labor government's imposition of the NAPLAN high-stakes testing regime in 2008 and its introduction of the MySchool website, which ranked school performances, has caused an uneven distribution of students, with more "attractive" schools pulling larger numbers of enrolments.

In 2019, the NSW government introduced enrolment caps and adjusted school catchment areas to force parents to keep their children enrolled at the school nearest their home.

These measures were unsuccessful. Enrolments at Sydney schools have since dwarfed their population caps. Castle Hill High School had a cap set of 900 students in 2019 but now accommodates more than 1,000 students over this limit. The Ponds High School in Western Sydney experienced a 380 percent increase in enrolments from 2016 to 2021 and now has 48 "demountable" classrooms on its grounds.

Hanna Braga, a mother in the Camden region southwest of Sydney, expressed dismay at the conditions of schools in the area, including her daughter's Gledswood Hills Public School. "I am actually so thankful this report has come out because it just proves the experience that we're all living with in south-west Sydney," she told the Australian Broadcasting Corporation.

NSW Education Minister Sarah Mitchell has refused to accept responsibility for the school infrastructure

crisis. Instead she has attempted to pit city and regional parents against each other, saying “the people of NSW do not expect new schools and upgrades to occur only in Sydney’s growth areas.”

This situation has been created by decades of successive Labor and Liberal-National governments stripping funding from public education. In this year’s federal budget, the funding of private schools was buoyed by \$14.7 billion, an increase of 13 percent from the previous budget, while public schools continued to be starved of funds, despite the extra burdens placed on teachers and students due to online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. According to the Australian Education Union (AEU), public schools face a \$19 billion funding shortfall over the next four years.

A decade after the last federal Labor government launched its “Education Revolution,” Australia has one of the most unequal school systems in the world. In 2020, of the 37 countries in the OECD, only Turkey and Colombia had lower levels of government funding for public schooling than Australia.

NSW Teachers Federation (NSWTF) President Angelo Gavrielatos said the auditor-general’s report showed that “the government’s planning and investment in public education is woefully inadequate both in terms of the infrastructure needed and also in the conditions of work for teachers.”

But the trade union said the same in 2015, when it advised teachers to “highlight to their local politicians and aspiring politicians their schools’ needs in the effort to achieve greater investment in public schools.” Such lobbying of local politicians has failed to reverse the assault on public education.

In fact, the NSWTF and the AEU have for years strangled opposition by teachers, parents and students. They called off the teachers’ boycott of the NAPLAN testing regime in 2010 and they were cheerleaders for Labor’s pro-business Gonski agenda, which only poured more funds into wealthy private schools.

As a result, a generation of working-class children languishes in cramped, temporary and potentially classrooms. This highlights the need for the creation of new organisations, such as rank-and-file committees, completely independent of Labor and the unions, and for a socialist perspective that rejects the subordination of education, and every other social need, to the interests of the wealthy elite and the profit demands of

big business.

To develop this fight, teachers and parents are urged to contact the Committee for Public Education (CFPE) at:

Email: cfpe.aus@gmail.com

Facebook:

www.facebook.com/commforpubliceducation

Twitter: @CFPE_Australia



To contact the WSW and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact