

# Australian state Labor government decimates drama studies in schools

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A decade-long collapse in drama enrolments by final year secondary school students in the Australian state of New South Wales (NSW) has reached crisis proportions, with teachers warning the subject is being driven out of public schools.

The figures, reported by the *Sydney Morning Herald* (SMH) last Monday, confirm the trajectory that the *World Socialist Web Site* has documented since Premier Chris Minns' state Labor government launched its sweeping "de-cluttering" of the creative arts curriculum in 2024.

Public school Higher School Certificate (HSC) enrolments in drama have fallen from 2,403 in 2016 to 1,441 last year—a decline of 40 percent. Fewer than 1,000 girls in public schools now study the subject, alongside just 436 boys. Across the public, private and Catholic systems, enrolments have dropped by a third, from 4,724 to 3,192. Dance, textiles and design have suffered comparable losses of around 20 percent.

Drama NSW president Amy Gill described the situation as "devastating," adding: "There's a real sense in the drama education community that we are in crisis."

The SMH presented the decline as a lamentable but essentially organic development—parental anxiety about career prospects, the lingering effects of COVID-era remote learning, the "digital world" eroding young people's confidence.

But the collapse is the direct and foreseeable consequence of policies pursued by successive federal and state governments, and most immediately by the NSW Labor government's curriculum "reform," which is being used to impose budget cuts.

When the NSW Education Standards Authority (NESA) released its initial draft for public consultation in November 2024, professional associations like Drama NSW teamed up with music educators to launch parliamentary petitions demanding the drafts be completely scrapped. Academics and industry figures—including Tim Minchin, Bell Shakespeare, and the Belvoir St Theatre—publicly condemned the proposal.

Educators and artists criticised the draft for removing the externally examined, iconic HSC Group Performance in favour of internally assessed ensemble pieces—gutting, teachers argued, the collaborative soul of HSC Drama. They also opposed the reduction of practical, hands-on learning in favour of longer, more rigid written examinations, and the cutting of Individual Projects, eliminating options, such as Director's Folio, Lighting Design and Video Drama, and pushing strictly electronic submissions that stifled tactile, technical, and spatial theatrical skills.

Faced with what its CEO Paul Martin described as "vitriol" from the teaching community, NESA agreed to reconsider some of the more controversial changes before releasing the final syllabus in December 2025.

However, the finalised Drama 11–12 Syllabus confirms the substance of the proposals, to be implemented from next year, with the first HSC examination under the new arrangements in 2028.

The Year 12 course now has three focus areas—"Australian drama and theatre," "Approaches to drama and theatre" and a single "Individual project." The former Individual Project, which offered students a choice of options including directing, video, research and lighting, has been consolidated into one undifferentiated project.

The Group Performance, a highly collaborative student-devised performance, has been preserved—now officially called the Ensemble Performance—but markers will now assess each student's individual performance rather than the group performance as a whole, undermining the collaborative nature of the assessment. The reformed 90-minute written examination has a heavier academic focus.

As the WSWs warned in 2025, one likely outcome of the curriculum reform "is that HSC Arts subjects will be less attractive to senior school students, reducing the need for qualified teachers in these areas." The enrolment figures vindicate that prediction.

The decline in school-level drama cannot be separated from the assault on arts education at the tertiary level, which

the WSWs has documented since 2021. The federal government's decision to nearly double the cost of arts and humanities degrees sent an unmistakable signal that an education in the arts was, in the words of University of Melbourne academic Jo Caust, "effectively an indulgence."

This was accompanied by the closure of theatre studies and musicology at Monash University, the abolition of drama departments at the Newcastle and La Trobe universities, and cuts to fine arts and design at Griffith University's Queensland College of the Arts.

Research published this year confirms a nationwide reduction in creative arts courses at universities and Technical and Further Education (TAFE) colleges.

The result is a self-reinforcing spiral downwards. Governments cut funding to the arts; universities respond by closing courses; students and parents, seeing that the arts are being strangled, steer away from creative subjects; enrolments fall; and governments then cite the falling enrolments as justification for further cuts.

There is a further dimension to the assault on drama. The Group Performance and Individual Projects targeted by the Minns government are the most student-centred components of the HSC, driven by students' own interests and frequently exploring contentious social and political questions—climate change, the plight of refugees, attacks on democratic rights, the horrors of war. The Labor government, and the ruling elite as a whole, has no interest in developing young people as politicised critical thinkers.

The arts are being sacrificed to the same logic that saw Minns announce \$148 million in public school cuts in April 2024 followed by a further \$1.4 billion over four years, and that has driven an exodus of teachers from the system. The "crisis" cited by Drama NSW—teacher shortages, fragile pathways into the creative workforce, the collapse of the live performance sector—is not a series of unrelated misfortunes but an expression of the subordination of education and culture to the profit system.

The Albanese federal Labor government's 2026–27 budget contained another \$63.8 billion in cuts to social programs over four years, spearheaded by the evisceration of the National Disability Insurance Scheme—the largest cut to a social program in Australian history. The budget also slashed the Student Engagement and Wellbeing program from \$4 billion to \$1 billion—funding that schools had used to subsidise art, music and drama programs, creative arts spaces and school camps—and cut \$417 million from disability support within the Education Department, money that paid for teacher aides and classroom resources for children with disabilities.

The same budget lifted annual military spending toward \$60 billion and continued to fund the \$368 billion AUKUS

nuclear submarine program—the centrepiece of Australia's integration into US preparations for war against China. The Labor government's 2023 Defence Strategic Review called for a "whole-of-nation" effort, declaring that every aspect of society, from the schools and universities to the economy, must be subordinated to the war effort. The destruction of arts education is inseparable from this drive: a ruling class that is preparing for war is totally opposed to any curriculum that develops young people as critical, creative and politically conscious human beings.

Across the country, educators and school workers are fighting soaring workloads, staffing shortages and real pay cuts, confronting sellout agreements pushed by the Australian Education Union and National Tertiary Education Union. The same trade unions have done nothing to defend drama studies.

The Committee for Public Education (CFPE), the rank-and-file educators' network, calls on educators and school workers to establish rank-and-file committees, independent of the union bureaucracies, to fight for a counter-offensive against the assault on the arts in schools, linked to the struggles over conditions and wages, and for a fully funded public education system.

Only the working class, organised independently, can guarantee the conditions in which the creative capacities of young people can develop to the full. Rank-and-file committees must be built to unite workers across workplaces and industries, as part of a broader movement to fight for the socialist transformation of society.

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