

144 schools since its election in 1999, with scores more

eration," she told *The Sunday Age*. "[Mergers] are about maximising

"One of the worst examples is John Brumby's forced mergers

seat of Bendigo East MP Jacinta Allan in danger. Labor insiders

said mother Debbie Rose, "We're being targeted because we're

Liberal candidate Michael Langdon has promised \$2 million

de facto private system for our schools," he said.

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Line in the sandpit over push to create super campuses

"HOW lucky are we?" says Dandenong High School principal Martin Culkin, pointing to a collection of sleek, space-age buildings. "The kids say it looks like a private school."

Yet Dandenong High is one of the biggest public schools in Australia, with 2100 students, in one of the nation's poorest urban areas.

It is also one of a new breed of Victorian "super schools", the product of a controversial Labor government strategy to rationalise education spending by merging small schools to offer students more resources.

By all accounts, Dandenong High is a success story. But not everyone touched by Labor's push to amalgamate feels so lucky.

Accusations that schools have been bullied by officials into merging have given the Liberal Party a chance to attack the Brumby government on education, after years of being slated over the closure of 350 schools during the Kennett government's reign.

Since Labor came to power in 1999, it has cut the total number of state schools by 80. Forty schools have closed and 144 have been involved in mergers, while 40 new schools have been built in urban growth areas.

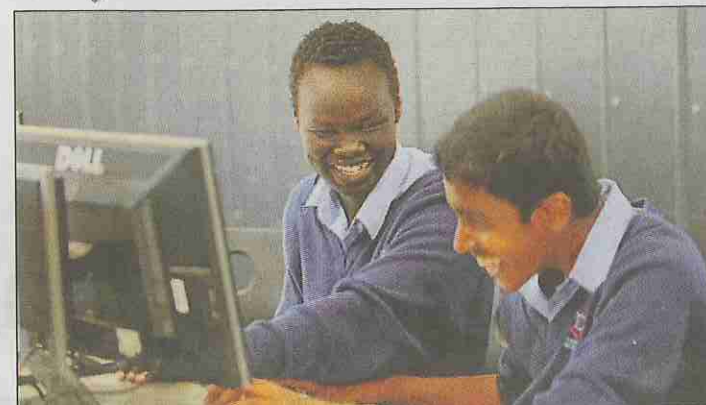
The Liberals are quick to say that the Brumby government has "let down many families in growth areas of Melbourne by not providing sufficient government school education options". But they are less candid about their own plans for school infrastructure spending, sidestepping the question entirely when asked by *The Sunday Age*.

For their part, the Greens say they will push to keep open smaller schools, with education spokeswoman Sue Pennicuik saying many merged schools are too big, too impersonal and too far away from students' homes.

Martin Culkin disagrees, saying the way Dandenong High is structured means students have the best of everything. The merger came about three years ago when 525 students from Cleeland Secondary College and 175 from Doveton Secondary College moved in with about 1200 students at the existing Dandenong High School.

At first, students were housed in old buildings, portables and a 1940s aluminium "Bristol build-

Labor's policy of merging schools hasn't got everyone's tick of approval. **Natalie Craig reports.**



ing" — the legacy of decades of government neglect.

But a \$45 million revamp has changed the school's fortunes: attendance has soared, official surveys show students are happier, and the school has become a beacon for researchers looking for ways to improve education in disadvantaged areas. "For kids in this area to walk into an education environment like this has just been so uplifting," Mr Culkin said.

But the Greens say smaller schools should be protected, suggesting the government inject an extra \$1 billion annually into education by cutting costs such as the grand prix and celebrity golf events.



Stephen Lamb, an expert in school systems at the University of Melbourne, said smaller, local schools were good in theory but could be extremely expensive.

"In an ideal world, small schools might be a good thing, as long as they're extremely well resourced," he said. "But the cost of giving every disadvantaged community a small school would

be so much greater than what governments are prepared to put in ... I don't think the community would bear it."

He said closures and mergers were the consequence of schools increasingly competing for students over the past decade.

This has happened for two reasons. Victorian principals, unlike their colleagues in other states, have been given the power to choose their staff and make financial decisions to shape the character of their schools.

Catchment zones 2 have also been removed, allowing students to attend the school of their choice. This has been great for some, such as Balwyn High, which has become so popular it has reinstated a zone.

But others have been caught in a vicious cycle of falling enrolments, leading to less per-capita funding and run-down schools.

So how do you ensure schools are sustainable in such a competitive environment?

Education Minister Bronwyn Pike said the challenge was to make every school "a great school". To do that, you often needed a "critical mass" of students so schools could offer more subjects, better facilities and lower student-to-teacher ratios.

She said the government had also spent about \$330 million a year on renovating or building schools, compared to an average of about \$100 million spent during the Kennett years.

But opposition education spokesman Martin Dixon said schools had declined under Labor

because they were starved of funds — and were then forced to amalgamate.

The government has been plagued in the past two years by claims of coercion, including over mergers in Echuca, Reservoir and Bendigo East. But it insists that mergers are always the decision of the school community.

Some merged schools, however, have been left with even fewer resources and are waiting years for new buildings.

In Reservoir, school councillors say they were persuaded by bureaucrats to agree to a merger with the promise of \$15 to \$20 million for new buildings in this year's state budget.

But the school only received \$1.7 million for planning, meaning 430 students from Lakeside College will next year have to cram in beside the 350 students in old buildings at Merrilands College, to form the new William Ruthven Secondary College.

Following questions by *The Sunday Age*, Labor has promised that if re-elected, it will fund the complete redevelopment of the school in the coming budget.

Dandenong High also missed out on funding for the last stage of its redevelopment in the budget. But Martin Culkin knows the school remains a beacon of hope for other merged schools.

Its open-plan buildings and "team teaching" strategies, in which groups of about 60 students work with four teachers for the duration of the year for core classes, will be emulated at the William Ruthven school.

"People complained when we first merged that the school was too big, too impersonal ... they didn't feel connected to it," Mr Culkin said. "This has given us the best of the small within the big."

Year 9 student Diana Vitali, 15, was sceptical about the change when she moved from Doveton. "I wasn't happy; I didn't want to come here," she said. "But it was easy to make new friends. I like the new buildings, I've never been in anything like it before."

That's because schools such as Dandenong High remain the exception rather than the rule.

As Mr Culkin bemoans, "private school" is a byword for excellence. The challenge for governments is to make state schools the yardstick, instead of the problem.



At Dandenong High's merged campus, Lea Aurel (left) and former Cleeland High student Tatiana Affoque became firm friends. Inset: Poullos Awo (left) and Ashwanth Nagendran.

PICTURES: CRAIG SILLITOE

Teaching in two tongues

NATALIE CRAIG
EDUCATION

VICTORIA'S first bilingual secondary colleges could allow students to study maths in Mandarin or chemistry in French if Labor is re-elected.

Education Minister Bronwyn Pike said the \$4.7 million for four bilingual secondary colleges would likely focus on Asian languages and help students become more employable "global citizens". They would add to Melbourne's 12 bilingual primary schools offering programs in languages other than English.

But the Coalition has tried to trump the promise, offering a \$39.7 million package including the introduction of compulsory foreign language classes at primary school, more funding for community language schools, and 210 scholarships to train foreign language teachers.

"Victoria is the multicultural capital of Australia and a Coalition government will rebuild our competitive advantage," Opposition Leader Ted Baillieu said.

About 36,000 students study more than 42 languages at Victoria's 180 community language schools.

The Australian Education Union commended the proposals but said a shortage of foreign language teachers meant both were impractical.

■ Meanwhile, principals would receive money directly to support children with conditions such as depression, behavioural problems and autism under a Coalition government.

Whereas schools rely on regional offices to make referrals for students needing services such as counselling or speech therapy, the change would give principals the power to hire the professionals to visit the school.

Principals Association president Gabrielle Leigh applauded the idea. A Labor spokesman countered that such a system would be unresponsive to emergencies. Its program targeted support at students in most need.

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