

Australia:

New disciplinary measures against NSW teachers

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12 March 1999

New disciplinary measures against public school teachers in New South Wales are part of a drive to lay the blame for the growing crisis in public education at their feet.

Education funding as a proportion of the state's budget has been cut back by more than 20 per cent over the past 20 years. Moreover, a recent study revealed that school funding per child in NSW is the lowest of any state.

While schools are reeling under the impact of budgetary cuts and restructuring, the number of teachers facing official action over allegations of sexual misconduct is on the increase. At the same time discussions are underway between the NSW Education Department and the New South Wales (NSW) Teachers Federation to finalise new dismissal rules which will halve the time it takes to sack a teacher.

The state Labor government's targetting of teachers suspected of sexual misconduct has all the hallmarks of a witchhunt. It originated in 1995 when a NSW Royal Commission investigation into police corruption became a useful tool in focussing attention away from corruption at the highest political levels and towards government departments and agencies allegedly protecting paedophiles. The media began cranking out sensational headlines, while the Education Minister vowed to "flush out sex offenders" and those who failed to stop them. At least one teacher was removed from a school under the glare of a television news crew's lights.

Since 1996 more than 1,000 allegations have been investigated, 90 percent concerning teachers, creating a tense and increasingly poisonous atmosphere inside the schools.

Some 300 teachers are currently under investigation by the education department. At least three teachers facing unproven allegations have committed suicide. Others have been stalked, had their pets poisoned, and homes stoned. One teacher, cleared of allegations of misconduct, transferred to another school, only to find the charges against him being handed out at the school gate.

Basic legal formalities have been dispensed with. Teachers are assumed to be guilty as soon as an allegation is made. Removed from their schools, they face a wait of up to a year before being told of the complainant's identity or the nature of the allegations. Moreover, suspects are forbidden to discuss their case publicly or even with colleagues, which serves to heighten their isolation.

In one recent case, under appeal, a mother who defended a teacher sacked over sexual misconduct found that her daughter's name was being used, not to support the teacher, but in the education department's allegations against him.

The procedures allow for the most wide-ranging accusations to be made on the flimsiest of evidence. Some examples of charges include touching a child on the shoulder, being alone with a student or giving a youngster a friendly pat on the back. Teachers failing to report allegations of paedophilia, themselves face disciplinary action, including dismissal.

Many careers have been permanently damaged, regardless of whether the charges have been proven or dismissed. Teachers' lives are being destroyed, while a climate of fear has been generated inside the schools.

Perversely, the "paedophile" campaign has enabled the education establishment to pose as a defender of

children's rights, at the same time as it participates in an all-out offensive against public education. The campaign has also played a role in weakening teacher solidarity and in cultivating a more compliant workforce. Additionally, fear of vexatious allegations is undermining the relationship between teachers and students.

Current moves to speed up sackings of teachers labelled "inefficient" arise from similar motives. Anecdotal evidence--neither the union nor the education department have released any figures--suggests that hundreds of teachers have been driven out of the public school system since the process was last streamlined in 1995.

Teachers labelled "inefficient" are frequently those who are unable, single-handedly, to deal with the range of problems they confront in classrooms. Under-resourced school administrations are loading the responsibility for discipline and the handling of behavioural problems more and more onto the teaching staff. Those who are inexperienced, or unlucky enough to be allocated a series of difficult classes, or to have the misfortune of an unsympathetic supervisor, are open to being categorised as "inefficient".

Education officials point to "bad teachers" as the source of the problems in public schools, and the media demands they be forced out.

The current procedure puts teachers assessed as "under-performing" on a 10-week "improvement program", with an additional 10-week period of monitoring available if required. The new system, expected to be in place this year, allows for a teacher to be dismissed 10 weeks after being identified as "inefficient".



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