

New Zealand government prepares to boost teachers' workload

A correspondent
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New Zealand's minority National Party government has signaled its intention to launch another round of attacks on public education and the conditions of teachers with the recent release of a "discussion" paper on the length of the school day and the school year.

The country's teachers are already being hit in their current contract negotiations by the introduction of performance-related pay criteria, and the growing imposition of "bulk funding" of school finances, which removes all centralised administration, including pay, from the hands of government, and turns it over to individual school boards.

The new report, which will form the basis of government policy decisions after a brief one-month "consultation" period, has been put together by a committee chaired by former Labour MP Margaret Austin.

The report essentially argues that the country's children and youth are no longer "internationally competitive" in educational terms, and therefore need to increase the number of hours they spend "under instruction". It is clear that the main target is teachers' hours of work. The government is intent on extending the opening hours of schools, and on making inroads into the current system of holiday breaks between school terms.

Welcoming the release of the report, Education Minister Nick Smith claimed that students were being "short-changed on essential learning time," and that the government is not getting full value for the \$20 million per day it costs to open schools. He added that a major issue is "sorting out" the time a teacher is expected at school, accusing too many teachers of believing that "when school's out, they're out".

The government aims to get rid of the traditional six-week summer holiday period. The report dubs such

holidays the "time for forgetting". Smith claims that the break is a hangover from the agrarian calendar when children needed to be off school to help with milking and haymaking on family farms.

The report highlights international trends to year-round education, especially in parts of the United States and the Pacific, pointing to the additional advantages of "reduced costs" and decreases in vandalism and burglary of school property. One of its suggestions is to move from the current four-term year to five terms. As a cautionary note, however, it warns of "resistance to change by parents, teachers and communities, set-up costs and extra workload for educators".

The entire report is based on the dishonest and selective use of international research. While noting that instructional time for OECD countries is "very difficult to assess accurately owing to the dubious nature of the data on which it is based", it proceeds to use OECD figures to "prove" that New Zealand has one of the shortest school years in the OECD. In some subjects such as mathematics and science, the figures are broken down to purportedly measure the number of minutes students are under instruction per year.

The document quotes extensively from reports by the Education Review Office, which has a history of attacking teachers. It gives the impression that schools willfully organise themselves to deprive students of time spent in class. Its underlying outlook is based on a narrow view of education that teachers' time not spent in activities directly related to delivering the curriculum is wasted time. As a result, a whole range of administrative and pastoral activities is likely to suffer, as will important activities for the social development of young people, such as sport and cultural pursuits.

The entire discussion is designed to direct criticism away from the effects of government policies on the

educational development of the country's youth and to blame schools and teachers. The most recent research shows that there has certainly been a deterioration in educational results, but that this is impacting most particularly on working class students.

The *Third International Mathematics and Science Study* (TIMSS, 1995) showed that New Zealand now has the greatest gap between high and low achievers in these two subjects among OECD countries. The research is supported by recent studies into the country's levels of literacy which demonstrate that at the top end of the range New Zealand is still among the highest levels of literacy in the OECD, but at the bottom end, particularly among impoverished Maori and Pacific Island students, it has the lowest literacy levels internationally.

The *TIMMS* reports are unequivocal that the social and economic situation of students is the most significant factor which influences levels of educational achievement. This conclusion is readily apparent in the "League tables," published in the media, which set out the public examination results of the country's secondary schools.

Recently released data shows that the country's "top" school, Marsden College, a private fee-paying all-girls' college in the capital city of Wellington, last year gained 37 percent 'A' passes and 34 per cent 'B' passes in School Certificate, the national examination in year 11. At year 13, the last year of secondary school, Marsden students gained 58 per cent 'A' passes and 33 per cent 'B' passes in the Bursary exam, which is used for entry to university. In contrast, Porirua College, which serves a poor working class area of the same city, with a roll composed mainly of Pacific Island students, gained only 2 per cent 'A' passes and 1 per cent 'B' passes in School Certificate with no 'A' or 'B' passes at all in Bursary.

The Austin report, which cites the *TIMMS* studies in order to misuse them for its own purposes, ignores these findings. Nor does it have anything to say about such crucial issues as student-teacher ratios, the reduction of government education funding, exponentially increasing teacher workloads, or the disparity of resources between rich and poor schools. Behind the totally meaningless "consultation" process over the document lie preparations to further turn the country's schools--particularly working class

schools--into holding pens for unemployed youth.

Alongside these preparations to increase teacher workloads are plans to further intimidate and discipline teachers. The Education Minister has announced a proposal to increase the powers of the Teacher Registration Board (TRB) to discipline so-called incompetent teachers. The proposals being foreshadowed include giving the TRB the right to impose fines and suspensions on teachers deemed to be incompetent or "disreputable". The TRB will also be empowered to establish a register of "black marks" against identified teachers, and to require "under-performing" teachers to work under supervision.

Significantly, the teacher unions are mounting no campaign against these significant new assaults on the rights of teachers, and are working with the government to impose some of them. There has been some criticism by the unions of the Austin Committee's report. However, the primary teachers' union, the NZ Educational Institute, has already agreed to the introduction of extensive, detailed and prescriptive performance criteria in the primary teachers' contract, while the Post Primary Teachers Association (PPTA) is currently negotiating similar clauses in the secondary contract.

Further, the PPTA president, Graeme McCann, this week approved the government's proposals to strengthen the powers of the Teacher Registration Board and agreed that the board should have "a wider range of powers over teachers", rather than just having the right to exonerate or deregister a teacher deemed to be incompetent or unsuitable to teach.



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