

Australia:

Victorian Labor government unveils blueprint to further attack education

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Under the guise of raising standards and redressing education inequality, the Labor government in the Australian state of Victoria last November released a “Blueprint for Education” whose actual agenda is to facilitate further cuts to funding—while blaming individual schools and teachers for the deteriorating state of the school system. It also seeks to narrow the education curriculum and run government schools along corporate lines.

When Premier Steve Bracks’ government came to office in 1999, one of its main commitments was to repair the damage to the school system inflicted by the previous Kennett Liberal government, which shut more than 300 schools and slashed \$350 million in spending over seven years. But the Blueprint will extend the methods employed by the Liberals, albeit using more “caring” terminology.

While the Blueprint claims that Labor has invested an “additional \$3.9 billion” in the education system, according to Swinburne University academic David Hayward, this figure owes more to double-counting than to reality. By any measure, education expenses this year will account for a smaller share of the state’s economic output than they did in 1999 under Kennett.

In the name of fighting inequities across the system, the Labor government is exploiting the already run-down and inequitable conditions in public schools to seek to justify a harsh new regime in which school principals and administrations that fail to meet arbitrary testing standards will face replacement, with the prospect of demotion.

Under the banner of giving every government school student a “genuine opportunity to succeed,” the Blueprint sets out measures that will enhance a handful of elite schools and pressure more parents, unable to secure access to those schools, into sending their children to private schools.

The Blueprint contends that its plans will facilitate co-operation between schools to replace the competition that occurred under Kennett, who introduced a system of tables ranking schools according to their Year 12 exam results as

well as Learning Assessment Program (LAP) tests in primary schools. Inevitably, wealthier parents selected well-endowed private and government schools for their children, while poorer schools entered a cycle of declining resources, poorer results and falling student numbers.

But the Bracks government will in fact escalate the competitive struggle between schools by broadening the use of testing tables beyond Year 12 results. The Blueprint introduces a range of benchmarks, which will include student retention rates, truancy levels and Year 3, 5 and 7 Achievement Improvement Monitor (AIM) tests, assessing English and maths.

These will also become the basis for comparing and benchmarking schools of similar socio-economic rankings. While Education Minister Lynne Kosky insists that the purpose is not to “name and shame” schools, the placement of schools into “like” categories will stigmatise poorer schools even further. The government has not stated whether or how the socio-economic rankings will be publicised, but the classifications are certain to become public knowledge.

The scheme will extend the rankings race to schools in middle class regions. Now largely immune from government attacks on the poorest schools, they will face monitoring and threats of funding cuts. In the words of the report: “Some schools, sometimes called ‘cruising’ or ‘coasting’, appear to be successful yet may be adding little to the knowledge and skills of students who may be coming from advantaged home backgrounds. This is a significant and largely hidden area of under-performance in the system.”

If any school falls behind in its cohort it will face government intervention. “School funding should be linked to school improvement,” the Blueprint states. Under the threat of losing their contracts, school principals will face ceaseless pressure to ensure that teachers satisfy the standardised benchmarks. “If, after intervention, improvement is not evident, we will consider changing the school leadership,” Kosky stated.

The Blueprint offloads all responsibility for educational outcomes onto teachers. Despite earlier admitting that schools in high socio-economic areas achieved better average results than schools from low socio-economic areas, Kosky insisted: “By far the most important source of variation in student achievement is the quality of teaching”.

This flies in the face of key research. A recent Australian Council for Educational Research study, *Influences on Achievement in Literacy and Numeracy*, reviewed national data on 27,000 Year 9 students tested on their maths and reading abilities. It found a “persistent link” between socio-economic status and school achievement. In another key finding, most of the variation in test scores was attributable to differences between students—not schools.

Extensive research demonstrates that to lift standards, particularly in the poorest neighbourhoods, an essential factor is class size. In the most documented experiment, conducted in Tennessee since the early 1980s, children in classes of 15 have obtained higher test scores and displayed more participation in school, resulting in improved behaviour. Students gained a greater share of the teacher’s attention and benefitted from the different character of the lessons conducted in small classes. Moreover, they carried many of the advantages they gained into their later years of schooling.

These results go unmentioned in the Blueprint because a massive outlay of funds would be required to train and employ more teachers. Victorian high schools average 22 students per class, and more than half have classes that exceed 25 students. For primary schools, the average last year was 22.9 students.

Kosky referred to “the centrality of the teaching-learning relationship,” yet the government is in the process of alienating teachers from their students. Standardised testing regimes force teachers to narrow the curriculum and “teach to the test” for fear that their school or career will suffer if their results are below prescribed standards. Subjects that are not tested, particularly the arts, are marginalised. And with time constraints forever pressing, teachers cannot delve into topics in any meaningful way.

Standardised testing undermines a thoughtful approach to learning among teachers and students alike. Instead of the development of critical thought, students are trained in servility. They can become so alienated that they leave school altogether or function as passive receptacles accepting a rigid body of knowledge from a depleted curriculum.

Without specifying details, Kosky announced that students and parents will write report cards on teachers, which will play a key role in assessing teacher performance. When problems emerge, a certain number of students will

inevitably seek recourse by writing unfavourable reports on their teachers. This will create an intimidating atmosphere, in which teachers will face increased risk of victimisation by school administrations, acting in concert with disaffected students and parents.

Many teachers are particularly vulnerable to such pressure because the proportion on short-term contracts has returned to levels commensurate with the Kennett years. More than 16 percent of the teaching force—mostly lower-paid young teachers—is employed on limited contracts, which are anathema to developing long-term relations with students.

The Blueprint is hardly original. Similar agendas are being pursued internationally, both by social democratic and openly right-wing governments. In Britain, the Blair Labour government has imposed a regime of continual testing and inspections, with “failing schools” threatened with closure or placed under the control of private consultants.

In the United States, the Bush administration’s No Child Left Behind Act classifies as “low-performing” or “failing” any school that does not show year-to-year improvements in test scores. “Failing” schools are required to allow students to transfer to other schools, hire tutors, or face state takeover and closure, with the dismissal of principals and teachers.

For all its professed concern for educational outcomes, the Bracks government is embarked on a business-focused operation that will promote schools that are “performing” well against under-funded and tension-filled “poorly performing” schools, increasingly subject to punitive measures.



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