

# Australia: Labor's schools policy will further privatise education

Peter Byrne (SEP candidate for Batman)  
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Released last month, the Australian Labor Party's education policy for the October 9 federal election has been widely promoted as an advance for the public school system and an attack on privilege.

One of Rupert Murdoch's tabloids, the Melbourne *Herald Sun*, declared in an editorial on September 15 that Labor leader Mark Latham had "resurrected the ALP's entrenched obsession with the class war". Taking this to absurd lengths, an opinion piece in Murdoch's *Australian* stated that Latham, "has charged the class enemy in crenellated castles such as the King's School—in much the same spirit as Spartacus leading his revolt of the gladiators".

Labor's plan involves taking \$520 million over four years from the nation's 67 wealthiest private schools and redirecting this money to the remaining 2,500 schools in the private sector. Yet, while there has been an outcry from the most privileged schools, overall, no money would be taken out of the private system, which would still receive the massive injections of funds granted by the Howard government. Federal funding to the non-government school sector has doubled since 1996-97, while the proportion of students taught there has increased by only 10 percent.

Latham claimed that Labor's policy would establish a "fair" funding scheme, based on "need". But a careful examination reveals that it is entirely in keeping with his socially regressive agenda, summed up in his slogan of the "ladder of opportunity". Throughout his career he has advocated a "user-pays" society where everyone fends for themselves. Those who fail to climb the social "ladder"—including by paying for the education of their children—will be left languishing on the bottom rungs.

In his 1998 book *Civilising Global Capital*, Latham opposed the very notion of addressing the growing inequality within the education system, insisting that individual parents had to take central responsibility for the education of their children. "Educational disadvantage cannot be resolved simply by providing better schools for the poor," he wrote. Parents on welfare support should be penalised if they failed to "upgrade their skills and effectiveness as educators in the home".

In line with this philosophy, Labor's package would have the effect of further strengthening the private system and reducing government schools to a residual "safety net" for those unable to afford private fees.

In a bid to differentiate himself from Howard, Latham announced that government schools would receive an extra \$1.9 billion over four years. Australian Education Union federal president Pat Byrne immediately claimed: "Parents now have a clear choice in this Federal election between the Howard government's unfair system and the ALP policy which will end the discrimination against public schools

which is inherent in the current system."

Yet, over a four-year period, the \$1.9 billion amounts to little more than \$6,800 per year for each public school—only about a tenth of the expenditure of employing one extra teacher, when superannuation and insurance costs are taken into account. The money is but a tiny fraction of the funding stripped from government schools, by federal and state governments, Labor and Liberal alike, over the past two decades, and diverted into a mushrooming industry of fee-paying private schools.

In 1980, 50.8 percent of federal funds went to public schools. By 1996, after 13 years of Labor government, this had declined to 41.5 percent. This year, only 35 percent will go to public schools—their funding was cut in real terms by more than 5 percent between 1995 and 2000 alone.

Like the Liberals, Labor would also enforce a stringent market regime in schools. Funding increases would be contingent upon meeting a host of performance benchmarks. Students would face continual testing, designed to produce "league tables" of narrowly-assessed academic results, with schools forced to compete with each other for enrolments. As always, such a "marketplace" would ensure that the rich and more powerful schools, with access to parental fund-raising and business sponsorship, would continue to benefit at the expense of those in poorer regions.

At the same time, the elite schools would continue to receive a "basic grant" of some 15 percent of the national standard. According to Canberra University associate professor Dr Louise Watson, these schools boast average resources per student more than 62 per cent greater than those utilised by the average student in the public system.

Given that most of the parents of students attending the wealthiest schools are blue-ribbon Liberal voters, the slight reduction of government funding will not harm Labor's electoral chances. Latham's immediate aim is to win the votes of the parents in middle class areas. His policy would increase the funding to the many newly formed private schools, as well as Catholic schools.

Latham's package would accelerate what Howard began in 1996, by completely deregulating the building and setting up of private schools. For the first time, they could be opened near public schools and operate in direct competition with them. Howard's claim was that he was offering parental choice. But this market-driven model was not left to chance. Private schools, mostly religious, received massive government subsidies to ensure they could survive, including an Establishment Grant of \$500 per student in their first year and half that in their second year.

Had the newly formed schools been government schools, most would have been designated unviable and closed down. Government

secondary schools with less than 300 students are under constant threat of closure. Yet of the new private schools, over 60 percent have less than 60 students. Virtually anyone can open a private school. In one graphic case, a cult led by a self-proclaimed prophet has, since 1996, secured \$332,000 from the government to run a private school. William Kamm, who previously predicted a tsunami would devastate Australia's east coast and claims to be sent messages by the Virgin Mary, obtained financing for capital works at Saint Joseph's School on the New South Wales south coast.

Far from representing a new beginning, Latham's package continues Labor's record of facilitating the erosion of public education. In 1997, Labor voted for the Howard government's Enrolment Benchmark Adjustment (EBA) scheme, which systematically reduced funding to the government schools as the proportion of students in the private system increased. From 1997 to 2000, the EBA transferred \$92.6 million to the private sector. Labor also backed the reactionary Socioeconomic Status model of funding for private schools, which was introduced in 2001. As a result, in 2003 alone, some of Australia's wealthiest private schools received a real funding increase of \$11.4 million.

With a chronic lack of funding, the deteriorating conditions in many public schools have been used to further undermine them and pressure more families into sending their children to private schools. One survey in 2000 found that 94 percent of 300,000 people interviewed believed that public schools were inadequately funded. Not surprisingly, enrolments at non-government schools have grown at five times the rate of those in government schools.

Moreover, government schools take all students, including those who require more time and resources to assist, and those rejected by the private system. By contrast, private schools have substantially increased their share of enrolments of students from high-income families, and decreased their share of students with low-income families. This has been most pronounced at the secondary level.

The tendency for the public system to become "residualised" is well underway. It deals with a disproportionate number of students from backgrounds where education is not seen as a high priority and where major disruptions occur on a regular basis in classes. The students leaving the public system tend to be the more academically motivated, worsening the state of affairs within the government schools.

The Howard government's blatantly elitist funding model has been the butt of widespread criticism because its greatest benefits go to the wealthiest private schools, such as the King's School in the Sydney suburb of Parramatta, with its 15 cricket fields, five basketball courts, a 50-metre swimming pool, gymnasium and indoor rifle range. The Latham model is a more sophisticated model of privatisation, pitched to middle class and working class people, and designed to make private fee-paying education the norm for all but the poorest and most disadvantaged families.

Labor's document "Great Australian Schools" states: "The current average level of public expenditure per student in Australian government schools for recurrent purposes is around \$7,600 in primary and \$10,000 in secondary schools". It advances a "21st century resource standard" as a benchmark for both private and public schools: \$9,000 in primary and \$12,000 in secondary schools.

A number of pro-market commentators and advocates of privatising the education system have praised Latham's funding model for setting in place the framework for a voucher system, whereby all parents would be given notional cash amounts with which to "buy" education for their children at private or public schools. Education would then

cease to be free or universal in any sense. And rich parents would receive the same amounts as the poor, enabling them to purchase decent schooling, leaving the poorest children in third-rate, under-funded but nominally free "welfare" schools.

Jennifer Buckingham, education writer for the *Australian*, and a long-time champion of vouchers in her former capacity as a policy analyst for the right-wing thinktank, the Centre for Independent Studies, wrote: "Labor's policy is positive in that it undertakes to fund schools according to a benchmarked basic cost of education... To its credit, the Labor Party seems to have resolved this problem: Bring on the vouchers".

While there remains deep popular opposition to the introduction of a voucher system, both major parties are moving in that direction. In fact Latham has been one of the most consistent proponents of a user-pays system. In *What Did You Learn Today?*, published in 2001, he opined that the days of free education were numbered because "every trend in policy is undermining this approach". He proposed a system of "Lifelong Learning Accounts" in which "learning would be positioned at the centre of family budgets and household decision-making".

In the name of offering more "choice," both Latham and Howard are working to create the conditions where the type of education that a student obtains will depend entirely upon the amount his or her family can afford to pay. Through a process of attrition, the government system will become so downgraded that parents will increasingly feel obliged to take their children out and pay fees to obtain anything approaching a decent education.

The Socialist Equality Party is the only party standing in the federal election to advance the opposite perspective, based on the basic democratic and egalitarian conception that first-class, free and comprehensive education is a basic right for all, from kindergarten to higher education. That is why we insist that billions of dollars must be poured into the upgrading, expansion and staffing of schools, universities and child care facilities to the highest standards, freely available to all.



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