

Australia: performance-based contracts planned for school principals

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The Labor government in the Australian state of New South Wales (NSW) has introduced measures allowing it to dismiss public school principals who fail to meet as yet unspecified performance criteria. The move is a thinly-veiled step toward placing principals and all teachers on fixed-term contracts, with salaries tied to performance.

Legislation was unveiled in parliament last month, giving the Education Department's director-general open-ended powers to determine benchmarks for the state's 2,200 school principals. Principals will be "measured against key accountabilities" including, but not limited to, students' test results, student enrolment and retention data, planning and budget management, and resource and risk management.

Under the Teaching Services Amendment Bill 2004, principals will be reviewed "at least" annually but more often if deemed necessary by the director-general. Principals who fail to meet targets will be put on a "performance improvement program". Those who fail to satisfactorily complete such a program will be subject to dismissal or demotion.

In addition to annual reviews, a principal's appointment to a particular school will be assessed every five years, and the positions of principal and senior staff will be opened up to applicants from the private school sector and from other Australian states.

Up to now, NSW school principals have been employed as permanent teachers, able to be dismissed only through a breach of conduct. The new laws also "streamline" the process of sacking principals on misconduct grounds.

Performance testing is designed to pave the way for contract employment. The Kennett Liberal government in neighbouring Victoria introduced employment contracts for principals in 1994, replacing the previous Labor government's system of employing principals on five or seven year fixed-term appointments. It then extended the system to classroom teachers. After Kennett was ousted in

1999, partly due to widespread hostility to his education cutbacks, the incoming Bracks Labor government retained contract employment.

By linking employment to a school's performance in statewide tests, the NSW legislation will accelerate the move away from child-centred learning, in which the individual's interests and needs are taken into account, back to narrow, test-centred teaching methods that were discredited more than half a century ago. The increased focus on school rankings will place pressure on principals to exclude those students requiring the most attention, such as students with learning or behavioural difficulties.

The legislation takes a major step toward transforming school principals into managers, whose primary focus is not the education of students but budgeting and account keeping. In order to keep their jobs, they will have to regiment and police teachers, insisting that they conform to official performance measurements.

A recent survey undertaken in Victoria found 8 out of 10 principals experiencing high levels of stress, with half reporting work-related illnesses and some suffering breakdowns or even committing suicide. Their chief difficulty, the report said, was attempting to reconcile their responsibility to their students with the demands placed upon them by the education department.

The proposal follows the agenda being pursued by governments internationally to undermine state-run schools. Under-funded schools in poorer regions will be hardest hit and the onus placed on the principal, rather than the education department, to decide where to cut spending. Parents seeking a decent education for their children will feel increasingly obliged to send them to private schools, requiring the payment of costly fees.

In Britain, after national school tables were established, poorly performing schools—the majority from disadvantaged areas—were threatened with funding cuts and closure. Devolution of increased powers to principals

under the “Tomorrow’s Schools” reforms in New Zealand overwhelmingly disadvantaged schools in low-income districts.

In Australia, private schools have been allocated massive funding increases, encouraging a steady rise in private school enrolments at the expense of government schools. Public schools and teachers have been blamed for the drop in enrolments, with teachers’ “inflexible” working conditions a regular target of attack in the media.

In its May budget, the federal Howard government tied school funding to a range of measures, such as the publication of school performance benchmarks in order to rank schools, and increased autonomy for principals, including the right to hire and fire teachers.

Premier Bob Carr’s government in NSW is not the only state Labor administration to introduce legislation in line with these policies. The Western Australian government has declared that from 2005, principals will be appointed to schools for only five-year periods. Teachers in metropolitan schools will also be given “five year postings” after which they can be “moved on” by principals.

In order to stifle opposition by principals and teachers, the Carr government negotiated its measures with Australian Council of Trade Unions president Sharan Burrow and the NSW Teachers Federation (NSWTF).

The erosion of security of employment for school principals was first revealed on June 15 when the *Sydney Morning Herald* reported on the education department’s “Future’s Project,” described as “the first long-range plan for public education in the state for 50 years”.

Under the guise of halting the enrolment drift to private schools, the plan targeted 10 areas for change, canvassing the de-regulation of teachers’ working conditions, and the devolution of more powers to principals, including the right to recruit and sack staff.

Education deputy-director Alan Laughlin referred to the review of schools “every five years or so” and measures to deal with “under-performing” teachers, who were a “continuous thorn in our sides”. He revealed that the NSWTF was involved in the discussions, which had commenced months earlier.

The union, however, kept the state’s 60,000 public school teachers, then in the final months of a year-long salaries campaign, in the dark about the government’s plans.

It said nothing until the Industrial Relations Commission decided on June 10 to overturn pay parity by awarding Catholic school principals \$13,000 a year more

than their government colleagues. A week later, Education Minister Andrew Refshauge stipulated that public school principals would receive equivalent increases, but contingent on losing their security of tenure. Henceforth, government school principals, like their private school counterparts, would be hired on fixed-term appointments, Refshauge said.

In order to retain some credibility with teachers alarmed by the government’s moves, and to ensure the union’s place at the bargaining table, union leaders stridently condemned the government, accusing it of resurrecting the agenda of the state Liberal government of the early 1990s.

NSWTF president Marie O’Halloran told teachers at the union’s annual conference on July 5 that if principals were given the new responsibilities, “schools would be left in their local cases to sink or swim with ever decreasing (amounts) of money”.

While loudly denouncing the government’s agenda, union leaders had no intention of mobilising teachers to fight it. Instead, they entered closed-door talks with the government, emerging to fraudulently claim that the deal they had worked out ensured “that the government would not introduce contract employment.”

However, the underlying agenda has quickly emerged. On November 7, the *Sunday Telegraph* reported that the government intended to allow principals to hire teachers. This would threaten the statewide staffing system, teachers’ transfer rights and their job security.

The union has again rushed into print to denounce the “Future’s Project reforms” as “redundant and dangerous”. But just as it has straitjacketed teachers and backed the introduction of the Teaching Services Bill, it will play a similar role with the entire package. The union’s only suggestion is that concerned teachers make written submissions to the department.



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