

Australia: school principals given power to select teachers

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A new agreement between the Labor government in the Australian state of New South Wales (NSW) and the NSW Teachers Federation (NSWTF) takes a significant step toward dismantling the current public school staffing system. Launched late last month, the agreement is the second major shift in this direction, following last year's amendments to the Teaching Services Act, which allowed for the dismissal of school principals who failed to satisfy various performance benchmarks.

Until now, NSW teachers have been assigned to schools by a centralised personnel unit without principals being formally involved. Underpinning the system was the conception that government had responsibility for ensuring that resources, including trained and qualified teachers, were distributed equitably. Dating back to the late nineteenth century, the system also reflected the need to establish a statewide public education system, extending into rural areas.

In theory, all public schools throughout the state, whether located in socio-economically disadvantaged regions, isolated rural districts or better-off metropolitan suburbs, were allocated teachers on a common basis. Staffing agreements gave priority to both permanent and casual teachers who had taught for years in hard-to-staff schools in remote regions or in economically disadvantaged areas.

Of course, genuine educational equity was always a myth. Public school coffers in affluent areas were swelled by donations from parents and benefactors, helping to make them more attractive workplaces and therefore more highly sought by teachers. However, even a generation ago, governments still felt pressure to close the gap between educational opportunities in public schools in all areas.

The new agreement undermines centralised staffing, by introducing partial local selection, which will inevitably widen the gap between schools in different areas, while

undermining teachers' basic rights and working conditions.

The involvement of principals in filling a vacancy will only come into play after the Education Department has exhausted other possibilities, including forcibly transferring teachers from "over-staffed" schools, compassionate transfers, transfers for long service in hard-to-staff schools, service transfers and the hiring of more highly qualified or "targetted" graduates.

In the past, once these processes had been completed, the central staffing unit would appoint the next job applicant from its employment list. From term two this year, principals will be able to choose to simply accept the education department's selection or to proceed to interview the next five on the list, hiring the teacher they deem most suitable. They will also have additional capacities to appoint casual staff in permanent teacher positions.

When the staffing deal was announced earlier this year, following weeks of closed-door negotiations between the teachers' union and the state education department, the media hailed it as a "landmark change". Newly appointed education minister, Carmel Tebbut, declared it introduced "local selection," giving "principals a greater say in choosing teachers in NSW public schools".

The union, having collaborated with the government in drawing up the new system, denied, in its journal, *Education*, that there was any fundamental change at all. It claimed that the centrepiece of the old staffing formula had been retained, and therefore teacher recruitment remained "effectively the same". Aware of the hostility of teachers, union leaders continue to argue that any changes have been "small".

Teachers have opposed "local selection" because it gives considerable power to principals and opens the way for favouritism and victimisation. Principals are themselves under considerable pressure to "perform"—that

is, to attract students and run “cost-effective” schools. Qualified teachers who failed to match the required “image” or are not able or willing to fulfill demands for longer hours and more “commitment” will inevitably find themselves passed over for transfers or appointment. In the case of casual teachers, a principal can hold out the prospect of a permanent appointment as a means of imposing onerous duties.

One indication of the logic of local selection can be observed in the neighbouring state of Victoria, where school principals were given the right to hire staff in 1993 under the Kennett Liberal government. At the same time, individual schools were made responsible for their own budgets, which included the cost of salaries. After Kennett was ousted at the ensuing election, the Bracks Labor government retained the new regime.

In NSW, teachers have been able to apply for a vacancy in a preferred school provided they have worked three or more years in their current position. Victorian teachers wanting to teach in another school must search for vacancies on a jobs list and apply to the school, with the principal determining who will be hired. Inevitably, principals constrained by budget shortfalls are under pressure to hire the least costly and most inexperienced teachers, often on short-term contracts.

Teacher opposition is one reason why the changes to the staffing agreement have been kept “small”. In 1989, in line with the recommendations of the former NSW Liberal government’s *School Renewal* paper, authored by Brian Scott, a system of local selection was introduced in which principals hired their own teachers. Following widespread opposition among teachers, a moratorium on local selection of classroom teachers was called in 1993. In 1995, the incoming Carr Labor government shelved the system.

However, statewide staffing again came under fire in a report commissioned by the Carr government in 2000, headed by consultant Gregor Ramsay. Ramsay’s conclusions amounted to a call for the abolition of centralised staffing and recommendations that individual principals be given the power to hire and fire. This is just one element of a broader strategy of subjecting all aspects of public schools to “market forces”.

The NSWTF’s endorsement of the staffing agreement comes a year after the Carr government foreshadowed a new round of attacks on public education under its *Futures Project*. Among other “reforms,” the government signalled its intention to devolve more powers to principals, part of a transformation of principals from

educators to managers.

The Carr government has obviously learnt from the 1989 failure to implement local selection and is pursuing a different tactic. By limiting the involvement of school principals, at least initially, the education department will be able to establish and trial the process then expand its application in the future. Significantly, Trevor Fletcher, the state education department’s new deputy director-general, told a state assembly of principals last November that, in his opinion, 90 percent of teacher vacancies should be filled by local selection.

The union even acknowledged the education department’s objective in an article written by its senior vice president, Angelo Gavrielatos, in *Education* last November. Headlined, “Plan aims to dismantle staffing system”, the article denounced changes foreshadowed by the education department’s *Futures Project*, such as giving principals the capacity to choose their own staff. Gavrielatos wrote: “Local selection is the antithesis to a statewide staffing system.”

In the course of negotiations, however, the NSWTF bureaucrats accepted the principle of local selection—albeit initially on a limited scale—and are now helping the Labor government and the education department to drive in the thin end of the wedge by duping teachers into believing that no significant changes are taking place.



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