

Australia: “Quality” teaching and the Labor/union assault on public education

Erika Zimmer
12 June 2009

Last month the national media reported a shift in the position of the New South Wales Teachers’ Federation (NSWTF) on performance pay for the state’s 60,000 public school teachers. According to the *Sydney Morning Herald’s* education editor, it signalled “an end to their long-standing opposition to so-called performance pay.”

In the latest NSWTF *Education* journal, the union claims to oppose performance pay “based on student results”. But the Federation’s acceptance of the “need to create new ways of rewarding and recognising the value of teachers’ work” and the payment of “accomplished” teachers “beyond the common incremental pay scale,” are clear indicators it has agreed to the central thrust of the Rudd government’s performance pay agenda, first outlined last year, which will further extend market policies into public schools.

Under the federal Labor government’s scheme, states are to receive \$550 million in additional federal government funding for the introduction of new—divisive—methods of teacher payment. This will reward a select number of teachers deemed to be of “high quality,” and thus turn on its head the long-standing practice of paying teachers according to qualifications and years of service.

Capitulation by the union was foreshadowed last August during a meeting of NSWTF councillors. When delegates criticised the Australian Education Union (AEU) for endorsing the need for merit-based pay, NSWTF general secretary John Irving, warned that attacking the AEU was “very unwise”. Vice-president Maurie Mulheron rose to reject what he claimed amounted to a “war with the AEU”. He reminded meeting delegates of deputy prime minister Julia Gillard’s insistence that unions either, “came on board or they would be excluded”.

The union is engaged in a clear case of political double-talk. Its officials are well aware of teacher opposition to performance pay, which has a long and divisive history. First introduced in England and Australia and some schools in the US during the mid 19th century, it was designed largely as a cost-cutting measure. The system quickly fell into disrepute not only because it led to a narrowing of the curriculum, with teachers compelled to “teach to the test”, but also because it destroyed collegiality.

Nevertheless performance pay was not phased out until early in the 20th century. Then in the 1980s and 1990s, it was resurrected, as the Hawke-Keating Labor governments, with the active collaboration of the teacher unions, began rolling back public education reforms won over the previous 40 years. Labor’s policies during this period were part of an international counter-offensive against the working class.

Recent studies show teacher hostility towards performance pay remains

unchanged. A 2007 Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER) report found, “Teachers lacked faith in the fairness and validity of the ... evaluation processes.... There were concerns about threats to teachers’ collegiality [and] objections to including student achievement as a measure of performance based on conceptions that there were many influences on students learning.”

This explains the euphemistic language employed by Rudd and Gillard when describing their new pay regime. Performance pay will reward “quality” teachers and “professional accomplishment and leadership”. The system will be “standards-based”, with “competency benchmarks”. Behind a façade of objectivity and progressive educational reform lies a right-wing political agenda that has nothing to do with improving teacher quality.

The aim of the Labor/union campaign on “teacher quality” is to break-up teacher solidarity, paralyse opposition and pave the way for the introduction of competitive pay rates and contract-type employment throughout the public school system.

This process is already well underway. In Victoria, 20 per cent of teachers are currently employed on contracts, while in NSW, half of all teachers in Technical and Further Education Colleges (TAFE) work as lower paid casuals. In 2008, TAFE teaching qualifications were downgraded from a 700-hour degree or graduate diploma at a university to a 90-hour course available through private and community colleges. The Rudd government and its state Labor counterpart are yet to explain how this downgraded qualification will boost “teacher quality”!

The NSW example fits a broader pattern. In 2010 a “Teach for Australia” program will commence. University graduates without teaching qualifications will be employed by public schools after a training course of just six weeks.

Teacher “quality”—and dodgy facts

On the first day of the 2009 school year, a “pupil-free” day was held in every public school. Teachers throughout the country were subjected to power-point presentations, reports, pie-charts and graphs, “proving” that “teacher quality” outweighed every other influence on student achievement, including socio-economic status.

In NSW, the state’s education director, Michael Coutts-Trotter,

followed up with an email in March claiming a 2005 Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) report made “crystal clear” that, “the major influence within school on what students achieve is the quality of classroom teachers.”

The report, *Teachers matter: Attracting, developing and retaining effective teachers*” does nothing of the sort. It relies on two studies. One is authored by US academic Eric Hanushek, a strident supporter of the importance of teacher quality over class size reduction in determining student achievement.

Hanushek’s paper, *Teachers, Schools and Academic Achievement* is based on a study of maths and reading tests conducted in Texas elementary schools from 1993 to 1995. Hanushek et al claimed to have isolated the separate factors influencing student achievement, including socio-economic status, school resources, class size, curriculum, teacher turnover, school selection of teacher or student, and measurement error. Their conclusion was that, “between grade differences in average teacher quality within schools account for at least 2.0 per cent of the total student variation in student test score gains” a number they admitted was “small”. Moreover, because the authors believed that this figure “vastly understates the importance of teacher quality differences” they multiplied the 2 per cent by 3.75, i.e. by the average number of teachers per grade, to come up with a conclusion that “teacher quality accounts for 7.5 per cent of total student variation in test scores.”

A second study, entitled *The Impact of Individual Teachers on Student Achievement: Evidence from Panel Data* published by John Rockoff in 2003 found “differences among teachers explain policy-relevant test score variance ranging from lower bounds of 4-9 per cent to upper bounds of 16-23 per cent.” One would have to say that findings ranging from 4 to 23 percent shed very little light. Moreover, Rockoff warns against drawing conclusions from the study due to its limited scope. Yet the OECD cites Rockoff’s study to claim that “differences among teachers explain up to 23 per cent of the variation in student test performance.”

The oft-quoted studies by Hanushek and Rockoff point to the shaky foundations underpinning government claims that teacher quality overshadows every other factor in student achievement. As does the latest Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), which found that the proportion of low income students in Australia not achieving expected academic levels was 5 times that of high income students. The PISA findings point to social inequality as the overwhelming determinant of student performance. An Australian study, by Melbourne academics Jack Keating and Stephen Lamb, found the likelihood of a Year 9 student from a low income household in Victoria gaining entry to university to be less than half that of a student from a high income household.

The OECD report—and there are dozens of similar papers cited by the Rudd government—explicitly rejects any assessment of social inequality and its impact on student learning. The OECD claims its 236-page report is, “probably the most comprehensive analysis ever undertaken of teacher policy issues at international level”. Strikingly, the OECD admits that variations in economic and social status constitute “the largest source of variation in student learning” but its recommendations are limited to “those variables which are potentially open to policy influence.” It is difficult to imagine a clearer admission of policy bankruptcy.

There are definite political reasons why the OECD rules out a further investigation of social inequality. The emphasis placed on “teacher performance” serves a twin purpose: accommodating privatisation and pro-market school reforms while simultaneously preparing the ground for a

major new assault on the teaching profession.

The OECD’s report identifies policy options for attracting, developing and retaining effective teachers in a period in which “the large number of teachers who were recruited during the great expansion period of the 1960s and 1970s are now close to retirement.” According to the OECD this wave of retirement presents to governments “an unprecedented opportunity”. Conditions historically available to public school teachers in OECD countries: security of tenure, annual salary increments in a life-long career based on public service, will be eliminated. In its section entitled “priorities for future policy development,” the OECD’s report calls for “more flexible terms of employment” and devolution of teacher hiring and firing to local school level.

Viewed in tandem with the raft of reforms already in place--the overturn of centralised staffing, “Teach for Australia” and other forms of contract employment, streamlined dismissal procedures for “underperforming” teachers--the introduction of performance pay is ominous. With NAPLAN and the publication of school report cards and league tables, the conditions are being set to penalise and remove teachers—and entire schools—for educational problems created by decades of government neglect.

Deputy Prime Minister Julia Gillard asserts that, “We have left the debates of public versus private behind us. They are yesterday’s debates.” “The old progressive assumptions about the roles of different schools and the nature of disadvantage don’t hold.” Gillard, the deputy prime minister and education minister, is giving voice to a fundamental shift in the entire thrust of government policy. The “progressive assumptions” she attacks date back more than a century: that government bears responsibility for ensuring equality in education as a path to social equality based on the fullest material and spiritual development of all members of society. In reality capitalism has never delivered on its earlier democratic promise, while governments today are rejecting it entirely. Already Australia has one of the highest proportions of students in private schools in the world, 32 per cent compared to the OECD average of 13 percent. The Rudd government’s new school ranking system and its attendant regime of “performance pay” will vastly accelerate this process.



To contact the WWSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wwsws.org/contact