Australia: League tables and democratic rights—a reply to News Ltd

Laura Tiernan
8 July 2009

Over the past week Rupert Murdoch's News Limited publications have ramped up their campaign for school league tables. Editorials and major OpEd pieces have appeared in the *Australian* and in Sydney's tabloid *Daily Telegraph* castigating opponents of school reporting as "class dunces" and opponents of free speech.

According to the *Telegraph* (which quoted liberally from Labor's Education Minister Julia Gillard), a "fear campaign" is being waged by teacher unions amounting to "censorship of the public's right to know how schools compare on academic performance".

The newspaper's education writer Maralyn Parker was more direct: "Laws prohibiting NSW [New South Wales] media from ranking schools are ineffective, insulting to parents, offensive to civil libertarians and a provocative attack on media, specifically *The Daily Telegraph*."

Behind the moral outcry is a definite political agenda. Murdoch's columnists and lead-writers are helping the Rudd Labor government push through education reforms opposed by virtually the entire teaching profession.

As an article on the *World Socialist Web Site* explained on June 11, the Rudd government's new school ranking mechanism, based on standardised tests, "dovetails with a seismic shift underway in the entire concept of education—away from the all-rounded physical, intellectual and cultural development of young people, toward a system based on narrow 'outcomes' defined by the productivity requirements of business" (See: "Rudd Labor's NAPLAN school 'league tables': 'NAPALM that kills learning'").

A column in last Wednesday's *Australian* by long-time Liberal Party supporter and former Howard confidante Janet Albrechtsen underscored Labor's regressive agenda. "NSW Liberals at the bottom of the class" ran the headline, with the unabashed defender of free-market capitalism arguing that "the Labor Party has finally seen the sense of education reforms long pursued by the federal Liberal Party to empower parents and help students".

Toothless amendment

Murdoch's "free speech" campaign was triggered by a toothless Greens amendment to the Education Amendment (Publication of School Results) Act 2009. It was passed by the New South Wales Parliament's upper house on June 24 with the support of the Liberal opposition, Shooters Party MPs, and Christian fundamentalist MPs Fred Nile and Gordon Moyes.

As media outlets have themselves noted, the Greens amendment will do little to stop the publication in NSW of league tables. Newspapers will simply compile the tables from school performance data supplied to federal authorities by state and territory governments. Alternatively, they may compile league tables online. The Greens amendment excludes publication of test results only in "a newspaper" or "other document that is publicly available in this state", a description widely interpreted to exclude digital media.

Stipulating its provisions would do "nothing" to prohibit "anything authorised to be done by or under a relevant national agreement" the Greens made clear their amendment would not obstruct the Rudd government's pro-market reforms.

The amendment's real purpose was to deflect public opposition, allowing the central thrust of Labor's legislative agenda to proceed unopposed. According to opposition education spokesman Adrian Piccoli, his office had received, by the end of June, some 400 emails from constituents opposed to Labor's national ranking system. Professional school organisations, including the Primary Principals Association, the NSW Secondary Principals Council, the Australian Association of Mathematics Teachers, the Australian Association for the

© World Socialist Web Site

Teaching of English and the Federation of Parents and Citizens Associations have each lobbied vigorously against the publication of comparative data based on student test results.

A great deal of printers' ink has been devoted to the successful Greens amendment, which contains provisions to fine newspapers up to $55,000 if they publish league tables or reveal the identity of schools in the bottom 10 percent. The *Telegraph*'s July 2 editorial was headlined "A Sinister Plot to Hide the Truth" declaring the amendment was "a straight-up example of political censorship". But the objections raised by the *Telegraph* have nothing to do with protecting democratic rights, least of all the rights of parents, students and teachers to access accurate information.

On the contrary, News Ltd is campaigning for education reforms that are deeply anti-democratic. And they are doing so with the stock-standard methods of the gutter press: disinformation, selective journalism and outright dishonesty. Such are the methods used in defence of parents' "right to know".

Laws allowing "harm"

According to Janet Albrechtsen, the Rudd government's education reforms will "empower parents and help students". If that is the case, why did Education Minister Julia Gillard ram through new federal protocols *overturning* previous protections to students, including a 2008 "ethical principle" safeguarding school communities from "harm"?

On this question the columnists and editorial writers at News Limited have been largely silent.

Gillard's new reporting protocols, adopted by education ministers in Hobart on June 12, will govern the public release of school performance data. Significantly, they remove a clause adopted just 12 months ago: "The avoidance of harm to members of the community: this could occur where the privacy of individuals would be compromised or where the reputation of an institution or group of people would be damaged through the publication of misleading information or stereotyping."

The omission constitutes de facto admission that the release of national test score data will indeed cause "harm", "damage" and "stereotyping".

Following the June 12 meeting, the NSW Department of Education received legal advice that the new national protocols faced a potential legal obstacle in the form of legislation adopted by state parliament in 1997. This legislation, preventing the creation of league tables, was passed after the *Telegraph*'s notorious "name and shame" edition, in which Mt Druitt High School's class of 1996 was publicly humiliated over its Higher School Certificate results. The Supreme Court later found the newspaper had defamed the students, with the *Telegraph* forced to offer an apology.

Now, under orders from Gillard, the Rees Labor government and its Education Minister Verity Firth have successfully amended the 1997 laws, with the crucial support of the Greens. Gillard threatened that $4.4 billion dollars in education funding would be withheld unless the amendments went through. So much for democracy! Labor's measures were sufficiently regressive to earn praise from the far-right's Reverend Fred Nile: "I congratulate the Commonwealth government on its strong stand," he declared. Federal Labor, Nile said, had been "lobbied strongly" by education groups, but had "kept its nerve and put a condition on the funding for which I congratulate it".

According to results from a national survey published last month, 95 percent of school principals believe performance rankings will have a negative effect on school communities. Over 90 percent of those responding said that league tables--which will inevitably follow the publication of national test score data--were not a useful tool to improve the performance of schools.

When they speak about providing "transparency" and "information" for "mums and dads", Gillard and Firth are engaging in a snow-job. The publication of performance data based on National Assessment Program—Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) tests, will automatically divide schools into winners and losers, penalising and stigmatising schools in the most socially disadvantaged areas.

It is the Rudd government, backed by the Murdoch press, which is conducting political censorship. It is riding roughshod over the views of the overwhelming majority of education professionals, in the service of an agenda entirely antithetical to the welfare and development of students. This is the essential content of Labor's "education revolution".

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site