

Australia: Labor's My School web site launches new attack on public education

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The Rudd government's launch of its *My School* web site on January 29, publicly ranking government and private schools across the country according to standardised tests, marks an enormous acceleration of the shift toward a market-based, fee-paying model of education.

The measure, opposed by virtually the entire teaching profession and many parents, and which the former Howard government proved unable to introduce, is now being carried out by a Labor government, with the enthusiastic backing of business and the media, and the assistance of the teachers' unions.

Exactly as intended, *My School's* data was immediately turned into media league tables of "winning" and "losing" schools. This process is designed to stigmatise those schools at the bottom and create an inevitable stampede of parents seeking to enrol their children at higher-scoring schools.

Under the cynical guise of giving parents transparent information, Labor's web site provides misleading figures designed to advance four major objectives: further privatise education; narrow and commercialise the curricula; attack the conditions of teachers; and blame teachers for poor education outcomes, diverting attention from the ongoing underfunding and gutting of public education.

The Rudd government is drawing on international experience. In Britain and the United States league tables and report cards have been used already to victimise and sack teachers and force the closure of "underperforming" schools. Just last month, 19 "failed" public schools were slated for closure in New York City, where New York's billionaire mayor Michael Bloomberg and his chancellor of schools Joel Klein have campaigned to gut public education in favour of privately-run charter schools. Nearly 100 New York public schools have been shut down since 2002. The aim of the *My School* web site is to produce similar results in Australia.

Hailed by media publications as "the beginning of the real education revolution", a "victory for everyone who believes in education" and a "win for the public", the data in fact presents a damning picture of glaring educational inequality, a situation that will rapidly worsen under Labor's scheme.

According to one quick calculation by education writers Jane Caro and Chris Bonner, after decades of generous public funding, metropolitan private schools have 50 percent more teachers per students than similar government schools—one to 10.1 students, compared to 1 to 14.8 students. The disparity is even greater for administrative and support staff: private schools enjoy a fourfold advantage—one for 21 students, compared to one for 84.4.

Since the mid-1970s, government spending on public schools in Australia has more than halved as a proportion of GDP, from 5.9 percent to 2.7 percent at the turn of the century, while Labor and Liberal governments alike have poured record amounts of public money into the coffers of private schools.

This fundamentally regressive policy has driven down enrolments in government schools to historically low levels, below 70 percent of the total, and led to an increasing concentration of students from low socio-economic backgrounds in the government sector, including students from jobless families, non-English speaking backgrounds, indigenous students and students with learning and behavioural difficulties.

The *My School* web site provides a narrow and distorted range of information, primarily relying on test results for literacy and numeracy for years 3, 5, 7 and 9 for each of 10,000 schools. On the basis of this "high-stakes testing", the fates of schools, the careers of teachers and the futures of students will be determined.

The site reveals a yawning gap in educational achievement between rich and poor students. Invariably, schools in socio-economically advantaged areas score highly, producing green-coloured results on the site, while clicking onto poorer and isolated rural areas shows a wash of red or pink, the site's colours for "school underperformance".

For example, the private St Mary's Preparatory School on Sydney's wealthy north shore is ranked second in the state of New South Wales for overall performance, and has a socio-economic index of 28 (very high), while St Mary's North Public School in Sydney's far western suburbs is ranked 864, with an index of 335, making it one of the most disadvantaged schools in the state. The performance results in the poorest areas of Sydney, such as Mount Druitt and Campbelltown, are uniformly low, demonstrating that the fault is not that of individual schools or teachers.

The Rudd government is using the site to exploit the widespread anxiety felt by working class and middle class families over deteriorating conditions in public schools. According to a weekend article in the *Sunday Mail*, parents are already pulling their children out of poorly performing schools and seeking to enrol them in schools that rate highly.

The publication of national league tables demonstrates the true character of Labor's "education revolution". It is part of a wider agenda, driven by big business, to reduce social spending, and restructure every aspect of life, including education, to meet the requirements of corporate profit.

An editorial in the *Australian* enthused: "*My School* will be welcomed

by everyone who understands education is the engine of productivity.” The *Australian Financial Review* declared: “We tend to hear a lot about industrial relations changes, reducing regulatory burdens and increasing competition. These all matter, but the evidence shows education reforms would make a much bigger difference to our gross domestic product ... School outcomes are the dominant driver of growth in GDP per capita across a number of countries.”

Both publications also emphasised that the implementation of *My School* was a test of the government’s resolve to carry through the entire business agenda, regardless of any working class opposition.

To avoid “naming and shaming”, schools will be forced to narrow their curricula and concentrate on drilling their students in those subjects that will be tested. This is in line with business demands for more “job-ready” and less critically-minded graduates.

School league tables will also accelerate the introduction of “performance pay” for teachers, the empowering of school principals to hire and fire teachers and the adoption of contract employment in schools. This is an agenda being pursued by governments internationally to pit teachers against each other and reduce their job security, making them less able to resist further steps to undermine education quality.

Performance pay programs are being trialled already. In the state of Victoria, up to 25 schools will this year participate in the Teacher Rewards scheme, with school administrators ranking teachers using benchmarks such as test results in literacy and numeracy. Teachers ranked in the top 30 percent will be handed annual bonuses of up to \$7,000. In addition, 50 schools will participate in a scheme to reward the 20 percent deemed to have shown the most improvement.

In launching the web site, Prime Minister Kevin Rudd and his deputy, Education Minister Julia Gillard, made plain their determination to confront teachers, and try to incite parents against them. Gillard provocatively urged parents to “have robust conversations with teachers and principals”.

Acutely conscious that the government’s free-market agenda is opposed by wide layers of the population, the media has launched an unrelenting blitz in support. Nevertheless, letter writers to newspapers expressed deeply-felt hostility.

In Saturday’s *Sydney Morning Herald*, a parent from a primary school in a better-off suburb, which ranked among the top performers, described the “enormous pressure on teachers and students from day one and term one to achieve good results in these tests”. She wrote: “The ‘preparation’ was intense, with extreme pressure to practise through regular class time and heavy-duty homework. Many children felt overwhelmed and stressed by the level of work and the performance expectations. Excellent results followed but at what price to the children and to what purpose?”

Another wrote: “There is no reason to think sending your ‘ordinary’ child to the public school with the top year 5 maths results will help—all those children have year 5 opportunity classes, which bring in academically gifted and talented children from other schools. Interestingly at least one of those five schools also has separate classes for children with intellectual disabilities. Were those children included in the tests?”

Another complained: “At my school 99 percent of students have backgrounds other than English, and many will start school without English skills. According to the web site these factors are statistically

insignificant.”

A parent in outer Sydney commented: “The most interesting information on the My School website is the numbers of teachers in private schools. Some of our most elite and expensive private schools have more than twice as many teachers per student than the formula used to staff governments schools. Thanks, Julia. As a parent with two children in government schools, that was information I didn’t know. Maybe now that we all know, it is time to reconsider the formula for funding private schools.”

The Rudd government is relying on the teachers’ unions to straitjacket and stifle their members. Teachers and parents who expect the Australian Education Union (AEU) or its state affiliates to lead a movement against the government’s league tables need to examine the record.

The AEU has no objection to NAPLAN literacy and numeracy testing or the results being made public. The union only criticises “simplistic league tables”, a formulation that gives it maximum room for concessions and retreats. The union’s proposal to boycott the 2010 NAPLAN tests in May is a fraud—league tables have already been published!

While the AEU holds backroom talks with the government, Rudd and Gillard are upping the ante, vowing to extend the site’s data. Gillard has declared that the government will “use whatever means it takes” to ensure the tests go ahead. She has refused to rule out the employment of strike-breakers and threatened to punish teachers under the government’s “Fair Work” industrial laws, which ban all forms of industrial action except via postal ballots during enterprise bargaining periods.

In 2008, during negotiations over an enterprise agreement, Victorian public school teachers overwhelmingly endorsed a resolution to boycott NAPLAN tests. However, the union rushed into negotiations with the Brumby state government, calling off all action to enable testing to proceed.

The New South Wales Teachers Federation (NSWTF) is playing a similarly treacherous role. At a rally last August, when a teacher attempted to move the Socialist Equality Party’s motion calling for a national NAPLAN boycott, NSWTF vice-president Gary Zadkovich seized the microphone and debate was shut down.

NSWTF officials told teachers to place their faith in Greens-sponsored state legislation to ban newspapers from publishing league tables. Like the unions, the Greens have backed Labor’s testing regime, while claiming that measures can be taken to prevent league tables. That sham was well and truly exposed last week when NSW Premier Kristina Keneally dismissed Greens’ pleas to prosecute newspapers, describing the legislation as “crazy”.

Just over two years ago Labor won office promising an “education revolution” to supposedly overcome years of chronic under-funding. The *My School* web site reveals the truth: a corporate-driven agenda to intensify social polarisation and the breakup of public education, as part of a deepening assault on the conditions of working people.



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