

Australian teachers condemn Labor's My School web site

Our correspondents
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The *World Socialist Web Site* interviewed school teachers over the past week about the Rudd government's newly-launched *My School* web site, which publicly ranks government and private schools across the country for the first time, using standardised literacy and numeracy tests called NAPLAN.

As the federal Labor government intended, *My School's* data was immediately turned into media league tables of "winning" and "losing" schools designed to stigmatise those schools at the bottom and stampede parents into enrolling their children at private or higher-scoring schools.

Labor's web site is designed to accelerate the privatisation of education, narrow the curricula to serve the interests of employers, and blame teachers for poor test results, diverting attention from the chronic under-funding of public education.

The site also reveals a yawning gap in educational achievement between rich and poor students. Schools in socio-economically advantaged areas score highly, producing green-coloured results on the site, while those in working class and rural areas show red or pink, the site's colours for "school underperformance".

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Gemma, who works at a primary school in Melbourne's northwest, teaches many students who score poorly on NAPLAN tests and her school has many red indicators on the *My School* web site.

"We're in the red for everything," she commented. "NAPLAN gives an incredibly narrow snapshot of where your child is at. As a teacher I find it insulting to the profession because I know, day-to-day, what goes into my school. The way we work very hard to do the best for our students goes way beyond literacy and numeracy tests.

"We have psychologists, nursing, speech therapy, counselling, we have a program for parenting skills—it is no longer just reading, writing and maths. We still test for that, but we have a bigger agenda. We don't dumb it down, we've got very high expectations for the kids, and they have to be excited and engaged as well."

Many of her students were English as Second Language (ESL) students, with families from the Middle East. "They don't have

the same experiences as mainstream Australian children. We have a prep program of developmental play because many of them have never been to kindergarten.

"Our preps mostly come with little or no English. They could be two years behind when they reach the Grade 3 NAPLAN. Even if the gap closes, they are still 12-18 months behind when they reach the next NAPLAN at Grade 5.

"This *My School* is a very narrow view of education. These students have need of skills like critical thinking, creativity and resilience. These are all untested in standardised tests.

"Our kids know their test results are bad: They say: 'We know why we're there.' We've got a lot of kids who don't speak English. It doesn't mean we're not smart. Their parents come with the tests in their hands, look taken aback. They feel bewildered and they ask me to explain it. I've had to explain that the test questions are very middle class, very Anglo-Saxon. 'Your background is not taken into account. This is not who your child is.'

"It is so unfair. I know when our kids are reading questions, they can get caught up with one word that they don't know, and it doesn't even have to be a key word. Very quickly their comprehension then starts to deteriorate. Their stress levels drive up.

"There is a stigma attached to certain suburbs; we're already shifting out of the whole feeling of egalitarianism in Australia towards the slippery slope of patriotism, nationalism and racism. That was always there, but now it is becoming more overt."

Gemma said it was "amazing" that this was being carried out by a Labor government. She had no confidence in Deputy Prime Minister and Education Minister Julia Gillard's claim that the government would provide resources to support teachers in under-privileged schools.

Gemma had little faith in the Australian Education Union (AEU). "I'm not sure about the union saying it will organise a boycott. It is long time since teachers have had a decent rally in the city. Teachers don't believe in the union. I don't see it happening. NAPLAN has been in a long time, and the union didn't do

anything about that.”

Bruce, a former contract teacher, said: “The *My School* site is all political—to make the government look good. It has nothing to do with providing the students a general education. Look at the libraries at some of the schools—they are hopeless.

“The government wants to have less to do with education. They want to outsource it, that’s their language. They are giving it to people who run it as a business, making money out of it. The government doesn’t want to spend money on schools; they want to make education more cost effective for them.

“Funding has already been weighted to the private schools. The allocation of money is not proportional to the number of students. A wealthy school like Xavier will get another swimming pool, and a poor public school will only get \$100,000.

“All this serves to create a two-tier education system. Governments have enforced it by stealth, by cutting budgets all the time. The school administrations have to cut this, and cut that. When the government gets rid of a school, where do the students go? They still need education.

“Meanwhile the media is creating a myth. They say that parents approve of *My School*. What parents approve of it? They haven’t asked me. How can parents understand it? All those abstract figures are meaningless.”

Asked about the AEU’s proposed boycott of NAPLAN testing, Bruce responded with scornful laughter.

“I don’t know if they’re going to do it. They always say they’re going to do something. I might have believed them once or even twice, but never again. I heard them making a fuss when the Liberals were in, attacking Howard. But now with Rudd, they’re not protesting against Labor. According to them under Howard’s industrial relations system, he was using the iron fist. But now Labor is doing worse things than Howard did!

“Look at Rudd’s ‘Education Revolution’. Labor said that buildings were bad and they had to fix them. But they conned people that with a few computers, education would improve. The buildings are still falling apart; now that is forgotten about. The problem supposedly is the teachers! I think they should test the politicians.”

Bernie, a primary school teacher for eight years at a primary school in inner-western Melbourne, said: “For low socio-economic schools there will be many more negative consequences. The pressures to improve NAPLAN test scores will be massive, and that will not be so easy to address without resources. Those schools will look at cutting other areas of the curriculum. They will have to teach to the test.

“Already we have seen examples of a memo from the

Department of Education, on the front page of the *Melbourne Age*. The memo addressed to one region, explicitly directed schools to teach to the test. Five years ago tests were used to highlight things, areas that a school might want to work on. The shift is now to make the results public and the results become the be-all and end-all.

“The other immediate impact will be a middle class flight from ‘failing’ schools. Families that can leave stigmatised schools, will start leaving. This will further increase the pressure on the schools. Once the middle class families leave, then you could have a further drop in the NAPLAN results. Enrolments fall and then teachers are named in excess, morale falls and what happens is a whole circle of negativity.

“Declining enrolments mean schools start closing. Are those children expected to enrol in a private school or travel to a public school out of their area? The government has a responsibility to provide public education in all regions—you can’t have schools closing solely on the basis of the communities they serve.”

Asked if he was surprised that federal and state Labor governments were implanting these policies, Bernie replied: “Yes and no. I think this is somewhat deceitful when the Rudd’s Education Revolution was presented as giving kids laptops. None of this was mentioned in the election.”

Bernie commented on Labor’s focus on driving up economic productivity. “I think the government is putting certain incentives in education to encourage a certain type of development in our children. Now more so than any other time in human history, our education system needs to be diverse—not a one size fits all.

“We need to teach our kids to be creative and critical. We need to encourage the next generation to be the great inventors, designers, artists and performers. I am not saying maths and literacy are not important—they are super important—but they are not the only areas in education.”



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