

Australia: Queensland trials scheme to punish parents of truants

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In a trial scheme in the state of Queensland, parents in the impoverished working class suburbs of Logan are having their welfare payments stripped if their children fail to attend school. The measure is part of a deepening assault on the right to welfare being waged by the federal Labor government of Prime Minister Kevin Rudd.

The Queensland pilot program, which commenced last October, marks a significant expansion of punitive truancy-linked welfare suspension measures. Five indigenous communities and the town of Katherine in the Northern Territory (NT) were initially targeted by the federal Labor government's Social Security and Veterans' Entitlements Legislation Amendment (Schooling Requirements) Bill passed by the federal parliament in 2008 (see: "Labor to strip welfare from parents of truant children").

Under the Improving School Enrolment and Attendance Welfare Reform Measure (SEAM), the NT trials have been underway since the beginning of 2009. Plans to extend the program to the working class suburb of Cannington in Perth were shelved last year after the Western Australian Liberal government withdrew co-operation pledged by the previous state Labor government. The Liberals' Child Protection Minister Robyn McSweeney said last February that welfare "management" rather than suspension should be trialled.

Such "income management" measures—in which 50 percent of welfare payments are compulsorily diverted to store or debit cards forcing recipients to purchase approved products from government authorised stores—were implemented in indigenous communities as part of the former federal Howard government's 2007 police-military NT intervention. Last November the Rudd government passed legislation laying the basis for the extension of "income management" to welfare recipients, indigenous and non-indigenous alike, throughout the country. (See "Australian Labor government unveils historic welfare-cutting plan")

The parallel welfare-truancy trial program in Queensland involves the remote indigenous communities of Mornington Island and Doomadgee in Queensland's north-west, as well as Logan, in Brisbane's outer-south east. Logan is the first densely-populated urban area to be targeted in advance of a national SEAM roll-out; it is one of the most socio-

economically disadvantaged areas in Queensland and was chosen for the trial because of its high proportion of welfare recipients. Woodridge, one of the suburbs affected by the trial, has an official unemployment rate of 18.4 percent over three times the official Queensland rate, together with high numbers of public housing tenants, newly arrived migrants, and increasing numbers of refugees.

Under the scheme, parents or carers receiving welfare are compelled to provide details of their child's school enrolment to the federal social security agency, Centrelink. Schools are required to provide Centrelink with ongoing attendance data and, in the event of a truancy problem, principals must report parents who they deem are not taking "reasonable steps" to ensure their child's attendance. Parents will then be issued with a notice requiring them to address the situation within 14 days, or have their welfare payments suspended for up to 13 weeks, leaving families without any source of income for basic necessities. Once parents "re-engage" with Centrelink and the school, payments are supposed to resume, back-paid to the date of suspension. In cases where parents are accused of continued non-compliance, welfare payments can be cancelled altogether.

Since the trial began, 121 families have been issued with notices. According to a *Courier Mail* article published on February 9, fifteen of these have allegedly "failed to engage" with their child's school and now face welfare suspension.

The Rudd government claims that such draconian measures are driven by a concern for the well-being and education of children is a sham. Labor is in fact going beyond the former Howard government in vilifying and punishing the most disadvantaged members of society in order to further advance a reactionary agenda.

Truancy is a complex social problem, bound up with the impact of more than two decades of deindustrialisation and economic restructuring. Areas such as Logan now feature permanently high unemployment and grossly inadequate public services and infrastructure. The inevitable social problems which accompany this situation include drug and alcohol abuse, untreated mental health problems, homelessness and inadequate

and overcrowded housing, and family instability and breakdowns.

All of these issues affect children's attendance and performance in school. Unsurprisingly, many children who have never known a stable and nurturing environment attempt to evade going to class. Those kids with learning difficulties, behavioural disorders, or who suffer from bullying are especially susceptible. Specific issues also emerge for those children in Logan who are refugees, from countries such as Sudan and Afghanistan. Many of these students have had little or no schooling in their home countries, speak little English, and are often deeply traumatised by their experiences before coming to Australia. Refugee families are given little or no effective assistance by the government.

The Rudd government has no intention of addressing any of these social problems. Its withholding of Centrelink payments from the parents of truant children amounts to a cynical diversion. Promoting the right-wing nostrum of "personal responsibility", the Rudd government is attempting to evade its responsibility by placing the blame solely onto the affected families themselves. Far from deterring truancy, its punitive approach is likely to exacerbate the problem, with families either plunged into severe poverty after having their income cut off for up to 13 weeks, or kept in a state of permanent uncertainty and stress with the threat of devastating financial sanctions held over their heads by the authorities.

By portraying truancy as a problem of bad individuals and bad parents, the Labor government is also attempting to cover up the connection between truancy and the crisis of the public education system. Public schools have been systematically underfunded for decades and do not have the resources and facilities required to help tackle students' complex social and behavioural issues.

The crisis of the public education system in Logan is indicative. In October 2008, about 3,000 teachers from 54 schools in the Logan-Beaudesert region held rolling one-hour stop-work meetings to demand increased funding to meet the particular needs of disadvantaged students in the area's "complex schools". One of the stop-work meetings was held at Eagleby State School, a primary school which in 2008 had an enrolment of 364 students—102 of whom recorded short term "disciplinary absences" or suspensions. Teachers there demanded the government provide a fulltime lifeline counsellor, fulltime guidance counsellor, behavioural management funds, a fulltime time-out room, reduced class sizes, more teacher aide time, working air conditioners, and more funding for computer and internet resources.

Students at Eagleby State are now to be subject to the SEAM

welfare-truancy trial, with teachers and administrators placed in the invidious position of having to decide whether or not to report families with truancy problems to Centrelink, potentially plunging already disadvantaged children into deeper poverty.

The appalling conditions at the primary school are by no means unique—the Queensland Teachers Union (QTU) estimated that public schools in the Logan Albert-Beaudesert region alone required an immediate injection of \$40 million to improve and maintain buildings and facilities, reduce class sizes and develop initiatives to improve learning outcomes, including behavioural management programs. The state Labor government of Premier Anna Bligh replied with open contempt. Education Minister Rod Welford declared: "To expect the government to simply pluck \$40 million out of the air is unrealistic."

Working hand-in-hand with Rudd, the Queensland government has launched a "crackdown" on truancy. Measures include the prosecution and fining of parents for failing to send their children to school and, in a particularly sharp example, the deployment of mounted police in the southeast Brisbane area to round up kids who have skipped school. The media has played its role. For more than a year, Murdoch's *Courier-Mail* has conducted a concerted campaign decrying rising truancy rates and vilifying "wild" children and "irresponsible" parents. This is an attempt to create the conditions for the SEAM program's extension to welfare recipients throughout Queensland.

The Queensland Teachers Union has been a key accomplice of the Rudd and Bligh governments. Following the 2008 stop-work meetings, which were confined to the Logan-Beaudesert region, the union dropped the campaign for extra funding for so-called complex schools. It has remained silent on the introduction of the SEAM welfare-truancy trial, enabling the Labor state and federal governments to impose the measure without active resistance from already frustrated Logan teachers.

Educational and welfare experts have condemned the Rudd government's measures. According to Professor Larissa Behrendt and Senior Researcher Ruth McCausland of the University of Technology Sydney, the welfare suspension provisions "do not appear to support an evidence-informed approach to policy in this area". In other words, research internationally and in Australia has demonstrated that financial sanctions produce no improvement in school attendance rates.



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