

# Australia: Gillard rolls out right-wing education agenda

Alex Messenger  
13 August 2010

Australia's Gillard-led Labor government has entered the last weeks of the federal election campaign by firming up its right-wing education credentials, announcing a series of harsh market-based 'reforms'. 'Top achieving' schools will receive \$100,000 cash payments, leaving underfunded and disadvantaged schools to languish. 'Top performing' teachers will receive a one-off 10 percent bonus. Meanwhile, students who miss school will be banned from playing weekend sport.

The announcements are a transparent pitch to the most reactionary sections of the corporate media, especially the Murdoch-owned *Australian* newspaper. Like an obedient dog rewarded with treats, Gillard, who has been faltering in the polls, received the *Australian's* immediate praise for her "drive and political acumen" and for ignoring the complaints of practically every educational specialist in the country.

Gillard's performance-based announcements, however, are not just knee-jerk election promises. They are the next and inevitable tranche of the market-style restructuring agenda that she pushed through while education minister prior to the June 24 coup. As the *Australian* has been quick to point out, this week's performance bonus announcements are the "natural flow on" from the Gillard-initiated MySchool web site, essentially a school test result 'league table'.

The same observations apply to Gillard's announcement that principals under a re-elected Labor government would have 'hire and fire' powers over teaching staff. This is "a necessity after holding [principals] accountable for their students' test results on MySchool", the *Australian* declares. In other words, although Labor's new education policies have been trotted out in the manner of 'policy on the run', they articulate a long-prepared and carefully calculated agenda. The speed of their release reflects an attempt to claw back big business support for an election campaign broadly

perceived as a disaster.

According to this week's announcements, primary schools will receive \$75,000 and high schools \$100,000 if they show "the most improvement" in areas that will include school attendance, literacy and numeracy performance and "post-school destination information, such as the number going onto further education, training or work." The government does not explain how post-school destination assessments might factor-in the intractable youth unemployment rates that dog working-class areas—often at effective levels of 35 percent or more.

The 10 percent bonuses for 'top performing' teachers will be based, Labor claims, on a "nationally-consistent, transparent and equitable performance management system" that will assess student achievement. In fact, as with all performance-based schemes, Labor's measures are designed to increase competition between teachers, break-up teacher solidarity and stifle opposition to the restructuring agenda. Again, they follow logically from Gillard's 2008 introduction of the NAPLAN national school testing regime. The administering of these tests—the results of which were always intended for publication—was met with broad teacher opposition, but their introduction was rammed through with the assistance of the teachers' unions.

Teacher outrage over the MySchool web site resulted in the union calling a national boycott of the 2010 tests in April, but this was empty fist-thumping. The unions in fact refused to mobilise their members. Teachers and principals, whom Gillard threatened with criminal penalties, were left to fend for themselves. The boycott plan fizzled and was ultimately killed-off by the unions' announcement that they would take up Gillard's offer of being part of a "working party" to examine the use of educational data. Nothing has been heard of the working party since.

The unions, which support Labor's re-election, have

responded to the performance pay announcements with weasel-like criticism that has nothing to do with the real interests of teachers or students. It is a thin cover for the union's outright support of the Gillard agenda. According to the New South Wales Teachers Federation, "rather than develop a comprehensive plan to further lift student performance and improve equity in Australian education by implementing professional pay for all *accomplished* teachers [emphasis added] Ms Gillard has announced a scheme which is little more than a gimmick ... the Gillard Government will have to be elected twice before any teacher sees a dollar of extra pay."

The union goes on to explain that the problem is not performance-based pay per se, but that Labor will be doling out its rewards based on 'flawed' information. "A similar controversial scheme, using very similar and equally flawed criteria to assess teachers in Washington DC," says the union, "has recently resulted in nearly 1000 teachers either being dismissed or put on one year's notice. Like the proposed Australian scheme, the Washington scheme misuses NAPLAN-type student data to assess teacher performance."

Another Gillard education announcement this week was Teach Next, a scheme for parachuting perceived 'high-flyers' into schools to teach alongside experienced and trained teachers. According to the prime minister's press release, "many highly skilled and experienced individuals, like accountants, bankers, engineers and scientists have considered a career in teaching, but have been put off by the time it takes to meet the qualification hurdles." Under the Gillard plan—in fact just the rebadging and expansion of an already-operating scheme called Teach for Australia—the professional teaching qualifications and experience that teachers attain over years are treated as a kind of nuisance, perhaps even an out-dated hurdle to productivity. 'Instant teachers' will be spat out with no more than 8 weeks 'intensive' training.

There is no educational benefit to the Teach Next program. As David Berliner, Professor of Education at Arizona State University, wrote of the Teach for Australia program last year in the *Sydney Morning Herald*, "The news that Australia is following the United States in introducing a program which puts untrained teachers in the classroom came as a real shock to us here. Simply put, you are being conned. Teach for America, the model of your national program, is not effective in helping students in poverty learn more."

The real agenda behind Teach Next, as with other

equivalent programs in the US and the UK, is, as with performance pay, to prevent the build-up of any organised opposition to the marketisation of education and the hacking of education budgets. A de-skilling of the teaching profession not only means poor educational outcomes, but is a precondition for an inflexible national curriculum and the high-stakes uniform testing (NAPLAN) used to regulate it. Behind these changes—and, indeed, behind all the education policies Gillard has announced over the last week—is a desire to meet the demands of big business for a more pliant, low-cost and therefore competitive workforce. Gillard herself, signalling to the ruling class that she is 'on track' for its agenda, told reporters that "now is the time for the next major round of reforms, and education is the linchpin for the reforms we need in the future ... What drives wealth in a nation? Participation and productivity. What gives you the edge in participation and productivity? It's your investment in human capital."

The "human capital" conception of education involves the strict regulation of all facets of the education process. Both punishment and religion play their part. An astonishing \$222 million—enough to fund the yearly salaries of about 3500 additional teachers—is being invested to expand the school chaplaincy scheme initiated by the conservative Howard Liberal government. More than 4,000 schools will now have a chaplain in order to provide 'pastoral care'. The plan to ban truant children from playing sport, regardless of poverty or other circumstances, will cost another \$2 million, equivalent to the cost of employing around 30 qualified teachers (enough to staff a whole school in a disadvantaged area). That money will apparently go to corporate sporting organisations such as the Murdoch-dominated National Rugby League, to fund such high-grade educational initiatives as 'sports ambassadors'.

Click here for full coverage of the SEP 2010 election campaign

*Authorised by N. Beams, 307 Macquarie St, Liverpool, NSW 2170*



To contact the WSWs and the  
Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](http://wsws.org/contact)**