Australia: What next in the struggle against NAPLAN?

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Over the next three days, students in years 3, 5 ,7 and 9 across Australia will sit the NAPLAN (National Assessment Program—Literacy and Numeracy) test in order to provide data for the Gillard Labor government's MySchool website. MySchool assesses a school's performance based on the test results and is being openly used by the media to publish de-facto league tables, or performance rankings, of schools throughout the country.

On the eve of last year's NAPLAN tests, momentum was building among teachers for a nation-wide boycott of the regime. Performance ranking has operated in the United States for a decade and even longer in Britain. It has been exposed by education experts as destructive to the all-rounded intellectual and social development of young people.

The extensive Cambridge Primary Review (2009) denounced the British system for narrowing curriculum, exacerbating already stark class inequalities in education provision and undermining the teaching profession. Schools, it stated, had been transformed into "factories" that taught to the tests, with staff preoccupied with avoiding the sanctions that flowed from poor results.

In the US, performance ranking has gone hand-in-hand with the closure of "under-performing" public schools and the growth of charter schools, which receive public funding but are privately operated and generally exempt from a host of regulations, including those governing teachers' wages, conditions and qualifications.

Thousands of charter schools that offer lower conditions for teachers and focus on "teaching to the test" have sprung up in the most disadvantaged areas of the US. As American states and local governments impose unprecedented budget cuts to education funding, test results are being used to select more schools to be closed and turned over to charter operators.

The Gillard Labor government has made clear its determination to proceed with its own system of performance ranking, in defiance of widespread concern. It has only been able to do so, however, due to the role of the teaching unions in silencing opposition. A boycott of NAPLAN was blocked last year by the Australian Education Union (AEU), the New South Wales Teachers Federation (NSWTF) and other state teacher organisations. The unions called off any action—without mass meetings or discussion among their membership—on the grounds that the Labor government had agreed to include union officials in a "working party" that would provide advice on the operations of MySchool and the use of its data.

This agreement was presented as a victory for teachers and a guarantee that MySchool would not evolve into open league tables. In reality, it simply incorporated the unions even more closely into the day-to-day imposition of the performance ranking regime. The unions have called no mass meetings since, despite media publication of school rankings.

Thousands of teachers have been left to reluctantly administer the tests, understanding that it is detrimental to their students but with no perspective of how to oppose NAPLAN in the face of the union's collaboration with the government.

The starting point for a genuine struggle against NAPLAN is the frank recognition that what is at stake is the very future of public education.

NAPLAN and MySchool are not misguided policies on the part of the Labor government, the state governments or the unions. Rather, they form part of a conscious agenda aimed at pushing through a cost-cutting restructuring to public education and the narrowing of curricula.

In every part of the world, education, along with other fundamental social rights, is being openly subordinated to the profit dictates of global financial and corporate interests and their demands for lower taxes and a flexible and compliant workforce.

Labor's "education revolution" is in fact a counter-revolution. It intends to focus significant resources on developing the highly educated and skilled labour required by specific sectors of the economy, while reducing education for the overwhelming majority of young people to the minimal skills of literacy and numeracy required for employment in the low-paid and casualised service sector. Traditional notions of equal opportunity for all—never realised under the capitalist system even during the brief period of educational social reform in the 1970s—have been completely repudiated.

Now into its third year of operation, the MySchool website and NAPLAN are transforming the Australian school system. Anecdotal evidence indicates that school resources are being increasingly devoted to preparing students for the test, at the

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expense of other areas of learning. Stress levels among students and dissatisfaction among staff are rising. Students are inevitably being assessed on the basis of narrow calculations as to whether they are likely to produce a good NAPLAN result.

There are early signs that the MySchool rankings have panicked some parents into withdrawing their children from schools with poor results. Competition for places in better performing public schools, such as selective schools in NSW, is intense. Enrolments in private Catholic and independent schools have begun to proportionally increase again, after several years of decline. The stratification of schools is dramatically worsening, with those in working class areas generally registering the worst NAPLAN results and their students and staff suffering the greatest pressure.

The next stage of the offensive, following the US model, will be to use MySchool data to directly target under-performing schools. In a warning of what is to come, a 2009 report prepared by the Boston Consulting Group for the former New South Wales Labor government, which only came to light during the recent state election, proposed using NAPLAN scores to target 100 schools for closure or amalgamation and sack 9,000 teachers and support staff.

Christian school operators have also submitted proposals to this year's school funding review for new schools to be "tendered" to non-government providers but fully financed publicly. The submissions argued that private operators would run schools more "efficiently", that is, cheaply—above all by lowering staff conditions as in the US charter school system. The review will be considered by Gillard's education minister Peter Garrett.

While NAPLAN already encourages competition between schools, Gillard is actively promoting policies that seek to divide teachers. This week's budget contains provisions to pay bonuses of between $5,400 and $8,100 to the "top performing" 10 percent of teachers from 2014. NAPLAN results will be among the criteria used to determine who receives the bonuses. As the autonomy of principals over teacher hiring is extended nationally, schools with low NAPLAN scores will struggle to attract experienced staff, while high performing schools will inevitably seek out the so-called top performing teachers.

It is common knowledge that principals and teachers are already waging a form of guerrilla war against NAPLAN. The parents of children who, for whatever reason, may not do well in the test, are being quietly encouraged to withdraw them from participation—a right that parents retain. Last August, even the board operating the MySchool website felt compelled to warn that the quality of its data made the system "unreliable" for gauging the performance of a school or its staff.

In the long term, however, a defence of education cannot be conducted on the basis of localised actions to lessen the impact of the testing regime on a particular school and its students. The institutionalisation of performance ranking is proceeding apace and is fundamentally altering the character of education, with the most pernicious impact on an entire generation of youth.

Last May, public meetings organised by the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) in Sydney and Melbourne adopted a three-point resolution that mapped out a perspective for a unified struggle by teachers, parents and students.

Firstly, it called for the complete rejection of the Labor government's "education revolution" and the collaboration of the teaching trade unions with NAPLAN and MySchool.

Secondly, it called on teachers and parents to organise public meetings in every school district to open up a full, democratic discussion on the Labor government's assault on public education and the economic and political agenda behind it. The resolution noted that "national school rankings are opposed by 95 percent of education professionals yet our voices are being silenced."

Finally, it advocated the formation of action committees of teachers and parents in every school and district to plan a political and industrial campaign, independent of the unions, to oppose Labor's agenda and its draconian anti-strike laws, which have been threatened against any industrial action. In defiance of these laws, the SEP resolution called for the organisation of a boycott of the NAPLAN tests.

A year on, the need for teachers and parents to strike out on an independent road and wage a political struggle against the Labor government and the unions looms even larger. Such a struggle requires the development of the SEP as the new political leadership of the working class and a socialist and internationalist program that has as one of its aims the provision of universal, high quality public education to all as a fundamental social right.

The SEP encourages teachers, parents and students to send letters to the *World Socialist Web Site* on your views and your experiences with NAPLAN testing and its consequences. The suppression of doubts, questions and outright opposition, for which the unions are primarily responsible, must be opposed. We urge all teachers to contact us and participate in a discussion on how to take forward the struggle to defend public education.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

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