Australian government imposes new "performance" regime on public schools

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Prime Minister Julia Gillard's address to the National Press Club yesterday marks a major extension in the Labor government's promotion of private schools against public schools and in tying school funding, including teacher salaries, to students' standardised test results. This reactionary, pro-business agenda has been advanced under the banner of a new "National Plan for School Improvement."

Gillard's speech was in response to a government-commissioned report into school funding, conducted by former Australian Stock Exchange chairman David Gonski. After coming to office in 2007, the Labor government retained unaltered the previous Howard government's Socioeconomic Status (SES) model that poured large amounts of public funding into private schools, including the wealthiest elite institutions.

This mechanism is now set to transition to a new model, as outlined in the Gonski report, under which schools will receive a flat rate of funding per student enrolled, with extra "loadings" for students who are Aboriginal, disabled, from poor backgrounds, or with limited English proficiency. Every private school will receive public funds, calculated as a set proportion of the public schools' rate. This model marks a step towards a voucher system. Gillard declared that she agreed with Gonski's recommendations, except in so far as his proposals would have resulted in an estimated one-third of private schools receiving slightly less public money. Instead, the prime minister insisted, every private school will get more funding.

Gillard made clear her repudiation of any commitment to public education. The new funding model, she declared, "strips away all the old debates about private versus public and puts children at the centre of the funding system."

Between 2014 and 2020, additional annual spending of $6.5 billion will supposedly be committed to public and private schools. Gillard boasted that this was as a major progressive reform. She declared that there were "diametrically opposed world views" between the Labor and Liberal parties on school funding, and the issue "will be one of the great contests of the 2013 election, and Australians will have a choice."

This is a cynical fraud—the additional school spending promised by Gillard will never eventuate. The government cannot outline where the money will come from, or how much state governments will be expected to contribute. Labor's budgetary forecasts have already been upended by the economic slowdown in China and the end of the mining investment boom. New spending cuts, including the elimination of entire social programs, are being prepared for the next budget, in order to deliver the surplus promised by the government to the international financial markets and credit ratings agencies. After the next election, the government, whether led by the Labor or Liberal parties, will junk the $6.5 billion spending pledge as part of a stepped up austerity agenda.

Gillard yesterday announced a "national crusade" to have Australian schools ranked in the top five in the world by the year 2025. The prime minister explained that this was necessary to maintain the international competitiveness of the Australian economy. "Business leaders tell me about skill shortages today and how the future will demand higher and higher skill levels," she stated. "Put bluntly, our businesses will be unable to compete if our children's education keeps falling behind. To win the economic race, we must first win the education race."

She concluded her speech by boasting: "Our plan will make our competitors in the region sit up and notice. Our kids catching Shanghai's kids."

The "education race" is to be tied to Gillard's new "performance" regime. The prime minister announced that

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school funding will now be conditional on schools signing up to new benchmarks. These include giving “more power for principals—like hiring staff and controlling the budget”, developing a “School Improvement Plan for every school which will outline the steps that each school will take to improve student results”, and imposing annual “performance reviews” on teachers. At the same time, the My School web site, which collates data from the NAPLAN standardised testing system, will be expanded to feature new information including each school’s teacher qualifications, the unemployment rate of their student graduates, and the results of parent and student surveys.

This new funding mechanism will further entrench standardised testing at the very centre of school life. The inevitable outcome will be a narrowing of the curriculum, with more “teaching to the test” and an overarching emphasis on rote learning for literacy and numeracy tests, at the expense of students’ participation in non-testable artistic, cultural, and sporting activities.

In public schools deemed to be “underperforming” in their NAPLAN results, especially those in working-class areas, teachers will be victimised and sacked. Entire schools will be closed down or amalgamated.

Gillard has made it clear that teachers’ salaries will be tied to their “performance” benchmarks. A journalist asked if her wish to see university teaching courses restricted to students with the best school results meant that teachers would need to be paid much higher salaries. Gillard replied that she believed in “rewarding excellence in teaching” and that the government already “rewards teachers for higher and higher skill levels as part of our work in disadvantaged schools.”

Labor’s planned extension of these programs is designed to divide the teaching workforce against itself, triggering infighting in every public school.

In an extraordinary section of her speech yesterday, Gillard blamed teachers for children from low income families having below average literacy skills. “By Year Three, 89 percent of children from the poorest quarter of Australian homes are reading below average,” she stated. “These are not children raised in extremes of violence, neglect or disadvantage. Just kids whose parents pack their lunch, take them to school on the way to work and expect they’re being taught to read and write while they’re at school. And they’re not.”

Poverty and social disadvantage is directly responsible for numerous developmental problems in young children, both psychological and physical, which are evident long before they ever set foot inside a classroom. Public school teachers working in working-class areas, and with other children from disadvantaged backgrounds, do their best with inadequate support and a chronic shortage of resources. Countless teachers contribute their own time and money to assist their students. Gillard’s slander was aimed at denying that the government has any responsibility to raise living standards and minimise social inequality—instead the problem can simply be sheeted home to “bad teachers.”

Public education in Australia can only be defended on the basis of a political struggle against the Labor government and its accomplices. This includes the Greens, who provide the critical parliamentary support for the minority government, and the Australian Education Union, which has functioned as Labor’s direct accomplice by diverting and suppressing widespread opposition among teachers towards the NAPLAN standardised testing regime.

Every child ought to have the basic social right to a freely accessible, adequately funded, and high quality public school that is geared towards developing their all rounded intellectual, artistic, cultural, and social capacities. The resources already exist to ensure this right. But as long as economic and social life is subordinated to the drive for private profit, education will be geared towards the privileged minority that prospers under capitalism. Genuine educational and social equality can be realised only through the working class taking up the struggle for a workers’ government, the abolition of the profit system and the socialist reorganisation of society.

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