

Australian government guts university funding, promotes private schools

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Prime Minister Julia Gillard announced on Sunday a new regressive model for funding private and public schools. Its central aim is to accelerate the shift of students into private schools, further undermining the public education system, and extend the use of standardised test outcomes to impose school closures and amalgamations, especially in working class areas.

The additional money that will supposedly be spent on the new funding regime, \$14.5 billion over six years, will come from sweeping austerity measures, beginning with the Labor government's announcement that it is slashing another \$2.8 billion from the universities, on top of \$1 billion cut late last year.

The government's announcement is a long delayed response to a report it commissioned by David Gonski, the Australian Stock Exchange chairman, which was issued in December 2011. Gonski concluded that additional government funding of \$5 billion a year, a 15 percent increase, was required to address chronic underfunding of the school system. He also proposed a funding model that would see every private school, including the wealthiest elite institutions, continue to receive public funds, though Gonski suggested that some of these schools could be given less than under the existing system.

Gillard's plans will see spending rise not by \$5 billion a year, but by just over \$2 billion, though it remains to be seen whether this eventuates. The Labor government has insisted that it will contribute only two-thirds of the money, and that state governments must fund the rest. The Western Australian Liberal government has already rejected the proposal, while the New South Wales and Queensland governments have warned that they would have to impose further spending cuts to come up with the necessary funds.

Gillard has flatly ruled out reducing government

funding to any private school—permanently entrenching the heavy funding skew toward the private sector that was enacted by the former Howard government and maintained by Labor after it took office in 2007.

The central feature of the Gonski report that is being implemented involves a transition toward a “free market” voucher system, where under the guise of parental “choice”, families are provided a flat amount of money to enrol their children in either a public or private school. Funding will be based on a flat rate per student—currently \$9,271 for primary school students and \$12,193 for secondary school students. Additional amounts, or “loadings”, will be allocated for students from low socio-economic backgrounds, those of Aboriginal descent, those with disabilities, and for other factors. Private schools will receive a fraction of the baseline payment per student, calculated on the basis of the socio-economic status of their pupils' families.

Gillard claims that this will establish a fairer system, in which worse-off children receive a higher quality education. In reality, the government is bolstering a system that education experts have said is creating one of the world's most unequal outcomes. As the Gonski report concluded: “Australia's schooling system is characterised by a strong concentration of disadvantaged students in certain schools, and conversely, a strong concentration of advantaged students in other schools.”

At the same time, Gillard is extending the regressive, pro-business standardised testing regime that has been the hallmark of Labor's “education revolution”.

The additional school funding is conditional on the states signing up to a new “National Education Reform Agreement” that includes 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. The NAPLAN-MySchool standardised testing system will be further expanded (see “Australian government imposes new performance regime on public schools”).

Taken together, these measures will see a further narrowing of the curriculum, with more “teaching to the test” and an overarching emphasis on rote learning for literacy and numeracy. Supposedly “underperforming” public schools, especially those in working class areas, will be shut or amalgamated, with targeted teachers victimised and sacked. This is all consistent with the right-wing US education “reforms” begun under President George W. Bush and advanced by Barack Obama, from which Gillard has drawn direct inspiration.

Gillard’s blueprint exposes the Australian Education Union (AEU), which has been the critical accomplice of the Labor government. As it worked to impose regressive new industrial agreements on teachers in different states, and assisted the implementation of the NAPLAN tests, the AEU mounted a public relations campaign on Gillard’s behalf over the past 18 months, promoting the slogan “I give a Gonski.” The union sought to promote illusions in the additional funding proposed by the Gonski report, while blocking teachers and the wider public from understanding the reactionary character of the proposed funding model.

The education union bureaucracies, including the National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU), are similarly complicit in the government’s cuts to university funding, the largest imposed since the former Howard Liberal government’s first budget in 1996.

The NTEU has previously sought to divert and dissipate opposition among university staff and students toward Gillard’s market-based “education revolution” and substantial cuts to research funding, imposed last year, by blaming individual vice chancellors for the resulting job losses and course closures. Now, to help pay for the new school funding regime, the government has imposed across the board “efficiency dividends”, with every university required to cut spending by 2 percent next year, and 1.25 percent the year after.

Universities will be compelled to sack staff, eliminate courses, further hike student numbers in lectures and tutorials, and find other cost-cutting measures. The government has also eliminated Start Up Scholarships for students from working class and disadvantaged backgrounds, converting them into repayable loans. This will increase the debt burden on university graduates, while deterring working class youth from enrolling in tertiary studies. Another government cutback involves a cap of \$2,000 on tax deductible education expenses, further shifting the cost of education onto the backs of individual students.

The Gillard government’s combined assault on public school and university education underscores its right-wing, pro-business character.



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