

Australian government moves to gut public education funding

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Education Minister Christopher Pyne yesterday announced that the Liberal-National Coalition government is junking existing four-year school funding arrangements, breaking repeated pre-election promises not to do so. The government will next year unveil a new funding model that will retain all the former Labor government's standardised testing and "pay for performance" mechanisms, while being even more heavily skewed in favour of wealthy private schools and against the public education system.

During the campaign for the September 7 election, then opposition leader Tony Abbott declared a "unity ticket" with the Labor government on school funding. "We will honour the agreements that Labor has entered into," he declared in August. "We will make sure that no school is worse off."

This has now been jettisoned as the Coalition government prepares to implement the demands of finance capital and big business for sweeping austerity measures. Pyne seized on an alleged \$1.2 billion funding shortfall inherited from the Labor government as the pretext for scrapping the funding model, called the Better Schools or "Gonski" plan. "The cupboard is very bare," the education minister said, insisting that "the treasurer and the finance minister are very short of funds [and] it's not possible to simply find that money."

This was another barefaced lie from the government. There are vast resources, controlled by the ultra-wealthy at the top of society, available to fund a high quality, freely accessible public education for the entire population. The government, however, aims to accelerate the shift of students from the public system into private schools by funnelling even more public funds to elite schools, accessible only to children whose parents can afford the enormous annual fees, up to

\$30,000 a year. Public schools, especially those in working class areas, will be deprived of essential funding and be under constant threat of amalgamation or closure.

Pyne yesterday declared that he would devise a new funding model for 2015, explaining that "a good starting point" is the former Liberal-National Howard government's Socio-Economic Status (SES) scheme, under which the wealthiest schools were each allocated millions of dollars in federal funding every year. This funding model, which the Rudd and Gillard governments maintained until just before Labor lost office in September, helped create one of the world's most segregated school systems, with children from working class and rich families concentrated in different institutions.

The Abbott government is only able to proceed with its assault on public education because of the former Labor government's record. There is bipartisan agreement on the goal of education "reform," with Labor and Liberal both promoting a privatised, "user pays" system within which schools and teachers are assessed on the outcomes of standardised literacy and numeracy tests, and students subjected to the narrowest curricula in line with corporate demands for a more productive workforce.

Julia Gillard, first as education minister and then prime minister under the 2007-2013 Labor government, went far further than the previous Howard government in advancing this agenda. In partnership with the education trade unions, Gillard introduced the NAPLAN (National Assessment Program—Literacy and Numeracy) testing regime and MySchool web site, which publishes schools' test results.

The Labor government's "Gonski" funding model was developed to advance further standardised testing

and tie teachers' salaries to the results. Funding promised to the state governments, which run public schools, depended on them signing up to a "National Plan for School Improvement" that included imposing new annual performance reviews on teachers and making school principals develop annual plans on how they intended to boost students' test scores.

"Business leaders tell me about skill shortages today and how the future will demand higher and higher skill levels," Gillard declared in September 2012 when she announced the "Gonski" model. "Put bluntly, our businesses will be unable to compete if our children's education keeps falling behind."

The Labor Party, the Greens, and the trade unions promoted the "Gonski" scheme as a major progressive reform. In reality, every aspect was designed to undermine the public education system. Initial additional funding—which was grossly inadequate given the systematic starving of public schools of resources by successive Labor and Liberal governments—was to partly come from multi-billion dollar cuts to the university sector. Moreover, the Gonski model was based on funding schools based on a flat rate per student, with additional "loadings" calculated on the basis of socio-economic or other disadvantage. This marked a step toward a "free market" voucher system, where under the guise of parental "choice," families are provided a set amount of money to enrol their children in either a public or private school.

The Abbott government now plans to retain all the regressive features of the Gonski model, with even less funding.

This has triggered ructions with the states, including those with Liberal governments, which signed funding agreements with the former Labor government. These states now confront budgetary shortfalls, which will likely trigger further spending cuts at the state level. New South Wales Liberal Premier Barry O'Farrell declared that Pyne needed to learn to "have respectful discussions and consultations in private, not through the media."

The Abbott government has dismissed the criticisms, with education minister Pyne insisting that "what one government does, another government can undo." On ABC television last night Pyne declared that no "social equity" issue existed in Australian schools, an unmistakable indication of the government's intention

to favour elite private schools.

More broadly, the government is using the schools' funding decision to send a clear signal to the ruling class at home, and the credit rating agencies and investors abroad—that notwithstanding Abbott's declarations of a "no surprises" government, it is prepared to take whatever measures required to advance the ruthless austerity measures demanded by big business.



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