

Rising school costs deepen class divide in New Zealand education

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As New Zealand students returned to school this month, they encountered a public education system riven by sharply escalating costs and deepening social inequality.

According to the Education Act, New Zealanders aged 5 to 19 are entitled to “free enrolment and free education at any state school.” The *Herald on Sunday* reported on January 20, however, that Ministry of Education figures show families are being pressured to give “more and more money” to schools every year.

Faced with funding shortfalls, most schools impose costs on parents, usually in the guise of recovering expenses for “extras” such as educational trips, sports uniforms and even computers. Some have resorted to using debt collectors to enforce payments.

Overall donations and fundraising went up \$NZ1.2 million from 2013 to 2014, the last year for which figures are available, reaching \$161.6 million—\$8.4 million more than in 2010. Funding from these sources has totalled nearly \$1 billion since the year 2000.

The wealthiest state schools took in the most money. The elite Epsom Girls Grammar and Auckland Grammar were the top two, banking \$2.5 million and \$2.2 million respectively in 2014. The “recommended” parental donation at Epsom Girls in 2014 was \$765. The top public schools also attract large numbers of fee-paying international students, sometimes bringing in millions of dollars.

Lindisfarne College, a boarding school in Hawke’s Bay, took more than \$4,000 per student in donations. By contrast, Porirua’s Mana College raised just \$4,264 in total. Wainuiomata College, a working-class school near Wellington, raised about \$18 per student.

An entrenched system of educational inequality exists, a product of, and further exacerbating, deepening economic inequality. Internationally, a stark reversal has taken place in public education over the past 30 years, a product of pro-market “reforms” and the rolling back of social gains

won in struggle by working people during the twentieth century.

The *Education Review* noted last year that New Zealand spent \$US8,170 per student in 2010, significantly less than Australia (\$10,350), the United States (\$12,464), Ireland (\$11,380) and Britain (\$10,452).

The *Herald* reported on November 4 that wealthier schools are more likely to have “quality buildings, a wide range of extra-curricular activities, a wealth of IT and experienced, stable, staffing.” Working-class schools are compelled to spend their limited funds on items such as breakfast programs, social workers, truancy officers and community liaison personnel.

This unequal situation has its roots in the “Tomorrow’s Schools” program introduced in 1989 by the Lange-Douglas Labour government, then enforced by successive governments. Labour devolved the public education system to individual schools, forcing them to compete with each other along business lines and making each elected board responsible for the school’s administration, financial operations, staffing and educational “outcomes.”

Over the next decade, according to the NZ Council of Educational Research, the longer schools were subject to “self-management,” the “more they found their government funding inadequate.” Most schools scraped to employ more staff than they were funded for. Larger and poorer schools had the least adequate staffing.

Poverty, which has almost doubled since the 1980s and now affects one in four children, is a major obstacle to educational achievement. Statistics from 2014 showed just 17 percent of students from working-class schools gained University Entrance, compared to 60 percent from the wealthiest schools.

A report published last week by the OECD, “Low-Performing Students—Why They Fall Behind and How to Help them Succeed,” concluded that socio-economic status was “probably the most important risk factor

associated with low academic performance.” Based on tests of 15-year-olds conducted by the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA), the report found that the poorest 25 percent of students in New Zealand were over six times more likely to do badly in maths than the richest 25 percent. The only OECD nations with higher levels of disparity were Israel, Poland and Ireland.

A complex network of factors affects the educational outcomes of working-class students, many of whom have already fallen behind when they start school. These include a lack of early childhood education, parents working multiple low-paid jobs, limited access to books and computer equipment, a lack of parental expertise and assistance, frequent changes of school, inadequate space for home study, chronic ill health, poor food and clothing and high levels of stress and trauma within family life.

The conservative National Party government flatly denies that social inequality plays a significant role in educational outcomes. Last November, Education Minister Hekia Parata penned an op-ed article for the *Herald*, headed “Socio-economic factors are often overstated.” She falsely claimed that the “biggest difference” lies in “the quality of teaching in the classroom” and variables such as “quality of school leadership, parental engagement and community expectations.”

A wide-ranging review of the school funding system, currently underway, will lead to further attacks on public education. Students’ results, according to Parata, will be made central to determining each school’s funding. Schools and teachers can expect even more intrusive appraisal and compliance systems, with funding penalties for “non-performance.”

The government plans to open more charter schools, of which there are currently nine, mainly in working-class areas in Auckland and Northland. As in the US and Britain, these publicly-funded, privately-run schools are being used to undermine public education and establish a bridgehead for widespread privatisation. They can select which students they admit, are not required to use the national curriculum or have qualified and registered teachers.

Far from opposing the funding system review, the education unions are seeking their place at the “table” to collaborate with its implementation. Post Primary Teachers Association president Angela Roberts said her “biggest concern” was “how much the minister planned to consult the sector on the review.”

The unions have played a critical role in enforcing the

agenda that began with “Tomorrow’s Schools.” Amid deepening attacks on public education, their role has been to suppress the opposition of teachers. There have been no major strikes since 2002, when wildcat action over a pay dispute with the Labour-Alliance government drew thousands of students onto the streets in support of striking high school teachers. The unions finally shut down the dispute with a \$150 million settlement package, thereby rescuing the beleaguered Labour-led government weeks before a general election.

In February 2013, primary teachers reacted with outrage when the union covering them, the NZ Educational Institute, scuttled a strike against impending school closures in the earthquake-ravaged city of Christchurch. The closures have proceeded in “consultation” with the union.

The opposition parties seek to exploit the mounting concern and opposition among teachers, parents and students with band-aid proposals. These will do nothing to end the deepening educational divide, which is the product of a social order that subordinates every aspect of life including schooling to the profit requirements of big business.

The Labour Party, which agrees with the government’s austerity agenda and has been instrumental in the assault on public education, promises to give a paltry \$100 per student per year to schools that choose not to run their own fundraising schemes. Labour’s allies—the Greens and the Mana Party—have called for similarly inadequate measures, such as free school meals, state sponsored homework centres and holiday programs.



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