

Australian primary teachers resign in protest at standardised, assessment-based education

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The resignation statements of two longstanding and gifted teachers who, until recently, worked in the Australian public school system, have graphically highlighted the immense damage being done to public education under the new data-driven, standardised, assessment-based regime. Kathy Margolis and Gabbie Stroud decided to go public, posting their statements on Facebook, in the hope that their actions might encourage other teachers to speak out about the escalating education crisis, and ignite a public discussion.

Margolis taught in primary schools in the state of Queensland for 30 years, while Gabbie Stroud, a primary teacher on the South Coast of New South Wales, had taught for more than 15 years, in both Australia and the UK, before resigning last October. Disillusioned and opposed to the increasingly corporate-driven education agenda, both women wrote that they feared for their own mental health and that of their students, under conditions where they were being forced to implement methods in direct conflict with their educational philosophies.

Their Facebook postings have gone viral because they express the growing sentiments of many thousands of teachers in Australia and internationally, particularly in the United States and Britain, where governments have imposed savage free market policies, leading to the restructure, privatisation and gutting of public education.

Initiated by the Rudd Labor government in 2007, Labor's business-inspired "education revolution" was expanded into the current "standardised" system under the reign of Julia Gillard, Labor prime minister from 2010 to 2013. Since then, the school curriculum has been narrowed to focus almost exclusively on literacy and numeracy at the expense of the arts—especially music and drama—and of creative play that allows young children to explore the world and develop their natural curiosity and critical faculties.

Margolis wrote: "In my teaching career I have never seen so many children suffering from stress and anxiety. It saddens me greatly. Teaching at the moment is data driven. We are testing them and assessing them and pushing them so hard. I get that teachers need to be accountable and of course we need assessment but teachers have an innate ability to know what kids need..."

"I write this in the hope that we can spark a public discussion.

We need the support of parents, who I know agree with us. I write this because I love children and I can't bear to see what we are doing to them. Last year, as I apologised once again to my class for pushing them so hard and for the constant barrage of assessment, one child asked me "if you don't like the things you have to do then why are you still a teacher?" That question got me to thinking long and hard. I had no answer except that I truly loved kids and it was with a heavy heart that I realised that wasn't enough anymore."

Likewise, Gabbie Stroud wrote: "I have become morally and ethically conflicted as I am drawn away from my students and their needs and drawn toward checklists and continuums."

In a recent essay in the *Griffiths Review*, "Teaching Australia: fight or flight?" Stroud described her students, their varied backgrounds and socio-economic circumstances, their interests, personalities, behaviors, disabilities and nationalities.

Her description pointed to a typical group of young children, with which every primary teacher is familiar, while the picture she painted of the particular classroom environment that she had created, demonstrated her expertise, and her dedication and sensitivity to the development of her students.

She wrote, "I know how to bring them together. I am able to create a feeling of family and safety and security. In my classroom they know that they can take risks and try new things and experience failure and be supported by me and each other. We feast on stories together, devouring *Where the Wild Things Are* and savoring *There's a Hippopotamus on Our Roof Eating Cake*. They come to love the taste of reading, the flavor it adds to their life... I show them how they can make meaning out of the words. Their eyes sparkle when they know they can read, when they realise they can nourish themselves, there is something about the gift of reading that creates trust.

"These little ones believe me when I tell them they are writers. We put a sign on our door: SSSHH! Writers at Work.

"Our room comes alive with a hushed concentration. I join them in the writing process, my texta scratching onto butcher's paper, modelling my love of writing. I field the occasional question: How do you spell unicorn? Does motorbike have a 'a' in it? Can we put 'crocodile' on the word wall?

"We explore the world of mathematics. Every day we count to one hundred, by ones, by fives, by tens. We look at the

hundreds chart and become pattern detectives, noticing, questioning, creating. We solve problems, putting the big number in our head with a theatrical tap and counting on with our fingers.

“Watching children learn is a beautiful and extraordinary experience. Their bodies transform, reflecting inner changes. Teeth fall out. Knees scab. Freckles multiply. Throughout the year they grow in endless ways and I can almost see their self-esteem rising, their confidence soaring, their small bodies now empowered. Given wings.

“They fall in love with learning. It is a kind of magic, a kind of loving, a kind of art. It is teaching. Just teaching. Just what I do. What I *did*. Past tense.”

In an interview with the *Daily Telegraph* at the end of January, Stroud explained: “The truth is that a ‘standard’ education based on teaching standards, assessment standards and a standard curriculum does not guarantee student engagement, success or good teaching ...

“Thoughtful and informed change is needed and until then those children arriving in the school gates have every right to feel very nervous.”

The same is true for teachers. The ever-increasing demands for standardised testing, continuous improvement of student results and of teacher performance, have pushed teacher workloads and stress to breaking point.

As Margolis explained on Facebook: “Teachers have very little personal autonomy, we are told what to do, how to do it and when it has to be done by. No teacher works from 9 till 3. We go on camps, we man stalls at fetes, we take parent/teacher interviews, we coach sporting teams we supervise discos. And of course there is the lesson preparation, the marking, the report cards.

“Classrooms are overcrowded, filled with students with so many needs both educational and social. Teachers are told we must differentiate and cater to each individual. Good teachers try desperately to do that but it is near impossible.... Our young teaching graduates enter the profession bright eyed and bushy tailed, energetic and enthusiastic, ready to make a difference. So why I ask are they only staying for an average of 5 years? Of course that question is rhetorical...”

Recent research from the Australian National University has shown that between 30 and 50 percent of graduates leave the teaching profession in the first five years. In the 2014 school year, 21,404 left, a figure that has tripled during the last six years.

Permanent, secure employment is becoming a thing of the past. In Victoria, two thirds of graduates are now on short-term contracts, with no security of employment.

In an Australian Education Union (AEU) survey conducted last year, over 42 percent of teachers said they worked more than 50 hours a week and 23 percent said they worked 55 hours. Seventy percent of female teachers and 55 percent of males said that the workload was the major issue that would

make them leave, while 73 percent said that the workload had increased in the last year. Some principals said that they worked up to 70 hours per week.

In a recent interview with ABC Radio National, Stroud summed up her concerns: “Education today is run on a business model. Schools aren’t businesses. They aren’t places producing money-making little workers. I don’t want to work in a business. I want to work in school.

“I realised I wasn’t serving the needs of my students, I was serving the needs of politicians and bureaucrats.”

Why did Margolis and Stroud decide to resign before speaking out? One reason is likely to have been the gag orders, included in the various teacher disciplinary procedures, such as the Teacher Improvement Program in NSW, which have been introduced over the past couple of years around the country.

Under these Orwellian procedures, teachers whose performance is deemed inadequate, or not in conformity with the aims of the standardisation and assessment regimes, can be dismissed within as short a period as 10-weeks. Throughout that period, while being subjected to intimidating and humiliating daily class “inspections” by their superiors, teachers are required to honour a strict confidentiality clause, meaning that they remain isolated until being marched out the door.

The teacher unions, federally and in all states, have been the Education Department’s partners in and enforcers of every aspect of the Rudd/Gillard “education revolution” agenda, along with the teacher disciplinary processes that has accompanied it. They have supported the corporate-backed “school reform,” to the hilt and are concerned only with having a “seat at the table” and a share of the spoils.

While a large majority of teachers will identify and empathise with Margolis and Stroud, they are not in a position to resign. But they, also, cannot continue to remain silent. This means that, to defend their rights, and those of their students, to a high-quality, informed and enlightened public education, they will have to enter onto the road of political struggle against the unions and the entire political establishment.



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