

Australia: New South Wales government “bumps up” standardised testing in schools

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The New South Wales (NSW) Liberal government has recently announced new policies aimed at ramping up the toxic effects of the National Assessment Program—Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) standardised testing on the public education system in Australia’s most populous state.

The first of these policies, launched as Premier Mike Baird’s “Priority in Education,” and called *Bump It Up*, aims at an 8 percent increase in the number of students in the top two bands of NAPLAN reading and numeracy skills by 2019.

Another, *Stronger HSC Standards*, requires Year 9 students (14-year-olds) to achieve a high level NAPLAN Band 8 in order to qualify to sit the Higher School Certificate (HSC) examination in Year 12, a requirement for university entry. From 2020, students who have not reached Band 8 will be disqualified from sitting for the HSC, which will drastically limit their future educational options.

NAPLAN was introduced in Australia in 2009 by the Rudd Labor government, as part of a conscious agenda to push through a cost-cutting restructuring of public education. Borrowed from the US and the UK, standardised testing has been the mechanism in those countries for handing over “low-performing” public schools to private management. The damage this has wreaked upon public education is particularly visible in the UK where, in April this year, the conservative government’s White Paper on education demanded that all public schools be converted into academies, that is, into state-funded but privately-run schools, by 2022.

The *Bump It Up* plan will initially be imposed on 137 primary and secondary schools in NSW at the commencement of the 2017 school year, but will undoubtedly be introduced more widely. It is targeted at students whose performance lies somewhere in the mid-range NAPLAN bands. The education department’s Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation (CESE) will “statistically calibrate” “reasonable expectations” for each school’s required improvement. While expecting higher test results, the government will provide no additional funding

for resources or for teachers’ professional development.

Students from Grade 3 (8-year-olds in primary school) until Grade 9 (14-year-olds in high school) will sit an initial “standardised assessment” in Term 1 of the school year, then a second one in Term 3. In addition, those students in the NAPLAN testing years 3, 5, 7 and 9 will also undergo a NAPLAN assessment in Term 2. Where students’ test results have not improved, teachers will be obligated to “adjust their lesson plans.”

Every five weeks of the school year, until 2019, principals in the 137 *Bump It Up* schools will monitor and report to their directors on “the progress and initiatives and impact of student achievement.” In other words, schools will become virtual testing factories, with every lesson over several years being directed to improving students’ test results. Teachers will be forced to teach to the test, meaning that preparing for these tests will constitute the students’ entire learning experience. Other subjects, such as music and art, will be cut back.

All in all, it is already clear that the *Bump It Up* measure will do immense damage, escalating stress and anxiety levels among teachers, students and parents in the targeted schools.

The second reform, *Stronger HSC Standards* has predictably been hailed by the NSW Business Chamber as a “victory for young people and their employability.” This measure will introduce changes, including to the curriculum, for the HSC qualification. It requires students in Year 9 to achieve a Band 8 standard in the literacy and numeracy NAPLAN tests, in order to be eligible to take HSC courses. NAPLAN assessments range from Bands 1–10.

Many students are expected to fail. The Board of Studies Teaching and Educational Standards (BOSTES) has already predicted that up to 50 percent of students are unlikely to reach the required Band. It declared, “Based on an analysis of NAPLAN results, BOSTES forecasts that at least 50 percent of HSC students will pre-qualify for the minimum standard in Year 9, by achieving a Band 8 in their NAPLAN reading, writing and numeracy tests.”

Unquestionably, students in schools in the most socio-

economically disadvantaged areas of the state will be less likely to pre-qualify and will therefore be ineligible to study at university. Decades of funding cuts to public education have already resulted in a staggering three-year gap in the average level of achievement between students in rich and poor schools.

The stark inequities in Australia's education system have been documented in a number of studies. According to the Grattan Institute—a corporate think tank—even if disadvantaged students do well in their Year 3 NAPLAN test, the learning gaps grow larger every year. A 2016 OECD report found that the percentage of low performing students had increased significantly from a decade earlier. It concluded that low achievement was strongly associated with low-socioeconomic status and that a disadvantaged student was six times more likely to be a low performer than his or her advantaged counterpart.

Increasingly, evidence is emerging that the testing regime itself is exacerbating the achievement gap between rich and poor schools. An article published in *Educational Leadership* this month concluded that “data-driven instruction can distort the way reading is taught, harming students who need high-quality instruction the most.” It argues that struggling students need meaningful, content-rich education such as “developing background knowledge, applying it to a text and predicting what comes next.” Students at the lowest level “are being relentlessly measured and consigned to learning the lowest level of decontextualized skills.” Moreover, unsurprisingly, the report found that students stamped as failures, disengaged from the learning process, were identifying themselves as “losers.”

While Gillard claimed that NAPLAN would assist students who were struggling with literacy and numeracy skills by measuring their performance, these students are now being abandoned. *Bump It Up* targets those in the middle Bands, while *Stronger HSC Standards* excludes those in the lower Bands from any hope of qualifying for tertiary education.

The Baird government, in other words, is deliberately marginalising the state's most disadvantaged youth. Its measures will rapidly escalate the tendency towards a two-tier education system in NSW, where parents will feel increasingly pressured to enrol their children in high-performing NAPLAN schools. School education will become even more socially stratified. OECD data already demonstrate that the proportion of Australian students attending socially-mixed schools is even lower than that of students in the UK and essentially the same as students in the US.

For working-class students, attending a university will become even rarer, while skyrocketing vocational training

course fees will preclude them from trade and technical courses. At the same time, the number of available apprenticeships continues to decline.

The ever-increasing demands for “continuous improvement” in schools only deepens the educational divide. The Productivity Commission reported that from 2009–10 to 2013–14, spending per public school fell by 2.8 percent while spending per private school rose by 9.9 percent.

The key role in the implementation of this deeply unpopular and reactionary Labor/Liberal agenda has been played by the teacher unions, who have worked very, very hard, since the introduction of NAPLAN, to silence and sabotage teacher opposition.

In 2010, the Australian Education Union (AEU) and its NSW affiliate, the NSW Teachers Federation (NSWTF), announced a boycott of NAPLAN testing, due to the hostility expressed towards it by teachers and students. But the boycott was a sham from start to finish, and was chiefly designed to exert pressure on the Gillard Labor government to provide the unions with a place at the negotiating table. As soon as the unions reached their own deal with the government, they called the teacher boycott off.

Moreover, the NSWTF has worked closely with BOSTES to develop *Bump It Up*. BOSTES has gone out of its way to emphasise its “extensive consultation” “over the past three years” with key stakeholders, “including the Teachers Federation.” And the reward? The NSWTF now has a “core” seat on the six-member NSW Education Standards Authority, which will replace BOSTES in 2017.

The conception of education as the great equaliser has long been abandoned, not only by business, but by the entire political establishment and the teachers' unions alike. The first step in mounting a defence of free, high-quality public education for all is to make a definitive political break with the unions and to build independent rank and file committees in every school, led by teachers themselves, which will seek to mobilise teachers, parents and students across the state and around the country, along with other sections of the working class, in a unified political struggle, based on a socialist perspective, against job cuts, low wages, and deteriorating conditions and social services.



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