

Australia: NSW government re-introduces public school inspectors to enforce unpopular measures

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With the full support of the NSW Teachers Federation (NSWTF), the Baird Liberal state government has re-introduced inspectors into its public schools for the first time since the 1970s. Their role will be to entrench, expand and police regressive measures that are already deeply unpopular with teachers and students alike.

The Education and Teaching Legislation Amendment Bill 2016, passed in October, revamps the Board of Studies and Educational Standards (BOSTES), giving it the power to deregister and close public schools and to dismiss “underperforming” teachers. Previously, the Board’s remit was confined to setting school curricula, and overseeing teacher and private school accreditation.

In August, NSW education minister Adrian Piccoli announced that the board would be renamed the NSW Education Standards Authority (NSWESA). This came in response to a review into the function of BOSTES, conducted by West Australian education academic Professor Bill Louden. Piccoli immediately accepted all the review’s recommendations, which will come into operation in 2017. Both Labor and the Greens supported the bill.

Previously, the BOSTES board had the power to conduct inspections within private and Catholic schools. While the new bill covers these as well, Piccoli made clear, in a speech to the NSW parliament, that it is primarily aimed at introducing inspections into the public system.

Inspectors will be required to “look at the quality of student learning,” and “examine the standard of teaching.” Spot checks, the minister emphasised, would “send a strong signal to schools.” If they failed to meet the necessary criteria they could be deregistered and

closed. As for teachers, they will be targeted with “spot checks” on the “quality assurance arrangements for teacher accreditation,” and could lose their accreditation.

Inspections and audits can be triggered by factors such as a rapid turnover of senior staff, concerns about finances, poor academic results and parent complaints, with the power to close under-achieving schools and sack teachers.

Piccoli’s claim that the aim of the revamped board was “not punitive,” was belied by his declaration that, “The board ought to make schools nervous around school registration requirements, and it ought to make teachers nervous around teaching standards.”

School inspectors were ousted from public schools in the 1970s, after a decade of bitter struggles. In 1968, NSW teachers held a one-day strike against inspections, 80 percent of teachers stopped work and 12,400 attended a mass meeting to discuss their grievances. That opened a period marked by numerous strikes and walkouts throughout the first half of the 1970s on a range of issues, including wage increases, class sizes, and inspectors.

The actions in NSW coincided with a series of militant struggles carried out by Victorian teachers, dating from the mid-1960s. Teachers would walk out of their classes when inspectors arrived, resulting in strikes by their colleagues to defend their actions. The result was that by the mid-1970s, inspectors had been removed from the public school systems in Australia’s two most populous states.

In 2009, acting on behalf of the political and education establishment, the teacher unions called for the re-introduction of inspectors. In its coverage of this

treacherous action the Murdoch press reported—under the headline “Bring back school inspectors, says national teachers union”—that the union had called for a “charter” with 10 principles of “school accountability. “Schools have much to learn from external review,” Angelo Gavrielatos, then president of the Federal Australian Education Union (AEU), declared.

The AEU’s call coincided with the federal Labor government’s introduction of the NAPLAN, the nationwide standardised testing regime, used to rank and compare schools on the *My School* website, the brainchild of then Labor education minister, Julia Gillard. Widely opposed by teachers, parents, and students around the country, the NAPLAN is designed to set up competition between public schools, leading to the eventual closure of those identified as struggling, and to parents feeling obligated to send their kids to private schools.

When it commenced in 2010, the NSWTF agreed with the introduction of the NAPLAN. But hostility to the regressive measure had built to such an extent that momentum for a teacher national boycott of the testing regime was building. At the last minute, the teacher unions called it off, on the basis that an “inquiry” had been called and the unions had been invited to participate. Unsurprisingly, the NAPLAN remained, and the unions became even more closely integrated into its performance-ranking regime.

In the 2013 enterprise bargaining (teacher contract) agreement (EBA), the NSW and Victorian teacher unions (NSWTF and Victorian AEU) insisted on introducing a fast track mechanism for ousting teaching staff. For its part, the NSWTF publicly demanded new processes that would slash the time it took to remove “inefficient” teachers. This led directly to the introduction of the Orwellian “Teacher Improvement Plan” (TIP).

The 2013 EBA introduced the Performance and Development Plan (PDP), under which teachers are required to “align with the policies, aims and strategic direction of the Department and school plan.” While this was presented as a means for teachers to creatively develop and articulate their own teaching “goals,” in reality, it means they have to restrict themselves to implementing the NAPLAN. After all, this is the mechanism that provides the only data-based “proof” that a teacher has “value-added” to the education of his

or her pupils!

If any unauthorised deviation occurs, the TIP can be invoked and the recalcitrant teacher sacked, never to be reemployed and with no avenue for appeal. Clearly, the new inspectors will be used to streamline the PDP in the state’s public schools.

The NSWTF has fully integrated itself into this monstrous process, operating as nothing less than an arm of government. One of its most sinister responsibilities is to ensure the silence of the TIP’s victims. So pervasive is the secrecy surrounding the TIP, that the number of teachers who have been dismissed under its remit remains a state secret.



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