

Australian school principal removed for allegedly resisting “anti-radicalisation” program

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The principal and deputy principal of a high school in Sydney were dismissed from their posts last week, accused of not implementing a government program that instructs teachers to detect and report “anti-social and extremist behaviour” among students. The principal, Chris Griffiths, and deputy principal, Joumana Dennaoui, were replaced without notice.

Mark Scott, the head of the New South Wales (NSW) state education department, confirmed this week that the two were removed because Punchbowl Boys High School, in Sydney’s working-class southwest, resisted participating in the “School Community Working Together” program.

This program was unveiled at the start of 2016. It is part of a national “anti-radicalisation” plan launched simultaneously by Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull’s federal government, especially targeting schools in working class and immigrant areas. The aim, emphasised by federal Justice Minister Michael Keenan, who is also the Minister Assisting the Prime Minister for Counter-Terrorism, is to make schools “the frontline of defence against radicalisation and threats to social cohesion.”

Speaking to right-wing broadcaster Ray Hadley on 2GB Radio on Monday, Scott said the school, which has a significant population of Muslim students, had been “reluctant” to participate in the program, which “works with the police and other community leaders.”

A determination was then made “at a senior level” to send in a “very senior team” to conduct an “appraisal” of the school, which allegedly found “matters that were a concern,” including “a significant lack of staff unity.”

Scott’s comments reveal the real reasons for the pair’s removal, which was conducted behind a media

witch-hunt against Griffiths and students, laced with unsubstantiated claims by unidentified police officers of “verbal attacks” on staff by students and “threats of beheadings.” Griffiths was denounced for reportedly advising students of their democratic right not to be interrogated by police, and even accused of trying to turn the school—a government public school—into a Muslim-only college.

Teachers at the school generally supported Griffiths on not participating in the government program, but the department exploited some grievances among teachers, including complaints that female teachers were sidelined in last year’s school graduation ceremony.

Parents and students have opposed the removals. The local *Canterbury-Bankstown Express* reported that parents objected at a “tense” and “hostile” Parents & Citizens meeting at the school on Tuesday, where education department officials and new principal Robert Patruno spoke. Students could be seen and heard chanting “we want Griffiths back” while the meeting was underway.

After the meeting, parents told the newspaper they were angry that the department was not more transparent with its reasons for removing the pair. Iman Awad, whose son attends the school, said the decision was “unfair.” She described Griffiths as a “good person” who “used to go to the train station to walk all the kids to school each morning.”

The removals have all the hallmarks of a high-level political intervention. Scott himself is a major figure in ruling circles. He was appointed head of the education department by the state Liberal-National government last year, immediately after 10 years as managing director of the federal government-funded Australian

Broadcasting Corporation.

NSW Education Minister Rob Stokes told the *Australian* he had regular briefings from the department on the situation. He said it was “unusual” to remove both a principal and deputy principal, but “decisive action has been taken by the department.”

Federal Education Minister Simon Birmingham backed the decision and pointed to the wider precedent being set. He said the Turnbull government “expects schools to uphold and promote Australian values and is monitoring the response of states to these issues, including their application of appropriate de-radicalisation programs.”

Birmingham’s reference to “Australian values” indicates the broader thrust of the “anti-extremist” schemes. They initially target vulnerable Muslim students but are directed against any dissent or unrest among students, particularly under conditions of worsening youth unemployment in working-class areas and escalating Australian military involvement in Washington’s predatory operations in the Middle East and other US war preparations.

In February last year, when Birmingham and Keenan jointly announced the national “anti-radicalisation” plan, he said school staff would receive “awareness training” and be encouraged to report “concerning student behaviour” to authorities. The *Australian* hailed the program under the headline: “Teachers to be trained to spot teens on path to terror.”

In other words, teachers are being required to become informants on their students. The “School Community Working Together” fact sheet circulated to teachers in NSW government, Catholic and private schools notes that “in our modern society, students are more informed about world events than ever before” and “often discuss these passionately.”

The fact sheet instructs teachers: “[I]f support for extremist behaviour is exhibited during these discussions you should advise your Principal or their delegate that these discussions have taken place ... If there is any doubt whether someone has engaged in anti-social and extremist behaviour, it should be reported to the School Safety and Response hotline.” If a principal makes a report to the hotline, “information may be shared with relevant police authorities.”

“Anti-social behaviour” includes “offensive” conduct. “Extremist behaviour” occurs “when a person

believes fear, terror and violence are justified to achieve ideological, political or social change.” These classifications can cover not just opinions depicted as support for Islamic fundamentalism but views directed against imperialist war and the capitalist profit system itself.

One of the academics who prepared the national program, Professor Greg Barton, who heads Deakin University’s Australian Intervention Support Hub, told the *Australian* in February last year that the program sought to provide “safe” spaces to channel “angry” questions, such as “why has the war in Syria being going on for five years?” and “why did we invade Iraq?” into politically safe directions.

Throughout the media barrage against Punchbowl Boys High and its principal, there has been no mention of the broad outrage among masses of workers and youth, expressed particularly acutely in migrant communities, over Australia’s role in the criminal US-led interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq, Yemen and Syria, which have killed hundreds of thousands and forced millions to flee their homes.

Nor is there any reference to the economic and social conditions that provide fertile ground for recruitment of marginalised youth by Islamists. In suburbs like Punchbowl and neighbouring Bankstown, young people from Middle Eastern and other immigrant backgrounds face worsening levels of unemployment, poor educational and social facilities and constant police harassment. Youth unemployment in the area officially exceeds 20 percent, and many more young people have been pushed into low-paid casual or “cash-in-hand” jobs, or forced to work in unpaid internships or traineeships.

The purpose of anti-Muslim witch-hunts, such as what is taking place at Punchbowl Boys High, is to ramp up the 16-year-old “war on terror” both as a pretext for escalated military operations and as a means of diverting mounting social and class tensions at home in reactionary and divisive, chauvinist and nationalist directions.



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