Australian Labor's "self-managing schools," seven years on

Erika Zimmer
21 March 2017

In August 2010, then Labor Party prime minister, Julia Gillard, announced her government would make all public schools "self-governing" by 2018. The measure, she insisted, would drive "educational improvement" and "better meet the needs of students."

It is therefore timely, some seven years on, to take a look at how public schools are faring under Labor's autonomy agenda. Touted as a means to free them from the "shackles" of bureaucracy, the real aim of school autonomy was leaked in a 2011 New South Wales (NSW) education department report. It proposed closing more than 100 schools, sacking 7,500 teachers, selling surplus land and slashing the costs of programs for disadvantaged students in NSW, Australia's most populous state.

The report, compiled by the Boston Consulting Group (BCG), was tasked by the NSW state Labor government to identify savings. Its blueprint was based on education reforms carried out by the Kennett Liberal government in the Australian state of Victoria. In the 1990s, Victoria's state's public school system was devastated by the introduction of the *Schools of the Future* autonomy model, a plan whose origins lay in the devolutionary policies of the Victorian state government under Joan Kirner, Kennett's Labor predecessor.

Kennett closed 370 schools, sacked 10,000 teachers and all but eliminated regional offices and school support services. As a result, Victorian public school students receive the lowest level of funding of any Australian state. The BCG plan recommended that the NSW government model its reforms along Victorian lines. The paper also suggested, given the difficulty of selling the plan to the public, that it be dressed up as an opportunity for greater principal autonomy.

Apart from Victoria, Western Australia (WA) is the state that has gone furthest in adopting school autonomy for public schools. The latest available figures for that state make clear that school autonomy is being accompanied by massive public school education cuts. Between 2009-10 and 2013-4, total state and federal government funding of public schools in WA was cut by $1,341 per student, while government funding for private schools was increased by $1,288 per student.

At the time of Gillard's announcement, numerous national and international studies had documented the already stark inequities in Australia's school system. It had a stronger concentration of disadvantaged students in disadvantaged schools than in any other comparable OECD country, with an ever-widening achievement gap between working-class students compared to their wealthier counterparts. As intended, the emergence of a two-tier system of schooling was used to stampede principals and school administrations into signing up to school autonomy plans for fear of becoming "residualised."

A principal of one newly-converted Queensland public school declared, "[School autonomy] is the way of the future. It doesn't matter if you talk to the Commonwealth government or the State government, or to the Labor party or the Liberal National Party, they all have policies which support more school autonomy … it is the way of the future and anyone who tries to stop it is just like King Canute trying to stop the sea from coming in."

Far from being inevitable, however, school autonomy is part of a conscious agenda being implemented internationally to hand over "underperforming" public schools to private operators. Some seven years on from Gillard's initial announcement, the devolution agenda in Australia is quite far advanced.

Both WA and Queensland have adopted an "Independent Public Schools" (IPS) initiative, under which principals can "opt in" or not. WA launched its version of school autonomy in 2009, with some 83 percent of students currently enrolled in IPS schools. Queensland introduced its school autonomy program in 2013. By 2017, more than 20 percent of its schools had signed on.

In IPS schools, principals are given greater powers over budgets and the hiring of staff, but cannot charge fees and, in theory, must accept all student enrolments.

In NSW, as in Victoria some twenty years earlier, devolution was imposed from above. The NSW school autonomy model *Local Schools, Local Decisions*, commenced in 2012.

While Gillard's 2010 announcement was hailed in front page banner headlines in Murdoch's *Australian* newspaper, the process of devolving powers onto school principals is largely going on behind the backs of the population, including teachers, parents and students, among whom it has no support. What evidence *is* available, however, points to a dramatically

© World Socialist Web Site

worsening stratification of schools, escalating attacks on teachers' working conditions and an accelerating casualization of the teaching profession.

A 2016 study, *School Daze*, undertaken by two former school principals, found Australia had a "serious school equity problem worsening over time." Higher socio-educational advantaged (SEA) schools "are increasing their proportion of most advantaged students, shedding the strugglers," a process that "shows worrying signs of getting wider." The report also found that higher SEA schools were increasing their enrolments, while enrolments in the lowest SEA schools were declining. The authors refer to an "exodus of students from schools enrolling lower SEA students to schools enrolling higher SEA students" whether private or public, a trend "continuing in ways that are measureable over just a few years." They conclude, "The way we provide and resource schools is reinforcing inequality and social class."

The devolution agenda is deepening the education gap between advantaged and working-class students. A recent report exploring the influence of student background on educational outcomes found that, while socio-economic disadvantage already had a larger impact on test results than in many similar OECD countries, the gap was widening. It reported that between 2010 and 2014, the socio-educational gradient (relationship between socio-economic disadvantage and school test results) across Australia had increased from 32 percent to an alarming 37 percent. The authors concluded, "The advantage gained by one section of the school population has created a recognisable disadvantage to the remainder…. The educationally "rich" are likely to get "richer" in a zero-sum contest.

This process can be seen, in microcosm, in recent studies of public high schools in Queensland and WA that recently adopted "independent" status. At one Queensland public high school, Mrs G, an English as a Second Language (ESL) head teacher, referred to the IPS program as "disastrous" for her ESL students. IPS gave principals greater discretion on how school funding was allocated, but, according to Mrs G, ESL students tended to be regarded as "undeserving." She also criticised schools for adopting exclusionary practices in order to improve their performance and reputation. While such practices are not uncommon, Mrs G was concerned that the IPS program "further enabled these practices through the greater freedom and flexibility afforded to schools. She pointed out that, "X school is sending kids to us that they have just decided are too hard … they're creating a little niche, you know, improving their academic results, but they're doing that by getting rid of the kids that are [more needy] …"

Another study undertaken in WA showed that, in the face of ever-decreasing government funding, principals perceived their increased powers to recruit and employ staff as one of the most appealing features of the IPS initiative. The study revealed that IPS principals were replacing permanent teachers with teachers on impermanent contracts. One principal explained how he had recruited unemployed teachers from Ireland, England and Canada. "They sign up and they land at my school for two years on their visa," he said.

Almost two-thirds of new teachers in Victoria are now on short term contracts, while the proportion of teachers in NSW working as temporary or casual employees has soared following the introduction of *Local Schools, Local Decisions*. A 2015 news article reported that the numbers in NSW had increased by 40 percent in the five years since the school autonomy plan began.

The teachers' unions are feigning opposition to the school devolution agenda. In reality, they have played the key role in its implementation. The New South Wales Teachers Federation (NSWTF) called a one-day strike when *Local Schools, Local Decisions* (LSLD) was introduced; an action that resulted in the biggest teacher protest in decades. The strike, however, was nothing but an exercise in letting off steam. Since then the NSWTF, like its state counterparts, has worked to bolster principals' powers. In 2009, the union publicly called for the streamlining of measures to sack teachers, an initiative enshrined in the 2013 staffing agreement. In the 2016 staffing agreement, the union signed off, without any consultation with the membership, on a clause expanding principals' powers to hire teaching staff. In the same year, the union agreed to deregulate school hours, ramming though a salaries agreement that teachers had not even been given the opportunity to read.

The teachers' unions, along with governments of every stripe, are laying the groundwork for the widespread introduction in Australia of for-profit charter schools, a policy promoted by such right-wing think-tanks as the Centre for Independent studies (CIS) for decades. The dismantling of public education, depriving young people of the right to free, quality schooling, is part of rolling back all the social gains won by the working-class in the 20th century. Further attacks on public schools can be expected in the May budget, where a new school funding model will be announced.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site