

The Victorian teachers' agreement and "performance pay"

What the Australian Education Union is suppressing

David Cohen
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The Australian Education Union has mounted a calculated misinformation campaign as part of its efforts to ram through a new four-year industrial sell-out agreement covering 55,000 public school staff in the state of Victoria.

One aspect of this campaign is the AEU's claim that a key "improvement" with the new agreement is "a ban on quotas on the number of staff who can progress up the salary scale [and] a ban on lump sum performance pay for all staff." The AEU's web site also features a list of claimed "major achievements in the past few years," with the first being, "Defeat of the former Liberal government's performance pay plan and a commitment from the Andrews Labor government never to implement performance pay."

The AEU's claim that its deal with the state Labor government represents a blow against so-called performance pay and the wider agenda of tying teachers' job security and salary to standardised test outcomes is a fraud.

From the outset, the union has been complicit in the bipartisan drive by both Labor and Coalition federal governments to extend standardised testing throughout the Australian public school system. Testing, in the form of the NAPLAN (National Assessment Program—Literacy and Numeracy) regime, was introduced in 2008 by the former federal Rudd and Gillard Labor government as a key component of a long-standing agenda to undermine public education and promote, instead, the development of private schools. Under this agenda, "underperforming" schools are targeted—with many eventually shutdown, and teaching jobs cut—while the curriculum is narrowed to meet the demands of the major corporations.

Testing regimes have been introduced in several countries, where they have contributed to the virtual decimation of public education, particularly in the US and Britain, and its replacement with for-profit "charter schools," in the case of the US, and private "academies" or "colleges" in the UK.

In 2010, the Australian teacher unions sabotaged a planned teacher boycott of standardised testing, after the government extended their partnership role in enforcing the Labor government's so-called "education revolution" through a MySchool "working party."

The AEU's latest Victorian industrial agreement incorporates all the previously conceded clauses around teacher "performance."

The deal, for example, specifies that teachers' "performance will be assessed against demonstrated achievements against school priorities and Departmental criteria" (section 13.3a). The document's next section specifies: "Salary progression is not automatic. All employees will be assessed annually based on demonstrated achievement against school priorities and Departmental criteria [...]. Relevant data will be used."

The union is attempting to push through key new "performance" measures, which are contained in "service improvement" commitments that are tied to the new agreement. Ordinary teachers have no knowledge of these commitments, which have been made by the union behind their backs. But teachers and ES staff are nevertheless being asked to approve them as part of the agreement. The only information available is a one-paragraph summary on the AEU's web site.

The motion being put by the AEU to its delegates' meetings reads: "That the proposed Victorian Schools Agreement 2017 *and associated package of improvements* be endorsed." [Emphasis added]

This sleight-of-hand further underscores the contempt of the union for the democratic right of delegates, and of all teachers and ES staff, to be fully informed of every measure contained in the new agreement, *before* they vote.

Moreover, as part of the agreement, the AEU has agreed to the compulsory online collation of annual teacher performance reviews and related salary increment approvals. In addition, it has issued a sweeping pledge supporting the "implementation of the [government's] education reform agenda, and contribution to achieving targets."

A central plank of the state government's "reform agenda," however, is the introduction of teacher performance pay!

This is spelled out in precise detail in the *Greater Returns on Investment in Education: Government School Funding Review* that was released last year. The review was carried out by former Labor Premier Steve Bracks and advanced a suite of regressive proposals that were immediately endorsed by the government—including shutting down more public schools (in the guise of "amalgamations"), making it easier to layoff experienced teachers (to "avoid teacher profiles that are skewed to higher cost over time [and] manage the financial challenges presented by an ageing schools workforce"), and opening up more opportunities

for corporations to expand their operations in the public education system (in the name of “Learning Partnerships”).

One of the *Review*’s central planks involves the elaboration of various ways that school funding and teachers’ wages can be more directly tied to standardised test results.

It explains that industrial agreements between the AEU and the government already “provide significant flexibility” but that “there is not wide use of these options.” One option emphasised is the annual teacher performance reviews that the union signed off on more than a decade ago.

The *Review* complains of “a system-wide culture of near automatic salary increments,” in which “nearly all eligible school staff seeking an increment receive one.” It adds: “Such uniformity of merit payment is difficult to reconcile with the widening gap between the State’s real investment in schooling and student performance... This puts into question the application of the current teacher performance management framework.”

The government’s proposed solution to the “problem” of too many teachers receiving annual salary increment gains is to insist that principals have “difficult professional learning conversations” with teachers and declare a substantial part of the workforce to be “underperforming” every year. The *Review* proposes that “principals’ decisions on salary progression be subject to increased transparency at the aggregate level and that explicit links are made between the rate of salary progression and improved performance.”

Translating this into plain English, principals will be compelled to justify approval of teacher salary increments on the basis of students’ standardised test benchmarks. If, as has previously been claimed by the government, 30 percent of students are making inadequate progress, then 30 percent of teachers across the system can expect to be denied a salary increase. In addition, many of those deemed “underperforming” will be targeted for sacking, with the last industrial agreement imposed by the AEU allowing for precisely this process to be finalised within just 13 weeks.

These mechanisms make a mockery of the union’s claim that the government has committed to abandoning performance pay.

The new industrial agreement contains a clause declaring that the education department “will not impose a quota on the number of employees who can progress in any year nor make a lump sum payment as a result of the performance and development assessment.” This is simply aimed at providing the union with an alibi; the government does not need to impose performance quotas or issue lump sum payments to schools in order to proceed with performance pay.

Teachers and ES staff need to be aware that there are multiple calculations behind the agenda contained in the new agreement: “underperforming” public schools will be targeted for closure or for conversion into privately-run academies; teachers objecting to the new standardised testing regime will be intimidated into silence or victimised; the entire education system will be ever more firmly geared to the most narrow and mechanical teaching methods, including continuous assessment of literacy and numeracy skills, with any teachers who dare to encourage critical and creative thinking being shunned.

The *Review* outlines plans to create a new nominally

independent body, the “Education Performance Monitor” and to have a publically accessible “Education Performance Portal.”

This will essentially function as a substantially expanded version of the federal government’s MySchool website, which collates NAPLAN data. The Education Performance Portal will publish a raft of information, including parent and staff surveys, “school performance against threshold standards,” school financial data, and, most importantly, the proportion of school staff receiving an annual salary increment.

The *Review* explains that the education department will monitor the “proposed changes to salary increments” and “provide assistance [to schools] where necessary.” There will be continual audits of schools, with audit findings “informing principal performance assessments.” In other words, principals who do not fall into line, and deny a sufficient number of teachers their annual salary increment gain, will be disciplined or sacked.

The AEU is complicit in the government’s agenda. It has said nothing about the preparations for performance pay that are detailed in the *Review*. In fact, the bureaucracy welcomed its publication, on the grounds that it endorsed the Labor Party’s Gonski school funding model.

Moreover, the union cannot be unaware of a recent statement made by the current federal Minister for Education Simon Birmingham. While not announcing any details, he said: “I have been working on a funding model that ensures the Commonwealth’s record and growing level of investment in schools is fairly and transparently distributed, allocated according to need *and tied to reforms in school systems that are proven to improve student outcomes.*” [Emphasis added]

There is nothing ambiguous in that!

Teachers and education support staff need to take a stand and reject the AEU’s proposed industrial agreement, as the first step in mounting a unified defence of public education and of the rights, interests and very future of teaching staff and students alike.



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