

The rise of “edu-business” in Australian public schools

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In 2011, in his characteristically crude and cynical manner, Rupert Murdoch spelled out the agenda that now underlies the provision of so-called “public education” in Australia.

“With common standards and a competitive market, we can deliver a first-class education to any child, from any background, in any classroom ... I don’t pretend to be an expert on academic standards. But as a business leader, I do know something about how common standards unlock investment and unleash innovation. With standards in place, investors are willing to take bigger risks because there are bigger rewards... Now it’s true that setting common standards will help News Corporation as we try to figure out what programs our schools need.”

As Murdoch makes clear, providing “what programs our schools need” is, for him, identical with “helping” them “unlock investment and unleash innovation,” and thus enable his News Corporation and the financial and corporate sector in general, to “reap bigger rewards,” i.e., gouge profits out of the ever-accelerating privatisation of public education.

Murdoch’s comments follow a series of initiatives carried out in the US along these lines. Some three decades ago, US businesses began demanding that schools adopt “standards” and “standardised testing” to implement them.

In 2002 President George Bush’s “No Child Left Behind” (NCLB) mandated testing in all 50 states; Barack Obama’s “Race To The Top” (RTTP) tied federal funding for schools even more closely to test-based performance standards; while Obama’s Common Core State Standards established curricular standards across all states, making it possible for corporations such as Pearsons (a News Corp subsidiary), McGraw Hill and Apple to head a global education industry now estimated to be worth \$4.3 trillion annually.

Traditional indicators such as per-pupil spending and student-teacher ratios were replaced by standardised tests and standardised curricula, making schools and teachers accountable for test results and subject to rewards and punishments. Schools were forced to compete against each other for students; parents were to become consumers and choosers in a school market. Most significantly, any conception of an enlightened education, focusing on the development of curiosity and critical thought, an understanding of history, and appreciation of and participation in the arts, was torpedoed.

Between 2007 and 2010, Australian Labor Prime Minister Kevin Rudd began implementing the US model, launching the NAPLAN (National Assessment Program-Literacy and Numeracy) testing regime, the MySchool league-table website into Australian schools and implementing a national school curriculum.

Rudd’s “Education Revolution” was sold on the basis that it would

improve education outcomes, conflating the idea of “high academic standards” with a testing regime that reduced “education” into a system of rote learning information and skills that are required by business.

Since 2009, NAPLAN standardised testing has been a requirement for Australian students in Years 3 (8-year-olds) and Years 5, 7 and 9, and the current Liberal-National government of Malcolm Turnbull intends to extend it to Year 1 students (6-year olds). Its damaging effects have been far-reaching. Student anxiety is skyrocketing as their test results plummet. Everything from student performance, school-funding, teacher pay and performance and the viability of individual schools is increasingly being determined on the basis of the NAPLAN test results.

This year, the New South Wales government (in Australia’s most populous state) ramped up the test’s punitive effects by requiring Year 9 students to achieve a high level Band 8 in order to qualify for the Higher School Certificate (HSC) examination. This is a requirement for university entry. But it is expected that more than 50 percent of students in the state’s schools, predominantly students in working-class areas, will fail to achieve this level.

As in the case of the US and the UK (which has opened up its public education system to similar market mechanisms) these measures have been implemented despite widespread opposition from teachers, parents and students.

In an attempt to head off such opposition and to maintain the subordination of school communities to the teacher unions, the New South Wales Teachers Federation (NSWTF) commissioned a report, *The Commercialisation of Public Schooling*, whose conclusions are a further damning indictment of the public school privatisation movement.

The report points to a transformation taking place within school education. Seen for over a century as a function of the nation-state, education has become a globalised industry. The expansion of the Global Education Industry (GEI) is “based upon the idea that education is the key means to national economic competitiveness and success” and such “success” is gauged within a global education market-place. The GEI pits each nation in a race against others, with comparative assessments such as the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) and the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS), used as evaluative methods for identifying “winners” and “losers.”

Standardised tests and test scores have thus become the basis for identifying “winning” and “losing” nations, as governments slash education spending and dismantle their education bureaucracies. In so doing, they have opened the door to private providers and “edu-

businesses” to make a fortune from their increased role in all aspects of school education, “from agenda setting, research for policy, policy text production, policy implementation and evaluation, provision of related professional development and resources.”

According to Anna Hogan, one of the report’s authors, contractors are used for eight of the nine stages of developing Australia’s high stakes test, NAPLAN. In 2012, the cost of these contracted services totalled over \$4 million. In every state except Queensland, the printing and distribution of NAPLAN was contracted to Pearson. In NSW, Victoria and the Australian Capital Territory (ACT) the subsequent marking of the test was contracted to Pearson, making that company a central agent of the NAPLAN policy network. Last month, the *Sydney Morning Herald* reported that the NSW Education Standards Authority had signed two agreements with Pearson for marking and reporting on NAPLAN results worth a total of \$51.9 million. Another private company, the Australian Council for Education Research (ACER) is currently being paid \$7 for each of the 2.5 million students who annually sit its Progressive Achievement Tests in Maths, Reading and Science.

As the report notes, “More market and less state; more individual responsibility and less welfare provision; and more focus on the individual and less on the common good.”

The report points to parents’ concerns that the products pushed by these educational materials supply companies are “neither supported by vigorous research nor vetted by educators and parents.” The only research on these programs has been by the ed-tech companies themselves, without independent evaluation.

The report is critical of the utterly anti-democratic nature of such commercialisation. It cites a comment from Pearson’s CEO, John Fallon, who makes clear that not only are edu-businesses cashing in on meeting the global demands of education, but they are “working to constitute and influence global education policy.” The report’s authors point to the obvious conflict of interest between increasing company profitability and meeting the challenges in global education. At the same time, “Many of the business interests in public education are ...hidden, with civil society having very little idea of what is happening behind closed doors between politicians and businesses, philanthropies and/or entrepreneurs.”

Edu-business is also highly inequitable. “Empirical evidence reveals that parental choice actually works to increase inequity between schools by ability, socioeconomic status and ethnic background, where some schools get to hand pick their students and simultaneously force out disadvantaged and low performing ones.”

As the union-commissioned report confirms, a survey of teachers undertaken as part of its study pointed to widespread hostility to the increasing commercialisation of Australian schooling, along with concerns that businesses were dictating the focus of education policy.

Some 72 percent of respondents expressed opposition to the fact that schools were being required to run as businesses. One teacher commented, “Schools have to compete with each other for ‘clients’ on data created by raw scores from external exams, rather than being based on more complex and difficult measures that a school achieves, which benefits all students and society in general.” Others complained that, “Work done that cannot be measured by some standardised test, e.g., behaviour, emotional intelligence, personal and social skills are ignored.” Another declared, “I am the Deputy Principal of a large public school in Sydney. It has almost become an arms race in terms of resourcing, both human and capital. The more you have the better it must be! If you don’t go out and sell yourself to private benefactors

and fundraise with the P & C [Parents and Citizens] you have no hope of giving the kids the resources they really need to be the best they can be. The gap between the haves and have-nots (even in the public system) is widening by the year, particularly in ICT, which is a huge expense.”

The report notes that students in rural and remote schools are doubly disadvantaged, in that the government no longer provides opportunities for arts, theatre or sports opportunities as well as specialist in-teaching and curriculum support. But neither do commercial providers, since they do not service rural locations.

Another major theme in the report is the rise of data sharing, under programs such as the National Schools Interoperability Program (NSIP), which is expected to prove increasingly lucrative for edu-business. NSIP data includes a student’s identity, enrolment, legal, medical and behavioural records, which can be shared with external providers. This data is also used to monitor attendance, manage budgets and generate timetables. It plays an important role in setting targets linked to sanctions and rewards. The US education technology (Ed-Tech) market is estimated to be worth over \$8 billion, a modest amount in the context of the overall spending on public schooling. However, the combination of testing and data analysis is expected to be a “key growth area” of profitability in the future, growing over 57 percent in two years.

The NSWTF report, which has amassed and disclosed important information, ends with a plea to teachers, parents and students to maintain support for both the education unions, and the existing political establishment. They need to “pressure and work with/against both (all) sides of politics,” the report insists.

This is despite the fact that the unions and the major political parties bear full responsibility for the destructive corporate onslaught against public school education, including the implementation of standardised testing, peer reviews, massively increased teacher workloads, and the transformation of schools into business operations. Far from opposing this agenda, the NSWTF, like its counterparts nationally and internationally, only wants to be included in the process, and reap the attendant rewards.



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