

Gonski 2.0: A new business blueprint for Australian school education

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29 May 2018

Last month, the Australian Liberal-National government of Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull released another report into the country's public education system. It was overseen by David Gonski, a prominent member of the country's corporate and financial elite, and former head of the Australian Stock Exchange, who prepared the 2011 report (Gonski 1.0) into school funding. His latest review is purportedly focussed on ensuring improved school and student "performance."

The bombastically titled "*Through Growth to Achievement: Report of the Review to Achieve Educational Excellence in Australian Schools*" (the *Review*) was triggered after publication of the results of the latest PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment) tests, which measure "problem solving and cognition in daily life." The tests revealed that the performance of 15-year-old Australian students in mathematics, science and reading had plunged to new lows, as compared to that of their counterparts in other countries. Over the past 15 years, performance in reading had declined from fourth in the world to 16th, in mathematics, from 11th to 25th, and in science, from 8th to 14th—affecting students from all school sectors: public, Catholic and "independent," i.e., private or "corporate schools."

The most revealing aspect of the new *Review* is that it fails to provide any assessment of the role of the current education models in this debacle: first and foremost, "Gonski 1.0," the current school funding blueprint, and the NAPLAN (National Assessment Program—Literacy and Numeracy) testing regime. Ignoring the negative impact of both, the *Review* advocates a new, even more regressive testing regime, along with the maintenance of "Gonski 1.0's" gross inequities, which continue to dominate the Australian school system. Yet, the largest fall in PISA results followed the introduction, by the Rudd and Gillard Labor governments (2010-2013), of both "Gonski" and NAPLAN.

Introduced by Labor prime minister Julia Gillard in 2010, NAPLAN—a "high stakes" testing regime in literacy and numeracy, was opposed by school teachers throughout the country. It narrowed the curriculum, established league tables to evaluate teachers, students and schools on the basis of standardised tests, deepened school inequality and accelerated privatisation. Its fundamental aim was to ever more closely align school education with the rapidly evolving interests of "edu-business" and industry, the real motivators of the latest Gonski 2.0 *Review*.

In 2010, the Australian teacher unions, including the Australian Education Union and the NSW Teachers Federation, pledged to

organise a national teacher boycott to force the Labor government to abandon its new NAPLAN regime. But, at the last moment, the unions reneged, allowing the national implementation of the now universally reviled regime that has come to dominate the entire school curriculum. Over past months, there have been increasingly strident and widespread calls for NAPLAN to be abandoned.

The new *Review* asserts that the current education system has "failed a generation" of students.

That is certainly the case. Together, Gonski 1.0 and NAPLAN bear major responsibility for the current school education crisis. Nearly a decade of both has led to a mass exodus of teachers from the profession, and millions of alienated principals, teachers, parents and students. In the majority of schools—above all, the most disadvantaged and needy—any ongoing orientation to the development of creativity, play, sports and the arts, or to new and stimulating experiences and social interactions, has been removed. At the same time, any conception of developing student "well-being" as a school priority has been abandoned.

The best possible conditions have been created, on the other hand, for the rapidly developing "edu-business" industry, which includes the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER). The latter has developed, in advance, the new "assessment tools" required for the new testing regime. ACER CEO, Geoff Masters has already been charged by the NSW state government with "de-cluttering and simplifying" the curriculum, i.e. narrowing it to literacy and numeracy alone.

Gonski 2.0 advocates an even more intensive government testing and assessment regime of student, teacher and principal "performance," than that imposed under NAPLAN. It asserts that the "20th century model" of education has failed to "stretch" students to achieve their "maximum learning growth" each year or to "incentivise schools to continuously improve."

It proposes that public school teachers be required to constantly test all students, on the narrowest of bases: their day-to-day performance in literacy and numeracy. Other skills will be added to the testing regime in successive years. The teacher will extract the test data from each test and log the resulting "data" online.

The Progressive Assessment Test (PAT), an online "state of the art" test, touted as "surpassing" NAPLAN, is already being used in around two thirds of NSW schools. The schools are required to purchase it from ACER.

"Last year, about 6500 schools bought licences for the test, including the entire South Australian public school system and

several NSW Catholic dioceses,” according to Jordan Baker, in an article in the *Sydney Morning Herald* on May 12, entitled, “Beyond NAPLAN: the brave new world of testing.”

The purpose of these tests is to do away with the NAPLAN model of periodic assessments every two years, which, according to the *Review*, enabled “plateaus of performance,” to emerge, and a tendency to “cruising” by both schools and students. Instead student performance will be continuously monitored, to ensure, in Prime Minister Turnbull’s words, “our kids are coming out of school competitive ... this is a very competitive world.”

On the initiative of NSW Education Minister, Rob Stokes, the NSW government has already installed a new mass data collection regime in a range of the state’s schools. Called ALAN (Assessment for Literacy and Numeracy), it claims to encourage the “progression” learning advocated in Gonski’s *Review*. In a May 16, *Sydney Morning Herald* article, entitled “NAPLAN is bad but Rob Stokes’ alternative is worse,” Dan Hogan, a primary school teacher in western Sydney, writes, “The ALAN platform is built around hundreds of tedious ‘progressions,’ chunks of learning julienned further into ‘indicators’ that can be individually assessed or ‘micro-audited’ to document a child’s progress from beginner to master of a subject. Each indicator must be updated every five weeks.”

Teachers have been told virtually nothing about this new system, or what it will portend for their own ongoing responsibilities. “It is so dense that teachers are taken off class for whole days just to do data entry. Time poor teachers are expected to spend further precious time to analyse the data and to align the progressions with the syllabus,” Hogan explains.

He goes on to reveal that “the 562 schools at the forefront of the ALAN roll out in NSW this year are all listed as being in lower socioeconomic, rural, or ‘disadvantaged’ areas. They are the schools whose students can least afford to have teachers constantly pulled out of class to make sense of ALAN...”

“A year 2 teacher in NSW will clock up more than 10 full working days off class every term; that’s two full working weeks to complete either data entry, data analysis, ALAN training on top of existing commitments to accreditation and mandatory offsite ‘professional learning’ ...”

Hogan concludes, after a review of the various “progressions,” that “ALAN is far worse than NAPLAN for its focus on low-level skills.” This, of course, is why it is being foisted on disadvantaged schools in low socio-economic areas.

The Gonski 2.0 *Review*, like the Gonski 1.0 funding regime and the NAPLAN testing regime on which school funding was based, is aimed at both further entrenching Australia’s two-class school education system and meeting the insatiable appetites of business. It perpetuates and intensifies the immense inequities, both past and present, between the country’s elite private schools, attended now by more than a third of school students, and impoverished public schools in working class, regional and rural areas.

The *Review* aims to stream students according to their daily and weekly “progressions” on endless tests, which are oriented, not to the development of the intellectual, emotional, physical and creative capacities of school students, but to preparing them “for the future.” For the wealthy, that means a well-funded and

resourced school education, university and a professional career; for the poor, endless testing for numeracy and literacy at school, and a life of drudgery in the new 21st century, low-wage sweatshops being created by mega-corporations such as Amazon, or life-time unemployment and poverty.

While Gonski 2.0 called for another report into the school system for Years 11 and 12, the *Review* already raises the importance of “a broader reconceptualization of schools,” so that they could function “not just as education providers, but as service hubs.” These would be tied to the corporate sector, which would be provided with free youth labour, in the guise of “internships.”

The *Review* declares: “In the future, a typical week in the life of a senior secondary student could involve an internship for two days, a mathematics course via distance learning on another day, and two days attending a local school for more traditional learning.”

Gonski cited Switzerland as a prominent case study. The *Review* pointed out that only 20 percent of senior secondary students there attended academic schools that provided a pathway to university. Currently, in Australia, the proportion of school leavers who begin a university course is higher than 50 percent. The Gonski *Review* clearly implies that this figure needs to be slashed, with tertiary education reserved for a small upper middle class elite, along with a few specifically chosen high achievers from the public school system.

In October last year, following the imposition of yet another sell-out Enterprise Bargaining Agreement by the Victorian government and the Australian Education Union, the Socialist Equality Party established the Committee For Public Education (CFPE), in order to mobilise and provide leadership to teachers, parents and students in the fight for the social right to a fully-resourced, enlightened education for all students, in opposition to the agenda of the entire political establishment, including Labor, the Greens, and the trade unions. Such a struggle can only be based on a socialist perspective for the transformation of society as a whole, in the interests of the working class, not the privileged few.

We urge all teachers, Education Support staff, academics, students, workers and young people who agree with the CFPE’s perspective to become actively involved in this vital political initiative.



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