

Australian “edu-business” set to profit under Gonski 2.0

Erika Zimmer
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Last month, the South Australian Liberal Party government announced that it will partner with a major international education software provider, *Civica*, to “transform school and preschool operations.” The decision underscores the pro-business agenda behind the Gonski 2.0 plan for Australian school education.

The Gonski 2.0 report, announced in May, was overseen by David Gonski, a prominent member of Australia’s corporate and financial elite. It advocates an even more regressive testing regime than the NAPLAN (National Assessment Program—Literacy and Numeracy) model, implemented by the Rudd Labor government in 2008 as part of its “Education Revolution.”

NAPLAN itself was based on testing regimes introduced decades ago in the US, following business demands that schools adopt “standards” and “standardised testing.” According to academics, the test industry in the US alone is now worth \$48 billion annually, part of a \$4.3 trillion global education industry.

Civica states on the company’s website that its *Civica Education Suite* has been designed “to enable schools to fully embrace the Gonski 2.0 report recommendations.” It is to be rolled out to 30,000 teachers and 185,000 students in the state of South Australia.

For its part, the New South Wales (NSW) government, in Australia’s most populous state, has made clear its determination to proceed with the Gonski 2.0 agenda, following the publication of the Gonski 2.0 report by announcing that it would be conducting a major review of the NSW school curriculum. However, while the “review” would take 18 months to complete, NSW Education Minister Rob Stokes decided to declare its outcome in advance. It will implement the findings of the Gonski 2.0 report.

The speed with which governments have taken up the Gonski 2.0 recommendations is only matched by their failure to investigate why the current education model

has, according to the Gonski 2.0 report, “failed a generation of students.” It also confirms the warnings made by the WSW from the outset, that the fundamental aim of both NAPLAN and Gonski 2.0 is to align school education ever more closely with the rapidly evolving interests of so-called “edu-business.”

Ex-federal education minister Julia Gillard promoted the NAPLAN testing regime on the basis that it would improve education outcomes, especially for low achievers. In reality, and predictably, it has had the opposite effect. The already stark inequities in Australia’s school system have widened and the concentration of disadvantaged students in disadvantaged schools increased to one of the highest in the OECD.

The Gonski 2.0 blueprint titled, *Through Growth to Achievement: Report of the Review to Achieve Educational Excellence in Australian Schools* is being sold as an education model that promotes individualised learning. A key component of its recommendations is for schools to measure individual students’ “learning progressions,” rather than assessing progress according to a student’s age or year level. In other words, in addition to the NAPLAN periodic assessment every two years, teachers will be required to continuously analyse a student’s proficiency in relation to hundreds of new criteria.

The fact that a pilot mass data collection system, ALAN (Assessment for Literacy and Numeracy), has been set up in hundreds of NSW schools this year, and rejected by teachers as unworkable, has done nothing to halt the rush by governments and business to forge ahead with Gonski 2.0.

The NSW Education Department was forced to pause the rollout of ALAN after teachers found it time consuming and overwhelming. Teacher Dan Hogan told the *Sydney Morning Herald* that the workload involved addressing more than 1000 indicators, across seven so-

called “sub-elements” of literacy and numeracy, for each child.

These “learning progressions” have to be “micro-audited” to document a child’s progress from beginner to master of a subject, with teachers updating each indicator every five weeks.

“The micro level to which teachers are expected to be assessing and plotting children is beyond ridiculous,” one teacher told the NSW Teachers Federation.

Dismissing teacher objections, NSW Education Department secretary, Mark Scott, endorsed ALAN, declaring it was in line with Gonski 2.0’s recommendation for more focus on individual growth.

Academic Anna Hogan has warned that profit making, not evidence, underpins the agenda of edu-business. Writing on NAPLAN she stated, “According to ACARA (the Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority responsible for developing the test), NAPLAN is delivered by ‘experts’ across the field. It seems problematic that experts in this case are not teachers, curriculum developers or even university researchers. Instead experts are constituted by their ability to offer “‘value-for-money’ on competitive tender applications.”

Hogan also raised concerns over potential conflicts of interest, whereby edu-businesses are “contracted to develop aspects of NAPLAN, but also create revenue through marking the NAPLAN test and the selling of resources to improve NAPLAN results.” The NAPLAN market includes practice tests, student workbooks, online programs, tutoring, teacher professional development and data analysis for schools. One such test, the PAT (Progressive Achievement Test) records data that is utilised to prepare for NAPLAN. PAT has been purchased by over 7,000 of Australia’s 9,400 schools.

Gonski 2.0 will open up opportunities for edu-business to reap far bigger profits. In June, Deputy President of the NSW Teachers Federation (NSWTF), Joan Lemaire, claimed, following what she described as “productive discussions” with the NSW Education Department, that the mass data collection by teachers would be “slowed down.”

In reality, the opposite is the case. In July, Correna Haythorpe, President of the Australian Education Union (AEU), told delegates at the NSW Teachers Federation Annual Conference that the federal government intends to tie school funding to the introduction of Gonski 2.0’s “learning progressions and an online assessment tool.” Moreover, while the NSW ALAN trial only covered two curriculum areas, maths and literacy, the National School

Reform Agreement between the Commonwealth and state and territory governments would cover 15 areas: the seven Key Learning Areas, in addition to 8 “general capabilities,” an initiative outlined in the Gonski report designed to boost student workforce skills. At the same time NAPLAN would be retained.

“So NAPLAN, learning progressions, online assessment tools—when will teachers actually have the time to teach? It’s a resource-intensive, one-size-fits-all school reform, without any additional resources,” Haythorpe told the Conference.

The teachers’ unions are well versed in posturing as opponents of the government’s pro-business education reforms. In 2010, following mass opposition to NAPLAN, they pledged to organise a national boycott of the regressive testing regime, only to call off the ban at the last minute, after the government agreed to include the union in its “working party” to examine the use of student performance data. The union then insisted that their members administer the tests. Haythorpe’s main concern over the introduction of Gonski 2.0 reforms is not their impact on teachers, but the fact that the unions have not been consulted.

The teachers’ unions will enforce, not fight, the pro-business agenda of the entire political establishment. The Socialist Equality Party has established the Committee for Public Education in order to mobilise the rapidly growing opposition of teachers, parents and students, outraged at the ongoing dismantling of public education. Such a struggle can only be based on a socialist perspective, fighting for the transformation of society as a whole in the interests of the working class, not the privileged few.

We urge all those who agree with the CFPE’s perspective to become actively involved in this vital political initiative.



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