

Australian Labor and Liberal ministers agree on further regressive education measures

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A meeting of Australian state, territory, and federal education ministers earlier this month agreed to a series of measures that will accelerate the pro-corporate “Gonski 2.0” agenda, unveiled last year.

On December 12, after two days of discussion, the Labor and Liberal politicians signed off on the so-called Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Declaration. The pretentiously titled document subordinates federal and state education policy even more explicitly to the demands of the largest corporations for a trained and readily exploited workforce. Related agreements involve the further narrowing of the curriculum, imposition of regressive phonics programs for early years’ literacy teaching, and the extension of standardised testing regimes in schools.

The lead-up to the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) Education Council meeting featured big business representatives issuing a series of blunt demands that a new generation of productive workers be prepared within the school system, saving corporate Australia money by obviating any need for workplace training.

A December 4 article published in Rupert Murdoch’s *Australian* newspaper, “PISA results: Business tells schools to ‘lift your game’,” featured demands from every major corporate lobby group. Australian Industry Group chief executive Innes Willox declared, “... we risk finding it very difficult to develop the skills needed to succeed in the emerging world of work.” Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry director of employment, education and training, Jenny Lambert, added that businesses complain that it is “taking a long time for school leavers to become productive in the workforce, in part because they require significant training in these basic skills.”

Tony Shepherd, chairman of global infrastructure fund MSAM Limited, and of Infrastructure South Australia, denounced “educationalists [for] saying ‘a dog ate my homework’ and [making] the inevitable plea for more

funding.”

The article, like numerous others recently published in the Australian press, seized on purported declines in Australian 15-year-old students’ international ranking in literacy, maths and science standardised test results, as reported by the OECD’s Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA). The attempt to generate a moral panic about “declining standards” necessarily involved suppressing any mention of the numerous challenges to PISA’s testing veracity and international methodology made by education experts. Alan Reid, Professor Emeritus of Education at the University of South Australia, recently noted, for example, that “concerns come from educational statisticians and researchers, who argue the validity and reliability of the tests themselves are at best dubious and at worst render the league tables ‘useless’.”

Dan Tehan, education minister in the federal Liberal-National government, nevertheless declared that the PISA results demonstrated the need for further regressive curricular “reforms,” not for additional investments in public education. In a statement issued before the education ministers’ meeting, he declared that “money is not the issue,” and that instead “school systems need to de-clutter their curriculums and get back to basics.”

There was no reported conflict whatsoever during the two-day meeting, involving Labor Party education ministers for the states of Victoria, Queensland, and Western Australia, as well as for the Australian Capital Territory and Northern Territory and their Liberal counterparts from Tasmania, New South Wales, and South Australia. Victoria’s Labor education chief James Merlino described the meeting as “the most productive” he had experienced in his five years as minister.

There was no discussion about addressing the inequities within the Australian education system—which, with 40 percent of secondary students in private schools, is among

the world's most unequal—nor about how to resolve the crisis confronting countless working-class public schools, with inadequate student support resources, deteriorating infrastructure, and overloaded teaching staff.

The silence on all these issues reflects the bipartisan unity within the political establishment for a continued offensive against the public education system.

The collectively signed, 24-page Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Declaration mostly featured, as with other government documents on education, motherhood statements about the importance of schooling for children and for society. Tehan boasted, however, that corporate demands had been heeded. “The declaration also acknowledges,” he explained, “the need for workforce skills, including communication, teamwork, languages and problem solving.”

Other parts of the document referred to the “fast-changing labour market” and the need for “effective partnerships with education and training providers, employers, industry.”

The education ministers agreed to several measures that will soon be rolled out in schools nationally.

New literacy and numeracy “progressions” will be established, along with more intensive standardised and centrally monitored student assessments. This was a key recommendation of the “Gonski 2.0” report, authored by the former stock exchange chairman, David Gonski. The “progressions” are based on breaking literacy and numeracy sub-skills down to their narrowest component parts, with the aim of having students master each step in the chain of “progressions” before being taught the next.

The entire framework rests on mechanical and reactionary pedagogical assumptions. Student learning is assumed to proceed in an orderly, individual, and uniform manner, quantifiable in monthly increments. In reality, children’s learning is developmental, periodically taking qualitative leaps forward as students develop, together with their peers, an integrated experience and knowledge of society and the world.

The imposed “progressions” pave the way for the punitive targeting of teachers and schools deemed to be “failing” if assessed student progress does not advance by a 12-month or greater increment each school year. Tehan explained: “The literacy and numeracy progressions will help teachers ensure that every student gets at least a year of learning from every year of school.”

The federal education minister also pledged to take a “chainsaw” to the curriculum in order to “get back to basics” and focus on literacy and numeracy. This is a long

standing right-wing hobby horse. Precisely what it means remains to be seen, with a review into the Australian Curriculum now brought forward to begin next year.

Whatever specific “back to basics” measures are introduced, they will be targeted at working-class and other public schools. For the wealthiest families, who send their children to the most exclusive private schools, education will continue to be anything but basic. Thanks to the continued funnelling of enormous public funds into these institutions, there has been a construction boom in drama centres, music theatres, science and IT hubs, Olympic-class athletic facilities, and “aquatic and wellbeing centres” (see “Australian government hands private schools another \$4.6 billion”).

Ahead of the curriculum review, one measure the government has announced involves the further promotion of regressive synthetic phonics literacy programs. This is via new accreditation standards for teacher education programs, which will now have to demonstrate “explicit reference to reading instruction, including phonics.”

In response to the federal and state education ministers’ acceleration of the pro-corporate agenda, the central complaint of the Australian Education Union (AEU) is that it was not more centrally involved. The union has repeatedly collaborated with government attacks on public education in the last period—the only precondition being proper government acknowledgement of the bureaucracy’s services—as was most clearly demonstrated with its betrayal of a threatened teachers’ boycott of NAPLAN tests in 2010.

In a statement sure to leave the Morrison government shaking in its boots, AEU federal president Correna Haythorpe warned, after the education ministers’ meeting: “We acknowledge that in the communique the Education Council has committed to improving its consultation processes; however if that fails to address our concerns, then we will reserve our right to take further action.”



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