

Australian Labor's budget cuts real spending on schools, maintains lucrative subsidies for private system

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The Australian Labor government's second budget, delivered on May 9, included significant cuts to real spending for public schools while maintaining the enormous flow of public funds into private schools, including the most exclusive institutions reserved for children of the affluent elite.

Education barely featured in the government's promotion of the budget. The word "schools" was not once mentioned in Treasurer Jim Chalmers's budget speech.

Buried within the budget papers were real cuts to school spending. Funding for government schools will only rise by 5.7 percent from \$10.2 billion to \$10.8 billion in 2023–24, far below the 7 percent official inflation rate and what is required by the 2 percent population growth.

Federal funding is projected to increase even more slowly, by less than 4 percent a year, over the next four years, to \$12.1 billion in 2026–27, amounting to a significant real cut.

This is part of a wider series of cuts to social spending, on top of record real wage cuts and declines in working-class living standards. Prime Minister Anthony Albanese sought to advertise tokenistic "cost of living relief" measures that in reality do nothing to address the crisis confronting working people and those relying on welfare payments (see: "Australian Labor government's budget hits workers behind sham 'relief'").

At the same time, record anticipated military spending was kept off the books, including \$368 billion on AUKUS nuclear-powered submarines that has been allocated as part of the US-led preparations for an aggressive war against China. A massive giveaway of \$313 billion over a decade to the wealthy and upper-middle class via so-called Stage Three income tax cuts was likewise suppressed.

Teachers and school workers across the country are enduring real wage cuts, due to deals worked out between state governments and the Australian Education Union bureaucracy, along with the other teacher unions. Non-wage school expenses, however, are escalating rapidly, including

for infrastructure and maintenance, school supplies and equipment, and information technology. Public schools will be asked to do more with less money.

This is amid conditions of an unprecedented crisis within public schools. Numerous schools, especially in working-class areas, are chronically short-staffed. Record numbers of teachers are quitting the system or reducing their hours, in response to excessive workloads, inadequate support for students with additional needs, and mandated regressive teaching requirements. An unknown number also have been affected by COVID and Long COVID, as the coronavirus continues to rip through schools, with some forced to temporarily return to remote learning as in New South Wales last week.

The Labor government is phasing out spending allocations connected to the pandemic. This year it has axed a \$192 million "Student Wellbeing Boost" program that gave schools money "for the purposes of supporting students' mental health and wellbeing through the impacts of COVID-19."

Similarly, the government's "Schools Upgrade Fund," for "supporting capital projects to keep students and school staff safe after disruptions due to COVID-19"—involved just \$50 million in spending last financial year and \$215.8 million this year, before being axed entirely the year after.

This coincides with the Labor government's ongoing efforts to convince the population that the pandemic is over. This false claim has been pushed by education department officials across Australia. As a consequence, principals in countless schools are failing to enforce even basic mitigation measures. Numerous HEPA air filtration systems that have been installed in school buildings are not being switched on each day, despite the scientific evidence of their utility in helping to reduce infection transmission.

The Albanese government has attempted to promote a number of new spending measures involving the most miserly of allocations.

For example, it will spend another \$9.3 million, on top of the previously announced \$328 million, for its so-called National Teacher Workforce Action Plan. This involves scholarships for professionals transitioning into teaching, additional university places, and an advertising campaign to supposedly help raise the status of the teaching profession.

None of these measures address the basic reason for the teacher workforce crisis—the intolerable working conditions that have been engineered within the schools. The government’s “Workload Reduction Fund,” involving annual spending of just \$7 million in the next three years, amounts to a pathetic joke.

Labor is spending an extra \$40 million for majority indigenous-student schools in central Australia. That equates to little more than 0.01 percent of the money the Labor government is planning to spend on the AUKUS attack submarines.

The Australian Education Union (AEU) nevertheless heralded the central Australia spending initiative. Federal union president Correna Haythorpe (whose annual salary and benefits stood at \$298,000 when last reported in 2021) absurdly declared that it “potentially represents one of the most important steps forward for the future of Australian public schools.”

This statement underscored the AEU bureaucracy’s role as an active collaborator with the Labor Party’s assault on the public education system.

Haythorpe insisted that the central Australian spending represented “full funding” of public schools in that area, equivalent to 100 percent of the Schooling Resource Standard (SRS). Both the union and the Greens have suggested that the Labor government should move to fund public schools to 100 percent of the SRS more broadly.

What the AEU and the Greens never acknowledge is that the SRS funding formula is based on the pro-business, NAPLAN-tied (National Assessment Program—Literacy and Numeracy) school funding model first outlined by corporate leader David Gonski. On behalf of the previous Rudd-Gillard federal Labor government, Gonski developed a complex funding model, at the centre of which was a calculation as to how much money would be required to ensure that at least 80 percent of students are achieving above the national minimum standard in the regressive NAPLAN standardised tests.

In other words, delivering 100 percent of SRS funding would amount to ensuring that four out of five students in public schools have basic literacy and numeracy skills. This funding would not be anywhere near what would be required to ensure that every child, regardless of their families’ income level, has free access to the highest quality education as a social right that allows them to develop their full

potential—intellectually, physically, culturally, and artistically.

While continuing to starve public schools of desperately needed funding, the Labor government is maintaining the lucrative flow of public monies into the private schools. Annual federal spending on non-government schools this year stands at \$17.4 billion, rising by more than 10 percent to \$19.26 billion by 2026–27.

The elite private schools, which receive millions of this public funding each year, while charging more than \$40,000 in annual tuition fees, are awash with cash. They are spending a record amount on infrastructure investment, including Olympic-standard sporting facilities, world-class music studios, and, in one case, a library made to appear as a Scottish baronial castle complete with tower and turret.

Australia has one of the world’s most privatised school systems. Nearly 40 percent of students are enrolled in religious and so-called independent schools. The decline in public school enrolments is accelerating, because of the chronic under-funding and deteriorating conditions. Statistics released in February showed that enrolments in so-called independent schools increased by over 25 percent in the past decade, compared with an increase of less than half that in public schools at 11 percent.

Educators seeking to take up the fight for a properly resourced public education system and decent wages and conditions are encouraged to contact the Committee for Public Education:

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