

Sri Lanka's Dissanayake government announces market-driven education reforms

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The Sri Lankan government announced last month that it will introduce major changes to the education system starting in 2026. Its education program, however, is essentially based on the former Wickremesinghe government's *National Policy Framework for Education 2023–2033*, first unveiled in May 2024.

Secretary to the Ministry of Education, Higher Education and Vocational Training, Nalaka Kaluwewa, told the *Morning* on July 29: "The full framework for the [education] reforms was already in place [when the Dissanayake government took office]. A review was carried out... and the reforms are now moving into the implementation stage."

Dr. Harini Amarasuriya, who is education minister as well as prime minister in Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP)/National People's Power (NPP) government, has publicised some of the proposed changes in subjects and teaching methods through a 27-slide PowerPoint presentation.

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) and the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) are calling on workers, teachers, and students to oppose the government's market-driven education reforms. These privatisation and cost-cutting policies will deal a serious blow to Sri Lanka's already crisis-ridden free public education system.

The initial *National Policy Framework for Education* (NPFE) document was prepared by a 25-member committee appointed by the Wickremesinghe government. While the committee included 12 academics, it was dominated by 11 representatives from Sri Lankan big business and two officials from the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank. Duminda Hulangamuwa, then deputy chairman of the Ceylon Chamber of Commerce (CCC) and currently a senior advisor to President Dissanayake, was among the business representatives.

Wickremesinghe's NPFE "reform" program coincided with the International Monetary Fund (IMF) approving a \$US3 billion bailout loan in March 2023, which was granted in exchange for harsh austerity measures. These included the privatisation or restructuring of over 400 state-owned enterprises (SOEs), the destruction of hundreds of thousands of jobs, deep cuts to public spending—especially in health and education—and large tax increases on the population.

These government revenue-boosting measures were designed

to ensure repayment of foreign debts, which were suspended in April 2022 following an unprecedented foreign exchange crisis.

The aim of the NPFE is to cut spending on public education, eliminate barriers to privatisation, and allow "the participation of non-state partners, including public-private partnerships." The framework proposes removing restrictions on foreign ownership in higher education and skills development.

Government funding to schools could include incentives to increase enrolments in subjects demanded by industry and for transitional arrangements endorsed by the Industry Sector Skills Council.

Plans to abolish existing scholarships, such as Mahapola, have also been revealed. Students receiving government-backed loans for tertiary education will be explicitly informed of their repayment terms—effectively meaning that students must take out loans to continue their studies.

On July 24, President Dissanayake addressed parliament to promote his government's education reforms. Sounding like a human resource manager for international capital, he lamented Sri Lanka's lack of commercial resources such as oil, gas, gold and iron ore.

"Our most valuable asset, the resource that needs to be sharpened and honed to build this nation, is our human capital," he said, noting that only 3 percent of professionals go abroad for employment, while the remaining 97 percent are from lower-skilled categories.

"From an economic standpoint, we must secure a position in the advanced global labour market. For this, we require a high-quality education system that acquires and disseminates the knowledge emerging in the world at any given moment," he declared. In other words, the education system must be restructured to serve the immediate needs of both Sri Lankan and global finance capital.

Under the reform package presented by the education ministry, the number of subjects in grades 10 and 11 will be reduced from 10 to 7, with 5 compulsory subjects and 2 optional ones. The compulsory subjects include the mother language, English, mathematics, science, and religion. Optional subjects include second language, IT, history, civics, health, technology, geography, aesthetics, and entrepreneurship and finance.

Various academics have raised concerns that students will be forced to select subjects oriented towards labour market requirements, rather than subjects essential for a comprehensive education, such as aesthetics and history. Rather than cultivating future generations to be thoughtful, independent critical thinkers, the ruling elite aims to prepare youth for low-wage exploitation by local and global investors.

Dissanayake also told parliament that schools with small student populations would be shut down and that integrating such facilities would be “more profitable.” He urged opposition MPs not to “provoke the masses” regarding these closures.

All parliamentary opposition parties—including the Samagi Jana Balawegaya, United National Party, Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna, and Tamil and Muslim parties—participated in a discussion on the reforms with Prime Minister Amarasuriya on July 24. Having previously endorsed IMF-backed austerity policies and similar education reform plans, none expressed any opposition to the latest proposals.

Dissanayake’s warning to MPs “not to provoke the masses” was, in fact, a warning to workers and students who are likely to resist these regressive educational measures.

Sri Lankan workers and the poor already face unbearable conditions in trying to educate their children. According to the Ministry of Education’s 2023 census, new school enrollments dropped by 180,697 compared to 2022. Dropouts increased by 20,000, and another 80,000 students were classified as “on the margin” of dropping out in the same year.

This decline is directly tied to the worsening poverty caused by Sri Lanka’s economic collapse and ongoing IMF austerity measures.

Millions of Sri Lankan families are struggling with the financial burden of sending children to school. Meanwhile, with an estimated national teacher shortage of 40,000, educators are subjected to poor working conditions, low pay, and high stress.

Previous governments—as well as the current JVP/NPP one—have restricted education spending to just 1 to 2 percent of GDP. Like capitalist governments worldwide, they have cut costs, reduced educational quality, and increased privatisation to satisfy big business demands.

None of the education trade unions has opposed the plans outright. All of them in one way or another are calling for “discussion,” which means in effect an offer to help the government implement its regressive measures.

The fake-left Frontline Socialist Party (FSP) and the Inter-University Student Federation (IUSF), have called on the government to present a clearer education plan and initiate a “broader dialogue” on reforms. On August 5, the IUSF, which is controlled by the FSP, held a joint meeting with university and schoolteacher union leaders.

Participants included Ceylon Teachers Union leader Joseph Stalin, who urged the government to solve school-related issues first and said he was open to discussing a reform plan.

University Teachers Association secretary Charudaththa Ilangasinghe complained that the government was pushing reforms without consulting academics.

Amila Sandaruwan, leader of the FSP-controlled United Teacher Services Union, echoed similar sentiments, stating his union was ready to “fight in the streets” to press its demands. This demagogic is a cynical attempt to deflect attention from the FSP’s bogus claim that the pro-big business NPP government can be pressured into taking the “correct path.”

The Dissanayake government’s regressive education policies are not isolated decisions but align directly with its broader implementation of IMF-imposed austerity.

The SEP and IYSSE warn workers, youth, students, and the poor that free public education cannot be defended within the existing national framework or without a struggle against the capitalist system.

Defending free public education—won through working-class struggles in the late 1930s and 1940s—is bound up with the building a socialist movement of workers, youth and the poor against the pro-business agenda of the JVP/NPP government and the IMF’s socially destructive policies.

What is needed is a massive reallocation of resources, currently being diverted toward foreign debt repayment and guaranteeing the ever-growing wealth of the super-rich, and the reorganisation of production to serve the needs of society, not profit.

This means nationalising the banks, major corporations, and plantations under workers’ democratic control and repudiating foreign debt. Such a program can only be implemented by bringing a workers’ and peasants’ government to power as part of the struggle for a socialist and internationalist perspective.

Workers must prepare for this fight by building action committees, independent of the trade union bureaucracy and capitalist parties, in every workplace and neighbourhood to mobilise the independent strength of the working class.

The SEP and IYSSE call on teachers, students, and parents to form action committees in their schools to carry forward this vital struggle.



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