

Australia: ACT Labor government slashes secondary college budgets

Kaye Tucker
22 September 2026

Public secondary colleges in the Australian Capital Territory (ACT) are facing a combined \$4 million in budget cuts for 2027, as the territory's Labor government moves to redistribute an already inadequate pool of public school funding under the banner of "equity".

The cuts, announced suddenly at the end of August, supposedly resulted from a review of the territory's school resourcing formula. The ACT Education Directorate reduced the per-student funding weighting for colleges—which serve years 11 and 12—and shifted the money toward primary schools. Eighteen schools will see their funding fall by more than 5 percent, while 31 may receive increases of more than 5 percent.

The nine secondary colleges in Canberra are the worst affected—Dickson College, Erindale College, Gungahlin College, Hawker College, Lake Ginninderra College, Lake Tuggeranong College, Narrabundah College, The University of Canberra Senior Secondary College Lake Ginninderra and Melba Copland Secondary School.

Principals, who already had to have their budgets and staffing arrangement in place by the end of June, were caught by surprise. Many said they did know how the cuts would apply. The Education Directorate has not specified which colleges would lose funding and by how much.

ACT Public Service and Education Minister Rachel Stephen-Smith justified the cuts, saying that the goal was to achieve a fairer funding mix across schools and colleges. ACT Education Director-General Jo Wood described the move as a "small adjustment," claiming the directorate would offer "support" to schools forced to make cuts.

The government's claim that the cuts to the secondary colleges is a progressive measure to address

"equity and student need" is consciously misleading. This is not an increase in funding for disadvantaged schools, but a reallocation of scarce resources within a system that has been systematically starved for decades, including by successive federal governments and Greens-backed Labor governments in the ACT since 2001.

Teachers warn that the cuts will exacerbate burnout and harm student programs when the workforce is already exhausted by chronic under-resourcing and staffing shortages. Systemic pressures have forced schools into frequent class "splitting" and "collapsing" (where multiple classes are combined under one teacher due to lack of staff).

A teacher at one of the secondary colleges told the WSWS that the education department was "playing one part of the teacher workforce off against another. At this stage, the union has said nothing about this. My college is meekly accepting this as a 'fait accompli.' I am of course furious."

The ACT's colleges serve a working-class and middle-class student population. They have endured years of crushing workloads, oversized classes and staffing shortages, while federal, state and territory governments pour billions into private and religious schools.

This assault is intensifying. The federal Albanese Labor government's May budget outlined more than \$63 billion in social spending cuts over four years, spearheaded by the gutting of \$38 billion from the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS), while raising spending on AUKUS and other military programs to record levels. As a result of the NDIS cuts, thousands of students will be pushed into already underfunded schools, and teachers and support staff will carry the burden.

The Albanese government's 2026–27 budget further cut public school funding, including by slashing the Student Engagement and Wellbeing Program from \$4 billion to \$1 billion and cutting disability funding, while continuing to boost federal funding for private schools by 19.3 percent over four years.

The Albanese government's "Better and Fairer Schools Agreement," a ten-year joint funding and reform pact between the Commonwealth, states and territories for 2025 to 2034, is a fraud, with the vast majority of its nominal spending backloaded into the 2030s.

In response to growing discontent with the Labor governments, the ACT Greens last week withdrew their guarantee of supporting ACT Chief Minister Andrew Barr's government in a parliamentary no-confidence vote. But they have not opposed the secondary college cuts.

Instead, Greens ACT education spokeswoman Laura Nuttall, while saying the cuts were "distressing," only called for "urgent clarity" from the government about how a "central funding pool" would be allocated to affected schools.

On June 11, teachers and education staff carried out a 24-hour strike that shut all 93 ACT public schools, specialist schools and preschools, following unresolved negotiations on workload and pay. This month, ACT educators rejected the government's latest pay offer—9 percent over three years, a real-wage cut compared to the soaring cost of living—and endorsed further industrial action.

But the Australian Education Union (AEU) is seeking to head off this confrontation. It has refused to oppose the cuts. AEU ACT branch president Angela Burroughs said schools had been "blindsided" by the decision but agreed with the government that inequity existed and needed to be addressed. She said the announcement should have been made in June rather than late August.

The reality is that the AEU has been in continuous consultation with the Education Directorate and has also campaigned for the ACT Labor government at every election.

The AEU's proposed industrial action for Term 4 is confined to a log of claims with no concrete wage demand and deliberately vague conditions on staffing, class sizes and support services. The union apparatus is seeking to channel the anger of teachers and school

staff into appealing to the ACT government for slightly repackaged deal, as the AEU has just done in Victoria.

The ACT conflict is another expression of opposition among educators which has seen, over the past year, the first strikes in many years, including two 24-hour stoppages in Queensland, half- and full-day strikes in Tasmania and two strikes and a 40,000 rally in Melbourne. Yet these struggles have been all been isolated, then sold out or subjected to compulsory arbitration.

The AEU's response to the secondary school cuts demonstrates once again that it is not an instrument for defending educators, but a transmission belt for Labor's austerity agenda.

Educators, students and parents need to build their own organisations—rank-and-file committees in every school—independent of the AEU, to fight for a properly funded public school system. The demand must be for an end to all cuts, the restoration and expansion of college programs, and a massive increase in public education spending, halting the billions spent on corporate subsidies, war and handouts to private schools.

Through the Committee for Public Education (CFPE), the rank-and-file educators network, and the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC), educators in the ACT can link their struggle with those of their counterparts across Australia and around the world, and wage a unified fight against the subordination of all human needs, including education, to the profit demands of big business and the expansion of military spending in preparation for war.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact