Australia: ACT Labor government slashes school budgets across Canberra

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Public schools across the Australian Capital Territory (ACT) face budget reductions for 2027, as the territory's Labor government presses ahead with a "needs-based" funding overhaul that is, in reality, a zero-sum redistribution of grossly inadequate resources.

Data obtained by the *Canberra Times* reveals that 58 of the territory's 94 public schools will see their funding fall, with 37 facing cuts greater than 5 percent. The figures expose a far more sweeping assault than the Education Directorate initially admitted. Last month, the directorate claimed just one college and 18 schools would face significant cuts.

The cuts are being imposed through a new Student Resource Allocation (SRA) model—a centralised funding system the directorate has labelled a "generational shift" away from school autonomy. In practice, it is a mechanism for rationing scarcity and pitting schools against one another.

Nine public secondary colleges face a combined $4 million reduction, with the per-student weighting for Years 11 and 12 slashed to supposedly redirect funds toward primary schools. Principals have expressed grave concerns over how they will maintain existing elective and specialist programs.

Despite Labor's claim that the SRA model is a progressive redistribution toward primary schools, dozens of primary and combined schools confront heavy losses. Latham Primary School faces the sharpest proportional cut—24.8 percent of its budget is to be stripped away. Palmerston District Primary will lose 20.5 percent, or $2.1 million. Kaleen Primary will lose more than 16 percent, or $1 million. Kingsford Smith School, a combined primary and secondary campus, must find $3.5 million in savings.

Majura Primary School will have its budget cut by $2.2 million. Reportedly, the school has already moved learning support assistants (LSAs) from the preschool to the main campus and stopped giving shifts to casual LSAs entirely. Mount Rogers Primary is confronting a $1 million cut and has been forced to reduce its LSA workforce from 30 to just three.

The gutting of learning support assistance is one of the most destructive dimensions of the cuts. An anonymous staff member at a primary school told the *Canberra Times* that parents had not been informed and that the requirements of high-needs children had been entirely disregarded. "We have a lot of high-needs children. I don't think that's been looked at. Everybody's just got given this budget and had to make the cuts, but nobody's actually considering the level of support that the kids need," the staff member said. "It's absolutely disgusting that this has been kept such a secret."

The staff member warned that cuts to LSAs would create immediate health and safety risks: "You have kids who run out of class and straight onto the road. And so the LSAs are usually the ones who are chasing after them or making sure that they're safe."

The specialist schools, which enrol students with the highest levels of disability, appear to be losing the most funding. An Education Directorate spokesperson claimed an additional $7 million would be allocated across specialist schools above their SRA funding, insisting that "no specialist school will have less funding than in 2026." But this is an admission that the model itself is so destructive it cannot even be applied to the most vulnerable students without emergency top-ups, while mainstream schools with high-needs students receive no equivalent aid.

Veronica Elliott, executive officer of ACT Parents, said parents were "very worried" and demanded transparency. "If there is genuinely a redistribution of resources according to student need, then the government should be able to show the community where resources are going and why they have moved." Elliott warned that Parents and Citizens associations were being forced to fundraise for core school programs—learning intervention, music, art—traditionally the responsibility of government funding.

ACT Education Minister Rachel Stephen-Smith tried to justify the cuts as "needs-based," claiming the directorate has been "working with each school on how they can deliver for their students, staff and community within their new funding allocation." She announced an additional $40 million would be spent in 2027 to "address complexity in schools"—a pittance against the scale of the cuts.

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The government has pointed to a 7.3 percent rise in the total education budget, which has reached $1.2 billion, but that does not cover inflation and population increases.

Facing a $323.4 million budget shortfall, with net debt projected to approach $14.1 billion by the end of the decade, the government has also announced a $700 million pause on infrastructure projects and a drive to restrain public service growth.

The ACT cuts form part of a national assault on public education, spearheaded by Labor governments at both the federal and state levels.

The Albanese government's May budget outlined more than $63 billion in social spending cuts over four years. Federal funding for public schools will grow by just 4.1 percent in 2026–27—well below inflation and population increases. The centrepiece of the budget, the gutting of $38 billion from the National Disability Insurance Scheme, will force hundreds of thousands off disability support, including vast numbers of children, further increasing pressure on schools.

These cuts are being imposed to help fund the Albanese government's massive expansion of military spending, now reaching $60 billion annually, including the AUKUS submarine program and preparations for war against China. The ruling class demands that working people pay for its war machine through the decimation of social services.

The ACT Greens, who recently withdrew their guarantee of supporting Chief Minister Andrew Barr's government in any parliamentary no-confidence vote, have not opposed the school cuts. Greens ACT education spokeswoman Laura Nuttall, while calling the cuts "distressing," only demanded "urgent clarity" about a "central funding pool." The Greens have propped up ACT Labor governments since 2001.

Far from fighting the cuts, the Australian Education Union (AEU) is peddling the government's line. AEU branch president Angela Burroughs has agreed that "inequity exists and needs to be addressed."

In fact, the AEU is reportedly engaged in "intensive" negotiations with the government to work out a deal to end strikes by educators over pay and conditions. This is a warning of a sellout.

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

Opposition to the budget cuts is mounting. One teacher told the WSWS that they will not vote to accept any revised pay offer until the government's funding reductions are reversed, saying: "Any cost-cutting means that work conditions will deteriorate. As it is, all ACT government schools are under-resourced."

Another teacher said: "The key issue is some schools will get cuts and they will lower what they can do. The idea that teachers will just move to other schools is laughable. Teachers will leave, making the shortage of teachers worse."

The AEU has proposed to confine stoppages to one hour in Week 2 of Term 4, two hours in Week 4, a half-day strike in Week 6, and a full-day strike in Week 8. This is designed to contain and exhaust opposition. The union's log of claims contains no concrete wage demand and deliberately vague conditions on staffing, class sizes and support services.

The ACT conflict is another expression of the opposition among educators that 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-strong rally in Victoria. Yet the AEU has isolated these struggles, then sold them out or subjected educators to compulsory arbitration.

Educators, parents and students must take matters into their own hands. They must build their own organisations—rank-and-file committees in schools, independent of the trade union apparatus. These committees would fight for an end to all cuts, the full restoration of learning support assistant positions, a massive increase in public education spending, and an end to the billions poured into corporate subsidies, war preparations and handouts to private and religious 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 can link their struggle with those of their counterparts across Australia and around the world. The fight for public education is inseparable from the struggle against the capitalist system itself—a system that subordinates all human needs, including the education of children, to the profit demands of big business and the plunge into war.

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