

Secret report foreshadows numerous public school closures and teaching job cuts

By James Cogan and SEP candidate for Marrickville
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A secret report commissioned by the New South Wales Labor government, published by the *Sydney Morning Herald* last weekend, indicates the scale of the cuts to be made to public education and all areas of social spending, regardless of which party takes office in the state election on March 26.

The report, marked “cabinet-in-confidence,” exposes the federal Gillard government’s NAPLAN (National Assessment Program—Literacy and Numeracy) testing regime and its *My School* web site as vehicles for shutting down schools and slashing education spending.

The Boston Consulting Group’s (BCG) report, delivered to the state Labor government early last year, proposes closing more than 100 government schools, axing 7,500 teaching jobs, as well as those of 1,500 school support staff, selling off “surplus” school land and cutting back programs to disadvantaged students.

According to the *Herald*, the blueprint aims to eliminate a projected \$1 billion “black hole” in the education department’s 2012-13 budget, providing \$1 billion in one-off savings and up to \$800 million in recurrent spending savings.

The BCG report, organised by state Treasury, is part of a state-wide expenditure review—a so-called Better Services Taskforce—to identify ways to impose austerity measures across all government departments. The report reveals the draconian scale of the spending cuts envisaged. Up to \$1.8 billion is to be sliced from a \$13.6 billion annual education budget—a cut in the order of 13 percent.

The confidential New South Wales report took as its benchmark the education policies of the Labor government in neighbouring Victoria. Between 1999 and last year, when it was defeated, Victorian Labor retained all the cuts made during the 1990s by former Liberal premier Jeff Kennett, who destroyed 9,000 permanent teaching jobs and closed more than 300 schools. Short-term contracts were introduced, along with salary cuts.

While NSW Education Minister Verity Firth claims to have rejected a “number of radical suggestions” from the

BCG for school closures, Premier Kristina Keneally’s Labor government has been implementing large tracts of the report’s recommendations, with the complicity of the NSW Teachers Federation. Last year it conducted a trial, at some 47 schools, that gave principals responsibility for school maintenance and cleaning contracts. The report suggests that the implementation of this scheme across the state would save at least \$540 million.

The BCG advised the government to cynically dress this and other programs up as a means of handing schools greater control over their own administration. Principals were told that any savings they made would flow back into the education system, with half going into their own schools. In reality, the money was deducted from school budgets.

Prime Minister Julia Gillard’s NAPLAN tests will be used to determine which schools are to be shut. According to the report, schools with fewer than 400 students, whose test performance is considered below par, could be targeted for closure.

The BCG report confirms, as the Socialist Equality Party has consistently explained, that the testing regime’s purpose is to provide a mechanism for shutting down the most disadvantaged schools and pressuring parents into transferring their children to private fee-paying schools.

NAPLAN and the *My School* website, which ranks schools nationally based on their test performances, are modelled on schemes in the US and Britain that have led to the closure or privatisation of hundreds of “failing” schools and the transformation of curricula into little more than learning by rote.

The BCG recommendations are in line with Gillard’s agenda to fully open up health, education and welfare spending to profit-driven market forces, going far beyond the first wave of pro-market reform carried out by the Hawke and Keating governments in the 1980s and 1990s.

Last December, Gillard handed the state and territory governments a briefing paper aimed at making schools self-governing. Principals and school councils would be responsible for school budgets and hiring and firing

teachers. Like the charter school movement in the US, making schools autonomous, that is, publicly funded but privately run, is a transitional step toward privatisation.

Gillard's briefing paper outlined a two-phase implementation process. One thousand schools nationally were to participate in an initial rollout in 2012-13, with autonomous schools to become the standard in Australia by 2018.

As the BGC report makes clear, the education "revolution" being spearheaded by Gillard has nothing to do with "lifting education standards" and enabling principals to hire "good teachers". It is about cost cutting and handing over the provision of education services to business, while intimidating or silencing opposition from teachers.

The report specifies that principal-controlled appointments would end teachers' job security. There would be no placement guarantee for a displaced teacher "regardless of reason" in the case of school closures or amalgamations.

Like their public school counterparts, Technical and Further Education (TAFE) teachers also face further attacks. Plummeting government spending has already resulted in an estimated 70 percent of TAFE staff being employed on a part-time basis at lower rates. The BCG report points to a \$135 million in savings if NSW TAFE teachers' salaries were set at the levels of teachers in the states of Victoria and Queensland.

The BCG report has been kept secret by the Keneally government because such measures have no public support. *My School's* introduction last year was widely opposed by parents, teachers and educators. Faced with such resistance, the NSW Teachers Federation and its federal counterpart, the Australian Education Union (AEU), belatedly announced a supposed boycott of the NAPLAN tests.

Far from having any real differences with NAPLAN and *My School*, the only concern of the union officials was to remain collaborators with Gillard and her free-market agenda, with which they fundamentally agree. The boycott was called off at the last minute, as soon as Gillard agreed to include the AEU in the *My School* working party.

Covering up the teacher unions' central role in enabling the government's right-wing agenda, the *Herald* features a claim by the NSW Teachers Federation to oppose the BCG recommendations. In fact, the union also paved the way for principal hire to be implemented in 2009 by calling off a 48-hour strike against the abolition of the centralised teacher transfer system.

Now, despite the Liberal opposition's long record of gutting public education, and its avowed backing for "school autonomy," the union president, Gary Zadkovich, is attempting to divert teachers by begging Liberal leader Barry O'Farrell for a commitment to not adopt the report's

recommendations.

In the late 1980s, when the Liberals were last in office in NSW, the Greiner government eliminated 2,500 teachers' jobs, triggering angry demonstrations of up to 100,000 teachers, parents and students. This mass movement was also betrayed by the Teachers Federation, which eventually shut down the protests.

Whichever party forms government in NSW next week, an unprecedented assault on public education will be unleashed. No genuine opposition can be expected from the Greens, the partners of the minority Gillard government, who are just as committed to subordinating education and every other aspect of social life to the dictates of the financial markets and corporate elite.

To defeat this offensive what is required is a political rebellion of the working class, including teachers, students and parents, against these governments and their trade union accomplices. A total ban must be applied to every aspect of the NAPLAN performance testing regime.

The Socialist Equality Party insists that, as a basic social right, every child must be guaranteed a high quality, free education, from pre-school to university, and that billions of dollars must be poured into providing well-staffed and well-equipped public schools.

This necessary program cannot be achieved by appealing to the parliamentary establishment, but only through the revolutionary struggle for a workers' government that will reorganise economic and social life under the democratic control of the working class, for the benefit of all, not a wealthy minority.

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