

Australian states impose Gillard's “Empowering Local Schools” program

By Will Marshall
14 March 2012

State governments in Australia have begun to implement the federal Labor government's “Empowering Local Schools” program. In the name of greater school autonomy, it gives principals increased powers over teachers and other staff, paving the way for further budget cuts and the atomisation of the public education system.

The initial phase consists of a trial by 1,000 public and independent schools across Australia over the next two years. By 2018, according to Prime Minister Julia Gillard, all schools will be “self-governing”. Autonomy is a mechanism for transforming schools into businesses competing for students and resources, with those in working class areas losing out.

Last Sunday, the Liberal-National government in New South Wales (NSW) became the first state administration to outline what the changes will mean in its education system. Under its plan, teachers' pay will be tied to “performance” indicators. Principals will control 70 percent of their school's budget, and will have powers to determine the number of temporary and permanent staff they employ.

Premier Barry O'Farrell described the changes, to be fully implemented by 2015, as the most significant shift in public education in more than a century. Federal School Education Minister Peter Garrett welcomed the announcement, complaining only that the Gillard government's role “in leading these policy changes” had not been acknowledged by O'Farrell.

Garrett said the Empowering Local Schools (ELS) initiative was “being rolled out across 1,000 schools nationally from this year.” He added: “We know that if we give more power to local school principals it has a positive effect on student results. We just want the states to get on with it.”

The NSW scheme qualifies it to receive some \$12.5

million in ELS funding from the Gillard government. Queensland's state government has also signed up to the program, and other states are expected to follow in coming weeks.

Premier O'Farrell denied the NSW initiative had anything to do with budget savings. But, as a means of cutting costs, teachers' salaries will only increase on the attainment of “professional standards”, rather than years of experience. This will also place teachers' pay increments at the behest of their principals.

Moreover, public schools will be responsible for the number of temporary and permanent staff within their budgets, placing pressure on principals to find savings. Inevitably, schools will be forced to employ less qualified staff and younger, cheaper teachers.

The previous state Labor government in NSW commissioned an education blueprint created by the Boston Consulting Group, detailing how principals could be given more responsibility for determining school budgets, as a means of making savings. The leaked cabinet document of December 2009 referred to a trial of 47 schools, which underpinned Sunday's announcement.

That trial was part of a broader strategy to achieve \$1 billion in recurrent savings. The report recommended “devolution” of responsibility for services, including cleaning and maintenance, from the state education department to individual principals. Making principals responsible for cleaning services was estimated to save \$75 million annually. The report also called for more emphasis on commercial and management capabilities when choosing principals. The existing selection process was “heavily oriented towards educational leadership”.

Federal minister Garrett asserted that the ELS program would “attract and pay a better mix of staff

especially in difficult to staff schools,” citing the possibility of schools hiring student mentors as well as truancy officers. In reality, participating schools will receive a start-up grant of only \$40,000-50,000, less than the amount required to hire a teacher.

Garrett has claimed that Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) research had “identified associations between students that do well in schooling and increasing autonomy in school systems.” In fact, the OECD 2009 *Education at a Glance* report found little, if any, improvement was evident when schools operated with greater responsibility for budgets and teacher selection. Improvement occurred in schools that had control over curriculum and assessment.

A similar system to ELS, implemented in the state of Victoria during the 1990s, exacerbated educational inequality. Principals became more like business managers, forced to find savings while promoting their schools’ public relations image. Schools became increasingly reliant on funds raised from parents and local businesses, widening the disparities between wealthier and poorer localities.

One of the Gillard government’s ELS aims is to tie schools more closely to the needs, and finances, of business. A government paper last May, *Government Response to Realising Potential: Business Helping Schools to Develop Australia’s Futures*, stated: “The new Empowering Local Schools initiative will also create opportunity for businesses to help schools by contributing their advice and expertise to school governance, financial management, strategic planning and administrative operations.”

These measures are bound up with Labor’s broader pro-market “education revolution”. In 2010, the Gillard government introduced a standardised national testing regime to identify supposedly poorly-performing schools. Gillard’s *My School* web site, listing schools’ National Assessment Program-Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) results, means that lowly-ranked schools face an uncertain future.

Garrett pointed to the connection between the ELS and NAPLAN programs, saying autonomy would “empower” schools to “better respond to the needs of students”. In effect, schools and teachers that fail to demonstrate “success” on NAPLAN tests will be singled out. Garrett previously told journalists that

under-performing teachers “should be supported to improve or be removed.”

The main teachers’ trade union, the Australian Education Union (AEU) and its state affiliate, the NSW Teachers Federation, criticised the O’Farrell government’s scheme as a means of cutting funding. Their responses made no mention of the Gillard government’s authorship of the entire program. In a previous bulletin to its members, the Teachers Federation said it remained opposed to the ELS initiative but simply called for “extensive and genuine consultation with all those potentially affected: teachers, support staff and parents.”

This appeal for consultation with the Gillard government mirrors the method used by the union to sell out the outraged opposition of teachers and parents to the introduction of NAPLAN and *My School* in 2010. Initially, under pressure from below, the AEU announced a boycott of NAPLAN testing, but quickly shelved it once the union was included in a government working party that has left all the essential features of *My School* intact.

Time and again, the federal and state teachers’ unions have proven that they do not oppose Gillard’s agenda to restructure education along the lines required by the corporate elite. On the contrary, their perspective is to function as partners in, and enforcers of, Labor’s program.

If teachers are to defeat the sweeping pro-business restructuring of public education, they must break from the union bureaucracy, organise their own independent organisations, and seek to mobilise the support of parents, students and other sections of the working class facing similar assaults. This means a direct political struggle against the Gillard government based on the fight for a workers’ government to implement a socialist program including free, high quality education for all.

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