

Australian government seizes on NAPLAN test scores to justify budget cuts

By Patrick Kelly
22 August 2016

The Liberal-National government of Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull has exploited the latest round of school NAPLAN (National Assessment Program—Literacy and Numeracy) results to defend its education budget cuts.

Education Minister Simon Birmingham released on August 3 the preliminary results from the standardised tests done earlier this year by Year 3, 5, 7 and 9 students throughout Australia. Across all year levels, the data reportedly showed an increase in average reading scores of 0.4 percent since 2013, a decrease in writing scores of -0.2 percent and an increase in numeracy of 1.26 percent.

In a media statement headlined, “Plateau Not Good Enough,” Birmingham declared that the NAPLAN results “once again show that, despite significant funding growth, we are not getting sufficient improvements in student outcomes.” He claimed that “while strong levels of investment in schools are important, it’s more important to ensure that funding is being used on initiatives proven to boost student results... we need to move the conversation on from just how much is being spent in schools to focus on how record funding can best be used for the benefit of students.”

Federal school funding, Birmingham claimed, rose by 23 percent in the past three years—and because students’ test scores have not risen by comparable levels it was necessary to “move the conversation on,” away from how much more funding schools actually require. Even within the narrow, stultifying framework of standardised testing and educational cost-benefit analysis, it is absurd to suggest that increased spending should produce endlessly improving test results.

The government’s rhetoric on the NAPLAN results serve two purposes. The first aim is to justify previous

education spending cuts and prepare the ground for further austerity measures, and the second is to undermine teachers’ working conditions and impose regressive teaching models in the name of promoting “initiatives proven to boost student results.”

The government previously abandoned the scheduled “Gonski” school funding for 2017 and 2018. The Gonski funding model, unveiled by the former Labor government of Julia Gillard, was always a fraud. Ahead of the 2013 federal election, however, then Liberal leader Tony Abbott went along with it, declaring a “unity ticket” on the policy with Labor. After winning office amid an accelerating economic slowdown, the government abandoned much of the planned funding, amounting to around \$4 billion, as part of its moves to defend the interests of finance capital and the ultra-wealthy through budget cuts targeting the working class.

Now Turnbull’s education minister is sending a clear signal. As global economic growth falls and signs emerge of an imminent slump in the Australian economy, the government is signalling its intent to slash education and other basic services as part of a stepped-up austerity drive.

The result will be to escalate the crisis confronting the public education system. Birmingham’s claims of record funding increases in the past period seek to cover up the reality that Australia has one of the most privatised and unequal education systems among advanced capitalist countries. While billions of dollars have been funnelled into private schools, including the most exclusive and lavishly resourced, by successive Labor and Liberal-National governments, overcrowded public schools across the country are struggling to cope with record enrolments and increasingly complex social, psychological and developmental needs of many

of their students, for which there is almost no additional support.

The government is now promoting a “conversation,” not about how to resolve this crisis but rather how to promote “evidence-based initiatives” to boost NAPLAN results.

In May the government announced a range of reactionary policies under the banner of a “Student Achievement Plan.” These include advancing so-called performance pay for teachers by “linking teacher salary progression to demonstrated competency and achievement, rather than just length of service” and “incentivising high-performing teachers to work in disadvantaged schools.”

Another measure extends standardised testing to Year 1 students (six-year-olds). They will soon have to undergo a phonemic awareness test, which is already used in Britain and has been condemned by literacy experts, involving children being asked to “read” pseudo-words such as “brip” or “snirt.”

The opposition Labor Party and the education trade unions are complicit in all the federal government’s education policies.

NAPLAN is the primary mechanism for the assault on public education—and it was introduced by the last Labor government. The Australian Education Union (AEU) played a critical role in sabotaging teacher opposition to the standardised testing regime. The union called off a planned boycott of NAPLAN in 2010, after the Labor government invited the union bureaucracy onto a “working party” to help organise the implementation of the tests.

NAPLAN is being used in different ways by state Labor and Liberal-National governments to undermine the public education system. In New South Wales, the Liberal-National government of Premier Mike Baird recently announced that Year 9 students will have to achieve a certain benchmark NAPLAN score to qualify for their Higher School Certificate (HSC) at the end of Year 12. The HSC is required to enter university.

In other words, 14-year-olds will be told that the possibility of going on to tertiary study depends on their performance on a standardised test. The New South Wales Teachers Federation (NSWTF) issued a statement making clear that it had no opposition to the government’s proposals, requesting only “further clarification” on the details of the implementation.

In Victoria, the Labor government of Premier Daniel Andrews has directly tied some school funding to NAPLAN test scores. The government has allocated \$72 million over four years for schools where students have registered poor NAPLAN results in Year 5. The measure was presented as a means of helping schools and disadvantaged students—but what has been established is a reactionary precedent. Moves will no doubt soon be made to tie school funding “bonuses” to high and improving NAPLAN results, further accelerating the pressure on school administrators and teachers to “teach to the test,” to the detriment of the real needs of their students.

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