

Pay-for-performance reintroduced into Australian schools

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An agreement struck between the Australian Education Union (AEU) and the Labor government in the state of Victoria reintroduces, after nearly 100 years, performance-based pay for teachers.

Known as the *Victorian Government Schools Agreement 2001*, it was endorsed in December by 78 percent of the teachers who voted. According to a union organiser, some 70 percent registered a vote.

Under the agreement, all teaching promotions will be “linked to improvements in student learning”, which will be monitored via statewide testing. Already the Achievement Improvement Monitor (AIM) program involves the testing of students in Maths and English in years three and five. It will be extended in 2001 to year seven, the first year of high school. Education minister Mary Delahunty said that the AIM program would provide a comparison of a “child’s progress, both at an individual school level and at a statewide level”.

Performance-based pay was abolished in Victoria in 1902 after prolonged complaints from the teaching profession. Introduced in 1862 in Britain it became known as a system that stifled inquiry, creating a highly circumscribed curriculum. Teachers were constantly under pressure to prepare their students for regular standardised examinations. The results would determine their students’ ranking, and thus the teacher’s pay.

An early British opponent of pay for performance was the noted educationalist Matthew Arnold who, in the 1870s, spoke of its consequences, declaring that it had “made learning rigid and narrow, reduced teachers to ciphers, and turned educational administration into a vast exercise in accountancy”.

The traditional teaching methods at the time relied on rote learning and testing, supplemented by corporal punishment aimed at establishing discipline and scaring

children into compliance.

Progressive educational thinkers fought for an approach that was child-centred, moving away from the conception that children were simply small adults. They promoted flexibility, creativity and a concern with fostering each child’s interests and potential, not simply the passing on and testing of a rigid body of knowledge.

Such methods are incompatible with pay for performance. The new agreement will see testing assume ever-increasing prominence within the school curriculum. Students as young as eight-years-old will be obliged to cram for tests, with the emphasis on achieving high marks, not the development of critical thought and genuine understanding.

Not only will the subjects on offer become more rigid, but their breadth will also be curtailed. High performance in key subjects will augment a school’s ranking. The less “academic” areas, such as art, music and drama, already badly affected by funding cuts, will be further marginalised.

Robert Lowe, who in 1861 recommended to Britain’s House of Commons that the Revised Code (Pay for Performance) be implemented, openly acknowledged that the system discriminated against the poor. “We do not profess to give these children an education that will raise them above their station and business in life; that is not our object, but to give them an education that may fit them for that business”.

Likewise today, there will be an inbuilt incentive for teachers to work in wealthier neighbourhoods, where academic performance is generally better. While the Bracks government has attempted to dodge this fact, insisting that schools and teachers will only be compared to their counterparts in similar socio-

economic areas, the door has been opened for across-the-board competition.

Research conducted by Melbourne University academic Richard Teese shows that a vast gulf already exists in Victoria between different areas of the state. More than half the boys in government schools in Melbourne's north-eastern, working class suburbs, for example, failed *Further Maths*. Their failure rate was more than double that of their government school peers in the wealthier inner eastern suburbs and nearly ten times that of boys in non-Catholic private schools.

Moreover there are vast differences between classes and students within each school. Students with learning difficulties require more attention and therefore more of a teacher's time, often with little to show as far as standardised testing is concerned. Now there will be a financial as well as social pressure for teachers to avoid troublesome classes by handing them over to more junior staff. At the same time, school administrations will tend to minimise the amount of time allocated to tackling severe educational problems.

Ominously, the Bracks government has called for a huge improvement in “educational outcomes”. “The government recognises that quality teaching is the single most important factor that influences a child's learning,” the premier recently announced, indicating that teachers will be blamed for poor test results and any failure in their schools reaching government-stipulated “benchmarks”.

But the government will provide resources for only a tiny increase in the number of teachers available to achieve the desired “outcomes”, under conditions where Victoria's public schools are still reeling from years of funding cutbacks.

By focusing on the market-driven model of “outcomes”, the government avoids any accountability for why schools and students actually “fail”—the lack of resources, facilities and specialist staff, overcrowded classrooms and the disadvantaged conditions of life of escalating numbers of children. Instead the most simplistic solution is advanced: run schools like businesses, rewarding the successes and punishing the failures.

Improving the state of public education was one of the key policies of the incoming Labor government in 1999, after the previous Kennett Liberal government slashed \$350 million from the education budget,

closing more than 400 schools and destroying around 8000 teaching jobs. Yet in the new agreement staff to student ratios, teachers' workloads and class sizes remain unchanged.

The lure for teachers is the introduction of a new “career structure”, offering experienced staff the possibility of a 17.8 per cent pay rise by becoming an “Experienced Teacher with Responsibilities”. While 63 per cent of teachers are eligible for such a promotion the reality is, in the words of Premier Bracks, that “only a limited number of teachers will be able to get the high-performance, high-quality classification.” School administrations, already facing funding shortfalls, will be responsible for deciding whether to fund promotions or essential programs.

In order to push the agreement through, the AEU cynically told its members that *all* eligible teachers would be able to gain the new positions. At the same time, the AEU promoted pay for performance under the banner “Gold for schools' sectors”. Notwithstanding the union's stance, it will not be long before the real implications of the new agreement start to hit home.



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