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Contradictions rule

The Rudd government's policies on education are inconsistent and inequitable.

Throughout 2009 Kevin Rudd has repeatedly argued against market fundamentalism. He rightly attributes the cause of the global financial crisis—which continues to cause hardship and pain for people around the world—to the unfettered markets of neo-liberalism and the ideologues who drive them.

Unfortunately, there remains a massive contradiction between what Kevin Rudd has said and the policies of his government. Nowhere is this more apparent than in his government's education and school funding policies.

The government's so-called "transparency agenda" represents one of the most serious attacks on the provision of quality education in our history. It has the potential to damage education in a way never seen before in this country.

This agenda had its origins in Kevin Rudd's speech in August 2008 in which he referred to sacking teachers and principals, closing down schools and encouraging parents to "vote with their feet". Its primary focus is on extending the philosophy of the market in education, a policy which can only deepen inequality and segregation. Extending the market and ameliorating social divides in education are incompati-

ble, mutually exclusive policies. They are antithetical to the government's social inclusion agenda.

Despite repeated representations by the teaching profession—united in its opposition to policies which will result in the creation and publication of league tables—ministers around the country refuse to act.

Given that the creation and publication of league tables is the direct result of government policies, ministers have the power, and responsibility, to act. Ministers who claim to oppose league tables, yet do nothing to prevent them being created and published, lay themselves open to the charge of hypocrisy.

There is no doubt that parents want access to quality information about their child's school performance. But they want the information to be made available in a way that does not damage their child's

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education. These are the clear findings from a comprehensive AEU-commissioned national phone poll: almost two thirds of parents with school age children want the government to introduce laws preventing the creation and publication of league tables.

The contradiction between the government's analysis of the impact of neo-liberalism and their policies is also evident in the area of schools funding. While announcing unprecedented levels of new investment for schools, the Rudd government is haunted by its decision to retain the discredited Howard government schools funding regime until 2013. The indefensible decision will continue to deliver massive increases in funding to private schools—increases which bear no relevance to student enrolment changes.

With the already announced review into schools funding set to commence in 2010, we must activate the entire public education community in the interest of achieving the introduction of a new funding system that will guarantee all children have access to a public school of the highest quality in their community.

Without a doubt, school year 2010 will be one of the most politically challenging and critical for the public education community. The outcome of our campaigns—on 'league tables' and schools funding—will be defining for public education and the nation as a whole for many years to come. ●



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