

High School at the Coal-Face: The Cost of Getting “What We’re Owed”

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<https://justiceinschools.org>

This case study draws on research and media concerning environmental sustainability, coal mining and education, as well as our experiences living in the Hunter Valley in New South Wales, Australia. This region is one of Australia’s largest coal mining regions and is home to the biggest coal export port in the world. In Australia, where there are growing inequities in public funding of schools, schools are looking to non-government sources, commercial sponsorship arrangements and private contributions to supplement the government funding they receive. To do so, public schools must report annually to the Department of Education on how private funding arrangements benefit department, school and community outcomes. Sponsorships are not philanthropic, but involve an exchange between the private company and the school where both parties benefit. Fossil fuels companies are large donors of education initiatives and it is not uncommon for schools in fossil fuels communities to receive funding, resources or sponsorship from mining companies in exchange for access to the school community, promotional opportunities, non-tangible benefits such as an enhanced corporate social responsibility reputation and the potential for future workers. However, partnerships with mining companies are controversial, with concerns about the impact of these corporate sponsors on school curriculum and their appropriateness in a climate changed world.

“Let’s move onto our next agenda item. Let’s see...the Executive is working on their report¹ for the Department of Education on the impact of South Mining’s sponsorship on the school community. Nick, what do they need from us?” Regional High School Parents and Community Association (P&C) Chairperson Carol Peters looked across the round table.

Principal Nick Donovan straightened up in his seat to survey the group. It had been a productive meeting with most of the time spent planning the upcoming trivia night to raise funds for the Year 12 Formal, but frustrations had grown when Carol announced that their latest funding request to relawn the school’s oval had been unsuccessful. This had been the third time the school had requested funding from the Department to upgrade the school’s sporting facilities, and with the oval worsening with each summer the rejection was particularly disappointing.

¹ The NSW Department of Education Commercial Arrangements, Sponsorship and Donations implementation policy requires that schools report annually on how commercial arrangements, including sponsorships, benefit the department, school and community outcomes. Sponsorships are not philanthropic, but involve the provision of “money and value-in-kind contributions to support a particular program, event or initiative in return for certain specified benefits.” (<https://education.nsw.gov.au/policy-library/policies/pd-2009-0399> p. 9) Value in kind may include acknowledgement of the sponsor through promotional materials relevant to the program, opportunities to address the school, and/or the right to distribute sponsor advertising ‘to staff, teachers and participants over 18 years’ (p. 22). In the annual report, the principal must demonstrate that the sponsorship agreement is in the school’s interests and that their association with the mining company will not bring the Department of Education into disrepute.

Nick addressed the group. “As you know, as a condition of our sponsorship agreement with South Mining, the School Executive are required to submit a report to the Department of Education each year.² This year, we’d like the P&C to again make comments in our submission as a representative of the school community to support the continuation of South’s sponsorship. We’ve been very lucky to have secured this partnership, particularly given the events of the past year. South’s sponsorship was critical to our remote learning plans during the COVID-19 lockdowns.³ Many of our students needed laptops at home, and we could only provide them with South’s funding. Their support has allowed us to continue running the literacy intervention program they sponsored while students were isolating. I think we need to do what we can to continue this sponsorship and would like to find ways to strengthen it. In fact, from my conversation with South’s community relations officer, they’re open to supporting the development of engineering-based curricular materials for Science and Technology, and funding new robotics equipment, too.”⁴

Carol added, “Thanks, Nick. Does anyone have any questions or comments about our sponsorship agreement? I think we should consider how South Mining could support the school community in the future, to add weight to the continuation of the sponsorship.”

“Yeah, I’ve got an idea, Carol.” Steve Jones raised his hand. “What if we reached out to South Mine about the oval? My son hurt his knee there last month during training. I don’t know if we can afford to wait another year for the Department to consider funding it. South sponsors the boys’ rugby team and donated equipment to the club. I reckon they’d be happy to chip in for re-turfing the oval, too.”

“Thanks, Steve,” Carol replied. “Perhaps they could also fund some shade sails to give the kids somewhere cool to hang out at lunchtime. I think South helped Regional Primary School last year with shading for their playground. And maybe we can work with them to do something about the classrooms without air conditioning. My son has been complaining that the classrooms get so hot he can barely concentrate.”

Carol looked across the room. “Helen, did you want to add something? I’m sure you know a few more projects they’ve sponsored, like, The Healthy Kids, Healthy Food program and the Breakfast Club.”

Helen Gordon had raised her hand briefly while Steve was speaking but lowered it, apparently thinking twice about adding to the conversation. Helen had joined the P&C relatively recently, when she and her husband had moved to town on a tree change,⁵ filling the vacancy for doctors at the local practice.

After a moment's pause, Helen spoke, “What benefits do the mines get out of this sponsorship agreement, I wonder? I think we should hold off on reaching out to the mines to fund this. They are already involved in so many projects with the school, I—” she hesitated, choosing her words carefully.

² As P&C groups are involved in the fundraising for schools, it is likely principals would consult with them to discuss funding initiatives.

³ South32 Illawarra Metallurgical Coal donated three cents from every tonne of saleable coal it produces and gave over \$25 000 to six schools to help support them through the COVID-19 pandemic.
<https://www.illawarramercury.com.au/story/7483842/mining-company-supports-school-students-and-their-families/>

⁴ Fossil fuels companies have developed a range of learning materials to encourage understanding of their contribution and impacts. Recent examples in Australia include excursions such as School Mine Tours the NSW Upper Hunter (<https://miningdialogue.com.au/engagement/school-tours>) and a controversial primary school incursion provided by Woodside Petroleum where Year 3 students were asked to make an oil reservoir using bread slices, vegemite and sprinkles. See:
<https://www.abc.net.au/news/2021-08-20/oil-exploration-kids-science-lesson/100388140>

⁵ A tree change is a term used to describe moving from the city to a rural or country setting.

“I’m worried about the message this is sending our kids. My daughter wanted to be a vet before we moved to town, but ever since that Careers Day earlier this year, she keeps talking about applying for an apprenticeship at one of the mines after Year 10 because she thinks it’s the only way to make money in this town. I’m worried we’re limiting our kids’ dreams of what’s possible for their future by spotlighting the mines all the time.”⁶

Helen continued. “And then there’s the message we’re sending to the community when we partner with companies like this. South has done some good for our school, but they’re not squeaky clean, what with the botched rehabilitation after that big fish kill in the river. I’m not saying...” She paused again before continuing. “I just think we should try to fundraise what we can on our own and reach out to some other stakeholders. There’s more to this community than those mines.”

Helen’s comment was greeted with stares. Carol broke the silence, “Thank you, Helen, um, are you saying you don’t support a continuing sponsorship agreement?”

Helen responded defensively, “Things are changing and we need to think carefully about where we stand. What if there’s another Juukan Gorge tragedy⁷ and South is responsible for it? Tens of thousands of years of history crumbled to dust, and we’re partnered with the company at fault?”

“Let’s not jump to conclusions—there’s a strong Aboriginal consultation process in place,” interjected Steve. “We can’t cut ties with the biggest investors in town just because they’re coal miners. The coal mines do a heck of good for all of us. Most of the people in this room are connected to the mines in one way or another.”

Steve continued, “If anything, I’m concerned about the message *not* reaching out to the mines to help pay for this sends to *our* kids. At the mine, we’ve been finding it hard to get properly qualified technicians. We need a stronger partnership to build a specialised mining academy here to meet demand. The mine has a long lease on the land. My kids came home after a Science lesson last week, going on about the negative impacts of mining and barely mentioning just how important coal is to our everyday lives. It’s not all truck driving and blowing stuff up! It’s like teachers are trying to make my kids feel guilty about what their parents do for a living.”⁸

“No, I’m not saying we should be demonising the mines or cutting ties with them, just that we should engage with other businesses first,” Helen responded. “Diversify a bit. And spend some time building

⁶ In 2013, a Narara Valley High School partnered with Nucoal to develop a Mining Academy program to prepare students for work in the mining industry. The partnership was met with criticisms by the NSW Teachers Federation over concerns about corporate influence on the curriculum.

<https://www.abc.net.au/local/stories/2013/02/04/3682744.htm>

<https://www.smh.com.au/education/mining-firm-signs-deal-with-school-20130202-2dr67.html>

<https://theconversation.com/mining-young-minds-the-challenges-of-private-interests-and-education-12133>

⁷ In May 2020, Rio Tinto destroyed the Juukan Gorge caves, a 40,000 year old sacred site to the Puutu Kunti Kurrama and Pinikura peoples in Western Australia, during an iron ore exploration project.

https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/Joint/Northern_Australia/CavesatJuukanGorge/Interim_Report An earlier Senate report argues that mining companies have consistently failed to live up to existing requirements to consult properly with those communities, and have repeatedly failed to deliver the benefits promised before mining commenced.

https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/Senate/Former_Committees/uranium/report/d07

⁸ These comments are derived from Dahlgren, K. (2021). The moral case for coal: The ethics of complicity with and amongst Australian pro-coal lobbyists. *The Australian Journal of Anthropology*, 32, 19-32.

<https://doi.org/10.1111/taja.12389>

relationships that will serve us better long after the mines are gone. What about that new wind farm that started up?”

“Thank you, Steve and Helen,” Carol started, “I appreciate you sharing your concerns.”

Nick stepped in: “I will speak with the Executive. We will try to take these points into consideration in our future planning, but we will need a statement from the Committee on how South’s sponsorship has contributed to the broader school community. Perhaps you can connect with the parents of a few of the kids who got the laptops, Carol?”

Helen shifted uncomfortably and began gathering her things as Carol called the meeting to a close.

“Well, that could’ve gone a lot worse,” David Matthews muttered as he joined Nick in reassembling the library furniture in the emptying room. Nick and David were neighbours and their kids often played together, but the two men had gotten to know each other better when David took up the school’s Aboriginal Education Officer⁹ position a few years ago. As the school had a high proportion of students who identified as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, David played an important role in the community in supporting the learning and wellbeing of Indigenous students.

“I thought it was going to when Helen spoke up.” Nick admitted, gesturing for David to grab the end of a table with him. “What do you reckon? Are we focusing on the mines too much for funding and job opportunities?”

“I get where Helen’s coming from,” David began. “In an ideal world, I don’t think we should have sponsors at all. Public schools should be publicly funded.”

“Yeah, but we’re not in an ideal world,” Nick sighed. “Public schools have drawn the short straw of the funding deal between state and federal governments.¹⁰ Until the funding is more equitable, we need to look elsewhere to cover the costs. We’re being encouraged to supplement the funding we get through sponsorships like these, and if we don’t...”

David nodded, “My niece just started her teaching degree this year and having a scholarship from East Mine has made things so much easier for her. I know the good that these mines are doing for our kids.” David paused. “Honestly, I think they should be doing more. We all see how much coal goes out of here on those trains, and it’s not like these mines are getting any smaller, and now with a gas plant opening

⁹ Aboriginal Education Officers are Aboriginal people who are employed in NSW public schools with a high proportion of students who identify as Aboriginal. AEOs work with teachers and Aboriginal students and families to support the learning, welfare and wellbeing of Aboriginal students. AEOs may also represent the school on the local Aboriginal Education Consultative Group which provides guidance for a range of culturally significant educational aims and practices.

<https://education.nsw.gov.au/about-us/careers-at-education/why-work-at-education/diversity-and-inclusion/aboriginal-peoples>

¹⁰ The National School Reform Agreement is a bilateral agreement between Commonwealth, State and Territory governments. The current agreement includes minimum funding requirements of states and territories for government and non-government schools from 2018-2023 that they must meet in order to receive Commonwealth funding. <https://www.dese.gov.au/quality-schools-package/fact-sheets/how-are-schools-funded-australia> This model uses the Schooling Resource Standard to determine how much public funding is needed by schools to meet students’ needs. However, funding of Australian schools has been reduced and the funding gap between advantaged and disadvantaged schools continues to grow, with many disadvantaged schools yet to receive the full SRS funding while private school funding has increased.

<https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2022/mar/13/the-gonski-failure-why-did-it-happen-and-who-is-to-blame-for-the-defrauding-of-public-schools>

down the road... These companies are desecrating Country¹¹ for profit, they're ignoring the objections of our Mob,¹² and the government is letting them. And it's these kids—our kids—who'll be left with the clean up bill and lost heritage when the mines are gone. If we can't stop them, our kids may as well reap the benefits of the mines and their money in the meantime. It's what we're owed."

Heading to the staff meeting the following afternoon, Nick bid goodbye to students as he passed. As he approached the staffroom, Nick walked into a conversation between new science teacher, Jessica Young, and Greg Martin, the science head teacher. Jessica had secured a permanent position at the school at the start of the year as part of a scholarship program for new graduates who would teach in rural or remote communities.¹³ The school had had a difficult time attracting new teachers and had been unable to offer physics as a Higher School Certificate¹⁴ subject since the old physics teacher retired four years ago. When Jessica arrived with codes for physics and biology, her appointment was greeted with optimism. But since then, her enthusiasm for climate science and environmental advocacy had rubbed some the wrong way. Not that she was wrong, Nick thought. Sustainability was a Cross Curriculum Priority¹⁵ and science was the right place to integrate it.

Jessica and Greg were discussing the upcoming School Mines Tour¹⁶ for Year 9 students. The tours were part of a long-running program that fostered dialogue between the community and mining industry serving as an opportunity for students to learn about the impacts and benefits of mining in the region. With a smile, Nick joined their conversation.

"Why do our students tour the mine sites?" Jessica asked. "Are there other options available to students interested in something else? I was talking to my Year 10 class about sustainable ecosystems and balancing human needs last week, and students started talking about the impact of coal mining on the environment and species like the black throated finch¹⁷ and how completely helpless they feel to change any of it. It was really sad. Surely they're not alone in this? And if they're not, shouldn't we be giving them the chance to tour some rehabilitated sites, maybe get involved with Indigenous mining

¹¹ "Country is the term often used by Aboriginal peoples to describe the lands, waterways, sky and seas to which they are connected through songlines. The term Country contains complex ideas about law, place, custom, language, spiritual belief, cultural practice, material sustenance, family and identity."

<https://aiatsis.gov.au/explore/welcome-country#toc-what-is-country->

¹² Mob is a colloquial term used to refer to a group of Aboriginal people associated with a particular place or nation group.

¹³ The Teach.Rural scholarship was established to address teacher shortages in rural and remote public schools. New university graduates who hold the scholarship are expected to accept a permanent, full-time teaching position in a rural or remote school for at least three years.

<https://education.nsw.gov.au/teach-nsw/get-paid-to-study/teach-rural-scholarship>

¹⁴ The Higher School Certificate (HSC) is the highest level educational award in New South Wales Schools and is usually completed in Years 11 and 12.

¹⁵ The Australian Curriculum identifies Sustainability as one of three cross-curriculum priorities to be taught through all key learning areas.

<https://www.australiancurriculum.edu.au/f-10-curriculum/cross-curriculum-priorities/sustainability/>

¹⁶ Approximately 1000 Year 5 and 9 school students tour mine and rehabilitation sites in the NSW Upper Hunter each year. <https://miningdialogue.com.au/engagement/school-tours>

¹⁷ The black throated finch is an endangered species. In the controversy surrounding the approval of the Adani Carmichael coal mine, conservationists drew attention to the vulnerability and displacement of the bird due to land clearing for the mine.

<https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2022/apr/05/conservationists-accuse-adani-of-sidelining-experts-on-endangered-black-throated-finch>

rehabilitation groups? They want to make a difference and to do something that gives them a bit of hope for the future. Some even mentioned organising a protest against the new gas power plant.”

“I appreciate that they’re passionate about this,” said Greg, “but I don’t think they should let themselves get upset about something that’s outside their control. If they want to do something to make a noticeable difference to the environment, they could get involved in the school’s recycling project, or volunteer to plant some trees at the North Mine rehabilitation site one weekend. Some students a few years ago used to clean up the creek every month, maybe these kids could start that up again.”

“I’m sure these students would be interested in those projects—I’ll pass it on.” Jessica continued, “But there’s a double standard here. We are encouraging them to be more environmentally conscious while we work with coal mines who have been fined for pollution!”

“We’re required by our Code of Conduct¹⁸ to work in partnership with our community,” Nick explained. “And really, the mines sponsor so many projects we take for granted here. A lot of the environmental projects we run are supported by the mines. South helped fund the community garden and their staff helped us plant the veggies they donated when it opened. They’ve donated equipment to your faculty¹⁹ and subsidised the costs of excursions for our students. In the broader scheme of things that might not account for much, but it’s more help than some might offer.”

“I think we should do better than that.” Jessica’s voice quietened, deflated. “I never saw myself making concessions for coal companies. It makes me feel complicit for all the things I stand against.”

“Jess, I know you mean well,” Greg said reassuringly, “but this isn’t the time to debate about coal mining and climate change; this is about what our students and our school need. Either we partner with businesses who can help cover the costs of what we need, or our students miss out. We compete with the private school for enrolments every year and then at the end of Year 10, we lose even more students to them because they can offer HSC subjects that we can’t. That’s all well and good for the families who can afford it, but for the ones who can’t, or the ones who choose to stay, we owe it to them to provide the best education we can. Sometimes that comes with compromise.”

“And what about our students’ futures, or their children’s? Don’t we owe them those same promises? Or is that part of the compromise?”

As Nick returned to his office after the staff meeting, he picked up a torn piece of paper that had fallen out of a bin. In large red letters it read ‘GAS POWER PLANT.’ Taped to a window nearby, he found the full poster, ‘SAVE OUR FUTURE! STOP THE REGIONAL GAS POWER PLANT!’, next to a flyer for an upcoming School Strike for Climate²⁰ protest.

Sighing, Nick mentally added this to his ever-increasing list of concerns as he churned over questions in his mind. The sponsorship agreement with South Mining had been critical in supporting his students’ academic and socio-economic needs in recent years, and continuing this sponsorship would ensure

¹⁸ The NSW Department of Education Code of Conduct values statement requires staff to “work openly in partnership with parents, communities and organisations.”
<https://education.nsw.gov.au/content/dam/main-education/policy-library/associated-documents/pd-2004-0020-01.pdf>

¹⁹ In NSW schools, the term ‘faculty’ is used to describe a group of teachers for a particular subject area. For example, all of the science teachers form the Science Faculty and their immediate superior is their head teacher. In the case, the school has been able to receive funding and grants by mining companies to purchase equipment needed for particular faculties, as well as whole school initiatives.

²⁰ <https://www.schoolstrike4climate.com/>

ongoing support for these students. Was the school becoming too reliant on the mining industry to supplement the Department's limited funding? What kind of relationship should the school and fossil fuels industry have now that community sentiment is becoming increasingly polarised? How should he lead his school through this sponsorship evaluation process while respecting community stakeholders' fears and responding to students' concerns?