

National NSW Education

## Politics kid from Sydney's west takes charge of education in NSW



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When a teenage Prue Car was nearing the end of high school some two decades ago, she gave her English teacher a framed photograph of Paul Keating.

The photo, still on her teacher's bookshelf at her home in Castle Hill, was taken in early October 1999, on the day the former prime minister gave his ALP life membership acceptance speech to a packed state Labor conference in Sydney.



NSW Deputy Premier and Education Minister Prue Car. WOLTER PEETERS

It was a classic, caustic Keating address: “vitriolic and rousing”, as the *Herald* commented. “This is the home of faith – of the true believers,” he told the forum. “Everyone here believes in Labor. But we need good candidates out there who can win seats.”

For Car – then a 17-year-old pupil at a western Sydney Catholic school – the formidable Labor figure who was never afraid of a challenge “struck a chord ... because he was a boy from Bankstown”.

Now – six weeks in as deputy premier and the state’s newest education minister – Car is confronting seismic policy challenges of her own: how to turn around tumbling student results, how to rebuild confidence in NSW’s public education system and how to plug chronic teacher shortages.



NSW Education Minister Prue Car at Parramatta East Public School this week. RHETT WHYMAN

“It’s the right of every student to attend their local school,” she told the *Herald*. “I’m going to be a champion of public education. We need to be talking up our system ... and we need to build confidence in the system, so we can encourage more to enrol in our public schools and encourage the next generation of teachers to teach in public schools.”

As more parents gravitate to private schools – [the share of students in public schools has hit its lowest in 15 years](#) – rebuilding confidence in the state system will require a mammoth effort. High school drop out rates have risen to their highest on record, with retention rates for government schools plummeting to 66.5 per cent.

“Public schools are not funded enough. That’s the truth of it,” Car said, adding the government will bring NSW public schools to 100 per cent of the School Resourcing Standard during the next five-year funding agreement with the federal government.

“I’ve already had a conversation with [federal education minister] Jason Clare about that,” she said. “As one of the biggest providers of public education in the world we have to lead the way.”



Her son attends a private school. It was a decision she said she made because “we were in one of the suburbs where the government didn’t build a school”.

President of the NSW Secondary Principals’ Council, Craig Petersen, said while dealing with school staffing was the obvious, immediate challenge, changing the “damaged culture” of public education was the bigger fight ahead. “We need to rebuild confidence in NSW public schools, and trust in the quality of the profession.”

One of the first moves the new government made was to sack NSW Education Department boss Georgina Harrison, a career bureaucrat who was head of NSW’s 2200 public school for two years. Her replacement is acting secretary [Murat Dizdar, a former garbageman, then school teacher](#), who was one of the most senior officials in the Department before stepping into his current role.

It was a symbolic step to place a former public school teacher and principal in the acting role after seven years under Harrison and her predecessor former ABC boss Mark Scott.

“We’ve been elected, I think clearly, to make systemic change for most teachers across the board,” Car said. “That is in terms of their pay and conditions. This is a big change, to have a government that admits to teachers you are not paid enough. That is the truth.”



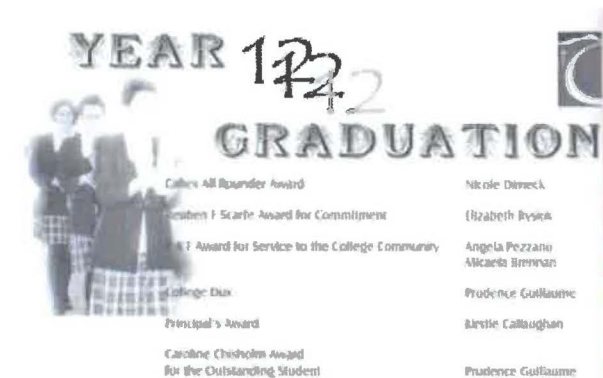
State school teachers walked off the job in support of better pay and conditions last May. GETTY

The NSW Education Department and the Teachers Federation have begun negotiation on lifting teachers pay, but Car would not be drawn further on the issue.

She also confirmed the new government would dump the previous Coalition’s rewarding excellence program, led by education academic John Hattie, which planned to give a selection of top teachers super-salaries.

“We are not about paying a very small percentage of certain teachers significantly more than others. We will be negotiating to provide greater opportunities for all teachers across the board in salaries, conditions and workload,” Car said.

Car grew up near Penrith. Her father, Noel Guillaume, who has French and Indian heritage, met her mother Ann when they were working for a bank.



Prue Car's year 12 year book; Car and her three-unit English teacher Michele Elborough.

She spent her schooling life in the Catholic system, attending Our Lady of the Sacred Way in Emu Plains, and then Caroline Chisholm College in Glenmore Park, where she was school captain and dux.

In an interview with *The Catholic Weekly*, she said the faith she “was brought up on influences me in everything I do, including politics”.

Her three-unit English teacher, Michele Elborough recalled there were early signs she would be drawn to a political career. “We’d be in class discussing *Jane Eyre*, or Yeats, and conversations would steer towards politics or political ideas. It was quite unusual.”

“I’d drive her and her classmates to so many random debating and public speaking competitions around western Sydney on Friday nights ... God, thinking about it, I’m sure these are things you couldn’t do now as a teacher.”

Elborough said as a student Car was diligent, hard-working. “She put a lot of pressure on herself. One day, she hands me this picture of Keating, and I’ve kept it ever since.”

Car, 40, has been in parliament eight years, and in the shadow education portfolio since 2019.





Car on the campaign trail with former NSW Labor leader John Robertson in 2011. PETER RAE

After dropping out of an arts degree at the University of Sydney (she ditched the course after becoming “swept up” in NSW Young Labor), Car took a job in 2003 at then-NSW premier Bob Carr’s office, where he remembers her as a “lively, self-motivated” recruit. “She handled liaison with the backbench, and that was more important than it sounds. I got the impression that her attention to detail would see her rise in the party ranks,” he recalls.

A stint as a Penrith city councillor was followed by her election to the NSW legislative assembly as the member for Londonderry in 2015. Four years later, she replaced Jihad Dib, a former principal of Punchbowl Boys High, who became famous for turning around the turbulent school, as shadow education minister.

In winter last year, in the lead up to the campaign, she was diagnosed with cancer after doctors discovered a rapidly growing tumour in her kidney. After immediate surgery she took two months leave during her recovery, returning in September.

One of the key election pledges by the new Minns government was to build a suite of new high schools spanning from Gregory Hills to Schofields.

She blamed previous governments’ failure to build public high schools in high-growth parts of western Sydney, as one reason parents have abandoned the sector.

“In my community, where I grew up, governments haven’t built enough schools. And then parents have often felt forced to send their children to non-government schools because there are precious little options. Around Marsden Park there is no public high school, but there will be now.”

In opposition Car was also a vocal supporter of the non-government system, declaring herself a “big fan” of private schools in a meeting of school heads two weeks before the election.

One policy idea borrowed from independent schools that the new government took to the election was the promise to make the International Baccalaureate available in state schools, an idea criticised by experts who believe it will undermine the HSC and deepen an already alarming education divide.

It's that divide, and arresting the slump in academic performance in international tests, that is another colossal task for the new government.

"The incontestable data is that we have gone backwards in results," former premier Bob Carr said, emphasising that turning around academic performance was the main functional policy challenge for Car. "You can't persuade me that we can't do better in maths and science and that we are doomed to be outperformed by Singapore."

"Given the extra resources [governments have] invested we should be busting through any benchmarks. I don't think new programs will excite the interest of the public as much as the demonstrable turn around in school performance," he said.

In the past two weeks, Car has announced a number of initiatives including reducing the administration workload on teachers, and starting a review of a controversial behaviour policy brought in during term 4 last year that restricted the length and number of suspensions schools could issue.

"We're not giving our schools the tools to deal with behaviour," she said. "And the implementation of the behaviour policy made it worse. One of the biggest things that teachers do is manage behaviour in a classroom. And the government has to make sure that it doesn't make it more difficult for them to do that."

It is understood Donna Cross, appointed as NSW's behaviour advisor under the Coalition, will stay on, but it is unclear in what capacity.

[As the Herald revealed this week](#), the government is also pausing the release of almost 30 syllabuses to allow teachers to focus on the new maths and English curriculum.

Car said the government was pressing ahead with a review of almost 200 NSW Education Department policies and programs, from school report cards to excursion forms.

"There will be no changes to NAPLAN," she confirmed. "Our priority at the moment is improving outcomes by getting more teachers in classrooms."

Meanwhile, Car's former teacher, Elborough, who now works for Macquarie University as a supervisor of student teachers in the classroom, said after working in Catholic schools for more than 30 years she was alarmed about the "dilapidated state" of some of the public schools she visits weekly for her university work.

"It blew me away, I am often overwhelmed by the disparities in the sectors. You do really notice the difference between the Catholic and the private schools and some of the state schools, you know, particularly out west."

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