

Children must be protected from the influence of companies profiting from war

Paul Daley



Primary and secondary schools are not the place for weapons manufacturers to be extending their reach

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When you visit the southern hemisphere's [biggest aerospace weapons show](#) you expect to see plenty of machines, worth billions of dollars, that kill lots of people and make companies obscenely wealthy.

What I didn't expect to see when I wandered the exposition halls a few years ago and spoke to the besuited salespeople about how their products killed, were the logos of many respected tertiary institutions that were collaborating somehow with the merchants of death.

Stem (Science, Technology, Engineering, Maths) is the critical acronym here. Besides needing wars, weapons companies also require people with such qualifications, and partnering directly with tertiary institutions offers under-resourced universities easy revenue while paving a more linear path from graduate to recruit. It also offers weapons companies a respectable branding platform, although the [ethical conflicts of interest](#) can be profound.

I've written extensively about the [militarisation of Australian history](#) and national identity, and of the insidious pervasion of weapons manufacturers into the [commemoration of war dead](#) at the Australian War Memorial. But now, it seems, the \$368bn [Aukus pact](#) between Australia, the US and UK to build nuclear-powered submarines for Australia, is offering new avenues for defence manufacturers – and the defence force itself – to partner with primary and secondary schools.

As the global strategic environment becomes ever more parlous amid increasing US-China tensions and Russian aggression, growing acceptance among students of war as a *fait accompli* can only be engendered by such relationships.

The idea seems to be to “get ‘em young and inculcate them”.

On 19 June Australia's department of defence launched a "Nuclear-Powered Submarine Propulsion Challenge in Australian high schools providing a new generation of ... STEM students the chance to win a trip to HMAS Stirling in Western Australia to see first-hand how submarines work".

"The introductory-level, nationwide program will provide teachers with learning resources to help students design their own engineering plans for submarine nuclear propulsion. The program aims to inspire students to discover how nuclear propulsion works and how it makes submarines more capable," reads [the defence press release](#) announcing the competition.

Defence makes it clear it sees student entrants as future submariners, engineers and technicians.

Earlier this month Adelaide's The Advertiser published a [detailed article](#) about how weapons makers were partnering with primary schools. The headline says it all: "Kids, 10, training to build a workforce for AUKUS, SA's \$368 bn nuclear submarine project".

"These kids are part of a pilot program called Beacon that wants to hook kids on the kinds of subjects that we keep being told they don't do enough of. Science, technology, engineering and maths ... The subjects everyone laments that not enough kids study these days, especially as Australia rushes headlong into a future where it hopes to build nuclear submarines and other assorted hi-tech defence toys."

Weapons. Toys. Same-same really.

The article details how "Beacon", run by tech company, [Lumination](#) (which collaborates with a range of industries, including defence) and weapons maker BAE, is "captivating" students.

"This year more than 600 students from South Australia, Victoria, Western Australia and New South Wales will take part in the program.

"The idea is to spark the imagination of students through the use of virtual and augmented reality, coding, robotics, artificial intelligence and 3D modelling. There has already been a tour of the Osborne shipyard where the submarines will be built. There is also an "intensive" camp where all the kids come together for a weekend."

Attitudes vary greatly from state-to-state and territory-to-territory about schools entering collaborative arrangements with weapons makers. It is clear that some hold serious moral reservations.

On 1 July the New South Wales education department updated [its policy](#) to stipulate it supports arrangements "with appropriate organisations, individuals, businesses and other government agencies

excluding organisations promoting unhealthy food, tobacco, alcohol products, gambling products, weapons manufacturing or anything illegal”.

The policy change resulted from extensive lobbying by the NSW Teachers Federation and the organisation [Teachers for Peace](#).

Victoria’s education department [deems it inappropriate](#) for schools to collaborate with “companies involved in the sale/promotion of firearms” though not, apparently, weapons of war. Queensland deems it inappropriate for schools to collaborate with an organisation “involved in the manufacturing or selling of weapons including guns, or ... associated with the use of weapons”.

The policies of WA, South Australia, Tasmania and the Northern Territory are more opaque.

The [Australian Capital Territory stipulates](#) “any company or organisation whose name is associated with the manufacture, distribution or sale of tobacco products, alcoholic beverages, pornography or armaments is not regarded as an appropriate sponsor”.

Coinciding with the NSW change of policy, Teachers for Peace director, Elise West, was quoted in [The Educator](#) online newsletter.

“Some of the world’s biggest weapons companies influence STEM education through sponsorships, partnerships, events, competitions, and more,” West said.

“These companies profit from war and insecurity; some of them are associated with weapons of mass destruction, alleged crimes of war, human rights breaches, and corporate misconduct. They should not advertise to children.”

Indeed, childhood and youth should be strenuously defended from such influence and incursion.

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