

AUSTRALIAN COUNCIL FOR THE DEFENCE OF GOVERNMENT SCHOOLS

PRESS RELEASE 604#

Free education - the Basic Right of Children - under Threat.

Free public education has existed for more than a century in Australia, and Abbott and Pyne through their think tanks, are attempting to change this.

PUBLIC EDUCATION SHOULD BE FREE, SECULAR AND UNIVERSAL, OPEN TO ALL CHILDREN, WITH WEALTHY OR POOR PARENTS.

IF ABBOTT THROWS EDUCATION BACK TO THE STATES THE TAXING POWER SHOULD FOLLOW IT!

Their Right wing Think Tanks are flying the user pays kite.

A confidential discussion paper by the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet shows how Gonski is not only gone. A range of weird and wonderful new reform options is on the table.

The paper emerges in response to current Reform of the Federation processes and flags four major options for comprehensively reshaping school funding in our nation.

Fairfax broke the story that the discussion paper contained a proposal that **wealthy parents pay for their children to attend public schools.**

There was a chorus of disbelief and rejection from State Education ministers, teachers and others.

ACT Education Minister Joy Burch and politicians from both parties said that public education should always be free and available to all. <http://www.canberratimes.com.au/act-news/act-not-about-to-meanstest-public-education-minister-joy-burch-says-20150622-ghugk0.html>

The Australian Education Union also called on state and territory governments to reject the Abbott Government's reported proposals to stop funding public schools or force many parents to pay to send their children to them.

AEU Federal President Correna Haythorpe said "Not content with abandoning Gonski and cutting \$30 billion from education, Mr Abbott now wants to either provide no money for public schools or end the provision of free schooling in this country," she said. "It is a fundamental right of every Australian to be educated in public schools free of charge and has

been since the 19th century.

<http://www.aefederal.org.au/Media/MediaReleases/2015/2206.pdf>

Ken Boston opposed the ideas in the Discussion paper and Abbott and Pyne distanced themselves from it. <http://www.smh.com.au/federal-politics/political-news/gonski-architect-ken-boston-slams-proposal-for-commonwealth-to-abandon-public-schools-20150622-ghuko7>
Chris Bonner commented in 2012 about a similar crazy idea at <http://www.smh.com.au/comment/public-education-slug-the-rich-and-starve-the-rest-20140430-zr1x3.html>

Pyne and Abbott quickly rejected the idea. But in given their tertiary education proposals, who believes them?

The discussion paper indicates the extreme lengths the Abbott government is considering in order to re-shape education in the name of economic efficiency. Options include:

- transferring all funding responsibilities for public schools to the states and territories;
- the federal government only funding private schools;
- scaling back government involvement in school funding programmes; or making the federal government the main funder of public and private schools....

The Age of 22 June 2015 had the following to say:

The notion of high-income parents paying for their children to attend public schools comes out of the fourth option, which would see the Commonwealth become the dominant funder of all schools. The paper suggests the federal government would adjust school funding amounts based on "student need and the ability of families to make a contribution".

It then adds: "States and Territories would have the option to 'top-up' funding to government schools, if they wished to do so, to ensure all public school students, regardless of the ability of families to make a contribution, were able to attend for free".

The devil, therefore, is in the detail. While the paper does not explicitly state that parents will be charged fees, it is implicit within the argument. Under this option, the federal government would give schools less money and if the states and territories cannot afford to top it up, the onus would fall to parents.

*This proposal bears a curious similarity to a recommendation made last year by free market think tank Centre for Independent Studies, which suggested charging "\$1000 per student from high-income families attending government schools". The CIS report, titled *School Funding on a Budget*, argues that such a change could save governments \$250 million per year.*

As the government's discussion paper rightly points out, such a move would drive 'school choice', which is code in policy circles for promoting the 'marketisation' of schooling. For

example, if a parent was faced with \$1000 fee for their child to attend a local public school, it would increase the incentive to leave the public system altogether and enrol their child in a private school.

Over time, therefore, such a reform has the capacity to increase the drift of higher income families away from the public school system, which will only serve to increase the gulf between private and public schools by further concentrating disadvantaged young people in the public system.

Australians have had access to free public education for well over a hundred years. While Australian states have constitutional responsibility for education and remain the principal funders of public schools, federal governments have progressively increased their share funding for Australian schools since the Karmel Report in 1973. This week's leaked report flags an extreme makeover to this historical settlement and potentially puts at risk free universal access to public schooling.

DOGS note that State Aid was commenced through the Federal Government and only a trickle has followed to State Schools. It should stop.

If Abbott and Pyne wish to starve State Governments of funds for public education and push responsibility for education back to the States, then the taxing power should follow it.

The Federation established in 1901 is in crisis largely because the taxing power (income tax etc.) was ceded by the States to the Commonwealth in the War years and Section 96 which continued past its used by date has been used to provide State Aid in tied grants to religious schools.

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