

AUSTRALIAN COUNCIL FOR THE DEFENCE OF GOVERNMENT SCHOOLS

PRESS RELEASE 619#

SOCIAL SEGREGATION INCREASING AS RESULT OF STATE AID TO PRIVATE SCHOOLS

Since 1964 DOGS have opposed State Aid to private religious schools because they segregate children on the basis of religion, ability to pay, ethnicity and social mores. This leads to both the pillarization and polarisation of society. This has deleterious effects, including inequalities and tribalism. For more than a century our public schools kept both pillarisation and polarisation of our society to a minimum. But things have changed – radically, and for the worse.

Educationists are finally waking up that DOGS were right about segregation. Unfortunately they are still romancing about ‘needs’ policies and Gonski. <http://www.saveourschools.com.au/equity-in-education/growing-social-segregation-in-australias-schools> and <http://www.australianreview.net/digest/2015/08/ho.html>

They have not yet reached the DOGS position that the only way forward is to withdraw public funding from schools that divide children on the basis of religion, ethnicity, social mores, or ability to pay.

Nevertheless, the research evidence is of interest:

Trevor Cobbold of *Save our Schools* points to [The research by the University of Technology Sydney’s Dr Christina Ho](#) which shows a highly divided education system in New South Wales with some elite private schools operating as virtually mono-cultural bastions of whiteness, while public schools, including selective schools, are sometimes overwhelmingly dominated by students from language backgrounds other than English.

Ho found that students from language backgrounds other than English (LBOTE) form more than half of all enrolments in Sydney’s public high schools (52 per cent) compared to 37 per cent in Catholic schools and only 22 per cent in Independent schools. Schools are becoming more segregated in terms of both class and ethnicity and it has serious implications equity in education and for multiculturalism and social cohesion.

Census data show that approximately 30 per cent of residents of the lower north shore spoke a language other than English at home in 2011. This means that on average, the private schools in this region are disproportionately Anglo-Australian, while the public schools are disproportionately non-Anglo.

The pattern of ethnic segregation is also evident (although to a lesser extent) in other areas. For example, the inner-west Burwood-Strathfield region is a more culturally diverse area overall, with 64 per cent speaking a language other than English but the schools are ethnically polarised. In public high schools, an average of 80 per cent of students are LBOTE, while in private schools, it is about half this figure, at 42 per cent. As Ho concludes:

More and more students are going to schools that do not represent the range of people in their neighbourhood, but rather a select group. Their families have chosen to enrol them in schools where there are more 'people like us'. In providing more school 'choice' for parents, the government has created a marketplace in schools that has led to self-segregation.

Ho also found a sharp contrast in the social composition of selective public schools and elite private schools. She identified 11 private high schools in the north shore area where the proportion of students from language backgrounds other than English was at or below 20 per cent. Queenwood School for Girls in Mosman had the lowest share (2 per cent) followed by St Ignatius College Riverview in Lane Cove (5 per cent) and Monte Sant' Angelo Mercy College in North Sydney (6 per cent). In contrast, the proportion of students from a language background other than English in two selective public high schools in the area – North Sydney Boys and North Sydney Girls – was above 90 per cent. As Ho told the [Sydney Morning Herald](#):

You can walk between some of these schools in a few minutes and yet one is like a white bubble and the other is like a non-white bubble.

Data from the My School website also shows strong social segregation between public and private schools nationally. Public schools in Australia have a much greater proportion of students from low income families and a much smaller proportion from high income families compared to either Catholic or Independent schools. In 2013, low income student comprised 30 per cent of all public school enrolments compared to 15 per cent in Catholic schools and only nine per cent in Independent schools. In contrast, high income students comprised 21 per cent of public school enrolments compared with 29 per cent of Catholic enrolments and 47 per cent of Independent school enrolments.

Ho says that school choice and increasing social segregation has significant implications for education and society. She says that there is now substantial evidence from around the world that the creation of a marketplace in schools increases inequality between richer and poorer schools, and between richer and poorer students. For example, an OECD report titled *Equity and Quality in Education* states:

Providing full parental school choice can result in segregating students by ability, socio economic background and generate greater inequities across education systems. [p.92]

Ho also argues that in a multicultural society like Australia, it is unnatural and unhealthy for our schools to be so ethnically divided.

In private schools that are overwhelmingly Anglo-dominated, students are not being given sufficient opportunity to develop the cross-cultural awareness and skills that can only be developed through everyday encounters and friendships with people from other backgrounds. On the other hand, in public schools, especially selective schools, where the majority Anglo population are all but absent, again, students are not exposed to the multicultural social environment they will need to engage with when they leave school. There are also concerns about who gains access to well-resourced schools, and whether some schools may be reproducing highly exclusive social networks into the future.

Increasing social segregation in Australia has been driven by government funding policies designed to promote school choice. As Ho says, school choice has been a powerful mantra in Australian government policy on education for decades. However, instead of improving school performance it has led to greater inequality between rich and poor schools.

The following are excerpts from the Ho's actual research paper at <http://www.australianreview.net/digest/2015/08/ho.html>

August 2015

‘People like us’: School choice, multiculturalism and segregation in Sydney

Christina Ho, University of Technology Sydney

‘Mean girls’, nerds, jocks, punks, goths ... Everyone remembers the tribes that populated their schools. Even if you didn't like your fellow students, you had to learn to deal with everyone, and in the process, understand that diversity is a natural part of any social environment. If you went to a school that was culturally diverse, you had to learn how to deal with people from different cultural backgrounds, and perhaps even forge cross-cultural friendships. Schools are ideal places for this kind of cross-cultural interaction, and for this reason, play an important role in fostering everyday multiculturalism and social cohesion.

Scholars of everyday multiculturalism (for example, Wise & Velayutham 2009; Noble 2009; Harris 2013) have highlighted the importance of daily encounters with cultural difference in establishing an organic multiculturalism that is an ordinary part of people's everyday lives. People learn to deal with each other in a practical and everyday fashion, and cultural difference is not a barrier to engagement and sometimes friendship. Ash Amin writes about schools, along with workplaces and other social sites, as ‘micropublics’, where people from different backgrounds are thrown together and forced to deal with each other on a daily basis, in the process enabling ‘unnoticeable cultural questioning or transgression’ (2002, p. 969). He argues that this routine, everyday negotiation across cultural difference is the best way to foster intercultural understanding.

So how are Australian schools doing in fostering this kind of everyday multiculturalism? This paper argues that neo-liberal education policies that encourage school choice are damaging schools' ability to function as micropublics. Increased public funding of private schools and a growing culture of competitiveness has led to a steady exodus from comprehensive public schools, as middle-class parents seek out more 'desirable' schools for their children (Bonnor & Caro 2007; Campbell, Proctor & Sherington 2009; Connell 2011). Across Australia, the number of students attending non-government schools increased from 22 per cent in 1980 to 35 per cent in 2013 (Evershed 2014). In NSW, public school enrolments increased by only one per cent between 2004 and 2013, compared to almost ten per cent for non-government schools (McNeilage & Knott 2015). As a consequence, there is now considerable segregation between public and private schools, with implications for multiculturalism and social cohesion.



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Schools are becoming more segregated in terms of both class and ethnicity. More and more students are going to schools that do not represent the range of people in their neighbourhood, but rather a select group. Their families have chosen to enrol them in schools where there are more 'people like us'. In providing more school 'choice' for parents, the government has created a marketplace in schools that has led to self-segregation.

School choice has been a powerful mantra in Australian government policy on education for decades. Providing families with free choice over where to send their children to school is presented as a democratic right, as well as the best mechanism for improving schools' performance and accountability. However, there is now substantial evidence from around the world that the creation of a marketplace in schools increases inequality between richer and poorer schools, and of course, richer and poorer students.

This paper adds another layer to this critique, by examining the ethnic self-segregation that has resulted as families engage with the school choice process. Looking at high schools in Sydney reveals a highly divided education system, with some elite private schools operating as virtually mono-cultural bastions of whiteness, while public schools, including selective schools, are sometimes overwhelmingly dominated by students from language backgrounds other than English.



Some elite private schools operate as virtually mono-cultural bastions of whiteness.

School choice has always operated to the extent that those with the inclination and means to send their children to private schools have been able to opt out of the public system. However, from the 1970s, successive governments have increasingly framed education policy in terms of encouraging choice. Since the early 1970s, federal governments have steadily increased funding of non-government schools (Forsey 2010, p. 2). During the Howard Government (1996–2007), for example, public subsidies for high-fee schools massively increased their resource levels to more than double the per capita resources available to public schools (Windle 2009, p. 233). The number of private schools has also mushroomed, adding to the exodus from the public system. The Abbott Government's ideological commitment to private education is explicit. For example, in June 2015, education minister Christopher Pyne made the bizarre comment that the government has 'a particular

responsibility for non-government schooling that we don't have for government schooling' (Knott 2015).

At the state level, in the late 1980s, the NSW government partially de-zoned schools, so that families could apply to enrol their children in a public school outside of their local catchment area. At the same time, it expanded the number of public academically-selective schools, catering for gifted and talented children. This expansion has continued since. There are now 47 fully or partially selective schools in New South Wales, the majority located in Sydney (Department of Education and Communities 2015). Selective schools are making their way into other states as well.

Research from around the world has demonstrated the negative consequences of school choice policies on disadvantaged students. The OECD report *Equity and Quality in Education* (2012, p. 92) states that 'Providing full parental school choice can result in segregating students by ability, socio economic background and generate greater inequities across education systems'. The Gonski report showed these outcomes had eventuated in Australian schools (Australian Government 2011).



Segregation in schools is more pronounced than neighbourhood segregation.

My research has also shown that segregation occurs across ethnic lines as well. Using data from the MySchool website, in 2011 I found that students from language backgrounds other than English (LBOTE) form more than half of all enrolments in Sydney's public high schools (52 per cent), while in independent schools, the figure was only 22 per cent. Catholic schools came in between at 37 per cent (Ho 2011). This segregation is particularly pronounced in some local areas. For this paper, I looked at 2014 MySchool statistics on the ethnic composition of high schools on Sydney's lower north shore, a wealthy and culturally diverse region with a large range of public and private schools. Among the public comprehensive high schools in this region, an average of 49 per cent of students came from a LBOTE in 2014. If we include the public selective schools, the figure jumps to 61 per cent. For the private schools however, LBOTE enrolments comprised only 13 per cent.

How do these figures compare to the general community in which the schools are located? Census data show that approximately 30 per cent of residents of the lower north shore spoke a language other than English at home in 2011. This means that on average, the private schools in this region are disproportionately Anglo-Australian, while the public schools are disproportionately non-Anglo. As in other countries that have encouraged school choice, segregation in schools is more pronounced than neighbourhood segregation. As Keels, Burdick-Will and Keene (2013, p. 242) explain, education systems with school choice 'have schools with higher levels of economic, ethnic, and ability segregation than the levels in the neighbourhoods in which children reside'.

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