

AUSTRALIAN COUNCIL FOR THE DEFENCE OF GOVERNMENT SCHOOLS

Press Release 694

Public School Enrolment Increase for First Time in 40 Years

Contrary to rumours to the contrary, there has been immigration and people are having children – again.

The children were in the labour wards a few years ago. Now their parents are seeking to enrol them in schools – public schools.

And the schools are not there – yet.

The private sector, which has been favoured, cannot and will not do the job. So- public education is in demand, but not supply.

Ho –hum! This has all happened before. It happened after the Second World War when the baby boomers entered school. But, in the 1960s the Catholic church gained influence in the Labour party, and later, the Liberal party. The Church gained State Aid for their schools and the other churches, abandoning their century old principles, went along to the public Treasury for the ride. The Church argued for State Aid on religious and economic grounds, but the hierarchy wished to stop the leakage of an even higher percentage of Catholic children into public schools. Poor Catholic children have always attended public schools in Australia. They still do. All children are welcome there. The public schools are non-sectarian and give all children educational opportunities.

There has been much moralising about educational ‘Needs’ policies by those disinclined to confront the private sector. But ‘Needs’ policies have never worked. A heavily weakened ‘Needs’ policy was introduced by the Whitlam Government in 1973 and a bit of much needed money –crumbs from the table of the wealthy private sector trickled into public schools. Welcoming the money, some State School opponents of State Aid became ‘collaborators’ with the State Aiders. And so the stage was set for undermining both our public systems and our national educational standards.

The high point of private school enrolment leakage into the public sector was 1977 when 79% of Australian children were in public schools. And then Peter Tannock (later rewarded by the Pope for his sterling work for Catholic education) received the chairmanship of the Schools Commission. The Needs policy very openly became the ‘Greeds’ policy. By 1984 there were two dissenting reports from State School representatives; and the Schools Commission was abandoned. It was meant to hose down the State Aid controversy, not exacerbate it.

Even more money was transferred to the private sector; and new so-called Christian schools of all shades and peculiarities sprang up like mushrooms in Spring. Billions of dollars and forty years later, the percentage of children in non-sectarian public schools in Australia is less than 2/3 of the school population . But, in spite of the missing billions in State Aid; in spite of the abandonment of the Gonski reforms – the times, and the enrolment trends are changing.

According to Trevor Cobbold from Save Our Schools, at <http://www.saveourschools.com.au/national-issues/public-school-enrolments-increase> new school enrolment data show a reversal of the steady drift of students from public to private schools over the past 40 years. Figures released by the Australian Bureau of Statistics last week show that the share of public school enrolments increased in 2016. This is the first time the public school share has increased since the 1970s.

The Catholic share fell from 20.59% in 2012 to 20.25% in 2016 while the share of Independent schools increased from 14.27% to 14.44%.

The increase in the government school share follows a period of decline from 1977 to 2014, where the share fell from 79% in 1977 to 65% in 2014. The annual declines over this period averaged 0.4 percentage points each year.

The figures show different trends in primary and secondary school enrolments. Public primary schools increased their share of enrolments from 68.87% in 2012 to 69.87% in 2016. The Catholic share fell from 19.38% to 18.61%. The Independent school share also fell in the last couple of years from 11.82% in 2014 to 11.52% in 2016.

The public school share of secondary enrolments has continue to fall, although the size of the decrease has been smaller in recent years. The public share fell from 59.96% in 2012 to 59.14% in 2016. However, the year-on-year fall decreased from 0.36 of a percentage point in 2010-11 to 0.04 of a percentage point in 2015-16.

The Catholic school share of secondary school enrolments fell for the second year in a row after increasing for decades. It fell from 22.62% in 2014 to 22.47% in 2016. The Independent school share continued to increase; it increased from 17.78% in 2012 to 18.40% in 2016.

While it is important not to read too much into small changes, the new figures do suggest a significant change in trend in school enrolments. Families seem to be more inclined to enrol their children in public schools than for many decades.

Cobbold believes that one reason is increasing awareness in the community that there is little academic advantage in attending private schools. Public schools achieve similar results to private schools for a given socio-economic background of parents. Research findings consistently show that students from a given socio-economic background achieve similar results in public and private schools. Increasing awareness of these findings may be affecting decisions about whether to enrol in private schools.

In the major cities in particular, where public schools were closed in the 1990s, the Departments of Education are struggling to keep up with demand. According to Eryk Bagshaw in the *Guardian* newspaper, over the next ten years demand for schools across Sydney is almost going to double, a NSW Upper House inquiry into inner-city schools has heard. Sydney is facing a once-in-a-generation enrolment surge, as the NSW Department of Education struggles to keep up with demand. The inquiry's final report, made seven recommendations when it was tabled in parliament on 13 February. The department's problems have been exacerbated by the simple fact that apartments have been built, residents have moved in – with children – and the only land available requires expensive de-toxification. <http://www.smh.com.au/national/education/sydney-is-facing-a-onceinageneration-enrolment-surge-nsw-innercity-schools-inquiry-told-2017021>

Melbourne parents, particularly those in the inner city areas lobbying for new public schools understand the problems confronting their Sydney cousins, only too well. Only public schools can do the job of educating ALL our children.

The privatisation experiment, which failed in the nineteenth century, has failed again. It is no answer to those with children in the twenty first century.

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