

AUSTRALIAN COUNCIL FOR THE DEFENCE OF GOVERNMENT SCHOOLS

Press Release 739

Wealthy schools building projects: Resources Arms Race ritual

The resources arms race of wealthy private schools has hit the newspaper columns AGAIN-

The outrage, understandable outrage, at use of public money for extravagant new building plans has long hit the egalitarian nerve of those in poorly resourced public schools.

Yet, here it goes again. Pallavi Singhal of the Sydney Morning Herald tells us

<https://www.smh.com.au/national/nsw/sydney-s-top-private-schools-reveal-extravagant-new-building-plans-20180223-p4z1ek.html>

A \$25 million library designed to look like a Scottish castle, an orchestra pit and a chapel nestled into nearby bushland are just some of the new features planned for Sydney's elite private schools, despite complaints from neighbouring residents and local councils.

In Sydney, Seven schools are planning to spend a combined total of more than \$365 million on new facilities and school redevelopments, an analysis of development applications currently waiting for approval from the NSW Department of Planning and Environment has revealed.

What is more interesting than the arms race ritual is the arguments of those who are, as usual outraged. Instead of merely mouthing a proper application of a Needs Policy or noting, as Associate Professor Helen Proctor of Sydney University says: "It does seem extraordinary that those very top schools would need government funding, "other, older, nineteenth century arguments are surfacing.

Chris Bonner recognises the usual 'politics of envy' ritual, but questions the assumption that private schools are saving the government money. Given the level of overfunding of so many private schools, he is not far from the DOGS position. That is what our forefathers argued in the nineteenth century.

If we are already paying for these schools, why not rationalise and nationalise them. Privatisation and throwing children's educational opportunities to the winds of market forces has failed. This is what Bonner has to say in *Pearls and Irritations* (26 February 2018) :

CHRIS BONOR. The elite schools' arms race goes nuclear

Yes, it was Sunday and the news is usually more sensational than during the week. But the extravagant building plans of some 'elite' schools, [revealed in the Sun Herald](#), were certainly eye-opening. According to the report, two of these schools are already funded by governments well above their Schooling Resource Standard. The combined cost (\$365m) of the planned capital projects at the seven named schools is close to the amount allocated to address the maintenance backlog across all public schools in NSW.

If the time-honoured ritual plays out as in the past there will be various denials and a resurrection of previous explanations. The principal of one of the schools is reported as saying that “government funding goes directly to the educational needs of our students alone”. We can also expect to be told that the schools still save governments mega-bucks and regardless, student outcomes justify the huge expenditure. The embellishments will apparently include an outdoor rooftop learning terrace, aquatic centres, an orchestra pit and a bush chapel. One school is going to have two vertical connection pods. I'm not sure what they are, but they are surely an essential weapon in any elite school arms race.

The claim that government funding goes directly to educational needs in these schools is probably true, but misleading. Anyone remotely connected with schools knows that targeted funding enables other funding to be diverted to other purposes, including grand capital projects. According to *My School*, state and federal governments paid \$44 million in recurrent grants to these seven schools in 2015, a substantial addition to each school's coffers. The seven schools between them also allocated \$25m of recurrent income to capital projects. While details of where this money comes from are not available, it suggests that the schools receive more than they seem to need to meet recurrent costs.

In turn, this suggests that the students are already achieving at high levels and extra funding isn't needed for things like teachers and learning resources. But if NAPLAN data on *My School* is any guide, the students are achieving at much the same level as similar students in NSW comprehensive – not even selective – schools. Yet the students in the seven schools are recurrently funded, in total, at double the amounts of the approximately \$12 500 going into the education of similar students in public schools.

Of course there is much more to student outcomes than NAPLAN, but [comparison of HSC results](#) also shows little difference between the sectors. And yes, it is almost certain that wonderful outcomes which can't be measured will feature among the claimed advantages of schools such as these. Now that we know that school sector makes little difference to measurable outcomes it is remarkable how some schools prattle on about the education of the 'whole child' – the implication being that some schools do it and others don't.

So what about the claimed saving to government? It could be argued, for example, that the \$6 861 which governments pay to educate each student at St Aloysius' College is a mere fraction (around a quarter) of the \$25 000 spent in total on each student at that school. The Independent school peak groups mount this argument all the time. But it is 65% of what governments spend on similar students in public schools. Students at Loretto Kirribilli receive 77%. An increasing number of non-government schools receive over 100%.

It still may amount to a saving of sorts, but it raises many questions about priorities. Student achievement is the 'bottom-line' business of schools and a primary purpose of government funding. Do these schools need large additional amounts of recurrent funding from government, as well as from parents? In total, the additional recurrent funding of non-government schools over government schools was [around \\$5 billion in 2015](#), around \$3 billion of which was provided by governments.

If reallocated, even a portion of this \$3 billion would provide extra for schools where the investment would make a measurable difference. There is an abundance of research which shows that, subject to targeting and strict accountability, additional investment in disadvantaged schools is an investment with real achievement dividends.

There are a host of questions arising as a consequence of overspend on so many of Australia's school students. If a 'black hole' is a place where things disappear without leaving much of a known trace, then it seems an apt description of these schools and the money they receive. To what extent should public funding be allowed to contribute to this problem? Many politicians and commentators wring their hands over the amounts going into schools for little apparent return. In this context the questionable priorities of government have created a big part of the problem.

In the past such concern about elite schools was written off by some as 'the politics of envy'. The unearned status of these schools and the funding they receive is really the politics of absurdity.

<https://johnmenadue.com/chris-bonor-the-elite-schools-arms-race-goes-nuclear/>

Scots College in Sydney's east has submitted plans for a \$25.1 million major upgrade of its library building, including a "complete recladding of the exterior in a Scottish Baronial architectural style" complete with castellations, a tower, a turret, and "grand bay windows".

A rendering for Scots College's proposed \$25 million new library by JCA Architects.

Loreto Kirribilli has submitted plans for a \$103.3 million staged redevelopment of the school, including a new five-storey "innovation centre", outdoor rooftop learning terraces and two "vertical connection pods".

Cranbrook's \$75 million redevelopment plan includes a new aquatic recreation centre, a drama theatre, "teaching terraces" and a new academic and liberal arts facility, while SCEGGS Darlinghurst's \$48.7 million plan includes a new six-storey "multi-purpose building", possibly with new swimming facilities.

St Catherine's School has submitted modifications to its previously approved \$62.5 million redevelopment, which still includes an orchestra pit, a ballet studio, a playbox theatre and a new aquatic centre.

St Aloysius' College is also planning a major redevelopment, including a new sports facility and extensions of its great hall, chapel and existing learning facilities. The plan does not provide an exact value but will cost over \$30 million.

Loreto Normanhurst is planning to construct a number of new buildings and a "bush chapel" and increase its student cap from 1150 students to 2000, with costs expected to exceed \$20 million.

The school's principal Barbara Watkins said the projected student increase "is in line with the expected growth in demographics in schools over the next 30 years" and that the school funds its physical site through loans, fees and fundraising.

"Government funding goes directly to the educational needs of our students alone," Ms Watkins said.

Associate professor in the school of education and social work at the University of Sydney, Helen Proctor, said the top private schools often become "caught in a bit of a cycle".

"It becomes an arms race where those schools are charging very high fees and they feel like parents want something very visible for those fees, they want the state-of-the-art sports stadium, library and performance centre," Dr Proctor said.

"It would be difficult to find a top school that doesn't have a current building project.

"It's hard to imagine what more they need. It does seem extraordinary that those very top schools would need government funding."

Two of the schools with planned redevelopments were revealed as being among the [most overfunded private schools in the country](#).

Loreto Kirribilli last year received federal government funding equivalent to 196 per cent of its appropriate level, as calculated under the Gonski Schooling Resource Standard (SRS), and St Aloysius' was funded at 183 per cent of its SRS.

Sydney's high-fee private schools raised fees by up to 5 per cent this year and SCEGGS and Cranbrook are currently two of the most expensive, with annual fees rising to [more than \\$37,200 for year 12 students this year](#).

The combined price tag for the seven schools' planned developments is close to the \$390 million allocated by the NSW government last year to address an enormous maintenance backlog across the state's 2100 public schools.

A number of the plans have been met with concerns from local residents and councils over ongoing traffic issues in areas surrounding the schools.

A spokeswoman for Woollahra Council said it has raised concerns about "ongoing parking problems and traffic congestion" with Scots College, and has [refused a previous development application by the school due to traffic issues](#).

Similar traffic congestion issues have also been raised by local residents and local councils in relation to the submissions by SCEGGS, Loreto Kirribilli and Loreto Normanhurst.

Two letters of opposition from local residents to Loreto Kirribilli's planned redevelopment said nearby streets are "gridlocked" in the mornings and afternoons, and residents and North Sydney Council told the Department of Planning that the school should be required to build dedicated pick-up and drop-off areas on its grounds.

Loreto Kirribilli, Scots College and SCEGGS did not respond to questions by deadline.

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