

**AUSTRALIAN COUNCIL FOR THE DEFENCE OF GOVERNMENT
SCHOOLS
PRESS RELEASE 851**

**COVID TIMES EXPOSES NEED FOR PUBLIC EDUCATION
AND
BANKRUPTCY OF PRIVATE SCHOOL BUSINESSES**

In times of plague the strength of a countries resilience if not survival, is directly related to the strength of their public services, in particular our health and education facilities.

The inherent weaknesses of the privatisation strategies of neo liberal Conservative – and Labor governments that have resuscitated a private sector designed for an eighteenth century aristocracy with its religious hierarchy, is laid bare in both the UK and Australia.

At the beginning of the crisis, private schools in the UK started to ‘price fix’ their fees and received a slap on the hand from [the Competition Watchdog](#).

Then on 29 April we were told that that in the UK:

The competitions watchdog issued a strongly worded warning to [private schools](#) in the UK, threatening hefty fines if they are found to be price-fixing during the coronavirus crisis.

The [Competition and Markets Authority](#) (CMA) said it had been made aware that a number of independent schools “may be engaging in discussions with each other about the level of discounts and/or refunds on school fees”.

A letter from the CMA to the Independent [Schools](#) Council and other bodies representing the sector warned that moves to agree prices and exchange commercially sensitive information would almost certainly infringe competition law and could result in fines of up to 10% of total turnover.

Independent schools have been [badly hit by the fallout from the Covid-19](#) pandemic, with some parents who have lost work unable to pay fees while others are reluctant to pay the full amount for the online education schools are currently providing.

Many schools have already offered discounts and refunds to try to keep families onboard and stay afloat. While the bigger, more established schools will most likely survive, there are fears that smaller schools, which may have already been facing difficulties, will go to the wall as a result of the crisis.

In the UK , the private schools that have survived the depression to date are those that have converted into State schools. We are told in the [Guardian of July 18 2020](#) that

Thirty two private schools have moved into the state sector since 2010, the school is also part of a broader experiment that has fresh relevance for a private sector facing a severe economic battering because of the coronavirus pandemic.

In the past few months, at least nine private schools have closed, including Boris Johnson's old prep school, [Ashdown House](#), in Forest Row, East Sussex. Hundreds more face potential collapse, with dire forecasts of [one in 10 independent schools](#) going to the wall. Displaced private school pupils could add to the alarming predicted [shortfall of 380,000 state school places](#) in England in the academic year 2021-2022.

It seems certain that more private schools will seek to give up their independence and welcome state pupils. David James, until recently deputy headteacher at Bryanston school, in Blandford, Dorset, says: "Some schools will inevitably be forced into the maintained sector. If it helps save jobs, only a zealot would oppose."

The government quietly dropped the free school route for conversion a few years ago, and has not replaced it with any other established process. Labour, meanwhile, has indicated it might support conversion of failed private schools, but under local scrutiny.

With the private sector arguably at its weakest since the late 1930s, many see this as a moment of potential transformation, with conversion a key element in a broader, long-term strategy to close the gap between private and state provision.

It should be noted that the English 'nationalisation' experiment is only a half way house towards proper public provision. These pseudo private, pseudo public schools are only public in funding, access and accountability. They are not always public in ownership, and control. Supporters of public education in the UK see many failing private schools as ripe for the picking.

Meanwhile, in Australia, we discover from the Murdoch Press on July 19 2020, surprise surprise, that our private schools, including Geelong Grammar at the front line for any COVID subsidies they can pick up, in particular the jobkeeper subsidy designed to help struggling businesses.

This raises the question: how many of our heavily subsidised private schools are now 'failing businesses', useless, if not dangerous for the future well-being and education of our next generation?

And in the last week we discover that, due to a decline in enrolments Xavier College – no, not the one in Kew but a prep school in Brighton – is closing its doors. [The Age](#) of July 22 tells us that:

One of Victoria's oldest and most expensive schools, Xavier College, is shutting its 83-year-old Brighton campus to boost cash and in the face of declining enrolments.

The large Catholic school emailed parents on Wednesday to confirm the "very difficult but necessary" closure at the end of next year.

The Brighton campus is staffed by 45 people and attended by 220 students from early years to year eight. It is co-ed until grade four, and then becomes boys-only.

Xavier College said in a letter to parents that it was "extremely committed to ensuring that 2021, as the final year of education at Kostka Hall, is a year of celebration and one that students and families will never forget".

"Funds from the sale of Kostka Hall will be used to support ... new buildings and significant capital works at both Kew campuses, as well as contributing to ongoing bursaries for future Xavier students," the letter said.

The school said a recent review "observed difficult contemporary realities, of which some decline in enrolments at Kostka Hall was one of a number of factors" and concluded that "the ongoing needs of the College, and its students, are not best served by maintaining campuses across Brighton and Kew".

Xavier is 142 years old and charges more than \$33,000 for local year 12 students.

Its alumni include former Labor leader Bill Shorten.

The comments to the Age article are fascinating. Citizen taxpayers are aware that this 'charitable institution' has been subsidised with their money for decades. If the property is sold, should the school be asked to reimburse taxpayers?

But the more basic question is: Is it time to cut the private business operators loose from the taxpayer teat and make them into public schools. If we pay for them, then ALL Australian children should be able to use them.

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