

AUSTRALIAN COUNCIL FOR THE DEFENCE OF GOVERNMENT SCHOOLS

Press Release 1007

HOW FREE ARE PUBLIC SCHOOLS?

In the weeks leading up to the start of the School year, there has been much hype about the cost, of both public and private education. The assumption behind a great deal of commentary is – that public education is no longer free. We are told by the ABC and the media that ‘research’ indicates that it can cost up to \$93,000 for 13 years or \$7,132 a year to educate a child in an Australian public school.

Does this mean that public schools are no longer free? And how seriously should this ‘research’ be taken?

The ABC’s [Leonie Thorne](#) and national education reporter [Claudia Long](#) claim that two new surveys — one from a financial group, another from a charity — shed light on how much education costs are affecting Australian families at <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2024-01-17/public-private-catholic-school-education-costs-bills-data/103324992> .

Public school parents are put into a similar ‘costs’ bundle as Catholic parents as follows:

‘Parents are being squeezed by the cost of sending kids to school, whether their children are attending public or private, according to two new studies....and

There is [new data estimating parents may need to spend thousands of dollars on their child's education](#), even if they go to a public school

The ABC Report, taken up by the mainstream media, claims that

- One in four parents say they're struggling to pay bills because of rising education costs
- Families are also struggling to afford costs at public schools, such as uniforms and shoes
- Sending a child to public school in a capital city from prep to year 12 is now estimated to cost more than \$92,000

Putting a child through public school from prep to year 12 in a major city is now estimated to set families back more than \$92,000, according to new data from Futurity Investment Group.

These estimates blow out to more than \$195,000 for Catholic schools and more than \$315,000 for independent schools.

Meanwhile, a separate survey by the Smith Family has revealed parents of public school kids are particularly stressed when it comes to affording the things their children need for education.

The charity surveyed more than 2,200 families who used its services and found almost half worried their children would miss out on uniforms and shoes for school this year.

One in three said their kids would miss out on excursions, about half said they could not afford digital devices and one in six said their children would go without internet access.

What does this all Mean? Are Public Schools almost half as Expensive as Catholic Schools?

Is Public Education no Longer free?

Firstly, the Report which produced these figures, prepared by Futurity Investment Group, a group offering ‘tax-effective, life-event Education Bonds – designed to help people save for the cost of education, the sample survey was 1500 people, and includes ‘ancillary costs’ like private tutoring and music lessons. The third most expensive item is ‘electronic devices’. The school fees at a public school represent only 4% of the cost.

According to the Guardian of Friday 19 January 2024, Dr. Ange Fitzgerald, a professor in the school of education at RMIT said the data appeared to be ‘really inflated’.

“I worked in the public school system as a principal and I know students can access their education for free – and good-quality education,” she said.

“Government schools have to cover anything to do with students learning within the cost of a school – they can advertise fees but parents don’t have to pay them.

“I don’t think we should be concerned [by the data]. I’m concerned about data like this making people concerned ... it becomes its own energy.”

Fitzgerald said the Futurity figures “always surprised” her, pointing to the ancillary costs which were “individual family decisions” rather than a need.

“They’re lovely add-ons, but not a must-have,” she said.

Two of the ancillary costs – camps and excursions – she noted were important to a student’s social experience and personal growth. But she said many states and territories had funding schemes in place where families could access up to \$300 for the activities.

“There’s mechanisms so students don’t miss out,” she said.

“Education is free and there’s no reason to pay. Principals and school leaders are working really hard to make sure there are holistic education programs kids can access within the budget.”

Of particular concern, Fitzgerald said, was the reported spending on outside tuition – outpacing school fees in some sectors including for Catholic schools.

“I’m really concerned about it, it’s a cycle we don’t want to get ourselves into,” she said. “Not just financially, but students don’t need to be going to school all day then continue outside.

“We should be valuing young people having free time and engaging with friends.”

So what is the actual cost to parents of kids attending public schools, without including tutoring, music lessons and other optional items?

The number can vary depending on the number of kids enrolled, schooling level, voluntary school fees and other contributions, school camp costs, and how much you are willing to spend on a computer or other devices.”

DOGS COMMENT:

The principle of a free public education is still alive and well, although the reality can be more complicated for poor parents. The cost of uniforms, books, excursions, optional extras, and even sufficient nutrition are ongoing worries for poor families. However, there is evidence that Charities like the Smith Family – which was established and supported by public school teachers, are attempting to ameliorate the situation. And the need for every child to have access to a computer and the internet in the digital age indicates the need for government policy and action.

Parents should be wary of inflated figures, investment groups, and media commentary which places public education in the same ‘expense’ bag as private Catholic or wealthy private schools.

A public school cannot refuse to enrol any child on the basis of their parent’s inability to pay an education fee or any other financial requirement. A public school cannot and does not discriminate against any child on the basis of their ability to pay.

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