

# **AUSTRALIAN COUNCIL FOR THE DEFENCE OF GOVERNMENT SCHOOLS**

## **Press Release 1023**

### **The History of State Aid to Private Schools – A Contested Space**

Politicians continually tell their constituents that the State Aid to private schools issue is 'settled'. In spite of ongoing controversies which have been exacerbated in recent years by glaringly unequal funding of the public and religious systems, David Hastie, from Alphacrucis University College has the gall to argue in the [Sydney Morning Herald of 12 September that](#)

*The idea that public schools are underfunded in Australia is persistently being depicted as a ghastly controversy, a zero-sum game: public versus private; give to one, you take from the other; four legs good, two legs bad. A [headline](#) in this masthead this week describes Australia as a "[lone wolf](#)" in spending more on private schools than the global average, based on a recent snapshot of school funding from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development.*

*But Australia has far more private schools than most other countries in the OECD, so it is not surprising that Australia spends more money on them. According to the OECD's [figures](#), about 40 per cent of Australian enrolments are in non-government schools, while the OECD average is 18 per cent. The [Australian Bureau of Statistics](#) puts the number lower at 36 per cent, but that still places Australia around third highest in the world with comparable nations, the others being Belgium, the Netherlands.*

Not only does he wish to obtain justification for his position from the fact that Australian education funding is comparable to other countries, he tries to rewrite history.

*The idea that state schools represent good, and private schools represent bad, is, in comparison with many other nations, an immature narrative. The private/public school arrangement in Australia is not a divide. It is a settlement. And has ever been: Catholic schools and other non-government schools have existed side by side with state schools for 150 years in Australia.*

David Hastie lives in a world of wishful thinking. Private schools have and are dividing Australian society and have always done so. Nor have they always been funded from the public purse. For almost a century (1872-1964) they survived to educate 20% of the population and caused sometimes violent and dangerous religious division.

Hastie did not go unchallenged. Ken Boston responded to his opinion piece in the Sydney Morning Herald of 15 September as follows:

### ***You think there's no divide in school funding? Take this history lesson***

*You think there's no divide in school funding? Take this history lesson*

<https://www.smh.com.au/national/you-think-there-s-no-divide-in-school-funding-take-this-history-lesson-20240915-p5kami.html>

#### **Ken Boston**

*Former director-general of education and training in NSW.*

*September 15, 2024 — 7.30pm*

*Public schools do not need three swimming pools, rowing sheds, iconic buildings and geography excursions to Antarctica. But they must have full provision of the basic requirements of education for their students to have "an equal chance at the best life possible", an aspiration embraced by Associate Professor David Hastie, of Alphacrucis University College, in his column last week.*

*The fact is that public schools starved of resources have difficulty offering face-to-face teaching in the most demanding senior school subjects, let alone the full range of educational experience in the arts, physical education and competitive sport. The Kings School, meanwhile – receiving public funding worth [tens of millions of dollars](#) – [boasts](#) that it has 17 playing fields; surely every public school needs at least one.*

*I agree entirely with Hastie's aspiration for all students, but his other arguments about school funding cannot go unchallenged.*

*He claims that private schools are not overfunded at the expense of public schools. Public schools in all Australian states (though not in the ACT) are at 90 per cent or less of the Schooling Resource Standard, to which they and the Commonwealth committed following the Gonski Review (2011), while non-government schools in all states (not in the Northern Territory) receive more than 100 per cent. Does Hastie really propose that governments simply stump up more taxpayer money for public schools, rather than take it from overfunded private schools?*

*Second, Hastie says Australia spends more public funding on private schools than other OECD countries because Australia has more of them. He fails to acknowledge that this is because in the past 30 years, federal and state governments have encouraged the growth of non-government schools at the expense of public schools to shift the cost of education from the public to the private purse.*

*This has been achieved by per capita grants to private schools, funding for capital works, the granting of charitable status and tax concessions for donations. The Albanese government recently [rejected a Productivity Commission recommendation](#) to remove the tax-deductibility status of the more than \$200 million in donations annually received by private schools.*

*Third, while stating that non-government schools in many European countries receive full public funding, Hastie ignores the attached conditions: they are subject to stringent government regulations concerning school operations, of which the most demanding are restrictions on private funding, and the implementation of non-discriminatory enrolment practices. In England, 93 per cent of schools, including faith-based schools, are government-funded. Other schools such as Eton receive no public funding and are not subject to the same government regulations.*

*Such provision is superior to our unique and absurd arrangement of public school systems, faith-based school systems and independent schools, wholly or partially funded by two levels of government, the states and the Commonwealth.*

*Fourth, Hastie makes the astonishing claim that “according to our Constitution, almost all state school funding comes from the states, and almost all private school funding comes from the Commonwealth”. The Constitution makes no reference to education: the facile mantra about Commonwealth and state funding responsibilities is from the Howard era. Hastie exonerates the Commonwealth and blames the states for the underfunding of public schools. The real problem is not so much lack of funds (the total annual all-governments funding is more than \$60 billion), but that the funding is not distributed according to genuine need.*

*Fifth, it is nonsense to say the private/public school arrangement is not a divide, but a settlement that has existed for 150 years. The history of Australian education – one of sectarian conflict and strife – proves otherwise. Much to the concern of the Catholic Church, colonial funding of non-government schools largely ceased in the 1880s and was not resumed by state governments until the second half of the 20th century. The Commonwealth started providing non-government school funding only in 1964. Countless bishops would rise from their graves in protest at Hastie’s assertion.*

*It is obvious to any fair-minded observer that our current school funding arrangements fail to ensure “that all citizens have an equal chance at the best life possible”. If achievement of that goal means reducing taxpayer funding to overfunded private schools, so be it.*

***Dr Ken Boston AO is a former director-general of education and training in NSW. He was a member of the Gonski Review of School Funding.***

## **DOGS POSITION**

Both Ken Boston and David Hastie agree that all schools should have *full provision of the basic requirements of education for their students to have “an equal chance at the best life possible”*, but they do not go the next step.

The only way that schools can be equal is if they treat their students equally.

The only way that schools can treat their students equally is if they have open enrolment practices.

The only way they can have open enrolment is if they are free, secular and universal for students, teachers, parents and administrators.

But private schools can never be free, secular and universal since – you name it – fees, religious belief, sexual preference, - they divide children at the school gate and demand ever more billions or taxpayer funding to do it.

That is why the DOGS do not object to their existence, but they do obtain, very strongly to continued funding, indeed overfunding, of their enterprise.

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