

AUSTRALIAN COUNCIL FOR THE DEFENCE OF GOVERNMENT SCHOOLS

Press Release #1068

Public cannot be Subsumed under Private:

Integration of Private into Public is NOT the Answer to the Education Question

In her new book, ‘*Rich Kid, Poor Kid – The battle for public education*’ produced by Vintage Point, for the Australian Institute, Jane Caro walks through the decades of policy decisions by both Coalition and Labor Governments that have led to the current Byzantine funding systems in Australian education, alongside increasing inequality and crumbling social cohesion. Interestingly, she notes that her mother, a fierce believer of public education was a supporters of the NSW DOGS in the late 1960s.

The book is well worth reading.

Alongside the book, in an article in *The Age* on May 3 2026, an excerpt was printed as follows:

Our kids are segregated in every way imaginable. We should look to Canada for a solution

We have given the chronically underfunded public system all the responsibilities and expect it to accept every child, including the most disadvantaged and so most expensive to teach, while starving it of resources. We have given sometimes extravagantly overfunded private schools all the rights, including the right to isolate themselves from the toughest end of education. As a result, we now have one of the most segregated education systems in the OECD: In the decade to 2015, Australia [had the second-highest increase](#) in concentration of disadvantaged students in disadvantaged schools, lagging only the Czech Republic. And we are continuing to use public funding to increase that segregation.

For those kids in the so-called “good” schools results have at best flatlined. For those in what are rapidly becoming residualised schools, results [have plummeted](#).

And we haven't just segregated our kids along class lines. We have sliced and diced them every way we can think of. We put girls with girls; boys with boys (though, as I've suggested, that might be changing a little); smart kids with smart kids; rich kids with rich kids; poor kids with poor kids; Christian kids with Christian kids; Muslim kids with Muslim kids; Jewish kids with Jewish kids; Catholic kids with ... oh, wait, I'm not so sure most kids in Catholic schools are very Catholic any more; sporty kids with sporty kids; arty kids with arty kids; black kids with black kids; and white kids with white kids. Is this a good idea? [Will it build a cohesive society](#)? Does it help our kids to get to know one another and help break down prejudice? Or does it do the opposite?

Her solution?

An integrated system promoted by Tom Greenwell and Chris Bonner. She says:

Education researchers Tom Greenwell and Chris Bonnor in their book, [Waiting for Gonski](#), take this idea a step further. They suggest that all schools should be offered the chance of being publicly funded as long as they agree not to charge fees. They could keep their "special" character, usually religious, but would have to accept all children who wanted to attend within their area. Some private schools, especially high-fee ones, might decide this was a bridge too far and decline the offer. In which case they would lose their public funding and be self-supporting.

This would then release some badly needed dollars for schools struggling with high concentrations of disadvantage.

Greenwell and Bonnor call this "the Ontario Solution", as that's what schools in the Canadian province have done. Chris Bonnor told me about the shock the Catholic bishops of Ontario expressed when it was suggested that their schools could charge fees. They saw it as utterly antithetical to their religious mission. Maybe they should come and have a chat with the Catholic bishops in this country.

In both the United Kingdom and New Zealand, the majority of religious schools are part of the public system. They do not charge fees, must accept all local kids who want to come, but may keep their religious character. The only problem with this suggestion is that the private schools will fight it, and that matters because they are exceptionally powerful lobbyists. They can have their cake and eat it now. They will probably fight to the death against any attempt to rebalance the scales.

[Trevor Cobbold from Save Our Schools reacted](#)

He wrote to *the Age* but his letter was not published so he put it up on the Save Our Schools website:

Canada is No Solution

The following letter was submitted to the Editor of the Sydney Morning Herald in response to an opinion piece by author Jane Caro in the Sun-Herald on 3 May. The letter was not published.

It is baffling that erstwhile advocates of public education want to jettison core principles that have governed public education for 150 years. Jane Caro's proposal to adopt Ontario's system of full taxpayer funding of private schools (SMH 3 May) should be comprehensively rejected because it breaches the core principles of secular, non-discriminatory and free education.

It would introduce structural contradictions in the public system: some schools would be secular and others free to propagate a religion; some would be prohibited from discrimination in hiring staff while others would be allowed to discriminate on the basis of gender, disability, sexual orientation, transgender identity and marital status.

Full taxpayer funding of private schools is no guarantee that they would not be able to charge fees. Other countries such as Netherlands, Belgium and New Zealand which integrate Catholic schools in the public system permit a plethora of fees, capital charges and pseudo fees in the form of so-called voluntary contributions.

Catholic and Independent schools had the chance to participate in a truly needs-based funding system designed by David Gonski. They squibbed it in favour of special funding deals. Generous government funding and fees provide Catholic schools with a significant resource advantage over public schools and a very large advantage in the case of Independent schools. It is incomprehensible that they would give this up in the light of the Gonski experience.

It is equally incomprehensible that the Catholic bishops and education leaders would give up the privilege of diverting government funding intended for regional and outer suburban disadvantaged schools to inner-city schools competing for market share with wealthy Independent schools.

The direct way to reduce social segregation in schools is to stop the massive underfunding of public schools and ensure their full funding as well as end the overfunding of private schools.

On May 11 [Tom Greenwell Replied to SOS and this was also printed on the website](#)

 [sosaustralia](#) / [May 11, 2026](#) / [Funding](#), [Public education](#)

Tom Greenwell, co-author of *Waiting for Gonski*, has submitted the following comment on to our post *Canada is No Solution*. The comment is published in the interest of furthering public debate on an important issue in school funding in Australia.

In Ontario around 93 percent of students attend public schools. Two thirds of these public schools are secular, while one third are faith-based. But all are fully publicly funded and completely free; and all are required to enrol students from a local enrolment zone. The socioeconomic profile of the students in the faith-based schools is almost exactly the same as those in the secular schools. Social segregation is much lower in Ontario's schools than Australia's. The very small fee-charging private school sector serves around 7 percent of students and receives no public funding.

Trevor Cobbold appears determined to defend the status quo in which Australian private schools receive huge public subsidies but can continue to charge fees as high as they wish, enrol (and not enrol) whoever they like and expel whoever they want to. This is because he believes it would introduce a "structural contradiction" for some fully publicly funded schools to be religious and discriminate in hiring staff. This is an extraordinary position for someone who knows Australia's school system as well as Cobbold does. We already have a system where lavish public subsidies to religious schools often exceed the funding at comparable public schools. And these schools enjoy exemptions to the Sex Discrimination Act. How is that situation redressed in any way by allowing those schools to continue to charge fees? How is it improved by allowing them to enjoy significant resource advantages (public subsidy + fees) which gives them a competitive advantage over public schools?

The heart of the matter is how we dramatically reduce the intense social segregation in our school system. Cobbold says we must fully fund public schools and stop overfunding private schools. That's absolutely necessary but nowhere near sufficient. Even if that happens some time in the middle of next decade – and I'm not holding my breath – private schools will still enjoy net resource advantages through the

combination of their SRS entitlement + unregulated fees. As those resource advantages attract the able and affluent, the unregulated fees and enrolment practices will continue to push the disadvantaged away. Money is important. But public funding must entail commensurate public obligations and regulations. And we can only make the demand that fees are prohibited if full public funding is there to replace it.

[Jean Ely](#) from the DOGS responded on [May 11, 2026 at 11:35 am](#)

By all means take over the full funding of private schools, but then just take them over and make them fully public schools i.e. public in purpose and outcome, above all genuinely public in access without any enrolment requirements – public in ownership and control. Then they might be public in accountability. Our nineteenth century forefathers understood all this. You can't afford to be tolerant with the intolerant, and compromise the public with the private good. I know public school supporters don't like to be called sectarian when they oppose public funding of private religious schools, but why be afraid of mere meaningless invective?

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