

**AUSTRALIAN COUNCIL FOR THE DEFENCE OF
GOVERNMENT SCHOOLS
Press Release #1071**

***Do we strengthen public education — or dismantle its
core principles.***

Public Education, like Democracy, is at a crossroads throughout the Western World. In Australia, the Labor Government in the quest for a fairer education system in 1973, the Labor Party, courting the Catholic vote, initiated a Needs policy.

This quickly became a ‘Greeds’ policy with the private sector fleecing both taxpayers and parents in the name of religious freedom.

The result, sixty years later?

1. One of the most segregated schools systems in the OECD with only 62% (down from 78% in 1977) attending public schools.
2. A system which is failing in its purpose of achieving academic results, falling behind in the OECD comparison stakes.
3. A system which is costing the taxpayer to duplicate school facilities on the basis of class, creed, colour, and any other criteria invented by latter day culture ‘warriors’.
4. An underfunded public system and an overfunded religious private sector.

Some very genuine public school supporters, still believe that the way forward is to compromise with supporters of ‘parental choice’; clerical control of property, curriculum and taxpayer funds; entanglement of religion with the State; and discrimination against children, parents, teachers and school employees on the basis of class creed and , in these latter days, sexual status.

Those hoping for some compromise with those who have never compromised, are now promoting a system of full public funding for private schools on the provision that they do not discriminate in their enrolment policies.

Trevor Cobbold, from Save Our Schools, while still hoping against hope for a ‘Needs policy ‘ along the lines of the 2011 Gonski Report, has realised that

The central question is not whether Australia needs a fairer education system. It unquestionably does. The real question is whether we strengthen public education — or dismantle its core principles.

DOGS recognise the importance of his return to the basics of a definition of the essentials of public education and its definition in his latest Report, a summary of which is reproduced below. We await the realisation that public education cannot survive and flourish unless and until it is the only system which is publically funded.

The private religious system is and has proved itself to be, parasitic upon the public system.


If the parasite is favoured with nourishment, the host declines and dies.

But here is where Trevor Cobbold from Save our Schools is at.

[Don't Destroy Public Education in the Name of Reform](#)

 [Trevor Cobbold](#) / [June 10, 2026](#) /



 The following is a summary of a research paper by Save Our Schools. The full paper can be downloaded at

<https://saveourschools.com.au/funding/dont-destroy-public-edcation-in-the-name-of-reform/>

Australia's education debate is at a dangerous turning point. In the pursuit of greater equity, some commentators propose that private schools receive full taxpayer funding, provided they do not charge fees and relax some enrolment restrictions. Save Our Schools completely rejects this proposal as a chimera that also jettisons the foundation principles of public education.

The central question is not whether Australia needs a fairer education system. It unquestionably does. The real question is whether we strengthen public education — or dismantle its core principles.

SOS rejects full taxpayer funding of private schools for two reasons:

- It abrogates key principles of public education; and
- Religious and private school organisations are very unlikely to give up their resource advantage over public schools and their special funding privileges.

Australia's public schools were founded on three enduring principles: they are secular, non-discriminatory and free. These principles matter because public education is not simply another "provider" in a marketplace. Public schools are civic institutions designed to educate all children, regardless of income, religion, ethnicity, ability, sexuality or family background.

The proposal to fully fund private religious schools fundamentally blurs that distinction.

Even if private schools do not charge fees, they would still retain what advocates call their "special ethos." In practice, this means continuing religious instruction and observance, continuing faith-based student enrolment and staff recruitment, and preserving exemptions from anti-discrimination laws. These schools would remain non-secular and discriminatory within the public system.

Secular and non-discriminatory public education plays a critical role in ensuring children from diverse backgrounds learn together. This is particularly important in an increasingly multicultural Australia.

It is a fact that government funding of private schools currently supports discrimination in employment and enrolments as well as religious curriculum and values. However, this is not a reason to continue or extend government funding of such practices. It is a reason to look for an alternative method to fund private schools.

Australia has one of the most socially segregated education systems in the developed world. Advantaged families increasingly cluster in overfunded private schools while disadvantaged students are concentrated in underfunded public schools.

But absorbing private religious systems into a full taxpayer-funded quasi-public model while allowing them to retain private privileges is not the way to reduce social segregation. Attracting more disadvantaged students to private schools by making free as a way to encourage a more balanced social profile in private schools is a bizarre way to reduce social segregation. The better solution is to properly fund the schools that already educate the overwhelming majority of disadvantaged children: public schools. Full funding of public schools will help to retain more advantaged students in public schools. It also has the advantage of maintaining the integrity of the principles of public education.

For years, governments have claimed to support "needs-based funding" under the Gonski framework. Yet public schools remain billions of dollars short of their Schooling Resource Standard (SRS), while private schools are funded above their SRS and enjoy other substantial funding advantages.

The consequences are obvious in classrooms across the country: teacher shortages, inadequate specialist support, deteriorating infrastructure and widening achievement gaps between rich and poor students.

Money alone will not solve every educational challenge, but sustained huge underfunding guarantees failure for disadvantaged students.

Supporters of full taxpayer funding for private schools argue that removing fees would reduce inequality and improve access. But this argument ignores a crucial reality: many private systems are highly unlikely to surrender the financial and structural privileges they currently enjoy.

Catholic and independent school systems currently benefit from a significant resource advantage over public schools across Australia and in nearly every state and territory courtesy of generous government funding. In 2024, total income per student in Catholic schools was \$1,699 more than in public schools and \$8,274 more in the case of independent schools. These are large advantages to surrender.

If private schools agreed not to charge fees in order to be fully funded by the taxpayer, they would be funded on the same needs-based model as public schools. As a result, they could even end up with less income per student than public schools for as long as they fail to attract the same proportion of disadvantaged students as in public schools. This would occur because the higher funding loadings would apply to a smaller proportion of disadvantaged students than in public schools.

Currently, students from low socio-educationally advantaged families comprise a much larger proportion of public school enrolments than in private schools. In 2023, 31% of students in public schools were in the lowest SEA quartile compared with 16% in Catholic schools and 11% in Independent schools. It would take years, even decades, of not charging fees for the demographic profile of private schools to become similar to that of public schools and during this time they would receive less government funding per student and therefore less income per student than public schools.

It would be a huge gamble by Catholic and other private schools that they would ever gain so many higher-funded disadvantaged students as to have the same proportion of disadvantaged students as public schools.

Another privilege for several private school systems is that they receive block funding by government that allows diverted funding intended for less advantaged schools toward wealthier schools in order to maintain market share with limited transparency as documented by official audits and reviews.

They also receive additional special-purpose funding not available to public schools such as the billion dollar slush fund called the Choice and Affordability Fund.

Why would these systems voluntarily abandon funding arrangements that have served them so well?

There is also a deeper issue at stake: what exactly makes a school “public”?

Public schools are not merely schools funded by taxpayers. They are publicly owned, publicly governed and publicly accountable institutions operating under universal social obligations.

Under proposals for fully funded private religious schools, institutions would remain privately owned and privately operated while continuing to exercise selective rights over curriculum, staffing and culture. In this case, public schools would then become “public” in name only because part of the system would not operate in accordance with the principles of public education.

The way to reduce inequity is to strengthen the public system that serves everyone. That means implementing a genuine needs-based “Gonski-Plus” funding model with substantially higher support for disadvantaged students and schools. It means ending the accounting tricks that defraud public schools, ending the special deals that advantage private schools and limiting their taxpayer funding of private schools to filling any gap between private income and the community resource standard.

Such a model should be supported by a system of regular review of progress in reducing the gap in school outcomes between advantaged and disadvantaged students. The current Closing the Gap report between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people provides a model to follow in keeping the pressure on governments to increase equity in school outcomes.

There is understandable frustration among public education families, organisations and advocates. Progress on fully funding public schools and increasing equity has been too slow. But abandoning the principles of public education is not reform — it is surrender.

Australia should not destroy public education in order to save it.

It is important to keep perspective and not be overcome by despair at the slow progress. Much has been achieved. Fifteen years ago, choice was the dominant paradigm in school funding. That has changed dramatically. Equity in education and needs-based funding are now dominant themes. The basic Gonski model is not in question. The Coalition and private school organisations dare not openly challenge it.

The real challenge is the fight for truly fully funded public schools to properly support the learning of disadvantaged students and rebuild confidence in the one education system designed to serve every Australian child.

That is the reform agenda Australia actually needs.

The author thanks SOS colleagues Professor Ian Morgan and Grant Battersby for their helpful comments and suggestions on drafts of this paper.

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