

AUSTRALIAN COUNCIL FOR THE DEFENCE OF GOVERNMENT SCHOOLS

PRESS RELEASE 646#

PAPER PRESENTED TO POLITICAL GROUP

7 MARCH 2016

The Australian Council for the Defense of Government Schools (DOGS) has been fighting for public education since the 1960s.

The Council has two main objectives:

1. The promotion and protection of public education
2. The separation of Church and State and opposition to public funding of private religious schools

The DOGS also have a radio program on Melbourne's community radio station 3CR at 855 on the am dial at 12.00 Noon every Saturday to listen to the latest news on the radio. Our website is at www.adogs.info/

Framing the current Education Funding debate:

First up, you are probably not going to like what I have to say, as The DOGS position is very clear and has been for 50 years.

NO state aid for Private schools. That is to say PUBLIC FUNDING FOR PUBLIC SCHOOLS ONLY. A public school is public in ownership, control, access, and oversight and accountable to the public for outcomes.

In contemporary Australia this statement may be offensive to some, or viewed as a nice idea that is unrealistic, or impolitic, or uneconomic, or by some strange twist and implication sectarian - as so many private schools are religious in nature.

But I put it to you that contemporary Australia is a very strange place when it comes to education funding, and the idea **PUBLIC FUNDING FOR PUBLIC SCHOOLS ONLY** is actually normal for the majority of the rest of the civilized world.

In fact to many people from overseas who look as Australia schooling system we are just plain weird.

But, different cultures and societies are around the world are weird in different ways. The internal national logic for 'its just the way we do things around here' plays out in the education funding arrangements in Australia is particularly obscure when compared to other countries. The argument goes like this:

1. People have freedom.
2. Parents must have rights to freedom and choice.
3. Religion and enterprise must be free to do what they want.
4. Give public money to religions and enterprises to educate the children of parents who can pay money and choose to opt out of the public education system for any reason.
5. These are saving taxpayers' money.
6. Place a minimum burden of audits/oversight/accountability on private providers and allow them to exclude whomever they want to. (Because they must be free to do what they want - see point 2)
7. This will save public money.
8. The more private schools the better as this saves more money
9. If you take public money away from religions and enterprises that are privately educating children this is anti-choice/anti freedom/anti individual/anti religion and wastes money.

This internal logic is unfortunately and obviously flawed at every point after point one, (People have freedom) and I will elaborate on this later. But I would like to draw a parallel with another situation in another country where freedom is valued to explore how internal logic within a society can lead to weird outcomes.

In the US for example they have an issue with the relation between freedom and gun violence and the internal logic of how this plays out goes like this.

1. People have freedom
2. People have rights and freedoms to choose to own guns
3. It is a dangerous world with bad people with guns, and people need to feel safe
4. People have rights and freedoms to choose to own lots and lots of guns, and big ones too, to protect themselves from the bad people and feel safe.
5. The more guns there are the safer everyone feels, and is.

There may be some people here who support the unrestricted gun ownership regime in the US, but no one can argue that this internal logic makes the US a safer place.

By the same logic no one can argue that the internal logic of Australia's education funding system is making Australia a better-educated nation. In fact the current funding processes since the introduction of state AID to private schools are directly correlated with both an overall lowering of comparative educational success by every international comparison and a dramatic increase in Australia's inequity of educational outcomes by the same measures.

In short, while each society intends the opposite, the US Gun regime makes the US more dangerous, and Australia's education funding regime makes us stupider.

This is the framework for discussing what is going on now:

Over the past 15 years, total Commonwealth and state government funding for private schools has grown at more than twice the rate of funding for public schools, and in more recent years, funding for public schools has been cut while private school funding still increased.

Between 1998-99 and 2013-14, government funding per private school student, adjusted for inflation, increased by 39% compared with only 17% for public schools. More recently, between 2009-10 and 2013-14, real funding for public schools funding per student fell by 3% while private school funding increased by 10%.

We the people are wasting money on kids who do not need it:

Since 2009, total government funding per student for many high fee, exclusive private schools in Victoria and NSW increased by several times more than for many highly disadvantaged schools. In Victoria, the average funding increase per student for 16 selected elite private schools was 25% compared with 3% for 17 disadvantaged public schools. Six of the disadvantaged schools had their funding cut.

On average, 76% of students in the elite schools were from the highest socio-educational advantage (SEA) quartile and 1% were from the lowest SEA quartile while 61% of students in the disadvantaged schools were from the lowest SEA quartile and 3% from the top quartile. The average total income of the elite schools in 2013 was \$27,085 per student compared with \$13,897 per student in the disadvantaged schools.

One example: MLC gets \$7 Million from the public purse and \$25.4 million from fees in 2014. That works out to \$6000 per student in public money and \$21,730 from the parents. I estimate it costs about \$14,000 to educate a kid from an advantaged background effectively and about \$17,000 p.a. to educate a child from a disadvantaged background and they have a greater need for extra-family support. This anecdote is an obvious, and I would argue stupid waste of money.

But what about the poor/low fee private schools? Recent trends in school recurrent funding strongly suggest that over forty per cent of students in Catholic schools next year will average as much, if not more, public funding than their peers in similar government schools. Two years further on an additional forty per cent will most likely join them. Half the students in Independent schools are on track to get as much, if not more, than government school students by the end of the decade. This is just public funding –and excludes parental funding and fees. All private religious school sectors are exempt from anti-discrimination legislation in Victoria. They can, unchallenged, enroll and expel, employ or sack whomsoever they wish using the argument that as the school has religious ‘values’ which allow this. Public schools are different. They have ‘values’ of inclusion and as a result the vast majority of physically and behaviorally challenged kids are in state schools, where they are welcome.

It is apparent that Australia has an incoherent and unfair school funding system that

favours advantaged students and discriminates against disadvantaged students. The state labor government in one of their first acts in government passed legislation to accelerated this stupidity by legislating an automatic 25 cent to go from the state coffers to every private school for every dollar that goes to a state school (even if the private school has NO NEED for it!). Please remember that it is the federal government that is responsible for private school funding, not the state government who is responsible for state schools. This is not a 'money saver' is a money waster. This decision was objectively a bit crazy (Ken Boston, one the Gonski architects and the only state school educated one certainly though it was). This decision is just silly and one can only guess as to the political motives behind it.

There can be little wonder that Australia has failed to improve the results of disadvantaged students or to reduce the large achievement gaps between advantaged and disadvantaged students over the past 15 years. This gap has increase to almost 3 years. Public schools bear the very large burden of disadvantage but received less than half the funding increase provided to private schools.

Failure to overhaul this incoherent and unfair school funding system will incur major social and economic costs. The life chances of hundreds of thousands of disadvantaged students will continue to be severely curtailed. It means a future of unemployment, low income and poverty for many which contributes to social alienation and division.

Poor education outcomes mean low workforce skills and participation which, in turn, results in lower productivity and an under-performing economy. Poor education outcomes also lead to poor health, more crime and greater welfare dependency all of which increase government expenditure over the long term.

This unfair school funding system must be overhauled to improve the life prospects of hundreds of thousands of students, promote economic prosperity, and strengthen the fabric of Australian society`

In summary:

State schools and state school parents are keen on the Gonski plan but this is just a chimera. It is a school voucher 'sector blind' model that will not address the underlying problems of the flawed internal logic behind education policy. Gonski was forbidden in his brief from even asking questions about the private schools system. Free enterprise and 'money saving' religious schools will not educate the kids, come one come all, of this nation. They do not want to, they are not designed to as private education is designed to make profits and/or create adherents to particular tenets.

It can be said that the ideologically pure are the politically impotent. The DOGS by this measure are arguably ineffective.

But we see a different perspective.

The Overton Window

We have not changed our perspective of public funding for public schools only, for 50 years. The Overton window is a window of discourse – defined by the range of ideas the public will accept. The DOGS, have been for two decades at least, outside this window, but are now acceptable and peeking over the sill. This is because as economic conditions deteriorate the aspirational middle classes are becoming attracted to the idea that a public education in a good state school is an acceptable pathway for their children save money and is a bloody good investment. In 2015, for the first time, in a long time, enrollments in state school increased nationally and there was a corresponding decrease in private school enrollments. This is despite the millions of taxpayer's dollars spent by private schools, rich and poor, on advertising marketing, discounts and scholarships to prop up their business model.

The Overton widow of what is politically possible is shifting, and the DOGS point of view is now acceptable as an argument both socially and politically. Politicians who ignore equity in education and bow down to private and religious education lobbies now do so at their peril.

LISTEN TO DOGS PROGRAM

ON 3CR

855 ON THE AM DIAL: 12.00 NOON SATURDAYS

For Podcast go to <http://www.3cr.org.au/podcasts/podcasts/list> and go to DOGS