

AUSTRALIAN COUNCIL FOR THE DEFENCE OF GOVERNMENT SCHOOLS

“Free Education’ and Public School Fees

“Free Education” Denied by ever-Increasing Fees of Private Schools

We are being treated to the usual Press Reports about ‘spiralling’ fees at private schools –again. (*The Australian*, Tuesday, Jan. 17, 2017, p. 3)

Back-to-back fee increases have pushed private schools out of reach for a new generation of parents with education costs spiralling above \$500,000 per child in the country’s top schools.

Private school costs have jumped by more than 64 per cent in the past decade to an average kindergarten to year 12 total of \$487,903 in city schools.

Access to education for ALL children, i.e. Educational opportunity for ALL children, depends upon a very very simple premise.

ALL Education should be free . The education of ANY child should not have to depend upon the income or bank balance of his/her parents or grandparents.

Education should be paid for by the taxpayer and be public in purpose, outcome, access, ownership, control, accountability. There should be no undermining of this basic democratic principle by private institutions that both charge fees and depend upon the public purse.

These principles were hammered out and adhered to in 19th century Australia, but in the last half century have been undermined by State Aided private schools and charging of fees at public schools themselves. This is justified by the outmoded principle of ‘choice’ – i.e. ‘choice’ for the wealthy and those who wish to advance their self interest at the expense of those less fortunate than themselves.

Public school parents not only pay double education taxes – they pay taxes for public schools that they use, and ever increasing taxes for private schools – which they do not. To add insult to injury, they are asked to pay ever increasing fees at public schools themselves. According to data compiled by education financing company ASG, government education costs are calculated to have jumped by a quarter in the past decade to \$68,613 across a student's total school years. User pays has trickled into the public sector. Anyone who cannot pay is deprived of extra-curricula activities and reduced to 'charitable status.

A precedent has been set for 'user pays' – with extensive government subsidies. Australian education is now ripe for the USA/Trump/DeVos charter school experiment – the for-profit scheme guaranteed to give billionaires and their hedge funds the key to the public treasury.

So much for public education as a 'right' in the Australian democracy!

Meanwhile, in Melbourne, as parents are looking at a bill of \$536,515 for a P-12 private school education for their children, they are casting their eye around for a local public school – which provides as good if not better opportunity for tertiary entrance than any private, over-resourced institution. (See *The Australian* January 18, p. 10.)

And why not? It certainly makes good economic sense if you are forced to help your child into the housing market at the end of the day. It is not surprising then, to find that in Victoria there has been a 19.2% increase in public school students with 220 new schools needed and in NSW there has been a 14.4% increase in public school students with 213 new schools needed.

But parents who are savvy enough to 'choose' a public school education are now confronted with a problem. The 'choices' of public schools in the inner city where Kennett closed so many schools, and in the new development areas — are very thin on the ground. Even Kevin Donnelly (*The Australian* January 18, p. 2) admits that public school parents are being "shoe-horned into private schools where successive fee increases push their finances to breaking point'.

Yet he has the gall to say that ‘choice remains the key’, and suggests further tax deductions for private school parents.

It has obviously slipped his mind that, if you are going to get tax deductions you have to have money to spend – in this case on private schools – in the first place. And what does not appear to be in his mind at all is that educational ‘choice’ should be about children and their educational opportunities, not that of the parents buying commodities in a market place.

Meanwhile, if public school parents want information on school fees and what they should pay in a public school, the following information from VCOSS may be of use

<http://vcoss.org.au/blog/new-rules-to-protect-parents-from-dodgy-school-fee-requests/>

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The notion that sending your children to a government school is “free” is a persistent myth.

As parents well know, families are asked to [spend increasing amounts](#) on their children’s education, forking out on digital devices such as iPads, textbooks, stationery, school uniforms, sports days, elective subjects, camps and excursions.

These costs [have increased](#) by at least a third over recent years. And the cost burden isn’t helped by the Federal Governments recent [axing of the Schoolkids Bonus](#).

If parents don’t pay these fees their children are often barred from full participation in school activities. They can miss out on important development opportunities and may be excluded from their friends and peers.

So what fees are schools allowed to charge?

[Victorian legislation](#) states schools must not charge to teach the standard school curriculum. That is the eight core subjects: arts, English, health and physical education, languages other than English, maths, science, studies of society, environment and technology.

However, schools can (and do) request payments from families for things like textbooks, stationery and student ID cards, and activities all students are expected to attend such as camps and excursions. Schools can also charge for ‘optional’ activities or items, such as music lessons and class photos, and can seek voluntary school donations.

These charges are known as [school-level parent payments](#). Schools are responsible for developing their own parent payment policies (based on government guidelines). VCOSS members have previously [identified substantial problems](#) with how these payments are calculated and communicated.

In 2015, a [damning Auditor General's report](#) also found some parents were being charged for items that should have been free, such as class sets of text books, first aid nurses and grounds maintenance. It concluded payment requests lacked transparency, with some school invoices using vague descriptions like “curriculum contribution” or “classroom consumables”.

A survey of 366 schools founds 30% either didn't have a formal payment policy, or the one they did have was in breach of department's guidelines. None of them had a financial hardship policy to help struggling families.

To its credit, the Victorian Government has reviewed and [revised](#) its parent payment policy (which schools are required to implement from this school year).

The [new policy](#):

- **GIVES** families and schools greater clarity about what they can charge.
- **INSTRUCTS** schools how to better support families experiencing financial hardship.
- **CLARIFIES** that schools can't charge extra to teach senior students VCAL subjects
- **SUPPORTS** schools to better communicate their payment structures.

Importantly, it also emphasises that students must *not* be penalised when payments aren't made. “Students are not to be denied access to the standard curriculum program, refused instruction or disadvantaged,” the policy reads. *If you feel this is happening to your child you should contact your school immediately.*

Unfortunately, the new policy doesn't fix *all* the problems.

Schools are still able to determine what items are considered “essential” to student learning, and can still send parents monthly payment reminders, potentially causing undue stress.

The new policy also fails to address the underlying issue that school funding should be adequate to deliver the standard curriculum program for free.

Related: [Schools Funding Review \(VCOSS Submission\). July 2015](#)

VCOSS is firmly of the view that the Department of Education needs to regularly monitor the rollout of this new regime, and act quickly if breaches or sloppy practices are identified.

Monitoring should also be used to identify systemic issues, so these can be resolved quickly.

No child should have to miss out on a quality education because of their family's finances, and no parent should be made to feel guilty if they can't afford to pay.

WHAT MUST I PAY FOR?

Victorian Government schools can ask you to pay for:

- ❖ Items your child **takes temporary or permanent possession of**, including text books, student stationery and some school uniforms
- ❖ Materials for learning and teaching where students **construct, consume or take possession of the finished articles** (for example, ceramics, photography, etc)
- ❖ **Activities that *all* students** are expected to attend (for example, transport and entrance costs)

(Source: Victorian Government)

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