

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

## **Press Release 742**

### **What if Goulburn's Catholic schools were closed again?**

When dealing with the history of Australian education in the nineteenth century, historians have emphasised, for good reason, issues of church and state and what they regarded as sectarian battles. History is the history of ideas and the secularist educational settlement together with the constitutional separation of religion from the state are important themes in Australian educational history.

But there were other, very fundamental practical, and democratic issues that led political leaders like Henry Parkes in NSW, George Higinbotham in Victoria and others to place the future of the majority of Australian children in the hands of State rather than church institutions. They wanted ALL the children, not just those of the right religion or parental income, to be educated.

Income tax was not introduced until the 1860s. But even with secure taxation income, our forefathers were conscious of limited budgets; payment of overseas loans; reluctance of the wealthy to pay taxes for the services of those less fortunate than themselves; and the need to answer for every penny of public money spent to parliament. If you go to the documents of the time you can find exactly how many pounds, shillings and pence went to which institution. Things have not changed that much except that, until 2010 citizens could not find out exactly how much public money was going to schools in the private religious sector.

In the C19 politicians were also confronted with religious men, especially the bishops of the Catholic church who wanted public money, but with absolutely no strings attached. They wanted control of the curriculum and teachers. They rejected State inspection. Above all, they wanted the money with no accountability i.e. no public control of expenditure, Henry Parkes et al were democrats, not mediaeval monarchs. They were not going to funnel limited taxation into irresponsible hands. They looked at the situation. Private schools duplicated public facilities and the situation was expensive, inefficient and inequitable. So, they withdrew State Aid to private schools. And in 1900 Australia led the world in educational provision.

In the 1960s, the private sector blackmailed Australian governments and taxpayers into believing that they could not afford to pay for the 23% of private school pupils in the public sector. The media seized upon the drama created by the infamous ‘Goulburn Strike’! The religious lobby group and the DLP held the balance of power in Canberra and public money, starting as a trickle, soon flooded the private sector as they cried “Poor!” “Poor!” “Poor Us!”. But it was really “ Just!” “Just” “ Just Us!”. It still is.

Public schools suffered grievously as governments favoured their rivals. And by the twenty first century, the Australian nation has fallen well behind the international Joneses in educational standards.

But, thanks to the Myschool website, taxpayers and citizens can finally get some idea of what is actually happening to taxpayers’ money as it is channelled out to every school in Australia. And the figures are there for all to see. Australia is back in the nineteenth century and, whether they like it or not, politicians are being confronted with the plain economic and ideological facts of life.

DOGS are no longer alone in pointing out that the tipping point of State Aid to private schools has arrived. It is no longer economic, efficient, or democratic to continue propping up an expensive, divisive system with public money.

DOGS pointed out in 1964 that it never was or could be. But the figures on the MYSCHOOL website now tell the same story.

Chris Bonner from Save Our Schools has taken his readers back to where it all started in 1964 – in Goulburn and asks:

<http://insidestory.org.au/what-if-goulburns-catholic-schools-were-closed-again/>

What if Goulburn’s Catholic schools were closed again?

[Chris Bonnor](#)

28 March 2018

By promising special funding deals for Catholic schools, Labor is reviving the earliest deal-making in the “state aid” battle. What did that compromise actually achieve? In a symbolic way, federal government funding for non-government schools — “[state aid](#)” as it was known at the time — began fifty-six years ago, in Goulburn, New South Wales. At the time, Catholic schools were under pressure from uncertain finances and rising enrolments. Other countries faced with similar problems, including [New Zealand](#), set about integrating church schools into their state education systems, but Australia decided to preserve their educational

and organisational independence while allowing them to become increasingly reliant on government funds.

The Goulburn dispute began in 1962 when health inspectors insisted that extra toilets be installed in a local Catholic primary school. The schools cried poor, shut their doors and sent their 2000 students off to the local government schools. Not surprisingly, there wasn't enough room for them. The state government surrendered, handing over funds to help solve the sanitary problem. It was a classic case of successful brinkmanship, and it helped create the funding mess we have today.

Another idea was born at around the same time — the idea that governments were actually saving money by funding private schools. The notion might have made sense in the days when government funding was modest, but these days it's little more than a stubborn myth, as the latest school funding figures on the My School website make clear. These 2016 figures mean that we have an idea of what would happen if the Catholic schools in Goulburn shut their doors again and sent their flocks off to the local public schools.

My School's figures show that governments provided \$13,117,061 in recurrent funding to Goulburn's three Catholic schools in 2016:

- Each student attending Goulburn's [Trinity Catholic College](#) during that year was funded at \$14,168, which is more than the public funding (\$13,830) that went to each student at Goulburn's [Mulwaree High School](#). (Mulwaree is chosen in this example because, measured by the Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage, or ICSEA, it is the closer of the two government high schools to Trinity.) If the 539 Trinity students had attended Mulwaree High School instead, governments would have spent an extra \$7,454,370 at that school, but saved the \$7,636,552 they spent to have the students attend the Catholic school.
- Each student attending [Saints Peter and Paul's Primary School](#) in 2016 was funded at \$10,549, which is well over the \$9284 going to each student at the closest ICSEA local public school, [Goulburn West Primary School](#). If the 241 students had attended Goulburn West instead, governments would have spent \$2,237,444 rather than the \$2,542,309 they outlaid to have them attend the Catholic school.
- Each student attending [St Joseph's Primary School](#) in 2016 was funded at \$9960, which is 7 per cent higher than the \$9284 going to each student at Goulburn West Primary School. If the 295 students had instead attended Goulburn West, governments would have spent \$2,738,780 rather than the \$2,938,200 it cost to have them attend the Catholic school.

Combined, the cost to government of all the students in Goulburn's Catholic schools in 2016 was \$13,117,061. If all these students had attended local government schools the figure would have been \$12,430,594, a yearly cost saving to government of \$686,467. (None of these figures includes fee income, which was \$2,560,245 for Trinity Catholic College in 2016.)

These calculations are conservative. They assume that the recurrent cost of the transferred Catholic school students would be the same as the per student cost of the government school in which they were enrolling. In reality, the cost would be lower for two reasons. First, students in Catholic schools are measurably more advantaged, on average, than the students

in the government schools in which they would be enrolling, and so the per-student cost of the combined enrolment would be lower. And, second, the calculations don't take account of the economies of scale that would come from increased enrolments in Goulburn's public schools.

Of course, money would need to be spent on expanding accommodation at the public schools. But My School reveals \$12.5 million in federal government funding of capital improvements in the three Catholic schools between 2010 and 2016. Along with recurrent funding savings, even a portion of this investment in the area's public schools would certainly ease the burden of accommodating a larger number of students.

Is Goulburn typical? Anyone can check what My School reveals about his or her local schools, but the most meaningful comparisons are between schools that enrol similar students (as indicated by similar ICSEA values). On this measure, the vast majority of Catholic schools in Australia are publicly funded at [between 91 and 99 per cent](#) of the level for similar government schools — but this rises to over 100 per cent in many places, especially in Victoria.

Why might it matter? Catholic and independent schools are recurrently funded as if they are public schools, yet they clearly aren't. The significant increase in support has been accompanied by only minor increases in accountability, and so they essentially remain as private as they were in 1962.

Goulburn's Catholic schools — funded at more than 100 per cent of the rate for government schools — have no obligation to serve all the families of Goulburn. Their charging of fees, alone, is enough to ensure that they don't. At the very best, they are accessible to half of the families living locally. On average, they enrol the more advantaged, Catholic or otherwise. They can use discriminators, mostly illegal in the public system, to deny a request for enrolment, and any student who poses a challenge or is more costly to teach can be shunted off to a public school. And the town's Catholic schools will rarely be mentioned in reports on incidents in schools, student behaviour problems and suspensions because they aren't covered by freedom of information legislation and aren't required to divulge such information.

In their own ways, Goulburn's Catholic schools probably try to even out this tilted playing field. But Australia's schooling framework — a patchwork of governance structures and processes, financial incentives, obligations, responsibilities and accountabilities — pulls in the opposite direction. The results are absurd enough when private schools are 90 per cent publicly funded, but they make a mockery of fairness when, as in Goulburn, private schools receive more government money per student than their public counterparts nearby.

This is a sleeper issue in the interminable debate over school funding. The pressure on Catholic school authorities to accept a wider range of obligations in return for public funding can only increase. It's a good reason for them to be careful in pursuing more funding, even if they try to present it as a restoration of previous funding levels. Leaving aside comparisons within Australia, our Catholic schools are now funded at a similar level to their counterparts in New Zealand — but without anything like the same obligations.

The government's welcome resolve to introduce "school resource standard" funding is already under pressure and could easily be corrupted by existing or proposed special deals. It was ever thus. In reporting on the actual dollars that end up in real schools — rather than on what was *projected* to happen after previous changes in funding rules — My School shows how good intentions often dissolve in the face of vested interests. The risk is that it's about to happen all over again.

The solution needs to include a major review of the extent to which all publicly funded schools — government, Catholic and independent alike — have equal obligations to the taxpayers who fund them. Until this happens, not much else is going to change. ●

[Chris Bonnor](#)

Chris Bonnor is author, with Jane Caro, of *The Stupid Country* and *What Makes a Good School?*.

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