

**AUSTRALIAN COUNCIL FOR THE DEFENCE OF
GOVERNMENT SCHOOLS
PRESS RELEASE 899**

**Private Schools Create Social Problems
Mega Schools are Not the Answer
But Community Schools Could be**

In Australia, as in other countries, private schools exacerbate and create economic and social inequalities, undermine public education and cause the amalgamation of local schools into mega schools such as we have seen in the failed experiment at Shepparton.

Private schools in Australia try to ameliorate the grievous effects they have on the social fabric by offering ‘scholarships’ to members of the ‘deserving poor’. But as well all know, most children of all walks of Australian society – except the foolish aspiring middle class and the very wealthy in private schools, are in our public schools.

And there are alternatives to offering a wide range of opportunities in public school deprived of enrolments and resources by private competition or declining population.

The benefits of local ‘community schools’ over private and mega schools have been discovered in both America and Australia, as the following articles indicate. Australia was trying them in the 1970s and 1980s before the neo-liberal ideologues like Kennett attacked and closed most of them.

The American Experience

This article by Jeremy Mohler from the *Progressive Magazine* in the USA is full of relevant information on this topic:

**Charter Schools Aren’t the Answer, but
Community Schools Could Be**

If our mission is to make sure all children receive a great education, then community schools—which offer services like free healthcare and meals—might be our best bet.

by [Jeremy Mohler](#)

June 29, 2021

“Our mission is to support all children,” [wrote](#) the social media strategist of Texas’s IDEA Public Schools in a blog post.

It’s a worthwhile sentiment and one that is often declared by charter school chains like IDEA. But these chains, despite claiming to be universally beneficial to all children, are publicly funded but privately operated and serve only a narrow portion of public school students.

An increasing body of research reveals that charter schools often drain funding from students in traditional neighborhood schools.

This type of PR-friendly rhetoric is found throughout the industry: KIPP, a nationwide chain similar to IDEA, [says](#) that its vision is that “every child grows up free to create the future they want for themselves and their communities”; Charter Solutions, a Utah-based charter school management company, [says](#) the schools it works with ensure that “every individual has the opportunity to thrive”; and the California Charter Schools Association, a charter school lobbying group, [says](#) it exists to “uplift all of California’s students.”

More famously, former U.S. Education Secretary Betsy DeVos—a staunch supporter of charter schools and other forms of education privatization—[said](#) that her job was to “make all schools better for all students across the country.”

Yet, this language doesn’t match the reality, as the operation of these schools comes with a cost to other students. An increasing body of research reveals that charter schools often drain funding from students in traditional neighborhood schools. A 2018 In the Public Interest study [found](#) that four California school districts—including San Diego and Oakland—lose tens of millions of dollars each year that would be recouped if students attended neighborhood schools instead of charter schools.

Another study found that the net negative fiscal [impact](#) to six Pennsylvania school districts ranged between \$8,000 and \$17,000 per pupil in the first year after a student leaves for a charter school. (A recent study concluding that charter schools don’t hurt the finances of school districts has been thoroughly [critiqued](#).)

Charter schools also all-too-frequently engage in fraudulent financial schemes that take funding directly out of classrooms.

In February, the founders of A3 Education—a California network of online charter schools—were required to return [more than \\$210 million](#) that they obtained through an enrollment scam to funnel public dollars into their own pockets. Last month, IDEA’s board of directors [ousted](#) two of the chain’s leaders due to financial mishandling. This came after IDEA drew criticism in 2020 for attempting to [lease](#) a private jet for board members at an annual cost of \$1.92 million. Charter Solutions, the Utah company, is run by a state senator who, between 2015 and 2018, collected [\\$5.7 million](#) in fees from charter schools, all of it public money.

The gobs of money leaving the classroom become even more eye-popping when considering perhaps the biggest lesson the pandemic has taught us about public education: The most

resilient schools are those that have enough resources to provide students, families, and even communities with support beyond just education.

From Los Angeles to West Virginia, educators and school staff have stepped up in ways they never would have imagined, from delivering lunches to coordinating vaccines. It's become apparent in recent months that public schools following the "community school" strategy have been some of the most successful at navigating the ups and downs of the pandemic.

Many community schools even offer things like food, clothing, and bill assistance to community members with no ties to the school.

Community schools are public schools that [bring together community partners](#)—including nonprofits, local businesses, and public institutions—to support students, families, and nearby residents. This support ranges from after-school educational programming for both students and parents to health care, such as dental services and mental health resources. Many community schools even offer things like food, clothing, and bill assistance to community members with no ties to the school.

Southside K-8 School in the town of War, West Virginia, exemplifies this approach. Since becoming a community school in 2014, it has offered free dental and other wraparound services to students, movie nights for families, gym access for residents, and more.

During the pandemic, Southside and other nearby community schools have leveraged school bus routes to deliver books, meals, and schoolwork to families. They've also opened wireless access points to facilitate online schooling. By May 2020, they had distributed [nearly 40,000 books](#) to students sheltering at home.

Enos Garcia Elementary in Taos, New Mexico, has been [providing families](#) with food, clothing, assistance with paying bills, basic computer training, and English as a second language (ESL) classes based on needs assessments school staff conducted when the pandemic began.

Club Boulevard Elementary in Durham, North Carolina, used an innovative app to communicate with parents as the local school district navigated between online and in-person schooling. This streamlined the school's distribution of computers and tech support to students.

Arrey Elementary in rural New Mexico has been providing COVID-19 health information and testing services to its surrounding community. In May, it coordinated with the local health department to administer vaccines.

Those are stories of individual schools doing remarkable things. But the community school strategy works on a much larger scale, too. Research shows that community schools that adhere to [best practices](#) not only improve student educational [outcomes](#), but they also reduce racial and economic [achievement gaps](#).

State legislatures and even the federal government are starting to take more notice of the community school strategy. President Joe Biden proposed [\\$443 million](#) for community

schools in his education budget, fifteen times the current level of federal spending. California used \$45 million in federal COVID-19 relief to start a competitive [grant program](#) for expanding community schools. Cincinnati's school district used the relief to offer students [summer learning programs](#) that address learning loss due to the pandemic.

If our mission is to make sure all children receive a great education, then charter schools, private school vouchers, and other forms of privatization fall short. And if we want to go even further to ensure that public institutions are meeting the needs of the communities they serve, then community schools are a promising education reform that deserves adequate public investment

The Australian Experience

Public education was established in Australia in 1848 to educate the white children in outback NSW. Their parents were concerned that they would grow up 'like the blacks' - unable to read, write or do arithmetic. Private schools have never been able to educate those in remote areas unless they are able to pay expensive boarding school fees. So the Australian politicians, in their wisdom established the old Irish National system which was intended to be non-sectarian and open to all children. But the problem of lack of resources and declining population when families move to the cities has always dogged rural schools. Declining enrolments mean loss of teachers and curriculum choices particularly in small secondary schools. If there is both a private and public school in a small rural town, the problems are exacerbated many fold. But Adam Carey, in *The Age* of 3 August has a successful story to tell. Here it is:

Rural schools join forces and funds to fight student exodus

By [Adam Carey](#)

August 3, 2021 — 11.56am

Advertisement

Country principal Jo Amott freely admits she is in charge of a school that is caught in a downward spiral.

Enrolments at Balmoral K-12 Community College have fallen sharply in the past six years, from 162 students in 2015 to just 97 this year, in a pattern of decline that has begun to feed off itself.

Although the school's results have remained steady, the declining number of students has made it harder to offer some specialist subjects, or put on team sports and graduation ceremonies. This has led some students to leave, defecting to other schools in bigger towns.

Others have moved on simply because their friends have left.

“I came here three years ago and I was like, I am going to turn things around, this is going to be awesome, but I got to a point at the end of my first year where I was like, it’s just this spiral and unless I can grab 40 kids and start afresh I can’t see a circuit breaker,” Ms Amott said.

The small-town school’s problems are not unique in the west Wimmera region, which lost 14 per cent of its population in the 10 years to 2016, the most recent census found.

Since then, enrolments at government schools in the region have declined at an even faster rate: down by 40 per cent at Balmoral, by 22 per cent at Edenhope College and by 34 per cent at Goroke P-12 College.

The shared problem has led the schools to commit to something they have never done before, combining forces – and funding – to try to arrest the slide.

“Too often it’s like a competition between schools trying to get each other’s numbers, but at the end of the day the schools are there for kids, not for us,” said Edenhope College assistant principal Chad Frost. “It’s like merging a footy team. It happens all the time in the bush, otherwise they die.”

But the three schools have no plan to merge.

Rather, they have committed to pool resources to hire new teachers and support staff, beginning with a mental health practitioner who will work across all three schools.

Goroke P-12 College principal Dee Kearsley said this will overcome one of the biggest problems small schools face in hiring new staff: lack of funds to offer a full-time position.

It is hoped new teachers will be hired to work across all three schools, which have agreed to align their timetables and composite year levels so specialist classes happen simultaneously, with students either being bussed to one school, or two schools joining in virtually while students at the third are taught face to face.

“We’d be able to offer things like woodwork, metalwork, automotive and LOTE [language other than English], which we haven’t as it’s really hard for us when we try to get teachers for those,” Ms Kearsley said.

The schools have also agreed to hold a combined year 12 formal later this year. Ms Amott said her school could not have held an event on its own, given its small number of VCE and VCAL students.

The three schools committed to work together at an all-staff meeting in July, which was convened by the Country Education Partnership, a non-profit organisation that works to improve education opportunities in rural and regional areas.

Executive officer Phil Brown said the west Wimmera schools were following the example of a handful of other Victorian schools seeking to find strength in collaboration, including a government and a Catholic school in Nathalia and a cluster of primary schools in Gippsland.

“The work that we are doing is about encouraging schools to come together and explore the possibilities and breaking down those often limiting barriers that some schools see as not an advantage to work together,” he said.

LISTEN TO THE DOGS PROGRAM
855 ON THE AM DIAL: 12.00 NOON SATURDAYS
<http://www.3cr.org.au/dogs>