

AUSTRALIAN COUNCIL FOR THE DEFENCE OF GOVERNMENT SCHOOLS

PRESS RELEASE 925

TIMES HAVE CHANGED:

PRIVATE SCHOOLS ARE TOO EXPENSIVE

THEY DO NOT SAVE TAXPAYERS MONEY

From the return of State Aid for private sectarian schools in 1969 to the present, a major argument has been that it would be too expensive to take them over and make them public schools.

That argument never held very much water, but the facts and figures are now very much on the record. They are now far too expensive for the taxpayer to subsidise as private institutions in hard economic as well as social terms. Even direct funding figures - minus the taxation exemption figures, - are starting to speak for themselves.

In a recent article in the *Australian Financial Review*, entitled 'Publicly funded private schools need Obligations,' Chris Bonnor and Tom Greenwell made the point very clearly.

The recent debate about the exclusion of homosexual children from Citipointe and other private schools, together with the Morrison Government's failed effort to legislate religious freedom laws, has opened up floodgates of questions, questions and more questions. It seems that the State Aide problem, allegedly buried, has risen with a vengeance.

Private school peak groups have long argued that they should have unregulated control over whom they enrol and employ to teach in their schools. In fact, in the late nineteenth century, this power was at issue when the Roman Catholic church took its schools out of the State subsidised system. The hierarchy wanted the power to own, enrol, hire and fire and determine what was taught in their schools.

In recent times, the National Catholic Education Commission's executive director, the erstwhile Labor Minister, Jacinta Collins, has argued that these powers are OK because in a pluralist school system, families should be able to elect for a faith-based education for their children.

Bonnor and Greenwell point out that this view give primacy to pluralism in religious beliefs.

But pluralism is about comparable opportunities for people of all races, classes, religions and backgrounds.

The current private school version of pluralism has led to a lopsided system in which not only are children divided along sectarian lines, but there is not much mixing of the rich and poor in the current Australian lopsided system.

Religious schools overwhelmingly cater for those who can pay fees, in the process creating a socioeconomic hierarchy. This isn't pluralism. It is discrimination and separation based largely on circumstances of birth. The Myschool website shows how this plays out in every community.

Arguments about the rights of private schools to discriminate seemed acceptable – until they received public funding. But even when they finally received public funding, the argument was that the expansion of the private sector would represent a big cost saving to governments. And nobody, not even Karmel or Gonski, seriously addressed what obligations, including student enrolments, should accompany public funding.

BUT now, with the Citipointe case, not to mention the demands for religious discrimination legislation which places religion at the top of a hierarchy of rights, the assumption that private schools have unfettered rights to discriminate, given their financial dependence upon the taxpayer, has opened up the bankruptcy of their economic argument. This is how Bonnor and Greenwell see it:

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The aggressive discrimination practised by private schools has challenged the assumption that private schools save the public purse.

Take the example of Citipointe Christian College:

Governments, in direct recurrent grants pay approximately \$8500 for each student at Citipointe Christian College. Parents pay about the same, hence about \$15,000 in total is spent on each student. Meeting all the recurrent costs at the school seems to be a big impost on federal and state governments.

BUT...Is it?

If the Citipointe students attended Mansfield State High School nearby, the cost would be just \$11,000 a student. That is in direct recurrent funding alone, and not all the indirect funding extras. Why would governments need to find \$15,000 a student, especially when the lower-cost government school reveals better NAPLAN results than most private schools nearby? Yes, there is more to schools than NAPLAN but achievement matters.

This Christian schools is funded to about 80% of the cost of similar students in the public school. In that region also Loreto College Corrparoo is funded to 95 per cent, the figure for Lourdes Hill College is 98 per cent. All these schools enrol students from similar socioeconomic backgrounds.

And many private schools in Australia are funded at more than 100 per cent. It is not much a bargain for taxpayers- particularly if such schools merely duplicate public facilities unnecessarily.

In any case, governments are now much bigger stakeholders in private schools than their religious owners. What started as a subsidy now often amounts to equivalent funding. Parents may pay school fees, but it is nonsense to say these constitute savings for the taxpayer. In the same fashion, the substantial capital spend for the higher fee schools does not represent public saving. While the taxpayer funded buildings represent an alienation of the public estate.

There is substantial overspend on private schools throughout Australia as they compete for 'market share'. Given that schools enrolling similar students yield similar results, the amount spent by the lowest-cost providers, usually public schools, becomes a benchmark for each group of 'similar' schools.

Amounts spent in excess of these total about \$5 billion in recurrent spending each year - all that money coming from governments and parents.

Next time conservative governments complain that school funding goes up but results do not, it should be pointed out that this is because the total spend isn't sufficiently directed to where it would make the biggest difference. And every time attempts have been made to change this, the private school lobby has played politics and prevented any semblance of a 'needs' policy getting off the ground, let alone succeeding.

PUBLIC FUNDING OBLIGATIONS

But there is more to the money argument, and this related to the obligations of schools and the way they operate. There is a serious disconnect between the demands of the private sector and the reality of their funding.

Are these schools going to continue to demand every greater shares of the public funding for education while discriminating against the poor – who cannot even dream of paying their fees or anyone else who does not fit their narrow religious or social or political criteria?

DOGS POSITION

Bonnor and Greenwell say that

‘...it is well beyond time to contemplate a level playing field for all publicly funded schools. Our school system can be much fairer, more productive and more sustainable.’

DOGS agree, and note that they have always argued that only public responsible schools should be publicly funded. Those are schools which are

Public in purpose

Public in outcome

Public in access- without discrimination

Public in ownership

Public in control

Public in accountability

In other words, the public schools we have inherited and which still do a great job educating two thirds of Australian children.

DOGS point out that the only way genuine pluralism can be practised in education is in a public system open to all children, teachers, parents, and employees.

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855 ON THE AM DIAL: 12.00 NOON SATURDAYS

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