

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

**Press Release 962**

## **Churches are Still Abusing Children – Only this time it's in public schools**

**Tom Orren**

**19 December 2022**

What is abuse? According to Slater and Gordon's website, there is no legal definition but there are certain elements associated with it. It can be either and intentional, or unintentional, action, or inaction, that harms another person. Institutional abuse is when people in care (including school children) are mistreated due to an imbalance of power, or when there is an expectation of trust which is not fulfilled. It can also involve taking advantage of a position of power to coerce others and, finally, there is 'financial abuse', when a person (or group) takes control of economic resources that belong to someone else and, by doing so, places them at a disadvantage.

### **Churches and Public School Children**

Jesus said, "Love the little children," and that we should love our neighbours. In fact, he went even further and said that we should love our enemies. So why do churches that preach 'Love thy neighbour' on Sunday seem to hate public school children from Monday to Friday? At least that's the way it looks. If their behaviour is anything to go by, churches see public schools as an enemy that must be defeated. Far from loving the children in them, they do anything in their power to deny them the best education possible. Otherwise, why would they keep lobbying for funding that ensures that public school students will always get less than students in religious schools?

The reason is simple. Religious schools could not survive unless they had superior funding, so they insist on a system where their fees, plus public subsidies, will always be greater than what any public school can get. Without that extra funding, nobody in their right mind would pay for an education that they could get for free.

### **How do churches justify this systematic inequality?**

The subsidisation of religious schools is often justified on the grounds that it provides choice for parents, but that only applies to parents who can afford private school fees, so it's not a choice for everyone. Public school parents are even denied a choice of public schools. They have to use the schools to which their children are allocated. Moreover, free choice may not be all that it's cracked up to be. There's an economic parable that illustrates this.

*'There's a football game where every spectator is happy to watch from their allocated seat. However, during a particularly exciting passage of play, the people in the front row 'choose' stand up and, naturally, this blocks the view of those sitting behind them. As a result, those people also have to stand and, when they do, they block the view of those behind them. This continues until everyone in the stadium has to stand, even though they would all be happier watching the game from their seats.'*

In other words, sometimes, the choices made by a small number of people can have an adverse impact on a far larger group (who were better off the way things were). The subsidisation of private schools in Australia creates just such a paradox. In the 1960s, the vast majority of Australians were happy to send their children to free, public schools, while a minority 'chose' to pay for their children to attend private schools. Then the churches started begging the government for modest funding to help cover the costs of toilet blocks and science labs and, once they got it, they realised they had some political muscle (especially in the Labor Party), so they started flexing it. No longer satisfied with a 'little' help, they started demanding equal funding and, when they got that, they wanted more than equal funding. The Bible has a thing or two to say about wanting more than others. It's a cardinal sin called greed.

### **We Deserve More Because We Pay More!**

Some churches argue that their schools 'deserve' more because their parents choose to pay fees, but should that mean that the only way to get a good education is to pay for it? Nobody mentioned that when the churches first asked for help. If they had, I'm sure the public would have quickly gone cold on the idea.

The extra funds available to private school students creates the perception that public schools are second rate - that the only way to ensure that your child gets a 'great' education is to send them to a private school. Those who feel this way are forced to pay between \$2000 and \$30,000 a year for a service that was once free, which would be like forcing people pay to walk on footpaths, to visit parks or to go to the beach. Because its paid by choice, many people think that this acceptable but, for many, it is no longer a choice. The fear that their children will

miss out has forced them pay for something that was previously free. In other words, those fees are a tax disguised as a fee.

### **How did this come about?**

In the 1950s (a time when subsidising private schools was frowned upon) a small number of struggling, Catholic schools humbly asked the government for some funding to help cover costs. But somehow, that modest funding, for a small number of Catholic schools, has grown into generous subsidisation for every religious school in the country. Another analogy might put this into perspective.

*Imagine driving along and seeing someone who needs help, so you pull over and give them a lift. They're very grateful but after a while they start complaining about not having their own car and, a while later, they become aggressive about it. Then they get bolder and ask if they can drive your car and, to keep the peace, you agree. Soon after, they tell you that they have to go a long way past your destination, and that they'll need your car for the day. You're not quite sure how it got to that stage but, by then, you don't have much choice, so you agree. Besides, they said they'd pick you up on the way home, so you let them go. That afternoon, you wait outside your workplace and give a wave when you see your car coming, but it drives straight past. Now it's you who has hitch.*

Religious schools that once begged for limited funding are now demanding funding for luxuries. No longer are they asking for 'just a little' help. Now they're demanding the best education that money can buy. Meanwhile, public school students have to make do with whatever they can get.

### **What About Efficiency?**

Some people justify the subsidisation of private schools by pointing to other subsidised industries and asking, "Why not us too?" But time and time again, economists have proven that subsidies (and their cousins, tariffs) actually create inefficiency. Propping up inefficient businesses always ends up making consumers pay more, and private schools are no exception.

It's beyond question that public schools are more efficient. It costs far less to educate a child in a public school than in a private school, so why are we subsidising a less efficient (i.e. more costly) education system? Wouldn't it be wiser to invest in the most efficient system? If so, there'd be far more money for everyone. By subsidising a less efficient system, we are literally throwing money away.

## **We're Saving the Government Money**

Advocates of private education often claim that it would cost more to educate everyone in the public system, but it always costs more to operate a dual-system than a single system. To see why, imagine if every electricity retailer had to run their own set of power lines to every house. A single-system offers greater opportunities to plan and to achieve economies of scale, while dual systems always result in duplication and waste. Subsidising private schools for a minority ends up costing everyone more.

## **Let's Talk Costs**

In 2022, NSW public schools received 87.4% of the Schooling Resource Standard while private schools received 106%, and they will continue to be over-funded until 2029. By then, \$2 billion will have been diverted to private school students from those who really need it.

The average cost of educating a child at a public, high school is about \$15,000 a year, but there would be very few (and probably no) private schools that could come close to that. Some are spending upwards of \$20,000 or \$30,000 per child, per year, and even the poorest of them would be spending \$1000 or \$2000 more, per child, than a public school. If we extrapolate that extra cost across Australia, it would probably be enough to pay for the much-discussed blowout in the NDIS.

## **But We Pay Taxes Too!**

Another justification for subsidising private schools is that private school parents pay taxes, so they deserve some money to pay for their child's education. But there is no logic in subsidising private schools to have 'more than' public schools, and nor is there a moral or ethical argument that can support it. Shouldn't churches that preach 'love your enemy' insist that public school children get at least the same funding as their children?

This could be achieved in two ways. Either, public schools could be given extra funding, to bring them up to the same level as religious schools. Or religious schools could be subsidised to a point where their 'total funding' (fees plus subsidies) equals that of public schools. So, if it costs \$15000 to educate a child in a public school, a private school with fees of \$3000, should get no more than \$12000 per child. And schools with fees higher than \$15000 should get no subsidies whatsoever.

## **Are Churches Really Guilty of Child Abuse?**

Are public school students harmed because they cannot access the same level of funding as students in private schools? Yes. Do public school students suffer because there is an imbalance of power? Yes. Do churches have a duty of care to all children? Yes. Do churches act to ensure that all students have equal access to education funding? No. Do churches use their political power to gain a financial advantage for their schools? Yes. Do church schools take control of resources that place public schools at a disadvantage? Yes. All these elements demonstrate that churches are denying the children in public schools what they expect for the children in their schools. Far from loving them, it appears that couldn't care less. Does this constitute abuse? Figure that out for yourself.

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