

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

## **Press Release 986**

### **THE ‘COMMON FRAMEWORK’ REQUIREMENT OF CHRIS BONNOR AND TOM GREENWELL ONLY A PARTIAL SOLUTION TO THE STATE AID PROBLEM**

**In a recent book entitled *Choice and Fairness* and in various articles Chris Bonner and Tom Greenwell are promoting the idea that**

*All schools that receive public funding, should be free to the user and prohibited from charging fees. They should be open to children of all abilities, and prohibited from excluding children based on entrance tests and other similar discriminators. They could continue to promote their specific religious or educational ethos, but would lose their public funding if they charged fees.*

They call for

*a common framework which ensures that, in return for public funding, all schools take on commensurate public obligations. Only then will we slow and reverse the separation of students, by family advantage, into different schools – and improve equity and overall student achievement.*

They admit that the Gonski reforms, even if properly implemented have, if anything, exacerbated inequities in Australian education. Their full analysis, as presented in John Menadue’s *Pearls and Irritations* is worth a careful analysis.

Here it is :

## **A problem bigger than rich schools and funding**

By Chris Bonnor and Tom Greenwell

Jun 20, 2023

PEARLS AND IRRITATIONS at <https://johnmenadue.com/a-problem-bigger-than-rich-schools-and-funding/>

*It's easy to gain the impression that there are just two school sectors in Australia: elite private schools and public schools, the former being exclusive and over-funded, the latter inclusive and cash-strapped. True to a point, but in dwelling on this dichotomy we are missing bigger policy issues that cry out for resolution.*

The contrasts between rich and poor schools are better known than ever. Just over the last few months we've read about how private schools are crying poor, while underfunded public schools suffer – and how Sydney's top private schools rake in millions in donations and why we should just defund such schools. A more recent offering from Crikey's Maeve McGregor goes further, the very title of her article declaring that the school funding wars are over: rich people won and the country lost.

Australia has indeed lost, and it is a loss created by the way our framework of schools has evolved – far more than anything that goes on inside them. McGregor asks: “do we truly comprehend the scale of what's at stake?” She writes how the bonds of fairness and social contract have cracked under the weight of a series of attacks [on public schools]. In the process our very segregated education system “is defined by impenetrable barriers of class, privilege and wealth”.

While it might be explained in different ways, Australians have long known about the divides in our schooling. The content and tone of the above five articles eerily repeats a similar public discourse twenty years ago: the gap between rich and poor is widening, the way we resource schools is the problem, adequate and equity funding is the solution. Exhibit A is Ivyclad Grammar up the hill, Exhibit B is the public school on the other side of town.

Then along came the Gonski Review which was going to fix much of that. It generated high expectations, alas which dissipated in the years of neglect which followed. Yes, we apparently all still believe in equity and there is a commitment to funding all schools to their Schools Resourcing Standard (SRS) ...eventually, maybe.

But almost none of the fundamentals of how Australia 'does' school have changed for over half a century. On the one hand we have fully government funded public schools, most of which are obliged to be open to every child from every family in every circumstance and location. They stand alongside and compete with almost fully-funded private schools which choose where and who they serve – and where enrolment is subject to payment of fees and usually a background check. The problem is compounded by rapid increases in their public funding, while their public obligations remain stuck in a time warp.

It's a perfect arrangement to create a system characterised, as McGregor attests, by class, privilege and wealth. And it is a system in which family and school socio economic status (SES) is increasingly determining school outcomes. This was confirmed only last week by yet more research. Murdoch University's Michael Sciffer, found “a school's socioeconomic status predicts the likelihood a student will achieve minimum literacy and numeracy benchmarks.” And the impact on children's literacy and numeracy is dramatic.

“Attending a disadvantaged primary school costs half a term of learning per year for every student. This grows to one term of learning per year in secondary schools.”

The response of governments, including the current federal government, is to commission more reviews of anything but these fundamentals. It is even fair to argue that the purpose of many reviews is to distract from school education’s terminal structural failure.

The failure is both historical and endemic. In the 1970s, the Karmel Review knew that in creating a government funded public/private system we were taking risks. The Gonski Review didn’t directly touch the problem. Hence in 2023 we are still absorbed by the need to implement Gonski, chapter and verse, while remaining wedded to the structures that will always undermine what little progress we make.

In the public domain, as evidenced by the rich versus poor narratives, all we seem to do is create and channel outrage. In the process, such narratives risk going too far in a distracting direction, while not going anywhere far enough in a search for solutions.

It’s arguably worse than that. Some public education advocates are wedded to the hope that the scenarios described by Maeve McGregor and others might be transformed by a more equitable (SRS) distribution of money alone. But what will really change?

In *Waiting for Gonski* and *Choice and Fairness*, we argue that even if the full Gonski finally arrives, the un-level playing field on which Australian schools currently operate will remain almost entirely unaltered. Publicly-funded private schools would continue to charge fees as high as the market will bear, and pick and choose their students. Even if we were to achieve what is euphemistically called needs-based funding, all the drivers of segregation would still be there, unaltered and untouched.

Michael Sciffer, the researcher at Murdoch University who provided the most recent evidence of the problem, has also put his finger on the solution: “Much more substantial reforms are needed to ensure every school is playing its part in educating all young Australians. This would require schools to be representative of their communities in proportion to their public funding. Secondary private schools receive 80-90% of the government funding public schools receive. They should enrol a similar percentage of the disadvantaged students that nearby public schools enrol.”

The biggest challenge is how to decouple school choice from family advantage. In *Choice and Fairness* we propose that all schools that receive public funding, should be free to the user and prohibited from charging fees. They should be open to children of all abilities, and prohibited from excluding children based on entrance tests and other similar discriminators. They could continue to promote their specific religious or educational ethos, but would lose their public funding if they charged fees.

This is a brutally short summary of the full proposal, readily available in various forms. If just a one sentence summary is needed, we call for a common framework which ensures that, in return for public funding, all schools take on commensurate public obligations. Only then will we slow and reverse the separation of students, by family advantage, into different schools – and improve equity and overall student achievement.

At first sight, the common public framework proposed in Choice and Fairness might seem like a radical and costly proposal. But it isn't really: over two-thirds of non-government schools are already funded close to the same level as public schools which enrol similar students. It is Australia's current school system that is radical – in all the worst possible ways.

It wouldn't be easy. While there is considerable variation within each sector, Independent, Catholic and government schools (in that order) form a social hierarchy in almost every community. But if other countries have created school systems which provide diversity without generating division, and offer choice without amplifying socio-economic segregation, why can't we?

Do we really need more narratives that simply restate part of the problem? It's beyond time for a real debate about achievable solutions that address the most fundamental issues. In Choice and Fairness, we have proposed a common public framework for all schools. If there is a better way to address the socioeconomic segregation that is undermining our aspirations for equality, opportunity and achievement, let's hear it.

Chris Bonnor and Tom Greenwell are the authors of *Choice and Fairness: A Common Framework for all Australian schools*, Australian Learning Lecture, 2023.

## **DOGS COMMENT**

Unfortunately, Chris Bonner and Tom Greenwell's solution is unlikely to solve the inequity problem. It will only succeed, as all compromises have done since 1964 with pouring more billions into private schools which will find a way around the segregation problem. Because division of children on the basis of class, creed and colour is their basic *raison d'être*.

Chris Bonner and Tom Greenwell need to go back to a full definition of what a public school is, rather than grab one of its key indicia, namely 'open access' to children without discrimination ( but not necessarily parents, teachers, and other employees.

DOGS remind our readers and listeners that a public school is one which is

1. Public in purpose
2. Public in outcome
3. Public in access to children, parents, teachers, and other employees
4. Public in ownership
5. Public in control
6. Public in funding

## 7. Public in accountability.

Private schools are currently none of the above. Chris Bonner and Tom Greenwell are proposing that in return for full public funding private schools are partially open in access. It is a nice idea predicated on a great deal of trust. **Perhaps, if they defined their idea of a common public framework to include all of the above indicia of a public school their ideas of a compromise between two systems with opposite ideologies might have some hope of success.**

But as they have done since 1964, the private sector, and most particularly the religious bureaucracies will grab the money and continue to divide the community, build up their assets at public expense and laugh all the way to the bank, making public accountability a joke.

The only answer to the State Aid problem, as it has always been, is to take over the private schools which the public purse is already paying for and make them genuinely accessible and public in the seven ways listed above.

If private schools wish to be genuinely independent they should, in a democracy, be free to be just that. But not at public expense.

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