

# AUSTRALIAN COUNCIL FOR THE DEFENCE OF GOVERNMENT SCHOOLS

## PRESS RELEASE 491#

### FINNISH EXPERIENCE PROVES

### PUBLIC EDUCATION CAN BE AN ENTITLEMENT FOR ALL

The wealthy, and powerful in Church and State have never accepted taxation for the common good.

They have always sought to minimise tax – their own tax that is - and obtain privileges for themselves and their children through ‘State Aid’ - public payments for the private good. The argument for ‘parental choice’ is based upon private entitlement to public funds.

To add insult to injury, especially for those taxpayers in developing areas bereft of public schools, Australian conservatives are telling parents their children are no longer ‘entitled’ to a public education.

Yet two thirds of Australian citizens are dependent upon the public sector for the education of their children. They pay taxes. Why should *their* ‘Age of Entitlement’ be over?

Australian citizens are being told that upper-and middle-class welfare will have to be withdrawn so that only the genuinely needy are subsidised. ( Laura Tingle : ‘Great Expectations: Government Entitlement and an Angry Nation’, *Quarterly Essay*, Issue 46, 2012, and Percy Allan: ‘Age of Entitlement over for Middle Class’, *Australian Financial Review*, 28 September 2012) )

DOGS note :

1. Public schools available for all our children are a national good, a necessity for our future, as well as a right, an entitlement for every child.
2. Even if the conservative argument is correct, - the upper and middle-class welfare in State Aid to private religious schools throughout Australia costing billions - should be the first to go.
3. It is possible to have a first rate public education system available for every child if we refuse to divert public money to the private, religious sector. Finnish precedent proves this.
4. Finland, not the UK or even the USA should be our model.

The following experience of Katrina Kemp, a NSW teacher who went on a study tour of Finland, illustrates the above:

See <http://www.smh.com.au/national/education/first-past-finnishing-line-20121021-27zbx.html#ixzz2AAF3Jbxw>

Finland has repeatedly rated near the top in international rankings based on science, mathematics and literacy. Sydney teacher Katrina Kemp visited the country to learn why.

Look and learn ... small class sizes are one of the keys to Finland's educational success. The country ranks near the top of the world in literacy and numeracy outcomes. Public education need not be a political battlefield. It can be an undisputed national priority that operates on the basis of equity, goodwill and trust, unhampered by government demands for accountability. It can be the sole provider of education to all children across a nation without any division of resources across competing school systems. It can be a product of highly trained and respected professionals who know their work is valued and their integrity unquestioned throughout all levels of their society.

It can be regarded as so important to that society that it is the first choice of the professions for school-leavers and only 10 per cent of those who apply to enter teacher training courses are accepted. After a rigorous series of entry tests where personal aptitude for teaching and a capacity for research must be demonstrated, these students attend university for five years, pay no fees and receive an allowance that is not means-tested.

The above scenario is not an imagined utopia but the effective features of the education system I observed on a recent

study tour of schools and universities in Finland. It is a nation that has demonstrated what can be achieved when "achievement", as measured by scores from national tests, is not driving classroom teaching and learning.



Study tour ... Katrina Kemp.

We know that Finland ranks near the top of the world in literacy and numeracy outcomes according to the Program for International Student Assessment, an international testing system of 15-year-old students undertaken every three years by the OECD.

That the Finns consistently do so in the absence of any national testing program, or school inspections as in Britain, should be

enough to shake the confidence of those in our society who are bent on adopting models from the US or Britain, especially when we already outrank both those nations in PISA. Ultimately, beyond any comparisons that arise from national or international testing, the true efficacy of any education system lies in how well it nurtures children in terms of present needs and future life outcomes. Arguably, the more thoroughly present needs are addressed, the more likely it is that potential in a child will be developed and therefore life outcomes will be positive.

This is something the Finnish people understand well and which informs every level of their education system. As a precursor to academic learning, physical, social and emotional wellbeing are treated as a communal responsibility, not just the preserve of a child's parents.

Since the 1930s, all children have been provided with a free, nutritious meal for lunch every day at school or preschool. Children go to school when they are turning seven but all are individually assessed for social and emotional development as indicators of school readiness.

At age six, Finnish children attend a free year of preschool where they play together, eat their soup, drink their milk and lie down for afternoon naps in birchwood beds. Informal interactions with each other and adults encourage natural language development in Finnish and

English without pressure to acquire academic skills.

After sufficient developmental play in preschool, they go to school in small class groups of 15 students. Children are ready for academic learning and attend to demanding, teacher-directed lessons where content is delivered without disruption. Children are quiet and focused without the use of overt reward systems. They mostly learn to read in Finnish in their first school year and go on to learn English and Swedish as well from the next year on.

Crucially, for those who demonstrate reading or learning difficulties in that first year or at any time thereafter, support is immediately and indefinitely available. Each school has a full-time special-education teacher and, like all other teachers in Finland, each of them holds a master's degree.

Finnish education is guided by the social mission of equity across the nation and the understanding that quality education enhances long-term life outcomes for citizens. It is therefore a sound investment of taxes, as defined by the practical and humane attitude that exclusion is more expensive than education.

It is worth noting that equal opportunity turns out to be the underpinning of the proven excellence of public education in Finland.

***THE DOGS RADIO PROGRAM***

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