

Reforming Commonwealth School Funding to Make Private School Funding More Public Spirited?

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The National Priority for Schools

The Australian PISA Report (Lokan, Greenwood and Cresswell, 2001) showed that the performance of Australian students is comparable with the best in the OECD, but that Australia has relatively poor outcomes in regard to equity. Countries such as Finland and Korea which produced better performances than Australia also had a smaller spread between high achievers and those not doing so well. As Dr. Barry McGaw, Director of Education at the OECD puts it: 'If you are going to be born in circumstances of poor family background, it would be better to be born in Finland, Korea, Japan or Canada, than in Australia...' He concludes that ... '(o)ther countries show that Australia can do better (and that) we should abandon fears of dumbing down and set about levelling up' (McGaw, 2002) (2002, Slide 37).

A number of reports and case studies conducted by community organisations in the past decade highlight the way in which those from families which are the most financially disadvantaged suffer inferior education opportunities. (Anglicare Tasmania, 2000; Flanagan, 2002; Orr, nd ; Orr and Taylor, 1996; Webster, 2002.) The major challenge confronting Australian schooling is to address this disadvantage and inequity. The National Goals for Schooling (MCEETYA, 1999) expresses the right sentiments when it says:

Australia's future depends upon each citizen having the necessary knowledge, understanding, skills, and values for a productive and rewarding life in an educated, just and open society. High quality schooling is central to this vision.

And everyone should support its desire to ensure that:

Schooling should be socially just, so that students' outcomes from schooling are free from the negative effects of...differences arising from students socioeconomic background or geographic location?(Goal 3.1)

But unless this becomes a national priority it is little more than a platitude. There needs to be both large increases in funding and large scale redistribution of existing funding if we are to live up to the ideal of 'a fair go for all.' Work by the Dusseldorp Skills Forum (King, 1999) and the Business Council of Australia (2002) show that this is not only a matter of social justice but in the national interest. The economic cost of neglecting those who are least successful at school is further underlined by Chapman et al., (2002) in their study of the links between crime, unemployment and education. It is within this context that the Commonwealth funding of private schools must be examined to ensure that it serves the national interest.

¹ This paper has been prepared as a Chapter in a forthcoming ACSA publication entitled "Rethinking Public Education: Beyond the Market".

Private schools, public money

According to Budget Forward Estimates (Commonwealth, 2003: 6-19) in the 2005-06 financial year the Commonwealth Government will spend over \$5 billion dollars on private schools². This will be the largest area of Commonwealth education expenditure, exceeding the \$4.9 billion spent on Higher Education. It is time that serious questions were asked about how this major expenditure can be made to better serve the public interest.

Lobbyists for private schools like to portray the private sector as being ‘complementary’ to the public sector (e.g. Daniels, 2000: 40.). The reality is very different. Private schools are one of the principal barriers to making Australian schooling more equitable. How they seek to do this and the success they achieve is made clear throughout a recent book, *Undemocratic Schooling* (Teese and Polesel, 2003). For example, they argue:

Parents with the freedom to choose expensive private schools seek to protect and augment the cultural capital of their children through social and academic segregation. By creating a rich pool of cultural and financial resources at selected sites, they are able to pedagogically multiply individual advantages. (p.119)

To return to the PISA results, the link with the inequity shown in Australia is clear. An analysis of the success of Finland and Korea in the PISA results concludes that: ‘along with most of the other high performers, Finland and Korea have a strong commitment to comprehensive education....They also have very few private schools’. (Slater, 2002). This is substantiated by McGaw (2002), who argues that the PISA data demonstrates that comprehensive provision of schooling is better than differentiation, and that quality and equity can and must be achieved together.

In this regard, private school policy cannot be viewed as separate from public school policy or indeed from school policy in general. However, the current policy of the Commonwealth government has become inimical to the interests of public schooling, and the health of the private sector is directly at a cost to the public sector. The emphasis on “choice” has created a choice, for those who can afford it, between a less well funded public sector and a better resourced private sector.

Policy related to private schools is also exacerbating the tendency for schools to become more socially segregated. Marginson (2002: 12) notes that there is an increasing tendency to brand any school catering for lower achieving students as a low performing school. The National Inquiry into Rural and Remote Education (HEREOC, 2000) notes:

The Inquiry was disturbed to find extensive de facto racial segregation in which one of the local schools enrolls predominantly Indigenous students while the other is the school of choice for local white families. (p. 4)

Rothman (2002: 39) observes a similar pattern in relation to socioeconomic status as a result of de-zoning and school choice programs.

² This paper concentrates primarily on the role of the Commonwealth. However, it should be noted that states and territories contribute an additional \$1.3 billion per annum to the funding of private schools, and in the absence of Commonwealth action, or in partnership with it, could use this leverage to achieve many of the objectives outlined here.

The effect of increasing private schooling has been to encourage social divisions and segregation within schooling. Although there are exceptions (HEREOC notes that sometimes in the Kimberley it is the Catholic school that becomes the de facto Indigenous school), in most cases it is the public school which takes the more disadvantaged. Any public school which “front loads” programs for the lower achievers knows it will probably backload more of its middle class higher achievers to a nearby private school. Nevertheless, Aulich (2002: 1) observes that:

..public funding of private education will continue and is unlikely to be contested at a political level, even if the level of funding is perennially adjusted through the political process.

In this absence of a will to contest the public funding of private schools by either major party, the task must be to push for a funding policy that regains control of private schooling and allows it to be operated in the national interest. It must be made to operate in a way that does not undermine and downgrade a free public system that caters for all. Private schooling must therefore be reframed to create greater equity rather than exacerbate existing inequity. Commonwealth school funding must be brought back into the tool bag of government policy options so that it can again become a force for social mobility and social justice.

The Evolution of inequitable funding

Prior to 2000, funding was primarily ‘needs based’ (see previous chapter). Although wealthy schools received some government subsidy, this was accepted as a political settlement whilst focussing on those with lesser resources. The initial cry was to improve the resource standards of all schools and to bring ‘poor’ private schools up to the desirable resource standards in government schools. By and large, this was achieved by 2000. In 1992 the then Commonwealth Minister of Education, John Dawkins, released his proposals for ‘*Funding Non-government schools to the year 2000*’ (Dawkins, 1992). It put in place not only indexation of funding, but a ‘Betterment factor’ designed to ensure that by 2000 all private schools were operating at the Average Government School Recurrent Cost (AGSRC), even though, of course, not all government schools are at the average. This was delivered in full, and whilst there has been no report to assess the effectiveness or otherwise of the program, it is reasonable to assume that all schools and systems have been given the means to rise to this standard.

In addition, nearly all Catholic systemic schools received a further boost in their funding by being re-categorised from category 10 to 11, an increase that was carried forward into the new system. Burke and Long (2002: 9) calculate this as the equivalent of an 8% increase. The cry of ‘poor Catholic parish schools’ - for so long the dominant rationale for increased private school funding – is no longer sustainable. It is not surprising therefore that the Senate Inquiry into the education of students with disabilities (The Senate, 2002, Appendix 6, Corrigendum) showed that “In 2004 the Catholic education system will have an estimated income that is 15.2 per cent higher than the estimated cost of educating students at AGSRC levels. Other non-government schools will have an income that is 52.2 per cent higher.” Whilst these figures are being hotly disputed by the private sector, there can be no doubt that the needy schools are now mostly in the public sector.

The new funding model introduced in 2001 was therefore significant for a number of reasons:

- it took place in a context where private schools were, by and large, already resourced at or above their public school counterparts;
- nevertheless, it vastly increased the amount of Commonwealth subsidy to private schools over and above the anticipated indexation, whilst maintaining that to public schools only on an indexed basis;
- it broke any nexus with school needs;
- it ignored private school private income.

Thus Commonwealth school funding now ensures differential resource provision based on capacity to pay rather than on student needs.

In the debates that followed, the Commonwealth government and the private school lobby sought to entrench the notion that the Commonwealth's prime responsibility is to private schools whilst the state or territory governments look after public schools. This in fact sets up a dual system in which the two parts are not complementary but work against each other. The notion that the Commonwealth is there to compensate for state or territory policy, or to run a system in competition with that of the state or territory governments is not likely to produce a viable national system of education.

The substantial funding given by the Commonwealth to private schools, as currently figured, does not purchase much in the way of policy levers. Most of the Commonwealth's expenditure on schools does no more than maintain and expand a series of private schools designed to entrench privilege. Many of these schools are largely dependent on public money to operate, and yet they are not subject to serving a public policy, especially that of greater equity.

The MCEETYA principles – a viable alternative

At its meeting in Auckland in 2002, the Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs (MCEETYA) agreed, with the notable exception of the Commonwealth, on a set of principles for funding all schools. This has been published as *“Resourcing the National Goals for Schooling: An Agreed Framework of Principles for Funding Schools”* (MCEETYA, 2003) and provides a platform from which to begin to reframe the role of private schools and the funding relationship between them and governments.

It is based on five key principles and takes as its starting proposition that all schools should be funded to a level that ensures that the National Goals of Schooling can be achieved for all students. Given that, as noted above, these National Goals express important ideals about developing all individuals to their full potential and also seeking social justice through the school systems, this is a reasonable base from which to begin.

This document asserts that:

- governments at all levels should work together to achieve equitable educational opportunities for all;
- government funding must be disproportionately directed at schools and students with greater needs, rather than directing massive amounts of public funds to the wealthiest schools;
- government school systems overall carry particular costs due to their responsibility for providing universal access to quality school education,

- real choice in schooling cannot exist without effective and socially diverse government school systems.
- private funds must be taken into account when funding private schools;
- any funding must be on the basis of genuine needs.

financial viability is an important criterion. Finally it notes that ‘public funding carries with it commensurate responsibilities for reporting and accountability for all schools’.

Overall then this document is a significant affirmation that governments at all levels have a responsibility to ensure that they work together to provide diverse educational opportunities within a context of high quality schooling for all, and of ‘upholding the contribution of schooling to a socially and culturally cohesive society’, regardless of sector.

The document offers a real possibility of a change and of establishing a new base from which the ongoing funding debate can take a more rational and equitable direction. It is an assertion that public and private schools must serve similar objectives, and that the national interest is best served by ensuring that the two sectors work within a common framework to common national aims. Complementarity would replace competition.

Necessary policy directions

Essentially there are three policy levers which must be used to bring private schools back within the purview of public interest:

- Planning/regulation ;
- Funding;
- Accountability

An integrated package across all three areas needs to be developed.

Planning

The creation of new private schools was originally a response to parents who wished to have their child educated in a particular set of values, usually associated with a particular religion. It was thus largely demand driven and new schools were created primarily to cater to the needs of identifiable parent groups. The abolition of the new schools policy in 1996 changed the nature of new private schooling to one that is supply driven. There is increasing evidence in parts of Australia of an over supply of school places, both within and between the public and private sectors. At the same time, the creation of new schools in such areas continues, often driven by individuals or small groups who do not themselves constitute an identifiable school community. Similarly existing schools expand not in response to demand but to their own corporate growth plans.

Whilst schools are allowed to open at the whim of small groups and individuals, governments will be left unable to provide adequate resource levels across all schools. As they bring up resource levels in some schools, new schools emerge with more demands for needs to be met. Unless school planning is stabilised and the emphasis placed on existing schools and *needed* schools (rather than creating needy schools) governments will be forever chasing their tail in seeking to improve the quality of schooling.

Whilst the building of new private schools may seem to be primarily a private capital matter, Burke and Long (2002: 13) point out that about one third of building donations are publicly contributed through tax concessions. Connors (2003: 121-134) explores the inter-relationship

of excess places in government schools whilst private schools continue to receive interest subsidies (from the ACT government) and capital grants from the Commonwealth. She comments:

The main impact of existing ISS approvals has been to enable established centrally located independent schools to either extend their facilities or enhance them. The ACT community needs to decide whether this is a sensible use of public funds particularly at a time of excess government school capacity and with no projected increase in school-age population. (pp.132-133)

Nevertheless, the Commonwealth introduced Establishment Grants in the new funding regulations implemented from 2001. This facilitates and subsidises the opening of new private schools. It creates a situation in which a school that does not yet exist has an entitlement to a grant for which an existing school is not eligible; and gives a grant if a student moves to a new school, but not if they stay where they are. Outside of any planning process, at least, this makes no sense.

The system of 'per student' recurrent funding that has become the basis of private school funding also masks the waste of public money in establishing schools where they are not needed. It allows the creation of new private schools and the movement of students in an over supplied market to appear cost neutral on the government books when in reality there are considerable costs in terms of lost accumulated benefit compared to stable school populations. It is important to note that in public schools, per student calculations are a measure of inputs, but far from the only basis of the inputs themselves.

It is not possible for public education to be properly planned whilst the expansion of private education is not controlled. It is not viable to have one system able to decide how many and which students it will take, and when it will start operating, whilst the other copes with all the fluctuations in enrolments and welcomes everyone who shows up. It is an absurd waste of public money for the state or territory governments to have to provide schools for all whilst Commonwealth policy actively encourages distortions in their planning processes. The legislation should be amended therefore to restore some planning requirements in relation to the building of all new schools. The option of funding schools rather than students would provide a more realistic emphasis on building quality resources.

Funding

The current Commonwealth system encourages a widening gap in resource provision. It uses public money to encourage those who are able and willing to pay more to purchase a more expensive education. This fundamentally flawed and inequitable philosophy must be replaced with a national vision of schools as an agency of social justice and transformation.

A new funding system should direct more money to schools where students are disadvantaged, and less to schools where students are already privileged, ensuring that government funding ameliorates inequity of resource provision, not exacerbate it. Ignoring a school's private income and capacity, as the new funding system does, creates a Commonwealth subsidy of voluntary social exclusion. Paralleling the creation of gated communities in housing, elite private schools are encouraging people to opt out of mainstream schooling.

Conversely, only a small percentage (about 10%) of the Commonwealth schools budget is directed to disadvantaged programs. This ensures that those with the least need and most likely to succeed operate at the highest resource levels. Commonwealth expenditure must be made to serve common and equitable interests. This is best accomplished by a substantial shift from recurrent expenditure to targeted programs. This would transfer money from programs of maintenance to programs of transformation. Rather than underpinning the perpetuation of privilege, funding would be made to address intergenerational change and mobility. Public schools (especially those with the greatest need) and any genuinely needy private schools will gain from this. Money that is currently funding voluntary social exclusion will be redirected to overcoming involuntary social exclusion.

In addition, the nexus between the Average Government Schools Recurrent Cost Index (AGSRC) and private school funding must be broken. The new legislation entrenched this link, but it is an inappropriate mechanism. Burke and Long observe in relation to the ACT (2002, p. 7) that:

The continued rise in the share of enrolments in non-government schools may imply that the concentration of disadvantage is increasing in government schools.

As private school enrolments increase, the distillation of disadvantaged students into public schools becomes more concentrated. The public systems therefore have greater proportions of students with higher needs, and it is reasonable to assume that per student costs will increase. Similarly, it has been agreed that raising the educational outcomes of Indigenous students is a national priority. It is reasonable to assume that whilst this may involve more than simply providing greater resources, it should result in considerably increased expenditure in this area. 88% of Indigenous students (SCRCSSP, 2003, Table 3A.14) are located in public schools.

The proportion of students with disabilities and of those from remote areas is twice as high in government schools compared with non-government schools (SCRCSSP: 3.11) and students from low socioeconomic backgrounds in public schools similarly are over-represented in public schools. All of this results in increases in the AGSRC index which are then passed on to the private schools where the student background variables are far different.

Increasingly, the AGSRC has become a mechanism to ensure that the “haves” receive the average cost of educating the “have nots”. It is a measure which counter balances any social justice initiatives in the public sector by providing increases to all students in the private sector. There are two options for reform. The simplest is to remove any ‘equity’ money from the calculation of the AGSRC. Whilst this would leave some problems and anomalies it would remove the greatest anomaly - that by which private schools benefit from social justice expenditure in the public system. Even more effective would be a strategy to base private school funding on measures which include comparison with equivalent public schools, rather than a national average.

Accountability

Those associated with private schools claim that current accountability mechanisms are already considerable (e.g., see Dunne, 2002). However, whilst it is the case that private schools do provide considerable detail of their financial and other situations to the Department of Education, Science and Training (DEST), and do have to ensure that Commonwealth monies are expended as allowed, this is not an adequate level of accountability.

Both Connors (2003) and Grimshaw (2003) note in a number of places that accountability to state or territory governments leaves considerable scope for improvement, and is generally considerably less than that of public schools. Connors (p. 82) cites both the Victorian and NSW Auditors General as pointing to the need for greater public accountability to their respective governments.

Aulich (2002: 4-5) indicates that current accountability arrangements are characteristic of “sponsorship, grants, and subsidy” arrangements rather than being a genuine partnership or contract arrangement, and more appropriate to the early funding quantum than that given today. He considers arrangements for funding private schools in many other countries and concludes that Australia (and New Zealand) provide significant funding to private schools with only a low to moderate degree of regulation (pp.11-12) and that:

... there are major discrepancies in relation to present accountability regimes for public funding of private schools in comparison with provisions in overseas countries and in comparison with the demands for accountability placed on public providers, generally. (p.19)

Aulich notes, for instance, that public providers face regular performance audits and reviews of programs, management and school leadership (p.16). By contrast, in the ACT, at least, even private school enrolments, on which their funding is based, are not properly audited. He concludes that:

As education funds are increasingly sourced from the public any suspicion that public and private providers operate under markedly different regulatory regimes will inevitably become a source of tension and friction within the community. (p.13)

One of the primary difficulties in financial accountability lies in the fact that whilst the details have to be given to DEST, it does very little with them, because it is restricted by inappropriate confidentiality clauses. For example, in response to a request from Senator Carr for information on private income of private schools, including fees and non-fee income an official replied, “There are privacy arrangements about the Commonwealth collecting information from schools so we would not be in a position....” Hansard, 2002: 198). The public is expected to contribute the greater proportion of the budget of many private schools, but even its elected representatives are not allowed to know about the financial situation of private schools

Because private schools account only for the money they receive from the respective governments, they are able to cost shift their own resources. In effect the government subsidies provide for the “essentials” whilst they can then use their private income for such things as swimming pools and equestrian centres. Whilst this is most apparent with those wealthier schools where a lower proportion of their income comes from subsidies, it applies to all schools and particularly to some systems. There seems no logical reason why the funding and financial operations of private schools should not be open to public scrutiny and reported to parliaments. However, such financial accountability is only the tip of the iceberg in terms of what is expected of public schools and should be the norm for all schools receiving public money.

Aulich (2002: 11) provides the following as a checklist for what other countries consider reasonable to include in areas of regulation:

- registration which binds them to a common core curriculum and exit testing;
- student admissions and discipline;
- teacher registration and certification;
- tuition fees and finances;
- values;
- standards and timetables
- representation on boards and councils;
- record keeping;
- inspection.

It is worth considering all of these and how they might better make Australian private schools serve the public interest. Most importantly, they must first be made more accountable in regard to the connection between government objectives and specified outcomes.

It is clear that private school funding is increased on the basis of certain “needs”, but the lack of clear accountability allows too much flexibility in its spending. The funding must be made to address the need on which it is justified. Other areas of financial accountability that need tighter regulation are:

- Principals salaries and benefits, which in some cases are reputed to be double that of public school teachers;
- Diversion of money into investment accounts and overly large bank accounts, which are the subject of considerable scrutiny in the public sector;
- Expenditure on promotion and advertising;

Therefore the agreements which the Commonwealth signs with authorities must be tightened and specify outcomes. For instance, in accepting Commonwealth money, the Catholics should be compelled to agree to meet specified class size targets.

Another area in urgent need of greater regulation relates to policies of admission, exclusion and expulsion. The rhetoric of private school funding talks of “parental choice”. The reality is that in most cases, it is the school which chooses who it will teach. Not content with the power to make the initial choice, in many cases they further import success and export failure to ensure that only those likely to enhance the image of the school are there at the end.

Consequently, they are also insulated from the need to develop appropriate and productive pedagogies in line with the needs of students, and can become bastions of outdated methodologies. Thus there is a need for quality control mechanisms, overseen by officials accountable to governments and the public, and proper admission and expulsion policies subject to appeal beyond the school or system itself.

In the area of fee regulation, it is noticeable that former Commonwealth Minister of Education David Kemp made many references to the increased government subsidies allowing private schools to reduce fees, thus making them more accessible. By contrast, in reality they have in many cases increased quite considerably. There appears to be no rational reason why governments should not intervene in the regulation of fees, and why those charging fees which put their schools beyond the reach of most people should receive any government money at all. This, of course, relates to the issue of values, and underlines the

inappropriateness of a government subsidising those schools seeking social exclusion based on elitism.

Similarly, the lack of public representation on boards and councils underlines that the current situation is more akin to large donations of public money to private purposes than the provision of genuinely open schooling. Connors (2003: 42) raises the issue of ownership of the schools which are in large part supported and maintained, and in some cases built from public money. In particular, she points out that there are currently no ongoing contractual arrangements to obligate them to continue to provide a service. At any time, a private school can close, whereupon the legal obligation to provide a school place for the students reverts immediately to the public school system.

Conclusion

The role of the Commonwealth government in schools must become more than simply one of maintaining the existence and funding the growth of private interests. Commonwealth schools policy must again be made to serve worthy national ambitions, interests and goals in partnership with the states and territories.

Without a strong public system, the private system could not operate as it does. It has all the advantages of being able to plan its own growth whilst the public system copes with any volatility in student numbers. Private schools can choose their geographic location, and time when they begin operations. They can control admissions to ensure they operate at optimum capacity. They can expel or persuade students to leave, knowing the public system takes anyone, anytime. The sectors cannot be complementary whilst the relationship is based on competition: one sector has the overriding social responsibility, and the other has the resourcing advantages.

It is time to re-examine the relationship between the two sectors, but this must be done from the perspective of the overriding public policy imperative of achieving more equitable outcomes from the schooling system. Proposals which are based on making some public schools able to compete with private schools (e.g., Caldwell and Roskam (2002)) are approaching things from the wrong angle. Creating havens of selectivity and exclusiveness within the public system so that the already advantaged can pursue the inter-generational transfer of this advantage without paying for it is not the answer. The deleterious effects of setting up public schools as autonomous competing entities have become all too apparent. Nor should means testing parents of students in public schools be dressed up as a social justice initiative. Eventually those who pay the piper call the tune.

In the UK, recent research demonstrates that a determined attack on poverty linked to the provision of extra resources may make a difference (e.g., Slater and Mansell, 2002). It is time to rebut those in Australia arguing that resources do not matter when dealing with the disadvantaged, whilst condoning increases to the privileged. Distributing public money disproportionately to those with the greatest need and making private schools more subservient to a public policy of equitable outcomes for all social groups must become the schooling priority. Private schools must agree to abide by policies that ensure they serve a wider public interest, or forgo public funding and become genuinely private.

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