

Fairness and funding: it doesn't add up

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There seems to be little will to redress basic education inequities, say Lyndsay Connors and Jim McMorrow.

We know that the smartest thing we can do to help students do their best is to provide them with highly effective teachers.

Giving all students a fair go to succeed at school requires equity of access to quality teaching.

Yet school funding policies fall short of providing equity when it comes to quality teaching, and may even work in the opposite direction.

Governments across Australia provide more than \$37 billion for public, Catholic and independent schools. Included in this is sufficient funding to cover the costs of the teaching staff in all our schools. We know governments pay for teachers in our public schools. But they also provide more than \$7 billion to non-government schools - enough to cover the \$6.6 billion spent on teachers in those schools.

This has come about through governments, mainly the Commonwealth, increasing their funding for Catholic and independent schools at a greater rate than their enrolment increases.

In 2006, for example, each student in an independent school, on average, was receiving funding from all sources some \$3000 higher in real terms, after adjusting for inflation, than in 1996. This was due mainly to the 86 per cent real increase in Commonwealth per student funding of independent schools over that period. Funding of each student in a Catholic school increased in real terms by \$2500 between 1996 and 2006; and in public schools by about \$1700.

These figures include recurrent and capital funding from all sources. They reflect significant disparities in the level of spending on buildings and facilities in public, Catholic and independent schools. Average annual spending per student in the independent sector is about twice the level in Catholic schools and four times that spent on each public school student.

Recent disclosures of Commonwealth funding being directed to high-fee private schools to enhance already lavish facilities suggest a lost opportunity to begin using public funding to redress these inequities on the basis of genuine social and educational priorities.

Meanwhile, funding and enrolment shifts have led to an increase in the number and proportion of teachers working in the non-government sector. The net proportional shift in students and teachers has been from schools in public systems to non-systemic, independent schools.

A big effect has been that, while students and teachers have been shifting into the private sector, the salary bill for those teachers has been moving in the opposite direction - back to government and the public purse.

Teachers are not evenly distributed across school sectors. In 2006, public systems were on average employing one teacher for every 14.3 students while one teacher in the independent school sector was available for every 12.1 students. This is despite the fact that public schools cater for a disproportionately high, and independent schools for a disproportionately low, share of those needing more intensive teaching.

The student-teacher ratio of 15.1 nationally in Catholic schools reflects the efficiencies available to systems, as well as the fact that non-government schools control their student intake and do not share the legal obligation of governments to establish schools in high-cost rural and remote areas.

Australia would need an additional 40,000 teachers - an increase of some 17 per cent in its teaching force - if all schools were staffed as generously as in the 11 per cent of schools that comprise the private, independent sector.

Governments have largely taken over responsibility for the supply, quality and remuneration of teachers.

But they have no coherent regulatory framework for discharging this responsibility in a rational and fair way.

What all this means is that when publicly funded teachers are employed in the independent sector, those teachers, on average, will be teaching fewer students than in either a public school or in a systemic Catholic school; the students they are teaching are more likely to be drawn from a higher socio-economic background; and they are more likely to be teaching in a locality where school places are in oversupply relative to the population.

We had, in the recent past, a federal minister for education who liked to refer to teachers as "a precious national resource". If this is true, we need funding policies that sustain both supply and quality. We need policies that guard against waste through the poor planning of schools, and that share the teaching force fairly among schools and students according to coherent, educational criteria, not to the superior buying power of some schools and parents.

The Rudd Government has promised to review the inequitable funding scheme it inherited from its predecessor. What is needed is a wider review covering the responsibilities of all the funding partners - Commonwealth and state governments and, in the case of private schools, non-government school authorities - for providing high-quality teaching and learning for all of our children.

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