

NATIONAL PUBLIC EDUCATION FORUM

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Session Four: For all children - achieving quality and equity in Australian schooling

Comment

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I have spent some time over the past couple of years investigating various aspects of this platypus, this odd beast, designed by the Australian school funding system.

Mostly my inquiries have been directed into the private school system and its funding.

In the non-Catholic private sector we are talking about two main types of educational institutions.

The first is the large, established, academically excellent colleges of the Scotch, Kings, Grammar type, which most people tend to think about when they think of private schools.

Then there are the thousands of smaller schools, of all religions, that have sprouted forth since the 1970s and 80s, and whose existence was given an enormous boost by the funding policies of the Howard Government. It's hard to establish exactly how many people are educated in this kind of school, but my best guesstimate based on Government figures, is that more than 200,000 Australian children are now educated in evangelical Christian schools of various stripes. That's 6% of all students in Australia. In addition, 16,000 attend Islamic schools and 10,000 are in Jewish schools.¹

Turning firstly to the large private schools, it is clear that their businesses have been major beneficiaries of the SES funding scheme, and the extra money provided through it. I discovered that, when it came to a choice between equity and loot after the SES started injecting huge rises into their budgets in 2001, many schools had chosen the loot.

One an admirable man, Neville Clark, the former principal of Mentone Grammar School in Melbourne, was prepared to talk about this². He told me of his distress at trying, and failing in 2001 and 2002, to convince his board to use the bounty of the SES to do what David Kemp told people it would to – to reduce fees. Instead the board, as did most private school boards around the country, decided to kept increasing fees at well above inflation, and then pocketed the extra Government money too.

I quoted Neville Clark saying: "The board said we should keep up with the Joneses. If everyone else was going up 7 to 8 per cent, we should too," Clark told me.

This money added hundreds of thousands and then millions, to the school's bottom line in the first few years of SES, and the board used it all. They used to fast-track the building of an indoor sports centre, and to renovate classrooms.

They weren't the only one going on a capital spending spree. Geelong Grammar spent \$16 million on a "Wellbeing Centre". At Melbourne Grammar it was a "Centre for Learning and Leadership" of \$20 million or

¹ At the Crossroads, <http://www.theage.com.au/news/in-depth/religious-schools-at-the-crossroads/2008/02/24/1203788145887.html?page=fullpage>

² Principal slams massive edifices, <http://www.theage.com.au/news/national/principal-slams-massive-edifices/2007/06/08/1181089329502.html>

thereabouts³. So disgusted was another former principal, Tony Hewison, that he described the building boom as “indecent”.⁴

So that’s the big private schools.

I have also delved into the small, usually fervently religious private schools nurtured and funded by the Australian system. Not all of this can be blamed on Howard – it had started much earlier – but Howard gave it nourishment, funding and political patronage.

In his Irving Kristol lecture of March last year, this is what John Howard said of his endeavours in this area:

“A conservative edifice must always have at its centre the role of the family ... and faith-based organisations in maintaining and strengthening social infrastructure ... governments should reinforce the role of parents in choosing what form of education their children receive ... the major growth sector amongst independent schools has been in the low-fee independent Christian category. This is a direct result of more liberal funding arrangements initiated by my government. It is hard not to see this growth as other than a collective search by parents for a more values-based education experience for their children”.⁵

What he means, of course, is a religious values based education, not secular values such as equality, non-discrimination and so on.

This is the regime that allows hundreds of Australian high schools to teach creationism, and many others to run sex education courses based on virginity pledges and just saying ‘no’ to sex. Anti-discrimination law exemptions mean these schools can make prospective teachers fill in documents describing their conversion experience, and they can dismiss teachers who have sex outside wedlock, or who are gay. ⁶ In a recent example, a Muslim woman was denied a position in such a school because she would be out of place in the prayer circle in the morning staff meeting.⁷

Do not believe that the curriculum, which is overseen by state curriculum authorities, is safe from this religiosity, either. The website of the Bayside Christian College in Melbourne’s Mornington Peninsula says that “Topics are dealt with, where possible, using a ‘creation/fall/redemption platform”.

“For example,” it goes on to say, “a SOSE (study of society and environment) topic on pollution might look at the original environment and what that might have looked like. Then we examine why we have pollution and the effects of sin upon creation. Lastly, thinking about the redemption message of renewal in the Gospel and what that might mean for the environment.”

Even sport is Godly at Bayside: the school’s three houses are “Conquerers”, “Believers” and “Overcomers”.⁸

In Accelerated Christian Education Schools, of which there are some 41 around the country, primary school children learn science with statements like this: “God made many kinds of fish. He made them on day five.”

At Heatherton Christian College, year 4 students were taught “dinosaurs from a biblical perspective”.⁹

So prevalent now is the teaching of the bible as science in Australian schools that the University of NSW evolution scientist Rob Brooks says he is increasingly seeing “irreconcilably strong creationist viewpoints” among the university’s biology students.¹⁰

³ Building boom as elite schools play catch-up, <http://www.theage.com.au/news/national/building-boom-as-elite-schools-play-catchup/2007/06/08/1181089329499.html>

⁴ Private school fees rise despite massive windfall, <http://www.theage.com.au/news/national/private-school-fees-rise-despite-windfall/2007/06/08/1181089329467.html>

⁵ John Howard, ‘Sharing Our Common Values,’ http://www.abc.net.au/news/opinion/speeches/files/20080306_howard.pdf

⁶ At the Crossroads, *op. cit.*

⁷ Christian school rejects teacher, <http://www.theage.com.au/national/christian-school-rejects-teacher-20090324-98y0.html>

⁸ At the Crossroads, *op. cit.*

⁹ *ibid.*

¹⁰ *ibid.*

It is not just Federal funding that has allowed this to happen, of course. It is states which monitor curriculum and accredit schools – a fact the Feds are swift to point out whenever questions are put to them about school registration.

And for most states, it's simply too hard to stop the religious types from doing what they want, lest they come under fire for allegedly restricting religious freedom. This lobby is a very well organised, very persistent, very squeaky wheel. It has a powerful voice in parliaments, particularly among the conservative parties, and it is very good at exploiting the gaps between the government doing the regulation, and the government doing the funding.

The problem is compounded by the almost total lack of transparency of the state education bureaucracies, or at least the one in Victoria. This is among the least transparent of government agencies I have come across in 19 years in journalism. In answer to my questions of the Victorian department about the small schools, I was told that any details of any school's performance or inspection, even whether a school had been inspected or not, was prohibited by the Privacy Act. This is ridiculous. Privacy is a right accruing to an individual, not an institution such as a school. In the UK, the results of school inspections are published online.

One part of this puzzle I have had some success in investigating is the Exclusive Brethren school system, which now has six schools Australia-wide, each with multiple campuses. It will reap \$50 million or more from the Commonwealth in this quadrennium to do exactly what it was set up to do: to remove its children from any contact with children in the outside world for the entire duration of their education.¹¹

Along with a technical education to set them up for a life at work in Exclusive Brethren businesses, the values taught children in this sect are superiority, paranoia about the outside world, its literature and art, and the inferiority of women. It's to prevent what they call the "degradation of the race", to "deliver [the children] from an area of defilement and contamination", according to the sect's world leader, Bruce Hales.

How they achieved this separation is fascinating, and it's detailed in my book, *Behind The Exclusive Brethren*. In essence, they convinced one state Government, in NSW in 1988, to give them a concession allowing their kids to be absent from the class during some discussions, on the ground of religious conscience. Once they had a foot in the door, they lobbied furiously and tirelessly, and pushed that door wider and wider open until they could squeeze a whole new school system through it.

Having done so, the Federal Government came along and lavished funding on them. Under the current system, the largest of these Brethren schools, M.E.T school, is in the funding maintained category, after having been a Category 12 school under the old system. It's a deal which at one time made it the 40th best resourced private school in the nation, up there with schools for Aboriginal kids and those with autism. The fact that they use campuses, rather than new schools, when they set up all over the state, means that funding model gets carried over for all their schools, wherever they are situated. This in a group which boasted in a submission to Government that they are in the "middle to upper levels of the socio-economic group".

I won't go into detail about the way the Brethren businesses privately fund these schools, but they have structured their businesses, through family trusts, to take absolutely full advantage of the tax-free status of the schools. With top-notch legal advice, they have found they can pay for their children's schooling from pre-tax dollars, at the same time as allowing Brethren families to collect maximum social welfare benefits. They call it 'spoiling the Egyptians'. Of course, under SES, none of this external funding is taken into account when calculating the Government grants.

My work on the Exclusive Brethren, if nothing else, has shown me that the private school funding system in Australia is in desperate need of an overhaul. We could start by putting the regulatory accountability in the hands of the government doing the funding. After that, we would ask for less generosity and more transparency, less concern about religious freedom and more about our common values.

¹¹ Michael Bachelard, *Behind The Exclusive Brethren*, Scribe Publications, 2008