

NATIONAL PUBLIC EDUCATION FORUM

Friday March 27th and Saturday March 28th, 2009

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

Comment

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Let me tell you how bizarre school funding has become in NSW.

Last year Catholic systemic schools in Sydney began offering full scholarships to all Indigenous students who enrol. Very quietly I will add. Brother Kelvin Canavan, just retired executive director of schools in the Sydney Archdiocese, was extremely anxious about my writing about it, and rightly so.

The scholarships are worth about \$3500. They cover fees and expenses for excursions, uniforms and so on. But Catholic systemic schools get up to around \$10 000 for each Indigenous student from the federal government. Let's not even bother adding in state funding. I am no maths whiz. But I'd say the federal government pays for the scholarships with about \$4000 left over. And as you would know more than others, the most disadvantaged Indigenous students don't even make it to school; forget being scholarship material for Catholic schools.

I have to tell you these scholarships are given to children Catholic school principals believe will "fit into their communities". They will be reviewed at the end of each year. So there will be children who do not measure up and we all know what will happen to them.

The Sydney Archdiocese's target is 60 per cent of Catholic Indigenous families in its area. At present it only educates about 20 per cent. Guess which 40 per cent will be left to public schools to educate? Barbara Preston's research shows Independent and Catholic schools are already taking most of the wealthiest Indigenous families.

In light of these scholarships, and others, I believe it is hypocrisy for the Catholic Church to continually claim to support a strong public education system in Australia. In fact I am fed up with all private schools and private school authorities saying they support a robust public education system at the same time they offer a wide range of scholarships to skim off the top students in everything from basketball to mathematics from public schools. There are thousands of private schools around Australia increasingly doing the same thing and the effect on public schools is potentially disastrous. This is a litany of self-interest: non-government school authorities jostle for the best government subsidies, the best teachers and the best students. Responsibility for what is happening across the whole country is someone else's problem.

We already have an elite minority of well educated medium and high socio-economic families. What we need is a majority of well educated Australians. And the only way to get that is to have a quality public system that has not been stripped bare of all the easy to educate students and any who have potential of some kind.

That brings me to a very basic problem that needs to be addressed. Private schools are still being built at what I see as an unsustainable rate. In the last two years 11 new Independent schools have been established in NSW - I haven't counted new Catholic and Anglican systemic schools. Most of these new Independent schools only have around 50 students. But at least one has 14 brand new publicly funded classrooms - already built and ready to take students.

And another, Belfield College, describes itself on its website as a "secular Islamic college welcoming all members of the community." Yes it is bizarre. But its intent is clear enough. It is currently only a kindergarten to Year 1 school. However it says it intends to grow to until it is a full K to Year 12 school. We all know where it expects to get its students from.

A few more points I want to make quickly.

- Just before the federal election last year I organised the Daily Telegraph's 11 th education forum at News Ltd headquarters in Sydney. Kevin Rudd was our only speaker.

In response to a question about funding Rudd used the very Howard term "politics of envy". I was shocked and disappointed. And I was not alone. Remember - this was before the election. Like many others I am long past that but, review or no review, I have little expectation the Rudd government will change the overfunding of private schools. Nevertheless I will join you Gerard in perversely hoping the state of the economy will influence any future decisions about the flawed SES model.

- I don't know how it is going in other states but the billion dollar federal government windfall for public schools in NSW has become a windfall for state government coffers in NSW.

Yesterday I heard from one public school who had quotes from local builders for four classrooms for \$600,000 but the education department wants to charge them \$450,000 for one MDR -modular design room. An MDR is a prefabricated building, built elsewhere and bolted together on the site. The private school down the road is getting a lovely new modern, permanent, brick building for its money. This is just one example. In NSW I fear with the Building the Education Revolution money we are getting a generation of public school cheap alternatives while private schools are being beautifully upgraded. And the difference in costs for public schools will go into the state black hole.

- Another quick point about the new draft legislation for changing federal FOI laws.

With the federal government starting to collect data about schools the legislation will make it easier for media to find and publish such data. And I have to say it will give some unprecedented access to data collected about private schools.

I was refused access to the applications from wealthy private schools for hundreds of computers in the first round of computers meant for the neediest schools. They successfully argued that giving me access would affect their businesses. Under the new legislation that argument would not work.

But the fact remains no private school or private school authority is liable under any state or federal FOI legislation. Church run schools are still exempt from some anti-discrimination laws. Public schools will always be at a disadvantage as far as media scrutiny goes until those things change.

I want to finish by telling you about my good friend Margaret. Margaret is a, now retired, NSW public school primary principal of great renown. She is married to a now retired secondary public school principal who ran a highly successful comprehensive co-educational high school in Sydney for many years. Their children attended public schools. One was a high achiever at a public selective school.

Not long ago Margaret and I had dinner together and she told me how heartbroken she was that all of her grand children are enrolled in private schools. I know Margaret and her husband would walk over hot coals to support public schools, but they cannot convince their own children to enrol their sons and daughters in public schools.

This is a hearts and minds battle public school supporters are engaged in. It will take people like you, passionately working together, to change things. I hope this forum is the beginning of a fierce and hard nation-wide fight-back for public education in Australia.