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# Public priority

It's time for public education to get funding priority.

**T**he federal government's review of school funding—that starts next year—will determine the system and levels of schools funding for years to come. It is one of the most important chapters in the history of school funding in Australia.

It provides the opportunity for the federal government to get rid of the Howard government's discredited funding regime and fulfil its primary obligation to properly and adequately fund government schools.

Unsurprisingly, opponents of public education are seeking to resurrect funding proposals aimed at further undermining the right of parents and students to a public school of the highest quality in their local community.

In recent months the Liberal Party-aligned Centre for Independent Studies and the Institute of Public Affairs have resurrected radical right-wing notions of school vouchers as a form of schools funding.

Vouchers are a smokescreen intended to disguise the further increase of funding to private schools. A voucher system to fund each individual's education represents the absolute commodification of education, smashing any notion of public education for the common good.

By denying public schools any guaranteed minimum level of funding, vouchers will further divert funding away from the capacity of schools to develop programs to meet the needs of all children.

Dressed up in the language of "parental choice", vouchers will be beholden to the rules of the marketplace which always favours the individual choice of those with power, money and privilege.

One could be excused for thinking that the global financial crisis may have provided an important lesson for these prophets of neo-liberalism.

The failures of neo-liberalism having been exposed, governments and aspiring governments should be providing certainty in the public institutions that guarantee every citizen's right to quality public education and other essential public services that are the hallmark of civil society. The Liberal/National Party coalition must rule out the introduction of a policy that would cut public school funding and replace it with vouchers for individuals.

Frank McCourt, teacher and author of *Angela's Ashes*, when asked if he would support vouchers, is quoted as saying: "only if you want to kill public education – that sucking sound you hear is the sound of public schools collapsing with the voucher system".

We are also hearing a call for an integrated system of schools and schools funding.

This proposal is both flawed and dangerous. "Integration" would effectively destroy the existence of a free, secular and universal education system established and maintained by the state for the common good, and the critical role it plays in bridging and bonding communities.

Proponents of integration naively think that the underlying

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divisions created by state sponsored segregation in the form of private schools will go away. They won't.

Private schools would continue to seek a position of privilege through their discriminatory enrolment policies and levels of total funding. Indeed, they would use a policy of integration to seek even more government funding.

The integration of school systems would compromise intellectual freedom, academic rigour and the maintenance of secular values that is vital to a dynamic education system. ●

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