

Schools of excellence

Parents and citizens should blog, twitter, text, lobby and argue for better funding of public schools, says former High Court Judge Michael Kirby

by Carolyn Rance

Throughout his career, the socially progressive jurist and human rights advocate has spoken proudly and fondly of his public school education and encouraged other prominent Australians to do the same.

"I've been a loyal beneficiary of public education and I've been talking about my teachers since 1956 when I left school. I owe an enormous debt to them. Next to my parents and siblings my teachers had the biggest influence on my intellectual and moral development and I honour them," he told *Australian Educator*.

Kirby says parents and citizens who support public education need to learn the art of advocacy and use it to end the unjust distribution of public funds to schools.

"Parents of students in public schools need to be aware that lobbyists for private and religious schools are highly skilled and well organised.

"They are constantly advocating on behalf of the schools they represent and

they have good inroads into the print media where they place lots of advertisements. I am not against private and religious schools but not at the price of the proper funding of public education."

In a speech at Melbourne High School late last year Kirby expressed his "constant amazement" that government leaders who have benefited from public education go along with inequality in the distribution of education funding. He points out that Bob Hawke, John Howard, Kevin Rudd and Julia Gillard are all alumni of public schools.

"The schools where 67 per cent of Australians are educated deserve better. The time has come for all citizens to make it clear that they demand an end to the underfunding of public education where the future of the nation is chiefly written," he said.

Kirby believes cultural attitudes play a large part in impeding public school communities from taking a more activist stance.

"Australians are not great people for being volunteers for causes that they see as state or community obligations. Unlike Americans, who are great ones for going out lobbying and causing a fuss, most Australians think

governments have a duty to provide education, health, law, justice and other basics.

"This makes it harder to get people involved in parents and citizens organisations supporting schools yet we should all think about what we owe to our schools and our teachers and we should speak up for them."

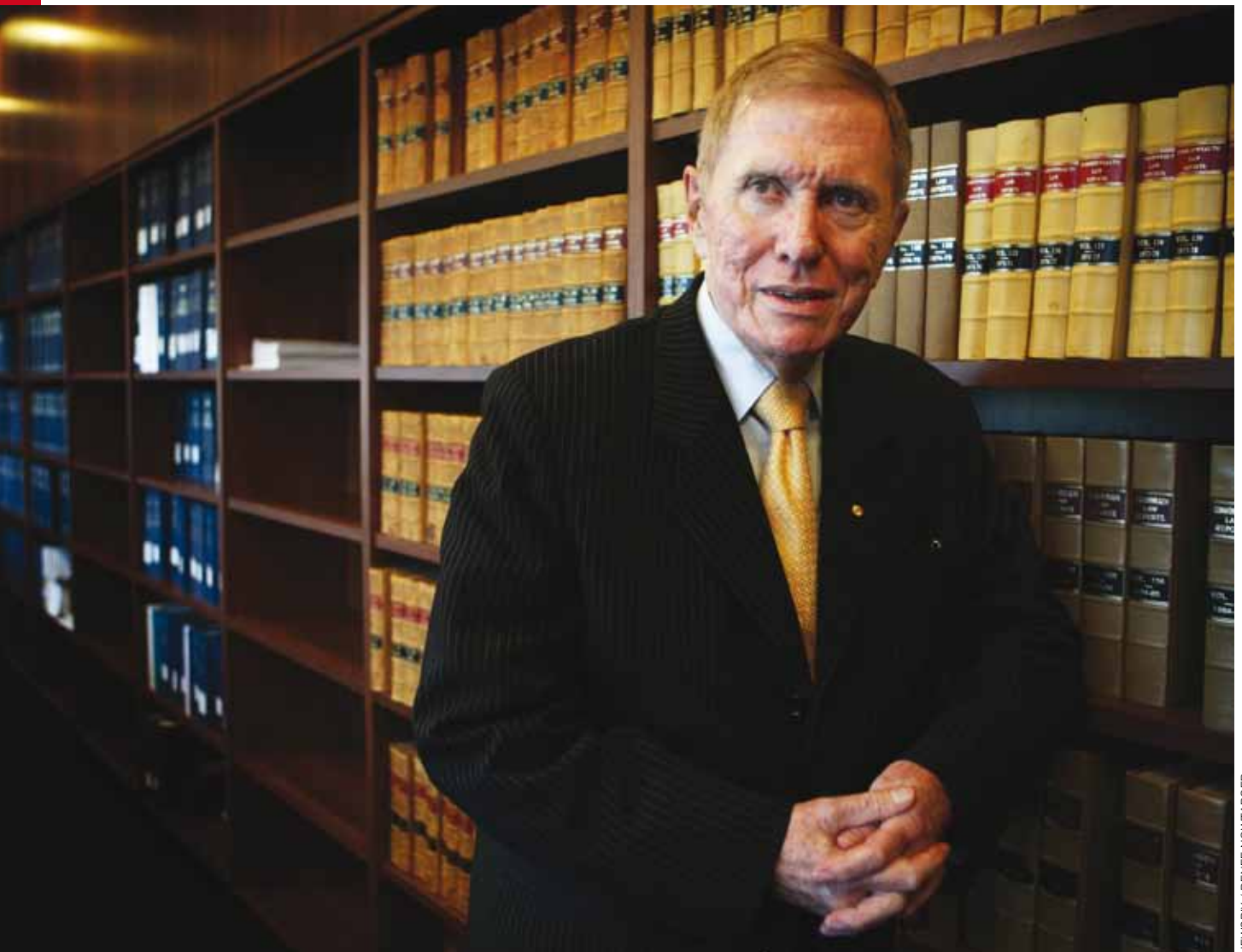
He is adamant that the argument that public education is not values based has no grounding in fact. A large part of Australia's success as a modern nation can be traced to the establishment of its free, secular and compulsory public school system.

"I have never forgotten the democratic values I received from my education in public schools. They have informed everything I have done in my life. It is a very good thing to go to a school where you mix with people of all religions and no religion and people from families who are rich and poor.

Kirby says democracy, equality and secularism are all very important values of public education. "Secularism means children can mix together...Public schools provide the melting pot of all races, cultures, religions and intellectual abilities. They are part of the diversity that is such a strength of Australia."

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Former High Court judge



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“During my 13 years of service on the High Court of Australia I was, for most of the time, the only Justice whose entire education was received in public schools. Clever children have special needs and if we are going to make sure that judges, professors, surgeons and

great teachers come from all social groups and families of all financial capacities we have to make sure we provide the very best education in the public system.

We should be striving to make our public schools ‘schools of excellence’

where parents are proud to send their children. What I want to see is that the best of public schools are better than private schools—that they give them a run for their money.” ●

Carolyn Rance is a freelance journalist