

Get smart

Australia is in danger of becoming ‘the stupid country’ through the systematic dismantling of its public education system, reports **Cynthia Karena**.

Public education has been significantly undermined by a decade of Howard government ideology that says anything public is bad and private is good, says Jane Caro, co-author of new book *The Stupid Country*.

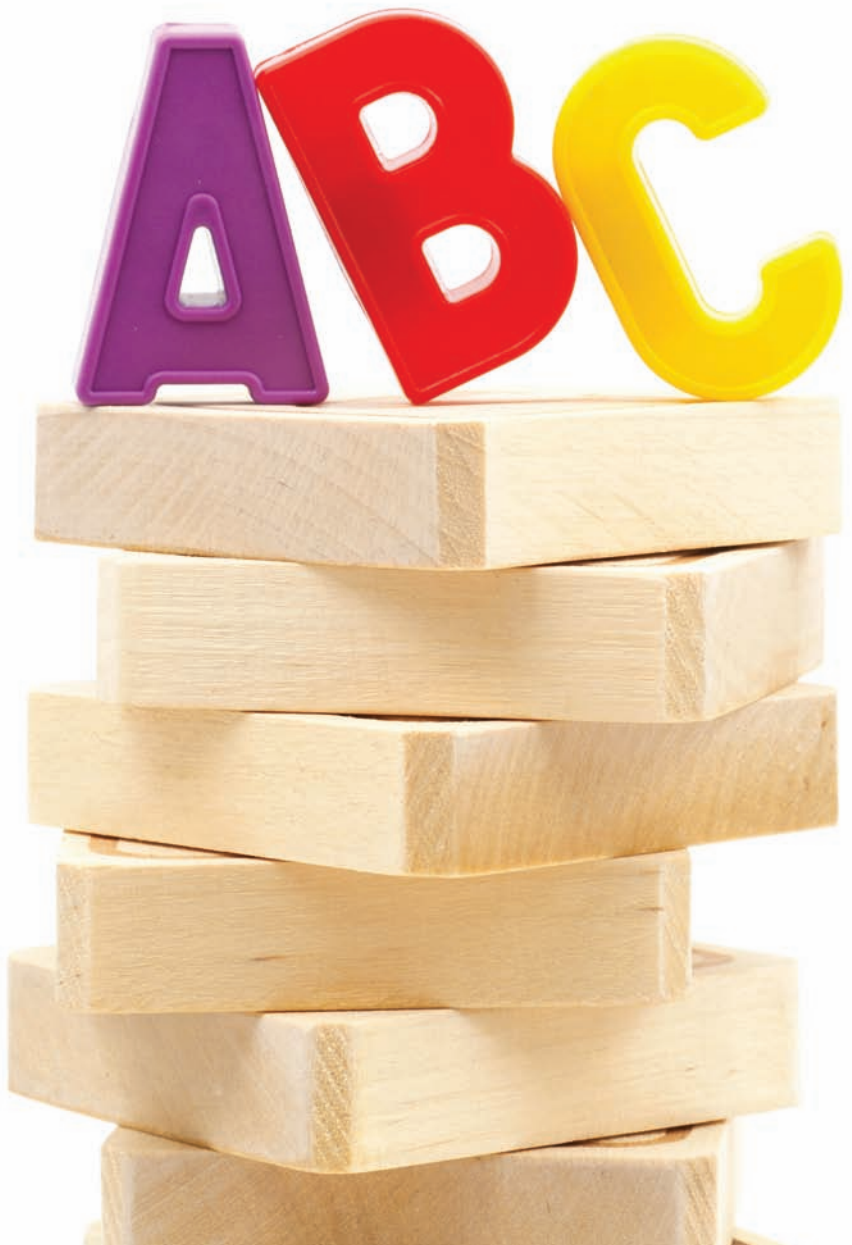
Choice between private and public education is an illusion, she told *Australian Educator*. “If you can afford upfront fees, you have choices, but there is no choice if you can’t. Choice is not open to everyone; it’s only open to the more privileged.”

And the more privileged get the most money under the federal government’s current funding arrangements, which Caro says are

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clearly unsustainable. “We are delivering our funding spectacularly inefficiently—giving too much to those who already have plenty and not enough to those who already have little.”

Australia is falling behind its major global competitors because it



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has less equitable schools-funding and is not developing all of its best talent, she says. In the United States, no money is given to private schools due to the separation of state and church in the Constitution, which bans funding of faith-based schools. "Ninety per cent of kids go to public schools; which means virtually all parents are interested in public schools—regardless of their relative wealth or social class."

Caro fears that Australia is at a tipping point where it risks losing something as a democracy. "We have a great public education system. Can we still remain a democracy if we residualise it and turn it into—in John Howard's words—a 'safety net' system offering a 'reasonable' standard of education for the poor? What are the consequences if we give privilege to some kids and

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handicap others because of their birth? Is that the best a rich country like ours can do?"

It's not enough to believe that democracy means everyone has one vote, says Caro. "We need to equip people to use that vote and make an informed choice. The best method for moulding effective citizens in a democracy is via a free, secular and compulsory education system. Under our current system, how much real democratic choice do we have? I've never come across a democracy that has such a disregard for equity in its allocation of educational resources."

Your say

Theo Bougatsas Teacher, Blacktown Boys High School, NSW



"A lot of money goes to private schools...[yet] everywhere teachers in public schools are screaming for resources. Drive past the schools and see where the money is going. Funding to private schools is like feeding some drunk guy at a bar—you're doing something unnecessary and it's based on greed."

What do we really want?

Caro wants to have "the debate we've never had" in Australia, but which most other countries have had. We need to ask ourselves: "What's an education system for? What are the outcomes we want? What do the private school subsidies cost us? What is the effect of having one schooling system for the middle class and one for the rest? Is that good or bad? We need a proper discussion, rather than people with vested interests in a school using personal anecdotes and grievances in place of debate on policy."

Caro is passionate about the public education system and says it continues to have the same things going for it that it has always had. "It remains the ideal. All children should have access to an excellent, well-resourced education, no matter who their parents are. Most teachers in public schools continue to do a great job, despite the increasing concentration of kids with social disadvantage in public schools. Once you adjust for social background factors, there is no difference in educational outcomes. But the tipping point will come.

"If we're going to shove all our poorest and most troubled kids together in one group of schools, we need to resource those schools and train the teachers who work

there with that in mind, instead of turning our faces—and taking our own kids—away from them, and then blaming them for not 'performing' as well as their more privileged counterparts teaching more privileged students.

"We know, however, that many public schools must be getting something right. Children from comprehensive public schools continue to outperform their peers from both selective and private schools at university. They get better marks and less of them drop out."

Caro's daughter went to a public school. At university she caught up with her friends from primary school who went to private schools, and said: "They dress like me, they talk like me, they're studying the same subjects as me, they're at the same uni as me. What did they get for their \$15,000 [per year] education?"

The morale of principals and teachers in public schools needs to be maintained and built upon, says Caro. "If public school teachers are encouraged rather than brow-beaten and blamed, they can be re-energised, and we badly need them to remain energised and engaged in their increasingly difficult task." ●

CYNTHIA KARENA is a freelance writer.

Resources

● ***The Stupid Country: How Australia is dismantling public education*** by Jane Caro and Chris Bonner (New South, UNSW, 2007)

ONLINE OPINION

● Jane Caro
www.onlineopinion.com.au/view.asp?article=6179

● Mercurius Goldstein
www.onlineopinion.com.au/view.asp?article=5504