



The Howard Government and Public Schools: An Introduction

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The Climate of 'Choice'

For the past eleven years the Howard Government has supported private schools and undermined public schools.

Instead of promoting universal public education which is free and accessible to all, it has funded private schools to provide what it calls "choice". The rhetoric of "choice" has replaced notions of "equality of opportunity", and has the support of the Labor Opposition as well.

Choice in public administration has become an expression of the funding priorities of government and the Treasury, where the provision of a universal system of the highest quality public education has come to be seen as a funding burden, not a right for all students in Australia.

The hugely generous funding of private schools means that those schools are the ones exercising choice. They are free to choose who attends them based on wealth, and/or religion or belief, and/or academic ability and/or any other criteria chosen by the school. Private schools are also free to exercise the choice of de-selection of students on any basis whatsoever.

One of the earliest decisions of the Howard Government was to abolish the notion that the primary obligation of government in funding schools is to provide and maintain public school systems of the highest standard, open to all. This had been expressed in the Schools Commission Act of 1973 and in the Schools Council which replaced the Commission in 1988.

Instead, the Howard government has:

- introduced a funding system for private schools which is explicitly aimed at "promoting parental choice".

The appeal to 'parent choice' is used as justification for increasing the number of private schools and the resource levels of existing private schools.

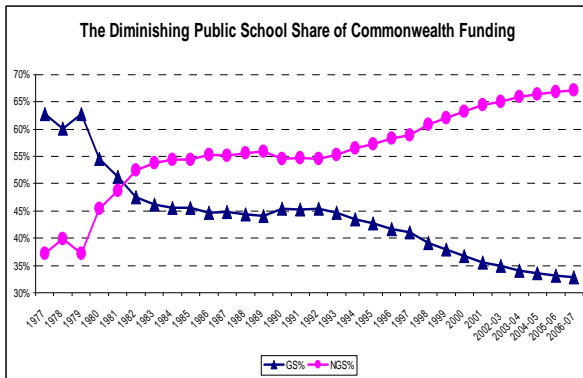
- removed all previous restrictions on the growth of private schools and the establishment of new ones. Funding now flows as soon as one student is enrolled, rather than the onus being on the school showing that it is viable.
- reclassified all systemic Catholic schools so that they receive higher funding, regardless of the government's own rhetoric of "needs-based funding".
- used funding to intimidate, coerce and demonise public education systems, schools and teachers by attacking curriculum and the very values of public education.

The Inequity of the Funding Formula: Creating Further Advantage for Private Schools

The way the funding formula works means there is a direct link between the average cost of educating a child in a public schools and the actual amount delivered to private schools.

This nexus means that whenever average costs in public schools go up, there is a direct flow-on to private schools. In this way, the gap can never be closed.

As well as that, the Howard government has deliberately increased funding to private schools in real terms, so the gap has actually widened.



Much greater funding per student for those at private schools

The government claims that the increases in funding to private schools is all about increased enrolments. But that is not true. Irrespective of enrolments, in 1996, for every \$ 1 spent on a student in a public school, the federal government spent \$ 4.40 (recurrent) on each private school student. By 2005, for every \$1 spent on a child in a public school, they spent \$ 5.63 on every private school student.

This was a deliberate policy decision to increase the amount per student in private schools compared to students in public schools.

Funding as a weapon, and attacks on teachers and curriculum

Funding to state systems providing public education is now being used as a weapon to coerce schools, teachers and systems into compliance. The government has become more aggressive by making funding conditional on an ever-expanding list of requirements; e.g. flagpoles and A-E reporting.

It has threatened to withhold the next round of funding unless systems introduce performance pay for teachers; meet certain curriculum demands; and introduce hiring and firing at the local school level.

This is accompanied by denigration of teachers:

“Teachers are one of the few professions not accountable for their performance and it is high time they are held responsible for their students’ achievements.”
(*The Australian*, 10 July, 2006)

Julie Bishop referred to teachers as *“...ideologues who have hijacked the school curriculum ...”* and said that there are *“...themes emerging in school curriculum straight from Chairman Mao.”*
(6 October 2006)

and irresponsible attacks on curriculum, including:

- the so-called crisis in reading, including the phoney ‘phonics’ versus ‘whole language debate. Real teachers use a range of strategies to teach students to read.
- the attack on the teaching of history.
- the attack on the teaching of geography.
- claims about lack of ‘values’ in public schools.

More information can be found in the Lobbying Kit on this website:

- The Howard Government’s Education Agenda
- Information Sheet 1: Why Prioritise Public Education Funding
- Information Sheet 2: Commonwealth Funding for Public Schools
- Information Sheet 3: The Howard decade – No Cause for Celebration

And in the Further Reading section:

- Too Smart by Half? Lyndsay Connors
- The Great School Fraud: Howard Government School Education Policy 1996-2006 Trevor Cobbold