

How God is Killing Public Education: Indoctrination versus Education

Jane Caro

Our current education situation is, quite frankly, unsustainable. As a society, we cannot afford to maintain two parallel education systems where kids can move from private school to public school at will. At the time of writing, one third of all secondary students attend private schools. These schools may be called private or even independent, but they are funded from the public purse. Some may receive as much as 90% of their income from taxpayers.

This extraordinarily generous funding system – unique in the world – has, predictably, led to an explosion in the number of private schools. Particularly since the federal government deregulated the establishment of new private schools in 1996.

Until recently, the establishment and funding of schools took place over decades characterised by growing numbers of students. The start of the 21st century, however, has seen a decline in the number of children of school age, so the market has begun to contract. We now have too many schools, too many duplicated facilities and too few students to attend them; all the ingredients for an unsustainable education system. And this will only get worse as we begin to lose an estimated 45–85,000 people of school age over the period 2003–20.

Indeed, in comparison with other Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries, Australia underspends on actually educating students, while overspending on the infrastructure needed to support the illusion of choice. Indeed, the rest of the world now sees Australia as an example of a high performing, low equity system. Which means, in plain English, that some of our kids – the most privileged ones, by and large – perform very well, and some of them – the most underprivileged ones – very badly. We now have one of the largest gaps between the lowest and highest performing 15 year olds in the OECD.



‘What did you learn in school today?’
‘That I’m all right and they’re not.’

And why does no-one seriously question this ludicrous state of affairs? Why is no one in any parliament, in any state in Australia thumping the table about our class-dominated schools? The answer has very little to do with market forces, or healthy competition, neo-conservatism or even parental choice – and everything to do with God.

The first schools in New South Wales (NSW) were operated by church affiliated groups and their main aim was to improve the moral condition of the underprivileged. Interestingly, foreshadowing the situation of private schools in the second millennium, the churches focused their educational endeavours in established areas and were less willing to start schools in new and smaller settlements. To meet the needs of children in rural areas, particularly those who could not afford private tuition or to attend boarding schools in the larger centres, the NSW government established ‘national’ schools in the mid-19th century. By the 1860s the denominational schools were beginning to struggle, once again foreshadowing events almost a hundred years later. At the time, funding for these schools was far more closely tied to curriculum, enrolments, inspections and school fees (fees were paid by students in all schools at that time, religious or ‘national’) than it is now. However, this tight linking of funding to compliance soon proved to be too much for the Catholic church. Their chafing under the restrictions imposed by government saw two divergent movements emerge in the 1870s. The church increasingly resisted state control, while pressure correspondingly increased for a free, compulsory, secular school system. The debate raged for a decade and ended in the heated withdrawal of Catholic children from state schools (a strategy that was to be repeated in the 1960s) and to the Public Instruction Act of 1880. This Act cut the Catholic schools loose from any state restrictions but also from any state aid. This separation between church and state (if I may put it that way) was to remain in place for the next 80 years.

By the end of our first century, therefore, the idea of public schooling for all children became established because churches either couldn’t or wouldn’t accept the obligation. The principle of very specific trade offs in exchange for public funding of church schools was initially accepted but eventually resisted, and the church schools broke away. A century later one fundamental of that original compromise has remained sacrosanct; that the state and its public schools alone shoulder the responsibility for compulsory education of all children. Church schools and other private schools do not and have never accepted such an obligation. What has changed is that church and private schools are back on the public payroll, this time without having to trade off any significant part of their ‘independence’.

This has created schools that are public when it comes to the handing out of taxpayers money, but private when it comes to which ones of those taxpayers kids they will and will not educate. And tragically it has led to a polarisation of our school system, where we find high concentrations of high socioeconomic status (SES) students in private schools, and high concentrations of low SES students in public schools. In other words, government supported ghettos of

privilege and under-privilege. 98% of indigenous students attend public schools, the vast majority of students with a disability, the poorest 40% of Catholics, and just about every student with emotional, behavioural and intellectual problems sit in a public school classroom.

Even if you don't care about fairness or the loss of our egalitarian spirit, there are other, serious ramifications of this high performance, low equity schooling system that will eventually rebound unpleasantly on us all. They include:

1. The loss of real merit and talent as a basis for success, to be replaced by inherited privilege. When the mediocre get to run the country simply because they went to the right schools, and the brightest miss out because they went to the wrong ones, this is a tax on all of us. We limit the pursuit of true excellence by limiting the opportunities of two thirds of our kids and create a future disaster for our country in an increasingly competitive world – we leave the field open to those countries with high performing, high equity school systems.
2. An increase in sectarianism, and segregation along socioeconomic and religious lines. As schools become more homogenised and stratified, the most disadvantaged students become more and more disaffected. The gap between the haves and have-nots is now both widened and exaggerated by our schools, and we can expect more Cronulla and Macquarie Field style riots, more gated communities, more private security guards, more vigilante groups as a result. As the deputy principal of a very underprivileged school said to me recently, if we don't put some more money into public education soon, we'd better build a lot more jails. Teachers at schools where disadvantaged students are becoming more and more concentrated spend so much time dealing with the inevitable and societal results of that disadvantage, they have little time to teach, so all the kids suffer. Yet public school teachers must still be doing something exceptional, given that at least four major studies have shown that kids from comprehensive public schools may arrive at University with a five mark disadvantage, but by the end of their first year they have neatly reversed the situation, with an average five mark advantage over both their private and selective school educated peers.
3. An increase in parental paranoia. Parents are frightened and confused, lacking confidence in themselves and their ability to bring up their children. They lack boundaries and are unable to provide them for their children, so they look to the church for what they call 'discipline' – whether they believe in God or not. It is understandable for parents to want the best for their kids, even if they are misguided about how to get it, but it is unconscionable for governments and hypocritical churches to take advantage of parental fears and insecurities. Consumerism, education as a commodity and the glorification of the individual over the community are all reasons for the valuing of private good over public good, but it is ironic that the church is benefiting from this. As Andrew Blair, the President of the Australian School Principals Association (ASPA) said at the NSW School Principals Conference on 15 June; he is not aware of any independent school – religious or otherwise – currently espousing support for the public good or social capital. It is only the wicked secular schools that continue to talk about and fight for equity, and opportunities for all our children.
4. A loss of understanding about the difference between

preaching values and practicing them. The churches are the world's best and most experienced propagandists. Because their schools – even the low fee ones – are more expensive to attend than most public schools, the churches are running more schools for the richest and least needy students, while the state runs more schools for the children of the poorest and most disadvantaged, yet it is state schools that are criticised for lacking values. But public schools still receive more public funding per student than private schools, as they should, although this is under threat. However, private schools do not have to abide by the same rules or shoulder the same responsibilities as public schools. Public schools remain more accountable, transparent and inclusive, which sometimes backfires on them. For example, the reason we hear more about violence in public schools is because they must publicly report all such incidents; private schools can keep such problems to themselves – unless they are exposed in court.

In fact, the current SES grants system of funding, masquerading as a needs based formula, actually works like a reverse Robin Hood – taking from the poor to give to the rich. Let me give you a concrete example of how this works. Not far from Sydney, there is an area identified as a postcode of disadvantage in Tony Vinson's recent report on the subject. An area also described as one of the five most disadvantaged postcodes in the region by the local area health service.

Located in this postcode are two schools. One is a government subsidised, religious private school, the other a comprehensive state high school. Each school enrolls approximately 600 secondary students (the private school also enrolls about 200 primary students).

Under the federal Government's SES formula, to apply for extra funding due to its perceived disadvantage, all the private school must submit is the census codes of its students. (After all, one wouldn't want to pry into a chap's private financial affairs, would one?)

Because of the number of its students who live in the area, the school (which charges annual fees of up to \$10,000) has attracted an increase in Commonwealth funding of 135%, taking their total federal Government subsidy to about \$2.5 million per annum. They also receive around \$450,000 annually from the State Government. (According to the *Sydney Morning Herald* two weeks ago over half of all private schools are now funded to above their formula entitlement, and some already very well resourced schools – most of them religious – have experienced increases in public funding of over 300%.)

The high school charges a voluntary contribution of \$50 per annum (which mostly goes unpaid), and, as a result, actually enrolls the most disadvantaged kids in this disadvantaged area. Its base funding from both State and federal governments is roughly equal to the \$8 to \$10,000 per student fees paid by the parents of the private school. To address its disadvantage, the public school can apply for the Priority Schools Funding Program (PSFP). To do so the high school must submit surveys of individual parents personal and employment details. (After all, you can't be too careful about bludgers and welfare cheats, can you?)

If sufficient parents are prepared to supply such details or, indeed, are literate enough to do so, the school may qualify for PSFP funding (previously the Disadvantaged Schools Program). If the school is successful, they will attract a funding increase of a grand total of \$100,000 spread over four years, plus one or two additional staff. This funding is, however, tied to literacy and numeracy outcomes

and, if it is not completely spent, must be returned. No such rules apply to SES funding. Oh, by the way, the school was not successful and receives no additional disadvantaged funding, unlike its fee charging, highly resourced private neighbour.

So what will be the result of this increasingly polarised, segregated and economically unsustainable education system, which has prioritised parental choice over children's opportunity? I believe we are well on the way to becoming the first western democracy to residualise our public school system. You think I exaggerate? With the current falling school age population, wholesale duplication of school resources, untouchability of ever increasing public funding to private schools – with virtually no strings attached (they say it is to make such schools more accessible, but their fees go up year after year, unaffected by their increasing subsidies), I believe it is inevitable.

It's already starting to happen. Just this week, the ACT has announced it will close 30 public schools with low enrolments. There is no mention of removing public funding from equally small and unsustainable private schools – surely they are the first schools that should lose funding in any rational universe because, unlike public schools, they are not open to all students. The first schools we should open and the last schools we should close, should be the schools open to all, but in high performance, low equity Australia, we do the reverse. But the ACT – perhaps after their experiences over abortion and civil unions – is also too frightened to take on the church.

If we go on like this, and I think we will, in 10 years time the hardest schools to get into will be public ones – because there will be so few of them. And as a result of the headlong pursuit of more choice, Australian parents will not only have less of it, many – particularly middle class parents – will have lost their birthright: access to a free, secular education where all our kids from whatever class and background actually got the chance to get to know each other.

Ironically, in Australia, it is secular public schools, in my view, that are on the side of the angels. □

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