

Submission

to

Senate Employment, Workplace Relations and Education
References Committee

Inquiry into Commonwealth Funding for Schools

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This submission responds to the 13 May 2004 reference regarding Commonwealth funding for schools - in particular that part of paragraph (b) which refers to "the role and responsibility of the Australian government for promoting efficiency and effectiveness in the allocation of public funds for schooling, [focusing on] effects on enrolment trends in the government and non-government sectors".

Summary

About one-third of children now attend private schools, and that proportion is continually growing. Unless the Government promptly does something decisive to change this situation, that proportion will reach two thirds before very long. This will happen between 2030 and 2080, according to the trend shown by Australian Bureau of Statistics figures for 1979-1999. By that time, the public schools will have become little more than detention centres "taking care of" the poorest, most disadvantaged and worst behaved children.

How did we come to be in this sorry situation? The Government provides, on average, more than half of the operating costs of private schools. This subsidy enables them to keep fees low enough to attract students who would otherwise go to the Government's own public schools!! If one were intent on sabotaging the public school system, it would be difficult to find a more effective method than this.

What is the socio-economic basis of this situation? It is the wholesale adoption, by successive Australian governments, of an economic doctrine developed in the 1950s and 1960s, asserting that competitive markets ensure the best possible outcomes in all aspects of social endeavour - the "survival of the fittest". Our present situation shows that this is not applicable to schools. Human judgement and imagination enable/oblige us to transcend this law of the jungle.

What is to be done? Government funding to private schools must be gradually and judiciously reduced, eventually to zero. Public money will then go only to public schools, which will educate the vast majority of children, and private schools will be supported entirely by non-government funds (as in other countries).

In the course of this re-direction of resources, the public school system must be adjusted to provide the diversity of educational opportunities required for a truly civil/civilized society. One element of this system should be a series of top-level tertiary public schools, modeled on France's Grandes Écoles, to educate the country's technical and management elite.

Is all of this feasible? It is indeed feasible, if it is done carefully and openly. It will involve re-educating the public to the idea that education must be an all-public responsibility/opportunity, so that we eliminate the disparity between the opportunities available to the children of the "haves" and to the children of the "have-nots", which plagues our society at present.

Enrolment Trends

Since the late 1960's, when government funds were first made available to private schools, the percentage of children attending private schools has increased from 22% to about 32%. That increasing trend will continue, unless decisive action is taken to stop it.

What is happening is that the government subsidy to private schools (on average, more than half of their operating expenses) enables them to keep fees low enough to attract students who would otherwise go to the Government's own schools!! If one were intent on sabotaging the public school system, it would be difficult to find a more effective method than this.

Children of the 'haves' are increasingly attending private schools, and are increasingly advantaged. Children of the 'have-nots' are constituting an increasing proportion of the public school population, and are becoming relatively disadvantaged. This process is increasing the gap between the advantaged and disadvantaged sections of our society.

Factors contributing to the drift to private schools include -

- Parents naturally want to provide the best opportunities for their children. As soon as they see or hear of something wrong with a public school, they scrape together whatever funds they can to send their children to a private school. Whether or not the private school is better, the parents tend to think that it is, because they are spending hard-earned cash on it, and are unwilling to admit that they might have made a mistake. This contributes to the general impression that private schools are superior.
- The present Prime Minister says that public schools don't sufficiently emphasize "values", and a substantial part of the population is sufficiently uncritical to believe that.
- There is a popular mantra about "giving parents choice", and it is widely believed that choice is provided only by private schools. But it is obvious that a similar degree of choice (except, of course, for religious aspects) can be provided by a diversity of public schools, if people/governments want it sufficiently.

Unless Australian governments take decisive action to reverse the current trend, we will eventually reach the point at which not one-third but two-thirds of students will attend private schools. This will happen between 2030 and 2080, according to the trend shown by Australian Bureau of Statistics figures for 1979-1999. Public schools will then become little more than detention centres "taking care of" the poorest, most disadvantaged and worst behaved children.

Apart from this inevitable consequence of the continuing drift to private schools, there are serious wastages resulting from the widening privatization of schools -

- Individual private schools act as little businesses - hiring business managers, pursuing funds, marketing themselves, and competing for students. These activities divert time and resources from their proper educational function.
- Best educational practice, which can be expected from State-wide school systems, is inaccessible to individual private schools. They are limited to the collective knowledge and judgement of small groups of local parents, teachers and administrators.

Roots of the present situation in Australian schools

Looking at the history superficially, it is easy to see that government aid to private schools began with the provision of funds to support libraries and science labs in poor, under-resourced schools in the late 1960s. The camel thus got its nose under the edge of the tent, and since that time private schools have become ever more adept at gaining access to the public purse.

But the roots are deeper and more complex than that. As Professor Simon Marginson explains in his essay in the April 2004 issue of the Australian Book Review (of which I enclose a copy), the decisive event was the acceptance, by governments of English-speaking countries, of the economic doctrine developed in the 1950s and 1960s by F.A. Hayek and Milton Friedman.

Hayek argued that competitive markets ensured the best outcomes in all aspects of social endeavour - the survival of the fittest. That is the fundamental driving force behind the privatization of everything in this country, including essential public utilities. Friedman proposed that no education except basic elementary schooling should receive government funding, and all education beyond that should be left to market forces, which would generate continuous improvement in teaching.

Though the US people and their government have rejected the proposition that their nation's education system should be subjected to wholesale privatization, the Australian government swallowed that doctrine, hook, line and sinker (though with the weird aberration of government support for private schools). The unfortunate results, particularly for our universities, are laid out in Marginson's essay.

Toward a solution

Tinkering with isolated aspects of the present education system is simply a waste of time and effort. We must reclaim and re-invigorate the public school system, for the vast majority of parents and their children.

The most important initiative is gradually to reduce the flow of public money to private schools, eventually to zero, so that the only children going to private schools are those few with an overwhelming religious or some other personal reason. As more resources are thus released to the public school system, it can be improved and diversified - and those advances can be talked up by the Government, as contrasted to the "talking down" that one hears now.

Some of the Federal politicians with whom I have been corresponding say that the situation is already "too far gone" to reverse the current privatization trend. One has been honest enough to admit the fundamental objection - "[There is] nothing wrong with your line of reasoning except that neither the Government nor the Opposition would implement it because too many are already in the private sector and they are not prepared to take the electoral backlash and the upheaval it would cause." That's a pretty shameful reason for not trying to correct the situation, and an unnecessarily defeatist attitude. The parents and grandparents of the almost 70% of children who attend public schools will surely support strengthening of the public school system, if it is explained to them openly and intelligently. This re-education of adults is necessary because they have

grown up to believe that government-subsidized "private" schools are a common-sense element of the natural order of things, and the only way to ensure a choice of school options, and a well-disciplined environment.

There is some evidence that support for reducing government funding of private schools will be found even among those who benefit from high-grade private schools. In his article "Lessons in Privilege", Frank Moorehouse says (bottom of page 6 in the enclosed copy) - "One of the most encouraging things I have noticed when talking about these matters with people connected with private schools, either professionally or as former students or parents of students, is that there is either a sadness about the situation or a defensiveness. They know that something is not quite right."

A common objection to eliminating government funding to private schools is that the public schools could not afford to accommodate all the children now attending private schools. The shallowness of that line of reasoning is astounding. If the diminution of government subsidy to private schools is carried out gradually and thoughtfully, there need be no disruption to school education. In the long run, the overall cost of education to the populace will not increase - the funds will simply flow through the Government rather than through private channels. In fact, there should be some reduction of total expenditure, by elimination of some of the costs now incurred by private schools - for non-educational functions such as business managers, marketing, fund-raising and so on.

Potential jewels in the crown of the public school system

In the process of convincing parents that public schools are not inferior to private schools, it will be important to have, early on, a system of high-profile, flagship public schools capable of challenging the elite private schools.

This could be accomplished by setting up an Australian equivalent of France's Grandes Écoles - a system of elite public tertiary schools catering to the development of potential leaders - where influential connections can be made - the it's-not-what-you-know-it's-whom-you-know syndrome. Entry to those schools would be through special education at the secondary school level, and a series of rigorous examinations. They would **bring together an elite of the intellect, not of parental affluence**. And inter-personal connections would be made at the level of tertiary education, which these days is probably more appropriate than "old school" connections made in elite secondary schools. I enclose a concise description from a French website. [There is somewhat more detail at - [http:// www.bath.ac.uk/ewl/ewlecole.htm](http://www.bath.ac.uk/ewl/ewlecole.htm)] Especially significant is the statement near the middle of the second page -

"highly selective admission process - Admission is based on a nationwide examination or on records; this is probably the most characteristic feature, as there is a nationwide consciousness that the Grandes Écoles are the place where the country's technical and managerial élite is shaped up."

The facts that the special education preparing children for these Great Schools would be at the secondary school level, and that the competitive examinations would be administered by the public school system, would definitively dispel any perception of their being poor relations of the top private schools.

There are two other benefits that would flow from the establishment of such Great Schools, but I will not go into them now -

- they would constitute a welcome counterpoise to the hodge-podge of “universities” that have developed in this country in recent decades, and
- they would prepare superbly qualified people for the top jobs in this country - jobs that are now taken by products of the elite private schools, qualified by parental affluence/influence rather than by intellectual ability (see the article by Frank Moorehouse, enclosed).

Conclusion

The damage that has been done to the public school system over the past 35 years can surely be undone in the next decade or two, if only we have the will. It will take political courage, and the risking of short-term electoral disadvantage, but the long-term benefit to the country will vastly outweigh any temporary discomfort.

All children should have an equal chance at as much education as they can assimilate, and any resulting advantage should depend on their intellectual ability and hard work. The only way to achieve that outcome is gradually and judiciously to reduce government funding to private schools, ultimately to zero.

When practically all students go to public schools, as they do in other countries, time and effort will no longer be wasted on unproductive contests for public funds by two classes of schools. Instead, sensible debates about education can occur within and between State-wide systems, free from the intrusion of non-educational distractions.

Schools will no longer be required to operate within a “survival of the fittest” framework. We will have used our powers of reasoning to pass beyond that law of the jungle.

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