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# Quality education for all: state aid is still the issue

Anthony Ashbolt

The fundamental measure of education in all spheres is its contribution to a democratic society. To ensure that the Australian education system creates what Benjamin Barber calls 'an aristocracy of everyone', we need grand spending plans. We also need to embark on a mission to rescue the public education system, which has been sidelined during our years of transferring funds to private schools.

The public realm and the importance of education within it was a critical foundation stone of the fledgling Australian state. The same is also true of the USA, where even someone with residual monarchist tendencies like John Adams could still acknowledge that 'a passion for the public good' is 'superior to all private passions'. To put it another way, democracy cannot be propelled by private instincts and preferences alone - it is dependent upon informed public sentiment and desire. In John Adams, Thomas Jefferson, and some of the other founding fathers, we see the beginnings of a 'powerful linkage between democracy, public citizenship and public education for all' that 'formed the cornerstone of schooling.'

Yet within the United States, problems of democratic access to quality public education persist. Jonathon Kozol's *Savage Inequalities* and *The Shame of the Nation* are required reading on this issue. Inequality does not destroy the ideals of public education. Rather it alerts us to the need for their resuscitation.

In Australia, state aid to private schools is still a critical issue. Why? Because it distorts our school funding priorities, elevating the private to a position which it should not have in a democratic society. Democracy is based upon the public good and public choices, not the private good and private choices. The public good should not be regarded as merely an aggregation of private interests and individual desires. Rather, it is something greater than the sum of its parts. Individual freedoms, important as they are, must be placed in the context of a general democratic impulse. In that sense, we are not free to choose in some open-ended way what goes on in the public realm that lies at the heart of democracy. There are, of course, private choices that should be allowed to remain in the private realm. Democracy in no way precludes this but rather thrives on it. Once education, however, becomes essentially a private choice it loses its democratic function.

Parental choice of school tends to privilege private, individual desires over the common good. Such choice should not be prevented, but it should also not be subsidised where it dilutes or even undermines the public system. And that is what is happening now in Australia. If a funding formula can be devised that avoids this, that preserves both private choice and public schooling as something more than a residual system, then this could find a place within democratic thinking.

There is such a formula — no state aid to private schools.

The policy solution of integrating systemic Catholic schools and some other private schools does have an appeal at one level. In theory it could increase accountability, reduce elitism by eliminating fees and make the private/public distinction as genuinely tenuous as it is in The Netherlands where the system is underpinned by a historic religious compromise. That system, however, cannot simply be transplanted to Australia, where the elite sector has grown dramatically in the last thirty years. Even the poor parish school is the exception now, not the rule.

The New Zealand model of integration, because it is relatively recent, is sometimes recommended. I visited one integrated school in the Wellington district earlier this year. It includes a Christian statement of faith as part of the school's ethos (if only for show, as integration requires schools to have a 'special character'). It began as a private school but after a few years applied for integration and now thinks of itself as almost private, drawing on a clientele of parents with desires shaped by the ideology of private choice. It is, in essence, a virtual private school that pays all its teachers a 'higher duties' allowance and raises significant money for building purposes. Integrated schools retain ownership of their property and can use that as leverage for a type of fee system.

Those who appeal to the New Zealand model might also like to ponder the private logic that pervades even the state system there and consult studies such as those carried out by Hugh Lauder, Martin Thrupp, and Edward Fiske and Helen Ladd (see references below). Many state schools advertise themselves like the Independent ones and have spent a lot on getting foreign full fee-paying students to their school. A policy of competition, devolution and entrepreneurial managerialism has infiltrated the school system there - just one reflection of neo-liberalism's significant impact in New Zealand.

The Centre for Policy Development asks us to propose viable alternatives in this debate. Perhaps, then, I should cast aside my nostalgia for the May '68 slogan, 'Be Realistic, Demand the Impossible'. Short of the abolition of state aid to private schools, such aid should be tied to much greater accountability. That accountability should not just relate to school finances as a whole but also to teachers' salaries (any top up means an automatic reduction of state aid). There should, at the outset, be a thorough investigation of the private system that would help shape a new funding model weighted towards public education.

First, the viability and indeed validity, of all the new schools that have popped up since the abolition of Labor's New Schools Policy should be investigated. Some might need to be phased out, seek alternative methods of funding or adjust their internal funding policies. The viability of Catholic systemic schools should also be investigated. Rather than integration, I would propose the absorption or abolition of any failing systemic schools (and I suspect there are not any, due in no small part to generous state aid). These measures should be part of a model whereby any school (not just Catholic systemic) that receives 75% or more of its funding from the state should be given an alternative: absorption into the state system or survival as a more financially independent entity. The point is not to make private schools more affordable but, rather, to reinforce democracy through the strengthening of public schooling. Finally, a process whereby government funding of all private schools is reduced progressively should be put in place.

In terms of recent policy, The Federal Government's commitment of \$90 million to fund school chaplains is scandalous, particularly given the under-funding of public school counsellors. Note Bob Carr's critical and sensible response to this diminution of secularism. Remember, however, that his Government provided generous funding to private schools, including a staggering transport subsidy (at last count it was \$400 million a year, with a measly \$100 million going to public schools). Jenny Macklin's (and subsequently Beazley's) support of the chaplain policy gives ample testimony to the lack of an alternative vision from the Labor Party.

Benjamin Barber puts the case for public schooling well:

'The lesson seems obvious: We cannot do without public schools. A nation of fractious individuals schooled in avoidance ceases to be a nation. A democracy of consumers focused on their private interests ceases to be a democracy. A community of multicultural fragments celebrating only difference ceases to be a community. A republic of privately schooled narcissists blind to what they share ceases to have res publica and hence is no longer a republic.'

Our proposals must be radical if they are to have any substance or meaning. They must get to the root of the problem. In the context of schools funding, the root is the refusal of governments to fund public education in a way that recognises its crucial role in Australian democracy.

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## **About the author**

Anthony Ashbolt is a Senior Lecturer in Politics at the University of Wollongong and an editor of the labour history journal Illawarra Unity.