Private schools are becoming steadily more popular with parents. And public education's supporters have been left flat footed. The reason, argues Simon Marginson, is that the left has had very little to say about parenting.

It needs to be stressed that this crisis does not derive from a material decline in the quality of public schooling. On all indicators except for the condition of buildings (literacy and numeracy; range and depth of curricula; participation rates; teacher qualification; class sizes), public schooling is better than it was ten years ago and much better than it was twenty years ago. Nor is there any clear evidence that private schools are educationally superior.

Nonetheless, the drift of enrolments from public to private schooling is accelerating. Between 1977 and 1986 the proportion of all school students enrolled in private schools rose from 21.5 percent to 26.4 percent: it is higher at the top end of secondary school, and in Victoria and the ACT. Since 1977,
100,000 public school students have been lost to private schools. There are four main elements that explain the net enrolment drift to private schools.

Firstly, State Aid to private schools has been a necessary precondition of enrolment drift. It has made private schooling relatively cheaper than before by improving class sizes and other facilities while holding down fees. It has increased the number of enrolment places available, through new schools and growth of existing schools.

With the cost of private schooling falling as a proportion of income for some families, more parents can enrol their student children in private schools. State Aid does not explain the existence of demand for private schooling in itself, but it explains why that demand has become effective demand for an increasing number of parents.

Secondly, competition for jobs and places in higher education has intensified in the context of youth unemployment, increasing school retention rates, the scarcity of higher education places and the rising Year Twelve cut-off scores needed for entry, and the declining labour market value of all educational credentials. For many parents equal education opportunity is not enough; they’re searching for relative advantage for their student children. The growing private school sector — seen to be associated with social success — provides the avenue for investment in relative advantage.

Public education is now paying for the failure of the educational meritocracy to deliver. For most of the post-war period education was sold as the royal road to upward social mobility. Combined with the idea of equality of opportunity, this secured wide support for the expansion of public education, but at the price of inflated expectations.

Education had been sold as the originator of individual employment opportunities, so when room at the top turned out to be limited and the value of educational credentials fell, it was hardly surprising that people blamed education for the labour market’s shortcomings. (One of the reasons why “right to work” campaigns have lacked support is the meritocratic idea that attaining work is an individual responsibility expressed through individual effort in education).

The private school individual investment model offers an apparent means of satisfying the desires for income and career through education that the meritocratic conception has failed to fulfill. It offers parents an identity attuned to the “solution” of the problem of their child's future: the identity of wise individual investor.

Third, New Right free market ideas have positioned people against government services financed by taxation and in favour of market services and private effort. These ideas find resonance with people because of their personal experience of the relative increase in Pay As You Earn taxation and their self-identity as market consumers, from which traditional bureaucratic public services appear alienating — an alienation recognised and played upon by the New Right.

Denial of desire is not a very effective strategy.

Finally, all of these factors have come together in the development of a powerful new discourse of good parenting as private school parenting. Increasingly, parents are persuaded that to be good parents they must place their children in private schools. Increasingly, too, parents who can afford private schooling feel guilty if they leave their children in the public system. As entrepreneur Dick Smith was reported as saying recently in Time Australia:

A lot of people are being conned by peer pressure ... Instead of making a rational decision on the evidence, they thing “People might think I'm neglecting my children if I don't send them to a private school”.

Parents are persuaded that they should make economic sacrifices (for example, by working in an extra job) in order to pay for private school fees; the experience of sacrifice reinforces the sense of good parenting and absolves guilt. The notion of good parenting as private school parenting has two main aspects: private schools are seen to provide a climate of moral security and child safety (discipline, curriculum, the benefits of a selected student population) and private schools are seen to provide relative advantage through improved chances of reaching higher education, the development of useful social networks and the acquisition of style and language.

This new discourse about good parenting is not simply a product of New Right advocacy of private and market forms. It also has separate origins in the growing importance of education and the evolution of attitudes to parenting itself; parents are now defined as themselves educated and capable of decisions about education, and autonomous in relation to trained professionals. Our problem is that these new attitudes to parenting have become associated with private schooling.

The freedom of choice argument gains much of its power from its presentation of the market model as the opportunity for good parenting. The fact that the choices it offers are beyond the reach of many and the best choices are closed to nearly all does not reduce the power of the argument. Desires that are unachievable can still be motivating desires. And for an increasing number of people, the desire for private schooling can be fulfilled.

The point that cannot be overemphasised is that the shift in ideas about good parenting is felt acutely by individual parents. It is therefore very important and cannot be ignored.

Given these factors, the force of the debate about school standards becomes clear. The issues raised by the Old Right and New Right critics of "standards" in public schooling embrace the whole spectrum of parental anxieties; from moral
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school security and discipline, to the social qualities of the school’s enrolment, to the values expressed in the curriculum, to teachers as suitable guardians for their children, through to the perceived relative educational performance of public schools (numeracy and literacy, academic rigour, incidence of high achievement, and so on). Any and all of these elements can invoke fears that leaving children in the public education system constitutes bad parenting.

Teachers’ stock response has been to concentrate on teaching and learning standards and to assert that measured evidence shows that educational standards in public schools have not declined, have in fact improved and are as good as those found in private schools. This response is necessary and sound, but it is not a sufficient political strategy in itself. In fact, by itself it largely misses the point.

Parents see their children as children rather than (as teachers see them) as students. The dynamics of the standards debate and the public/private debate turn around parenting, not education. We are grappling with a parenting debate and not an educational debate.

The arguments about inadequate numeracy and literacy actually gain their credibility from the prior assumption that good parenting is associated with private schools (the presence of this prior assumption explains why anecdotal evidence of failings in the basics is taken as gospel while solid evidence of improvements — which contradicts the assumption — is easily ignored). Arguments about educational inadequacies in public schools serve as a post hoc rationalisation of decisions to be “good parents”; it is not easy to acknowledge openly that you are committed to private education because of the relative advantage it offers.

Even in cases where individual parents are convinced that educational standards in public schools are adequate this will not necessarily shake their common sense association of private schooling with moral security and relative advantage. Within the notion of good parenting as private school parenting it can be quite consistent to support public schools as a social project while continuing individually to use the private schools. Many parents on the left are in this position.

Demands for an end to State Aid to private schools are also justified in themselves, but as a strategy this is not enough either. At present the anti-State Aid demand is merely seen by many as denial of parent’s aspirations to be good parents. Denial of desire is not a very effective strategy.

**Parenting is a blank space on most left agendas.**

To end State Aid and to achieve the necessary popular support for resource needs in public schools we must shift the attitude to parenting in education, and legitimate State education provision in the eyes of parents. Unless good parenting becomes associated with public schools we cannot win.

And if we do not win, the public schools will eventually be destroyed as comprehensive schools, becoming low quality educational ghettos occupied only by the poorest families — while the rest climb over each other endlessly to secure relative advantage in private education (a zero-sum game if ever there was one).

We urgently need a left intervention in schooling that is positive and productive rather than purely defensive:

Firtly, we must start to take the politics of parents and parenting in education more seriously. The dominant notions of parenting have tended to be conservative and oppressive and parenting is a blank space on most left agendas. But parenting does happen and it’s a perfectly good thing. Parenting is also now a political issue in a way it has never been before.

As Angela McRobbie said last year in *Marxism Today*:

There is no doubt that parents have been invoked by the media and in particular by the mass dailies for their own political purposes. To some on the left, they are already a lost cause... This is a dangerous assumption. Apart from anything else it allows the Right to court the parents unchallenged. It also further isolates the Left from feelings, not to say popular passions.

Parenting has entered the domain of public concern and shows no sign of retreating back into the more hidden sphere of the home. It is subject to greater professional scrutiny, more extensive media debate... To speak as a mother or parent is no longer to speak falteringly from within the realms of a privatised and a political sphere. On the contrary it is to insist that these old distinctions be done away with.

Parent power is here. Parents see themselves as people with the right and the responsibility to make decisions about education. This active concern is not in any way confined to middle class parents. Angela McRobbie again: “The myth on the left that working class or immigrant parents are not deeply involved in their children’s education should be dislodged for once and for all.”

Secondly, public schools must be opened up much more to parental involvement in school decision-making. This means bringing parents into schooling as equal partners with teachers, not only in school administration (discipline, excursions, special needs, etc.) but also in teaching and learning matters. It means involving all parents and not just a few parents on School Councils.

The automatic assumption that “teachers know best” will have to go.

The active involvement of parents in the life of the school provides an effective way of overcoming their anxieties about moral security, child safety, curriculum content and educational standards. It can also provide public schools with the solid political constituency that they sorely need at present. A new model of public schooling based on parent-
teacher partnership can also provide a political model of parental involvement that is more attractive than the economic (market) relationship between parents and private schools.

Most private schools involve parents in fund-raising and social activity, but (like most public schools) they shut them out when the real educational action is on.

Therefore private schools do not fully encompass the pervasive new notions of parents as autonomous and competent in relation to professionals. The opportunity has been presented to public education. The democratic public sector model based on collective production (the unity of producers and consumers) can provide a level of parent participation that can fully satisfy the desire for good parenting in relation to schooling.

This collective public sector model is the liberating political counter we need to the individualised economic determinism of the New Right.

Thirdly, to effectively involve parents as partners in the public school enterprise teachers will need to change some of their professional practices. The automatic assumption that ‘teachers know best’ will have to go if parents are to be brought into decisions about methods of teaching and assessment, the nature of homework, the pattern of school sport; as well as decisions about, say, discipline or whether there should be separate classes for women students.

Teachers have long held parents at arm’s length by assuming professional superiority as the scientific technicians of education. This form of the professional role is the product of well-established norms of child development and educational practice. These norms lead the teacher to blame the home environment (over-protective or neglectful) if the child is not fully ‘educable’, and the parent to blame the teacher if the child is not fully successful.

Building an education partnership in public schooling means that these deeply structured barriers need to be dismantled. But the few schools where there is a high level of parental involvement have usually found it easier to overcome parent/teacher divisions than either group expected.

NOTES

5. I am not arguing here that the content and structure of the curriculum should be determined by the local school. It is important that central government frameworks guarantee every child’s right to mathematics, language, and so on.

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