



SCHOOL CHOICE IS THE BEST CHOICE

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Parents deserve the right to choose which school best meets the needs of their children, writes Hannah Pandel.

The war over school choice has been reignited and once again, opponents of market-based education reforms entirely miss the point.

A national study released in April this year analysed the cognitive outcomes of 4,000 Australian primary-school children at government and non-government schools. The study, entitled 'Does School Type Affect Cognitive and Non-Cognitive Development in Children?' declared that 'sending children to Catholic or other independent primary schools has no significant effect on their cognitive and non-cognitive outcome'.

These results have been met with the inevitable response from critics of non-government schools, who have taken the opportunity to denounce school choice, and call for increased funding for government schools. This is easy to refute. If any point is to be taken from this study regarding



funding, it is that school choice has not destroyed government schools; rather, they have been able to achieve results comparable to those of non-government schools with less funding. Competition works. But why let the truth get in the way of a good cash-grab opportunity?

While calling for increased funding for government schools, Save Our Schools spokesman Trevor Cobbold went so far as to say that, 'If you think you are getting some advantage in education outcomes from sending your child to a private school rather than a government school, think again'.

Cobbold's response is typical of people who wilfully ignore the myriad of reasons that more and more Australian parents have when choosing to enrol their children in nongovernment schools.

Yes, academic outcomes are a priority for parents when it comes to selecting a school for their children. But it is not the only factor. This is the conclusion of a 2013 study by the Friedman Foundation for Educational Choice, 'More Than Scores: An Analysis of Why and How Parents Choose Private Schools'. It found that academic results did not even factor in the top ten reasons parents choose non-government schools.

Earlier research goes further. A study published in 1997 by David Figlio and Joe Stone entitled 'School Choice and Student Performance: Are Private Schools Really Better?' found that parents may still choose to send their child to a non-government school even if there are no academic advantages.

As Figlio and Stone found, parents were flocking to the non-government school sector because they tended to provide their students with a more disciplined environment, a religious education, or a greater opportunity to participate in extracurricular sports.

This is precisely because parents think about much more than just academic achievement when choosing a school. The Australian literature also overwhelmingly supports this. 'Factors Affecting School Choice', a report from the Independent Schools Council of Australia, found that the most important reasons as to why parents chose to send their child to nongovernment schools were the good facilities, good teachers, and the supportive and caring environment.

And a study by the Australian Council for Educational Research found that the most common factor influencing parents when choosing whether to send their child to a government or non-government school was 'the extent to which the school embraced traditional values to do with discipline, religious or moral values, the traditions of the school itself, and the requirement that a uniform be worn'.

Again, academic achievement did not feature as the most significant factor. This is in recognition of the fact that it is no longer acceptable for schools to only equip their students with knowledge and skills.

Our world is highly competitive, fast-paced and constantly changing. To provide stability, parents are turning to schools they believe will give their children the best opportunity to succeed while



promoting traditional values in a supportive and disciplined environment.

IT IS NO LONGER ACCEPTABLE FOR SCHOOLS TO ONLY EQUIP THEIR STUDENTS WITH KNOWLEDGE AND SKILLS. WE DEMAND MORE

School choice comes down to one simple thing: parents want to be able to choose a school that best matches the needs of their child and their own values. This may mean they choose a single-sex school, on the basis that they believe the educational and social outcomes will be greater for their child in that environment. They may prefer a school espousing religious values that mirror their own, as opposed to a secular one, a feature of all Australian government schools. They may select a special school for their disabled child because they feel that school can better cater for their specific needs.

And they may choose to send their child to the same school that they attended, their parents attended, and their grandparents attended purely on the basis that family and tradition is important to them above all else.

It is unacceptable for any organisation or government to decide that none of these reasons are acceptable. It is the right of the parent—informed by their own values and their own priorities—to make the decisions they believe are best for their children. Even the UN recognises this, and have enshrined it in Article Thirteen of the *International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights*, which commits all signatories, of which Australia is one, 'to have respect for the liberty of parents ... to choose for their children schools, other than those established by public authorities ... to ensure the religious and moral education of their children in conformity with their own convictions'.

Education is more than academia. If that were not the case, the controversy surrounding the ideological nature of the National Curriculum would not exist. All aspects of the education system whether they be the subjects enshrined in the National Curriculum, the principles upheld by the schools, or the textbooks used in the classroom—are value-laden. It is for this reason that parents must have the definitive power to choose what these values are (at least to the best of their abilities), as they will ultimately influence their children's future values and decisions.

A major strength of nongovernment schools is that they are directly accountable to parental values. If they stray from the ideas important to their community, parents will inevitably withdraw their children and search for a more suitable alternative.

School choice empowers parents to control their child's education and the values they are being taught in schools. The fact that we have an education system which gives parents the power to choose what is best for their children is something to be celebrated, not lamented.