

Education Agenda

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Funding: a no-brainer election issue

Should non-government schools receive taxpayers' money? Judged by the Australian Education Union's (AEU) 1998 curriculum policy, the answer is 'no'. The union argues: 'that the resources of Governments should be wholly devoted to the public systems which are open to all'.

The belief is that education should be a state monopoly and parents choosing the non-government system should be financially penalized.

Evidence of the AEU's continued antipathy to non-government schools is easy to find. The union has embarked on an extensive campaign, placing political signs on school property and enlisting teachers to fight in marginal seats, based on the (mistaken) premise that private schools are over-funded (see <http://aeu-vic.labor.net.au/campaigns/>).

The Australian Labor Party (ALP) is also a critic of non-government schools and, while acknowledging their right to receive some government funding, argues that many receive too much money and that priority must be given to government schools.

To quote Mark Latham, when interviewed on ABC radio in Perth: 'We'll be taking money off the over-funded schools like the Kings School and Trinity Grammar'.

That such attacks on non-government schools are erroneous, illogical and counter-productive is easy to prove. The reality is that Federal funding to government schools (especially when compared to State funding levels) has increased since the election of the Howard Government.

It is also true that every time a parent decides to send a child to a non-government school, more money is freed up for the government school sys-

tem. With government schools, the average student government recurrent funding (2001–2002) is just under \$9,000.

On average, students attending non-government schools receive approximately \$5,000 in government recurrent funding—a saving to government of \$4,000 for each student. Not only are parents who make the choice saving governments money; their taxes also fund the government school system.

Based on research carried out by the Productivity Commission, it is estimated that the financial sacrifice made by non-government school parents amounts to a \$4.2 billion annual saving to governments across Australia.

As demonstrated in 1962 in Goulburn, NSW, when the local Catholic authorities closed the system and 2,200 additional students suddenly knocked on the door of their overcrowded public schools, the government system would collapse if not for the presence of non-government schools.

It should also be acknowledged that non-government schools are funded on a needs basis and the amount each school receives depends on the school's socio-economic status. Thus, more advantaged schools receive substantially lower funding than those schools that are more disadvantaged.

Students attending Scotch College (Victoria) receive only \$1,713 and those at The Kings School (NSW) receive \$1,905. Less well-off non-government schools receive something in the order of \$5,500 per student. Obviously, such figures are well below the \$9,000 in funding given to government school students.

Notwithstanding the fact that non-government schools save Australian governments billions of dollars and, on the whole, perform better academically and promote values more in tune with

what parents expect, such schools have become a target of the Left in the forthcoming election.

Why is this so? One reason is because teacher unions define non-government schools as elitist and guilty of promoting a 'competitive and culturally-biased system of education'. Although the Berlin Wall may have collapsed, those running the AEU still believe in the class war and non-government schools are an easy target.

Second, as evidenced by the nature of the attack on so-called wealthy schools such as Geelong Grammar, ALP strategists believe that there are votes in fomenting the politics of envy and class division. By attacking the 'big end of town', they hope that many of the Howard battlers will return to the Labor fold.

What this overlooks is the fact that parents are voting with their feet (32 per cent of students now attend non-government schools, up from 22 per cent in 1980) and that the largest growth in enrolments is associated with low-fee-paying schools in marginal electorates.

Such are the failures of the government system, that aspirational voters are increasingly choosing the non-government alternative.

Finally, by focusing the debate on resources and levels of funding, the AEU and the ALP are able to ignore the more pressing question of standards and how well the system performs. As a result, under-performing government schools continue unchecked and failing teachers go unchallenged.

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