

Australian Education Union distorting the education debate

Sinclair Davidson

Critics of private schools are playing an increasingly shrill game of one-upmanship. In May of this year, Catherine Deveny—a columnist for *The Age*—wrote a scathing op-ed on private schools. She used explosive terms such as ‘social apartheid’ and ‘false economy’ to describe private schools.

Deveny had, in turn, been inspired by an ideological rant by Shane Maloney, recounting how he had verbally abused a group of school boys at Scotch College. Writing again in *The Age*, Maloney argued, ‘our children are increasingly divided into educational ghettos that undermine our civil values and reward religious fundamentalism’. (It is not clear from his article, however, whether it is public and private schools that he considers as ‘ghettos’.)

Meanwhile, Deveny argued that non-public schools were ‘divisive, discriminatory, [and] reliant on hand-outs’. Her fundamental point was that if people wanted to send their children to private schools, they should pay for it themselves.

Running through this ugly commentary is contempt and hatred for religion—yet the Victorian Equal Opportunity Commission has yet to bring charges under Victoria’s *Racial and Religious Tolerance Act*.

The Australian Education Union (AEU), with its celebrity and media allies, has been running an appallingly dishonest campaign against private schools. We hear and read that government fund-

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ing is biased towards private schools. In particular, that public school children go without because private school children get all the government funding.

The AEU even produced figures showing that private school children have greater per capita funding than public school children. It suggested that Commonwealth funding was ‘the major contributor to the fact that private students have more spent on their education’. This remarkable statement is refuted by the AEU’s own data. Its data show that the single largest source of funding for private schools comes from private sources—school fees and endowments and the like. Private school students have more spent on their education because their own parents chose to do so.

Figure 1 shows school funding data for the period 1998–99 to 2005–06. In the first instance, it is clear that the lion’s share of school funding comes from the State and Territory governments. The public education lobby tries to be vague about the actual funding of schools. For example, in its press release of 20 August, the AEU cited Commonwealth funding figures per student, but not State funding figures. The AEU went on to argue, ‘That is what the Education Minister, Julie Bishop should be explaining rather than hiding behind state funding figures ...’ Yet it is plain to see that the Commonwealth is not a large player in funding education.

Until recently, the school funding debate occurred in a factual vacuum. Indeed, the AEU would have it no other way. It is easy to blame the shortcomings of the public school system on an elitist Howard Government and its alleged under-funding of public schools. It isn’t enough that the public school lobby wants more money from the federal government, it wants private schools defunded.

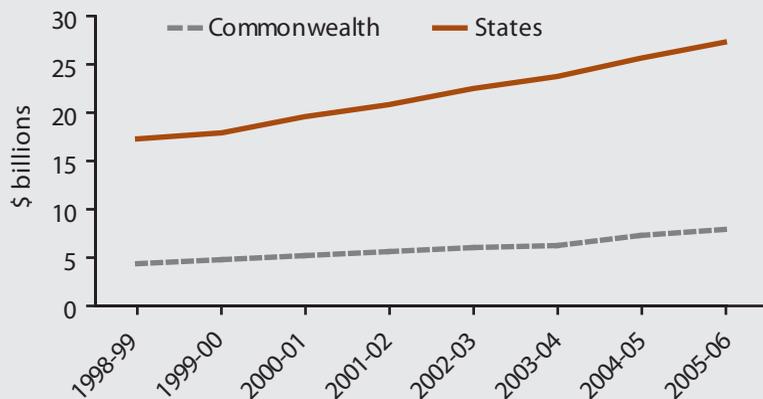
In response to this attack, the Association of Independent Schools of Victoria (AISV) commissioned an analysis of total government spending on schools. Using data for 2004–05, that study finds that total public funding to government schools is far greater than that to non-government schools. The AISV argued that the existence of a private school system saved the taxpayer \$4.9 billion in that year. This calculation was performed on the basis of what it would have cost for all private school children to be educated at a public school.

The AEU responded with a press release headlined ‘Independent schools sector research confirms the imbalance of federal education funding’. You have to admire the chutzpah.

In the 2005–06 financial year, total government spending on primary and secondary education amounted to \$35 billion. The Commonwealth’s share of that funding was a mere 22 per cent, with the States and Territories paying the remainder.

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Figure 1: State and Commonwealth funding for schools



Source: ABS Cat. 5512.0 (Various)

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The States and Territories paid \$28.19 billion for schools in that year, with the Commonwealth paying just \$7.8 billion. Schooling is not a Commonwealth responsibility and, unsurprisingly, the Commonwealth plays a minor role in funding schools. School funding makes up 3 per cent of the Commonwealth budget, while it comprises over 20 per cent of State and Territory budgets. In other words, if there is a problem in school funding and performance it is primarily a State and Territory government problem. The AEU claims that public schools are under-funded by \$2.9 billion—it is a State responsibility to meet that funding shortfall—if it exists at all.

The data do not get any better for the AEU. Approximately two-thirds of Commonwealth funding is spent on private schools, with one third going to public schools. This is the basis of the AEU complaint. Yet what the AEU doesn't tell us is that State government funding is distorted too. Approximately 88 per cent of State and Territory funding goes

to public schools, with the remainder going to private schools. Consequently, it is possible to calculate total funding to each sector, public and private. The share of total government money going to private schools is slightly over 24 per cent, and funding going to public schools just slightly over 75 per cent. Yet, only 67 per cent of students attend public schools. The public school system has a greater share of government funding than is justified by its share of students. Yet, somehow, the AEU and its allies are able to claim that they are hard done by.

We can go one step further. Total government funding per public student in 2005–06 was approximately \$11,790, and approximately \$7,589 per private student. The ratio of private spending per student to public spending per student is 64 per cent. In other words, I estimate a discount to private schools of 36 per cent. The AISV estimates a discount of 42 per cent (it includes capital costs in its analysis). If anything, private students are being under-funded,

not public students. It is public schools that are reliant on hand-outs. Imagine if the public education lobby achieved its goal of having no private school system. All those students would come into the public system that would then be funded at the rate of approximately \$10,390 per student. At best, funding per student would fall. Indeed, if the Commonwealth exited the school funding market, the per capita funding would fall dramatically. Clearly, it is nonsense to suggest that private school funding deprives public schools of resources.

The first \$4,000-or-so of private school fees simply makes up the short-fall in government funding to those schools. Yet, the public school lobby complains that it is government schools that are starved of resources. The AEU claims that public schools across Australia are under-funded by \$2.9 billion. Yet if public school children's parents were to pay a mere \$1,300 per child, that shortfall would be made up. Indeed, that amount would be far less than the average shortfall that private parents have to pay. It seems that the AEU would rather have under-funded schools than ask parents to help pay for their own children's education.

The blunt reality is this: every student that exits the public system further highlights the failures of the AEU and its members. Parents are leaving the 'free' education system for an expensive education system. As a response, the AEU engages in class warfare and continues to argue that private schools are elitist and snobbish. Never mind that Dr Andrew Leigh of the Australian National University investigated that very question and found no evidence that private school children were less tolerant than public school children.

Of course, we should recognise that our union-dominated public school system is in crisis. The AEU wants to create a monopoly education system with a monopoly provider of teachers. And yet, as always, parents want choice and competition.

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