

Why Can't We Work Together?

I am a principal of an independent secondary school and am concerned that we in the education sector work together in the run up to the next election. I would suggest that the campaign to focus education on 'public' education alone will be detrimental for the students of Australia.

But why is this campaign for 'public' education being undertaken? It seems to me that the logic goes something like this: the independent sector is growing; government is giving more money to the independent sector; therefore the public sector is not growing because of the money being given to the independent sector...

There is difficulty with this type of thinking though, not only in terms of logic, but also for education generally. Firstly, let's begin with the terms employed. The media normally use the terms 'private versus public'. The differences between the two types of schools are not best understood along that line however.

The so-called 'public schools' are run by the state government along the lines of 'compulsory, secular and free'. How does this compare to the so-called 'private' schools? Well, they also are part of the system that keeps schooling compulsory (home schooling is also part of this social agreement). Are they 'secular'? Most independent schools are not. The fastest growing sector in Australian education is faith schools (eg evangelical Christian schools, including low-fee paying evangelical Anglican schools, and Muslim schools). Even many of those that are not 'faith' schools in terms of having an identifiable religious heritage, have a definite philosophy – for example, the Steiner schools. This compares to the state run schools that do a fine job in teaching to the values that enable a multicultural political system to stay alive, but who cannot teach in a unified way to the connection between faith, belief and all aspects of life.

Then there is the rhetoric of 'free'. What this really means is that in large part schools are tax funded. For all parents, their most basic contribution to schooling is based on the level of tax they pay, and this includes all sectors of education. However, for those who choose to send their children to a school that has a particular and specific way of looking at the world to the deepest levels of meaning (an explicit faith and belief system), they will pay two lots of tax. They will pay their normal tax, and because the sum total of all federal and state contributions to independent schools is still only about two thirds of that given to a state run school, they will pay a second tax, called fees.

The critical difference between what I call 'state-run' schools and 'independent' schools is how they are governed. The former are run by one of the largest educational centralised bureaucracies in the western world. The latter are run by families getting together around a more explicit belief system. Both systems are required to act legally as recipients of government money (as do all partially or fully-funded organisations), and to meet requisites if they wish to sit students for government based external accreditation (the School Certificate and the Higher School Certificate).

How can these definitions of 'state run' and 'independent' help in the debate about funding? It is that whilst the debate continues along the lines of 'private schools stealing from the public ones', two important issues stay

masked. One is that education needs families to be closely involved if it is to ever reach anywhere near its full potential. The state-run system, which is so centralised in critical parts of its organisation, mediates against local increased governance in critical areas of school leadership and management.

Secondly, if the debate continues along the 'public/private' lines, it also masks the fact that governments continue to *save money* the greater the number of students who attend independent schools. This is because, as indicated above, the total amount of monies given to independent schools (on average) is only about two thirds of what it takes to educate a student in a state-run school (the 'double tax' system). I do not want the government, riding on the back of increased giving by parents in schools like mine, to spend less of our taxes on education.

Why can't we have a system where any child in Australia, regardless of background or belief, has a guaranteed government minimum contribution to her/his education? And let's remember that whilst we stay as a democratic multicultural society, one's faith and beliefs ought not to be grounds for receiving less government support. If there is to be any sense of 'levelling', then this can be an extension of the current tax system that already asks us to contribute more to society the more we earn (keeping in mind the current debate about tax bracket creep problems).

So let's work together in the run up to this election. Let's keep the priority of the total commitment to education on the table, and let's keep the principle of support for *all* families and their children, regardless of background and beliefs, well and truly alive.

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