

***TITLE:* An exclusive school system won't build an inclusive society**

***AUTHOR:* Dr Richard Denniss**

***PUBLICATION:* The Canberra Times**

***PUBLICATION DATE:* 14/01/12**

LINK:

Should wealthy art collectors have to contribute to the cost of public galleries if they choose not to visit them, or should their contribution be refunded to help them extend their own collection? Should city residents have to contribute to the cost of upgrading regional hospitals they will never use, or should their contribution be refunded to help them pay for their own private health care? Should parents of private school children have to contribute to the cost of public schools they choose not to enrol their children in or should their contribution be refunded to help them meet the rapidly rising cost of private school tuition? The great thing about democracy is that there is no right answer to those three questions, nor is there any need to answer them consistently. No doubt some wealthy rural families feel differently about the obligation of the public at large to fund regional roads and hospitals than they do about their obligation to fund public schools they would never send their kids to. But perhaps the worst thing about democracy is the tendency for people to dress self-interest up as principle and the growing unwillingness of the media and our politicians to call it what it is.

Don't get me wrong, if parents want to send their children to private schools, then they should be able to. But if they want to opt out of a perfectly good public system, then they should be willing to pay for it. Moaning about the contribution to the public school system that they aren't using makes about as much sense as complaining about the cost of a road you don't drive on.

But let's take this logic further. Perhaps people with no children shouldn't have to make any contribution to the education system and people with three or more kids should have to pay an extra tax levy? The idea of "user pays" is never as simple as it seems.

Public education funding is gradually being redefined in Australia. While it was once described as an essential government service, it is increasingly being framed as little more than a private entitlement, an entitlement that should remain even when parents choose not to use the public education system.

Choice is at the heart of the campaign to undermine the public education system. Parents, we are reminded, know what's best for their children. Parents, we are reassured, need to be supported in making the best decisions for their children. It is of course pure coincidence that wealthy parents have more choices than low-income ones. This, we are told, is a debate about choice, not equity.

But the issue is not just the ability of parents to choose a school for their children, but of the school to choose the children it teaches. Public schools are required to accept all comers; many private schools pride themselves on their ability to choose the right children to teach. Of course, private schools in Australia also retain the right to discriminate against staff on the basis of sexuality. But despite private schools' determination to retain the right to discriminate when choosing their students and staff, as well as their freedom to set whatever fees they think the market will bear, it seems the taxpayer at large is supposed to support all of these private choices with public money.

When it comes to our public education system there are really only two possibilities. First, the system is perfectly adequate and functioning well. If this is the case then parents making a choice to abandon it should expect no more support than a person who decides to switch from taking public transport to buying a new car. The second possibility is that the public education system is coming under increasing pressure due to the rising costs of providing education, the rising expectations of middle-class parents and the increased difficulties that education ministers seem to have in securing real increases in per-student funding.

But if there really are emerging problems in the public education system then the parents that are so keen to try to buy their children a head start should be honest about their motives. Rather than pretend their motivation is to "take pressure off the public system" they should admit their fears and, even if they chose to remove their kids, they should remain concerned about the quality of education available to all Australian children.

If the parents of private school students were really concerned about the education of other people's children, then, rather than try to "take pressure off the public system" by withdrawing their kids they would be campaigning for increased taxes to fund a big increase in public school budgets. The parents of private school children should be as concerned about the quality of the public school system as the parents of the children who go there. And, if so, then surely they would push the private school they send their children to to spend less money on sporting facilities and more money on scholarships for disadvantaged children.

The economics of school funding are quite simple: every million dollars we give to private schools is a million dollars we don't give to public schools. The only way to help both systems would be to increase the amount of tax we collect, but I don't hear the private schools leading the charge on that campaign.

An excellent, well-funded, and widely supported public education system is essential to Australia's economic and social wellbeing. You cannot increase the productivity of the workforce

by pouring a growing portion of our education funding on to a minority of our students. And you can't build an inclusive society on a foundation of exclusive schooling.

Dr Richard Denniss is executive director of the Australia Institute, a Canberra-based think tank.
tai.org.au