

Rich Kid Poor Kid:
The battle for
public education

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How did we end up pitting our kids against one another?

When my father was offered a job in Sydney in 1963, my mother was keen to move. That year was one of the grimmest English winters in living memory and while our village of Swanland in Yorkshire was picturesque, it was also knee-deep in snow. Lots of frozen Brits migrated to Australia in 1963, including, I was delighted to discover, Angus and Malcolm Young, who went on to form AC/DC. The lure of sunny Sydney was too much to resist. But my mother had one proviso: she would only take her three children — aged from my two-year-old brother to five-year-old me — to a country where she could send them to the local public school. For her, that was the mark of a truly civilised society.

JANE CARO

My mother was born in Manchester in 1931 to a lower-middle-class family in an era when your position in the social hierarchy was rigid and unforgiving. She was very conscious of her Lancashire accent and humble social status. My father came from a somewhat posher middle-class family and had been to Manchester Grammar School and Cambridge University. As he rose through the ranks of the multinational Reckitt and Colman, my mother was painfully aware that every time she opened her mouth, she was instantly defined as “common”. Still alive and well at the age of 94, she is a very intelligent woman, but brains didn’t matter much for girls with regional working-class accents in 1950s England.

One of the reasons my parents have been happily married for so long — 70 years and counting — is because my mother’s brains *did* matter to my dad. He has always said that she is the smartest person he knows. He is right. Both my parents believed strongly in the right of every child to realise their potential, regardless of their position in society. They still believe that.

My mother remembers the sting of being dismissed. Her ingrained sense of inferiority,

inculcated by the class anxiety her parents suffered from all their lives — it did not do to get above yourself — thwarted her in many ways. As a result, she has always been passionate about equality and angry about her lack of it. She and my father rose up the ladder economically, but their children were taught that our privilege gave us obligations as well as benefits. Our responsibility was to spread privilege, not clutch it tightly to ourselves and others like us. We have all taken this lesson to heart. The importance of a high-quality public school in every suburb and town, supported by locals, was and is at the heart of my mother's world view.

In 1963, Sydney and most Australian towns and cities easily lived up to her hardly exacting standard. Tragically, there are many people today who feel that such confidence in the quality of their neighbourhood school is no longer a given. Only about 60% of Australian children now attend public schools, with many more attending public primary schools than public secondary ones. Families literally beggar themselves to get their kids into private schools, with high school fees now one of the top five reasons for bankruptcy.¹

JANE CARO

It is in no small part due to my parents' passionate belief in the importance of public education, including my mother's advocacy for DOGS (the National Council for the Defence of Government Schools) back in the day, that I have been an activist for the importance of a strong, well-resourced public education system for more than a quarter of a century. I first got active while pregnant with my first child back in 1988 when people started asking me what private school I had put his/her (her as it turned out) name down for. I was astonished. My children would go to their local public school, as I had done. What on earth were these people thinking? That's when I first became aware that neoliberalism had taken a hatchet to the education system that I had benefited from and taken for granted.

My comprehensive public school cohort in the 1970s included everyone from the Housing Commission kids across the road to the sons and daughters of doctors, architects and CEOs. We didn't know what anyone's father did, nor did we care. At my recent 50-year school reunion — organised by a few of us in our spare time; no well-funded alumni associations for public school grads — I spent a wonderful afternoon and evening with

a group of people whose only connection was that we'd all gone to high school together.

My old schoolmates had followed many and varied pathways through life. Some had earned big bucks, others not so much. Some had lots of children, others none at all. Some were what the wider world would have called "successful", others had navigated more than their fair share of difficulties. Some had spent decades living and working overseas, others had spent all their lives in the suburbs we grew up in. None of it mattered. In our mid-sixties, we seemed a group of more-or-less content, contributing and useful members of Australian society. And we were all grateful for the opportunities our education in a bog-standard NSW public high school had given us, regardless of who our parents were. These are the very schools that we have largely lost, especially in our cities.

What did we change that so undermined these local schools or, at least, our trust in the quality of them? When did so many Australians start to believe that good schools were private and public schools were crap?

When I went to school, between 1963 and 1974, nobody talked about school choice. Almost