

In Defence of Non-Government Schools

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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The Rudd Labor government has so far taken a hands-off approach to the issue of non-government school funding. Rhetoric and policy from the Prime Minister and Education Minister have been supportive of school choice and of non-government schools.

On the horizon, however, is a promised review of the major non-government school funding formula, and it is highly likely that reforms will be made to the school funding agreement for the 2013–16 quadrennium.

It is therefore important to reiterate the reasons for public funding of non-government schools, with a rational and ethical defence of non-government schools and their contribution to the public good and society.

- **Non-government schools are educators of the public.** They transmit to children the knowledge and skills they need to be active and productive members of society. On the available indicators, non-government schools' academic and post-school outcomes are at least equal to government schools.
- **Non-government schools play a role in democracy.** Australian and US research provides no evidence that non-government school students and graduates are less tolerant or civic-minded. Indeed, the existence of non-government schools is essentially democratic because they empower citizens. The religious character of non-government schools attracts criticism but much of this is unfounded.
- **Non-government schools contribute to society.** As well as the 1,700 systemic Catholic schools, many of which are less well-resourced than government schools, there are also dozens of independent schools serving some of the country's neediest students—from children with profound disabilities to children in the most remote parts of Australia.
- **Public funding of non-government schools gives parents choice.** Without government funding, many non-government schools would not exist, and many children would have no education available to them. Likewise, denying public funding to non-government schools would effectively lock all but the wealthiest families out of school choice.
- **Denying parents a choice in schooling is unjust.** School choice is a moral and social equity issue. When schools fail, it is children and families that suffer most. Most people who are opposed to school choice would never accept the same limitations for themselves that they seek to impose on others.

If parent income is the proper basis for school funding, then this should apply to parents of children in all schools.

The only way to create equity in funding, and end the long-running debate that pits sector against sector and shifts blame between levels of government, is to create a single funding source and fund children—not schools.

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Introduction

The Rudd Labor government has so far taken a hands-off approach to the issue of non-government school funding and making no significant changes to recurrent funding mechanisms. The ALP's rhetoric and policy have been supportive of school choice and of non-government schools—both pre- and post-election in 2007.¹ Recent funding programs such as the Building the Education Revolution stimulus package do not discriminate between public and non-government schools.

On the horizon, however, is a promised review of the major non-government school funding formula—known as the SES (socioeconomic status) funding system.² This system determines how much recurrent funding each non-government school will receive each year.

In the eight years since the SES system was implemented, several flaws have emerged. Of these, the most serious is that only a minority of non-government schools are receiving the amount of funding to which they would be entitled if the mechanism were applied properly. Due to a condition in the policy that no school would be worse off under the SES system than it had been under the previous funding formula, many schools are exempt from the application of the SES formula.

It is highly likely that reforms will be made to the school funding agreement for the 2013–2016 quadrennium. In the next two years, the debate over the funding of non-government schools is set to intensify once again.

Public funding has been provided to non-government schools in Australia for more than 40 years. The first major federal government grants to non-government schools were implemented under the Menzies government in 1964. By the end of the 1960s, all states were giving recurrent funding to non-government schools.³

The original impetus for the funding was the political influence of Catholic schools, but funding is now available for all non-government schools that comply with the requirements of registration set down by their state government. There are now 2,729 non-government schools across the country serving 1,169,737 students.⁴ This represents 34 percent of all students nationally, a proportion that is growing annually. In Sydney and Melbourne, 44 percent of all secondary students attend a non-government school.⁵

Despite this seemingly solid history and a large support base, public funding for non-government schools is still controversial. Some people argue that non-government schools are a drain on the public purse and argue for it to be either reduced or abolished.⁶ Although the Rudd government has so far supported non-government schools and parental choice, complacency would be unwise. An analysis of federal spending on non-government schools over the last three decades shows that spending has plateaued or decreased under Labor governments and increased under Liberal governments.⁷

It is therefore timely and important to reiterate the reasons for public funding of non-government schools. This paper sets out the principles that underpin the provision of public funding to non-government schools and mounts a rational and ethical defence of non-government schools and their contribution to public good and society.

What is a non-government school?

A non-government school is a registered provider of primary or secondary level education that is not a part of the government school system. There are two broad categories of non-government schools—Catholic systemic schools and independent schools.

The majority (62 percent) of non-government schools are Catholic schools.⁸ These schools form a 'system' of schools because most funding and governance decisions are centralised at the diocesan or state level. There is also a National Catholic Education Commission overseeing policy at the national level. Teachers in Catholic schools are employed by the diocesan Catholic Education Offices, but in recent years some of the responsibility for selecting staff has been devolved to the school level.

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Independent schools comprise the other 38 percent of non-government schools.⁹ Independent schools are non-systemic, which means that each school is a separate entity with independent governance, but some schools have formed networks, such as Christian Schools Australia.

There are strict regulations covering the establishment and operation of non-government schools. All non-government schools have to meet conditions regarding financial accountability, teacher qualifications, curriculum, and facilities in order to be registered and accredited as schools. Schools must be registered and accredited to enroll children of compulsory school age and to receive public funding.

In 1996, the Coalition government abolished the previous Labor government's New Schools Policy, enacted in 1985. This policy restricted the establishment of non-government schools by denying registration of new schools if they would potentially have an impact on existing public schools. It also limited the funding available to new schools to the lowest half of the funding schedule even if their real funding eligibility was higher. This restricted the capacity for growth in the non-government sector.

In the five years following the abolition of the New Schools Policy, 105 new independent non-government schools opened, compared with 48 in the previous five years. Reinstatement of this sort of policy would be a retrograde step.

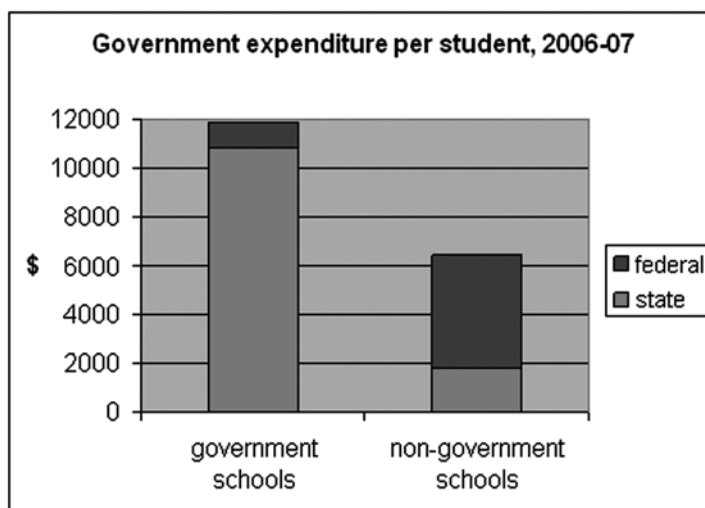
Non-government school funding

Non-government schools receive funding from both the federal and state governments, but most of their funding is from the federal government. This is the reverse of government schools, which receive the majority of their funding from state governments, who are constitutionally responsible for funding school education. Although the federal government has no constitutional responsibility for school education, over the last four decades successive governments have enacted policies to provide funding to both government and non-government schools for a variety of philosophical, educational and political reasons.

Increases in federal funding to non-government schools under the SES system have more than offset simultaneous contractions in real state funding to the extent that public funding to non-government schools has risen to unprecedented high levels. Nonetheless, students in non-government schools still receive far less public funding than students in government schools.

The most recent funding figures produced by the Productivity Commission are for 2006–07. Average per capita funding for students in non-government schools is just over half the average per capita funding in government schools.

Figure 1



Source: Productivity Commission 2009¹⁰

Figure 1 shows average government funding only. The funding levels of individual schools vary widely within both the government and non-government sectors. It is notoriously difficult to obtain information about the funding of individual government schools,¹¹ but a study of primary school funding published in 2007 found that expenditure in government primary schools varied by several thousands of dollars per student.¹²

In the non-government school sector, some schools get as little as \$1,100 in federal funding per student, while other schools receive as much as \$7,000 per student depending on the SES-score assigned to the school.¹³ Because of the large gap between the amount of public funding they receive and the cost of providing an adequate school education, most non-government schools charge fees.

Catholic schools charge relatively low fees. Average fee income for Catholic systemic schools in 2007 was \$2,240 per student.¹⁴

Fees in independent schools vary significantly. The average fee income of independent schools in 2007 was \$7,312,¹⁵ but this average does not reflect the actual income of many independent schools. It is well known that there are numerous high profile independent schools that charge around \$20,000 per student in fees. There are also many independent schools that charge no fees.

Why should non-government schools receive public funding?

The non-government school sector is sometimes described as private education. This suggests that the education provided by non-government schools has only private benefits. In fact, non-government schools are educators of the public. They exist for this express purpose. They transmit to children the knowledge and skills they need to be active and productive members of society. In doing so, they contribute to the common good and the progress of society.

All education has benefits that go beyond the individual, and the 'common good' case for education is well-established. It is also widely accepted that in order to ensure that all children have access to education, it should be subsidised by the wider public, usually via government.

It does not follow, however, that education must be provided by government in order to fulfill this function. This paper will show that the purposes and functions of public education—academic, social and civic—are carried out by non-government schools as well as public schools.

1. Non-government schools are educators of the public.

Denying public funding to non-government schools cannot be justified on the basis that they, by definition, provide a lesser quality education. Non-government schools have to be accredited by the state government and are required to use the same curriculum, submit to the same testing regime, and hire teachers with the same minimum credentials as government schools.

Comparing the outcomes of school sectors is ultimately an academic exercise, as there are wide variations in quality within each sector. Any differences in results between school sectors are contentious, but the bottom line is that there is no evidence that non-government school education is inferior to government school education.

On the available indicators, the academic and post-school outcomes of non-government schools are at least equal to government schools.

Research on academic performance done by the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER) found that on average, non-government schools have higher literacy and numeracy outcomes and Year 12 results than government schools. After removing the effect of socio-economic status, the difference between the sectors in Year 12 results is reduced but remains substantial. An interesting finding from this research is that independent schools seem to obtain their advantage not just by channeling their efforts to high achievers but by improving the performance of students who were low achievers in Year 9.¹⁶

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Likewise, graduates of non-government schools are no less employable and no less successful in tertiary education than government school graduates. Several studies have indicated that government school graduates do better in their first year at university than non-government school graduates with the same tertiary entrance score.¹⁷ This can be interpreted as showing that students from non-government schools do not perform as well in the higher education environment. But it is equally plausible that government school students do not achieve at the levels they are actually capable of while at school and they catch up at university. Possibly it is a combination of the two effects. There is no research showing what happens after first year, and ACER research shows that there is no difference in university completion rates depending on the school sector attended.¹⁸

2. Non-government schools play an important role in democracy.

Public education has two components: education for economic productivity and education for democracy. School education should produce citizens that understand the history of their country, are educated in a core body of knowledge that allows them to participate economically and politically, and should instill the values and habits that underpin a healthy democracy.

Since it cannot be shown that non-government schools are derelict in their duty to properly educate their students in the academic and technical curriculum, critics of non-government schools instead call into question their role in society, claiming that only government schools are the true foundation of democracy.¹⁹ This leads to the assertion that only government schools can produce good citizens.

At the extreme end of this argument are comments from University of Wollongong professor Anthony Ashbolt, who says ‘the value basis of public schools is democratic and that of private schools reeks of socially undesirable attitudes and practices. The very existence of a private education system tends to promote values that are antithetical to a just and equitable society.’²⁰

Is it true that government-provided education is the ‘cornerstone of democracy’? Do non-government schools somehow produce lesser citizens?

Most research on this has been done in the United States, where almost all studies have found that attendance at a private school has either no effect or a positive effect on civic values and participation, including voting, voluntarism, political tolerance, and political knowledge. The exception was patriotism, which was stronger in public schools.²¹ Another study found that students in private schools are more likely to have cross-racial friendships.²²

Australian survey data provide no evidence that non-government schools turn out more or fewer bigots and racists than government schools. The Australian Survey of Social Attitudes found no difference in attitudes to gay and lesbian civil unions between people who had attended government and non-government schools. It found that people who had attended non-government schools had more positive attitudes towards immigrants.²³ These findings are not conclusive, of course, but they do not suggest that non-government schools breed intolerance.

There is nothing inherently undemocratic about non-government schools. Indeed, it can be argued that the existence of non-government schools is essentially democratic because it empowers citizens. Parents send their children to these schools of their own volition and are also free to remove them at any time. The academic curriculum is the same as public schools, and their teachers must be trained and accredited in the same way as public school teachers. However, because they are not required to be secular institutions, non-government schools are able to give religious instruction a larger role.

The religious character of non-government schools attracts much criticism. Some of this criticism is expressed as thoughtful concern about the possible influence of faith-based teaching on academic instruction in religious schools.²⁴ However, some of the denigration of religious schools seems to be driven by a dislike of religion in general.²⁵ Non-government schools seek only the right to exist alongside government schools.

They do not mount arguments against secular education or lobby governments to withdraw funding from public schools. Ironically, it is the very same people who actively oppose the existence of non-government schools and their religious character who are also more likely to demonstrate intolerance and seek to restrict the freedom of others.

This does not mean that any school should have complete sovereignty. There must be some restrictions against schools teaching undemocratic values such as hate and prejudice. Many religious schools, especially Islamic schools, are sensitive to the perception that they are not contributing to a harmonious society. In 2005, a group of schools signed a declaration of their commitment to 'shared Australian values.'²⁶ This is in fact an argument for the public funding of non-government schools as a way of keeping schools under public scrutiny. Forcing religious schools to operate outside systems of accountability allows them to teach whatever they want, free from the regulations attached to public funding.

This leads to the issue of access. It is claimed that government schools are open to all-comers and that this defines their 'public' nature.²⁷ This is untrue, as many government schools still have designated enrolment zones. In effect, government schools are only open to all-comers if they happen live in their enrolment zone. Parents pay a high premium on houses that fall within a desirable school's zone.²⁸ Unless they are selective or specialist, such schools rarely go out of their way to recruit children from other areas, so financial and social exclusivity is by no means alien to government schools.

3. Non-government schools contribute to society.

There is no typical non-government school. Non-government schools are not havens of the financial and academic elite but cater for a wide range of needs. For many people, the term 'independent schools' conjures up images of ivy-covered sandstone buildings, performing arts centres, and rifle ranges. That's an easy mistake to make, given it's the image that is promulgated through the media. But these elite institutions are the small minority of non-government schools.

As well as the 1,700 systemic Catholic schools, many of which are less well-resourced than government schools, there are also dozens of independent schools serving some of the country's neediest students.²⁹

These are just a few examples:

ALESCO Learning Centre: An independent non-government school that enrolls students who cannot complete education in a mainstream school: kids who have been victims of serious bullying; kids who have emotional and behavioural disorders; and kids who have been permanently banned from the public system.

Gawa Christian School: A little school serving Indigenous children in one of the most remote areas of Australia, the northern tip of Elcho Island in the Northern Territory. It was established by a retired school teacher with the help of families in the local communities and Gawa elders.

DALE Christian School: Part of St Philips Christian College, DALE enrolls students who are unable to cope in a mainstream school because of psychological disorders or intellectual disability. DALE also offers a special schooling program for teenage mothers to complete their education part-time, with an on-site crèche.

Giant Steps: Caters for children from kindergarten to high school age with Autism Spectrum disorder and need specialised education and care not available in the mainstream school system.

Djarragun College: Located in Gordonvale, south of Cairns, it draws most of its students from Cape York and the Torres Strait. The school is well-known for its success rates with Indigenous students at high risk of educational failure. It recently established a foster-care boarding facility for children who cannot live with their families.

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These so-called 'private schools' are serving a public purpose. They are just a few examples of the many non-government schools, big and small, that operate under the radar but contribute to Australian society in important ways. Without these schools and others like them, there would be a lot of children without any options. Apart from the tragic effect on their quality of life, the likely welfare and societal burden would be life long. Non-government schools form an essential part of the educational landscape because they have the ability to adapt to the needs of their students. Although they have to conform to numerous government standards, they also have more flexibility.

The range of schools within the non-government sector is as broad as the range of schools within the public sector, and arguably more so. The non-government sector includes schools like ALESCO, DALE and Gawa, Catholic parish schools in rural and metro areas, low and moderate fee independent schools, Montessori and Steiner schools, through to the high profile, high fee independent schools.

Non-government schools are often criticised for not having their 'fair share' of children with disabilities. Children with disabilities are concentrated in the government sector. In 2007, they accounted for 5.7 percent of enrolments in government schools. In the non-government school sector, the proportion was 2.5 percent.³⁰ This is partly because they are not eligible for the same level of public financial support if they go to a non-government school. The difference in funding can be tens of thousands of dollars, a shortfall that most parents cannot meet.³¹ It is a self-fulfilling prophecy to deny equitable funding for students with disabilities in non-government schools and then criticise them for not enrolling an equal number of these students. Despite these obstacles, non-government special schools serve many children with the most profound intellectual and physical disabilities.

4. Public funding of non-government schools gives parents choice.

ALESCO, DALE, Djarragun College, Gawa Christian School, and many other schools like them would not exist without public funding. They charge either no fees or nominal fees, supplementing their government grants with fundraising activities.³²

Some people think that enough choice can be provided within the government school system. They say that parents should be able to send their children to any government school they like at public expense but that the choice of a non-government school should be at private expense.³³ What that argument amounts to is this: Non-government schooling opportunities should only be available to families with high incomes. Refusing to provide public funding to non-government schools would require parents to meet the full cost of schooling and effectively lock all but the wealthy out of this choice. Then it really would be a two-tier education system—one for the rich and one for the rest.

Furthermore, government school choice is not real choice. There need to be other options available. If a town has two Woolworths supermarkets and nothing else, can that be called choice?

To continue the analogy, imagine if food were publicly funded and provided. In such a scenario, a government department of nutrition and eating would dole out a weekly ration of food, and if people don't like it, or think that it's bad for them, then tough luck. If they want something else, they have to pay for it. It sounds completely unreasonable, and it is. But we accept this situation in education year in and year out.

Nobel laureate economist Milton Friedman explained that in order for there to be real options in schooling and real choice, and in order to continually raise educational standards, funding for schools must be separated from the provision of schools.³⁴ The common good argument for public funding of education is strong, but it does not follow that education must be provided by government. At the very least, parents must have access to other quality options.

The dream scenario of all children attending their local government school is that every school will be a societal melting pot. The current president of the Australian Council of State School Organisations (ACSSO) recently described public education as 'a microcosm and model of our community: where young people meet, mix, work,

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and interact with others from every part of society, drawn from all walks of life and social circumstances—from near and far.³⁵

The reality is that people tend to live near other people who are like themselves. Public school zoning, which allocates children to schools by residence, restricts the movement of children even within the government school system, and entrenches social segregation even further. Unfortunately, the neediest children are often forced to attend the worst schools because they have no alternatives. There are examples of this across Australia, but it is profoundly true in remote Indigenous communities.

5. Denying parents a choice in schooling is immoral.

School choice is a highly effective systemic reform strategy. International research evidence shows that school choice, including a healthy, publicly-funded non-government school sector, produces significant benefits both for the students in non-government schools as well as improved educational outcomes across the board.³⁶ Dissent among researchers is generally about the size of the positive effect.

However, school choice is also a moral and social equity issue. When schools fail to educate the children in them, who suffers most? Not the education minister, or the bureaucrats, not the principal or teachers. It is the children themselves and their families. Even prominent public education advocate Lyndsay Connors has acknowledged this, writing that ‘It is possible to construct arguments for the public funding of non-government schools that stem from a concern for children and young people in their own rights as citizens. Such arguments have both a moral and rational force.’³⁷

School choice is not just a lofty theoretical concept supported only by economists and policy researchers. In recent years, a grassroots movement has gathered momentum in the United States among people who have been poorly served by the take-it-or-leave-it public school system.

Howard Fuller, an American academic, founder of the Black Alliance for Education Options, and former district school superintendent, is a strong supporter of school choice as a means to enhance the educational opportunities for poor and minority children. He argues that choice of school is a way out of the poverty trap and the next step on the road to racial equality that began in February 1960 when four black students sat down at a lunch counter and demanded to be served. In 2009, Fuller says, black students are welcome in restaurants, but there is a good chance they can’t read the menu.³⁸

In Australia, the quality of public schools in metropolitan areas and large towns is generally higher than in the United States. Nevertheless, there has been a steady drift to non-government schools over the last three decades in Australian cities, demonstrating a growing demand for an alternative to public schools. In many inland country towns and remote communities, however, schools are often of poor quality or virtually non-existent.³⁹ After decades of neglect by the state and territory governments, a growing number of frustrated communities have sought to establish independent schools. These schools, such as Djarragun College and Gawa, have succeeded where the usual model of public provision has failed.

Schools such as Djarragun and Gawa make a water-tight case for non-government schools, but children in urban areas should not be denied choices in schooling just because their situation is not as dire. School quality is variable among both public and non-government schools. The difference is that no one is compelled to attend a poor quality non-government school, while scores of children are allocated to mediocre public schools that operate wherever they have a captive market.

Fuller speaks of the ‘grinding hypocrisy’ around the issue of school choice, because most people who are against school choice would never accept the same limitations for themselves and their own children that they seek to impose on others. Some of them may have chosen a public school for their children, but the key word is *chosen*.

The Sydney and Melbourne broadsheets occasionally publish articles in which writers express their anxieties about sending, or not sending, as the case may be, their child to

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a government school, as though it is an ideological choice rather than a rational one. The emotional gamut ranges from smug self-righteousness to anxiety and guilt.⁴⁰

This angst is completely unnecessary. People shouldn't choose a school sector, they should choose an individual school for their individual child. Each school should be judged on its merits, and no choice is more virtuous than another as long as it is made with the child's best interests at heart.

A fairer school funding system should provide more choice, not less

Government schools receive public funding at a rate of almost \$12,000 per student on average. Non-government schools, on average, are funded by government at a rate half that. There is substantial variation around the average within both sectors. Some schools get a lot of money, some not enough. The difference is that in the non-government sector, the allocation of public funding is much more transparent.

Funding for non-government schools is designed so that the schools with wealthy parents should get less public funding than schools with lower income parents. The current non-government school funding system is imperfect, but the specific details of that system are not the subject of this paper. The focus of this paper is the principles on which the funding system is based—that all parents are entitled to public support for the education of their children, regardless of the type of school they attend.

Funding for wealthy non-government schools has become a touchstone for the debate on school funding. People understandably feel some level of discomfort with scarce public funding going to schools that, by all appearances, have plenty of money. It is said that the parents of children attending high fee schools do not need to have their education subsidised, even at a low rate.

If that is the case, then the same argument can be made for the equal number of wealthy parents whose children attend public schools and whose education is subsidised at the full rate. If parental income is the proper basis for public funding, then the same rules ought to apply to parents of children in all schools.

One way to deal with the issue of perceived over-funding is to allow the government to pick and choose which schools it will fund and which it will not. The inevitable result would be a high level of subjectivity, corruption and unfairness. The Australian Labor Party talked about just such a policy during the 2004 federal election with a 'hit list' of independent schools that would have their funding reduced if the ALP were elected.⁴¹ Wisely, the Labor Party has since rejected that policy.⁴²

A better way to deal with the problem of funding equity is to fund children and not schools. Each school age child could be given an 'education entitlement' to fund his or her school education that would be based on individual needs and not dependent on the school.⁴³ The education entitlement could be weighted so that children whose learning needs are greater would be given more funding. The weightings might be for low socio-economic status, disability, remoteness, English as a Second Language, or other measures of disadvantage. Indeed, there are numerous variations of this sort of funding system operating around the world, including Sweden since 1992.⁴⁴

If designed correctly, funding would follow children—and schools with the neediest children would receive the most public funding, regardless of the type of school. Parents would have greater choice of schooling because their funding would be portable. They would not automatically lose several thousands of dollars in public funding that they would then be required to make up out of their own pockets, just by choosing the non-government school next door rather than the government school across town, or vice versa.

Each school age child could be given an 'education entitlement' to fund his or her school education that would be based on individual needs and not dependent on the school.

Conclusion

With an impending review of non-government school funding by the federal government, it is necessary to emphasise the important role non-government schools play in education provision across Australia. As this paper makes clear, the reach of non-government schools extends to all parts of the community and all areas of the country, operating alongside government schools and where government schools do not exist. Without adequate and equitable public funding, many non-government schools would have to close their doors.

The only way to end the debate that pits sector against sector and shifts blame between governments is to create a single funding source and to fund children, not schools. This way, the needs of children and young people would be paramount, and many more families would be able to actively choose the school they believe offers the best opportunities.

The creation of a child-centred school funding system would not be an easy task, but it would not be impossible. There have already been attempts to estimate a national resource standard, which could provide a starting point.⁴⁵ The relationship between the state, territory and federal governments is currently one of cooperation, with national agreements on previously contentious education policies such as school performance reporting. This would seem to be fertile ground in which to germinate an historic resolution to the public/private divide that has plagued school education for decades.

Endnotes

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