

New resourcing strategies for education should fund kids not schools

Jennifer Buckingham July 02, 2009

THE debate over funding to non-government schools has never really gone away. On the horizon is yet another review of federal funding arrangements and it is likely that big changes will be made.

There is widespread agreement that the existing funding system is flawed. However, the principle that underpins it is sound and should be preserved; if all children are legally required to attend school, then all children deserve public support for their school education, including those in non-government schools.

Non-government schools deserve public funding because they are educators of the public. Non-government schools can serve the key productive and social functions of public education just as well as government schools.

The productive function involves transmitting to children the knowledge and skills they need to be active economic and civic participants. Non-government schools use the same curriculum, submit to the same testing regime and have teachers with the same minimum qualifications as government schools. Their students' academic and post-school outcomes are at least equal to government schools.

Since it is not possible to argue that non-government schools, by definition, provide an inferior academic and technical education, critics therefore tend to question their role in society. Government schools are lauded as being the cornerstone of democracy and lighthouses of social inclusion. Non-government schools are accused of elitism and of creating intolerance.

This is a long way from the truth. The high-fee independent schools usually associated with non-government education are a small fraction of the 2700 non-government schools across Australia. Non-government schools serve a wide range of students, including some of the neediest children in the country.

As well as the 1700 Catholic systemic schools, many of which get by with less total funding than government schools, there are numerous independent schools catering for children who have no other educational options. These include schools for children who have been excluded from the public system because they cannot conform to its requirements, children who have severe disabilities and need specialist education and care and schools in remote parts of the country without access to any other decent school.

These schools could not exist without public funding. Furthermore, there are low and moderate-fee schools that would have to greatly increase fees if public funding were reduced. Rising fees would push many families out of these schools, making school choice a privilege available only to the wealthy.

Critics of non-government schools also claim public education is defined by access; that public schools are open to every child while non-government schools are not. Present funding levels mean non-government schools need most of their students to be fee-payers and cannot accept an indefinite number of families who cannot pay.

However, financial exclusion is by no means unique to non-government schools. Public schools in NSW, for example, are open only to every child in their enrolment zone. More than half of all children in high-income families (defined as having a weekly income of

more than \$1700) are in government schools. By and large these families have bought their place in a highly sought-after government school by living in an area where housing prices are at a premium. But unlike parents in non-government schools who have invested in their child's schooling, these parents have invested in real estate to access a quality education for their child.

In the coming months, attacks on the funding of non-government schools will intensify. Once again, high-fee schools will become the touchstone. It is understandable that many people feel uncomfortable with public funding going to wealthy schools that appear not to need it.

There are two ways to get around this. One is to allow governments to pick and choose which schools they will fund. This would inevitably be corrupt and unfair, much like the hit list proposed by the ALP in opposition in 2004. If parental income is the correct basis for funding it should apply to parents of children in all schools.

A better way is to create a unified funding system that is centred on the needs of individual children rather than the type of school they attend. A child-centred funding system would not only scuttle any divisive comparisons of school sectors, it would be a marked improvement on government school funding, which is notoriously opaque and often poorly targeted.

All schools, government and non-government, should be schools of choice. While school choice is a highly effective systemic reform strategy, it is also an ethical and social justice issue. As many families as possible, especially low-income families, should have the opportunity and means to choose the best school for their child.

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