

OPINION – ACSSO Guest columnists comment on values driven issues in education

Australia - The Stupid Country

Jane Caro (August 1 2007)

In the US, 90 per cent of students attend public schools; the government provides no funding to private schools because the Supreme Court's interpretation of the separation of church and state in that country prevents public funding going to faith-based schools. Only public schools in America are expected to shoulder the burden of compulsory education for all American children. Private schools receive no government funding and so are free to select the students they will educate via both the fees they charge and the offering of scholarships. Wealthier American parents have a choice of schools but they must pay the full cost to access it.

There are, of course, both good and bad schools in America, with schools in poor neighbourhoods struggling - as they do the world over - to educate children who are often disadvantaged in many ways. However, schools in the US mostly reflect the community they serve, with the middle classes present in public schools at about the same percentage as they are in the society as a whole.

This of course means the public education system benefits from the energy, commitment and concern of articulate, well-educated parents who have themselves been able to successfully navigate their way through life. Funding of public schools reflects this fact and while it is not able to cancel out all the inevitable inequalities between poor and wealthier neighbourhoods, at least American public policy is (mostly) designed to close those gaps, rather than to exacerbate them.

The United States is a well-educated country, by and large, many children, from all sorts of backgrounds, go on to further education and, as we all know, it remains the powerhouse economy driving the rest of the world.

Compare this to Australia. Sixty-six per cent of Australian students attend public schools, and the Australian Government is by far the most generous in the world with the subsidies (with little or no strings attached) it gives to what we call private schools but which are more accurately called government subsidized schools.

Private schools in Australia receive between 40 and 80 per cent of their incomes from the public purse (in some cases, this may be a higher percentage of their income than that of some public schools), yet are not expected to take on any of the responsibility for the compulsory education of all Australian children. As in the United States, that remains the responsibility of the public system alone.

Combined with the ability to set their own fees, regardless, again, of the amount of public subsidy they receive, this has enabled many private schools to amass resources far beyond the wildest dreams of any public school. Some of these schools now have students who enjoy educational resources 62 per cent higher than those available to any public school student. Yet, due to the almost instant corruption of the Howard government's socio economic status (SES) funding system, no matter how highly resourced these schools may be, no matter what level of fees they charge, no matter if their enrolments are growing, static or even falling, no matter if they only enrol students from the richest areas in Australia, they can never lose any of their funding.

Thanks to a no-loser clause in the SES system, their subsidies can only go up, never down. The same is not true of public schools. Despite the fact that by any measure they service the vast majority of the most expensive-to-educate children (90 per cent of Indigenous students, 80 per cent of the disabled, 90 per cent of the newly arrived and even 69 per cent of the poorest Catholics), public schools can lose their disadvantaged funding if their school population changes and can be closed if deemed too small and uneconomic.

Only half of private schools are now funded according to their SES formula, the rest are funded above it. No wonder the percentage of middle class students in public schools is now much lower than their percentage in the population. Unlike the US, and, indeed, most other school systems in the OECD, Australia's public schools are becoming - in the words of our Prime Minister - "safety net schools" only required to offer a "reasonable standard" of education.

Obviously, on virtually any measure, it is easy to make the argument that this system is socially unjust and unfairly marginalizes and handicaps our most vulnerable and disadvantaged children. Almost alone in the OECD, Australia has a funding system that sets up one system of schools to succeed and the other to struggle.

No wonder we now have one of the largest gaps between our highest and lowest performing 15-year-olds in the OECD. Our most disadvantaged 15-year-olds are as much as 18 months behind their higher performing peers. And the OECD now claims that 70 per cent of the variation between schools in Australia reflects social privilege or under privilege. Compare this with Canada (50 per cent) and Finland (20 per cent), two of the most successful performers in the OECD comparisons, who can offer their societies both higher performance and greater equity.

Which gives us a clue as to why Australia's education system is not just manifestly unfair but also stupid. Talent does not just pop up in one socio-economic group, or in one gender, religion or ethnic group. Talent appears everywhere and the more equitable an education system is, the less likely smart kids are to fall through the cracks, whoever their parents are.

Entrenching privilege is stupid because the wrong people can get the big jobs and so act as a brake on the entire country. Australia must compete on a global stage, but it is highly likely we will find ourselves struggling to keep up with those countries which are better able to develop the potential of all their available talent.

Australia will never be the US, and will probably always have a larger number of government subsidized private schools than most comparable countries, but we don't have to fund public and private schools in such a regressive and wasteful way. What we need to do is look at all our children, regardless of who owns the school they attend and use public money to enhance all their opportunities, rather than stuffing public money into schools that are already well resourced and high achieving, while starving schools that are already demonstrably under fed.

It really is pretty stupid to keep pouring water into buckets that are already full and overflowing, while allowing only the smallest trickle to find its way into those that are almost empty.

The Stupid Country: How Australia is Dismantling Public Education, by Jane Caro and Chris Bonner will be published in August 2007 by UNSW Press.