



For those concerned about the current inequitable distribution of inadequate public money it is encouraging to learn that there is to be a senate inquiry into school funding.

Funding levels based on post codes may have some validity as applied by the Catholic System of Education for their systemic schools. Clearly it has no validity in assessing the financial needs of well established non-government schools. These schools continue to call themselves independent notwithstanding the high level of public subvention they enjoy. It needs to be recognised that the remarkable recent increases in commonwealth recurrent funding for these "prestigious" schools have not led to these schools putting a cap on tuition fees which apparently continue to rise at a rate far exceeding inflation.

Presumably this means that independent schools are no longer accountable to the government by way of having to show how the public money they have received has been spent. Certainly the increased grants received so far cannot be justified by suggesting that they will enhance choice and therefore broaden the socio-economic mix of students.

How is the money being spent? Almost certainly it is enabling the construction of very impressive and very costly capital facilities which, at a time when much of the public system catering for 70% of Australian children is run down and under resourced, can only be seen as an extravagant use of public money. Further, because this public money is being made available, it seems that these schools are able to employ professional sports coaches as well as meeting exorbitant costs of putting on lavish school music and dramatic productions which can be properly described as extravaganzas. Such projects in themselves can be regarded as highly desirable but they are an indication that the school concerned cannot on a needs basis justify receiving what has become a very high level of public subvention, and especially when so many children are destined from birth to have very much deprived educational experiences.

Genuine needs based funding no longer seems to exist, any more than free education: the time has come to be honest about these matters. Further, "positive discrimination for the disadvantaged" is very much a thing of the past, as is the idea that a school receiving public subvention should be publicly accountable.

New Schools. Quite deliberately the Howard government rejected the notion that a new school should receive commonwealth funding only if it could be shown that there is a need for the school to be built. This was a simple and effective cost saving measure which, in Victoria at least, was managed efficiently by a committee representing the State, Catholic and non-government sectors. In particular, it could preserve the integrity of existing schools and especially government which could be very seriously affected through the loss of even 20 students. Such a loss can lead to a reduced curriculum and this immediately impinges on the choices available to the remaining students.

At long last the critical importance of the pre-school and lower primary years is being acknowledged. However, from the point of view of an interested but now somewhat distant observer it seems that policies will, above all else, again be determined for reasons of political advantage. It seems that the Nelson \$700.00 handout for tutors in reading was

just such a policy and also made on the run. Certainly many children in Grades 1 - 4 need individual attention to establish sound literacy and numeracy foundations. Without this help they are doomed to failure and are certain school drop-out candidates. That said, has any thought been given to how the tutoring system will work? It seems that this is going to happen at the end of the school day when children of that very active age are likely to be tired. Is it going to take place at school or at the tutor's home? If the latter, how is the child going travel to the tutor's home? The children most in need of this special attention probably have a mother who works. Probably there is, at most, only one car in the family. How many times each week is this extra help to be given? Any experienced teacher knows that little but often is the way to go and best of all in the child's normal classroom. This is best done by an extra teacher being available to help the regular class teacher with all the children but with special emphasis on those needing extra help. In that way the child needing special help is not made to feel the odd man out. The money could be more effectively spent on improving the staff:student ratio in the first three years of primary school.

This leads to a fundamental funding question. States are responsible for education, including the registration of schools. Should the Commonwealth simply pay to the states \$X per pre- school student, \$Y per primary student, and \$Z per secondary student and leave it to the state authorities, which have the local knowledge, to allocate the money according to a transparent needs based policy? This is a radical proposal but it does remove one not inexpensive level of bureaucracy and could bring the 3 sectors closer together and lead to greater efficiency. There might even be more sharing of facilities and resources.

There is an urgent need for an independent expert inquiry similar to the 1973 Peter Karmel Inquiry, which made recommendations for something of the order of 5 years. Professor Karmel indicated that a further inquiry would be needed but this has ever happened and in a very different social, economic and educational environment there is an urgent need for one today. The present government may claim there was one before the current inequitable funding policy was set in place. That inquiry was undertaken by bureaucrats directly responsible to the then minister Dr Kemp who gave them their riding instructions which did not include the need to consult with the Public Sector as well as with the Catholic and non-government sectors. Any government committed to developing a coherent and equitable educational policy addressing the social and educational needs of children from all backgrounds as opposed to political advantage would, as a matter of urgency, establish an Inquiry consisting of independent experts into the Needs of 21st Century Schools in Australia.

Obviously non-government school management will do everything it can to maximise the benefits of public subvention whether through direct grant policies or through tax deductions. "Rorts" as described in The Australian, May 24 are worth following up, as are the sources that meet the cost of extremely high fees. Those who can afford to do so establish family education trusts and higher income earners may well enjoy the benefits of having a salary package that meets the cost of private school fees, and this at a time when some families are seriously disadvantaged because they cannot meet the cost of

public school "voluntary" levies, so called. compulsory tax deductible building fund levies were the subject of a High Court or Supreme Court test case in 1966 or thereabouts. It was a scheme proposed by a long established non-government school and there was a test case in the Court which clearly stated that no compulsory fee could be tax deductible. The issue was between the Crown and a parent: the Crown won the case but this has not prevented other schools from using similar arrangements to reduce the net cost of compulsory fees.

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