
Perverse outcomes of national policy decisions intended to promote equality of opportunity: The Australian experience

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Abstract

Historically Australia has had a very large private schooling system, made up of Catholic systemic schools, high fee independent schools, and a diverse range of other private schools. This paper begins by sketching the background from colonial times, covering the structure and funding of schools, Australia's constitutional and governmental fiscal arrangements, and the political dynamics leading up to the 1972 federal election. This includes a detailed description of the positions taken in the debates about public funding of private schools ("state aid") in the 1960s. In the mid 1970s a social democratic government established a structure for the generous federal funding of private and public schools within an ostensibly needs-based framework, intended primarily to enhance equality of educational opportunity for all Australian children, whatever their social or religious background. The proposed framework was greeted with enthusiasm by almost all stakeholders after a period of seemingly intractable debates and conflicts over state aid. The complex structure of funding and administration became established, influencing schooling well beyond the relative magnitude of initial funding. It was a clear political and social settlement. Yet the settlement contained within it contradictions that were soon apparent, but was a juggernaut and could not be undone. The paper investigates these contradictions and how the contemporary structures and social roles of schooling developed. The paper concludes on a pessimistic note. Changes and improvements are possible, but, beyond the marginal, anything that would turn schooling towards greater equality of opportunity for a rich and rewarding school education for all students does not appear politically or socially feasible.

Australia has constructed a [schooling] system not just of sectors but of gated communities and educational slums. (Ashenden, 2015, 16 October, p. 7/10)

Introduction

In this paper I seek to explain the origins of the entrenched inequalities in the contemporary Australian schooling system and show how it has developed, especially since the 1970s “settlement” that created the framework for the current programs for funding private as well as public schools. I discuss how the settlement was shaped by politics, and how unintended consequences have shaped Australian schooling, creating perverse outcomes, limiting equality of opportunity and, paradoxically, limiting choice.

This work arises out of more than forty years as a policy researcher, primarily for non-government organisations in education (see, for example, Preston, 1984; Preston, 1993, 2008, 2011b, 2013). While I was often a partisan participant in debates, in this paper I seek to reflect with disinterest on the past half century, while still adhering to basic principles of social justice and equality. My approach is historical and policy-analytic, and thus is “methodologically eclectic” (Dunn, 2011, p. 3). I investigate and analyse policy documents and debates, government reports and decisions, and draw from literature and major data sources, interpreting them through the lens of my own experience.

The paper begins by sketching the background from colonial times, covering the structure and funding of schools, Australia’s constitutional and governmental fiscal arrangements, and the political dynamics leading up to the 1972 federal election. This includes a detailed description of the positions taken in the debates about public funding of private schools (“state aid”) in the 1960s. In the mid 1970s a social democratic government established a structure for the generous federal funding of private and public schools within an ostensibly needs-based framework, intended primarily to enhance equality of educational opportunity for all Australian children, whatever their social or religious background. The proposed framework was greeted with enthusiasm by almost all stakeholders after a period of seemingly intractable debates and conflicts over state aid. The complex structure of funding and administration became established, influencing schooling well beyond the relative magnitude of initial funding. It was a clear political and social *settlement* (Laws, 2012). Yet it contained within it contradictions that were soon apparent, but was a juggernaut and could not be undone. The paper investigates these contradictions and how the contemporary structures and social roles of schooling developed. The paper concludes on a pessimistic note. Changes and improvements are possible, but, beyond the marginal, anything

that would turn schooling towards greater equality of opportunity for a rich and rewarding school education for all students does not appear politically or socially feasible.

Background

In early colonial Australia schooling was private and largely under the auspices of the various churches, which received public financial support. However, over the period from 1872 to 1895 the six separate colonies¹ passed education acts that established systems of public schooling funded by the colonial governments, and abolished public funding of private schools. Public schooling that was to be “free, secular and compulsory”, but the meaning of secular was not taken to preclude religious teaching (Austin, 1961). Private schools continued to exist. There were Catholic primary schools supported by local parishes with teaching carried out by members of religious orders. In major cities and regional centres there were high fee, usually single sex, “corporate” (not for-profit) schools, developed in the Arnoldian tradition of self-proclaimed preparation for leadership in society (Sherington, Petersen, & Brice, 1987, p. 49), most operating under the auspices of the churches (Anglican, Methodist, Presbyterian, Catholic), some nondenominational. These were and remain the schools of the upper classes. Thus Australia was different from the United States, where, as Boyd noted in the mid 1980s, “at the heart of the success that American public schools have enjoyed historically has been their ability to attract and retaining the support of the middle and upper middle classes” (1987, p. 192). There were also many other small private schools. Most small, for-profit schools had closed their doors by the time of Australia’s federation in 1901, while a diverse range of other independent, not for-profit schools opened through the first half of the twentieth century (Sherington, et al., 1987, pp. 186-200).

Australia has a federal system of governance, with the states constitutionally responsible for schools. Thus the states administer (and largely fund) public schools, and they register private schools - ensuring at least minimum standards of physical facilities, educational provision, teacher qualifications and governance. The federal government only became involved in schooling very gradually from the 1950s. That level of government is significantly less financially constrained than the states – a situation of “vertical fiscal imbalance” (Mathews, 1983, p. 27), which was exacerbated by changed tax-sharing arrangements in 1979-80. During the post Second World War period Australian has been governed federally and in the individual states and territories by either a social-democratic Australian Labor Party (ALP), or a stable Coalition of parties (the Liberal and National parties) that combine conservative and traditional liberal (or libertarian) political philosophies. The ALP grew out of the trade union movement (it still retains formal links and

¹ Australia as a unified nation with its own constitution did not exist until 1901.

basic principles), and is now generally socially liberal and economically neo-liberal (with a social safety net). In the 1940s and 1950s the Communist Party was (or was perceived to be) strong in the union movement and the ALP. This dismayed many traditional Catholics - as predominantly working class people of Irish extraction, they were Labor people. The Coalition parties (especially the Liberal Party) tended to be associated independent private schools and with Protestantism: “Catholics were rare in the Coalition parties [in the 1960s] and those who were involved complained of anti-Catholic prejudice” (Warhurst, 2012). The Labor Party split in the mid 1950s, and conservative Catholics formed the Democratic Labour Party (DLP), which directed voting preferences² to the Coalition, and those DLP members elected to the Senate tended to vote with the Coalition, rather than the ALP. Thus the conservative Catholic vote played a significant part in keeping the Coalition in power until the 1972 federal election – something that is returned to below.

After the Second World War almost a quarter of Australian schools students were enrolled in private schools that received no financial aid from governments other than some minor and indirect forms of funding from some state governments, such as means-tested scholarships for secondary schooling. Federal government aid began indirectly as income tax deductions for gifts to school building funds and education expenses in the early 1950s (Mathews, 1983, p. 136). Greater pressures for public funding of private schools (“state aid”) were emerging as school enrolments burgeoned with the post-war baby boom, and the need for educational modernisation become imperative, yet resources in all schooling sectors were deemed inadequate.

The multi-stranded, national debate about state aid in the early 1960s has been documented and analysed by Bannister (1981) and others. A dominant strand in the debate was sectarian. Support of state aid was based on the parlous financial state of Catholic schools (discussed further below) and the rights of students in those schools and the chaotic disruption to public schooling if Catholic schools were forced to close. This was countered by the arguments put by Protestant church representatives as well as secular interests that such aid would be financial assistance to Catholics, and would mean “the semi-establishment of religion” (Bannister, 1981, pp. 3-4, 9), and that the dual Catholic-public system of primary (elementary) schooling created social divisions, and that “a universal consequence of state aid [would be] the undermining of the state system of education” (pp. 4, 11). Other arguments drew directly or indirectly from Milton Friedman (1955/1962), and sought state aid for independent schools (including new schools) via grants to schools or vouchers for students as a means of promoting diversity, competition between schools

² Australia has a preferential voting system in state and federal elections.

and individual control over education, and of undermining a public school system characterised by “a stodgy, rigid centralism and the discouragement of experiment and innovation” (Bannister, 1981, pp. 5-6). While these arguments developed little traction for some decades, they were advanced from time to time, and had an indirect influence.

Another major strand in the state aid debate was the importance to “national survival” (p. 15) in the post-Sputnik era, demanding a modern, high quality school education, especially in science, and the need to increase retention to year 12 in all schools. The position of the federal Coalition government at the time was to provide specific purpose aid to public and private schools and students “without discrimination” according to sector (Bannister, 1981, p. 15). Senior secondary school scholarships intended to “support students to stay on at secondary school” were introduced in 1964 (Burke & Spaul, 2001, p. 442), and grants for science laboratories and then libraries in subsequent years. Even though such aid was claimed to be granted without discrimination, it particularly favoured high fee independent schools and their students. The scholarships were granted according to competitive academic criteria, and thus favoured high socioeconomic status students at well-resourced private schools³ (as well as students at academically selective public schools) (Burke & Spaul, 2001, p. 442). The magnitude of the grants for science laboratories and libraries depended on the funds available for that purpose from the school (they were “matching grants”), and thus larger grants were provided to schools that were already well resourced and had wealthy benefactors. State aid for high fee independent schools elicited conflicting arguments: those opposing the aid argued that it increased “the privileges of one group [already] ‘at the top of the economic and social scale’”, and, on the other hand, state aid could help independent schools “from becoming the preserve of the wealthy” by allowing them to constrain fees and expand scholarships (Bannister, 1981, pp. 24-25).

While these various forms of state aid were proposed and then introduced by the federal government through the 1960s, opposition to state aid in general did not disappear. A number of Anglican bishops (and “most Anglicans” according to a leading lay Anglican), and many other Protestant church school representatives were opposed to “direct” state aid including the grants benefitting the schools they were associated with (Bannister, 1981, pp. 18, 20, 27). Anti-Catholic sectarian passions as well as secular support for public schooling led to the development of a number of lobby groups opposing state aid from around 1964 (p. 27), the most notable of which was the Council for Defence of Government Schools (DOGS), formed in 1966, and which ran

³ I attended a high fee independent Anglican school as a boarder in the 1960s and received one of these scholarships, as did around 80% of my classmates. Almost all of us would have completed secondary school whether or not we received such support, and we were well aware at the time that the proportion of students receiving such scholarships at our school was not matched by most public schools or lower fee private schools.

candidates in elections and took an anti-state aid case to the High Court, which it lost in 1981. Public school parent organisations and teacher unions were also publicly opposed to state aid, “arguing against the social effects of subsidising schools which segregated children into religious and social groups and [for] the need for public education systems which were open to all” (p. 27).

By 1970 all state governments provided some level of per capita grants, and in that year the Coalition federal government commenced a program of per capita grants to all private schools that increased over three years to 20% of the estimated cost of educating a public school student (Mathews, 1983, pp. 144, 146). State aid had become well entrenched over the decade, and sectarian bitterness was diminishing. In addition, the post-war economic boom was contributing richly to government revenue, and aid to private schools was not seen as coming at the expense of public school funding. The cultural and social optimism and progressivism of the 1960s was in the air, and the Coalition government that had been in power since 1949 had lost its stability, and was seen by many as chaotic and out of touch. It was in this context that the 1972 election occurred.

The ALP was led by the charismatic Gough Whitlam. In his pre-election policy speech he set out a comprehensive program of social democratic, progressive reform: Australia’s exit from the Vietnam/American war, the introduction of universal health insurance, urban renewal and outer suburban infrastructure, new cultural institutions and funds for the arts, and a policy of expanded federal involvement in education from pre-schools to universities, incorporating private as well as public schools (Whitlam, 1972). Equality of opportunities was a central theme (p. 1), and the ALP’s election program had three “great aims”: “to promote equality, to involve the people of Australia in the decision-making processes of our land, and to liberate the talents and uplift the horizons of the Australian people” (p. 2). These three aims are important in understanding what was intended to be achieved by fundamental recasting of federal funding of schools that has shaped Australian schooling ever since.

The 1970s “settlement” on state aid to private schools

The ALP was elected in 1972, in part on the votes of conservative Catholics who had voted against Labor since the mid 1950s, but were persuaded that Labor would support state aid for private schools after previously opposing it (Johns & Rolfe, 2011, 21 July). The new government established the Interim Committee for the Australian Schools Commission, chaired by economist Peter Karmel, to examine the situation of all public and private schools and make recommendations regarding the financial needs of schools (Interim Committee for the Australian Schools Commission, 1973, p. 3). There was no qualitative difference in treatment between public and private schools throughout the detail of the Committee’s terms of reference. In addition to

documenting the financial needs of schools, in its report (known as the Karmel report) the Committee discussed values and perspectives in detail, including a whole chapter on equality of opportunity (Chapter 4), a purported underlying value of the report's recommendations.

The Committee made recommendations regarding per capita (per student) recurrent grants (almost half the recommended allocation, primarily used to support the salaries of teachers and other staff), capital grants for buildings (almost a third of the recommended allocation) and special purpose grants (around one fifth) (p. 142). Per capita grants for private schools were recommended on a needs basis, based on the estimated capacity of schools to support their own endeavours according to the level of fees charged. The Committee recommended eight levels of per capita grants to private schools, the highest level, going to the most needy schools, around five times the level of grants going to the least needy category of schools to receive grants. Recommended public school per capita grants were slightly above the average private school grant. The Committee recommended that the grants that had been available under the previous government be withdrawn from high fee independent schools (p. 12). Capital grants are not considered in detail here, though they played a major role - not only in initial upgrading and modernising of schools, but also in facilitating the expansion of the private sectors over subsequent decades.

The special purpose grants in particular reflected the themes of Whitlam's 1972 election speech. These grants were directed at addressing disadvantage, educational modernisation (teacher education and professional development, school libraries), and innovation. In these areas there was emphasis on the democratic and active participation of students and parents, as well as teachers and others in school communities, with a special concern to ensure the involvement of those from communities that had historically been excluded. The manifestation of choice was to be participation in one's own school community — or “voice”, not “exit” (Hirschman, 1970) to an different school (Interim Committee for the Australian Schools Commission, 1973, pp. 13-14).

These democratic and progressive themes, as well as the very large increases in funds for all schools that were recommended, led to enthusiastic responses to the Karmel report from organisations that had long-standing positions in opposition to state aid. Marginson documents the responses of such organisations (1997, p. 47) (only DOGS maintained trenchant opposition to state aid), and quoted the president of the national peak organisation of public school teacher unions, who wrote:

The report has our complete support. We believe the philosophy and recommendations of the committee members represent the most important development in Australian

education this century. The Karmel committee's report represents a giant step forward in Australian education.

The work and recommendations of the Committee and the consequent legislation and immediate aftermath are commonly referred to as the “1973 settlement”, the “Karmel settlement” (Marginson, 1984) or more broadly as the “1970s settlement”. Such a political and social settlement is not to be understood as a simple phenomenon. Laws, in his report on how political settlements have been and should be defined and understood (Laws, 2012), notes that they are “typically the outcome of bargaining, negotiation and compromises between elites”, and those elites have varying relationships and agreements with their own constituents. They are “always characterised by internal differences and a variety of interests and forms and degrees of power”, they are on-going political processes that change and adapt – they are not set in stone. They can be “more or less inclusive of social and political groups”, and thus important affected groups can be marginalised, misrepresented or excluded. Importantly, political settlements “influence the form, nature and performance of institutions, [which] can in turn help to consolidate and ‘embed’ political settlements” (pp. 1-2). Internal contradictions existed in the original Karmel report, but were largely ignored in the initial euphoria of its reception. More arose in the aftermath, and divisions widened, but the institutional structures created by the settlement had a powerful dynamic, strengthened in particular directions by shifting fiscal, social and cultural developments over subsequent decades.

Contradictions, political power and an institutional juggernaut

In the Karmel report there were contradictions. For example, there were references to one objective of per capita and capital grants being to hold the private sectors' enrolment shares at 1972 levels (but not to increase beyond) (Interim Committee for the Australian Schools Commission, 1973, pp. 68, 78). However, to reverse the then trend of increased enrolment shares in the public sector (see Table 1) would be a significant development, and there were no recommendations to control such a reversal – there was no constraint on the number of per capita grants, and there were generous criteria for new private schools (p. 78). In addition, the only accountability requirements recommended by the Committee were for financial auditing and the provision of statistics (p. 149).

Yet there was a profound caution in the chapter on values and perspectives, which probably reflects the diverse positions of members of the Committee:

There is a point beyond which it is not possible to consider policies relating to the private sector without taking into account their possible effects on the public sector

whose strength and representativeness should not be diluted . . . As public aid for non-government schools rises, the possibility and even the inevitability of a changed relationship between government and nongovernment schooling presents itself. (p. 12)

There was thus a contradiction between the Committee’s actual recommendations and their apparent understandings of dynamic relations between the public and private school sectors. In other countries facing similar issues, the response was to fund Catholic schools on condition that they integrated into the public schooling system. Following the Netherlands in 1917 and England in 1944, integration in New Zealand in the late 1970s allowed the Catholic (or other) schools to maintain their “special character” with regulation of enrolments and fees (Lynch, 2012). In contrast, Australia provided almost unconditional funding – “Australia is unique in the ways in which it finances non-government schools and in the levels of support and the conditions which it attaches to them” (Schools Commission, 1978, p. 14). Yet even integration might not be a panacea: in New Zealand, the religious integrated schools (mostly Catholic) are increasingly enrolling students with higher socio-economic backgrounds than are public schools (Table 2). In addition, the private sectors are (and have been) much larger in Australia than New Zealand (Tables 1 and 2). Such an integration model was not actively considered by any stakeholders until around the early 1980s, when the public sector teacher unions responded to a Schools Commission discussion paper on funding options and officials visited New Zealand to investigate integration there. The positions eventually adopted were to allow private schools the option of joining with public schools to form a “new public school system”, but otherwise not to support state aid. Integration arose as a possibility from time to time through the 1980s and into the early 1990s, but did not become accepted policy⁴. Even so, once the 1970s settlement had occurred integration was never politically viable - there could be no reason why private schools would be interested in integration and the constraints that would bring, because once the settlement was in place private schools received increasing levels of funds with no (or no significant) encroachments on their autonomy, especially regarding enrolments, selection and exclusion practices (of teachers as well as students), school and campus locations.

As the Committee’s recommendations were legislated the grants to high fee private schools were restored. This occurred through amendments in the Senate, where Labor was outnumbered by the combined vote of the Coalition and the conservative Catholic-based DLP (Connors & McMorrow, 2015, p. 20). The Catholic bishops had wanted to lock in state aid as a “right not a privilege” (Warhurst, 2012), and thus supported the high fee independent schools to ensure their

⁴ Based on my personal papers and internal union documents maintained in public archives.

grants were retained – and increased. This philosophy of entitlement irrespective of means was in conflict with the needs-based (or means-tested) philosophy of the Whitlam government and the Karmel report. The same coalition of forces ensured that again in the early 1980s and in the mid 2000s, ALP policies to end or reduce grants to high fee schools were overturned. The powerful alliance of bishops and independent school representatives also ensured that there were progressive increases in grants to private schools, that when funding criteria were changed no private school would lose funds, and that accountability would continue to be minimal.

Choice and residualisation

The Schools Commission again expressed concern about the effects of grants to private schools on the public sector and society generally in the late 1970s. By this time the market-based conceptualisation of choice had gathered strength as an objective in schools policy, and the Schools Commission considered its complexities in a discussion paper on aspects of school finance (Schools Commission, 1978). They raised issues arising out of the public subsidy of choice to move from public to private schools, including the “extent to which the governance and operation of the [private] schools should be publicly regulated as public subsidies to them rise, and about how and under what conditions new [private] schools should be permitted or assisted”. They went on to comment:

There are also questions about the effect on public systems arising from making the choice to move out of them easier for parents. If such a choice is greatly enhanced, [public] schools could become residual institutions, serving only those children whose parents were unwilling or unable to meet even low fee levels in [private] schools, or who were geographically isolated from, indifferent to, or unaware of, alternatives. (p. 6)

While this statement, out of context, implies that active choice would tend not to be for one’s local, comprehensive public school, there was much more in the Commission’s paper, including a consideration of the concern (by some) that public funds “should not exacerbate for children the inequalities of life circumstances ... nor sustain privilege among a sectional group of the population” (p. 9), and that choice could also involve greater choice of program and approach within public schools and diversity among public schools (p. 7). However, by this time the view that “choice” involved choice of a desirable private school over a less desirable public school had become widely prevalent. This philosophy of choice in support of private schools was in contrast with the Victorian private school sector’s protectionist monopolisation of upper secondary education a century ago, described in Appendix 1.

By the mid 1980s it was becoming widely accepted that the public funding of private schools was the driver of their relative expansion. Economist Ross Williams (1985) published an influential paper that argued that “the demand for private schooling is particularly dependent on the relationship between fees charged and services provided [and] this relationship in turn depends upon the extent of government funding...” (p. 622). However, the dynamics were much more complex, as the Schools Commission explained:

A continuing significant decline in the government school sector’s share of overall enrolment is likely to change substantially the social composition of the student population in government schools, with potentially significant negative consequences for the general comprehensiveness of public school systems. The cumulative effect of these financial, educational and social consequences could, in the long term, threaten the role and standing of the public school as a central institution in Australian society. Such a development would be unwelcome to most citizens and is inconsistent with the stated policies of governments, as well as the major school interest groups, government and nongovernment. (Commonwealth Schools Commission, 1985, para 20)

The Hawke and Keating ALP governments (1983 to 1996) sought to take some action in response. Funds of public schools were increased relative to those for private schools (Cahill & Gray, 2010, p. 127), and there was some success with the implementation of the New Schools Policy . This constrained the establishment and expansion of private schools where they might damage existing public and private schools (this paled beside the constraints imposed on public secondary schools the behest of private school interests in Victoria around 75 years earlier - see Appendix 1). The Hawke and Keating governments’ constraints on private school establishment and expansion were terminated by the Howard Coalition government after the 1996 federal election, and the residualisation of public schooling gathered pace.

Residualisation was a concept common in the sociological and political literature on social welfare and social services in the 1970s, but had gained only minor traction in education debates (see previous quotations from the School Commission), though the essential arguments were made from time to time (see Marginson, 1984). I sought to apply the concept to what I saw happening to public education through the 1980s in short articles (Preston, 1984), internal reports and conference presentations (Preston, 1993). Residualisation involves a complex, self-reinforcing dynamic. Important components when applied to Australian schooling, especially since the 1970s settlement, include the openness and vulnerabilities of the public system, on the one hand, and the general exclusiveness of the private sectors and their role as providing *positional goods* (Marginson, 1997, p. xiv) on the other. As schooling (or other public service or good) is residualised, the

politically influential middle classes (and other social groupings) leave or lessen their commitment and advocacy.

The public school system is open to all comers – schooling is compulsory, and thus governments must provide for all. However, private schools are under no such obligation. They can indirectly exclude via fees and various enrolment criteria, by not providing appropriate facilities, pedagogy or curriculum for students with disabilities or other special needs, and by directly excluding any students that become disruptive or are otherwise seen as undesirable. Private schools, especially, but not only, high fee independent schools, market themselves and are seen as providing powerful positional values through their exclusiveness: they can provide advantages to their students and graduates that are not available to others, and those advantages depend on the competitive and hierarchical nature of access to the most prestigious university courses and careers and to powerful and high status social networks.

The openness of public systems entails that they bear the brunt of fluctuations in enrolments – as a government official in Western Australia put it, they “must expand, contract and adjust according to movements in the location and size of the population and the changing nature of students in particular locations” (quoted in Cahill & Gray, 2010, p. 127). This has happened time and again around Australia, as the school age population in a locality waxed, local public schools have become over-crowded and hard to manage, then as the population waned the public schools lost students, curriculum options, funds for maintenance, and, often, reputation. At the same time, the private schools in the same localities (mostly local Catholic schools) maintained enrolments at close to optimal levels, turning away applicants as the population waxed, then actively marketing themselves as the population waned. Thus the larger the private sector, the greater the disruptive enrolment fluctuations in public schools. I investigated such a dynamic in two regions of Canberra where primary school age populations were contracting or expanding between 2003 and 2011. The results show relative stability in Catholic school enrolments in both regions while very large changes occurred in public school enrolments (Preston, 2011a, pp. 8-9). A similar dynamic occurs when states change school starting age and a small (or large) cohort passes through primary, then secondary schools, disrupting the organisation of teaching, resourcing, and management of facilities. Again, the public sector can be shown to bear the brunt of the enrolment fluctuations and the disruption (Preston, 2011b, p. 7).

Developments in resourcing, enrolments and the social make-up of schools

Federal and state per capita grants to private schools increased substantially over the decades from the mid 1970s. From 1976 to 2011 the real level of federal recurrent funding to private schools

increased by 685%, while federal recurrent funding of public schools increased by 182% (Connors & McMorrow, 2015, p. 29). Currently private schools in the lower half of the SES range receive much the same levels of public funds as equivalent public schools (and, with the addition of fee income, generally higher total per student resourcing), and high fee private schools have total resources more than twice the level of equivalent public schools (Bonner & Shepherd, 2016, p. 52). The public sector's share of enrolments fell from 78% in 1980 to 65% in 2015 (Table 1). The relative socio-economic profiles of the sectors have changed: in the mid 1980s the public and private sectors had roughly similar overall socioeconomic (SES) mixes of students, but now lower SES students are concentrated in public schools, and higher SES students tend to be concentrated in Catholic as well as independent schools (Preston, 2013). In 2009, only in a number of Central and South American countries are socio-economically advantaged students more likely to attend private schools than in Australia⁵ (OECD, 2012, p. 101).

There are great disparities in the effective resourcing of Australian schools. The bottom SES quartile of Australian schools, according to the 2015 OECD PISA study, were around six times as likely as the most advantaged SES quartile of schools to experience a lack of teaching staff and a lack of educational material, and twice as likely to experience a lack of physical infrastructure (Thomson, De Bortoli, & Underwood, 2017, pp. 264, 266).

In addition to these macro-level developments between the sectors, there have been significant changes within sectors. In the independent sector there has been significant expansion of low fee schools of diverse religious affiliations including fundamentalist Christian, Islamic and sects such as the Exclusive Brethren (Dillon & Parker, 2011, 8 March) – this expansion of lower fee independent schools with their lower SES and less academically oriented students is associated with lower overall retention rates in the sector that had historically been dominated by high fee elite schools (see Table 3). Lower SES Catholic students are now more likely to attend public than Catholic schools (Preston, 2013, pp. 37-39). Within the public sector there have some substantial changes, in part in an attempt to compete with private schools. These have involved reducing or eliminating specified catchment areas for schools, and the creation of a large number of academically selective and other specialist schools. While these developments may have been successful in keeping a proportion of middle and higher SES students in the public sector, they have worked to exacerbate social, ethnic and religious divisions between schools, and to residualise many local comprehensive public schools as students in their locality have enrolled in more distant, but desirable schools. Ho documented the very strong cultural segregation between public

⁵ Of all OECD and OECD partner countries.

and private schools in Sydney, noting that in most high fee independent schools more than 80% of students spoke only English, while in comparable (in terms of student SES and academic results) public schools 80% also spoke another language (2011). Ashenden commented on this finding: “Students who do not learn about others do not learn about themselves ... Australian schools are increasingly active in constituting an elite that knows only itself, and an underclass that is being duded and knows it” (2015, 16 October). As the trend in Australia is towards greater social and economic divisions between schools, a recent review of research in the United States (Ayscue, Frankenberg, & Siegel-Hawley, 2017) indicates the importance of schools that are diverse according to student SES and racial/ethnic background – both in total student body and internally. This is not only positive for academic achievement and individual life outcomes, but for the “economic and democratic well-being of communities and society” (p. 3).

Academic achievement

Australians are very aware of the distinctions between public and private schools, and the generally favourable image of private schools relative to public schools. Yet in academic results in standardised tests and in year 12 tertiary entrance scores, the public sector tends to do as well as or better than the private sector if SES is held constant (Bonnor & Shepherd, 2014), and research in Australia, as well as England, indicates that graduates of comprehensive public schools do better at university than graduates of private schools (especially high fee schools) with the same tertiary entrance score (Preston, 2014, July 17). For middle and higher SES students academic opportunities are generally good. However, according to 2015 OECD PISA results, “regardless of their own socioeconomic background, students enrolled in a school with a high average socioeconomic background tended to perform at a higher level than students enrolled in a school with a low average socioeconomic background” (Thomson, et al., 2017, p. xxx). Thus the increasing SES discrepancy between schools (high SES students concentrated in private schools and selective public schools, and low SES students concentrated in certain public schools) is leading to increasing discrepancies between the educational achievements of high and low SES students. For many lower SES students in lower SES schools, opportunities are slipping further away.

There was hope for many in the much higher levels of public funding for the most disadvantaged schools (private as well as public⁶) recommended by the exhaustively researched federal

⁶ Low SES private schools receive significantly more public funding than equivalent low SES public schools, according to data on the federal government’s My School website. In fact Catholic schools at all SES levels up to the national average received more public funding per student than equivalent public schools, yet each of those Catholic schools remains free to select and exclude students and manage enrolment levels. (Bonnor & Shepherd, 2016, p. 84)

government's Review of Funding for Schools (Gonski et al., 2011) (established by an ALP government, but involving individuals with high level business and Liberal Party connections). However, the magnitude of net additional funds required is almost politically prohibitive if there is to be no reduction in funds to higher SES private schools (including those which are classified as "over-funded" according to the existing system). As I write, proposals are being developed for decisions by the council of state and federal governments later this year. Not surprisingly, the powerful independent and Catholic school lobbies are making very clear their opposition to any reduction in the public funds to the most advantaged private schools, including those that are "over-funded" according to the criteria of the current scheme. Even if the Gonski proposals were to be implemented, the effect, though valuable, cannot be fundamental. This is because of the private sectors' control over enrolments (selection, exclusion and total enrolments in a school) and school location, and almost total lack of accountability or responsibility to the general community, as well as the similar social role of selective public schools.

Conclusion

I have sought to explain the origins, characteristics and consequences of the 1970s settlement in schools funding and organisation. It was a settlement that appeared to please stakeholders that had been in conflict, to solve significant problems of inadequate resourcing for schools experiencing great needs, and it appeared to herald greater equality of opportunity and greater democratic participation and involvement in schooling that would be engaging and enriching for students from all backgrounds. However, the opposite has occurred, resulting from the dynamics that were unleashed by the settlement itself, which were exacerbated by developments over subsequent decades in political priorities, fiscal circumstances of governments and changes in society and culture.

Could the settlement have been different? If the Labor Party had not promised substantial levels of public funding of Catholic schools it is unlikely that it would have won the election, and a Coalition government would have continued to increase common per student levels of public funding for all private schools. It is possible that a type of integration (such as the later New Zealand model) could have been recommended by the Interim Committee of the Schools Commission, though it appears that it did not consider such an option. Even if it had, and the Whitlam government had accepted such a recommendation, it would have been unlikely to have passed the Senate, which had achieved public funding of well-resourced high fee independent schools against the wishes of the government (and the Interim Committee of the Schools Commission), and the independent sector would have strenuously opposed any restraint on their

autonomy – as it continued to do whenever integration-type proposals were raised in subsequent decades. At times elements in the Catholic sector have considered integration-type models, but the leadership (the bishops) have rejected such proposals and maintained solidarity with the independent sector, rather than the public sector (Furtado, 2006, p. 79).

More recent proposals (Gonski, et al., 2011) involve substantial increases in public funds for the most needy schools. While politically difficult in the current environment, even if implemented such changes would do little to change the social mix of schools, though they might well improve the quality of education of the most needy students – at least until the dynamic of residualisation had further progressed.

Concerns with Australia's school structures and funding are being publicly aired (see Appendixes 2 and 3), and there is variation around the country in the nature of the relationships between public and private schools. In many communities public schools remain strong and supported by the middle classes, even where there is a relatively large private sector. For example, in the Australian Capital Territory (ACT), with a population of around 400,000, the public sector has a lesser share of all enrolments than the national average (59% compared with 65% in 2015), especially at the primary level (62% compared with 70%) (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2016). This is for complex historical, demographic, social and educational reasons (Preston, 2011a), and the public sector tends to be well supported by the middle classes, especially at the final secondary years 11 and 12 (where the enrolment share is 62% compared with the national average of 59%) (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2016). Even so, for Australia as a whole (and, to some extent, for the ACT and similar communities), this paper does not conclude on an optimistic note. Australia's international ranking in school outcomes is slipping, achievement gaps are increasing, and so too is the detrimental impact of social segregation between schools on the achievement of low SES students (Cobbold, 2017a, 2017b). The one choice that has so clearly diminished since the 1970s is the choice for a student to attend a high quality comprehensive school that is part of the local community, where they can mix with and get to know peers from diverse social, ethnic and religious backgrounds and who have diverse aspirations and talents (Bonnor & Shepherd, 2016). There are thus diminishing opportunities for developing through schooling bridging as well as bonding social capital (Szreter & Woolcock, 2004), and getting to learn and understand the complexities in society.

Table 1 Percentage shares of primary, junior high and senior high school enrolments held by public, Catholic and independent schools, Australia, 1970 - 2015

	Primary	High to year 10	Years 11 - 12	All levels
1965				
Public	77%	76%	64%	76%
1970				
Public	80%	77%	68%	78%
Catholic	18%	17%	18%	18%
Independent	2%	7%	15%	4%
1980				
Public	80%	75%	68%	78%
Catholic	17%	18%	20%	17%
Independent	3%	7%	13%	5%
1990				
Public	75%	69%	69%	72%
Catholic	19%	20%	20%	20%
Independent	6%	11%	11%	8%
2000				
Public	73%	65%	63%	69%
Catholic	19%	21%	21%	20%
Independent	8%	14%	16%	11%
2010				
Public	69%	61%	61%	66%
Catholic	19%	21%	21%	20%
Independent	11%	17%	18%	14%
2015				
Public	70%	59%	59%	65%
Catholic	19%	23%	22%	20%
Independent	12%	18%	19%	14%
Percentage point (pp) change 1970 to 2015				
Public	-10pp	-18pp	-9pp	-11pp
Catholic	1pp	6pp	4pp	2pp
Independent	9pp	11pp	4pp	10pp

Note: From around the 1880s to the 1940s the public school share was around 80%; in 1956 and 1960 it was 76% (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2016; Preston, 2011b, p. 3).

Source: 1965: Commonwealth Schools Commission (1984, p. 53)

1970-2015: Australian Bureau of Statistics (2016)

Table 2 Percentage of New Zealand total enrolments schools in socio-economic deciles by category of school 1996 and 2015, and enrolment shares held by each category of schools

	Deciles	1996			2015			Enrolment share
		1, 2 & 3	4, 5, 6 & 7	8, 9 & 10	1, 2 & 3	4, 5, 6 & 7	8, 9 & 10	
Public schools	No Affiliation	29%	42%	29%	25%	41%	34%	83%
	Organisational affiliation	34%	50%	16%	11%	24%	65%	1%
	Religious Affiliation	14%	61%	25%	11%	34%	55%	13%
Private schools	(2016)				1%	7%	92%	4%
Total New Zealand school enrolments (est.)							805 233	100%

Note: The deciles of a school's socio-economic status range from the lowest at 1 to the highest at 10. Schools with organisational or religious affiliation are integrated schools, the large majority of religious affiliated schools are Catholic.

Source: New Zealand Ministry of Education, Education Counts: School Rolls web page (2016b), Roll by FYL & Student Type 1996-2015 pivot table

New Zealand Ministry of Education, Education Counts: Private Schools web page (2016a) Private schools spreadsheet download, Private Schools Directory - as at 07June2016

Table 3 Apparent retention rate, Australian schools, year 7/8 to year 12, 1972 - 2015

	1972	1980	1990	2000	2010	2015	Percentage point change 1972 - 2015
Public	28%	28%	58%	67%	75%	81%	53pp
Catholic	35%	45%	68%	77%	73%	78%	43pp
Independent	87%	88%	100%	95%	84%	85%	-2pp
All schools	32%	35%	64%	72%	77%	83%	51pp

Source: 1972 data - Interim Committee for the Australian Schools Commission (1973), pp. 19 & 28; 1980 to 2015 data - Australian Bureau of Statistics (2016)

Note: The apparent retention rate measures the proportion of a cohort of full-time students that moves from the beginning of secondary school (year seven in most states, year 8 in others) to the final year of secondary school, year 12, based on an expected rate of progression of one year level per academic year.

Appendix 1.

Private schools' monopolisation of full secondary education a century ago

As the nineteenth century ended, in Victoria private schools had a monopoly on full secondary education and thus matriculation and access to the University of Melbourne (then the only university in the state). Frank Tate, the director general of education in Victoria, attempted to establish public secondary education that could provide matriculation. He was trenchantly opposed by private school interests, and graphically portrayed the nature of the problem, as he saw it, in his 1905 annual report. He wrote:

[those who reject full public secondary schooling do so] because they regard such an extension as an attack upon their own class interest and privileges . . . At present we merely throw out a few ropes⁷ from the upper storey [to selected pupils, whereas what should be provided are] broad stairways for all who can climb. (Selleck, 1982, p. 157)

Tate returned to the theme in a 1908 report, in which he wrote:

The secondary storey [of schooling] is locked against the mass of the people, and can be entered only by private stairways for which a heavy toll is charged. . . . We need a broad open stairway accessible to all. (Selleck, 1982, p. 186)

The private school lobby argued against public secondary education because “state [public] secondary schools would always be inadequate [in preparing future leaders of the nation] because they could not provide effective character training” (p. 183)⁸, and there was a real competitive threat to many private schools in the establishment of low fee and fee free public schools in the same locality (pp. 188-189).

Thus at this time existing government regulatory support for private schooling was inimical to choice, as well as to equality of opportunity. Legislation allowing general public secondary schooling in Victoria was eventually passed in 1913. However, there were restrictions: public secondary schools could not be located where they were in direct competition with existing private secondary schools. That heritage remained live in Victoria, reflected in location and type of public secondary schools, and the relative size and social composition of the public and independent sectors in that state right through to the 1970s and beyond.

Source: An edited excerpt from Preston (2011b)

⁷ This is reference to the ‘continuation schools’ for the preparation of public school teachers, who could progress to the University of Melbourne, and the small number of country agricultural high schools being established that could also provide access to the university, again officially for teacher education.

⁸ A similar attitude was expressed a century later by conservative Coalition prime minister, John Howard, when he was reported saying that “the growth of private school enrolments partly resulted from parents being frustrated with the lack of traditional values in public schools” (Crabb & Guerrero, 2004, 20 January).

Appendix 2.

"Local schools aren't what they used to be", by Ross Gittens, *Sydney Morning Herald*, April 12, 2017, pp. 18-19

Local schools aren't what they used to be

APRIL 12, 2017 THE SYDNEY MORNING HERALD pp 18-19



ROSS Gittens

I love living in my suburb. I shop locally, just so I can run across friends and neighbours on a Saturday morning, and be greeted with a smile - even a name - by shopkeepers who know me.

I figure the best ways to get to know people in your suburb is to own a dog - you get to talk to other dog owners as you stand around in the local park - and send your kids to the local school. You can't help getting to know the other parents in your kids' classes.

But all that was some years ago, and times change. The local school isn't the institution it used to be.

Perhaps it won't surprise you to be told that, over the years, our capital cities have become more stratified, with a greater tendency for better-off people to live in better-off suburbs - the ones with water and views and, these days, those closest to the centre - and for the less well-off to live in less well-off suburbs far from the centre.

This is most true of Sydney, then Melbourne - which is catching up with Sydney in size - but less true of the other capitals.

But maybe this will surprise you: something similar is happening to our schools, particularly secondary schools. We have a widening divide between the schools attended by the offspring of better-educated, better-off parents, and those attended by, well, the not so well educated and paid.

This is happening partly in consequence of the increasing stratification of suburbs, but also because of the education policies pursued by federal and state governments. Unlike almost all other rich economies, Australia runs three school systems rather than one.

This array has tempted us to treat school as though it was a market, where government, Catholic and independent schools compete for youthful customers, thus providing parents with greater choice and obliging government schools to lift their game.



Everyone knows there's been a decades-long drift of students from government to non-government schools.

What our not-so-retired principals have discovered, however, is that this has masked a big shift from schools with low socio-educational advantage to those with high socio-educational advantage. (A school's socio-educational advantage is rated largely according to the socio-economic status of its students.)

My School shows that, over the five years to 2015, average enrolments at all schools grew by more than five students a year. But enrolments at schools with high socio-educational advantage grew by an average of 11 students a year, whereas enrolments at disadvantaged schools grew by just more than one student a year.

John Howard was big on choice. Julia Gillard left Howard's pro-choice funding arrangements running until Labor's last year, while emphasising competition between schools. She introduced the NAPLAN testing of literacy and numeracy and, to ensure parents were well informed before making their choice, she introduced the My School website, loaded with detailed information about every school.

We got a lot of choice, but no improvement in measured performance. Moral: schools aren't a market.

One benefit, however, is that researchers can collate the My School data to give us a much clearer picture of what's happening to our schools. Leaders in this research are two retired high school principals, Chris Bonnor and Bernie Shepherd.

When choosing schools, many of us think of a hierarchy of excellence - in teaching and results - running from government to Catholic to independent. But that's just what you see on the packet. (Echoed by the prices of the packets.)

Studies estimate that 78 per cent of the variance in the performance of schools is explained by differences in their socio-educational advantage - that is, by the socio-economic status of their students.

Independent schools tend to get good exam results because most of their students come from well-educated families. Catholic schools get better results than you might expect because the days when their classrooms were full of working class kids are long gone.

You'd expect this to mean public schools increasingly full of disadvantaged kids getting poor results.

True, but they retain a higher proportion of advantaged students than you'd expect.

Why? Partly because public schools in posh suburbs still have lots of smart kids, but mainly because - particularly in Sydney and, to a lesser extent, Melbourne - state authorities have responded to the demand for greater "choice" by creating more selective schools.

But this means greater stratification on the basis of socio-economic status even within the government system, coming at the expense of disadvantaged government schools.

Choice, however, isn't available to all parents. To have a choice you need either brains or money (which usually comes with brains attached).

The vogue for choice has also allowed greater stratification of

students on the basis of religion. These days, Jewish kids go to Jewish schools, Muslim kids go to Muslim schools, and Baptist and Pentecostal kids go to "Christian" schools.

Trouble is, high socio-educational advantage schools aren't always located in high status suburbs. So these days, a lot more traffic congestion is caused by a lot more students and parents travelling longer distances to and from school. Leading to the decline of the local school. Less than a third of schools now have an enrolment that resembles the people in their local area.

Sounds a great way to reduce the nation's social cohesion. What did the rich kid say to the poor kid? Nothing. They never met.

Ross Gittens is economics editor.

Appendix 3.

“The curious case of school funding in Australia” Australian Broadcasting Corporation RN radio program, *The Money*, April 13, 2017

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The Curious Case of School Funding in Australia

▶ Listen now ⬇ Download audio

Thursday 13 April 2017 5:30PM

Schooling is important and expensive. In Australia we spend tens of billions of dollars every year, and that's just from the public purse. But we don't just have a public system, we have three systems, all of which get public money.

Why is that? And how much do they get? Where does the money go? And why are our school children increasingly uncompetitive when compared to those in other countries?

Thursday 5:30pm
Repeated: Friday 5:30am
Presented by Richard Aedy

IMAGE: (RICH VINTAGE/GETTY IMAGES)

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Guests

- Ken Boston**
Former Director General of the NSW Education Department and Gonski panellist.
- Lyndsay Connors**
Former Adjunct Associate Professor in the Faculty of Education and Social Work at the University of Sydney.
- Andreas Schleicher**
Director for Education and Skills and Special Advisor on Education Policy to the Secretary-General at the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, Paris.
- Marc Tucker**
CEO and President of the National Centre on Education and the Economy in the USA.

Further Information

- ∞ [OECD education portal](#)
- ∞ [The Gonski Report](#)
- ∞ [The National Centre on Education and the Economy \(USA\).](#)

Credits

- Presenter** Richard Aedy
- Producer** Kate Percy
- Sound Engineer** Russell Stapleton

<http://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/themoney/the-curious-case-of-school-funding/8433936>

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