

'User pays' in Australian schools

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Two recent articles in Melbourne's *Herald Sun* newspaper detailed the methods used by public school administrations to compel parents to pay so-called 'voluntary' school fees for their children. They provide a revealing glimpse into the state of public education in Australia.

The articles cite a series of cases. Parents and students are publicly shamed through the publication of lists of non-payers. Schools bombard families with fee invoices and reminder notices that give no indication that fees are not compulsory. In some instances, the student is threatened with public humiliation -- a senior student is barred from an end of year dinner, a school captain is threatened with the loss of their position, another is placed on detention because her family cannot afford part of a physical education uniform.

In one of the worst cases, a parent received a letter from Maffra Secondary College, informing her that her fees were 'significantly overdue' and that the school council was tabling a list of those with debts, with a view to engaging a debt-collecting agency.

But no sooner had the issue been raised than it was buried. The Maffra Secondary College principal apologised for what he said was a 'computer error'. Victorian Education Minister Phil Gude said his department would take 'a dim view' of schools using such 'heavy handed tactics'. The Principals Association blamed the school councils, the Labor opposition blamed the Liberals, and the investigative reporters at Rupert Murdoch's *Herald Sun*, along with everyone else, promptly dropped the issue like a hot potato.

The situation will get much worse. Buried in the middle of one of the articles was a statement from the Victorian Association of School Councils calling on the government to pass legislation to make school fees legally binding. In the state of South Australia, such laws already exist. This means that access to free education is already a thing of the past. Debt collection

agencies and other legal measures will soon become the rule not the exception.

Neither Labor nor Liberal politicians want to seriously discuss the question because both parties, at the state and federal level, are responsible for the systematic slashing of funding to primary, secondary and tertiary public education over the last two decades. Public schools are being driven to use such methods to collect fees, as well as to drum up sources of private funding, because of the lack of government money to pay for basic running costs.

A study by the University of NSW found that across Australia, fees and other levies make up 27 percent of the essential operating costs of schools--excluding teachers' salaries. In Victoria, an Auditor-General's report stated that 'voluntary' parent contributions in 1996 amounted to \$97 million or 17 percent of non-wage operating costs in public schools. Fees are needed to pay for everything from computers to urgent building maintenance.

The right of young people to a free, high quality education--regardless of their parents' income or social background-- is being replaced by the 'user pays' principle. Those families who can afford it will send their children to private or better-off public schools while working class youth will increasingly be relegated to schools with few resources or facilities.

Already a huge disparity exists between the income from fees at public schools in more affluent suburbs -- an average of \$500 per student -- and that at public schools in working class areas with high unemployment -- an average of \$19 per student. If one considers an average size secondary school with 800 students, the first will receive \$400,000 each year, and the second, only \$15,200. Translated into computers, support staff, books and special materials, the difference is enormous. Moreover, if contributions become compulsory, then those parents who cannot afford to pay the higher fees

will be forced to send their children to poorer schools.

Public education is also increasingly dependent on direct corporate sponsorship. In return for funds, schools advertise the products, carry the company logos, modify their courses and even become sources of cheap labour.

When the Victorian government and the McDonalds corporation first agreed to establish accredited courses for senior students, the proposal was generally considered to be outrageous. Now other companies are following suit--BP Australia will soon have its own course, to 'meet the needs of BP retail outlets'. When enrolled in a BP scheme, a student will attend school for four days and work at a service station for the other day. The company will also expect the student to work the equivalent of one day over the weekend.

While public education is starved of funds, government money is being boosted for private schools. In 1996, the Howard government systematised the transfer of funding from public to private education with the passage of the States Grants Act. Under the legislation, federal funding to public education is cut whenever students transfer to private schools--encouraging the growth of private education.

In 1997, the first full year of operation of the Act, 38 new private schools were established and the number of public schools declined by 59. In Victoria, primary schools require 175 students, and secondary schools need 475 students to be considered 'economically viable'. No such criteria exist for private schools, which can be started up with an enrolment of just 12 students. A number of so-called 'garage schools' already exist, receiving 80 percent of their recurrent funding from the federal government.

In this way, a two-class education system is rapidly being established. Elite private schools have state-of-the-art science and technology centres with new computers, lecture theatres with the latest audio-visual equipment, modern art facilities, up-to-date libraries and sports facilities. Public schools in working class areas are deprived of staff and resources, and students are barred from courses if they cannot afford the cost of materials.

The right to a high-quality education from kindergarten through to university should not simply be the prerogative of the wealthy few, but must be made freely available to all young people. The Socialist

Equality Party calls for billions of dollars to be spent to upgrade and properly staff existing public schools and to build new ones equipped with computers and the latest in educational technology, accessible to all, regardless of family income.

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[17 September 1998]

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[12 September 1998]

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