

Australian government pours funds into private schools at the direct expense of public schools

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Despite a nation-wide increase of 8,300 pupils in the government school system this year, \$27.5 million, or around 6 percent of the total, will be cut from federal government funding to public schools under the Howard government's Enrolment Benchmark Adjustment (EBA) scheme.

The EBA is a financial formula introduced in 1997 aimed at undermining public education and accelerating the privatisation of school education. It penalises government schools when the increase in their enrolments is less than the increase in private school enrolments. This year, for example pupil enrolments at private schools rose by 19,270 more than those at public schools. Consequently, under the EBA formula, federal funding to government schools has been cut.

The crippling effect of the EBA on government schools applies even if their enrolments go up. For example, in the north-eastern state of Queensland, public school enrolments increased by 5,000 last year, yet federal government funding declined by \$5 million. New South Wales, the most populous state, has fared the worst: a mere 40 fewer pupils enrolled in government schools in NSW saw their share of federal funding reduced by \$17 million.

The passage of the Howard government's States Grants (Primary and Secondary Education Assistance) Act in December 1996, containing the EBA formula, marked a major turning point in the ongoing decline of the public education system. However, the groundwork for it was prepared by previous federal governments, Labor and Liberal alike, and their state counterparts.

Throughout the twentieth century, Australian public schools have existed alongside schools that are nominally private, yet are also beneficiaries of

government funds. The extent of government subsidies to so-called "private" school is unmatched anywhere in the world and it has steadily increased throughout the post-war period.

In 1974, state and federal governments met just under 40 percent of the cost of a student place at a private school. Present levels of funding have risen to more than 75 percent. This has allowed the wealthier schools to entrench their privileged position and produced an increase in the number of poorer parish, mainly Catholic, schools. Nevertheless, enrolments at private schools remained relatively stable, at around 25 percent of all school enrolments, from 1890 to 1990.

To encourage the drift to the private system that has occurred during the past decade, the Howard government is not only massively boosting funding to private schools—increasing funding by more than 40 percent by 2003-4—it is also cutting deeper into essential funding in the public school sector. Federal government cuts to state schools in NSW over the last three years demonstrate the destructive character of the EBA: \$4.6 million less in 1998, \$10 million less in 1999, now \$17 million less, with projections of another \$26 million to be cut next year.

The impact has been larger class sizes, fewer highly qualified teachers, cutbacks in specialty teachers, under-resourced facilities, lack of course and subject options, growing truancy rates, greater workloads for staff. Overall, the standard of public school education is deteriorating. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that private school enrolments are reaching unprecedented levels, already above 30 percent.

The publication of the latest EBA funding cuts has resulted in something of a public outcry. Press reports

refer to a major row developing over the EBA between the federal and state governments. The teacher unions have pledged to fight. Behind the hype, however, the record of both the state governments and the unions over the last decade reveals no fundamental differences with the Howard government's agenda.

The launching of the EBA itself is a prime example. The States Grants Act came into force without any campaign waged against it by the teacher unions, or any public debate or opposition from the Labor party. Most parents and teachers knew nothing of its existence, let alone what its impact would be on the public school system.

Moreover, the Act was passed after a decade of bi-partisan federal and state government cuts to public education funding, including significant job losses and a battery of measures aimed at forcing schools to compete against each other in order to survive.



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