

Australian government strategy succeeds:

Private school enrolments rise at expense of public schools

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The Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) released figures last month showing student enrolments in private schools have reached record levels. The figures testify to the success of a key strategy, pursued by Labor governments throughout the 1980s and early 1990s and the Howard government since 1996: the undermining of public education and the promotion of a “user-pays” system.

Thirty one percent of all Australian students now attend private schools, representing an historic shift away from the public system. In 1949, the proportion of private students was 20 percent. By 1980, it had risen to 22 percent, followed by a leap to 28 percent by 1990. In 1999 the figure was 30 percent, rising another one percent during the next year.

The deliberate weakening of the public school system has been carried out under the cynical banner of “free choice”. Parents have been encouraged to conclude that taking responsibility for their children's education, and providing them with the best possible standards, means sending them to private schools. Despite the hardships associated with paying hefty private school fees—which continue to rise notwithstanding huge subsidies from both federal and state governments—more and more parents are deciding to opt for fee-paying schools.

A vicious circle has been set in motion. As parents remove their children from public schools, these schools attract less funding. The range of subjects offered, new equipment purchases, specialist teaching staff, building maintenance all decline, and more children are withdrawn. Finally, only those who simply cannot afford private fees remain and the school becomes a place of last resort. The ABS figures give a sense of the pressures that parents are facing.

Of course the government's privatisation strategy is never openly discussed. None of the political parties, or the teacher unions or the media ever challenge the underlying assumption: that quality education requires a competitive environment, where public and private schools compete for “market share”. To the extent that public enrolments are falling, blame is laid on the public schools for failing to promote themselves and advertise more aggressively.

But the decline in public school numbers is a direct consequence of federal and state government policies. In 1996 the Howard government introduced the Enrolment Benchmark Adjustment (EBA) formula, which financially penalises a public school whenever a student transfers to the private system, even if the school's overall population actually increases. The EBA has served to institutionalise the promotion of private education. Since 1998 it has cost public schools in New South Wales (NSW) alone \$54 million.

Last year's federal States Grants Bill showed an even more blatant preference for private schooling. It allocated the bulk of its \$22 billion funding—\$14 billion—to private schools. Public schools, catering for nearly 70 per cent of students, were allocated \$7.6 billion.

Since 1996 private schools have been completely deregulated and all previous conditions on funding eligibility—size, location and curriculum—abolished. Private schools, many of them affiliated to various religious organisations, have sprung up with as few as 10 pupils. They have been accorded generous government subsidies while public schools, providing for hundreds of students, have been deemed unviable and forced to shut down. In the past year, nine

government schools have been closed and 14 private schools opened.

Predictably, teachers are beginning to drift away from the public system and into the private schools. Between 1999 and 2000 the number of teachers in private schools jumped by 2,207 (3.4 percent) to 67,449, while the number of government school teachers increased by just 128 to 150,610.

Not only are teacher numbers up in private schools, but they now have slightly better student-teacher ratios—1 to 14.8 students, compared to 1 to 14.9. The ratio is significantly better in non-Catholic private schools, averaging about 1 to 13. This is under conditions where public schools cater for a far higher proportion of disadvantaged children, and children with learning difficulties.

Education researcher, Barbara Preston, told the *Sydney Morning Herald* that one of the reasons teachers were moving into the private schools was because the increased government funding allowed these schools to pay higher salaries. The drift will further accelerate the decline of the public system.

Poorer schools in working-class suburbs and schools in country areas are consequently facing a chronic shortage of teachers. Many have resorted to holding combined classes, or sending children into the playground during class time, with minimum supervision. The media has taken to highlighting, rather than covering up, these problems, with the aim of scaring more parents into transferring their children to private schools. Regular reports have appeared contrasting public schools, lacking electricity, decent toilet facilities, casual replacement teachers and adequate classrooms, with the lavish facilities that exist in exclusive private schools. Murdoch's *Daily Telegraph*, for example, recently publicised a private school boasting a music centre, complete with orchestra and ensemble areas, 42 practice rooms, a drama studio, a 50-metre pool, rowing club and tennis courts. The school was about to be handed a \$529,750 no-strings-attached government subsidy to help pay off a \$1.7 million loan to purchase further facilities.

The decline in public school enrollments, coupled with deteriorating conditions, has set the stage for a new round of attacks. In the past month, the Labor government in NSW has seized upon the ABS figures to argue for the amalgamation or closure of 10 Sydney

high schools in a major education restructure. An announcement is set to be made on March 25, the second anniversary of the government's re-election. While keeping the specific details of the plan secret, the government intends to rush it through, overturning a legal requirement that two years of "community consultation" take place before any school is closed.



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