Australian parents pay for schools' basic needs

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Starved of funds by state and federal governments, public schools in Australia are increasingly turning to parents to fund basic educational needs, including teachers' salaries, gas and electricity, new school buildings, computers and photocopiers.

A recent *Sydney Morning Herald* survey of Parents and Citizens Associations at 90 government primary schools in the state of New South Wales reported that individual school P & C groups raised funds ranging from $200 to more than $100,000 each year. This does not take into account the voluntary labour, individual donations and payment of student fees provided by P & Cs.

The survey results reveal not only the extent to which governments are depriving schools of essential funding, but also the stark inequality between schools in wealthier and poorer areas.

While parents at some schools could raise very little, one primary school, Mosman Public, on Sydney's affluent north shore, raised $100,000 last year to pay for teachers for gifted and talented students and for those with learning difficulties, as well as computers, photocopiers and classroom equipment. Parents at a country school, Young North, raised $300,000 over three years for a hall containing a basketball court. Carlingford West Public School P & C, in Sydney's upper middle class north-west, spent $1,000 on security guards during school holidays after a series of break-ins to the school.

Despite paying lip service to one of the most important facets of modern education—the use of computers and information technology resources—governments have effectively shifted the burden onto parents to properly equip schools. While schools have been supplied with basic computers, parents have been left to raise funds for most of the associated and recurrent expenses, which can far exceed the initial outlay on hardware. According to the survey, parents at nearly half the schools were paying to lease or purchase computers or for cabling, networking or building computer rooms.

In addition, parents were paying for signs, literacy and numeracy programs, books, shelters, seating and footpaths—even crayons and toilet paper. At some schools, parents formed working bees on weekends to clean unhygienic toilet blocks.

Moreover, parents at almost 10 percent of NSW primary schools were directly paying for, or contributing to, teachers' salaries. This represents a marked shift in public education. Until the mid-1980s, governments undertook the entire core responsibility of recruiting, training and paying teachers. Since then, under-funding and under-staffing have reached such levels that parents feel obliged to hire extra teachers to ensure that their children have an adequate education.

Ray Ogilvie, principal of Seaforth Public in Sydney's better-off northern suburbs, told the *Herald* that parents at his school decided to hire an extra teacher to reduce class sizes to 22 or 23.

A significant number of parents were raising funds to employ teachers for students with learning difficulties because the state Labor government tightened the formula for allocating these teachers to schools. Payment of casual relief teachers by P & C associations was widespread. Other P & Cs had paid for sports teachers, kindergarten aides and computer teachers.

At the same time, with many families under economic pressure, frequently forcing both parents to work longer hours, it is often difficult to organise fund-raising and voluntary work at schools—whether running the canteen, assisting teachers or performing other tasks. One principal commented: "Essentially NSW

schools run on the goodwill of parents. It's a scandal. Parents don't really have the time for volunteering on the P & C, evident by the number of children in before and after school care."

The survey also showed that businesses seeking entry into the lucrative education market, such as McDonalds fast food outlets, were exploiting schools' lack of funding. In one deal, schools received 25 percent of the profits from "fun nights," in which students and parents went to McDonalds to eat. In another scheme, schools ran "cheeseburger days," where McDonalds charged schools $1.60 per cheeseburger, which the schools sold for $2.50.

NSW Education Minister John Aquilina initially attempted to discredit the *Herald* survey, claiming that the state's public schools had millions of dollars stockpiled in bank accounts. Then, in the wake of polls pointing to a slump in support for the government, Aquilina and Premier Bob Carr issued a press release announcing a $100 million program of capital works for government schools for 2001-02. Carr made a point of appearing on the nightly television news opening up new primary school toilet blocks.

In fact, the $100 million had been allocated previously in the May state budget. Furthermore, it was not expected to even cover cuts to capital works since 1995 by both Liberal and Labor state governments in order to help pay for the Sydney Olympic Games. Maintenance funding has been pared back even more severely, with schools facing a 5.7 percent reduction in last year's state budget and a 4.5 percent cut in the current budget.

Similar trends have become entrenched nationally, according to a report, *Our Future,* published earlier this year, based on a survey of some 2,500 government primary school principals in every Australian state. Although half the school principals across the country responded to the survey, the report's finding attracted virtually no media coverage.

The principals stated overwhelmingly that government funds were inadequate. "Grants have not increased in real terms for years, however, costs have gone up: utilities, consumables and casual teacher's salaries," the survey commented. "Each year, less money can be devoted to educational programs."

Principals said they had to choose between making cuts to school programs or turning to funds raised by parents. Not only had costs gone up, but schools were expected to do more. The primary curriculum had been expanded into eight Key Learning Areas, including music, the arts, science and physical education, without a corresponding increase in resources.

Schools reported insufficient funds to teach even basic literacy skills. Books and other resources were frequently unsuitable or lacking. Overall, *Our Future* reported that 91 percent of principals saw the reliance on outside funding sources as a problem with 85 percent expecting the gap between rich and poor schools to widen.

One principal estimated the recurrent costs for maintaining the school's IT program to be in excess of $20,000 per annum, almost as much as the school's total curriculum budget. Computers often remained idle for months at a time because schools did not have the money to pay for their wiring, maintenance or to train staff to use them.

The impact on disadvantaged schools was compounded in some states by programs rewarding schools that attracted funds from parents, doubling the value of their contributions. Public schools in better-off areas, boosted by such matching grants, were more likely to maintain their "share" of student enrolments. Poorer schools, without additional funds from parents, faced declining enrolments, setting in place a vicious circle of further funding cuts and threats of closure.