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Funding And Secondary School Choice In Australia: A Historical Consideration

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Abstract: Since public funds first began to flow into non-government schools in the mid-1970s, successive Commonwealth and state governments have steadily increased the amount of funding they have provided to non-government schools (Bonnor & Caro, 2007; Macfarlane, 2003). The outcome of this funding decision has brought the cost of a 'private school education' within reach of many more Australian families in the 21st century (Rothman, 2003; Symes & Gulson, 2005). This paper explores the historical backdrop within which secondary schooling is provided in Western Australia today in order to better understand how it influences and/or predisposes the secondary school choices currently available to parents in Western Australia. The issue of funding is considered within an historical account of Australia's dual system of school provision whereby government and non-government school sectors operate in parallel. Details of successive changes to state and Commonwealth school funding policies in Australia since the early 1970s provide a backdrop for consideration of the impact of funding on school choice.

Introduction

It was so much easier when I was a kid. Back then, everyone in town just went to the local high school. My parents didn't get all this grief about "good schools" and "bad schools", and they definitely couldn't afford to send us to a private school. Now it's all pretty confusing with so many choices and high stakes attached to getting your kids into the "right" school. You know – a bad decision now could have a big effect on the doors that open for your kids in the future. People will say we've got rocks in our heads if we send our daughter to (our local high school) next year – I've heard it's a bit rough – so if she doesn't get into this specialist program, we'll probably send her to a private school. Which ever one we can get her into. (Cahill, 2009, p.8)

The comment encapsulates numerous factors that will be explored through this paper. Firstly, the tone of the comment implies an overall sense of anxiety. Evidence of parental anxiety associated with school choice has been reported by several researchers, all of whom link the anxiety to the seemingly inescapable obligation to choose, combined with the high stakes and uncertainties attached to those choices (Campbell, 2005; Cannold, 2007; Forsey, 2006; Freund, 2001; Vickers, 2005; Walford 2006). The comment also demonstrates something of the Australian vernacular: that non-government schools are widely referred to as 'private' schools and government schools are understood to be the default 'public' or 'state' school option.

The first issue explicitly raised by the mother in her comment is the extent to which school choices have expanded in Australia in a generation. Twenty-five years ago when she

entered high school as a student, school choice was largely a non-issue. There are three dimensions to the expanded choice she now faces as a parent:

- a rapid increase in the number and range of non-government schools (Symes & Gulson, 2005, Vickers, 2005);
- diversification of provision within the government school sector (Angus et al, 2002, Campbell, 2005); and
- relaxation of 'school zone' rules whereby a student's residential address had previously determined which government school he/she was allowed to attend (Angus, 1998, Forsey, 2006).

Another issue raised in the mother's comment relates to the fees of non-government schools. Through to the early 1970s when she attended a secondary school, non-government schools received very little public funding so their running costs were drawn almost entirely from private sources; usually a combination of church contributions and tuition fees (Burke & Spaul, 2001). Fees at prestigious high-fee independent schools were beyond the reach of most Australian families, while low-fee (mainly Catholic) schools struggled to survive (Karmel, 1973; Potts, 2005). At that time, parents who opted to send their children to low-fee schools did so primarily due to religious or philosophical convictions, and not on the assumption of superior educational outcomes (Department of Education Services [DES], 2001).

In 1973, the Australian Commonwealth Government sought to reduce the plight of poor schools with a needs-based program, administered by an Australian Schools Commission, providing financial aid to schools (Karmel, 2000; Rothman, 2003). A pivotal feature of this differential funding program was that it did not distinguish between government and non-government schools, but rather, between rich and poor schools (Aulich, 2003; Whitlam, 1973).

Since public funds first began to flow into non-government schools in the mid-1970s, successive Commonwealth and state governments have steadily increased the amount of funding they have provided to non-government schools (Bonnor & Caro, 2007; Macfarlane, 2003). By 2001, public funds paid for approximately 40 percent of the running costs of the most wealthy non-government schools and some of the poorest non-government schools are entirely funded through the public purse (Vickers, 2005). Not only has this level of public funding enhanced the quality of facilities, resources and programs that non-government schools are able to provide (Cannold, 2007; Vickers, 2005), but it has also enabled them to achieve these improvements without a commensurate increase in tuition fees (Symes & Gulson, 2005). This, combined with increased disposable incomes for most Australian households in the past thirty years – ABS (2005) data indicates that in the last decade alone, disposable incomes for most Australian households have risen by approximately 20 percent – has brought the cost of a 'private school education' within reach of many more Australian families (Rothman, 2003; Symes & Gulson, 2005).

During the past decades in which non-government school affordability and availability has increased, confidence in government schools has declined (Bonnor & Caro, 2007; Campbell, 2005; DES, 2001; Forsey, 2006; Freund, 2001). This is evident in the words of the mother (from the parent's quotation given above) saying that people would think they had "rocks in our heads" if her family sent their daughter to their local government secondary school because it is reputed to be "a bit rough". This implies that a major aversion to the local government school is that it is reputed to have a large proportion of unruly students who, at best, will disrupt her daughter's classes and at worst, will bully her daughter or lead her astray. It might also imply a degree of concern about what people will think; some form of social pressure to send her daughter to a school that has more prestige than the local government secondary school.

This paper explores the historical backdrop within which secondary schooling is provided in Western Australia today in order to better understand how it influences and/or predisposes the secondary school choices currently available to parents in Western Australia. The issue of funding is considered within an historical account of Australia's dual system of

school provision whereby government and non-government school sectors operate in parallel. Details of successive changes to state and Commonwealth school funding policies in Australia since the early 1970s provide a backdrop for consideration of the impact of funding on school choice.

Historical Backdrop

The earliest Australian schools were either endowed private schools (modelled on English grammar schools) or charitable church schools which focused as much on Bible studies as they did on literacy and numeracy (Burke & Spaul, 2001). Early colonial governments recognised the need for an educated populace, so became involved in the provision of schooling by subsidising charity schools and/or by setting up a small number of state-run schools (Aulich, 2003). Despite this supplementary government support, the quality and availability of schooling in the 1860s was variable, student attendance was sporadic and school outcomes were widely considered to be failing a growing nation-state (Birrell, 2001). This situation gave rise to a Royal Commission in the colony of Victoria which recommended the establishment of a centralised system of state-run schools which would be “free, compulsory and secular” (Aulich, 2003, p. 2) as a remedy to concerns that the existing supplementary funding arrangements “would lead to a two-tier system with public education as a second-class system, dividing citizens according to their wealth and religious affiliation” (Aulich, 2003, p. 2). Key recommendations from the Victorian Royal Commission, including the decision that public funds should not be given to schools that choose to remain independent of the state-run school system, were enacted in Victoria in 1872. The Victorian model was subsequently adopted by other Australian colonies (Birrell, 2001).

An important feature of the Victorian model of state-funded school provision is that it did not preclude the continued, independent operation of a small number of ‘private’ schools that were able to function independently of public funds (Birrell, 2001; Reid, 2006). Nor did it prevent the Catholic Bishops of Australia from establishing their own Catholic school system to enable Catholic families to adhere to a decree that the Bishops issued in 1879 stating that the children of all Catholic families must regularly attend Catholic schools (Aulich, 2003; Potts, 2005). This decree was not in response to poor educational outcomes or low attendance, but rather, concern among the Bishops that a large number of Catholic children were attending state-run schools and, in the process, were being placed “in proximate danger of perversion” (Potts, 2005, para. 10). It is noteworthy that Symes and Gulson (2005, p. 22) use similar emotive language in their criticism of the many low-fee non-government schools that are springing up today on the fringes of Australian cities with the claim that those schools market themselves as “the antithesis of the ‘drugged’, ‘sexualised’ and ‘bedevilled’ state school”.

The model recommended in 1872 by the Victorian Royal Commission and subsequently adopted across Australia led to a dual structure of school provision, which continues to this day whereby government and non-government school sectors operate in parallel. Further, the non-government sector comprised two groups: Catholic systemic schools and ‘other’ independent schools (Aulich, 2003; McCarthy, 2007; Reid, 2006).

At the beginning, the major distinction between the government and non-government sectors was that while government schools received public funds; non-government schools did not (Bonnor & Caro, 2007; Reid, 2006). In return for the public funding that government schools received, they guaranteed universal access to schooling for all school-aged children and implemented a state-controlled, quality assured curriculum. While the (from hereon, ‘non-government’) schools that chose to remain outside the state-run system were not pleased to lose access to the public funds that colonial governments had previously provided, their decision to remain outside the state-run system enabled them to retain their independence with respect to

curriculum (including sectarian instruction), staffing, students, teaching, facilities and quality assurance (Aulich, 2003; Burke & Spaul 2001; Potts, 2005; Reid, 2005).

The absence of public funding for Catholic and independent non-government schools and the divergent strategies they took to ensure their viability had a major bearing on the character each group of schools within the non-government sector has developed over time (Potts, 2005). The strategy taken by the Catholic sector was to rely on religious orders to staff its schools. This enabled systemic Catholic schools to operate at minimal cost to parents and ensured maintenance of a strong Catholic ethos which upheld equity, compassion and support for the down-trodden (Ryan, 2004). The non-Catholic non-government schools, many of which were affiliated with the Anglican Church or other Protestant Christian denominations, were not able to draw staff from religious orders in the same manner, so they were forced instead to charge high fees (Aulich, 2003). This limited these schools to high-status wealthy families and had the effect of making such schools more exclusive and prestigious (Aulich, 2003; Caldwell, 2005; Townsend, 2005).

By 1901 when the six British colonies in Australia federated and formed a central Commonwealth government, each colony already possessed a system of publicly-funded schools so when the Australian Constitution was agreed, it did not include Commonwealth powers pertaining to education (Burke & Spaul, 2001). Given the nation-building role that is often attributed to schooling (Durkeim, 1950 cited in Elwell, 2003), one might expect education to feature among the responsibilities vested in the central government of a new nation. Paradoxically, recollections from Australia's first Prime Minister, Henry Parkes (1892) suggest that this may have been the very reason education was omitted: while the decision for the six colonies to federate formalised their political, military and economic ties, it did not translate into, nor did it reflect, a unified national identity. Immediately after Federation, inter-state rivalries persisted. State governments maintained their state-centric focus on building communities, industries, security and infrastructure within their own spheres. Nation-state affiliations did not extend beyond state borders and state governments were keen to maintain control over education as a pivotal instrument of shaping the hearts, minds and skills of their own youth (Andrews, 1993; Arnold 2001). Burke and Spaul (2001, para. 7) cite a 1911 international review of education conducted by Monroe in which the American "observed that it was 'perhaps unfortunate' that an education constitutional power had not been included in 'the act of federation' in 1901".

Public Funding For Non-Government Schools

Public funds first began to trickle towards non-government schools in the 1960s through State Aid programs introduced by state governments (Burke & Spaul, 2001; Aulich, 2003; Reid, 2005). This was quickly followed by Commonwealth grants, on a dollar-for-dollar basis, to assist with the development of science blocks in government and non-government schools (Burke & Spaul, 2001; Potts 2005).

Potts (2005) outlines a combination of factors that led to this significant change in government policy at state and Commonwealth levels. In part, it concerned seeking electoral advantage by the governments of the day but it also related to a funding crisis, especially in Catholic schools, which "could no longer rely on bazaars and fetes to fund increasingly costly schooling" (Potts, 2005, para. 16).

According to Potts (2005), by the 1960s, many Catholic schools were in serious danger of closure: the number of people entering religious orders (and becoming low-cost teachers in Catholic schools) had reduced to a trickle, the baby-boomer generation had reached school age, post-war migrant children (many of whom were middle-European Catholics) required schooling, huge class sizes were no longer acceptable and the cost of bringing aged school buildings up to

modern standards had become prohibitive. This crisis came to a head in Goulburn, New South Wales in 1962 when the local Catholic primary school was instructed by health authorities to install three new toilets. The Bishop of Goulburn claimed that the school could not afford to meet this requirement, so he closed the school. This forced all of the school's students to seek enrolment at local government schools, which could not cater for the sudden influx. After a week the Catholic primary re-opened, but the political point had been made. The Prime Minister of the day, Robert Menzies, saw the electoral advantage to be gained over the issue and changed Liberal Party policy to include State Aid for science blocks in non-government schools and Commonwealth scholarships for students in government and non-government schools (Australian Broadcasting Commission [ABC], 1997a).

The story of Goulburn Catholic School was selected for inclusion among the *TimeFrame* television series produced by the ABC because the producers of the series considered it to be a "turning point in Australian history – moments and events which changed Australia and its people from what they had been to what they would become" (ABC, 1997b, para. 2). Burke and Spaul (2001) indicate that when the first round of State Aid to non-government schools and Commonwealth scholarships to students in all school sectors was first provided in the 1960s, the very fact that extra funds were finally flowing into schools was greeted with widespread relief by teachers and the wider community. In this context, the fact that the 'no public funds to non-government schools' principle had been breached did not attract much dissent. Burke and Spaul (2001) suggest that a major reason for this was that the amount received by each school was initially modest and was calculated according to a flat per-capita basis.

Not everyone, however, supported this significant (and quickly bi-partisan) shift in education policy. In 1965, opponents of State Aid founded the Council for Defence of Government Schools (DOGS). This group was concerned that public funding of non-government schools would lead to a reduction of funds provided to government schools (ABC, 1997a). They argued that the principle of education provision being "free, compulsory, secular, universal and public" (DOGS, 2007, para. 2) would be compromised by State Aid because public funding of church-affiliated schools would embroil the government in sectarian activities (Potts, 2001) and further, that equity of school provision would be compromised:

If we are to have a society in which all children get an equal opportunity in education, this can only be done by a free public system, controlled and funded by the taxpayers. (Stella Bath cited in ABC, 1997a, para. 14).

To test the legality of publicly funding sectarian-based schooling, DOGS mounted High Court action against the Catholic Bishop of Sandhurst in 1978. Potts (2005) reports that the DOGS case was lost by a 6-1 majority verdict, but the furore did lead to the inclusion of the following clause in the *Schools Commission Act 1973* (later replaced by the Schools Council) which, according to the Australian Education Union (AEU) "was conveniently lost and forgotten" (AEU, 2001, p. 1) when the Commonwealth government, under the previous Prime Minister, John Howard, abolished the Schools Council in 1999:

The primary obligation, in relation to education, for governments (is) to provide and maintain government school systems that are of the highest standard and are open, without fees or religious tests, to all children.

(*Schools Commission Act 1973* cited by AEU, 2001, p. 1).

The amount of Commonwealth government funding provided to education – for universities, schools and early childhood – was again boosted from 1972 when, after more than two decades of conservative Liberal control of the Commonwealth government, the Australian Labor Party (ALP) came to power, led by Gough Whitlam as Prime Minister (Aulich, 2003; Burke & Spaul, 2001). As Whitlam proudly told a national convention of teachers organised by the Australian Teachers Federation just thirteen months after his government's election:

We have almost doubled Commonwealth expenditure on education; we have established a permanent Schools Commission to give aid to all

schools, without distinction, on a 'needs' basis; we have assumed full financial responsibility for tertiary education and have abolished fees; for the first time we are giving assistance to teachers' colleges and pre-school teachers' colleges on the same basis as universities and colleges of advanced education; we are giving much more generous allowances to students and have more than trebled the number of teaching scholarships. (Whitlam, 1974, para. 7)

Data from the ABS reported by Burke and Spaul (2001) show that government spending on all sectors of education during the Whitlam years leapt to 6.6 percent of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) in 1975 compared with 3.7 percent in the mid-60s and 5.8 percent in the early-80s. Approximately 60 percent of this overall education expenditure is directed towards schools; the balance goes to the tertiary sector.

A key feature of the schools' funding policy introduced by the Whitlam government was a differential allocative mechanism that Whitlam referred to as "distributive justice" (Burke & Spaul, 2001, para. 58) whereby, without distinction between the government and non-government sectors, schools with the lowest income/assets and the greatest needs received the largest amount of per-capita funding. Calculations used to determine each school's allocation were based on a formula that incorporated the socio-economic status of the student cohort plus the school's existing assets (Karmel, 2000). The allocative mechanism was central to recommendations contained in the first report on Australian schooling prepared by the Whitlam government's Schools Commission, and came to be known as the landmark *Karmel Report* (1973). The report recommended a departure from dollar-for-dollar grants (which the poorest schools could not afford) and flat per-capita allocations on the basis that:

If you give a little bit to everyone, you do nothing to raise the relative standards of the lowest on the scale. Inequalities are perpetuated. (Whitlam, 1974, para. 9)

Successive Commonwealth governments have retained the principle of differential funding to government and non-government schools, but the formulae used by each new government to determine distributive weightings have reflected the prevailing government's view of a 'fair go' and each change of funding policy has therefore created relative winners and losers (Edgar, 1999). In general, past Labor governments (Whitlam 1972-1975, Hawke and Keating 1983-1996) applied weightings that favour low-income, low-asset schools, while Liberal governments (Fraser 1975-1983 and Howard 1996-2008) introduced "corrective weightings" (Aulich, 2003, p. 5) which have proportionally increased the amount of funds provided to more wealthy schools (Aulich, 2003, Burke & Spaul, 2001).

Figure 1 illustrates how the corrective weightings of Liberal governments have favoured the non-government sector. For every dollar of Commonwealth funds that has been spent per student in government schools between 1977 and 2005, the graph shows the corresponding number of Commonwealth dollars that have been spent per student in non-government schools. Superimposed on the graph is the period of the Hawke and Keating Labor Party Commonwealth governments from 1983-1991 and 1991-1996 respectively.

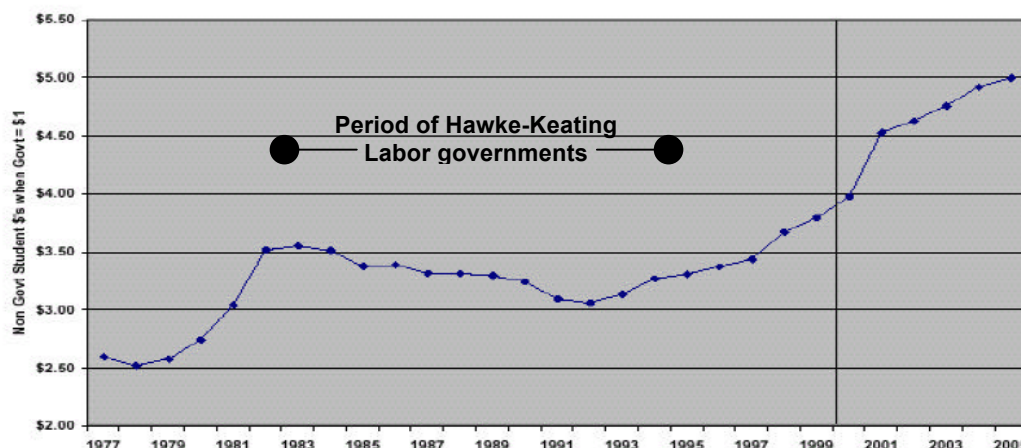


Figure 1: Ratio of Commonwealth per-capita expenditure on non-government students for every dollar of Commonwealth per-capita expenditure on government school students
(Source – AEU, 2001, p. 3)

Periods in the above graph of relative per-capita gains for the non-government sector coincide with Liberal governments – Fraser government up to 1983 and Howard government from 1996 – whereas a lengthy plateau occurred between 1983 and 1996 when Labor governments were in power (AEU, 2001).

The graph in Figure 1 refers only to funding from Commonwealth sources. It does not show funding provided by the states to government or non-government schools. The amounts that different states provide to non-government schools vary (Angus, 2000). In Western Australia, State Aid to non-government schools is calculated as a per capita grant based on 25 percent of the average per-capita cost of educating a child in a government school (DET, 2006). This average cost has risen in recent years as the ratio of high-need, high-cost students in government schools has increased (Edgar, 1999; Vickers, 2005; DES, 2001).

There are two major reasons for the increasing ratio of high-need, high-cost students in government schools. Firstly, the larger government sector has more established and substantial support mechanisms for such students and their families (Lucey & Reay, 2002, Mukherjee, 1999). Secondly, these students are less readily accepted into over-subscribed non-government schools that can afford to be selective without compromising their access to public funding (AEU, 2001; Bonnor & Caro, 2007; DES, 2001; Ryan, 2005; Vickers, 2005). A constant and growing challenge – and unavoidable cost – for government schools is that they are obliged by statute to take all students:

irrespective of social background, economic circumstance or location... 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 (DES, 2001, p. 33)

The very ability of private schools to be selective and weed out disruptive and/or failing students significantly contributes to their attractiveness, particularly in secondary settings, where parents do not want their adolescent children to be mixing with the ‘wrong crowd’ (Forsey, 2006; Symes & Gulson 2005). This point is illustrated in the following exchange between the researcher and a colleague:

Colleague: “The key factors for me when choosing a school for my kids were pastoral care and time on task. I knew both these factors were going to be better at the non-government school we chose for our kids”.

When probed about the ‘time on task’ element, the colleague elaborated: “Disruptive students weren’t allowed to stay at my kids’ school, so lessons were not being constantly interrupted”.

When further probed to ask what school the parent thought the disruptive students went to, the response was: “Well, I guess they went to a government school”. (Cahill, 2009,p.213)

In 2000 when Dr David Kemp was the Liberal government’s Commonwealth Minister for Education, Training and Youth Affairs, he claimed that Commonwealth generosity towards all schools

(government and non-government) since the mid-1990s had “enabled some states to limit their investment in government schooling” (Kemp, 2000, p. 18). He further suggested that some states had come to rely on the drift of students from government to non-government schools as a mechanism to shift costs away from their own schools. Two years later, his successor, Dr Brendan Nelson, highlighted savings to the public purse achieved through support of the non-government sector claiming that if all non-government students switched to government schools, it would cost states an extra \$3 billion per year (Nelson, 2003).

Australian Bureau of Statistics’ (2005) figures show that the wealthiest non-government schools in Australia receive approximately 45 per cent of their running costs from public sources (the balance comprising tuition fees and private donations) while the poorest non-government schools receive all of their funding from public sources. In recent years, there has been a marked increase in the number of non-government schools in the low-wealth range (Burke & Spaul, 2001; Symes & Gulson, 2005). It follows that a growing proportion of non-government schools draw an ever-increasing proportion of their operating costs from public sources (Vickers, 2005).

As the level of public funding for any given non-government school approaches 100 per cent, a key point of difference that has historically separated non-government schools from schools within the government sector is lost: that of privately-sourced funding (Reid, 2005; Townsend, 2005). A crucial difference that remains, however, is the extent to which the non-government school is able to maintain its independence from centralized state control (Aulich, 2001; McGaw, 2000; Reid, 2005).

Aulich (2001) examined regulatory and accountability requirements that apply to non-government schools in Australia and compared them with arrangements for public and private schools in other parts of the world. He noted that many of the current requirements for Australia’s non-government schools were established some decades ago when the amount of funds were significantly smaller. Overall, Aulich (2001) found that regulation of Australian non-government schools is relatively low and that financial and educational accountability requirements imposed on government schools are comparatively more stringent. He concluded that:

The relatively low level of government regulation of private schools in Australia has given them a competitive edge over public schools, thereby diminishing the equality of educational opportunity and encouraging large numbers of middle and upper class families to abandon public schools in favour of private schools. (Aulich, 2001, p. 8)

It should be noted that while the level of government regulation of non-government schools may be comparatively low, parental scrutiny of the school and its teachers through school boards and regular contact at the ‘classroom door’ is relatively high because paying customers expect to see value for money (Holmes, 2006b).

The rationale used by past Australian Liberal governments to provide public funds to non-government schools reflects the argument put by the American economist, Milton Friedman (1955), who suggested that market forces, through parental choice, should be allowed to shape school provision. He claimed that while public education is essential to democratic society and a strong economy, governments should extract themselves from actual school provision. In place of governments, private providers should be encouraged to establish schools and compete with each other for market-share, thus ensuring quality, efficiency and variety of service. In recognition of the community benefits derived from public education, Friedman argued that governments should contribute to the cost of schooling but, given the corresponding individual benefits that are also derived from schooling, parents should also help to pay.

The rationale used by Australian Labor governments for providing funds to non-government schools also reflects the principle of choice, but not in order to stimulate competing school markets. Rather, to achieve equality and widespread opportunity through distributive justice (Whitlam, 1973). This was manifest in the Whitlam years with free higher education and proportionally greater levels of funding to low-income schools, a policy that unintentionally “resuscitated Australia’s dual education system” (Burke & Spaul, 2001, para. 63) and ensured the survival of many non-government secondary schools through the 1980s.

Numerous researchers are critical of the differential funding formula currently used by the Commonwealth government to determine allocations provided to government and non-government schools (Aulich, 2003; Bonnor & Caro, 2007; Burke & Spaul, 2001; Campbell, 2005; DES, 2001; Preston, 2000; Reid, 2001; Symes & Gulson, 2005; Vickers & Singh, 2005). They claim that the policy drives competition and duplication between schools and sectors that have previously been highly

collaborative, and drives deeper gaps between rich and poor. These concerns have also been voiced by state government school systems, claiming that Commonwealth funding policies are consigning government schools (secondary in particular) to a 'residual' or 'sink school' status catering mainly for the poor (Caldwell, 2005; DES, 2001; WASSEA, 2007).

These concerns are supported by data reported by Mukherjee (1999), which show a direct relationship between socio-economic status and non-government school enrolments. In the secondary context, over 60 percent of students from the highest socio-economic decile attend non-government schools while over 80 percent of students from the lowest decile attend government schools. The economically skewed nature of the non-government school population was reiterated in 2003 by the then Commonwealth Minister for Education, Science and Training, Dr Brendan Nelson, in a statement he made to counter the suggestion that independent and Catholic schools are the bastion of the wealthy in Australia:

ABS statistics show that one in every five children who come from families with an annual income of less than \$20,900 attends a Catholic or independent school. ... (and) ... Nearly fifty per cent of students who come from families with an annual income of over \$104,000 attend a state government school. (Nelson, 2003, para. 12)

If an inverse analysis is applied to the figures quoted above by Dr Nelson, it could be said that while 80 percent of children from low income families attend government schools, the same schooling sector serves less than 50 percent of children from high income families. Further, as noted by Campbell (2005) and Forsey (2006), middle class families who send their children to government schools invariably live in more affluent suburbs where the local government school enjoys a good reputation whereas there has been "an exodus from (government) schools ... located in the poorer parts of town" (Forsey, 2006, p. 26).

Secondary Schooling In Western Australia

The early history of schooling in Australia focused on a grounding in basic reading, writing and arithmetic but the parallel functions that schools served to engender conformity and a healthy work ethic among the working class were never far from the surface (Wight, 2003; Parkes, 1892; Potts, 2005). It follows that the first state schools in Western Australia had modest aspirations and catered primarily for the children of working class families, providing a form of schooling that reflected the nomenclature of the legislation under which they operated: the *Elementary School Education Act 1893* (Bartlett, 1972). In contrast, the first secondary schools in Australia were mid-nineteenth century institutions established by private and church interests to cater for older children from middle and upper class families, preparing them for entry into universities (Angus et al, 2002) initially in England and later, in Sydney and Melbourne. They were based on English grammar schools and set the secondary schooling standard to which the government sector aspired several decades later when state governments established their own secondary schools (Angus et. al, 2002).

By the start of the twentieth century, demand for a more skilled workforce in Western Australia was only partially being met through post-primary programs provided by elementary schools and the Perth Technical College which was established by a coalition of public and business interests in 1900 (Burke & Spaul, 2001). This training bottle-neck, in combination with political agitation from civil libertarians who urged governments to broaden schooling options for working-class children reached a tipping point in 1906 when the Directors of Education from each state across Australia met and advocated government provision of secondary schooling on the basis that:

Working class children were entitled to secondary and university education and the state had an obligation to extend that access ... the restriction of a secondary education to the relative few who could attend existing private schools did not serve the interests of the modern State. (Angus, et al, 2003, p. 12)

By 1913, each Australian state had established at least one government secondary school. In Western Australia, Perth Modern School was established in 1911. All of these government secondary schools were state-subsidised, fee-paying institutions to which entry was gained through academic selection (Angus et al, 2003). The original intent was for these schools to provide a broad, comprehensive curriculum incorporating vocational streams alongside the academic, but the selected

clientele (students and their parents) preferred the academic streams, and the high-status academic courses were also favoured by the schools' principals (Angus et al, 2003).

These (first government secondary) schools adopted the rituals of the prestigious private schools designed to build 'character' – prefect systems, form captains, school songs. Thus, (such schools, including Perth Modern School in Western Australia) ... became the poor man's versions of the public (non-government) school. (Angus et al, 2003, p. 15)

From the outset, a key function of government secondary schools was to prepare students for teacher training and other tertiary education which is why the establishment of government secondary schools in each state closely coincided with the establishment of state universities (Angus et al, 2003). In the case of Western Australia, Perth Modern School's establishment in 1911 was quickly followed by the University of Western Australia in 1913. This close link was also manifest by universities taking a pivotal role in the process of secondary school exit examinations (Angus, 1998; DES, 2001). This continues to influence the final two years of secondary schooling today whereby the high status, high stakes school exit assessments are still configured as 'tertiary entrance examinations' rather than as broader assessments of school learning (DET, 2001; Robson, 2005).

Between 1911 and the start of the Great Depression in 1924, the Western Australian government school system established four more government secondary schools; one in each of Kalgoorlie, Bunbury, Albany and Northam (Angus et al., 2002). During this period, the claim has been made that selective government secondary schools did "little to advance mass educational opportunities or socially inclusive and democratic secondary schooling" (Burke & Spaul, 2001, para. 65) but that a high level of success was achieved in this regard by non-selective regional secondary schools because they offered (and there was significant take-up of) vocational programs for non-academic students alongside more academic programs for students with commensurate aspirations and abilities. This model of schooling, which Burke and Spaul (2001, para. 63) refer to as "the multilateral or omnibus high school" became a popular model of government secondary school provision, reflecting the comprehensive schooling model spreading across Britain at the same time (Angus, 2001; Young, 1998).

From the mid-1920s, the Great Depression and then the First and Second World Wars limited the growth of government secondary schooling in Australia (Burke & Spaul, 2001; Angus et al, 2002). The times of austerity not only hit state education budgets, but also affected non-government schools "whose overall enrolments collapsed by nearly 20% between 1930 and 1934" (Burke & Spaul, 2001, para. 45) due to reduced family incomes. It is noteworthy that in some parts of Australia, "government schools in many mortgage belt areas are experiencing dramatic increases in student numbers, attributed in part to interest rate rises and pressure on family budgets" (ABC, 2008, para. 2), but this has not occurred in Western Australia which is experiencing an on-going resources boom and is being protected from the economic down-turn observed in other parts of Australia (ABS, 2008).

The situation changed quickly after the Second World War with population growth through post-war migration and the baby-boomer influx (Potts, 2005). It was also a time of sustained economic growth across Australia, coinciding with the realisation among many Australian families that secondary education not only provided a pathway to further education, but also improved employment prospects (Angus et al, 2002). This was a period of rapid growth for government secondary schooling, not least because the government sector had sole access to the funds that were flowing into state coffers as a result of the strong post-war economy (Burke & Spaul, 2001).

After 1945 State secondary education is defined by the magnitude and pace of its physical expansion and the genuine attempts to introduce from overseas practice a comprehensiveness in location, curriculum and culture, for at least the 12-15 years old cohort (Burke & Spaul, 2001, para. 61).

Angus et al (2002) observe that while government secondary schools derived significant benefits from the post-war economic boom, primary schools remained the 'poor cousin'. In part, this uneven attention was a by-product of gradual increases to the school leaving age through the 1950s and 1960s. Not only did this mean that secondary schools had to expand to cater for larger numbers, it also created a group of (largely disaffected) students at secondary school, many of whom would previously have left school as soon as they could (Young, 1998). Most of these conscripted students attended government schools (Bonnor & Caro, 2007; Burke & Spaul, 2005; Campbell, 2005), prompting the need for government secondary schools in particular to develop new programs and methods to engage these students.

Of all the stages in schooling, secondary education is the most sensitive to both personal aspirations and societal demands. (Burke & Spaul, 2001, para. 13)

Many of the government secondary schools that were built in Western Australia during the 1950s and 1960s continue to operate in their original buildings and are now shabby and dated (WASSEA, 2007). Requests by school administrators to renew or replace these buildings compete for public dollars with every other government school in the state, and with pleas for governments to improve hospitals, roads and other public infrastructure (Vickers, 2005). In contrast, many of Western Australia’s independent schools boast newer buildings and more modern facilities. Vickers (2005, p. 269) claims “many private schools now offer opulent facilities that contrast sharply with their public sector competitors”. This is partly because more than half of these schools are less than 20 years old (ABS, 2006) but is also due to their resource base. Vickers (2005) cites research by Watson (2003) which found that in addition to recurrent grants from state and Commonwealth government sources, “in 27 percent of private schools, the fees *alone* exceed the average resources per student in a government school” (Vickers, 2005, p. 269, original emphasis). Further, the relative independence of non-government schools enables them greater scope to appeal for special-purpose funding from (often wealthy) alumni, school communities and governments to build or acquire improved facilities according to their own analysis of needs. Similar flexibility is also available to Catholic schools, but their school communities tend to be less wealthy (Potts, 2005; Kelley & Evans, 2004) so funds for capital works can be as difficult to secure for Catholic schools as they are for government schools.

Over the past two decades, the number of non-government schools that cater for secondary students across Australia has increased by almost 33 percent, whereas the corresponding number of government schools catering for secondary students has dropped by more than 4 per cent (ABS, 2006). Within the non-government sector, most of the growth has occurred among independent schools, as illustrated below in Table 1.

| | 1986 | 1996 | 2006 | Percent increase 1986 to 2006 |
|-------------|------|------|------|-------------------------------|
| Government | 730 | 764 | 771 | 5.61% |
| Catholic | 148 | 149 | 159 | 7.43% |
| Independent | 85 | 106 | 137 | 61.18% |

Table 1: Number of Government, Catholic and Independent Schools in Western Australia in each of 1986, 1996 and 2006
(ABS, 2006, Table 1)

While the above data do not provide a break-down by primary and secondary schooling levels, the ABS (2006) does report that from 1986 to 2006, the number of primary schools in Western Australia increased by only 4.28 percent. It also reports a 13.11 percent increase over that period in the number of secondary schools in Western Australia and a large increase – 30.72 percent – in the number of Western Australian schools that combine primary and secondary provision. While the ‘combined’ schools tally includes government district high schools and remote community schools, nearly all of the 30.72 percent increase over the past two decades has been in the form of low-fee non-government K-12 schools in metropolitan fringe suburbs and large regional centres (Symes & Gulson, 2005).

Another issue relating to the funding of government and non-government schools relates to duplication of provision. Vickers (2005) refers to a Ministerial Review conducted under the Hawke Labor government in 1983. The Anderson Review found that the cost to government of establishing a new non-government school includes not only direct capital grants and recurrent funding from state and Commonwealth sources, but also indirect costs “which include increases in the per capita costs of educating each student in nearby public schools as these schools shrink and lose their economies of scale” (Vickers, 2005, p. 272).

In response to the Anderson Review, the Hawke government initiated a *New Schools Policy* to limit duplication (Anderson, 1993; Vickers, 2005). In 1996, the Howard Liberal government discarded this policy and since then, the establishment of new non-government schools – and their entitlement to Commonwealth and state funding regardless of any duplication they create – has been regulated only by their ability to demonstrate criteria for school registration in each state (Vickers, 2005; Symes & Gulson, 2005).

With reference to ABS (2006) data in Table 1 (above), it is clear that the rate at which government schools were established in Western Australia dropped after the *New Schools Policy* was dropped in 1996 (compared with the rate before 1996) whereas the rate at which Catholic and independent schools were established increased after 1996.

Symes and Gulson (2005) note that many of the non-government schools which have been established over the past 20 years are small, low-fee K-12 evangelical Christian schools located on the fringe of most Australian cities. These schools are able to survive because the current Commonwealth funding formula benefits schools with a high proportion of low-income families. Symes and Gulson (2005, p. 22) claim that these schools are attractive to parents “whose motives are not necessarily Christian but who wish to ‘buy into’ some form of ‘private’ education for their children”, including the traditional Christian values they espouse and their ability to exclude undesirable students. Unfortunately, the small size and limited economies of scale within many of these schools means that they are not able to offer the breadth of academic and vocational curriculum that may be desirable for their diverse cohorts (Forsey, 2006).

The most recent development in government secondary schooling in Western Australia has seen a return to selective placement of gifted and talented students in various specialist academic and arts-related programs in several government schools. This includes the reinstatement of Perth Modern School as a selective secondary school reserved for students with exceptional academic abilities and John Curtin College of the Arts as a selective secondary school for students with exceptional talent in the arts: media, ballet, dance, drama, music and music theatre (DET 2006b). Gifted and talented program provision in these selective schools is supplemented by extension programs that operate alongside mainstream provision in a further sixteen government secondary schools, all of which are located in or close to metropolitan Perth. In addition, several government secondary schools have initiated their own specialist programs in pursuits ranging from cricket, soccer and basketball through to marine science and aviation (DET, 2007).

Selective schools and supplementary specialist programs are likely to benefit the minority of students who gain places in the programs they offer but the very nature of selection means that most students do not get selected (Campbell & Sherington, 2004). Also, the reputations of the majority of government secondary schools that are not chosen to run specialist programs could be further undermined because they will not attract specialist teachers and may also lose their most capable students to those specialist schools (Townsend, 2005). It follows that a possible down-side of selective specialism is that the achievements and accolades of a few “islands of excellence” (WASSEA, 2007, p. 2) in an ailing government sector will deflect attention from the unselected majority of students who have to do their best in their regular, unspecialized school (Bonnor & Caro, 2007; Milburn, 2005).

National Goals Of Schooling

While states and territories across Australia have responsibility for the provision and administration of schooling in each jurisdiction, several researchers have been critical of school provision across Australia for having lost its way (Bonnor & Caro, 2007; Reid, 2005; Saul, 2006; Townsend, 2005). These accusations are despite the fact that a shared set of National Goals for Schooling was formally ratified in 1999 by the Ministerial Council of Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs (MCEETYA) comprising education ministers from Commonwealth, state and territory governments (MCEETYA, 1999).

The national goals comprise three multi-point statements. The first emphasizes the role schools are expected to play in securing Australia’s economic future; the second outlines the range of knowledge and skills that students will need now and into the future; and the third focuses on the need for schools to uphold and promulgate principles of social justice (MCEETYA, 1999).

In 2001, a Labor Government came to power in Western Australia and immediately commissioned a taskforce, led by Professor Alan Robson, to review the structures, services and resources supporting government schools in Western Australia. The Robson Taskforce framed a total of 58 recommendations, the first of which emphasized the unique role government schools serve in the establishment and maintenance of a “socially-cohesive, productive and just community” (Robson, Harken & Hill, 2001, para. 3) and specifically referred to the National Goals of Schooling. The first recommendation of the Taskforce was:

That the State government affirms through amendment to the *School Education Act 1999*, the values and principles that provide the foundation for the establishment of government schools in Western Australia ... and within the context of the Statement of National Goals of Schooling, ... seeks stronger support from the Commonwealth government to promote better understanding within the community about the society-building role that government schools play in our democratic society and ensure that government schools are properly resourced to fulfil this role. (DES 2001, p. 2-3).

Inclusions (and exclusions) to the National Goals of Schooling are not the object of analysis here. Rather, attention is being trained on the fact that, in contrast to the prominence afforded the National Goals in recommendations from the Robson Taskforce, no direct reference is made to the National Goals in current planning documents from the Department of Education and Training (DET, 2008). For example: "Our goal is a strong public school system that earns the respect of the community for the quality of the education it offers" (O'Neill, 2008, p.2) implies that the ultimate goal of the department is to win public confidence – student learning and/or how public investment in government schools will benefit the community are notably absent from that goal. Likewise, the purpose of the department has been framed in terms of individual (rather than community) benefits: "to ensure that all public school students leave school well prepared for their future" (DET 2008b, p. 2). This stated purpose predisposes the broader community to also frame its thinking about school provision as a personal commodity rather than as a community investment (Caldwell, 2005; Emerson, 2006; Okuma-Nystroem, 2005). A final point about the National Goals: analysis conducted by Angus, Olney, Ainley and Caldwell (2004) concluded that, at current levels of resource provision for schools across Australia, the national goals are too costly to implement in any case.

Conclusions

The frequently cited rationale for the establishment of government schools during the 1870s was that schooling should be "free, compulsory and secular" (Aulich, 2002; Bonnor & Caro, 2007; Burke & Spaul, 2001; Reid, 2005). In contemporary terms, this rationale implies an undercurrent of inclusion and emancipation, but as suggested in this paper, the intent of the day was more about wresting socio-political control from church authorities and quelling (then harnessing) the hearts, minds and talents of (largely working-class) children to achieve social order and to amass the skills required by industry (Angus et al, 2002; Boston, 1999; Burke & Spaul, 2001; Parkes, 1892). Accordingly, the nature of government school provision through the first few decades – with strictly regulated routines and a curriculum that focused as much on diligence and compliance as in literacy and numeracy (Potts, 2005) was configured around the community benefits for which government schools were established and publicly funded to serve.

It was shown in this paper that the purposes that schools serve today are harder to divine. Despite the fact that Commonwealth, state and territory ministers for education jointly endorsed a set of National Goals of Schooling nearly ten years ago (MCEETYA 1999), those goals serve a largely ceremonial function. They are not the hinges from which Australian school planning, funding and provision hangs; indeed, analysis conducted by Angus, Olney, Ainley and Caldwell (2004) found the current levels of funding are not sufficient and not properly directed towards the realistic attainment of those National Goals. Further, the National Goals are notably absent from statements of strategy and intent recently issued by the Department of Education and Training in Western Australia (DET, 2008). The department's current stated goal is based on earning community respect (O'Neill, 2008) and the peak body of government secondary school principals asserts, "the essential purpose of all schools is quality teaching and learning" (WASSEA 2007, p. 6). These statements confuse the 'purpose of schools' with 'what schools do' and are bereft of the community-gain and democracy-building intent of school provision that dominated the establishment of public schooling across Australia in the 19th century (Boston, 1999). The current goals reflect a high level of populism within current education policy. They also hint at the vulnerability of senior education department public servants who, in recent years, have had their fixed-term contracts terminated along with the dismissal of the Ministers to whom they report.

It seems, as Bonnor and Caro claim that "we have forgotten why public education was established" (2007, p 197) and that "there has been no interest at

the state or federal level in properly defining the role and purpose of private schools in a subsidised system” (2007, p. 208).

The rationale offered by the recent Liberal Commonwealth government for making public funds available to non-government schools has been that it protects and expands the school choices available to parents (Kemp, 2000; Nelson, 2003). Labour governments have also upheld the principle of making public funds available to non-government schools, but not as a mechanism to enhance market forces. Rather, as the partner of opportunity and equity. This was most evident in the Whitlam years with “distributive justice” (Whitlam, 1972, p. 7) funding to low-income schools, a policy that “resuscitated Australia’s dual education system” (Burke & Spaul, 2000, para. 52) and ensured the survival of many private secondary schools.

Research shows, however, that the extent to which choices are available to parents is unevenly distributed (Cahill, 2009). Parents with limited means have limited choices while those with significant means have far more choice (Cannold, 2007; DES, 2001; Kelley & Evans, 2004; Mukherjee, 1999). It follows that some children get a lot more of what their parents want for them, while other children are left to make the most of what their parents can get.

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