



Alan Reid

A large achievement gap between rich and poor blights Australian education – and the gap appears to be widening. Australia is near the bottom of OECD countries in terms of equity in education.

A major cause of the gap is that successive governments have diminished the strength of public education and, in so doing, increased the social stratification of Australian schools.

This trend has major social and economic consequences for all of us. If these are to be addressed, governments need to properly fund public schools. However, adequate funding is a necessary but not a sufficient condition to strengthen public schools. Accompanying the decline in funding to public schools has been a trend to privatise them, which is diluting some of the important features of public education.

I will argue that both the decline in funding and the trend to privatise public schools need to be tackled simultaneously by basing strategies on agreed understandings about the essence of being public.

The neglect of public schooling

The policy neglect of public schools can be traced back to the introduction of systematic federal funding to private schools in the 1970s. If the public funding of private schools had been organised around a needs-based model as was originally intended by the Whitlam government, it could have ended very differently. But it wasn't. Starting with the Fraser government, funding policies began to neglect the concept of need and foreground the principle of entitlement.

The entitlement principle resulted in increasing amounts of public money going to private schools, with a consequent expansion of that sector at the expense of public education. Increasingly public education has come to be seen as a safety net provision for those who cannot afford private education, rather than as a public good.

Over time, the total amount of funding from Commonwealth, State and Territory governments closed the gap between the per capita funding of students in the public and private sectors. The most recent MySchool data shows that when like schools are compared in these sectors many private schools are receiving amounts close to that of public schools.



Add in the income from fees, and the average per capita income that many private schools have to spend on teaching, resources and facilities exceeds that of public schools, sometimes by a considerable amount.

Increased funding has enabled private schools to enhance their market appeal through such means as improving facilities and creating smaller classes – which in turn attract aspirational parents. It has led to a steady drift of students from the public system almost entirely comprising those from higher socio-economic status backgrounds.

The consequences for Australian education

The public education system now carries over 80 per cent of all students from educationally disadvantaged backgrounds. Of course this pattern is uneven across the public system which is itself becoming increasingly fragmented with differences between schools in terms of resources and student backgrounds.

Such developments have a number of serious consequences for Australian education, including that they widen resource disparities between schools, reduce educational outcomes particularly for students from educationally disadvantaged backgrounds, and diminish the social and cultural mix of schools and thus the capacity of schools to promote social and intercultural understanding.

There is an urgent need to change the current inequitable approach to funding schools so that there is a fairer distribution of funds based on need. In particular, additional public money must be directed to the most disadvantaged schools, most (but not all) of which are in the public system.

Funding is not the only issue for public schools

But funding is not the only issue. Increased funding to private schools has occurred in a policy environment which promotes choice in an education market. In this environment public education has come to be seen by policy makers as a safety net provision for those who cannot afford private education, rather than as a public good.



What are the dimensions of public education that must be protected and enhanced?

This is compounded by the call for public schools to win back ‘custom’ by taking on the trappings of private schools. The problem is that those schools which do so inevitably have to jettison some of the characteristics that are so central to public education.

So, while a fairer funding model is needed to reverse the drift to private schools, it is not enough on its own. A new funding model may reduce disparities in resources between schools and sectors as a whole, but it will do nothing about the creeping privatisation of public education. A strategy is needed to address both these issues simultaneously.

The need to articulate the essence of public schooling

The problem is that public discussion about education is being conducted in the absence of agreed understandings about what constitutes the essence of public education. Without such understandings education policy and practice can actually work to dilute those features of public education which make it such an important part of Australian democracy.

So, an important precursor to changing current policy directions is to refresh the foundation principles upon which our great system of public education has been built. By offering a common language for public discussion, an agreed framework for public education would achieve a number of outcomes.

Why an agreed framework is essential

First, it would emphasise the individual and public benefits which derive from public education. In so doing it would promote the idea that public education is the schooling system of first choice, rather than a safety net for those who can’t afford private education.

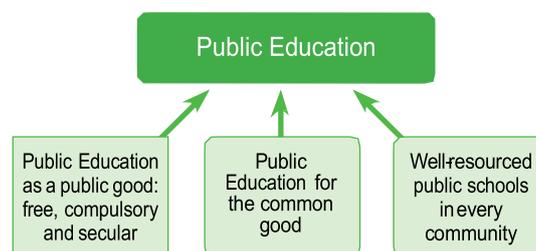
Second, it would provide a powerful public justification for the importance of a well-resourced public education system for Australian society, and would demonstrate the damaging effects of policies which produce large resource disparities between schools.



Third, it would identify those characteristics of public education about which our society can be most proud, and which must not be lost. These could constitute public benchmarks against which to judge many aspects of policy and practice, including what is expected of private schools for receiving public money.

In short, the first step in addressing the drift away from public schools and the associated stratification of the Australian schooling system lies not in the current trend of making public schools more private, but rather in (re)emphasising their public characteristics. What are the dimensions of public education that must be protected and enhanced?

Three fundamental dimensions of a framework for Australian public education



In a recent paper for the Australian Government Primary Principals Association (AGPPA), I argue that there are at least three fundamental dimensions of a framework for public education which must work together – to neglect one of them is to weaken the whole. They are:

Public education as a public good

This dimension relates to ‘ownership’. In this usage, public education is the same as a public utility: owned by the state, funded from taxes provided by the public, and managed by the state on the public’s behalf. The idea of public education as a public good is a powerful dimension that must be protected in contemporary Australia. From this perspective, public education should be understood not as a commodity to be used solely for the benefit of individuals, but as a community resource to which everyone has rights of access and which is non-exclusionary.



The key principles of public schools as public goods are that they are free, compulsory and secular. Each of these principles are under threat today and must be protected and promoted, for without them the idea of universal public education can only be a mirage.

Public education for the common good

The lack of focus on the public purposes of public education has created the conditions within which the idea of public education as a safety net has been able to flourish. A rejuvenated understanding of public education therefore demands attention being paid to its role in advancing the common good. It is the second dimension of a framework for public education.

There are at least two key aspects to consider. The first is to create and maintain a system of education which itself models a commitment to the common good. This includes ensuring that education is available free to all on a comparatively equal playing field on a non-exclusionary basis, and has policy and practices which are consistent with, and promote, the common good *IN* education. The second aspect relates to the role of public education *FOR* the common good. This involves public schools developing the skills, dispositions and understandings of children and young people, such that they can engage – respectfully and thoughtfully – with others in deliberation about the common good in the broader society.

There are a number of implications for understanding public education – teaching and learning, culture, structure, organisation, funding and governance – through the lens of its common good purposes. In particular, it injects specific meaning into some important characteristics of public education such as quality, links with local community, collaboration, innovation, equity, diversity and cohesion, and democracy. These characteristics look very different in and through policy and practice when they are understood through a more ‘privatising’ lens.

Well-resourced public schools in every community

If dimensions 1 and 2 provide a philosophical framework for public education, they are meaningless unless public schools are adequately resourced. Thus, the third dimension of a three pronged understanding of public education is that governments have an obligation to provide and maintain well-resourced quality public schools, available to all, in every community in Australia.



The foundation premise of this dimension is that in a democratic society education should be available to all on equal terms so that each child can develop to her/ his full potential. Properly resourced public schools are the starting point for the achievement of this goal.

It therefore follows that our society should make every effort to ensure that the differences between schools in such basic areas as equipment, teacher quality, buildings, class-sizes and so on are reduced. And yet at the moment, the schools with the greatest challenges are given the least amount of resources to deal with them. In the main these are public schools.

The approach to funding schools in Australia has magnified rather than reduced resource differentials, and contributed to creating totally unacceptable educational outcomes. Australia has developed a funding model which is complex, arbitrary, inequitable and dysfunctional. It privileges choice for some, at the expense of quality and equity for all. But given the self-interest at play in the education debate, how is it possible to engineer an approach which turns this around?

The Gonski review provided a once-in-a-generation opportunity to return to the principle of needs-based funding. The fact that the government has effectively rejected the major intent of the review does not mean it was wasted. Future governments may reconsider, and if so would do well to adopt a version of the Gonski model which retains its strengths, and removes weaknesses such as the 'no losers' policy which was imposed on the review by the previous government.

Each of these three dimensions needs to be fleshed out through public discussion, resulting in a rich description of what is valued in public education which can then be used as the benchmark against which policies and practices are developed, enacted and evaluated.

Every community in Australia deserves a high quality public school

Public education is a precious community resource which is so essential to the life and well-being of our democratic society, and to the individuals and communities that live in it. The framework above demonstrates the folly of under-resourcing public education, and treating it as a safety net. It underlines the need for a different starting assumption for public policy: that every local community in Australia must contain well-resourced, socially-mixed, secular public schools which belong to a public system, provide a quality education, and are free and open to all.



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It has never been as important as now for the whole community to support, nurture and strengthen our public schools and to celebrate the contribution they make to the common good.

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This article is based on a major report he has written for the Australian Government Primary Principals Association (AGPPA) on the past, present and future of public education. The report, which will be sent to every government primary school in Australia, can currently be accessed online at: <https://app.box.com/s/8gb8s45n84g1ma7p8ubynudybf1ocowc>

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