

Who does the heavy lifting?

A tale of two countries

If you walk into any New Zealand private school be prepared for a surprise: they don't have high fees, they have the same rules and obligations as state schools, their dealings with staff and students are the same and all schools are funded according to the needs of their students.

They are really not "private" at all, in the sense that we use that term in commerce. Along with state schools they are part of the government's delivery of education to all of the nation's children. In fact public and private schools in most developed countries exist alongside each other in this way. The real surprise is that Australia is almost the only country that funds private schools, but requires far too little of them in terms of their public responsibility.

This is not an argument for making private schools part of our state system. But there is a strong case for seriously examining exactly what 'public' obligations should be taken on by all schools as a condition of being given a rather large slice of your taxes.

So what are 'public' obligations? They include obligations under public legislation to do with discrimination and freedom of information. You could include enrolment (and expulsion) practices and those relating to student welfare, staff employment and development. Any public school principal could give you a list.

Many government-funded private schools do the right thing and willingly meet their public responsibilities without being asked. Catholic systemic schools are well known for their attention to equity and social justice and even some high fee schools do outstanding work for students with disabilities.



However, most choose not to do this: while one-third of all students attend 'private' schools only 20% of

students with disabilities end up attending private schools. The private sector's share of the 'heavy lifting' drops dramatically when you add consider other disadvantaged groups.

This can be fixed easily by redirecting more funding to the private schools who are doing their share of this 'heavy lifting' and less to those who, in effect, 'cherry pick' the students who might be easier (and cheaper) to teach.

Many if not most private school principals might agree. There is a destructive competition amongst schools which (indirectly) use public funds to compete against each other as well as against public schools.

If the present situation sounds chaotic it is exactly that. It is also very wasteful in an economic sense. At the expensive end our private schools are massively over-resourced. While governments seem to favour marketplace reforms, such competition between schools does not deliver better outcomes for all students. The evidence is clear from the results: while Australian students do well on international comparisons the gap between the best and poorer performers is wider than ever.

One thing is certain: what we have in NSW is not sustainable. It does not work and has to be fixed.

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We would like to share these thoughts with parents over the next few months. This is the first in a series. Other topics will challenge the myths about public and private schools. We'll look at some of the arguments about funding of schools and what should be among the obligations of schools which receive public funds. Finally we'll point the way towards a better future for students in all schools.