

MEASURING EDUCATION*Republished  
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There was a time during my nine years in the Federal Parliament when the whim of the boundary commissioners placed over sixty government schools within my electorate. I was initially surprised to find that the headmasters of some of them sent their children to private schools. Similarly, before giving the matter much thought, I was surprised to find that a senior employed official of the Australian Teachers Federation should choose to pay for his daughter's education at one of the more expensive private schools and that so many Labor Party members of parliament choose private education for their own children.

All these people enjoyed high incomes and could obviously find the money to pay school fees by forgoing other expenditure, but I had expected them to have more faith in the government sector. They were all people who were in an excellent position to be well informed about education.

For quite another reason I was surprised to find that a member of one of my branches, employed as a fireman, pinched and scraped to put two sons through one of Western Australia's most expensive private schools. I have never ceased to be surprised at the proportion of children from broken homes which fill the boarding houses of private schools, or how much less well equipped most of these private schools are now, compared with the gear and plush buildings of the State Schools.

For some reason many middle and lower income people choose to forgo holidays, better homes, cars and financial peace of mind, to pay for an education for their children even though the general run of taxpayers provide an education service for them without charge. Most of the private schools are run by churches, but it is not for religious education that the children are sent to church schools. Most of the parents neither attend church themselves nor require church attendance of their children.

Since 1970 peoples' attitude to education has changed profoundly. In the early

schools and win votes by promising to build schools everywhere like them. That advertisement wouldn't work now; people no longer see money as fixing education's problems. They say less about the quality of facilities and more about the quality of teaching. In the early seventies educators commanded much goodwill and aspiring politicians lived in terror of the education lobbies. That goodwill has been dissipated by teacher excesses, but parental concern is no less because it has shifted focus.

Since 1970, in spite of the Whitlam funding which improved the state schools' relative command over resources, there has been a considerable flight to private schools. In 1970, 78.2% of all children were educated at government schools, but by 1982 this proportion had slipped to 76.3%. In Victoria, where the teachers' unions have been most militant, the flight has been more dramatic; government school enrolments slipped from 75.4% to 71.9%. Victorian government secondary schools fell from 73.9% down to 68.8%; a fall of 5.1 percentage points or 6.9%. More parents are rejecting the free service in favour of the service they buy, but not all of these tax paying parents pay for the primary school years. If the flight from government schools is a flight to quality, then a system which discriminates against private schools also discriminates against children whose parents can't afford to buy them out of the state schools.

The Whitlam government funded a parliamentary enquiry into specific learning difficulties. This parliamentary committee encouraged the Australian Council of Educational Research (ACER) to conduct research into basic levels of literacy and numeracy of 10 and 14 year olds. It was announced in 1975 that the study was to monitor changing standards over time. In particular ACER would be able to check the "extravagant" claims of employers and universities that standards were falling.

The 1975 findings facilitated comparison of the success of three different groups of schools in imparting the most basic skills. (The schools compared were government schools, catholic parochial schools, and the better endowed and known private schools. The government schools did least well.)

While the success of the non-catholic private schools could have been explained in terms of the unrepresentative sample of children which attended them, or more resources per pupil, no such explanation was possible for the case of the catholic parochial schools. These schools had bigger classes, poorer buildings and fewer teaching aids than the government schools, and they drew their pupils from relatively low income families.

Several apologists for the government schools made the point that the tests only measured two aspects of education - very basic reading and very basic arithmetic - and that while more pupils in the schools which did badly, might not have learned to read and add, they may have learned other valuable skills. That is of course quite possible. The evidence was silent on the point.

Nevertheless, Committee members thought that it was likely that the Schools Commission had failed to measure every resource available to pupils at these catholic schools. In conversation we called the unmeasured resource TLC, which stood for tender loving care.

In 1980 the 1975 surveys were repeated. It would have been instructive to know whether the 1975 data was repeated, or whether the government sector had improved its relative performance, perhaps as a result of resources diverted during the seventies to education generally and the public sector in particular, but the researchers were forbidden to release the comparative data. Perhaps the government schools came out of the survey well and all those families who go without so much, carrying large part of the cost of educating children who would otherwise be educated at total cost to the taxes, are subsidising their fellow taxpayers without advantaging their children. On the other hand perhaps their sacrifices are well made. Either way, they are entitled to know, and suppressing information is like burning the books.

We now spend 6.1% of gross domestic product on education (4.5% in 1970). Even if the value of education is no more than cost, Australian society has much to gain from an education system which best educates. Comparison of the present practices is the surest way of knowing how best to provide for the future. People too afraid to release research findings have no place anywhere near an education system which should pride itself on dissemination of truth.