

How to avoid education rat race

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No doubt the next few weeks will be a busy time for Australia's market research companies as they ask parents why they are drifting away from public education.

We can speculate about the reasons why more parents are finding non-government schools attractive - the prospect of an improved chance at university entrance or greater affordability through increased public subsidies perhaps or even aversion to a supposedly values-neutral political correctness now sweeping state schools - but that's all. All the heat over the past few weeks reveals just how little we do know.

This lack of accurate, timely, representative data about parent decision-making is surprising given the extent of public subsidies now helping to shape a large scale market in primary and secondary education.

In 2004 non-government schools are increasingly dependent on public subsidies, and to describe them as 'independent' is a misnomer. About 70 per cent of expenditures in the Catholic system are met by the public purse, and the taxpayer meets about a third of the costs in the other non-government schools. By stealth non-government schools, and Catholic ones especially, have become increasingly tied to public financing.

Two important and seemingly contradictory consequences have resulted. On the one hand public funding has enabled market forces to penetrate the provision of education, much to the fury of some.

At the same time however public funding has in effect extended the reach of the public interest into the realm of erstwhile private schools. The potential implications of this are yet to be fully realised, but over time it could redefine what we mean by 'public education'.

By viewing public funding as a means to achieve shared purposes across sectors rather than a tool to maintain hostile interests, schools would be more able to share innovations, pedagogies and resources for the benefit of students, parents and communities. It may also mean requiring non-government systems to account more carefully for the public funds they receive, such as how they meet their responsibilities to students at risk of educational failure and to indigenous young Australians.

Acting against this though may be the recent higher education changes.

Competition to obtain entry into a publicly funded university place is likely to grow. The stranglehold the universities have had over senior secondary certificates and the measures of success in our schools will increase. Education is likely to become even less an odyssey and more of a rat race. Non-government schools seen to maximise the chance of entry to a publicly funded place are likely to be major beneficiaries.

Here the Prime Minister might profitably look to the lead taken by George Bush from his days as the Governor of Texas. In 1997 Bush introduced State Law 588 that grants students from all secondary schools who graduate in the top 10 percent of their class automatic admission to any public college or university in Texas. As well Texan universities must take account of the socioeconomic background of applicants including their level of poverty, household income and parental level of education, and the nature of their schooling.

It means the best students from the poorest schools have the same chance of gaining entry to university as those from the wealthiest schools. Such an approach applied to Australia might create a more level playing field for tertiary entrance.

The recent debate has featured parents, educators and commentators but not the voices of the actual consumers, students. Yet across the world education systems face a crisis of confidence and identity, not because of political correctness but because of widespread student disaffection.

Last year the OECD reported that on average one in four of all students have a low sense of belonging at school and one in five have a low level of participation. Australia is close to the average on both measures of disaffection.

Combined with the recent finding by Chris Ryan and Louise Watson at the ANU that Australia's level of school retention is closer to 71 percent than the official figure of 75 percent, considerable work needs to be done to motivate all students to be actively engaged and in control of their learning.

The Prime Minister's remarks on political correctness in education, and Mark Latham's interest in reshaping public funding for schools, should be taken as an opportunity to ask some fundamental questions: what do we want for our children, what do they want, what are we trying to achieve in education? And what do we need to achieve these goals?

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