



Independent Schools  
Council of Australia

## **RIGHT TO CHOICE RECOGNISED**

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The Australian Bureau of Statistics schools data released in February 2005 showed that national average enrolment growth in the independent schools sector in 2004 was 3.2 per cent. In 2004 there were 467,810 full-time equivalent students enrolled in 1,057 independent schools (including independent Catholic schools).

As in past years, media headlines focused on enrolment drift. 'More shun state schools', ran the headline in *The Age* (25/2/2005), which noted however that 'Victorian state schools fight the trend', while *The West Australian* reported that 'WA parents are leading a national charge away from public schools to the private system' (25/2/2005). However, after a decade of continued solid growth in non-government schooling in Australia, the real story conveyed by the ABS schools data is that parents want choice in schooling options, and if necessary are prepared to pay for it. It is a story that has been recognised by the major political parties.

Parents' right to choice in the education of their children was a key message of the federal Coalition parties in the 2004 federal election. There are signs it is also becoming integral to the rhetoric of the federal Labor party. Labor's election platform affirmed the right to choice in schooling and more recently this position has been confirmed by Opposition leader Kim Beazley. An article by Glenn Milne, based on an interview with Mr Beazley, appeared widely in the News Ltd Sunday metropolitan press on 30 January. In the article Mr Beazley is reported as saying that the right to choice 'needs to be given meaning (. . .) and that therefore families who are not necessarily wealthy should have the ability to choose a private education for their children'.

Mr Beazley's statement appears to recognise that if choice is to be a 'right' it must be affordable. This is good news for parents. Labor's schools policy attracted an immediate and strong grass-roots response from non-government school parents when it was announced just prior to the election. Reductions in funding to non-government schools were seen as penalising private effort and the overwhelming message to Labor was that high fees equal hard work, not privilege.

The ABS data show 32.5 per cent of students were enrolled in non-government schools in 2004. This proportion jumps to 37.8 per cent at secondary level and 39.5 per cent at

senior secondary level. As the number of families accessing non-government schools continues to grow, it is increasingly difficult for governments and political parties to support a right to choice in schooling on the one hand and, on the other, argue that the level of public support available to students should be based primarily on school ownership.