



Independent Schools
Council of Australia

DIVERSITY DEBUNKS ELITISM MYTH

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Since 1985, independent schools have added 271,000 students and 220 new schools. Contrary to some notions, the bulk of the system comprises schools with low socio-economic profiles that operate on low fee structures. BILL DANIELS, Executive Director of the Independent Schools Council of Australia, offers this assessment

There are now over one million young Australians enrolled in non-government schools. This represents over 30 per cent of total school enrolments. In the major cities the enrolment share of non-government schools is well over 40 per cent at the secondary level, and is still growing.

In anyone's language this makes non-government schools significant providers of school education to the Australian public and, what is most important, they have become so by public demand.

Independent schools are growing

The growth of enrolments in non-government schools has been principally driven by the expansion of the independent schools sector. Since 1985 independent schools have recorded the strongest growth in enrolment share with over 271,000 additional students and 220 new schools.

Independent school enrolments have continued to grow over the last thirty years irrespective of economic boom and bust and successive federal and state governments. Even in the current economic downturn independent sector enrolments are continuing to grow and waiting lists show there is still unmet demand.

Clearly independent schools must be doing something right as an increasing number of parents are prepared to “vote with their feet” and exercise choice in the provision of schooling for their children.

The number and diversity of independent schools have also increased as parents continue to look for different forms of educational services. Today the sector comprises 1,100 schools. Many provide a religious or values-based education, while others promote a particular educational philosophy or interpretation of mainstream education.

The proliferation of such a broad range of independent schools debunks the myth that somehow private schools are only for the very elite. The reality is that independent schools serve school communities located all around Australia with the bulk being schools with low socio-economic profiles that operate on low fee structures.

Why parents choose independent schools

There have been several studies of what is driving the growth of the independent sector. Clearly it is not just the increasing affluence of Australian society. A recent report by the Australian National Audit Office shows that one in every five students from the lowest socio-economic background is still opting for a non-government school education.

Research shows that parents are very specific about what they want for their children’s education. Parents of students in independent schools say they choose to educate their children in independent schools because:

- they see independent schools as stable, safe environments
- the school is responsive to the individual needs of their child
- the school has a wide range of facilities
- the school caters for the social, cultural and/or spiritual needs of their child
- the school allows them to enter into an active and genuine partnership with teachers in the education of their child
- the school is accountable to them.

Parents have primary responsibility for the education of their children. Parents’ willingness to engage with their children’s education and students’ engagement with their school can markedly affect student academic achievement and wellbeing. Exercising choice in schooling is an important form of engagement for both parents and students and deserves community support.

Affording school choice

One of the key issues for independent schools and the families they serve is affordability. Governments have a strong influence on school choice in Australia through their funding programs.

In the independent sector overall, family contribution through fees is the main source of income. The federal Government is the major provider of public funding although state and territory governments also contribute. Federal Government funding is allocated on a needs basis according to the socio-economic status of a school community. Students at lower SES

independent schools therefore attract more government funding than students at high SES independent schools and this is reflected in fee levels.

Good quality education is costly and what governments do not provide parents must make up through fees. In other words, schools can only keep fees low if governments contribute a reasonable share. The independent sector is appreciative of the federal Government's assurance of its funding to non-government schools to 2012. This has contributed to the stability of the sector during the economic downturn and helped families balance their budgets.

The independent sector also welcomed the inclusion of independent schools in the federal Government's economic stimulus package. The facilities enjoyed in independent schools have been built almost entirely through private effort, through fees, fundraising and donations. The federal capital funding available in the past was directed at low SES schools. Under the Government's Building the Education Revolution package all Australian families with children in schools will benefit from school refurbishments or new facilities.

A further pressure on affordability is the increasing expectations parents have of schools. The integration of information and communication technologies into classrooms and learning and teaching practice, and the pressure on schools to continually update curriculum and facilities to meet the demands of a 21st century education are also cost drivers. Teacher salaries, which represent the bulk of independent school costs, have a major impact on affordability.

All schools face these pressures and government funding policies must reflect the responsibility of the wider community to bear the cost of educating all young Australians. Parents of students in independent schools demonstrate a willingness to contribute financially to their children's education but governments must be responsible partners in the enterprise.

School choice and accountability

The term 'independent school' refers to the governance structure of independent schools. They are operated by a board rather than a centralised government bureaucracy and the principal is responsible to the board. 'Independent' does not mean that independent schools are free of government regulation. On the contrary, independent schools must meet all the child protection, occupational health and safety, employment and myriad other regulations that cover any school. Independent schools must also meet the school registration requirements of their state or territory government, which may cover the curriculum they offer. From 2011, independent schools will be obliged to offer the national curriculum in the same way as other schools.

It is right that organisations that serve young people and, in particular, the schools that educate young people are held accountable to the wider community. The federal Government has begun implementing a program of enhanced school transparency, assessment and reporting requirements. For the first time, there will be nation-wide public reporting of school performance and operational data to provide public comparison of like schools across sectors.

Schools in the independent sector are diverse in character, ethos and offerings. The full dimension of education offered in independent schools is unlikely to be captured by the new reporting arrangements. However, for independent schools, the most telling measure of their performance has always been the “proof in the pudding”. Independent schools thrive or fail on how well they meet the needs of their communities. The continued growth of the sector is a very good indicator of their success.