

School Choice Down Under

In Australia, competition between schools has generated a wide range of educational options.

By Steve Kessell

Many North Americans are surprised that in egalitarian Australia nearly one-third of primary and secondary students attend private schools.

Most of these children are not from wealthy families. A typical two-income Australian household has perhaps \$40,000 - \$45,000 income after tax. So why do they spend fully one-third of this amount to send their kids to private schools?

As a middle-income parent with three kids in private schools, as an educator, and as a migrant (from the USA) who grew up in a very different system, I'll attempt to answer that question. While I live in Perth (population 1.5 million), I think my comments apply generally to our entire country.

In Australia, education is seen as the primary means for social and economic advancement. The high (by North American standards) proportion of children in private education can be attributed to several factors.

Historical

There was a clear demarcation between the original settlers and the convicts, and class distinction undoubtedly played a role.

Religion

The vast majority of private schools have a religious affiliation. Clear religious differences and the absence of a predominant religious tradition led to separate independent schools.

Funding

Private schools are funded on a sliding scale. "Wealthy" private schools receive 20% of their money from the state, while "poor" private schools receive up to 90% of their funding from the state.

Regardless of political persuasion, most Australians deem this to be a fair and equitable process. All appreciate that economic disaster would occur if the state suddenly had to educate the millions of students currently in the private system. Of course the \$64,000 question is whether the private schools are "better." I guess it all depends on how you define 'better.'

Using Freedom of Information, our state newspaper recently released the academic results for all of the state's secondary schools. Sixteen of the top 20 schools are private.

The head of the state teachers' union decried the publication of academic results, claiming that private schools drained the public system of the brightest students by offering scholarships (although in reality perhaps two percent of private students have scholarships). The head of the state private schools' association said that she believed private school students were so successful because their parents had made a big financial commitment to, and placed a high family value on, education.

I agree. Our local public high school is one of the best in the state, and the government has recently relaxed restrictions on students crossing district boundaries. Our children would get a very good education at that school. So why do we spend \$14,000 per year on fees, books and school uniforms by sending our kids to private schools?

In my view, many private schools offer a better culture and ethos than their public counterparts — a sense of community, an emphasis on the personal, educational and spiritual growth of the 'whole child.' Many parents want their own brand of religious education; others look for schools with good music, or art, or language, or science, or tennis programs. Family traditions clearly play a role in the older schools, most of which are single-sex. Only a few of the very expensive private schools provide 'gold-plated' facilities.

In short, the private system offers a huge range of choice and diversity. Parents who are not satisfied with the "product" can shop for a different brand — as we are doing now because our son's school is putting more emphasis on football than algebra. Competition for students is strong and healthy. Private schools that are viewed as second-rate, poorly-equipped, or 'not keeping up' will wither and die, with new schools replacing them.

There is no foreseeable decline in the 30+% that attend private schools. Clearly, parents think they are getting their money's worth. Individual families make the necessary financial sacrifices (Mom goes back to work, no new car, perhaps even increase the mortgage), the overall tax burden is reduced, students thrive in private schools, motivated students do well in public schools, and we have a choice that generally is not available in North America.

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