

# SAVE OUR SCHOOLS

## Education Policy Brief

### Public Education Should be Free, Even for the Well-Off

Advocates of the privatisation of public education want a user-pay system in government schools. They reject the basic principle of free, universal provision. Their strategy is to get an initial breach of the principle of free education with means-tested fees for the well-off.

This was proposed recently in an article by [Gerard Henderson in the Sydney Morning Herald](#). If implemented, it would establish a beachhead to make more and more families pay fees in government schools. It would make education subject to capacity to pay and restrict access to education. It would lead to greater privilege, inequity and social segregation in education. It could ultimately reduce the quality of education in public schools.

Public education is **for the public**; it is free to all citizens and non-discriminatory. It takes all-comers - the well-off and the not so well-off. It is free to all so that all children have the opportunity for a quality education and that no child gets a restricted education because of lack of family capacity to pay. In a democracy, education outcomes should not depend on family background, wealth and ability to pay.

The [Gonski report on the future of school funding](#) in Australia strongly re-affirmed this principle and its implications for education policy:

The government sector is required to provide access to a place for all young people whose parents wish them to attend a government school and has less scope to deny entry or exclude some students than non-government schools. It is important for the future of Australian schooling that the government sector continues to perform the role of a universal provider of high-quality education which is potentially open to all. This has significant implications for funding and means that, in practice, funding for government schools from fees cannot be significant or compulsory. [p.176]

It said that government schools should "...be universally accessible to all students regardless of parental financial capacity to contribute towards the cost of schooling" [p.176].

Even means-tested fees make education subject to capacity to pay and once the principle of free education is breached for some, it can be breached for others. Governments under budgetary pressures readily increase and extend fees for public services.

Means-tested fees would foment divisions between those who pay and those who don't. "Why should we have to pay when they don't have to pay" would be the call in all government schools. This would make it easier for governments to reduce the income threshold for the payment of fees over time to entangle more and more families in the fees net.

Fees would undermine democratic access to a quality education. They can be used to exclude those who do not pay, or to provide them with a lesser service.

Schools could set higher fees in order to exclude some students from the school and to attract only those parents who are willing to pay higher fees. This would further stratify government

schools into haves and have-nots - with the haves having more fee-paying families and so being better resourced and able to provide a higher quality education.

Fees could also restrict access to extended years of education for some children. As the fee net is widened, many families may be unwilling or unable to keep their children at school for longer.

It is also likely that those who are paying are likely to demand better services because they pay. First-rate courses could become restricted to those who could afford to pay fees while the rest would have to make do with second-rate courses. Access to advanced courses could become even more a privilege for the well-off than they are now.

Thus, the introduction of means-tested fees would undermine the joint interest of all parents in advocating for a high quality government school system for all. The outcome could be a two-tiered government education system - one serving the well-off and one serving the less well-off. In this way, means-tested fees would compound social inequity in education.

A key principle of public education is that it is funded and provided **by the public**. It is the collective responsibility of society to provide an adequate education for all future citizens and ensure the basic human right of access for all to the cultural heritage of human society. Public funding and provision is necessary to ensure non-discrimination and non-selectivity in access to high quality schooling. It is needed to ensure that children cannot be excluded from a quality education for reasons of family background and low income.

The introduction of fees would further privatise education. Fees make education a private responsibility rather than a collective responsibility. There can be no guarantee that governments will sustain their expenditure effort on education with the introduction of fees; they may reduce their role by substituting income from fees for public expenditure. Government schools could be forced to call more and more on fees to supplement their resources.

The introduction of fees would also further privatise the provision of education by reducing the incentive to stay in the public system. If families have to pay for education, they may be more inclined to send their children to a private school. Research studies show that privatisation of education provision leads to greater inequity in school outcomes and social segregation in schooling.

Henderson's argument that the well-off get a free ride on the taxpayer and should pay their own way ignores the fact that they already pay through the progressive taxation system. Fees for public education are a form of double taxation. Public education is paid for through taxation. The well-off contribute more to public education costs through a broadly progressive tax system, even though progressivity has been reduced in recent decades.

No doubt Henderson would respond with the claim that the well-off pay double if they choose a private school. However, that is their choice – whether it is for a religious-based education, extra services and facilities, or just plain status. Those who buy exclusivity and additional services should be expected to pay for those privileges.

The logical extension of Henderson's argument is that means-tested fees be introduced for all kinds of public services. If the well-off should pay for education in government schools, why should they not also pay to use public parks, play grounds, public libraries, public roads, pay the police to attend after their houses are burgled or if they are robbed in the street, pay the fire brigade to attend their property in the event of fire, have their garbage collected, and even to pay the armed services to defend them. We could end up with a fee on the well-off for all kinds of

public services because they forgo using private services – a public library fee, a law and order fee, a road fee, and a national defence fee and so on.

All this is not implausible. A low fee has been introduced for many previously free public services and then increased regularly and extended once the initial breach in free provision was made. In health, a Medicare levy was introduced and increased and a surcharge on the levy was introduced to encourage the well-off to access private hospitals. A small co-payment was first introduced for the Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme and then regularly increased and also extended to include those on pensions. When university fees were first introduced they were tightly regulated, then they were increased and now have been deregulated so universities can set their own fees. Waste disposal at land fill sites used to be free, but then low fees were introduced and subsequently increased.

Henderson actually uses the Medicare surcharge to argue for fees in public education. Once achieved in education it can be extended to other public services. It is all designed to push more people into privately-provided services even if these have to be subsidised by government as are private health insurance and private education. Thus, Henderson's argument is an attack on all public services, not just public education.

Fees are a threat to the quality of public education. At present, the outcomes of public schools are just as good as in private schools when student background is taken into account, but that could change if advocates of privatisation such as Henderson have their way. Pushing well-off families out of the public sector would lead to higher concentrations of disadvantage in government schools which, research shows, can lead to lower average results. It could also lead to reduced government expenditure effort and reduced services in government schools because of the loss of an articulate voice in support of public education. There is also research evidence, published in the latest issue of the *Scandinavian Journal of Economics*, that fees lower student achievement in the upper secondary years.

If the government considers the wealthy are not paying enough for public services such as education, it should increase taxes on the wealthy, not introduce fees which undermine the “public nature” and quality of public education or other public services.

Henderson's proposal would also undermine our capacity to **create the public** which is a fundamental and essential role of public education in a democracy. As the [eminent US educator R. Freeman Butts](#) wrote nearly 40 years ago:

The original intent in creating a system of universal, free, compulsory, and secular public schools was thus a political purpose. It was to enable peoples who came from diverse national, religious, and cultural backgrounds to achieve a sense of community and to acquire the common values of a democratic polity. It was to do this by promoting the knowledge, the understandings, and the sentiments or attitudes necessary for exercising the responsibilities of democratic citizenship. In order to enable all persons in the population to acquire the requisite knowledge and disposition essential for the social cohesion of a democratic republic, it was essential to build a *system* of schools that would not only be public in purpose but also public in control, public in support, and public in access. [*Teachers College Record*, December 1973, pp. 208-9]

Democracy depends on a public education system to provide all children, whatever their family background or capacity to pay, with the skills and knowledge to exercise their rights and obligations as citizens. Democratic citizenship for all is threatened by means-tested fees.

Means-testing is also likely to lead to greater social segregation and undermine social cohesion. If well-off families have to pay fees, they may be more willing to join their peers in private schools. Already, we have a high degree of social segregation in schooling in Australia. It could increase with means-tested fees in government schools by encouraging well-off, usually white, families to transfer to elite private schools. This could have far reaching implications for the nature of our society.

Schools segregated by class, religion and race make it difficult for children to develop a practical understanding of people of different backgrounds and break down social prejudice and intolerance.

Historically, public education has played a crucial role in absorbing new waves of immigrants in Australia with different ethnic and religious backgrounds. Public schools have been a melting pot for the children of the first generation of newcomers, providing the place for children to learn and work together across many cultures. It is hard to think of any other social institution that creates such opportunities to bring together numbers of young people from different backgrounds and promote a socially tolerant community.

Diversity in school composition makes possible the interplay of ideas and exchange of views between students from different backgrounds and better equips young people with an understanding of others from different backgrounds. It reduces prejudice and social intolerance and promotes social understanding, co-operation and cohesion. It helps create citizens better prepared to know, to understand, and to work with people of all races and backgrounds. There are extensive research studies showing a positive relationship between attending schools with diverse peers and greater acceptance of cultural differences, declines in racial fears and prejudice, and the development of a socially cohesive, multi-ethnic, democratic society.

Social tolerance and understanding is a core value of a democratic society. People of different backgrounds have to learn to live and work together. Unless children learn together, there can be little hope that they will ever learn to live and work together as adults.

So, Henderson's proposal for the well-off to pay for their education in government schools threatens the future of public education. It will undermine its ideals and compound inequity in education. It is about restricting education – about making it a privilege for those who can pay and not a democratic right for all. It may push more families into private schools and reduce the quality of education for those that remain in the public sector. It will undermine social cohesion and, perhaps ultimately, our democracy and the nature of our society. It is an attack on the principle of free public provision in other areas. Good reasons to reject it!

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