

## **Towards a level playing field**

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Something good may actually come out of the current furore over child sexual abuse which surrounds those strange bedfellows Peter Hollingworth and Bill Heffernan.

An Amendment Bill, moved by the Democrats and passed in the Senate on the 20th of March, would require all Australian schools to submit sexual, physical and emotional abuse action plans in order to receive annual funding from the Federal Government.

And about time too.

Public schools, of course, would be unaffected by such legislation as they have long been publicly accountable for all forms of child abuse. Systems have been in place for years making it virtually impossible to cover up such activity, and if such a cover up is discovered, retribution is swift.

The Principal of Trinity Grammar, for example, had he worked in the public system, would no longer hold his job.

All schools are accountable under the law for illegal behaviour, but public schools have an extra level of responsibility. As public institutions they are publicly accountable and must answer to bureaucrats, the parliament and, ultimately, a Minister, of the crown, not the cloth. If this new Bill is passed, the level of accountability between the two systems will become a little more equal.

The sting in the tail of the current lopsided accountability expected, is how it can rebound on the public system.

NSW Education Minister Watkins has just announced an independent analysis of school violence statistics. Of course, only the public system is required to provide such statistics. Subsequent stories in the press then increase the perception that public schools have a monopoly on violence and are, therefore, less safe.

But how would we know how safe private schools are? How can we know how much violence and bullying goes on in them? Unless someone blows the whistle, as in the Trinity Grammar case, private schools can keep such information very private indeed.

Now, I'm not claiming all private schools cover things up, I'm sure many deal with such problems with great integrity and sensitivity, I am simply pointing out that under the current system, they have much more opportunity to do so than public schools.

The current double standard also means we expect the public system to absorb all demographic changes. When school age populations shrink in an area, we close only local public schools (the only schools open to all children, regardless of gender, religion, or ability to pay) whilst continuing to generously subsidise nearby private ones.

Private schools receive interest subsidies from the government, public schools may not borrow money at all.

Private school finances are their own business, public school's bank accounts can be published in newspapers.

Private schools may exclude students, including troublesome and low performing ones, comprehensive public schools must accept all comers, including the rejects and failures of the private system. Worse, many public schools now find their best students, especially at the end of year 10, being offered scholarships by those same private schools.

We expect extraordinary things from our public schools, as we should, but we give them less money per student to achieve them, and tip the scales against them in almost every other way we can. You could say public schools are being nobbled.

Then we add insult to injury by condemning them for finding the going tough and the competition fostered under the mantra of parental choice, unfair.

Schools which accept public money should be equally accountable for it. For the sake of our priceless public schools and the 70% of Australian kids who attend them, lets hope the Democrats Amendment Bill is passed.