

If you want private education for your kids, pay for it yourself

Parents' obsession with finding the perfect school for their perfect child is nauseating, writes Catherine Deveny.

I've wanted to write about the social apartheid and false economy of private schools for a while. And the Government's "privatisation by stealth" of the education system. So a few months ago I hunted down the speech that writer Shane Moloney made to Scotch College. Reading it, I cheered, thumped the table and yelled "hallelujah" at the sheer brilliance and balls of Moloney. I then slumped in a heap thinking, "Well, there's no point me writing anything because he's said everything that I want to, but much better."

A recent chance meeting with Moloney had me gush about the speech and explain my quandary. He encouraged me to basically "just say it all again". So Shane Moloney, if you're out there, this one's for you. And for the 70 per cent of parents who send their children to government schools. And for the 70 per cent of students who attend them.

Here's something in the budget that you may have missed: federal funding for private schools will increase from \$5.8 billion to \$7.5 billion over the next five years. Funding to public schools will rise from \$3.1 billion to \$3.4 billion over the next five years. Shame on us.

Here's where I stand: private schools should not receive funding. That's it. We have a police force funded by the Government. If you want a bodyguard or private security, you pay for it out of your own pocket.

The same should go for schools. If you want your child to go to a school where they wear blazers so you can get over your own insecurities, or the chip on your own shoulder, you should pay for it. Every single cent.

And it should be compulsory for all politicians to send their children to government schools. And use only public health care.

It's liberating not to be worried about where my young sons will be going to high school. It will be one of the closest government high schools. If things don't work out, we'll try somewhere else. It's not their education. It's their school. Not the same thing. The school a child attends has no bearing on their future success or happiness. I'm disgusted by parents' nauseating obsession with the perfect school for their perfect child. Parents panic that any "wrong" decision may mess up their kid's potential trajectory. They seem to believe that kids can simply be programmed by their parents' desires. Here's a tip: instead of both working full time just so you can send your kids to a private school, cut down your work, be less stressed, stop outsourcing your life, send them to the local secondary and be home more. Teenagers need, and want, their parents to be around.

Sending children to private schools seems to be less about parents doing what they think is best for their child and more a case of parents wanting their children to have something better than every other child. Education is the entire community's responsibility and the outcome affects us all.

I am torn between saying that the public schools desperately need more funding and writing about how wonderful they are. Both of which are true.

The lessons kids learn in government schools - resilience, motivation, community and tolerance - hold them in much better stead than hand-holding, spoon-feeding, mollycoddling and segregation.

When I think of kids less fortunate than my own, I think of kids stuck in middle-class, single-sex, white ghettos from the age of five (or four if they're "gifted").

The independent and Christian schools are divisive, discriminatory, reliant on hand-outs and implicitly teach children that some kids deserve nicer playgrounds than others. Even within their own tribe. The preps at Burke Hall surely don't deserve better facilities than the preps at St Gabriel's in Reservoir. Give me a child when they are seven and I'll show you an invoice for \$12,477 (excluding uniforms, excursions and music lessons) for something they could get around the corner free.

I added up the cost of fees for what it would cost to send my three children to a middle-of-the-range private school for six years. Not counting uniforms, excursions, transport, building funds etc. And it was about \$330,000, give or take. My first thought? No one can be getting value for money. My second thought? I could buy my kids a degree for that amount of money, and I might have to if education keeps heading the way it is. But I'm hoping that my kids will all be tradies. Because the happiest blokes I know are the tradies. People say, "Stop funding private schools? It's not as easy as that."

Yes it is. Like smoking in hospitals, gender-based pay and taking babies away from unmarried mothers, funding private education is something we will look back on and be ashamed of.

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