

No need to go the distance for a good school

By Kath Lockett

Shunning local public schools in favour of far away private ones makes no sense.

MANY Melburnians take out huge mortgages to live in tiny, no-cat-swinging-possible cottages in inner-city suburbs so they can avoid the grind of long travelling times to work. A large proportion of these people, though, think nothing of inflicting a brutally long journey on their children when it is time to start high school.

I am amazed at the convenient myopia parents seem to experience when considering what secondary schools to send their children to.

In my neck of the woods, inner-city Flemington, government school Debney Park Secondary College is as far removed from Scotch College as you can get, geographically and economically, and is the school my daughter will attend in 2012. We've done tours of the school (inside and out), we've picked up wind-blown litter every weekend and say "Hi" to most of the schoolkids as they pass by our gate.

Read more: <http://www.smh.com.au/federal-politics/society-and-culture/no-need-to-go-the-distance-for-a-good-school-20100918-15h40.html#ixzz2hfNn7mn4>

I like the place. It sure ain't pretty and reminds me a bit of my own high school with its 1970s Soviet-style buildings and all-conquering bitumen. But we all know that it's what's inside that counts.

Behind the shabby exterior are a huge library, a fully equipped recording studio, computer animation equipment that is envied by a parent who works in advertising, a gymnasium with a mezzanine level, a kitchen with overhead mirrors, and gleaming new science laboratories.

Some locals seem to regard this as the "housing commission" school and therefore not suitable for their darlings. Yes, there are a lot of dark faces there and, yes, the VCE rankings are low, but spending five minutes figuring out why isn't difficult.

Recent VCE students started at the school (literally for local kids and symbolically for those stuck in refugee camps in Africa) around 2001, when many of them had English as their second or third language or had arrived in Australia at 15 with no formal schooling of any kind. It is their younger siblings that my daughter attends Flemington Primary School with now and, when high school starts, they'll all be on equal footing in terms of language, curriculum, capabilities, social skills and support.

At a recent social function a parent shuddered when I answered "Debney Park" to her loaded "What school are you sending your daughter to?" question, even while admitting she had never set foot in the place. Our daughter attended Debney's recent "open night" and was amazed at the facilities. "I want to go here, Mum. It's in my street and is where I live. I can find my way around here and know that I'm close to home." Why is her sentiment now the exception to the rule?

Last week, The Sunday Age revealed that "Victoria's richest private schools made profits of up to \$14 million last year, with financial reports showing taxpayers contributed more than half of some schools' gains". Well, hooray for them: Debney could do with a fence that makes it look a little less like a concentration camp and a paint job to eradicate 40 years of pollution, but dear old Scotch has only 18 tennis courts, an observatory and a diving pool and apparently needs every government dollar it can get.

The Flemington Primary School newsletter informed us that out of the 44 year 6 students finishing up this year, 10 were off to private schools and 34 to public schools. Of the public schools, two are highly selective and one parent remarked that he considers them "private" in terms of "exclusivity and status". Included were details of schools the graduates of 2010 were attending in 2011, making it easy to estimate the distance required to travel to their chosen secondary schools.

The public high schools the kids are off to range from 3.5 kilometres away from the local primary school to as far as 15.2 kilometres (Melbourne Girls in Richmond).

The private schools are just as distant. The closest is just two kilometres, but Scotch College, for instance, is 16 kilometres, Wesley is 12 kilometres and St Michael's Grammar is 13.8 kilometres. In contrast, Debney Park Secondary College is just 21 metres from Flemington Primary School.

Across Melbourne, how often are perfectly good public schools ignored by inner-city parents in favour of distant private school alternatives?

Inner-city Flemington prides itself on its multi-culturalism and close proximity to the city. Most professionals take the tram, ride their bikes or power-walk into work, yet they pack their children on to the trains at 7am wearing \$2000 uniforms to attend schools that are more than 10 kilometres away. Why?

It's because stigmas stick and few parents want to be the first to go local. This puzzles me - we all survived our schooling, so why do we assume that our kids won't, especially if we're on hand to help them?

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