

The rich are buying their way into sandstone uni's and sandstone schools

By Jane Caro

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A few years ago I took my daughter's primary school chess team to play a tournament against the chess team from a prestigious, harbourside, private school. I picked my little team up from their quite presentable public school and drove them, as mothers do, to their game. We parked, walked through the sandstone and iron gates and literally stopped dead in our tracks. We gasped as we surveyed the multi-million dollar view (bad luck Hunters Hill High, such views are too good for the likes of you), the tennis courts, sandstone buildings and elegant, manicured rolling lawns and gardens. Our eyes were on stalks as we walked past gaily painted, air-conditioned classrooms along softly carpeted corridors.

We put up a good fight but each member of my little team (aged 8-10), lost their games.

As we left, my daughter turned and surveyed the scene, "Well," she said, "Their school may be beautiful, but they are ugly." I spoke sharply to her, of course, about being a good sport and a gracious loser, but there was a subversive part of me that secretly felt a bit the same way.

This school, of course, has received generous subsidies from both the Federal and State Governments ever since the Whitlam Government granted recurrent funding to private schools almost 30 years ago. Presumably they receive this public money because they so badly need it, though for what, one wonders?

I am sure this school offers scholarships and bursaries to the academically gifted, but those who can afford to pay the fees can, of course, buy their children a place in this sandstone school, whatever their ability. They always have been able to and successive governments, of both persuasions, have championed their right to do so under the mantra of "parental choice".

So why all the fuss about some of these same privileged children being able to buy their way into sandstone universities and the prestigious courses they offer, despite failing to gain the required marks?

Australia is one of the few countries in the world who subsidise their private school system. We have long endorsed the right of the better off to purchase a place in a privileged educational institution, endorsed it to the extent of publicly subsidising them to do so. So why the double standard about university?

Do we really believe 19 year old uni students are more in need of our protection and righteous indignation than 5 year old school students? We happily offer different standards of education to our 5 year olds and continue to ever more generously subsidise the growing gap between schools like the one I described earlier and disadvantaged schools in depressed areas. (Unsurprisingly, the latest OECD figures score us second worst on having the biggest gap between the highest and lowest achievements in literacy.) Why should equality of educational opportunity suddenly become an issue only once our kids have finished school?

At least we expect the parents of the kids getting into Uni on lower marks to cough up the full cost of their education, for the first year of their course, anyway.

(A word of advice to these parents, perhaps it would pay to save the private school fees and send your kids to the public system, they'll probably get much the same mark and it'll cost you vastly less in the long run for exactly the same result.)

Either buying a place in a prestigious educational institution (infants, primary, secondary or tertiary) is perfectly acceptable, or it isn't. We either have to look carefully at our attitudes to education in total, or accept that wealthier kids paying for a spot in Medicine at Sydney Uni is simply part of the Australian way of life.

After all, to paraphrase Oscar Wilde, there is no prettier sight than the privileged classes enjoying their privileges.

Though perhaps my daughter would not agree.