

Debate
Sydney Mechanics School of Arts
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Should Taxpayers be Funding Religious Schools?
The Case for the Affirmative

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- Despite the well worn mantra that there should be a clear separation between church and state, governments in Australia have been historically linked to, and dependent upon, a multitude of services provided by churches and religious organizations since the very earliest days of settlement.
- Even today, welfare programs such as counseling, family support, mental health advocacy, respite care and prisoner rehab survive largely on the volunteer and infrastructure commitment from community agencies including many religious organizations.
- So the calling of the church to minister to the needs and concerns of society and the social welfare responsibilities of government have had, and continue to have strong overlapping objectives.
- Historically, these links between church and state have also been an integral part of the schooling landscape ever since Rev Richard Johnson started the first schools in the Colony in the late 1780s.
- It has only been in relatively recent times that a charge has been heard from a vocal minority in the state school sector that there is something questionable, even sinister, about the motives and behaviours of those involved in schools operated by religious organizations.
- First, let me assert that, as registered and accredited schools, all non-government schools that receive taxpayer dollars must demonstrate through a rigorous inspection process, that they serve **a public purpose** as prescribed by the office of the Board of Studies – an agency whose functions are firmly enshrined in state legislation.
- **The public purpose** that is served encompasses all manner of standards and expectations that the society, through the BOS, deems necessary for young men and women to demonstrate in order to acquit themselves adequately for the many roles that they will have to fulfill in the society and economy beyond their school days.
- The content of curricula, the standards of performance, the values required for responsible citizenship, processes required for child protection, facilities required to support curricula, qualifications required of staff, technology required to keep pace with changing paradigms and a host of other compliance protocols – all are aspects of the standard laid down **to protect the public purpose of schooling**; all these and more are **pre-requisite standards for any registered and publicly funded school**.

- But beyond these somewhat pragmatic issues, there are also important philosophical considerations that are simply dismissed by many of those who attack the right of “religious schools” to receive taxpayer dollars.
- Public education, while defined in the Act as “secular” in nature, is **far from neutral** in matters impacting beliefs, moral standards, interpretations of curricula, selection of course content, the values orientation of policies, etc.
- While state school advocates might claim that they are not influenced by particular creeds or religions, they are none-the-less influenced by philosophical axioms that more or less define the worldview within which they unpack the complexities of life and nature embodied in the curricula.
- Philosophically, the worldview that is commonly promoted and modeled within state education lies somewhere in the mix of Secular/Scientific Humanism, Naturalism, Utilitarianism, Deconstructivism and Post Modernism.
- It’s a composite worldview that, while not religious per se, stands in the place of religion in that it positions itself both formally and informally on the same metaphysical questions that major world religions address: Does prime reality begin with matter or God? Is life autonomous or created? Is nature random or ordered? Are humans complex biological machines or image-bearers of God? Is morality just a social and cultural

convention or an extension of the character of a good God? Is the end of history in the lap of chance or the eternal purposes of God? and so on.

- The worldview that is therefore promoted in state schools clearly positions itself as a substitute for religion.
 - Its advocates claim the intellectual high ground simply on the basis that they are not religious.
 - I find this a curious logic and a convenient blind spot in their *raison d'être*.
 - Is there an hypocrisy going on here? For one belief system (for that's what it really is) that remains largely unexposed to public scrutiny appears to be OK to be publicly funded, yet another, that is open to any who care to examine it, is not in the public interest and certainly ought not to receive public funding.
 - Let me ask again. Isn't this a double standard and isn't it time it was exposed for what it is?
 - Those who openly embrace the secular worldview do so with an evangelical fervour that speaks of a hope that they have in the intellectual and creative capacities of humankind for self-redemption – the spirit of man! They hope that their beliefs are right. No proofs – just hopes.
 - It has all the hallmarks of the “hope” that those with religious convictions would claim, yet without the presence of a deity. They can't prove that there's no God, so they simply assume it and move on.
 - And some of those of this persuasion would have us believe that there is something disingenuous and suspect about those of us who have the integrity to declare that we have a different hope.
 - I utterly reject this artificial divide between registered schools simply on the basis of the worldview that is officially or unofficially promoted within them.
 - I accept that faith-based schools have a “religious purpose” that is promoted through the activities of their schools, but I would resist the assumption that state schools are not. Rather, I would suggest that they have a definite quasi-religious “worldview purpose” that is inherently promoted by the underpinning philosophies and methodologies operating in state schools.
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- On the issue of divisiveness, just a few brief comments. For most of those of us involved in Christian schools, there is a very strong commitment arising from our faith-based worldview to preparing our students to engage as thoughtful citizens in society. Our worldview serves to promote a strong sense of purpose, responsibility, stability, connectedness and hope that, rather than being socially divisive, is passionately focused on the opposite – social cohesion, justice, mercy, reconciliation, and the highest of values that stem from the very character of the God whom we worship.
 - **And parents have voted with their feet in choosing this approach over other approaches.** It is their right to have their children taught from a framework that is consistent with their beliefs and values and it is fitting that this right should be protected as part of the rich diversity of the Australian Educational landscape.
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- Let's move now to the vexed issue of the funding of schools and who is and isn't getting a fair share of the education funding pie.
 - Right at the outset, I want to make it very clear. I firmly believe that state schools have been terribly neglected and, as a consequence, both their physical fabric and the availability of some services have suffered.
 - But I am also convinced that the great majority of *non-government* schools are struggling to survive under their current funding arrangements.
 - In one of my roles I have the privilege of visiting many non-government schools and I want to assure you that, across the full gamut of religious schools that I've seen, I've found very little evidence of privileged facilities and services.
 - This notion of religious or non-government schools being a uniform enclave of privilege and excess is a total furphy. It is a generalized and exaggerated argument of convenience that is *designed* to mislead.
 - How can those who use this strategy expect us to respect their integrity when they flagrantly and knowingly deceive the public and misrepresent the realities facing the great majority of non-government schools?
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- So what are the full facts of funding?

- It is a quirk of history and politics that government schools are funded almost entirely from state coffers and non-government schools are funded substantially (though not exclusively) from federal coffers. (If required, I can explain the politics that gave rise to this state of affairs later.)
- This arrangement inevitably generates two sets of figures – one emanating from the states and the other from the commonwealth.
- When examined in isolation from each other, it is possible to “choose your own adventure” from the data – and many advocates for state schools do just that!
- But, when taken together, as any *honest* reviewer should do, a clear picture emerges.
- The 2007 Productivity Commission reported that the average cost of educating a child in a government school (Australia-wide) was \$10,715 (based on 2004 figures).
- The Ministerial Council (MCEETYA) reported that the average cost of educating a child in a non-government school (Australia-wide) was approximately \$10,444 (2004 figures).
- So, the **first thing to note here** is that, based on average costs, there is no evidence of uniform excess in the non-government sector. When one takes the relatively small number of high-fee schools out of the calculation, there must clearly be many non-government schools doing it very tough indeed – and there are!
- The Productivity Commission reports that government schools receive 88% of their funds from state governments, 8% from the federal government and 4% from private sources. But, in relation to these figures, it is important to note that, **under the terms of our constitution**, the funding of state schools is a state responsibility. Having first received their share of taxpayer funds through **states grants** from the federal government, it is the states’ responsibility to allocate those funds and manage their obligations.
- In the non-government sector, and arising primarily from those historic arrangements, 42.4 % of recurrent funding comes from the federal government, 15.3% from state governments and 42.3% from private sources. So only 58% of non-government school recurrent funding comes from government sources.
- For students with special needs, despite the constant threat of litigation under Disabilities Discrimination law facing non-government schools, governments provide little more than 15% of the average supplementation received by the same needy children in state schools.
- And in the capital area, roughly 10% of the cost of buildings and equipment in non-government schools are covered from government sources.
- So, **the second thing to note here** is that parents pay a significant premium for the right to choose their provider when it comes to schooling.
- **And a third point** follows closely. The taxpayers of Australia are saved **\$5.1bn per year** as a consequence of parents exercising their choice to have their children attend non-government schools, over 95% of which are religious in character. There is scarcely evidence here of the taxpayer being ripped off!
- The public purpose of schooling, irrespective of where it occurs, is obvious to any fair-minded Australian. Students who acquire the knowledge and skills, values and attitudes that flow from engaging in school curricula, move out of the school context to contribute significantly as taxpaying citizens to the economy, to the moral and social capital of their nation and to the cultural mix of their society. These are the dividends of schooling that all Australians take for granted.
- It follows then that, if parents determine to exercise their right of choice in selecting a religious school for their child’s education, it is only reasonable that the society which benefits from that schooling should make a substantial contribution to the costs of that schooling.
- The parents who make that choice are themselves taxpayers and are entitled to *some* discount for their investment in the state schools that they are not using. After all, they are paying 42% of the AGSRC for the right to choose.
- But what about government schools? Are they getting what *they* need?
- As I indicated before, I believe that the answer here is an unequivocal “No”.
- But it doesn’t dignify the debate for the advocates for government schooling to villainize “religious” or non-government schools as the primary reason for that underfunding. That is a simplistic and mischievous misrepresentation of the facts.

- The place to go for answers re the underfunding of government schools is to the authority that is responsible under the constitution – that is, the state government. And, in NSW, the state government is failing state schools miserably.
- It is not the non-government sector that has been taking funds away from government schools. Quite the opposite. For every child that moves from a government to a non-government school, the state government rejoices in savings of at least \$4,630 per year.
- So where are those savings being reallocated? They certainly don't appear to be going back into state schools.

- So, should taxpayers be funding religious schools? Let me put the question another way. Should taxpayers be able to choose where and how the public funds allocated to the education of their child are to be spent? My answer is an unequivocal "Yes"
- But perhaps I should put *another* question on notice: "Should all taxpayers have to fund schools where only a privileged secularist worldview is allowed to inform educational practice?"
- The state does not have an exclusive right to determine the character of the influences that will be brought to bear in the lives of children. That is a parents right and parents must have the right of first refusal when it comes to the default position of state education.
- It is my firm belief that taxpayers should fund all schools that serve **a defined public purpose** irrespective of whether those schools promote a religious worldview or a secularist worldview.
- When schools are **registered, incessantly accountable** and **open to public scrutiny**, why are they so afraid of those who choose to march to the beat of a different drum?