



# The Australian private school ascendancy: origins, development and future

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## Abstract

Australia's large private school sector receives high levels of public funding, has a high and increasing share of enrolments and advantaged students, and a decreasing share of disadvantaged students. Employing an historical sociology approach and drawing on primary and secondary sources, I argue that this ascendancy arose from the inherent differences between public and private schooling, combined with the historical circumstances as schooling developed from early colonial times. Inherent differences include public schooling's responsibilities to the whole community and the private sector's freedoms and responsibilities only to its chosen clientele and its politically powerful auspicing organisations. I clarify what private school ascendancy means, build on my own and others' arguments about residualisation, and explain my use of the terms positional goods and sector blind. Particularly, I show that sector blind policies fail to account for the role of the private sector's freedoms and the public sector's responsibilities regarding the teaching labour market and numerical and qualitative enrolments. I conclude with some brief suggestions about what can be done.

**Keywords** Private schools · State aid · Residualisation of public schooling · Sector blind · Positional goods

## Introduction

Australia's large private school sector is ascendent. It receives high levels of public funding, has a high and increasing share of overall enrolments and advantaged students. I argue that this arose from the inherent differences between public and private schooling, combined with the historical circumstances of schooling from early colonial times. Inherent differences include public schooling's responsibilities to the

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whole community and the private sector's freedoms and its responsibilities only to its chosen clienteles and its politically powerful auspicing organisations.

To explain how this situation arose I trace developments from the colonial period when the pattern of three major sectors was established: secular public school systems focused on access for all to schooling in the compulsory years; a small, politically powerful elite private school sector which largely monopolised upper secondary schooling and access to university; and schools under the control of the Catholic Church for the large Catholic population. By the end of the colonial period, private schools received no public funding. This pattern remained largely stable for more than half a century until the decades after the Second World War. During that period, demographic, economic, social and policy developments led to seemingly irresistible political pressures for public funding of private schools combined with the financial capacity of the federal government to do so. The prevailing sector blind government policy perspective led to generous funding without constraints on the autonomy of private schools and their authorities. Once such funding was established, the inherent differences between the public and private sectors became the primary drivers of the public sector's declining share of enrolments and advantaged students. These all contribute to a vicious cycle of residualisation. I conclude the paper with a consideration of some manifestations of the inherent differences between the public and private sectors and some strategies that could, if marginally, ameliorate this residualisation.

My approach is broadly that of historical sociology (Calhoun, 2003; Delanty & Isin, 2003), explaining the origins and development of the ascendancy of the private sector in particular historical circumstances. Circumstances considered include, but are not limited to, governmental structures, powers and policies; the influence of relevant interest groups; sociodemographics (including population size by religion, location, age, and socio-economic status); and economic and social trends. Due consideration is given to unintended as well as intended outcomes.

## Key terms and concepts

My definitions of public and private schooling follow the OECD classifications of public and private institutions 'depending on whether a public agency or private entity has overall control over it' (2017, p. 51). Who has ultimate control is clear-cut in Australia, and the distinction between sectors is set out in federal and state legislation. This OECD definition differs from (or is in addition to) the definitions used by scholars examining the complex features of schools that can be considered more or less 'public' or 'private' in management, funding, outcomes, and how they are viewed by and influence policy-makers, families and communities (Angus, 2015; Connell, 2013; Gerrard et al., 2017; Kenway, 2013; Marginson, 1997b; Reid, 2019).

*Ascendancy* is a core theme. There is much evidence for the Australian private school sector's increasingly ascendent status in relation to the public sector (while diversity within sectors is recognised). First, there is the expansion of the private sector as its share of overall enrolments increased from around 20% in the late 1970s (and most of the preceding century) to 37% in 2023, sharply up from 34% in 2020

(Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2025c), which reflects the differential impact on public and private schools of the COVID-19 pandemic and the then Coalition federal government's response (Conifer, 2022, 19 May; Hamilton & Hamilton, 2024, pp. 14–15; Preston, 2020). The largest increase in the private sector's enrolment share from the 1970s to 2024 occurred in the independent sector (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2025c), largely reflecting the increase in low fee schools in many different communities. Second, there is the increasing concentration of advantaged students in the private sector and disadvantaged students in the public sector since the 1970s (Cobbold, 2025; Preston, 2018, pp. 17–18). The Catholic system changed from the sector of primarily working class Catholics to the sector for middle class Catholics and others, while most Catholic students from lower income families attend public schools (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2025b). From the lowest to the highest Socio-Economic Index for Areas (SEIFA) localities, students from lower income families tend to attend public schools and those from higher income families tend to attend private schools (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2023, 2025b). Third, the ascendent political power and structural advantages of the private sector are manifest in its much higher levels of public funding than that provided to comparable public schools according to the current purportedly sector-neutral formula (Rorriss, 2023), resulting in much higher levels of per student funding from both public and private sources in low fee as well as high fee private schools relative to comparable public schools (Cobbold, 2024).

Other important concepts in this paper include the common *residual* role of public schooling in relation to private schooling and the processes of *residualisation* of the public sector. My conceptualisations draw from the sociology of the welfare state literature from the 1970s and 1980s (Esping-Andersen, 1983; Jamrozik, 1983; Titmuss, 1974). The conceptualisation as it is applied to Australian public and private school sectors is based on Preston (1984), which is the originating citation for more recent discussions of the concepts, for example in Marginson (1997b, p. 159) and Reid (2019, p. 72). The conceptualisation was further developed in Preston (1993). My concern in this paper is with the relationships between sectors, not within sectors.

*Residual* refers to the state of a school sector or schools in relation to other sectors or schools. The term is used in this way by Black et al., when they note that the high schools they study 'are termed 'residual' ... because they cater for the students remaining in the local schools while others attend either private or selective government high schools' (2018, p. 348). Residual schools or sectors can be initially established as residual or result from a process of residualisation.

*Residualisation* involves complex, self-reinforcing, dynamics leading to an increasingly weak status relative to what is ascendent (or a universal alternative). This involves losing social esteem, power and influence in relation to the ascendent, and losing resources as needs increase. Socially advantaged individuals and groups leave, taking with them their social and political influence. Meanwhile the disadvantaged and undesirable are excluded from the ascendent and are served by the residualised, adding to its costs and stigma. This results in declining quality and further loss of those students able to leave (Preston, 1984, 1993). It was such a process of residualisation within the public school sector that Lamb described (2007) and was

summarised for an individual school by the Nous Group (2011, pp. 6, 31). Residualisation is relational, and the larger the ascendent sector or school, the greater the possible residualisation effect. Residualisation involves increasing segregation of students, but not all segregation involves residualisation. Segregation in schooling is internationally significant and complex (Perry et al., 2022), but in this paper I am concerned with segregation only when it results from residualisation (or a residual state) of sectors, not individual schools.

A *positional good* (Schneider, 2007) is a scarce and valuable status, product or outcome such as an informal or formal credential that can provide access to further scarce and desirable activities, roles or networks (Marginson, 1997b, pp. xiv, 172–174). Positional goods are also relational (Schneider, 2007, p. 60). What are considered positional goods can vary over time and between different groups and individuals, though some are particularly socially significant and powerful. Institutions, such as schools, can obtain positional goods. For a school, high-achieving students from wealthy families are a positional good that can provide status and income through well-publicised achievements and donations (Gamsu et al., 2024; Kenway & Lazarus, 2017). Scholarships play a major role in elite schools obtaining the positional goods provided by the most promising students. The relational nature of the positional goods obtained by schools is here clear: providing scholarships to those who would not have otherwise attended provides the school with a positional good that is matched by a *positional bad* imposed on the schools depleted of these promising students, tending to residualise those schools. Similarly, selected students are positional goods for public or private selective schools, and the ‘unselected’ schools which lose promising students also have to accept the possible positional bads of lower ability or disruptive students that would have gone to the selective school if it had not been selective (Preston, 2011, p. 5). The theories of *Veblen goods* (Chen, 2023) and *Giffen goods* (Bloomenthal, 2024) explain circumstances where, contrary to neoclassical economic theory, demand increases when price increases (Schneider, 2007, pp. 68–71), for example, when fees increase at high and low fee (respectively) private schools and applications for places (demand) also increase (or do not fall).

An important reason for the private sector ascendancy since the 1970 s is that influential policy-makers have been *sector blind*. That is, they have not recognised and taken account of the inherent differences between the public and private sectors. According to Ken Boston, a co-author of the Gonski report (Gonski et al., 2011), ‘sector blind’ was an accurate description of the ‘concept of needs-based funding applied to all individual schools regardless of the sector of schooling to which they belong’ (quoted in Campbell, 2018, 15 July), which is the basis of that report’s recommendations and the current scheme of federal funding for all schools (Australian Government Department of Education, 2024). Sector blind refers to concrete policies, whether or not the term is actually used. Policy-makers and commentators have assumed that being sector blind is a good thing. It appears fair and reasonable to treat sectors equally, with equivalent treatment of specified disadvantages whatever the sector. Because it appears fair, politicians have been proud to claim that their policies are ‘sector blind’. In 2012, Labor education minister, Peter Garrett claimed that the government’s commitments on funding schools were ‘sector blind ... [having] left behind the old divisive days of public versus private’, quoted

in Morsy et al., (2014, p. 444), who point out that such claims of sector blindness are associated with attempts to depoliticise educational debates and silence critics of government policies.

## From the colonial period until after the Second World War

The first British colony in what became Australia, New South Wales (NSW), was established in 1788 as a convict settlement, and other colonies followed. The current ascendancy of the private sector over the public sector has its origins in colonial religious sectarianism, the political power of the Church of England, the large Catholic population, and the wealth and political power of woolgrowers and their associates who supported schools that catered exclusively to their class and aspirations. This section examines these factors and how they shaped Australian schooling.

Early colonial society was very different from England. By the 1828 census around two thirds of the colonial population were convicts or ex-convicts, a large proportion of whom were Irish Catholics who made up a third of the population. The remaining colonial population was mostly Anglican (Church of England), but sizable minorities were dissenters and influential Scottish Presbyterians. The Indigenous (Aboriginal) population in the areas under colonial control was reported in the census to be around 1% of the population (Biographical Database of Australia, 2008/2025, pp. pp. 54–56, 58). In contrast, in England in 1800, around 88% of the population were Anglicans, 10% other Protestants, and only 1% Catholics (Field, 2012).

Early governors provided schooling for children under government control in orphanages and the residential Parramatta Native Institution for Aboriginal children separated from their communities (Cadzow, 2007, pp. 2–3; Campbell & Proctor, 2014, pp. 18–22). Most other early schools were private, run by chaplains and others while colonial governors provided some support for buildings and convict labour. By the 1820 s only around one in ten colonial children attended school (Campbell & Proctor, 2014, pp. 9–18).

The Anglican church was granted powers and privileges not available to other denominations. In the 1820 s governors sought to establish public schools with Anglican curricula and pedagogy or managed by the Anglican church. Unsurprisingly, the other denominations objected and the schemes did not last (Austin, 1961, pp. 7–21, 31). Schooling continued to be ad hoc and inaccessible for the majority of colonial children. All denominations were busy establishing schools in locations of their choosing, catering to selected social classes, their congregations and some special groups such as children in rural Aboriginal missions (Cadzow, 2007).

As separate schools controlled by the denominations expanded, an enduring feature of colonial schooling developed. These were non-profit private schools for the elite, many of which became the contemporary high fee independent schools (Sherington et al., 1987). In the early colonial period the most influential elites were associated with the wool industry. Bongiorno noted that governors tended to take the side of ‘ex-convicts and small settlers’ against these wealthy elites (2022, p. 17) who had great influence on the Colonial Office and the British Government. In early

1831, Australia's first still-existing elite independent school, The King's School, was established by the Anglican Church with influential support from this wealthy elite (Marr, 2023, Chapters 2–8; Shineberg, 1967). The Colonial Office directed the newly appointed colonial governor, Richard Bourke, to provide it with substantial funds. While he facilitated the works and expenditure as directed, he reported his concerns in a letter to the Secretary of State for the Colonies (1834, 10 March/1914). He was particularly critical of this expenditure on the schooling for the 'sons of the wealthy colonists and civil servants..., whilst the children of the poor are educated in mere hovels under convict school masters' (pp. 393–4).

In the 1830 s and 1840 s governors tried to implement publicly funded, non-denominational schooling accessible to all colonial children, but received effective opposition from the Anglicans, other denominations and the wealthy elite (Austin, 1961, pp. 32–45; Marr, 2023, pp. 32–33; Shineberg, 1967). Barcan noted that 'upper-class Protestant landowners feared [it] would enable the lower classes, who were mainly of convict, Irish and Roman Catholic origin, to rise in the world' (1980, p. 44).

By the late 1840 s opposition to non-denominational schooling was dissipating (Austin, 1961, pp. 45–48). Public funding for denominational schools was maintained while non-denominational public schools were established in country areas which were undesirable locations for the churches. 'In this dual system, the government schools were regarded as being no more than supplementary to the denominational schools' (Committee of Review, 1983, p. 11). In other words, the first systemic public schools under the control of a public agency were to play a residual role in relation to publicly funded private schools. According to Austin, 'experience was to prove how cumbersome, expensive and exacerbating this dual system was to prove' (1961, p. 45).

This early colonial period set the framework for Australian schooling. The decades of delay and the continued funding of the dual system allowed time and resources for the expansion of denominational schools and the establishment of many new elite private schools 'as the secondary level of elementary school systems conducted by the various denominations' (Sherington et al., 1987, pp. 22, 184). These elite schools focussed on this secondary schooling to matriculation<sup>1</sup> and access to universities—even in 1970 elite independent schools enrolled only 2% of Australian primary school students, but 15% of students in the final two years of schooling (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2025c).

Separate Catholic schooling was consolidated after Pope Pius IX's 1864 encyclical (1864/2020) that directed the Catholic hierarchy to withdraw from any involvement in state-run schooling and the Catholic laity to send their children only to Catholic schools. A pastoral letter in 1869 from the Australian Bishops reiterated the Pope's directives and added an assertion of the right of Catholics to receive public funds to erect and maintain their schools (Wilkinson, 2018).

The current Australian public school systems in each state and territory arose out of the recognition, with political support, that in colonies with widely dispersed

<sup>1</sup> Matriculation is a course of learning and assessment leading to eligibility to study at university.

populations only *systems* of common schools could adequately reach all students, and that competing denominational schools were costly and inefficient (Austin, 1961, Chapter 4; Selleck, 1982, p. 101). By 1895 legislation had established systems of public schooling under ministerial control and managed by departments of education in the six colonies with compulsory school attendance up to the middle secondary years, and public funding withdrawn from private schools (Campbell & Proctor, 2014, p. 74).

While compulsory public schooling had been attended to, there had been a ‘failure to develop secondary education’ (Austin, 1961, pp. 233–234). But this was not always for want of trying. Public secondary schools threatened the status of elite private schools as the sole providers of full secondary education and matriculation in a locality or jurisdiction. For example, in 1883 eight public secondary schools were established in NSW, but only those in Sydney and Maitland survived after effective opposition from private schools (Campbell & Proctor, 2014, p. 93).

In the colony (later state<sup>2</sup>) of Victoria the opposition of the elite private schools to public full secondary schools was jurisdiction-wide and maintained by a supportive parliament. The 1872 and 1890 Victorian Education Acts (Government of Victoria, 1872/2019, 1890/2019) did not provide for public secondary schools. Frank Tate, Victorian Director General of Education from 1902, struggled to establish public secondary schools. He was trenchantly opposed by elite private school interests, and graphically expressed his view of the problem in his 1905 annual report. He wrote that those who oppose full public secondary schooling did so ‘because they regard [it] as an attack upon their own class interest and privileges... [what should be provided are] broad stairways for all who can climb’ (quoted in Selleck, 1982, p. 157). Legislation allowing public secondary schooling in Victoria was eventually passed in 1911. However, there were restrictions: public secondary schools could not be located where they were in direct competition with existing private secondary schools (Government of Victoria, 1911/2019, Part III, 24 (1), p. 656). The impact of that legislation has been long-lived: in 1948 more than 74% of Victorian matriculation students were in private schools (Marginson, 1997a, p. 24), and the location and type of public secondary schools and the social composition and year 12 enrolments of the public and independent sectors reflected the 1911 legislation through to the 1970 s and beyond (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2025b, 2025c; Teese, 2014).

By the 1900 s the structure of schooling had settled to the pattern of three major sectors. First, the secular public school systems, the responsibility of state governments, enrolled around 80% of all students. Public schooling focussed on access for all to the compulsory years, with provision for full secondary education varying between the states. Second, the Catholic sector provided for the children of the large Catholic population, enrolling around 15% of all students. It was under the control of the Catholic church (parishes and orders of nuns and brothers) and also primarily focussed on the compulsory years. Third, the small, politically powerful elite independent sector (which included some Catholic schools), enrolled fewer than 5% of all enrolments but largely monopolised (in student numbers and influence over the

<sup>2</sup> The colonies became states after they federated to become the independent nation of Australia in 1901.



curriculum and assessment) upper secondary schooling, matriculation and access to university (Teese, 2000). The enrolment shares between the public and private sectors were broadly stable until the late 1970 s (Marginson, 1997a, p. 24). No private schools received direct public funding, and state (and territory) governments had responsibility for their limited regulation. Until the 1960 s the federal government had minimal involvement in either the direct funding or regulation of any schools.

In 1901 the British colonies were federated as states and became the independent nation of Australia. The constitution adopted specified areas in which the Commonwealth (federal) parliament would have powers. Unspecified powers, including school education, were to reside with the states. However, according to Section 96 of the constitution, the States Grants power, federal parliament ‘may grant financial assistance to any State on such terms and conditions as the Parliament thinks fit’ (Australian Government, 2024). *Vertical fiscal imbalance* was established in 1942 when the federal government legislated itself monopoly over income tax (Tilley, 2024, p. 166) and inadequately compensated the states (Mathews, 1983, p. 138). This limit on revenue for the states constrains what they can spend on public schools, while the federal government has greater fiscal freedom. Since the Second World War Australia has been governed by either the social-democratic Australian Labor Party (Labor), or a conservative Coalition (Liberal and Country/National).

## The re-introduction of direct public funding of private schools

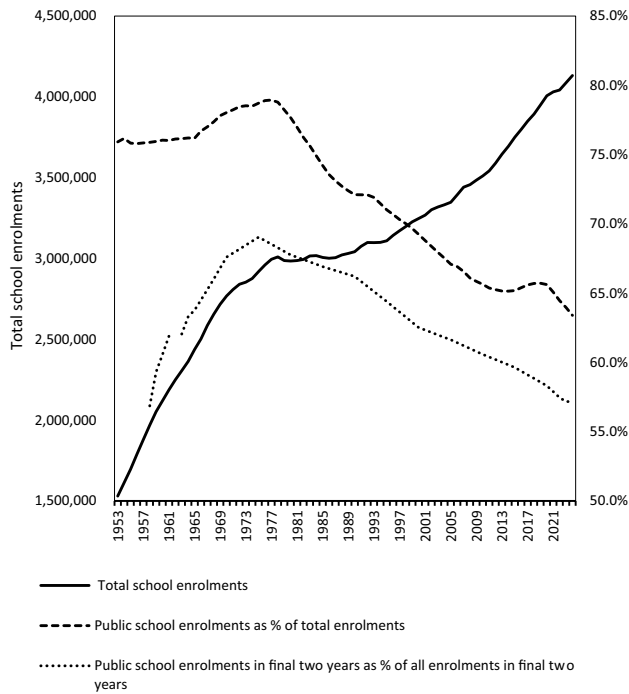
The re-introduction of direct public funding of private schools by the federal government in the 1960 s and the establishment in the 1970 s of the framework for the current schools funding scheme developed in the economic, demographic, social and political circumstances after the Second World War.

There was rapid population growth, fuelling rapid enrolment increases (Fig. 1), which put enormous pressure on schools. Political imperatives for educational modernisation after the 1957 launch of the Soviet Union’s Sputnik satellite led to a massive expansion in post-compulsory schooling and tertiary education (Marginson, 1997a, p. 21), adding to financial pressures on all schools. The economic boom eventually provided the federal government with the revenue for greater funding of education at all levels.

From the early 1940 s federal funding was advocated by many organisations representing public and Catholic schools (Smart, 1977). Initially elite independent schools opposed direct public funding, fearing it would threaten their autonomy, and they successfully lobbied for high levels of indirect public funding through tax deductions, especially for donations for school buildings, introduced in 1954 (Productivity Commission, 2024, p. 192; Tax relief urged for parents, 1949, January 18).

The Headmasters Conference, representing high fee independent boys’ schools, collaborated with the corporate elite in 1959 to form the Industrial Fund to use tax deductible corporate donations for building science laboratories. The Headmasters Conference had close connections with Robert Menzies, the Coalition prime minister from 1949, who opened many of the science blocks built with Industrial Fund money and, after the 1961 recession dried up corporate





**Fig. 1** Total school enrolments, public school students as a percentage of total enrolments, and public school students in the final two years of school as a percentage of all students in the final two years, 1953 to 2024 (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2025c)

Note: From 1958 to 1961 the Australian Bureau of Statistics published only age data, and age 16 and older is here a proxy for the final two years

donations, listened to pleas for federal funds to continue the Industrial Fund's work. By then the Headmasters Conference no longer opposed direct public funding ('state aid'). (Smart, 1984).

While all school sectors were lobbying the federal government for funds in the early 1960 s, a multi-stranded state aid debate occurred in the media (Bannister, 1981). Some supported state aid because of the claimed rights of Catholic students to public funding (a position held since the 1869 Bishops' pastoral letter), the parlous state of Catholic schools and the likely disruption to public schooling if Catholic schools were forced to close (this was illustrated in 1962 when Catholic schools temporarily closed in protest after demands for public funds were denied by the NSW government and students overwhelmed public schools until the Catholic schools re-opened (Barcan, 1980, p. 317)). Others argued that state aid would mean 'the semi-establishment of religion' (pp. 3–4, 9). Some opposing state aid for high fee independent schools argued that it increased 'the privileges of one group [already] "at the top of the economic and social scale"', while others argued that state aid could help independent schools 'from becoming the preserve of the wealthy' by allowing them to constrain fees and expand scholarships

(pp. 24–25). Other arguments drew from the neo-liberalism of Milton Friedman (1955/1962) and sought state aid as a means of promoting diversity, individuals' control over their education, and diminishing public schools characterised by a 'stodgy, rigid centralism' (Bannister, 1981, pp. 5–6), a view attractive to many in the Coalition over subsequent decades. With different values, others argued that 'a universal consequence of state aid [would be] the undermining of the state system of education' (pp. 4, 11), but this, at the time hypothetical, argument gained little traction.

During the 1963 federal election campaign, Menzies, who had previously opposed direct state aid, announced a policy to fund secondary school science laboratories in all sectors based on the Industrial Fund model. Menzies was influenced by the intense lobbying from all sectors and was aware of the importance of the Catholic vote after the close 1961 election (Smart, 1977). The science facilities and senior secondary scholarship programs began in 1964, followed by grants for secondary school libraries in 1968 and per capita (per student) grants to private schools in 1970. All these Coalition government schemes disproportionately favoured private schools. (Ainley, 1978, p. 297; Burke & Spaul, 2001, p. 442; Mathews, 1983, pp. 144, 146).

By the early 1970s state aid was established. There was concern with the favouring of private schools, but there was little concern among policy-makers that state aid might actually damage public schooling. This was not surprising. One of the most influential policy-makers, especially in Labor circles, economist Peter Karmel, chaired a committee of inquiry into schooling in the state of South Australia. The committee's report included a detailed consideration of state aid (Karmel et al., 1971, pp. 167–170). This analysis was sector blind, seeing nothing of the different and inherent responsibilities of public schools and freedoms of private schools: 'from the point of view of governments and taxpayers it is cheaper to give aid [to private schools] so long as it falls short of the full cost of educating the child in a government school' (p. 167). Those asserting that state aid would undermine public schools had not made clear how this would occur, and it was hard to do so when the public system was increasing enrolment share, including in the final years of secondary schooling (Fig. 1), and Catholic schools, the schools of the working class and migrant Catholic population, were so clearly under-resourced. According to Mathews, there was a 'dawning realisation on the part of both Labor and non-Labor politicians... that the opposition to state aid was more vocal than effective, and more imagined than real' (1983, p. 142). The remaining concern was that state aid should not come at the financial expense of public schools (Mathews, 1983, p. 141). This concern dissipated as the post-war economic boom contributed richly to federal government revenue.

Labor was elected in 1972 in part on the votes of conservative Catholics who were persuaded that Labor would support state aid for Catholic schools even more effectively than had the Coalition (Johns & Rolfe, 2011, 21 July). The new government established the Interim Committee for the Australian Schools Commission, chaired by Peter Karmel, to examine the situation of all public and private schools and make recommendations regarding the financial needs of schools (Karmel et al., 1973, p. 3). While recognising the obvious administrative

differences between the public and private sectors, the approach of the 1973 Karmel committee, like the 1971 committee in South Australia, was sector blind. The standard for determining per capita grants to both public and private schools was the 'national average [per student] quantum of recurrent resources used in government schools' (p. 57). The recommended grant levels for private schools were according to 'needs': the estimated capacity of schools to support their own endeavours according to the level of fees charged. Consistent with the 'needs' principle, the committee recommended that grants be withdrawn from high fee independent schools (p. 12).

The recommended large increases in funds for almost all schools led to enthusiastic responses to the Karmel report from organisations that had long-standing concerns with state aid (Marginson, 1997a, p. 47). It is the implementation of the Karmel report that is important, not its analyses and commentary. However, there was a prescient caution, which reflected the diversity in the Karmel committee:

There is a point beyond which it is not possible to consider policies relating to the private sector without taking into account their possible effects on the public sector whose strength and representativeness should not be diluted... As public aid for non-government schools rises, the possibility and even the inevitability of a changed relationship between government and nongovernment schooling presents itself. (Karmel et al., 1973, p. 12)

As the Committee's recommendations were legislated the grants to high fee private schools were restored through amendments in the Senate, where Labor was outnumbered by the combined vote of the Coalition and the conservative Catholic-based DLP (Connors & McMorrow, 2015, p. 20). The Catholic bishops had wanted to lock in state aid as a 'right not a privilege' (Warhurst, 2012), and thus supported the high fee independent schools to ensure their grants were retained.

The on-going powerful alliance of Catholic authorities and independent school representatives also ensured that there were repeated increases in grants to private schools, that when funding criteria were changed no private school would lose funds, and that regulation would continue to be minimal. The same coalition of forces ensured that again in the early 1980 s and the mid- 2000 s, Labor policies to reduce grants to high fee schools were overturned. Similarly, in 2017 when the funding scheme changed, the Coalition proposal to control increases to Catholic schools was abandoned and the minister removed from the education portfolio after political pressure from Catholic school authorities (Karp, 2018, 23 September). In contrast, public schools frequently lost funding when states experienced fiscal difficulties. The increasingly generous per capita grants and ready availability of public funds for capital works facilitated the establishment of many low-fee independent schools, as well as the expansion of Catholic systems and high fee independent schools.

A 1976 OECD review team commented that 'criticism of the [Australian] non-government sector and of the public subsidy to institutions in this sector appear to us remarkably muted' (quoted in Marginson, 1997a, pp. 47–48). The international outlier status of Australia was similarly noted by the federal government's advisory Schools Commission in 1978: 'Australia is unique in the ways in which it finances non-government schools and in the levels of support and the conditions which it

attaches to them' (Schools Commission, 1978, p. 14). Similarly, Jean Blackburn, the 1973 Karmel committee deputy chair, wrote in 1991:

We created a situation unique in the democratic world. It is very important to realise this. There were no rules about student selection and exclusion, no fee limitations, no shared governance, no public accountability.... We have now become a kind of wonder at which people [in other countries] gape. (quoted in Ashenden, 2012, 13 June)

## **Private freedoms, public responsibilities: the teaching labour market and enrolments**

With seemingly equitable (sector blind) federal funding since the 1970 s, why did the private sector become so ascendent? Previous sections have indicated the importance of funding arising out of vertical fiscal imbalance (constraining public school funding) and the political influence of private school advocates. In this section I consider the role of the private sector's freedoms and the public sector's responsibilities regarding the teaching labour market and numerical and qualitative enrolments.

The private sector's substantial advantages in the teaching labour market are notable in the development of new teachers and when there are teacher shortages. Leading educationalist, Gregor Ramsey, expressed his concerns throughout a 2000 report to the NSW government (Ramsey, 2000, pp. 90, 122–123, 166, 182, 203). He explained that 'the nongovernment school system is able to recruit teachers after they have had a few years of experience in the government system or can take their pick of the very best young graduates', and argued that the private sectors should pay a 'training fee' or the federal government should cover all the costs of developing graduate teachers (p. 182). Recent data indicates that these problems remain (Australian Institute for Teaching & School Leadership, 2019, Fig. 71; Preston, 2023, pp. 32–33). The public sector disproportionately bears the costs of supporting recent graduates, including their reduced teaching loads and professional development, the time of supervisors, and the costs to students of being taught by inexperienced teachers. As Ramsey also pointed out, where there are specialist or general teacher shortages the private sector can use its greater resources and administrative freedom to recruit from the public sector, ensuring optimal staffing while leaving the public sector to disproportionately bear the burden of shortages (for example, see Marchant, 2023, 5 February).

The larger the private sector relative to the public sector, the greater the damage inflicted on the public sector by the private sector's competitive advantages in the teaching labour market. It is not surprising that many families seek the staffing stability of private schools. This has parallels in student enrolments.

Private schools can usually manage enrolments at optimal levels while public schools must accept all comers or cope with too few. This is an ongoing experience, making it more costly for public schools to maintain curriculum options and generally to run schools when there are suboptimal numbers at each year level. Meanwhile, private schools in the same locality can generally ensure they have the

enrolment numbers at each year level for efficient and effective schooling. This may be hard to measure, but adds up substantially. The different experiences between the sectors are most obvious at times of national, state or local substantial enrolment change.

At a national level, after growing rapidly to the late 1970 s, enrolment growth sharply fell to around 0% annually until the mid- 1990 s (Fig. 1). Many localities experienced substantial enrolment declines that were costly and hard to manage (Centre of Policy Studies Monash University, 1981). These problems were overwhelmingly borne by the public sector, with an enrolment decline of – 8% over the period while private sector enrolments increased by 33%. Not only was this the period of the greatest rate of loss of enrolment share by the public sector (Fig. 1), but it was also the period of the public sector's greatest rate of loss of advantaged students and increase in disadvantaged students (Preston, 2018, p. 18).

At a state/territory level great enrolment fluctuations occur with changes in school starting age. Tasmania increased the school starting age in the early 1990 s, and the impact was felt through the primary grades then secondary. For example, between 1999 and 2000, year eight enrolments in all schools fell by 14%, in the public sector by 19% and in the private sector by less than 2%. The private sector's rate of annual increase in enrolment share was ratchetted up, with on-going effect. (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2025c).

At the local level the differential impact of substantial enrolment fluctuations is apparent as new suburbs are established and mature. For example, new housing was established in the Australian Capital Territory suburban district of Tuggeranong between the late 1960 s and late 1980 s. By the early 2010 s the school age population bulge from Tuggeranong's peak 'nappy valley' years had left school. Between 2001 and 2011 total Tuggeranong primary school student numbers halved, public school enrolments fell by a disproportionate 71%, private school enrolments by only 19%. Total secondary enrolments fell by 19%, public school enrolments by a disproportionate 37%, private schools by 0%. Again, the effect has been long-lasting. (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2025a, 2025b).

Location of schools is also a matter of choice for private schools and of necessity for public schools. Even though the current funding formula treats remote and small public and private schools in exactly the same way, the real costs for such public schools are generally much greater than apparently similar private schools, which can choose location and enrolments.

It is not only quantitative enrolments that are affected by the private sector's freedoms and the concomitant responsibilities of the public sector. There are also qualitative effects that can be even more powerful. Private schools have freedoms to select and exclude students, while the public sector has a responsibility to serve all comers. Families can choose, but only if their child is among those chosen. Private schools select by many mechanisms, including fees, interviews and references, academic test results, and scholarship programs. Those mechanisms also exclude, as do the explicit exclusions of disruptive or difficult to teach students. Those not chosen by private schools, including the disruptive and difficult to teach, attend public schools, increasing costs and disadvantages. Private schools (and some public schools) provide students and their communities with positional goods, and selected students

provide those schools with positional goods. Meanwhile students in residualised public schools often receive the positional bad of a sub-optimal education while their schools receive the possible positional bads of the students not chosen and excluded.

## What can be done

All the factors discussed above contribute to the powerful dynamic of the residualisation of the public sector. Many communities, stakeholders (including some in the private sector) and policy-makers seek to ameliorate this dynamic, but their effectiveness is limited, given the political power of private school authorities and school communities, as well as the circumstances of schools. But some strategies can ameliorate current trends, even if only marginally. The first task would be for the federal government to immediately fund public schools to at least the agreed (sector blind) standard and not delay doing so for a decade (Australian Government Department of Education, 2025).

The second task is consistent with the recommendations made by Gregor Ramsey a quarter of a century ago and could be done cost neutrally for the federal government. That government, rather than public and private school authorities, should fund all costs related to the supervision of student teachers and the induction and development of graduate teachers. Consistent with Ramsey's recommended 'training fee', these measures could be funded by deductions from allocations to school authorities in proportion to the average annual increase in teacher numbers over, say, the previous five years (which would be the costs to authorities if the preparation and development of new teachers was equitably shared).

Other ways of compensating for the costs borne by the public sector because of its responsibilities and constraints and the private sector's freedoms are more difficult both politically and administratively. Even so, they should be investigated, and some possibilities follow, which could be applied irrespective of sector.

Additional federal funds could be granted to schools with large proportions of early career teachers and vacancies for permanent teachers, and to schools that experience greater than average fluctuations in enrolments in a locality (individual schools) or jurisdiction (sector). Funds should be reduced to academically selective schools (including public schools) and schools that provide music, sporting or academic scholarships, and diverted to the depleted schools. Schools should be required to have reciprocal relationships with comparable schools in their sector for excluded/expelled students, or a financial penalty imposed with the funds diverted to schools accepting excluded students.

Australia is heading relentlessly towards even greater segregation and inequality in schooling, leading to poorer educational outcomes, greater social divisions and a diminished nation. The question remains: can our governments and communities prevent, or even significantly restrain, this juggernaut?

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