Fund learning, not schools

WHEN JOURNALISTS START WRITING STORIES ABOUT ELITE SCHOOL FUNDING, ONE THING IS OFTEN FORGOTTEN: YOU WON’T CREATE EQUITY IF YOUR FOCUS REMAINS ON FUNDING FOR SCHOOLS, SAYS DAVID LOADER.

‘$50M ELITE SCHOOLS PIGGY BANK.’  
So shouted the frontpage headline to an article by Age journalist Deborah Gough, which listed 10 Melbourne schools that in one year had ‘pocketed’ more than $30 million in surpluses from school fees and government grants. The article, which identified the schools from their audited company reports, found surpluses for schools such as Scotch College of $12.7 million, with a government grant of $4.3 million, Melbourne Grammar – $10.6 million, with a government grant of $3.2, Methodist Ladies’ College – $2.6 million, and Presbyterian Ladies’ College – $2.3m, with government grants listed for neither.

It wasn’t surprising to find critical quotations. It was described as ‘obscene and gobsmacking’ – twice. ‘We have hit the point of absurdity in school funding in Australia,’ wrote Andrew Blair, the president of the Australian Secondary Principals Association, in an opinion piece. ‘Exclusive private schools have enjoyed massive funding increases, and are overfunded to the detriment of those in need.’

It’s a fact that all schools are not equal and that students who attend well-equipped and well-staffed schools have better chances of success than others. Schools with playing fields, drama and music centres, well-equipped and well-staffed science laboratories, functioning and ubiquitous technology, regional campuses and the like provide motivation and support for student development. The question is not so much why some students should have such high levels of encouragement, but why all students can’t have such opportunities. We’re rich enough as a nation to deliver this, yet it seems that we’d rather have our tax cuts.

We’re left with a situation where some parents are prepared to forgo ‘luxuries’ and put their private money into providing what they perceive to be the ‘best’ opportunity for their child – although the wealthier you are the fewer ‘luxuries’ you have to forgo. Equally, some parents with the capacity to contribute private money refuse, arguing that it’s the government’s responsibility to provide an education for their children. Then there are those parents who cannot possibly contribute financially towards their children’s schooling. We need to explore more fully how parents in this third category might contribute to schooling. After all, in creating a positive school culture, we’re not just looking for financial capital, we’re looking to build social capital.

Importantly, it cannot be argued that attendance at a certain school guarantees that a student will be a well-educated graduate. All schools have failing students – and even one is too many. Of course, it would be impossible to provide a place at a ‘top 10’ school for every student, but even if it were, a more equitable future for our society would not ensue.

In our knowledge society, we need to look outside schools for the solution. The place to begin is with the home and local community. Instead of funding schools with millions of dollars, we could fund students and their families directly. They in turn could source their specific needs from the internet, social agencies, teachers or even schools that offer flexible access.

We still have a mindset that begins with institutions such as schools and assumes that there’s only one induction process – physical participation in a school following a national curriculum – that fits all students. We still don’t seem to understand that we live in a digital age where students are connected with each other and knowledge directly. For many students, ‘classes’ are unnecessary and, for some, even counterproductive. Those same students who are learning from the net, and particularly those who are socially disadvantaged, could benefit from funded group learning activities that focus on the development of the individual and the community.

Let’s be honest. Many of us, particularly university graduates, have benefited from an unjust system that favours the socially advantaged. It’s time we said it’s not acceptable that schools inadvertently contribute to a worsening social situation.

When some students gain more than others from the way learning is provided, we have an unacceptable situation, but the plight of those missing out may not necessarily be best addressed in schools. Why do more of the same? Let’s have the courage to fund new alternatives. Ask not which school gets what money, but how can we rethink the way we allocate government money, including funding for non-school alternatives.

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REFERENCES