

Why parents choose public or private schools





By Dr Adrian Beavis

Adrian is a Principal Research Fellow with ACER's Teaching and Learning research program

*Assumptions have often been made about what parents are looking for in the school they select for their children but there has been little evidence to support these assumptions. An ACER study for The Sydney Morning Herald looked into the reasons behind the drift away from public schools in Australia and asked what do parents really think of our schools? **Adrian Beavis**, the report's author, discusses its findings.*

In January this year Prime Minister John Howard prompted considerable debate on the subject of school selection when he suggested that more parents were opting for private education because they feel that 'government schools have become too politically correct and values-neutral.'¹ His comments sparked strong reactions and many opinions but to date there has been little real evidence to show what really does influence parents when choosing a school. What we do know is that parents have been voting with their feet over the past decade. Between 1993 and 2003, Government school enrolments in Australia increased by 1.2 per cent while enrolments in non-Government schools increased by 22.3 per cent.

There has clearly been a drift away from public school education but what has caused this drift? What do parents really think of Australia's schools? Do more parents of public school children aspire to join this drift to the independents? A search for answers to these and other questions prompted a study conducted by ACER and ACNielsen into parental attitudes to private and public schools.



The study's design

The study, commissioned by Fairfax for *The Sydney Morning Herald* and *The Age* newspapers, was designed to explore the reasons behind the growth in the proportion of students in private schools compared to Government schools over the past decade. The findings from the report, *Why parents choose public or private schools*, were featured in the 'Great Schools Debate' series in *The Sydney Morning Herald* from 9-13 August.

The study was designed to address three major questions:

1. What are the family background factors that influence selection of a private or public school?
2. What are the economic factors that influence selection of a private or public school?
3. What are the perceptions of schools that parents have that may shape their selection of private or public schools?

ACNielsen collected data from 609 households on family background, parents' perceptions of the school sectors and what factors most influence their decision in choosing a school.

Key findings

Among the findings on family background was that family occupational status is associated with the selection of a private or public school, with those having high occupational status more likely to choose a private school compared with those with lower levels of occupational status. Around half of families at Government and Catholic schools have middle levels of occupational status compared with around 40 per cent for those at Independent schools.

Conversely, families with students at an Independent school more commonly have higher occupational status – around 50 per cent compared to 25 to 30 per cent of families from Government or Catholic schools.

Educational level of parents also affects the decision to select a private or public school, with those having the highest level of education selecting a private school for their children. About 20 per cent of families at Government and Catholic schools have both parents with a degree compared with just on 25 per cent of families at Independent schools.

Political preference may also be associated with school selection. Labor voters are more likely to select Government schools and Liberal/National party voters are more likely to select Independent schools.

Data were gathered on the economic factors that may influence school selection based on household income. Those with higher family incomes were more likely to send their children to a private school. The proportion of families with an annual income of \$ 100 000 or more makes up 40 per cent of the families in Independent schools compared with 21.6 per cent of Catholic school families and 11 per cent of Government school families. Of all families in Government schools, just over 20 per cent have an income less than \$ 25 000 compared with 5 per cent in Independent schools.

Parents of government school students were also asked hypothetically if they would move their child to a private school if money were no object. Just over half of parents (54 per cent) answered that they would not move their children to a private school. Conversely, approximately a third of public

school parents (34 per cent) said they would change to a private school if the fees were no more than for government schools, suggesting that if private education were more affordable the drift away from government schools would continue.

The reasons given by parents who would stay with the public system relate to their experience of the quality of education offered by these schools, or a belief in the quality of education that they provide. Other reasons included support of the Government school concept, a dislike of religious aspects of private schools and a view of private schools as elitist.

The most common reasons given for changing from a Government school included the view that there is better discipline in private schools, the view that there is better education or better teachers (paid more or properly screened) in private schools, the view that there are smaller classes or there is more individual attention given to students in private schools. There was also some evidence of religious views influencing these opinions with 8.5 per cent of parents mentioning the religious or value systems of private schools.

Factors influencing school selection

Aspects of schools that were important to parents in the selection of a public or private school were also examined. A clear link was found between what parents perceive to be important and the selection of a school sector.

The strongest effect on the selection of a private school was the importance parents attached to the perception of the school having traditional values. The wearing of a school uniform and the traditions of the school are also important.

For parents with students in a Catholic school, discipline, the religious values of the school, the traditions of the school and the requirement of wearing a school uniform were considered important. Selection of a Government school was influenced most by parents' perceptions of the importance of academic and social and cultural security or familiarity with the school. The range of subjects available and the location of the school were also important. School uniform, tradition of the school and religious or moral values of the school were considered less important.

Conclusions

In so far as this research was able to pin down reasons for the selection of a private or public school, one factor stood out: the extent to which the school embraced traditional values to do with discipline, religious or moral values, the traditions of the school itself, and the requirement that a uniform be worn.

An interesting question raised by this survey is to what extent do parental perceptions mirror reality in schools? Does a school's connection to a church make it more likely that students will develop personal ethical standards and moral codes of behaviour? Or does the fact that government schools are more representative of local communities mean that students in those schools are more likely to value inclusiveness and to be supportive of others, including minorities and disadvantaged groups? We don't know from this study how parents view values or how these values should be treated in schools. An exploration of parental views of values in schools may be an appropriate topic for future research.

The perception that some schools provide a 'better education' than others is also

difficult to validate. While it is true that some schools achieve outstanding Year 12 results and are highly successful in terms of university entrance, some of these schools – both public and private – have selective student intakes. Some schools draw students from higher socio-economic groups within the community and have above-average levels of support at home and outside school.

An important conclusion of this national parent survey is that parents now seek a high level of involvement in choosing a secondary school for their children. If parents are to make informed choices between schools, they probably require better evidence than is currently available to them.

The study identified a number of differences between parents who send their children to government and non-government schools. There were also things that parents in the different school sectors had in common. For nearly all parents in this study, the selection of a school for their children was important. Most reported high levels of satisfaction with the school they had selected, and had high expectations that their children would successfully complete their schooling at Year 12. In other words, most parents have a positive view of Australian schools. ■

For further information.

The full report *Why parents choose private or public schools* by Dr Adrian Beavis can be read on *The Sydney Morning Herald* website www.smh.com.au/articles/2004/08/17/1092508439581.html

References

1. Maiden, Samantha, 'Howard slams public schools', *The Australian*, 20 January 2004, page 1
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