

Australian government hands private schools another \$4.6 billion

By David Cohen
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The Liberal-National Coalition government has pledged an extraordinary \$4.6 billion in additional funding, over the next decade, for private schools across the country, including some of the most elite and wealthy institutions.

The latest windfall will accelerate the gulf between well-resourced private schools and cash-starved public schools, in what is already one of the world's most unequal education systems.

A recent OECD report, "Education at a Glance 2018," showed that Australia has the highest proportion of private funding for non-tertiary education—19 percent of total spending—of any advanced economy. This is twice the OECD average of 8 percent.

Between 2005 and 2015, the government's share of total expenditure on non-tertiary education fell from 73 percent to 66 percent. Within the OECD, only Turkey and Colombia have lower proportions of public funding for primary and secondary schools.

The promotion of private schools by successive Labor and Coalition governments has resulted in the rate of secondary private school student enrolments rise to 40 percent, with the proportion greater than 50 percent in parts of the country's large cities.

The latest pretext for doling out more public money to private schools was provided by the release of a government-commissioned report into how private schools' "socio-economic status" (SES) is calculated. The SES affects the level of public funding they receive.

In June, the National School Resourcing Board issued its final report (known as the Chaney Report, after the board's chair Michael Chaney). Like his education advisor counterpart David Gonski, Chaney is a major figure in the corporate world, currently serving as chairman of Australia's largest conglomerate, Wesfarmers. The Chaney Report examined the SES methodology that was first introduced in 2001 by the Coalition government of John Howard as a means of

funneling greater public money into elite schools. The SES calculated a school's status, not on the basis of the actual wealth of its students' families, or the institution's existing assets and infrastructure. Instead, it applied a census data average of income, education, and employment of all households in the area where the students lived. This allowed multiple distortions favouring wealthy private schools (see "The Gonski 'needs-based' school funding fraud in Australia").

The Chaney Report concluded that enhanced government data collection now allowed a different calculation, based on the median income of parents and guardians at each school. The report stressed that private schools would not be negatively affected by this shift. "Preliminary modelling of the potential financial impact of using a direct household income approach indicates that nationally, both the Catholic and independent sectors would continue to receive significant funding increases, well above inflation, assuming all other variables remain unchanged," it explained.

Chaney rejected a consideration of household wealth (a more accurate indicator of socio-economic status than income). He also dismissed school wealth, including bequests, fees and assets. The latter was rejected for inclusion in a school's socio-economic status on the grounds that "the assets a school possesses may not reliably indicate the parents' or guardians' capacity to contribute." The report declared that "it is often the case that new school capital facilities like swimming pools, drama centres and new classrooms or laboratories are funded by a relatively small proportion of the school community, with a large proportion not doing so."

In other words, the ability of an ultra-wealthy layer within a school to finance (as has been documented in different elite schools) Olympic-class athletic facilities, quadrangles modelled on Oxford and Cambridge, or an "aquatic and wellbeing centre," has no bearing on the

amount of public funding it should receive.

This amounted to such a blatant diversion of public funds that one National School Resourcing Board member, Australian Catholic University Vice-Chancellor Greg Craven, issued a dissenting statement. He warned that ignoring schools' private incomes "would be correspondingly corrosive of the public's acceptance of any system as robust or reliable," adding: "In my view, it simply passes belief that the average Australian, faced with the fact that the fees for a school were \$30,000, or indeed \$20,000, would not conclude that these figures were to a significant extent reflective of the capacity of that school's community to contribute to recurrent costs of that school's education."

Responding to the report on September 20, Prime Minister Scott Morrison and Education Minister Dan Tehan ignored Craven's concerns and endorsed the Chaney Report's recommendations. They pledged an extra \$4.6 billion for private schools—\$3.2 billion over 10 years for "non-government schools identified as needing the most help," \$170.8 million to be handed over next year in the name of "funding certainty," and an additional \$1.2 billion for vaguely-worded "specific challenges in the non-government school sector," including "schools that need help to improve performance and to deliver choice in communities."

The government's mantra of "school choice" is a fraud. Working-class families who cannot afford the fees charged by private schools have little choice but to send their children to local public schools, many of which are badly over-crowded, with run-down infrastructure and over-stretched teaching staff.

Even those private schools in working-class areas, mostly Catholic institutions, receive more public money than equivalent public schools. According to data collected by the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA), and made public via a freedom of information request, Catholic schools in disadvantaged areas annually receive an average of \$10,000 *per student* extra funding than neighbouring public schools. For a public school with 500 students, this equates to a funding shortfall of \$5 million every year.

The entire parliamentary establishment is responsible for the crisis in public education. The Labor Party directly paved the way for the latest handout to private schools. Opposition leader Bill Shorten attempted to curry favour with the Catholic Church ahead of a forthcoming federal election by promising its schools extra cash. Last March, a week before a by-election in the Melbourne electorate

of Batman, Shorten wrote to Archbishop Denis Hart pledging that "Catholic schools would be more than \$250 million better off in our first two years of government alone." The church then made 30,000 "robo-calls" and sent letters to all Catholic school families in the area, urging a Labor vote in the by-election.

The politics of education funding, however, is not merely bound up with crass electoral calculations. Public schools have been deliberately neglected and run down by Labor and Coalition governments alike. This is one of the sharpest expressions of the offensive waged by the ruling elite against the working class. While no resources are spared for the children of the upper-middle class and the super-rich, public schools for working class youth, for whom the capitalist system has no decent future, are being systematically downgraded.

The teacher unions have been complicit in the public school funding debacle. While the Australian Education Union issued empty verbal protests over the latest funding deal, it was only in order to promote its bogus "fair funding now" campaign, which aims to help elect another pro-business Labor government.

The working class—including teachers, school staff, parents, guardians and students—can only take forward a genuine fight for the right of all to a freely accessible, high quality public education by striking out on a new road. The basic social right to free public education and healthcare, along with decent jobs, housing and full access to culture, requires the socialist reorganisation of society. The banks and major corporations must be expropriated and transformed into publicly-owned utilities, under the democratic control of the working class, so that the wealth it produces is used to satisfy social need, not to boost corporate profits. This perspective is alone advanced by the Committee For Public Education, established by the Socialist Equality Party.

The author recommends:

Free, high quality public education is a social right! Join the Committee For Public Education!

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