

It's a privilege?

In recent months, there has been public debate about the funding of schools which has caused a backlash from the Catholic sector and many of the independent schools. The potential loss of future funding compared with current arrangements has galvanized resistance to not only the currently accepted version of Gonski, but also the full Gonski which Labor has threatened to implement.

The main argument for the change in funding is that the government school sector has been underfunded while some schools in the other sectors have been overfunded. In other words, some non-government schools have been privileged.

Privilege

Privilege is defined as -

- *a special right, advantage, or immunity granted or available only to a particular person or group;*
- *an advantage that only one person or group of people has, usually because of their position or because they are rich;*
- *the way in which rich people or people from a high social class have most of the advantages in society. (Various dictionaries)*

Privilege is an unearned advantage. As a white, educated, heterosexual male, born in a Western country, I am advantaged in so many areas of life. I am not discriminated against because of my racial background or as an immigrant or being uneducated or because of my sexual orientation or because I am female. Privilege comes in many forms and often those who are privileged don't understand others who are not so fortunate. Such is the case in education. Those with privilege don't understand the disadvantage of those from low socioeconomic background and other less privileged positions who must fight to get ahead in life. Education for them is as important a goal as it is for the privileged even more so.

Christians, and especially Christian educators, ought to have some considered views on these matters, after all, justice is a major theme of Biblical Christianity.

The background

Non-government schools were few in the first half of the 20th Century and mainly Catholic schools who could not accept the full turnover of schools to the government in 1880. They wanted their own education despite the provisions of the 1880 Act for both general religious education and special religious education. These schools always struggled for funds because there was no state aid.

The major game changer came in the 1964 when the Australian Government announced funding for both government and non-government schools for science facilities. This major turning point in the provision of state aid and in 1968 the Australian Government announced

funds for libraries for both government and non-government schools. Further grants developed in the period 1968-1974.

At a state level, the new Liberal NSW Government of 1965 introduced 10,000 scholarships for students to attend non-government schools and an interest subsidy for borrowings for buildings.

In 1972, the Liberal Australian Government introduced per capita funding to achieve equality for all schools. They tried to persuade the states to fund half a per capita grant of 40% of the cost of educating a student in a government school. These would eventually be adopted in 1975 and today NSW pays around 25% per capita grant of the cost of educating a student in a Government school to all non-government schools. This has been an inhibiting cost factor for the growth of education funds in NSW because any increased funding to government schools must be matched by a 25% increase to non-government schools.

In 1973, the Australian Labor Government established the Schools Commission which delivered funds to Disadvantaged schools and provided funding for professional learning. These funds were carved up within states and not always directed on the bases of greatest need or disadvantage.

In 1976, it was proposed that standard non-government school costs would rise in increments to reach 100 per cent of standard government school cost by 1980 for primary schools and 1982 for secondary schools.

Later, *The Commission noted that a number of non-government schools were already operating with recurrent resources which exceeded target levels (i.e. 100 per cent of standard government school operating costs) but given the controversy that followed the Interim Committee's recommendation that government funding be removed from high-resource schools, the Commission recommended that all schools receive a government subsidy. (A History of State Aid to Non-Government Schools in Australia a project funded by the Department of Education, Science and Training, p74.)* From this advantage the distortion of non-government school funding grew to the inequalities that exist today so that some non-government schools receive funding that takes them for over 100% of the cost of a student in a government school.

Almost every year, the discussion in the Commission centred on the funding categories of non-government schools and the resourcing of these categories. But changes always ended up in the politically too hard basket. One of the anomalies remaining is that student postcodes are used to establish disadvantage and therefore funding category. Often non-government students from wealthier families with disadvantaged postcodes inflated the level of disadvantage to give these schools more funds. Hence, the recent desire to use family income tax data to decide on disadvantage and give a fairer distribution of funds across both government and non-government schools. But the result has been protests from sections of non-government schools, especially the Catholic sector that any school might lose funds.

There are many other decisions on educational policy that have affected the funding arrangements, but the above give a taste of the background and the reasons for the current problem. .

Current situation

Many governments over the last thirty years have proposed funding changes but the strength of the non-government school lobby within both major parties has prevented any action. Most

recently, the Gillard government decided in implementing Gonski 1 recommendations to increase total funding so that no school would be worse off. More recently, Gonski 2, a moderate proposal containing some reductions of funds to wealthier (over funded) non-government schools, has run into opposition with talk of ballot box protest, special deals and a new Commonwealth education minister given a mandate to “resolve” the problem and keep the peace.

As I write (20/9/18), this resolution has been announced. Schools will move to a taxable income based model to establish need, but the pool of funds will be increased by \$3.4b, that is billions, not millions, and that a special fund of \$1.2b will be set up to keep non-government school fees “affordable”. There has been no announcement of any increase for government schools.

In SMH (22/9/18) *Political fix: Why Morrison’s school funding deal is a dud*, Adrian Piccoli the former NSW education minister, used the words “outrageous”, “completely partisan” and “purely a political fix to shut down a powerful lobby group”. He goes on to outline some of his discussions with the Catholic sector and how funding of wealthier Catholic schools is used “to buy market share” and gives an example of how poorer Catholic schools will still miss out to their wealthier counterparts.

Even more telling is the SMH article *Why Catholic primary school parents can afford to pay more* by Peter Goss from the Grattan Institute analysing the capacity to pay of Catholic primary schools. He demonstrates that *few Catholic primary schools need big fee hikes under a fair and needs-based funding model. Parents who would have to pay more can afford it.* Then he concludes *The Coalitions school funding fix is a good deal for Catholic and independent schools. It’s a bad deal for the rest of us.*

This fix demonstrates that once a group gains an advantage then it is very difficult to take it away.

Then SMH 1/10/18, an article *State overpays private schools by \$160m*, explaining how the NSW government has also overpaid non-government schools.

That these advantages apply most to wealthier schools means that it has become a privilege where the rich have an advantage over others in the education of their children. As with most privileges, those holding them do not want to give them up and will fight to maintain the status quo or even improve their position.

As Christians

So where do Christians stand in these matters?

Do they accept that some schools are receiving an undeserved advantage at the expense of others or that in the market place each school should fight for the resources it needs?

Do they actually believe government schools deserve better funding or that the country spends enough on education?

If they believe that disadvantaged government schools should be better funded should some of the increased resources come from the wealthier government and non-government schools?

And what decisions did they make for their own children? How did they choose a school? How would they react if it is their children’s school that must give up funds? (Some church schools are the most likely to lose funding even under the new model.)

These are testing questions for Christians and recognise that there may be a diversity of opinions and that they could be part of the problem because they do not want to give up an advantage or advocate establishing greater equity in education, especially for government schools. When privileged, they too want to hang onto that privilege.

Are there some Biblical principles that can help us in this discussion? These came to mind:

Psalm 82:3 Defend the weak and the fatherless, uphold the cause of the poor and the oppressed.

Proverbs 14:31 Whoever oppresses the poor shows contempt to their Maker, but whoever is kind to the needy honours God.

Micah 6:8 And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.

Matthew 25:44-45 They will also answer “Lord when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or needing clothes or sick or in prison, and did not help you?” He will reply “Truly I tell you, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me.”

Our Prime Minister, a Christian, promotes the proposed fix as providing “greater affordability for parental choice”. Are these the only criteria for funding? The current, and newly proposed, funding of schools advantages the rich by entrenching privilege. Change is needed, and shaping that change should be of interest to all Christians.

John Gore

Vale John Dowe

John Dowe joined TCF in 1952. After only a few years of teaching he went into full time ministry with the Anglican Church. He served faithfully in the Diocese of Armidale as vicar at Walgett, Narrabri and Uralla. He served a few years with CMS as a lecturer at a Bible College in the Solomon Islands. He retired to Katoomba from where he continued to minister as a locum in a number of parishes. He and his wife, Clair, moved to the Anglican retirement Village at Castle Hill for the last part of his life where they attended St Matthews, West Pennant Hills and then St James Chapel at the village. Throughout this life John remained a loyal TCF member until his very last day on this earth! Well done, good and faithful servant.

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