

The topic of school funding is a highly controversial and hotly debated subject in Australia - in your view why is this?

Educating your children is a very emotionally fraught decision in this country, mainly because there are so many 'choices' and choosing can itself drive anxiety. Schools have also become proxies for social status or lack thereof and social class is always a controversial topic.

People invest a lot of themselves in their choice of a school and any criticism – not just of the individual school, but the type of school – is taken very personally by some. Most of the pushback I get when I defend public education or write about the systemic biases against it is people telling me personal stories about their child and why they chose a particular school. Understandable as this is, it is not the point.

The controversy is also fanned by neo liberal ideas about market forces and the right to choose within a market. This is a hot issue generally in our society, at the moment, so it makes sense that it would be equally hot when it comes to a neo liberal schooling funding system like ours. It has become a hot button in the state provision versus market provision tussle.

About 90% of private schools have a religious ethos and are run/owned by a church or religious organisation of some kind. The churches (to use a broad term to cover all religiously based organisations) have lost control of birth – contraception availability, abortion being legal and accessible, marriage – gay marriage being legal, and death – voluntary assisted dying is also now legal. One of their last bastions is in schooling. This is also occasionally controversial – when staff are sacked for being divorced and then remarrying, when gender or sexual orientation may become issues in a particular school. These are all issues that gain headlines, as does violence, bullying, drug abuse, poor public behaviour and just about any other scandalous event you can think of. Schools are controversial almost by their nature, and not usually for what they are doing educationally – though educational fads, quick fixes and miracles can also gain headlines and clicks.

There are more reasons, too numerous to go into here, but parents often feel very defensive about their choice of school, and this makes it an issue that can flare up quickly.

At different times you are referred to as an advocate and expert in the segment? What do you consider yourself? Do you have qualifications?

I have been advocating for better and fairer funding for public schools for 26 years, so I would definitely claim to be an advocate. I am also a graduate from public schools, a parent of children who graduated from public schools and am now the grandparent of children attending public schools. My daughter, two nieces and my sister are all currently employed in public schools. I am also a board member of the Public Education Foundation. Advocate is a fair and accurate way to refer to me.

It is worth noting that public school employees are not able to speak freely to the media as part of their terms of employment. That is why having advocates like me, who are free to speak up on their behalf, is both necessary and – if teachers responses to me are any guide – useful.

I have co-written two books about public and private schools 'The Stupid County; How Australia is Dismantling Public Education' and 'What makes a Good School?'. Both these books were co-written with Chris Bonnor, a retired public school principal and a past President of the NSW Secondary Principals Council. I have written many articles about public education. I do not know the exact number, but it would be at least 50. I am regularly published on the subject by The Saturday Paper and, in the past, the SMH and The Guardian. I have been asked to contribute to many debates, symposiums, conferences, international zoom meetings and school events all over Australia. I might hesitate to call myself an expert, but it appears others do not.

I just wanted to give you an opportunity to respond to this point directly. Do you stand by the claim made in the segment?

The claim I made was based on the [SMH article](#), which identified that private schools were one of the fastest-growing areas for bankruptcy action and provided a graphic showing that private schools were responsible for 2% of these actions, listing it fifth on the graph. Notably, this is just measuring the cases in which the private school itself is the creditor and not cases in which a separate lender was engaged to finance private school fees.

The [AFSA figures](#) are largely measuring something different and are not inconsistent with the importance of private school fees in bankruptcies. Firstly, AFSA is measuring new insolvencies rather than bankruptcies; only 56.5% of these insolvencies are bankruptcies. Secondly, the data related to reasons for becoming insolvent is self-identified under broad categories. These categories are dominated by 'excessive borrowing/credit' and life events that lead to a drop in income (unemployment, business failure etc). None of these major reasons is inconsistent with the pressure expenditures of high private school fees put on household budgets, increasing the chances of borrowing and insolvency, particularly when income unexpectedly drops away.

And more broadly, is there anything else you think would be useful for us to understand, or important to keep in mind, as we report this story?

The most important part of this controversial issue is how segregated, according to social class, our schools are becoming. We now have one of the most segregated schooling systems in the OECD, and concentrations of advantaged students in advantaged schools and disadvantaged students in disadvantaged schools is increasing at the second fastest rate. This is not a trajectory to be proud of and is a major reason why so many parents are choosing schools they may find hard to afford.