



Why Should Governments Support Non-Government Schools?

By Colette Colman, Executive Director, Independent Schools Council of Australia

April 2016

In 2012, when then Prime Minister the Hon. Julia Gillard gave the opening address to the ISCA - AHISA National Education Forum she drew attention to the question of the relationship between citizenship and nation, saying: "I believe Government support for a child's education is one of the entitlements of citizenship. No matter how rich or poor your parents are or where you go to school, our nation should provide a basic degree of support to your education: because you are Australian, because you are part of the whole."

This view was recently reinforced in comments made by the current Minister of Education and Training, Senator the Hon. Simon Birmingham.

This sentiment is reflected in law under the Australian Education Act 2013, which ensures that all Australian children attending all not-for-profit schools are entitled to a base level of government support for their education.

But why should this be the case? Why should governments support non-government schools?

One of the most fundamental reasons that all Australian school children should be supported in their education is that all schooling provides a public benefit, all education is a public good.

Governments are necessarily concerned with education as a public good, in the sense that society, and the nation, reap the benefits of a quality education system. This is essentially the framework for most of the public discussion about funding for education. The extensive investment of public resources in education is driven by a human capital agenda which connects the knowledge and skills of the population with national productivity, economic growth, social wellbeing and mobility. Decades of economic evidence confirm the connection between a well-educated population and national productivity and social cohesion, stability and engagement. Conversely, many economic and social problems, from crime rates to welfare dependence, are linked to low levels of skill and ability.

The public benefit derived from schooling cannot be seen as coming from any single school sector. All schools; government, Catholic and Independent; contribute by providing education to Australian students.

Non-government schools have contributed to the advancement of Australian society virtually since the establishment of European settlement. The benefits they bring are recognised and reinforced through government policies that provide funding support to non-government schools.

In the government school sector, the state or territory government that owns the schools contributes the majority of the funding, with the Commonwealth contributing a lesser proportion. Non-government schools are funded through a partnership between parents and governments, with

parents contributing a substantial portion of funding and the Commonwealth being the major government contributor. In Independent schools parents provide an average of 58% of income.

Based on Productivity Commission figures, ISCA calculates that the willingness and commitment of non-government school parents to pay school fees resulted in total savings in government expenditure of some \$8.7 billion in 2013-14. This is based on an average saving to government of \$6,850 per student educated in non-government schools.

Australia is an extremely diverse society, with geographically dispersed communities made up of a socially mixed, multicultural and multi-faith population. This brings demand from very different groups of people for schools that best meet the needs of their children and reflect their own values, within a framework of common social values.

Non-government schools assist governments in providing for the needs and expectations of our diverse society, contributing a wide range of additional school choices to those already offered by the government sector. Many non-government schools provide a religious or values-based education. Others promote a particular educational philosophy or interpretation of mainstream education. They provide for students of all abilities, including students with special needs, and serve a wide range of communities from remote and disadvantaged Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities to socially, culturally and ethnically diverse communities in capital cities.

Greater choice brings greater benefits, with stronger incentives to performance, creativity, innovation, diversity, efficiencies and higher student achievement. These benefits of choice are stronger when combined with school autonomy and accountability, both to the parent body and the wider public.

Australian schools; government, Catholic and Independent; collectively provide significant benefits to Australian society, providing quality education to Australian students and the benefits brought about by school choice. Australia is fortunate to have such a wide range of educational options available, enhanced by the important contribution of non-government schools that provide substantial fiscal savings to the government and bring the social benefits of even greater diversity and choice.

This article originally appeared in the ASBA Associate April 2016