



## Critics of Independent Schools Cling to Clichés

There's an old saying: everyone's an expert on education because everyone's been to school. It's a glib observation, not even a half-truth. What happened at school **then**, when you went to school, is not what happens **now**, when your children sit in class. And just because you once sat in a classroom, it doesn't mean you understand even half of what goes on in education.

Teacher training and professional learning are complex. So is creating a curriculum and balancing the constant pressure to squeeze more into crowded timetables. Beyond the classroom, there are the intricacies of managing a school, responding to parental requests, meeting individual student needs, and complying with regulatory requirements. It's complicated. Ask any teacher or principal.

These complexities are often missing in media commentary on school education. Instead, debate is often reduced to a clichéd recitation of stereotypes to create artificial all-or-nothing confrontations between government and non-government schools. Such arguments sometimes display prejudice and bias, replacing calm consideration of facts with finger pointing and point-scoring. Discussion is reduced to an infantile playground squabble. Instead of light and shade, we end up with false clarity.

I support the right of parents to have a choice in how their children are educated. If they chose an Independent school, they have a right to expect a fair share of the cost of that education will come from the taxes they pay, and they have a right to spend as much of their after-tax income as they can afford on that education.

Even when I disagree with critics of Independent schools, I don't necessarily question their sincerity or commitment to education. I do, however, challenge conclusions that would deny parents and their children their rights.

In particular, I object when Independent schools are reduced to stereotypes that overlook their diversity, the social good that they produce, and the range of factors parents consider when they send their children to one of those schools.

There's been plenty of prejudice in recent reporting and commentary. It reached farcical and offensive depths in recent *Herald Sun* articles that portrayed Independent schools as hotbeds of crime, producing students who go on to commit murders and run drug trafficking rings. These articles were extreme examples of a pattern of reporting that creates a lazy narrative by squeezing Independent schools into a well-worn template.

Julie Szego's article in *The Age* last week ([Going private: top grades or the right milieu](#)) displayed a different type of prejudice. Clearly Szego is a sincere and passionate advocate for education who is not in the same league as the reporter who portrayed Independent schools as incubators of crime.

Yet passion clouds her judgment and distorts her logic when she seeks, in her words, to tackle the 'mythologies and pure falsehoods' in the education debate. Unfortunately, she perpetuates her own myths by turning a defence of government schools into an assault on Independent schools.

Her article was awash with stereotypes: rich parents duped into wasting money on mono-cultural schools to ensure their rich kids enjoy the assumed lifelong benefits of the old school tie. The resulting picture is confused and one-dimensional. If you believe the stereotype, you'd think Independent schools are all in Melbourne's affluent eastern suburbs.

The reality is more complicated. The strongest growth in Independent schools is in Melbourne's urban periphery, which accounts for 22 per cent of all enrolments. The next highest growth is in regional Victoria, which accounts for 17 per cent of all enrolments.

Far from being the preserve of an exclusive elite, one third of all Independent schools are classified as low-fee schools, the category that has recorded the highest growth of enrolments over the past 10 years.

NAPLAN results are a far from complete measure of a school's value or its students' achievements. Yet when these results, at primary level at least, show little difference between government and Independent schools, Szego takes the opportunity to argue that parents of Independent school students have been conned. This patronises them and ignores the complex issues that they consider when choosing a school.

In regular surveys, Independent Schools Victoria asks parents why they chose a particular school. The top six reasons, in order, are: the school's emphasis on developing sound morals, values, beliefs and attitudes; a belief that the school best suited their child's needs; the school's reputation; the quality of its education programs; its educational philosophy; and its academic results. It doesn't sound like parents are duped. Rather, they value education and make an effort to investigate the options.

Szego suggests good test scores achieved by students at Independent schools are the result of lavish resources in classrooms filled with 'rich kids'. Yet she mentions a disadvantaged government school (Dandenong North Primary) that scores excellent results, despite its relative lack of resources and paucity of 'rich kids'. There's a contradiction here, indicating that there's more to student achievement than parental wealth. It tells us that education is complicated.

She also cites statistics indicating primary students at government schools are lagging behind in persuasive writing tests, and ponders if this is due to a higher concentration of students from non-English speaking backgrounds in those schools. But there's barely any difference. The 2011 Census of Population and Housing shows that 17 per cent of students in government schools speak a language other than English at home. In Independent schools it's 16 per cent.

Furthermore, 13 per cent of Independent school students were born overseas, compared with 12 per cent in government schools.

As for the suggestion that governments should stop funding schools that recruit 'cashed-up' overseas students, that's just plain bad advice. Last year, Victorian Independent schools enrolled 2067 full-fee paying overseas students. Government schools enrolled

3169. So it's actually government schools that would suffer more if governments stop funding schools that take in overseas students.

What lies behind the attacks on Independent schools is the greatest cliché of all: that education is a zero sum game in which selecting a school that suits your child is an attack on other children. Providing funds for non-government schools doesn't mean depriving students in government schools. Attacking Independent schools won't ensure that every Australian student receives what they're entitled to – a quality education. I applaud anyone who is passionate about education, especially parents who take time to consider the complicated question of which school – government, Catholic or Independent – is best for their child.

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