

# Public funding should come with strings attached

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A few days before Christmas 2012, Education Minister Joy Burch unleashed a storm of controversy by giving in-principle approval for the establishment of a number of new private schools. Her decision was initially shrouded in secrecy and it later transpired she had ignored potential impacts on the community, set aside advice from her directorate and failed to consider salient evidence. After the ACT Council of P&Cs, Save Our Schools, the Australian Education Union and the recently abolished Government Schools Education Council raised these concerns, the minister eventually conceded the necessity of a review into the entire process.

But why object to the setting up of a new school? What role does the ACT government have in deciding whether a private school can set up shop? The first point to make is that private schools aren't really private – they are mostly funded by taxpayers. Recent research by Chris Bonnor and Bernie Shepherd found that private schools receive between 83 per cent and 94 per cent of the recurrent government funding received by public schools that enrol similar students. They even found examples of private schools receiving more total government funding than public schools with similar student profiles. By 2020, 80 per cent of Catholic schools and 50 per cent of independent schools are projected to receive as much or more government funding than nearby public schools. The idea that private schools save the public many billions of dollars has been blown to bits.

So a proposal to create a new school raises questions about how we use a limited education budget to achieve the best possible education outcomes. If there isn't a rigorous process around the approval of new schools, taxpayers end up paying for new buildings while others are under-used, and for new classes while existing ones are under-enrolled.

Over-supply of schools also undermines the educational experience of all students in an area. Schools need to have a concentration of students to offer an interesting range of subjects and make special programs, excursions and co-curricular activities viable. If enrolments are spread too thinly across schools, it's harder to deliver the kind of education that really engages young people.

Minister Burch made her decision in 2012 without a proper evaluation of the impact on existing schools nor was there an analysis of the capacity of existing schools to absorb additional enrolments. Only a few years before, the ACT government had closed schools in Belconnen, offering as a justification a decline in the school-age population in the area. Reversing that logic, the minister was now endorsing the creation of new schools that risked spreading lower enrolments across more schools. Nor was there any evaluation of how new schools would affect the mix of students attending existing schools.

However, the problem went deeper than just one decision – the whole process for approving and then registering new schools lacked transparency and rigour. To view applications, one had to physically visit the Education Department and take notes. There was minimal publicity surrounding the application process or even the ultimate decision. Applicants did not need to present rigorous evidence that there was community demand for the new schools; applications didn't even specify the proposed address of the new schools. How can you assess the impact on other schools if you don't even know where a new school will be?

The release last week of new guidelines for registration of non-government schools in the ACT is therefore very welcome, even if they have come after a two-year delay. The new guidelines do require specification of the address of any proposed new school. There are now at least suggestions about how community demand for a new school can be demonstrated in a methodical way. There will now

be more opportunity for the community to learn about and contribute to decisions about the creation of new schools.

However, a series of issues remain. The new guidelines appear to not include an assessment of the impact of a proposed new school on existing public schools. It is still theoretically possible for the composition of advisory panels to have a private school bias. There is no guarantee that the first school established in a new area will be a public school, free and secular. Crucially, there is actually no obligation for the minister to adhere to the new guidelines and there is no avenue for community members to appeal ministerial decisions.

To her credit, the Education Minister also announced last week that non-government schools will, for the first time, be obliged to publicly report critical and non-critical incidents in the same way as public schools are. This is an excellent decision and a win for parents and taxpayers. It is entirely appropriate that non-government schools' obligations are commensurate with the financial support they receive from the whole community. That they now are in this respect is to be welcomed.

The danger of not insisting on this basic reciprocity is that we will be less able as a community to provide the best possible education to all students. Unacceptable gaps between the highest and lowest performing students will only widen further.

The new guidelines announced by Minister Burch are the result of energetic advocacy by organised groups of parents and educators. They represent an important step forward. However, they still do not give the community a cast-iron guarantee that the poor decision-making of the past will not be repeated in the future.

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