

# ABC NEWS

OPINION

## We hear the same lazy myths about 'private schools', but the term is meaningless

By Colette Colman

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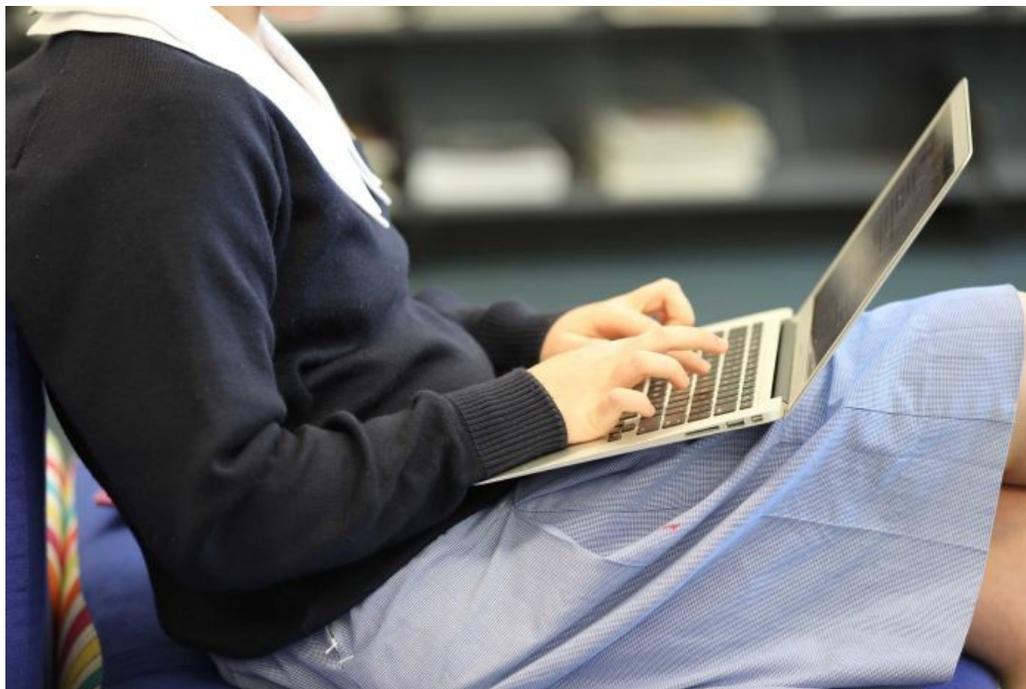


PHOTO: Not all independent schools are the elite "private" schools we see in the media. (ABC News: Elise Pianegonda)

### How do we most often see "private schools" described by commentators? "Elite"? "Privileged"? Perhaps even, "ivory towers"?

Is a 100 per cent Indigenous, outback school run by its local community "elite"?

Is a special needs school caring for children with autism "privileged"?

Is a special assistance school catering for at-risk and highly disadvantaged youth who have been excluded from mainstream schooling an "ivory tower"?

Hardly. Yet these are the lazy and convenient lines we are disingenuously peddled over and over again about "private schools."

The term "private school" is largely meaningless. It is not used in this country by any government or formal educational organisations.

It is commonly, and incorrectly, used to describe non-government schools, including Independent and Catholic system schools. But these schools are certainly not "private" in the sense of being for-profit businesses.

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In order to receive any government funding, **schools must be registered as not-for-profit organisations**. There are virtually no for-profit schools in Australia.



PHOTO: Independent schools are targeted in the school "funding wars". (Supplied)

## From Montessori to Indigenous

The Australian independent school sector is made up of an extremely diverse collection of more than 1,100 schools that provide a variety of school cultures and pedagogies that are often not available in the government system.

These include schools of many varied religious affiliations; specific educational philosophy schools such as Steiner and Montessori; community schools; and the majority of the country's boarding schools (in fact, the independent school sector is the largest provider of boarding schools for Indigenous students).

Independent schools also cater to specific groups of disadvantaged students including high needs students with disabilities attending special schools, remote students attending Indigenous schools, and highly disadvantaged youth attending special assistance schools.



PHOTO: 85 per cent of independent schools have a religious affiliation, including 42 Islamic schools. (ABC News)

## Do these schools deserve funding?

Much of the current "public vs private" debate we see in the media focuses on government funding to non-government schools.

Every student in Australia is entitled to a government contribution towards the cost of their schooling, just as all Australians are entitled to a government contribution towards childcare, healthcare or university costs.

A remote Indigenous school might be almost completely funded by government and charge no fees to parents, while a high SES (socio-economic status)/higher fee school would receive only a very basic funding entitlement, far less than they would receive as a government or Catholic system school, with parents paying fees to make up the bulk of the costs.

## Parents, not government, foot the bills

Yes, a small number of high-profile non-government schools are well resourced. But by far and away these resources come from generations of parents, not governments. While these schools are an important part of the independent sector, in reality they make up about seven per cent of independent schools.

Yet in the media's eyes they have somehow come to represent the entire sector.

We never hear about the other end of the spectrum, where nearly 15 per cent of independent schools are almost fully publicly funded and often charge no fees.

Most independent schools serve low to medium-income communities.

The median fee for an independent school in Australia is a **little under \$5,000 per year**.

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### How Australia's schools are funded



Do you understand how our schools get their money? Here are some jargon-free facts to clarify how it works.

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One of the issues that leads to this distorted image of independent schools is a fundamental misunderstanding about school funding arrangements that is frequently exploited by commentators to deliberately distort funding figures.

## Funding argument a cheap shot

In Australia, school funding is a shared responsibility between governments. The Commonwealth Government is the majority funder of non-government schools, and the state and territory governments are the majority funders of government schools. So, the only accurate way to compare funding between sectors is to compare combined Commonwealth and state/territory funding.

But despite this, we frequently read misleading comparisons that focus on Commonwealth funding only, selectively ignoring state and territory funding. This is a cheap shot that makes it appear that non-government schools are being funded at a higher level than government schools.

Except in cases of extreme disadvantage, government funding to government schools is significantly higher than it is to independent schools. The majority of funding for independent schools comes from parents.

The latest Productivity Commission data shows that in 2015-16 the average total amount of government funding going to a government school student was \$17,280 per annum, compared with \$10,670 for a Catholic system school student and \$8,850 for an Independent school student.

Looking at it another way, total government expenditure on school education was \$55.7 billion. Of this, \$42.4 billion was spent on government schools, while \$13.3 billion was spent on non-government schools (including Catholic system schools).



PHOTO: Independent schools offer parents choice between different educational philosophies. (AAP: Dan Peled)

## Schooling is also about diversity

Independent schools provide additional schooling options for Australian parents. It is reassuring for parents to know that they have access to a broad range of choice in education for their children both within and across the government and non-government school sectors.

Australia is an extremely diverse society, with geographically dispersed communities made up of a socially mixed, multicultural and multi-faith population. This brings a great diversity of demands.

Greater choice brings parents the ability to select the right fit for their child, or to move them if the fit is not quite right.

Perhaps a child's particular ability fits the ethos of a particular school, perhaps their particular disability matches the specialisation of another school.

There are many reasons a school may not meet an individual child's needs. Independent schools provide additional options to find the right fit or to fill gaps.

Independent schools are not exclusively the domain of the wealthy any more than government schools are the domain of the less wealthy. In fact, the majority of Australia's high-income families' children are educated at government schools.

So, let's end the tired debate and the hackneyed commentary. Education is not just a private good, but a public good.

Government, Catholic system and Independent schools play complementary roles in providing significant benefits to Australian society, quality education to Australian students and the benefits brought about by school choice.

We are all fortunate to have such a wide range of educational options available.

**Colette Colman is the executive director of the Independent Schools Council of Australia.**