

THE CONVERSATION

Withdrawing federal funding for public schooling would exacerbate two-tiered system

June 22, 2015 12.34pm AEST

Stewart Riddle

Senior Lecturer at University of Southern Queensland



All children must by law attend school, therefore the government has an obligation to provide quality public education, regardless of family status. Joe Castro/AAP

Fairfax press has reported the federal government's green paper on reforming the federation has suggested four possible scenarios for school funding:

Give states and territories complete funding responsibility

The federal government to fund independent schools, while states and territories fully fund public schools

Reduce overall federal involvement in schools

The federal government to become the major funder of schools.

Given there is nearly a A\$30 billion shortfall in school funding from 2018 in this year's federal budget, it can be assumed that number 4 is the most unlikely scenario. Given the Coalition's commitment to **small central government**, it is most likely they would support divesting in school funding, pushing back onto the states and territories.

The opposition has condemned the proposed changes. The government was quick to rule out means-testing parents who send their children to public schools. Education minister, Christopher Pyne took to Twitter:



Christopher Pyne

@cpyne

Follow

If the states and territories want to charge wealthy parents fees for public schools that's a matter for them. [#auspol](#)

8:54 AM - 22 Jun 2015

67

16

However, the question remains: if the federal government withdraws from funding public schools, which is looking increasingly likely, how will the states and territories pick up the slack?



Minister for Education and Training Christopher Pyne has distanced himself from the controversial plan saying it's up to the states. AAP/Lukas Coch

A two-tiered school system?

The **user-pays** mentality should be no surprise, considering that in the past 18 months the government has attempted (unsuccessfully) to introduce a GP co-payment and privatise the university sector by deregulating fees.

I have argued **previously** that the reform agenda misses one of the most important questions: what kind of society do we want to live in? A two-tiered system of schooling will have devastating effects on our social fabric, widening an already too large and persistent **equity gap**.

Under a market approach to schooling, poor students will be even **worse off**. Considering the **rising inequality** in Australia, this will only further exacerbate the situation.

The 2011 Gonski Review of School Funding was a sector-blind, needs-based and equitable funding model, which had at its heart the promise that

all students have access to a high standard of education regardless of their background or circumstances.

Despite claiming to be on a **unity ticket** for school funding in the lead-up to the 2013 election, the Coalition government has gone against many of Gonski's recommendations, including the bulk of Gonski funding.

The focus on whether parents might have to pay more to send their children to public schools is a distraction from the real situation, which is that the government is increasingly seeking to divest in public health and education.

Prime Minister Tony Abbott's statement that school funding is a matter for the states and territories belies the broader federalism "reform" agenda that puts market logic at the heart of education, health, welfare and other social services; turning them from public goods to private commodities.

Why we should all fight for public education

A common neoliberal myth supposes that if everyone is working in their own economic, social and political interests, then it will have benefits for others. Trickle-down economics is one example, with another being the argument that having a university degree benefits the degree-holder more than society.

When it comes to schooling, the argument is made that parents should have the choice to send their children to the best school in order to get the best education they can. This has played out in the US with the rise of charter schools, and in the UK with its focus on free schools and academies. Yet, as I have previously described, such moves increase inequity.

The adverse effects of the Swedish free schools system, where the creation of for-profit schools being funded by public money has seen both decreasing educational outcomes and increasing inequality, should provide a cautionary tale for Australia.

Since the New South Wales Public Schools Act 1866, legislation has enshrined compulsory, secular and universal access to public schooling. This is not something that should be taken lightly, nor should it be cast aside with a spurious argument that it is not the responsibility of the federal government.

Providing universal access to high-quality education that is publicly provided is something we are all collectively responsible for.

Public schooling should not be seen as a safety net, providing limited education for those who cannot afford to go to a private school. Instead, it needs to be celebrated as being one of the most important foundations for a healthy democracy.

Access to education provides enormous benefits to individuals and societies – increasing health, prosperity, social cohesion and political awareness – while also reducing welfare dependency, crime and incarceration rates.

If we are serious about our attempts to close the gap in Indigenous education, raise literacy and numeracy levels, reduce social disadvantage and provide a meaningful education for all students in Australia, regardless of where they live, then we must have a strong public education system.

Any attempt to undermine the fabric of public education is an attempt to undermine the fabric of society. As such, it is something that every single one of us should be very concerned about.



School funding

Independent schools

Private education

Public versus private education

Means testing

Non-government schools

Government schools