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# Christian schooling

# WHY

# BOTHER?

## PART 3

But don't you take both Christian children and teachers out of the mission field of the public school system?

Why should public funding go towards faith based schools?

Aren't Christian schools really only catering for middle class Christianity?

Have you ever been asked these or similar questions? Have you possibly wondered these or similar things yourself from time to time? This is the third in a series of four articles published throughout this year. These articles discuss the rationale for Christian schooling in the contemporary context and seek to offer apologetic tools to teachers and parents, who are often called upon to defend the existence of Christian schools. The first article was a positive statement outlining the necessity of Christian schools. The second article addressed quality and this third article will seek to address the inequality claims that are made against Christian schools. The aspects of this argument considered in this article are those centred around:

- the private versus public education debate,
- the affordability and accessibility of Christian schooling to all, and
- the flight of Christians from the mission field of public schools.

## PRIVATE VERSUS PUBLIC

Questions are often raised about the validity of public funding being given to religious or faith based education. Though this claim is often made towards independent schools in general, there is often vehemence evident towards faith based schools. The argument is that taxpayers' money should not be given towards educating the children of those who choose an alternative 'flavour' of education.

One of the important things to realise is that public funding towards education is on a 'per student' basis and not school based. It is an assumed right that every child in our nation will have their education funded from public money. This money is gathered from taxpayers; in part, the parents of these students. Why should this money not be transportable with the child to any schooling system the parents wish to embrace? Of course there must be accountabilities in place to maintain certain

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educational principles, standards in curriculum and quality of service in the independent school options, but if these are being met why should tax paying parents not have this choice? The reality is that the 'per student' funding provided for children in independent schools is less than that provided for those that attend government schools. The difference is contributed by the parents (who have already paid equal taxes) through additional school fees. In most of the Christian schools in Australia the parents pay about 40% of the education costs and the government – both federal and state – contributes about 40%. It is true that many independent schools collect fees that go far beyond this difference in public funding. This enables a higher level of services to be provided that may make it seem like an inequity. It must be also noted that if the students from independent schools were to be publicly educated, the total expense for education would increase substantially, with all taxpayers increasing their contribution.

A stronger argument in this public versus private debate may be found in the suggestion of the social divisiveness that may arise; a breaking down in the social cohesiveness that public education offers. The evidence for this within Australia's egalitarian society is questionable. We would suggest that faith based Christian schooling with its non separatist approach to collaborating with government, communities and local public schools, does not contribute to this divide.

## AFFORDABILITY AND ACCESSIBILITY

Let us now turn our attention to equity of access for those who do want to embrace faith based Christian schooling but are not able to afford it. Leaving aside the issue of the analysis of family priorities and genuine commitment to the vision of Christian schooling, there are characteristics of Christian school communities that can be explored. We would suggest that most faith based Christian schools would not seek to limit access to the vision of Christian education to any family. Most faith based schools will publicly state that they are willing to discuss fee relief arrangements for any family committed to the vision but unable to find the full school fees. The faithful core of the parent communities would prefer to subsidise those families in this situation. Discussing financial matters is always difficult. However, a family might be surprised at how open, understanding and flexible their local Christian school is in this regard.

It is possible that Christian schools have not always been as financially accessible as they have claimed. They may have at times been guilty of nurturing middleclass education. However, this must also be placed against the backdrop of very creative and innovative approaches that many Christian schools embrace. Bursaries, payment-in-kind arrangements and income indexed school fee structures are examples of structures in place in Christian schools.

# Christian schooling is not elitist, separatist or exclusive

## FLIGHT FROM PUBLIC SCHOOLS

Christians have a calling to be light and salt in all arenas of life; in their family, in the workforce and among their community relationships. When Christian families are involved with the local public school there is a wonderful opportunity for relationship building and evangelism. Christian students within the schools also share this opportunity with their peers. There is a sense that this is a powerful and attractive argument for Christians to embrace public schooling. However, it is worthwhile asking at this point if this decision is always weighed up against the impact that secular education can have on our children. Nothing is neutral and all forms of education are delivered through a faith based worldview; even secular education. The public school curriculum is written from certain worldview perspectives and it is also impossible for a teacher to completely divorce themselves from teaching through, and exposing their core beliefs about life and our place and purpose in the world. In fact quality teaching must always be characterised by a commitment to relationship and authenticity in the teacher. It is these perspectives of life held by the teacher that can often be more influential in shaping our children's minds, hearts and passions than skills in literacy or numeracy etc.

Faithful parents may suggest that they are committed to creating a learning environment at home that will critique and debunk the unbiblical (and sometimes quite ungodly) perspectives subtly nurtured at school. This is a commendable approach as parents take seriously their calling to raise their children in the ways of

the Lord and to nurture in them the understanding that Jesus is Lord of all of life. However, the examples often cited by those proposing this approach tend to be concrete, hot potato issues like evolution/creation or homosexuality. These are easy to critique with our children because they are obvious when they arise and somewhat black and white to critique. Perhaps not enough emphasis and concern is given to the subtle and more erosive worldview perspectives of naturalism, rationalistic humanism, reductionism, individualism etc. The discernment required to identify where the biblical worldview intersects with cultural worldview perspectives is difficult for mature Christian adults let alone developing young minds.

The authors also acknowledge their sympathy with the argument that Christian schools take Christian teachers out of the mission field of the public school system. It is crucial that we have Christian teachers in the public system, just as it is crucial that we have Christians in politics and nursing and other arenas of society. However, there is a limited number of students being educated and a limited number of teachers being the educators. If you move a number of students into Christian schools and move the required number of Christian teachers into these schools you have not actually changed the ratio in the public system. From a ratio perspective, it may be a spurious argument. Increasing the total number of Christians that we have training to be teachers will be what impacts in a genuine sense. Mention can be made here of the program embarked upon by the Sydney Anglican Church to actively encourage Christian high school graduates, and university undergraduates, to consider teaching as a vocation. (see [www.aec.edu.au](http://www.aec.edu.au))

It is also important to realise that there are some Christian teachers who have a sympathy with how the parents of students in Christian schools are unfolding their response to the biblical mandate of raising their children in the ways of the Lord, such that they choose to specifically partner with them. These teachers see this as a way to acknowledge their faithful response and to partner with parents as the educational professionals in this learning community. It may also be that there are seasons in a Christian teacher's professional life where they serve in a particular context. Time spent teaching in a Christian school may actually be a time of development and consolidation of their understanding of the biblical worldview. This may develop as they partner in a community that is willing to dialogue and evaluate how the biblical worldview may be applied to all aspects of life. If they were to then seek to serve in the public system, the Christian school would send them with their full blessing.

Christian schooling is not elitist, separatist or exclusive. There is a sense that it is public schooling in that it is accessible by all and because it takes the proclamation of the gospel of the Lord Jesus into the public space. Christian parents have the equal right to have their contribution to public funds used to serve their children in a faith based Christian school if they choose. Christian teachers ought to experience freedom to choose the mission/ministry of either public education or Christian education without the claim made that they are not contributing to the work of his kingdom.

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