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State schools slowly waking from a welfare class nightmare

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One of life's surprises for me has been the number of left-wing friends and acquaintances who've sent their children to private high schools. It's a surprise because I spent the first decade or two of my adult life listening to many of them proclaim the superiority of public education, stridently and for all sorts of reasons.

As you might imagine, this change of heart, which has occurred around the country, has been much noted by conservatives and liberals. Some describe it in harsh terms. They see the proponents of the left-wing ideas that did so much to destroy the state school system fleeing the wreckage, abandoning it to those too poor to escape. In education, as elsewhere, the middle class radicals' dream of the 1960s became the working and welfare classes' nightmare of the 1980s and beyond.

This is a bit harsh. But more importantly, I wonder if the assumption underlying both the flight from the public system and the conservative response is actually correct. Is the public school system really as bad as we often hear?

These thoughts have been provoked by a book to be published next week. *The Stupid Country* is by Chris Bonnor, a former school principal and president of the NSW Secondary Principals Council, and Jane Caro, a former convenor of the advocacy group Priority Public. One of their arguments is that state schools are under-funded, hence the title. But what really caught my attention was their claim that the state system is a lot better than many people think.

One reason for the belief the system is in crisis is the long-running barrage of media stories critical of state schools. Bonnor and Caro make the point that an important cause of this is that public schools are obliged to provide a great deal of publicly accessible information about what they're doing. Private schools, on the other hand, even though they receive between 42 and 82 per cent of their annual costs from government, don't have to reveal nearly as much about themselves.

There are many reasons parents move their children from public to private schools. One is the hope of an improvement in academic performance, but this is by no means certain. A 2001 survey by the Australian Council for Educational Research showed private schools do better academically, but Bonnor and Caro say the difference is small once you allow for the background of pupils. And they point to American and OECD studies showing that private schools provide no academic advantage.

There are, of course, other important reasons for choosing a private school, many of which involve the pursuit of socioeconomic, behavioural, racial and intellectual sorting. Public high schools in NSW have 62.5 per cent of all pupils but, the authors say, this includes 79 per cent of those with disabilities, 80 per cent of those who are poor and 91 per cent of recent immigrants and indigenous pupils. The increase in school retention rates that occurred some time ago has also, presumably, increased the proportion of pupils with lower IQs in state high schools.

Parents with many of these characteristics, including those who are mentally

ill, poor or on welfare, are often concentrated in public housing in certain areas of Sydney, particularly the south-west. It's little surprise, then, that the state schools their children attend have above-average levels of behavioural problems, and that working families in those areas seek private schooling for their children to avoid the state "welfare schools", as they're sometimes called. This accounts for a great deal of the flight from the public school system.

One of the outcomes of this is that many pupils in Catholic schools are not necessarily Catholic. When you consider that 69 per cent of pupils from the poorest third of Catholic families are educated in state schools, it seems the sorting here is occurring on the basis of class, not religion.

In some rural areas the sorting is done by race. The authors note: "Whole towns now have white schools and black schools. In NSW some students travel across the borders each day to attend schools in Queensland and Victoria."

Although the problems this reflects are not the fault of the school system, there's a widespread perception that the system has failed to respond to them adequately. This boils down to the issue of discipline, and the fact that public schools tolerate much higher levels of behavioural problems than private schools.

It would be foolish to deny this. On the other hand, as *The Stupid Country* notes, the State Government has done a great deal in recent years to address the problem, with \$65 million being spent. Principals now have increased powers to suspend pupils and special schools and centres have been set up to deal with unruly pupils. Another important government initiative has been to introduce better ways for principals to deal with dud teachers. (I'd be very interested to hear from principals, teachers, parents or pupils about how these various reforms are working.) Perhaps partly because of these changes, the flight from the state system has slowed in recent years.

And so it should. Most public schools are good schools. The authoritative Australian Council for Educational Research says Australian schools are doing well academically in international terms. *The Stupid Country* is a useful reminder that state schools are contributing more than their fair share to this happy situation.

The author's children attend state schools.