

SAVE OUR SCHOOLS

Education Policy Comment

The Spending Arms Race Between Elite Private Schools Is Out of Control

The arms race in opulence and ostentation between elite private schools is out of control as revealed by a new [ABC investigation](#). Australia's four richest schools spent more on new facilities than the poorest 1,800 schools combined between 2013 and 2017. Elite private schools spend millions and millions in competing over lavish facilities. This arms race is fuelled by big increases in government funding.

The luxurious facilities of elite private schools are in a league of their own – ultra modern science centres, libraries, auditoriums, theatres with orchestra pits, multiple sporting ovals, indoor Olympic size swimming and diving pools, gymnasiums, tennis courts, wellness centres, equestrian centres, rowing tanks and boat sheds and underground car parks.

What public school can afford a [\\$29 million new library](#) designed to resemble a Scottish baronial castle with castellations, a tower, a turret and grand bay windows as planned for Scots College in Sydney or the [\\$47 million performing arts centre](#) just opened by Knox Grammar? What public school can afford the two country lodges, a seafront school camp and other [extensive luxurious facilities of Scotch College](#) in Melbourne or to establish [a campus in China](#) to provide a special program for its Year 9 students as does Caulfield Grammar?

The My School website shows that Scots College outlaid \$45.7 million in capital expenditure in the last three years, Knox Grammar outlaid \$64.6 million, Scotch College \$60.4 million and Caulfield Grammar \$87.7 million.

No public school can compete with such spending sprees. There is a great divide in facilities between elite schools (and even second- and third-tier private schools) and public schools. At best, capital expenditure on public schools is confined to a base standard of facilities. For many it is not even that and they struggle with dilapidated buildings and playgrounds built 50 or more years ago. Many public schools have to cope with stifling classroom heat in summer without air conditioning, worn out carpets, run-down toilets, leaking roofs, damaged paintwork and rusting metalwork.

The lavish facilities of elite private schools are not about school outcomes. They serve as status markers in marketing strategies to attract enrolments from rich families. It is a fierce competition in which no elite school can afford to fall behind. In this, they are heavily supported by government funding.

The most recent funding figures available show that [government funding increases have massively favoured private schools](#) since 2009. While private schools are formally prohibited from using government recurrent funding for capital purposes, it fuels the rivalry because money is fungible. The big increases allow private schools to reduce the proportion of income from fees and donations devoted to staffing and other recurrent costs and direct more of it to the arms race.

Many openly admit to this. The [Herald-Sun reported](#) last year that one in five Victorian Independent private schools admit to using government funding to free up private income for capital works. The Chief Executive of Independent Schools Victoria said this “is entirely unremarkable”.

Government overfunding frees up millions in fees and donations from wealthy families to install more and more opulent facilities. Many elite private schools around Australia have been massively over-funded by governments for 20 years or more. For example, [data released under FOI](#) show that several elite Sydney private schools were over-funded by millions in 2018, including Loreto Kirribilli (\$5.8 million), Monte Sant' Angelo Mercy (\$5.6 million), St. Augustine's (\$4.7 million), Barker College (\$2.9 million) and Sydney Grammar (\$1.3 million). Many in other states are similarly over-funded.

A key problem is that there is no standard to ensure all children are educated in appropriate facilities. A national standard for recurrent resourcing of schools called the Schooling Resource Standard was introduced following the Gonski Report in 2011. The Report also recommended the development of a national standard for school infrastructure for both public and private schools, but it was rejected by the Gillard Government.

Private schools get recurrent and capital funding from the Commonwealth, but public schools only get recurrent funding. The Gonski report recommended that the Capital Grants Program for private schools be extended to public schools. It said the Commonwealth should provide equivalent capital funding for public schools as for private schools with adjustment for the larger enrolment share of public schools. It said that public schools need additional funding to bring their infrastructure up to a quality that enables them to effectively compete with private schools. This was also rejected by the Gillard Government.

The Coalition Government continues to increase capital funding of private schools. Department of Education figures supplied to Senate Estimates in 2017 show they will get \$1.9 billion in capital funding from 2018 to 2027. There is no equivalent capital funding for public schools.

Government funding for elite private schools is a waste of taxpayer funds. Their fees and donations alone far exceed the average income of public schools. Government funding just adds to their massive resource advantage and indirectly funds their gold-plated facilities. It denies much needed resources for disadvantaged public schools facing severe shortages in teaching staff, educational materials and modern classroom buildings and equipment.

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This Comment was originally published in [The Guardian](#)

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