

## 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.