

A conspicuous display of inequality

Monica Dux

A FEW years ago I attended a party where a woman was boasting about the spectacular fireworks display her daughter's private school held as part of their school fête.

I listened to her story, getting more and more annoyed, before finally interrupting to point out that my son's state school was so overcrowded that they'd been using the library as a classroom.

When I finished my outburst she looked at me oddly, then continued with her fireworks rave, unabashed, as if I hadn't spoken.

"So what if my daughter's school has money to burn, or at least to blow up," the fireworks woman seemed to be thinking. "If you choose to send your son to a school where the grade 4 class resembles a free-range chicken barn, that's your problem, not mine."

I have no objection to private schools. I just don't like subsidising their fireworks displays. Ditto their boat sheds, state-of-the-art sporting complexes and school camps in the French Alps.

I believe that public money should be reserved exclusively for public schools, equally available to all, regardless of wealth, privilege or circumstance.

And so I've chosen not to send my kids to a private school. I use the word "chosen" here, because I did actually have a choice. I could send them, if I wanted to. It would be financially stressful, but I could probably make it work. My kids have no special needs, so I don't have to worry about gaining access to extra support. I live in the inner city, in an increasingly affluent area, where the local high school has a reputation for academic excellence. If I really needed to, I could move to a different public school zone, to find a school that better suited them.

Being able to act on my political principles without real consequence is one of the many things that privilege gives me; the luxury of righteousness. But I'd be disingenuous if I didn't admit that I would reverse my decision in a moment if the benefits of private education greatly outweighed the negatives. Because in the end, I'll do what is best for my kids.

Would that make me a hypocrite? Perhaps, but I certainly wouldn't be alone. I know many parents who are critical of Australia's school-funding model, yet still send their children to private schools.

If challenged, they generally justify their decision on the grounds that, even if they had sent their kids to an overcrowded, underfunded state school as a form of conscientious objection, they wouldn't be making any difference to the overall system. So why sacrifice their children's education in an ineffective political statement?

Of course this logic doesn't just apply to schools. Many of us hold progressive political views, yet still benefit from the structural inequality in our society.

Take negative gearing, for example. I believe it should be abolished, yet if I did own an investment property, I don't doubt that I would negatively gear it. After all, it's legal, everyone else is doing it, and me boycotting it won't make a bit of difference to anything other than my bank account.

On a recent Facebook thread, someone compared the debate about school funding in Australia to the gun-control controversy in America.

In some respects it's an astute comparison, in that both countries suffer a kind of myopia on these respective issues. State-funded inequality in education has become so entrenched in Australia that unravelling the system seems an impossible task, just like achieving gun

control in the United States. There's also a tremendous amount of tribalism around both issues.

In Australia, parents argue among themselves, sometimes bitterly, defending and justifying their choices. All of which plays into the hands of those in power.

Because it skews the debate towards "personal choice", and the decisions made by individual parents, thereby obscuring the structural problems that enable this inequality in the first place.

Of course there have been moments in history when mass action by ordinary people has made a real impact on political policy.

But I doubt that this is such a case. Like gun control in the US, reform of our ludicrous education-funding policies will only be achieved with bold leadership. By a government that is willing to risk political damage in order to do what is right.

Sadly, our governments, both Liberal and Labor, have been failing miserably on this issue for nearly half a century. And with the current crop of jellied spines we call a parliament, it's hard to see how that will change any time soon.

Twitter @MONICA DUX