

## ANNUAL COUNCIL SPEECH

Recently I was asked to give a speech on the topic, *WHY AREN'T OUR PUBLIC SCHOOLS GOOD ENOUGH?* I enjoyed giving that speech and it ended up in 'Famous Reporter' so I've decided to share it with you. It starts with an excerpt from advertisements on the websites of 2 Tasmanian schools.

Students at School X are fortunate to have a range of sporting facilities for their use.

The Sports Grounds at (one location) play host to (it lists various sports).

The newly refurbished and extended Boat Club is at (another location).

X's Health & Fitness centre houses a 25 metre indoor pool, fully equipped free weight and circuit gym, electronic cardio gym and theatre, spin cycle studio, large group exercise class area, spa, steam room, tennis courts and Juice Bar.

Both School campuses have a range of hard court and grass playing surfaces.

At school Z, the School of Performing Arts facilities include a wide variety of indoor and outdoor rehearsal and performance spaces, a professional recording studio, state of the art lighting and sound equipment, sprung floor dance and drama studios, and exhibition and reception areas.

Entry to the School of Performing Arts is by audition. Children who are gifted, talented or who demonstrate exceptional interest in the performing arts will be given the opportunity to be full-time students at School Z.

... and if you're not into that:

"The Home of School Z Riding program operates at the Hopfield's Equestrian Centre which is close to both School Z and the sporting facilities at Ham Common. School Z students have their own club room at the Centre which is used for theory

classes and as a secure tack room for saddlery and grooming gear for the School Z horses."

I can tell you now these now are **not** advertisements for Tasmanian public schools. In fact, I know of one public school that has had to close its main sporting ground because it is full of cracks and holes, and is dangerous, but there is no money available to fix it. And there are many more examples of this nature. The adverts are of course for Friends and Collegiate.

The inequity of this is a crying shame and if we're talking about what's not good enough, what's not good enough is that when it comes to access to funds, our public schools are the poor relations. My husband and I have enough faith in the public education system to send our own children to public schools. But I despair when I hear how public schools make do with limited resources and when I know there are private schools trying to lure parents away with promises of being able to provide the best of everything.

Having said all that, I'd like to set the record straight from the start. In every other way, our public schools **are** good enough. They are full of excellent, dedicated and innovative staff with a genuine concern for children. Many students come out of the public education system with good results. Many of them have tolerance and social skills that allow them to relate to a wide range of people. They have the ability to question and think for themselves, and, importantly, the capacity to continue learning independently. Our public schools still produce some of the best academic results in the country.

But our public schools do it tough. Under the Howard Government they were reduced to being a safety net for those who couldn't afford private schools. And instead of being central to our democratic society as they should be, public schools now have to compete in an education 'market place'. Over the last 11 years, the notion of every child having the right to a good education, thus raising general community standards, was replaced by the egocentric notion that an education is a privately-owned commodity. Consumers purchase education purely for their own benefit.

This narrow view of students as consumers brings with it the concept of choice. Choice has meant that a significant number of parents who value education has wrongly assumed that cost indicates quality. They have taken their children out of the public system because they falsely believe that the higher the fee the better the quality of education, even though some of our most successful citizens have come through the public system. Public schools are then left with

a greater percentage of economically disadvantaged children. As Barry McGaw points out in his research, when disadvantaged students are grouped together in this way there is a negative impact on outcomes.

Public schools also have to fight to retain the best and brightest students. Private schools, through their scholarship entrance exams, take many of the top public school students at the end of primary school, after a lot of the hard work is done. To a large extent, the cream is taken off the top. All this in turn makes some of our public schools look less favourable and so the cycle continues.

Public schools work within a system in which it is not only considered reasonable that some individuals can choose advantage over others, but those individuals are supported by governments through funding. Private schools receive the lion's share of Federal Government funding while the states struggle to fund the public system. And every time the state government invests money into public schools, the private schools receive additional funding whether they need it or not. Very few western countries allow these types of funding arrangements because they are inequitable. If they do provide funding to private schools it is limited, and they have rules to ensure some students are not being advantaged over others.

Finland is often held up as being a high performer in the quality education stakes. Finland does not have a government funded education system of selective private schools. Faith schools are part of the public system. And if we were serious about having a truly inclusive, quality education system with equal opportunity for all, our state and Federal governments would not have funding arrangements that allow some individuals to gain an advantage either. This is to the detriment of the whole community. We must remember that although parents have a choice, children do not and it is our children who are being disadvantaged by this system. It is an obscene irony that it is only the wealthy that can access advantage to the detriment of the poor, and the poor help them do it through the taxes they pay.

So, what is not good enough, is the system in which public schools operate. What is not good enough is the flawed policy making of previous governments that created this inequity and that the Rudd government has committed to continue it for the next 4 years. What is not good enough is that most Australian children are being educated on a shoe string. (MCEETYA's own research reveals a shortfall of \$2.9 billion in funding of public schools.) BUT, our public schools certainly **are** good enough. In fact, they're brilliant to achieve what they do with what they're given!

I will say it is one thing to defend our public system but it is quite another to actually do something constructive to put what is wrong, right. I hope councilors have been proactive about inviting MPs into schools. It's something we will follow up on over the next couple of months.