

**Why we chose to send our children to public school, Dellaram Vreeland, *The Guardian*, March 26th, 2024**

Every week I help facilitate a local empowerment group for young people. It's a space for them to explore their sense of identity, develop their powers of expression and figure out how they can best help their neighbourhood.

A few weeks ago we were discussing education, and Ballarat's private schools were mentioned.

"Oh, that's where the smart people go," one of the girls said.

Plenty have weighed in on the private v public school debate. The decision on where to send your child will always depend on individual circumstances, the child's needs and what's best for the family.

But when children start to formulate labels in their minds, in very absolute terms, that's when Mumma needs to dust off her soapbox.

My family had no qualms about sending me and my brothers through the public system, in a regional city no less, even though many of their metropolitan counterparts questioned their choices. My parents' community outlook and their faith in our capacities instilled them, and us, with confidence that we would succeed in our chosen path no matter which school we attended.

When my husband and I built our own home 10 years ago, we didn't choose our neighbourhood because of its postcode. We loved the community, the primary school was just down the road, and I had attended the local secondary college a decade earlier, so there was a sense of familiarity.

We aren't located in one of Ballarat's most affluent areas. But we love that our children are part of an ever-evolving school community that is not solely focused on academia but encourages a holistic approach to education.

When our eldest started at primary school, there were just over 300 children enrolled. That number has almost doubled in seven years. More families are moving in and the cultural fabric is changing. We are creating a vibrant community around us and our kids are at the centre of it.

Soon it came time to decide where he would attend high school. In our minds, it was obvious: it would be my former high school where most of the neighbourhood kids would also be going. It made sense practically and socially but society's niggling idea of a "good" education and the fact so many in our social circles were opting for private schools had us in two minds. Would we be doing our child a disservice by sending him to the government high school?

According to the Productivity Commission's 2024 report on education services, private school funding increased by 15% in 2021-22, vastly outpacing the public system at 7%. The 2015 Program for International School Assessment report, which compares educational outcomes among OECD countries, stated that social segregation was felt acutely in the school system with an ever-widening gap between advantaged and disadvantaged children in Australia.

More than half (53%) of the students at our son's high school are from the bottom quarter of the socio-educational advantage spectrum and 4% are from the top quarter – a stark contrast to the city's top-performing academic school Ballarat Clarendon College, where 66% of students are from the top quarter and only 2% from the bottom.

As long as we continue to extract our children from government schools, or avoid certain segments of the population because we fear those from different cultural or socioeconomic backgrounds will be a negative influence, the funding disparity between public and private schools will only become more acute. Classroom enrolments in public schools will dwindle, schools will stand on the brink of closure and more children will determine their future success based on a flawed social rhetoric – that is, if you go to a certain school you are more likely to succeed, and if you go to another you are destined for failure.

The existence of a private and public school divide generates undue discrimination and stereotypes from both sides of the socio-educational spectrum, and this I find deeply unsettling, especially in a country such as Australia that prides itself on equality and diversity.

When the girls in my youth group realised I was a former pupil at their high school, their response was: "What?! *You* went to *our* school?" I hope their disbelief soon translates into a realisation that it's not your school that defines you, but your mentality. As parents, we have a big responsibility in how we cultivate that within our children.