

Inquiry into the state education system in Victoria

Submission: Dr James Thyer

I am a school councillor at Northcote High School, however am making this submission as an individual, informed by my six years on the council, and as a parent to two children at the high school.

I have been very satisfied with the education my children have received at the school due to the dedication of the teachers, however I am very conscious of the poor state of the school buildings, and the stretched nature of staffing at the school.

I have derived the following table from the My School website, showing actual funding by year for Northcote High School, with 2021 being the most recent date available on the website. I have compared this to similar data derived for Scotch College Melbourne, as one of the highest fee private schools in Melbourne.

Year	2018	2019	2020	2021
SRS per student ¹	13764.00	14254.00	14761.00	15204.00
NHS Funding per student \$ ²	13083.00	13862.00	13804.00	14587.00
NHS SRS %	95.1	97.2	93.5	95.9
NHS Govt State& Comm\$	10617.00	11523.00	12536.00	13062.00
NHS Annual increase %		8.5	8.8	4.2
Scotch Funding per student \$	31666.00	33100.00	32247.00	33289.00
Scotch SRS %	230.1	232.2	218.5	218.9
Scotch Govt State and Comm \$	3550.00	3761.00	3931.00	4241.00
Scotch Annual increase %		5.9	4.5	7.9

1. <https://www.education.gov.au/recurrent-funding-schools/resources/how-school-funding-indexed>
2. My School website for Northcote High School, <https://www.myschool.edu.au/school/45442/finances/2021>

It can be seen from the above table, that despite the Gonski report findings for a School Resourcing Standard (SRS), over ten years later our school sits at around 5% below the SRS, and shows no trend of nearing 100% funding. In comparison, the latest data for Scotch College shows it funds students double the SRS.

Despite the intention that schools should be funded to the SRS, each Scotch College student receives over the double the required SRS. This is also probably underestimated in the above table given Scotch includes primary school levels. Government money is still being given to this school, in increasing amounts, whereas for 2021 the percentage increase in government funds to Northcote High *actually decreased*.

Despite being well over the SRS, Scotch is given government funding (State and Commonwealth) at levels of roughly one third that given to Northcote High, despite it exceeding the SRS by more than double, and Northcote High falling below its SRS.

Why is government funding being given to schools that don't need it, when other schools that clearly fall below the SRS are not being given enough?

The tightness of funding for Northcote High can be seen firstly in the standard of the buildings and the lack of facilities. Our main hall has experienced structural cracking, and for safety reasons has had one end barricaded from student entry for approaching three years. The majority of teaching is done in portables. For sporting facilities, there are 6 outdoor table tennis tables, as well as a run down basketball hall (one court). The school has no sporting grounds of its own, and using Victorian School Building Authority figures I have calculated that our school is in the 5% most crowded schools in Victoria in relation the number of students per area of land.

We have received some substantial government grants to bring other run-down parts of the school – namely for a performing arts centre, and a new STEM centre to be completed next year. These funds have been hard fought for by the parent and teaching community.

The purpose of mentioning a lack of sporting facilities is in relation to frequent statements by the Liberal Party that despite increases in funding to Australian schools, there has not been an increase in educational performance of Australian students. Most recently, past Federal Minister for Education, Dan Tehan, made this statement on Q&A, ABC, 2 October 2023. He consequently makes the assertion that school funding is thus not the issue in declining or stagnant achievements by Australian students.

However, this ignores entirely the distribution of funds. One can imagine that \$1 million given to a school such as Scotch College could simply be used to enhance one of their many multi-million dollar sporting facilities. This would have little to no impact on educational achievement. If this same money was given to a public school, it would likely have a huge impact on the ability to hire teachers or to enhance basic facilities.

Where is the bang for the buck when money is given to private schools who greatly exceed the SRS, and don't actually need the money for their teaching purposes?

Discussions at school council show that funding for teachers at our public school is extremely tight. Planned school camps have had to be abandoned due to the inability to cover the penalty rates for teachers for overnight stay camps. There is little capacity to backfill teachers when sick, requiring fill-in teachers often with limited handover from the absent teacher. Historically there have been few teachers available to help kids who are falling behind, or have special needs.

My own experience in high school (although many years ago!) was at a public school in suburban Melbourne, with one year in a public school in the USA. I found a huge difference in educational standard in a well-funded public school in the USA, compared to my Melbourne school. My local schooling was done in extremely basic portables, whereas in the US the school was very well designed and with teachers who seemed to have much more time to provide extra help to students. Class sizes were small, and subject choice was extensive. The computing laboratories were better than those at Monash University when I reached there. It showed me just how good public education could be, with more funding available.

My partner and I have chosen public education because of many factors:

- Public schools do not discriminate on the financial status of parents.
- Public schools do not discriminate on religious grounds, ensuring our kids get to mix with kids of other secular, or religious parents.
- It is close to our home, and we want our children to be able to walk to school, and have friends nearby.
- Public schools build communities.

- Public schools do not force discriminatory practices on teachers and students, such as being anti-LGBTIQ or misogynistic.

It is disappointing that public education is not celebrated in Australia and not able to achieve the excellence it should, with more funding being available as recommended by Gonski.