

HOT TOPIC EDUCATION

Too late to democratise school

I READ Leena Lavonius's Talking Point article on Finnish education with interest and sadness (*Mercury*, May 10). Interest because I agree with her argument and sadness because I was saying the same things 10 years ago as state president of the Australian Education Union. I spent time in Swedish schools and saw many of the same things in their system, but it will fall on deaf ears while many Australians continue to believe the myth that education must be better if you pay for it.

Unfortunately for Australia it is too late to turn the clock back and we will never reap the benefits and better educational standards that come as a result of the democratic education systems of those countries which do best in OECD lists.

We often hear Singapore quoted as an exemplar of education outcomes and this anecdote may surprise you. Last year I was at a lifelong learning conference in Brisbane and was sat next to a professor from the University of Singapore and his wife. I mentioned to her that Australia has about 35 per cent of students in private schools. Her response: "Why? In our country parents would be embarrassed to say they had to send their child to a private school. That would mean they were not good enough for the state system."

Australia should have followed the example of countries with better results. By all means allow private schools, but not financed by government. The argument about paying taxes is illogical. We all pay taxes for things we cannot use or choose not to use and we pay for what we do.

A democracy means government provides services from taxes and if you cannot or do not choose to use them, you do not get a refund. Those who do not have children in education do not get a tax rebate.

Those who prefer to buy a book rather than use the library do not get their book paid for. If you do not want to use public transport, the government will not provide you with a car. That is the logic that applies in other countries yet many Australians refuse to accept this basic premise.

By moving away from basic tenets of democracy, we have allowed a system to develop to such an extent it now inhibits us from achieving the best for all students which then produces a bigger and bigger gap between the haves and have-nots, which ultimately results in a less civil society for which we will all end up paying a higher price than private school fees.

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Letter to the Editor of The Mercury dated 12 May 2016 from former Australian Education Union president Jean Walker in response to an opinion article on the Finnish education system by Leena Lavonius dated 10 May 2016.