



Families are flocking to non-government schools, with an additional 40,000 enrolments in just one year. PHOTO: LOUIE DOUVIS

Parents support move to private schools despite increasing fees

Julie Hare
Education editor

The exodus from public schools is continuing unabated, with a fall in enrolments nationally of 2800 students in the last financial year while private and Catholic schools attracted an extra 40,000 pupils.

Private school enrolments had grown despite average fees rising to \$21,000 a year in Victoria and \$16,000 in NSW, and with numerous schools now exceeding \$46,000 a year, Senate estimates heard yesterday.

Enrolments in private schools have been rising for many years, but the shift had accelerated since COVID-19.

"We saw quite a big step change following COVID. That's where we saw a big change in how we predicted enrolments in the non-government school sector," Fabian Harding from the Education Department said.

"We were unable to conclude what was [driving it]."

Harding said the federal government had not conducted any research into parental motivations for changing to independent schools.

The National Report on Schooling for 2023, published this week, shows 4,086,998 students were enrolled in Australian primary and secondary

schools, an increase of 1.1 per cent from 2022.

While 64 per cent were in public schools, that was down from 67 per cent in 2006. Catholic school enrolments remained steady at about 20 per cent while private school enrolments increased from 13 per cent to 16.3 per cent in that time.

Federal government data shows 131 more independent schools in 2023 compared with 2006, and 90 fewer public schools.

Assistant minister for education Anthony Chisholm was asked by Liberal senator Matt O'Sullivan whether the government acknowledged that the popularity of non-government schools was saving taxpayers billions annually because they receive significantly less public funding per student than public schools. "That debate was settled, in my view, a long time ago, and that they [non-government schools] play an important role in enabling parents to choose what they think is best for their child. Unfortunately, not everyone agrees," Chisholm said.

The Independent Schools Association launched a public campaign yesterday to urge both sides of politics to rule out funding cuts.

Chief executive Graham Catt said more than 60 per cent of students in

private schools come from low-and middle-income families and that the median annual fee was \$5537 – "not the misleading figures pushed by critics".

He called for a capital funding program for independent schools, saying the increased enrolments was putting pressure on teaching and other spaces.

"Government funding [for capital works] for the entire non-government sector is less than \$250 million annually compared to \$1.5 billion for government schools in NSW alone," Catt said.

Asked whether the government was concerned that private school fee increases were massively outstripping inflation, Chisholm said it was up to individual schools to justify their fee increases to parents.

Education Department officials were asked to explain how a private school in Canberra, Brindabella Christian College, could have received a \$927,000 government payment at the beginning of February, but two weeks later had not been able to pay staff.

The school has previously not paid staff their superannuation entitlements, but spent \$1 million on a robot dog. It is also in a dispute with the Australian Taxation Office over unpaid debts of \$8 million.

The ATO is seeking court orders to wind up the college.