

23 December 2011

Review of Funding for Schooling can learn from Normanton experience

OPINION: by Executive Director Independent Schools Queensland David Robertson

THERE is a place in far north Queensland where 50 young people, 70 per cent of them indigenous, are busy teaching academics a lesson about independent schooling.

Gulf Christian College, in Normanton on the Gulf of Carpentaria, has just celebrated its 25th anniversary. It's a compelling example of the many independent schools in Queensland that are an inconvenient truth to those intent on branding the sector as "academically selective, exclusive and well-resourced".

This college serves a low socio-economic demographic and is committed to indigenous students, providing choice and opportunity to a remote community.

A Nous Group research report, *Schooling Challenges and Opportunities*, prepared for the Federal Government's Review of Funding for Schooling, would have you thinking such a place could not exist, let alone have thrived so long.

In its report, the Nous Group identifies a growing "residualisation" of disadvantage in government schools, stemming from the drift of enrolments to non-government schools. It's an issue that has long been promoted by some academics and policymakers who would do well to fly to Normanton for a day.

Gulf Christian College and Normanton State School, the only other school in the area, sit side by side. Both play an extraordinary role in providing schooling for this isolated community.

Gulf Christian's principal, Jake Randall, speaks proudly of the many students who, for various reasons, were not coping at the local state school, then enrolled at Gulf and prospered. No doubt there are also examples of students who did not quite cope at Gulf Christian yet found their niche at Normanton State School.

The Nous Report states "there ought to be some pressure on schools to take on more under-performing students". In Normanton you will not find any evidence of an independent school wanting to take the best students, or being exclusive.

What you will find here and in many other centres throughout the state, are educators wanting to provide the best schooling opportunity for students, particularly in cases where they would be considered as highly disadvantaged in a schooling context.

The Independent Schools Council of Australia rightly labelled the Nous Report "a disappointing mix of rehashed existing policy initiatives and ideologically-driven attacks on non-government schools".

Recent independent research undertaken on behalf of Independent Schools Queensland and the Association of Independent Schools of NSW provides further evidence that the views of many academics and researchers are at odds with the general public.

As reported in *Positive Attitudes Towards Independent Schools in Queensland*, a nationwide survey conducted by UMR Research in July, seven in 10 (72 per cent) of Queenslanders are supportive of independent schools.

Nearly all respondents (95 per cent) agreed with the proposition that parents have a right to choose where their children go to school and have them educated according to their beliefs and values. More than 70 per cent of respondents rejected the statement that independent schools should not receive any financial support from state or federal governments.

The survey also found that there was majority support for equality of funding for students, with 67 per cent of Queenslanders believing students at independent schools should receive the same amount of government funding as those at state schools.

As the Federal Government's Review of Funding for Schooling nears completion with the Government set to respond to the final report in the new year, it is clear there is no appetite for any decreases in funding for independent schools.

Parents expect governments to support their legitimate educational choices through appropriate funding arrangements for all schools.

Funding a quality Australian education will continue to help millions of deserving children reach their full potential, children like those sitting in remote Normanton classrooms - be they state or independent.