

# THE NEW MIDDLE CLASS AND EDUCATION

The growth of private school enrolments is due to much more than ideology, explains **Alan Barcan**

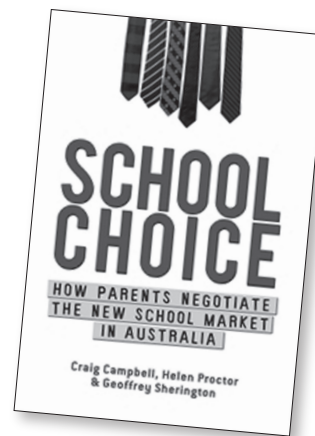
*School Choice: How Parents Negotiate the New School Market in Australia*

by **Craig Campbell, Helen Proctor & Geoffrey Sherington**

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Nowadays, few academics write books on contemporary educational problems; fewer still analyse the socio-historical context of these problems. As a result, the initiative has passed to academic researchers on policy and administration publishing in learned journals, investigative journalists writing in quality newspapers, members of think-tanks finding a variety of outlets, and assorted amateurs. This makes the authors of *School Choice*, all historians of education at Sydney University, distinctive. They are survivors of an era when the history of education, the philosophy of education, comparative education, educational psychology, and the sociology of education (the 'foundation studies') flourished, before the reform of teacher training in the early 1990s undermined them.

Critics have been studying the middle-class drift from government to non-government schools

for several years. The majority of such studies come, significantly, from New South Wales. In *The Comprehensive Public High School: Historical Perspectives*, Campbell and Sherington examined, at length and impressively, 'The Market' in NSW secondary education.<sup>1</sup> They attributed the decline of comprehensive highs to both neo-liberalism and neo-conservatism. Now the three authors of *School Choice* present a study of middle-class families choosing a school; they link the 'emerging markets in education' to 'the making of the modern middle class.' (p. 1)

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In *The Stupid Country: How Australia is Dismantling Public Education* (2007), Chris Bonnor, principal of a NSW state high school, and Jane Caro, journalist and broadcaster, placed most blame for the perilous plight of public (i.e. government) schools on the flight of the middle class.<sup>2</sup> In his foreword to *The Stupid Country*, economics journalist Ross Gittins discerns a broader, deep-seated process: 'Education used to be one of the great equalising institutions of a proudly egalitarian nation. Now, in the name of "choice" we're building a two-class education system.'

Unlike the authors of *School Choice*, Joanna Mendelssohn, art historian and author of *Which School? Beyond Public and Private*, makes no mention of neo-liberalism to explain the middle-class flight from state schools.<sup>3</sup> She blames the decline in the quality of public schools resulting from teachers unsuited to the type of school—comprehensive, selective, or specialist—in which they work; the influence of the suburb on the quality of schooling; and the prevalence of undisciplined or bullying students.

In his 2005 hostile review of 'neo-liberal think-tanks and the assault upon public schools,' Damien Cahill, a Sydney University lecturer in political economy, did not mention the middle class.<sup>4</sup> He attributed the malaise in government schools to ideology: the New Right had an 'almost paranoid concern with education.' Being socially conservative, neo-liberals gave values a high place in their concerns. Cahill saw think-tanks such as the CIS and IPA as prime sources of corrosion.

Kevin Donnelly, a Victorian defender of school choice and contributor to *The Howard Era*, rejected the complaint of the public schools lobby that generous Commonwealth funding has increased the attraction of non-government schools by helping them offer superior physical resources and smaller classes.<sup>5</sup> Parents choose non-government schools because they are more academically successful; are able to inculcate values more in tune with those at home; have a rich co-curricular range of activities; offer better discipline and, in most cases, have a religious affiliation.

Values? Religious belief? Bullying? Academic quality? *School Choice* throws light on these issues. It offers a balanced discussion. Many of its nine

chapters draw on 63 interviews with 'parents and caregivers' of children just beginning Year 7 and some 1,350 answers to questionnaires. Census tables and reports are also used, making it possible to reconcile opinions with socio-educational realities.

### Neo-liberalism and education

The 'Introduction' identifies 'basic features' of neo-liberalism that impinge on education (pp. 4–7):

- (1) Governments have redefined the good parent-citizen as an informed chooser of schools, displacing the older view that a good parent-citizen trusted the government to provide 'fair educational opportunity to all.'
- (2) Neo-liberalism distrusts large-scale government bureaucracies to provide goods and services. Public services, including education, are unlikely to adapt easily to the changing needs of families. The new doctrine favours decentralisation, competition, and the construction of markets. Governments have created such a market through major subsidies to non-government schools. Government comprehensive high schools are to provide a safety net for those unable to operate easily within the market.

This summary of neo-liberal education policy ignores its concern over the curriculum and standards, its emphasis on vocational education, and its advocacy of vouchers to extend choice beyond the middle class to families with limited financial resources. It overlooks vital changes. In the late 1960s and early 1970s consensus about the content of the curriculum, which illustrates the aims of education, collapsed; as a result the curriculum fractured. Further, by the late 1980s, government departments of education had shown their inability or unwillingness to control the content or methodology of schooling. These changes had nothing to do with neo-liberalism.

The focus on neo-liberalism as the prime source of the malaise in government schools raises a second problem: dating. The statistical analyses used by Campbell, Proctor and Sherington often

contrast 1976 with 2001; they state that ‘arguably 1976 was one of the last census years before the rise of neo-liberalism in public education policy.’ (p. 9) In fact, neo-liberal policies emerged later, in about 1983, with their impact on education occurring in the late 1980s and early 1990s. The middle-class retreat from state high schools started in the 1970s, before the era of neo-liberalism.

**The swing to non-government schools**

In the late 1980s, Geoffrey Partington of Flinders University summed up the situation. Each year from 1963 to 1977, government schools enrolled more students absolutely and relatively compared to non-government schools than the year before. In 1978, government schools again increased in absolute terms but fell in the percentage of students enrolled; but from 1979, they enrolled each year a smaller number absolutely and relatively than the year before—though enrolment numbers fluctuated after 1989. According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics, in 1995, 71% of students attended government schools, diminishing to 67.1% in 2005 and 65.7% in 2009.<sup>6</sup> The exodus from government schools started in the different states at different times, but all well before neo-liberalism. According to Partington, as shown in table 1, the peak years of enrolments in government schools were in the 1970s.<sup>7</sup>

**Table. 1:** Peak years of enrolments in government schools

State	Year	Percentage
South Australia	1972	86.1%
Victoria	1972–73	75.8%
Tasmania	1972–73	85.1%
Australian Capital Territory	1976	74.5%
Northern Territory	1976	87.1%
Western Australia	1978	82.6%
Queensland	1977–79	78.6%
New South Wales	1979	79%

*School Choice* gives the proportions of students in Australian government and non-government secondary schools in 1965, 1975, 1985, 1995, and 2005 (Table 3.1). This shows enrolment share in government schools peaking in 1975 and rising in non-government schools after 1975. Table 3.2, which gives the proportions in government and non-government secondary schools in 1993, 1997, 2002, and 2007, shows that between 1993 and 2007, the enrolment share of government schools fell from 67.7% to 61.3%; the Catholic share rose from 19.9% to 21.6%; the other non-government share rose from 12.3% to 17.1%.

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**Class and schools**

The first chapter (‘The middle class and education’) in *School Choice* is confusing. Campbell, Proctor and Sherington say, ‘Classes are not just about wealth and occupations but the cultural and religious histories of their diverse constituent groups.’ (p. 16); four pages later, they find families responding to religious and ethnic as well as to class factors. Surely this is old news! The authors recognise that ‘the Australian middle class has become more diffuse and fluid.’ They express concern that ‘traditional social class analysis, especially that associated with occupational categories’ does not accommodate ‘gender issues.’ (p. 17) They traverse the changing views of overseas and Australian academics about the middle class, a concept that ‘has ever been difficult to define.’ (p. 18) The great variety of opinion on the nature of the middle class detailed in the book fails to elucidate matters. The authors accept the view of two English academics that class is not defined by the ownership and management of the means of production, distribution and exchange. Yet in Chapter 4 (‘Who goes where’), which relies heavily on Australian Bureau of Statistics evidence, the authors largely adopt the ‘occupational’ approach to social class.

On the other hand, the authors of *School Choice* present a description of the contemporary middle class based on their interviews with parents and carers. They identify seven groups:

1. **the old middle class**, ('which originated in the mid-nineteenth century');
2. **the new middle class** ('the white-collar and new professional employees of the early twentieth century');
3. **the Catholic middle class** ('emerged from the aspirations of the Australian Catholic community over the twentieth century');
4. **the cosmopolitan middle class** ('usually emerged from the old and new middle-class groups');
5. **the first generation middle class** ('the first in their family to acquire some form of middle-class status as well as to have an extended education');
6. **the self-made middle class** ('created out of the economic expansion of the past two decades,' with some overlap with the first-generation middle class); and
7. **the marginal middle class** ('hoping to achieve middle-class status for their children through education,' many being recent arrivals, others Australians who have lost status or have yet to acquire it) (pp. 30-33).

There are a number of problems in these classifications, one of the most egregious being the confusion between the independent professions that developed in the first two decades of the twentieth century and the dependent, service-oriented, white collar or employee middle class created in the last 30 or 40 years.

A glance at the evolution of the middle classes would have been valuable. A small mercantile middle class emerged in the early years of settlement, a growing commercial middle class after about 1830, a small rural (farming) middle class from the 1860s onwards, South Australia

having most success in this. Local preparation of the 'three learned professions,' medicine, law and (less strongly) theology, slowly supplemented the importation of this class from Britain. The industrial middle class reached its peak from the 1890s on; it was still potent in the late 1930s and the most independent of the classes, being strongest in Victoria. The 'new' professional middle class grew from c. 1911-1921 onwards, its preparation requiring secondary and university education. This class's initial independence was circumscribed by the growth of the welfare state. The white collar, salaried or employee middle class, which developed in the 1960s and after, was also fashioned through education. It was coupled with the growth of large corporations and the service industries.

Unwisely, the authors conflate North American and British middle-class education with Australian (p. 21). Australia's socio-economic development has had several distinctive features. It had a Big Man's Frontier, whereas the American frontier was mainly a Small Man's Frontier, which meant closer settlement, provincial cities, and decentralisation. Britain's overseas empire was its frontier. In both America and Britain, the frontier strengthened the middle classes; in Australia, the middle class was weak. As the American journalist C. Hartley Grattan emphasised in 1947, 'Perhaps the outstanding factor [in Australian history] is the absence of a strong middle class able from its own strength to define a social ideal which is acceptable to the majority of the people.'<sup>8</sup> What Australia did develop was a strong working class with middle-class standards of living. Until the early 1950s, it was possible to rise economically and socially without much education. Thus, secondary education had a dual role: to confirm status and to confer status. This was obvious as early as 1880, when, while discussing the proposed state high schools, Sir John Hay, President of the NSW Legislative Council, stated:

These schools would be established chiefly for the advantage of what he might call the middle classes—that is to say, the children of those who were not dependent upon manual labour. They would also open a pathway of

advancement to the children of the labouring classes who were gifted by nature with superior talents.<sup>9</sup>

### Reasons for choosing a school

Chapter 3 ('Who goes where') is one of the most interesting, particularly if one skims over the numerous statistical tables. The chapter quantifies changes from 1976 to 2005 in the distribution of students between government, Catholic, and other non-government secondary schools. It also addresses, perhaps belatedly, changes in the social characteristics of families enrolling their children in the different sectors, and the relationship between middle-class parental occupations and their choice of school. It chronicles the decline (in Sydney) of the industrial middle class and, hence, of the industrial working class and the rise in women's employment, some of it representing single-parent families but much of it associated with double-income families with an enhanced ability to pay private school fees. Another change is the decline of government employment.

Table 3.12 lists 26 of the two main reasons given by 1,374 Sydney parents for choosing a secondary school for their child in Year 7 (p. 77). However, several of the categories could have been amalgamated, while 11.9% of the answers are not listed or were not stated by the respondents. The highest ratings were perhaps predictable: 'School reputation/recommendation' (9.8%), 'Proximity to home' (9.7%), then a gap to 'Academic quality' (7.0%) and another gap to 'Religious reason' and 'All round quality,' both at 6.3%. 'Discipline' came eighth, and 'Selective school' eleventh.

The seventh most popular reason, 'Single-sex school' (3.3%) contrasts with 'Co-educational school' (2.7%), which ranks twelfth. Single-sex government schools seem to be more numerous in New South Wales than in other states; they are, of course, concentrated in the metropolitan area. The authors could have given more attention to these schools. In a section on bullying (Chapter 7, 'People like us'), they note that boys' high schools 'might have a more difficult selling task' than girls' schools (pp. 150–151). In 1996, the *Sydney Morning Herald's Guide to Schools* reported that many girls' schools had to restrict enrolments whereas the 22 boys' schools had many unfilled

places. The report attributed the popularity of girls' schools to their reputation for strong academic results.<sup>10</sup>

The chapter concludes by noting that non-government schools are attracting enrolments from all areas of society; that the middle class is leading the way; and that in the middle class, family occupation is 'less important than other cultural and school-attached reasons for choosing particular schools,' though professional families put greater emphasis on 'academic quality.' (p. 80)

### The parents speak

The next nine chapters cover the interviews with parents about school choice. 'Family traditions' (Chapter 4) opens with a perhaps overdue analysis of the contemporary middle-class family. It is 'increasingly unstable.' It is small, divorce is frequent, many are two-income families. 'Buying an education may become a way of securing a custodial role, not only in terms of having children supervised during the day but also through the provision of moral guidance and firm discipline so that the values of the family are maintained' (p. 84). Following the election of the Whitlam government in 1972, some of the old middle class transferred its allegiance from traditional education policies to a faith in collectivist solutions. 'Now the new era of neoliberalism supports neither tradition, nor faith in collectivist solutions' (p. 85). Each family makes its own actions.

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An alternative view would be that the revolution of 1967–74 broke traditional styles and destroyed the liberal-humanist curriculum, causing some alarm in older middle-class circles. The neo-liberal revolution of 1989–93 tried to remedy the collapse, particularly as regards vocational training. It transferred power from the discredited education bureaucracies to the new political masters.

The authors examine seven groups within the (Sydney) middle class. Stories of the varying parental strategies enliven the narrative. The old middle class retains and even intensifies allegiances



to traditional corporate schools. The new middle class is loyal to government schools. The Catholic middle class merges 'Faith and aspiration' in their church's schools. The cosmopolitan (i.e. 'ethnic') middle class is flexible. 'They still take the view that parents as much as schools are responsible for a child's education.' The self-made ('aspirational') middle class is not made by education and feels the government system has failed them. The first generation middle class, mostly educated in the government system, is eclectic in choosing schools for their children. The 'marginal middle class' (recent migrants) see government selective schools as the way forward (pp. 86–99).

### Selective high schools

'The new middle class who did best out of them for most of the twentieth century is being displaced by an even newer middle class, with an equally strong but different ethnic character.' East Asian children have a very strong presence in Sydney selective highs (p. 107). A string of interviews illustrates the point. Although the book analyses parental interest in selective high schools, it hardly mentions the specialist secondary schools: technology high schools, sports high, agricultural highs, language, the performing arts. The interviews do not yield much previously unknown material.

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Nor does the discussion of 'Localities and choice' provide anything new or controversial. It is well known that high quality government schools exist in some (mainly middle class) suburbs and not in others; that children travel to schools in subsidised public transport or in their parents' cars; and that some parents choose to live in a particular suburb because of the character of its schools. These factors operated well before the rise of market-oriented school selection, though in the early 1990s de-zoning of government schools (usually retaining priority for local residents) exacerbated matters. Not mentioned is that

the drift in enrolments from state to non-state schools leads some comprehensives to widen their recruitment areas, often leading to the inclusion of less-academic pupils.

Chapter 7 ('People like us') looks at middle-class parents opting out of particular schools in order to shield their children from undesirable peer groups. The chapter notes a front-page *Sydney Morning Herald* report in March 2008 on 'White Flight' (picked up by *The Age* and *The Australian*) that in country districts, the decisions of 'Anglo-European' parents make some schools primarily Aboriginal; in Sydney for similar reasons, some government schools were becoming 'Middle Eastern.' The president of the Victorian Association of State School Principals commented that in his state it was 'more like a middle class flight than a white flight.' (p. 142) One letter-writer responded that many Muslims were choosing Islamic schools because their children were abused in public schools.

Middle-class parents were concerned about the dress and demeanour of particular students, bullying, and the lack of a work ethic. Yet some parents with children in selective schools complained of the excessive work-load. 'The kids from the Middle Eastern families, they don't care at all, but the Asian parents care too much' (p. 145). An urban professional couple from East Africa were puzzled by the relaxed Australian attitude to study and achievement, such as automatic annual promotion no matter what the examination results. Some boys' schools had a bad reputation for bullying, others seemed to have mastered the problem. But one mother said her daughter was bullied in a high fee non-government primary school, perhaps because of her failure to conform to the elitist spirit promoted by the school. The authors sum up: 'Some parents were concerned about the problems of mixing with too-wealthy or arrogant young people in elite non-government schools, but not as strongly as those who feared bullying or serious disruption to the day-to-day process of learning in the government comprehensive school classroom' (p. 159).

### Religion and values

The chapter on 'Religious and secular values' opens with a brief discussion of values in government

and non-government schools. Supporters of government schools believed they held a monopoly of ‘inclusivity and egalitarianism’ as fundamental values. The authors dismiss as ‘fairly bland’ the nine key values in the 2005 *National Framework for Values Education in Australian Schools*, without naming these values. Many of them (Care and Compassion; Doing Your Best; Fair Go, on so on) were concerned with character and citizenship, concepts somewhat scorned in many public schools in the 1970s and 1980s. The ninth value, Understanding, Tolerance and Inclusion, was clearly focused on the multicultural society. The authors remarked that a recent ‘crucial development’ was the view that doing one’s best for one’s child is an act of good citizenship (p. 163). Two of the six families with children at Christian fundamentalist schools felt that the religion was a bit too extreme. Some believed that government scrutiny would protect their children from being taught creationism instead of evolution in science; others hoped creationism would be given credibility. Some parents applauded the closer supervision of the students by these schools (pp. 167–168).

Catholic schools had changed. Archbishop Pell of Sydney remarked in 2006 that they now catered predominantly ‘for the huge Australian middle class, which they helped create.’ He had previously expressed concern that the schools might be too liberal, not committed enough to Church teachings. Many parents sent their children to Catholic schools for cultural rather than religious reasons. But middle-class Catholics were also carefully selecting particular Catholic schools. About 10% of children in Catholic schools were from non-Catholic families (pp. 171–172). Parents who could afford the high fees of the old Catholic, Anglican and Uniting Church corporate schools were satisfied with their decision. Almost all the corporate collegiate schools were single-sex schools (pp. 174, 176).

The chapter closes by stressing that nearly all parents represented school choices ‘as moral ones—made not only for the good of their own children but also for the production of good people. The values debate is crucial to the discourse of school choice in middle Australia’ (p. 178).

The final chapter (‘The Future’) notes that

parents ‘did not always reveal their anxieties about the future immediately.’ Some wanted educational qualifications and excellence in teaching for their children; others sought broad socialisation. The ‘labour market and world economy’ demanded ‘ever higher credentials’; but some families no longer trusted comprehensive schools to provide quality education (pp. 180, 182–183). The main obstacles were ill-disciplined students and certain racial and ethnic groups. The authors did not go further and wonder whether ill-prepared teachers or the lowering of academic standards in primary and junior secondary levels might have generated a rise in credential standards.

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This chapter had opened with a generalisation: ‘the way school choice operates in the market provides defining moments in the history of middle-class families’ and is increasingly significant ‘in Australia’s continuing history of middle-class formation’ (p. 179). It seems to me that for two decades after 1970 historical, sociological and other writers on education concentrated on the problems of the ‘lower class’ or the new identity/special interest groups. Campbell, Proctor and Sherington have corrected this imbalance; the crisis in state schooling facilitated this rethink.

#### And so?

The interviews and questionnaires give the investigation a vivid character, though this methodology generates considerable repetition of ideas. It is also a rather slow way of proceeding. One advantage of the interview method is that it permits the authors to present opinions without necessarily accepting or rejecting them. Nor need they adjudicate between alternative, conflicting views. All in all, a nicely post-modern arrangement.

An obvious problem is the heavy focus on Sydney. The *NSW Education Reform Act* of 1990 provided a wider range of academic and specialised

government schools than elsewhere in Australia. Subject to a few limitations, the Act permitted parents to choose the public schools to which they sent their children. *School Choice* asserts that 'large sections of Australia's diverse middle-class have often been crucial supporters of government schools' (p. 2). This is true of NSW but is less so of Victoria. The writers concentrate on the movement from primary to secondary school, i.e. from Year 6 to Year 7, though they argue that pressure is shifting downwards to choosing the right primary school. But is this a NSW phenomenon motivated by the existence of many government secondary schools for talented and gifted students? Although comparison is a vital investigative tool, one must be cautious about applying the diverse findings of overseas research to Australia; it is equally risky to transfer the findings about NSW schooling to Australia as a whole.

The authors could well have examined, even if briefly, school choice at Year 11. The existence of government Years 11–12 schools facilitates this move. By Year 11 most lower ability, anti-education students have departed; bullying and poor discipline is less likely—though moves to raise the minimum leaving age might soon erode this difference. A major motive for changing schools is the importance of the Higher School Certificate at the end of Year 12 as a credential. Government high schools often promise greater success at the HSC than small Christian schools. They are often more able to provide the 'right' subjects.

Another reason for transfers to public schools at Year 11 may be financial. Fees at the major corporate collegiate schools are rising annually; an economic crisis has touched Australia. As the 2009 school year opened the Australian Secondary Principals Association, representing government high schools, reported that a survey of almost one-third of public high schools across the nation (453 schools) showed a rise in enrolments at Year 11. This was highest in Queensland, Victoria and Western Australia, with almost 50% of principals reporting growth. *The Australian's* education editor commented: 'As parents feel the economic crunch enrolments in public high schools have risen this year with principals claiming a large proportion of the increase was due to students leaving Catholic and independent schools.' Almost half the principals said most new students had

left Catholic schools, 28% said most had come from low-fee independent schools, and 14% said students had left high-fee independent schools.<sup>11</sup> ABS statistics released in early 2010 showed that enrolment growth in Catholic and independent schools was slower in 2009 than in earlier years, but that the overall trend away from public education continued.

*School Choice*, coupled with the 2006 book on *The Comprehensive Public High School*, has established the reputation of Campbell and Sherington as authorities on this type of school. Though their analysis gives too much weight to ideology, and says too little about why the move to private schools started in the 1970s, their latest venture offers a series of mostly valuable scholarly studies on the role of middle-class flight in the decline of government schools.

#### Endnotes

- 1 Craig Campbell and Geoffrey Sherington, *The Comprehensive Public High School: Historical Perspectives* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006).
- 2 Chris Bonnor and Jane Caro, *The Stupid Country: How Australia is Dismantling Public Education* (Sydney: University of New South Wales Press, 2007).
- 3 Joanna Mendelsohn, *Which School? Beyond Public and Private* (Melbourne: Pluto Press Australia, 2007).
- 4 Damien Cahill, 'The Right Values in Education,' *Overland* 179 (Winter 2005), 10, 12.
- 5 Kevin Donnelly, 'Getting the Schools Back to Basics,' in Keith Windschuttle, et al. (eds.), *The Howard Era* (Sydney: Quadrant, 2009).
- 6 Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Schools, Australia* Cat. 4221.0, various years; *Schools, Australia, Preliminary 2009*, Cat. 4220.0.
- 7 Alan Barcan, University of Newcastle, 'The shift to non-state schools,' *The Australian Quarterly* (Autumn 1981), 92; Geoffrey Partington, 'Roll changes in Australian schools,' *The Australian Quarterly* (Winter 1988), 216.
- 8 C. Hartley Grattan, 'The Social Structure of Australia,' in C. Hartley Grattan (ed.), *Australia* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, University of California Press, 1947), 275.
- 9 *NSW Parliamentary Debates* (6 April 1880), 1787.
- 10 *Guide to Schools*, *The Sydney Morning Herald*, (fourth ed.), 13.
- 11 'School fees hit record highs,' *The Sydney Morning Herald* (26–27 December 2009); 'Catholic students lead exodus to public high schools,' *The Australian* (19 February 2009).