

A Short History Of The School System in NSW

Only a handful of Children landed at Sydney Cove in 1788, yet within a short time several Dame Schools had begun operating. Other schools followed in the 1790's. These early schools developed because it was believed that unless the "rising generation" were rescued by schools the children would grow up to be as bad as their convict parents.

Later schools emphasised the need for students to grow up literate, well behaved and Christian. The Governors of the Colony, supported by the Clergy, were heavily involved in the establishment and maintenance of Schools for the 'lower orders'. Those settlers who were well off, looked after their own children's educational needs by sending them to private schools or back to England to boarding schools.

In the 1820's, (in order to give the Church of England the resources to develop a system of Schools; Primary, Secondary; Technical and University) the British Government granted the Church one seventh of all land in New South Wales, an area of land a little smaller than the whole of Victoria. As the land at the time was undeveloped it failed to produce the revenue expected and the experiment failed.

When Governor Bourke arrived in the Colony in the early 1830's there was no System of Schools. All agreed that the Government should finance Schools but the real question, one which would cause much concern for the next half century, was whether the Churches or the Government should control them.

Governor Burke wanted to give Government aid only to Schools which were non denominational like the present day Public Schools. The Churches, believing that Education and Religion could not be separated, wanted only Church Schools funded by the Government. Because of the Churches' objections neither Governor Bourke nor his successor, Governor Gipps, was able to introduce a "Common System". Instead denominational Schools were financed by Government on a pound for pound basis.

In the 1840's Depression showed that the Churches could not educate all children in a Colony with such a scattered population. Half the number of school aged children never saw the inside of a school room. As a result, a compromise was worked out so that a Board continued to distribute Government aid to denominational Schools while at the time another Board set about establishing a system of Public Schools in country districts where the shortage of Schools was greatest.

The number of Public Schools grew steadily but the system of two Boards proved unsuitable. In 1867 a Council of Education replaced the Boards and took charge of all Government assisted Schools, whether Public or Denominational. This arrangement favoured the Public Schools, which grew rapidly in number as settlements spread following the passing of the Free Selection Acts and the growth of the railway system. In this period some denominational Schools were converted to Public Schools and by the late 1870's there were 1,100 Government Schools, 150

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Government assisted Schools and hundreds of private and non-assisted denominational Schools.

There were still complaints about this arrangement for giving Government assistance to Schools: many people felt it was not right for a Government to finance the teaching of particular Religious beliefs in Schools. Consequently, following a period of intense anti Catholic feeling in the late 1870's the Public Instruction Act of 1880 was passed.

The Public Instruction Act of 1880 was believed to be the "Final Solution": all Government aid to denominational schools was stopped and only Government Schools were to receive Government assistance. Most Protestant denominational Schools either closed or were converted to Public Schools. By the use of Teaching Orders the Catholic Church was able to maintain a system of Primary Schools and later developed Secondary Schools as well.

The 1880 Act is also important because it introduced State High Schools, made Education compulsory for the first time and established a Department of Education to replace the Council of Education.

The number of new Schools under the Department of Education increased rapidly as the Department tried to ensure that a Primary School Education was available to all children, no matter where they lived in New South Wales. By the end of the nineteenth century there were more Government Schools in NSW than there are now, but they were mostly one teacher schools.

Although Primary Schooling was available to almost all children, Secondary Schools were few in number. The growth in Industry and Commerce, however, in the early years of the Twentieth century, demanded better trained and educated people. Government Secondary Education proceeded to develop quickly after 1910.

At first the System divided students into those going on to Tertiary Studies and those who would enter industry, Commerce or the home. Gradually these distinctions faded and comprehensive High Schools emerged, offering a more general Secondary Education to students.

The Wyndham Scheme, introduced in 1962, confirmed the move towards comprehensive High Schools. It introduced a 4 year course of General Studies for all students and a subsequent 2 year course for those who wished to deepen their Secondary Education. The changes in Government Secondary Schools were followed in Catholic and non Government Secondary Schools.

The 1880 "Final Solution" proved less final when in 1963 the Federal Government began to give financial assistance to non Government Schools; and even less so in 1965 when the State Government once again began giving financial aid directly to non Government Schools.

Since 1848 New South Wales has had a mixed Education System, made up of Government, Denominational and Private Schools. Today the majority of Students (over 70%) attend Primary and Secondary Schools operated by the Government.

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Most of the rest attend Catholic Primary and Secondary Schools. A small percentage attend other Denominational Schools or Private Primary or Secondary Schools. These non Government Schools are funded partly by Government and partly by fees paid by students' families.

None of the handful of First Fleet children who splashed ashore was expected to go to School. In just over 200 years, all New South Wales children are required to be in School until at least 15 years of age and a third of them remain until they are 17 or 18. A year after European Settlement in New South Wales, one teacher taught a small hut full of children the "3R's". Today, in Government and Non Government Schools, over 70 000 teachers are responsible for over two million children.

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