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## Victoria Education

EXCLUSIVE

# Australian billionaires open their wallets to help students get into private religious schools

Some of Australia's richest identities are giving students from low income families the chance to study at some of the city's most prestigious religious schools - at a subsidised cost to their parents.



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Australian billionaires are helping students from low to middle-income families study at some of the city's most renowned private-religious schools.

Australian billionaires are opening their wallets to give students from low to middle-income families the opportunity to study at some of the city's most prestigious private-religious schools.

Ultra-wealthy philanthropists have come up with a “voucher system” to subsidise fees at some of Melbourne's most renowned Jewish schools, which come at a subsidised cost to the student's family.

The altruistic initiative was uncovered in new research by Monash University, which investigated how billionaires were addressing the growing financial divide between Australian public and private schools through “edu-philanthropy”.

Monash University School of Curriculum Teaching and Inclusive Education Dr Ilana Finefter-Rosenbluh said donors described their work as a way to make the system more equitable in a highly competitive education market.

“The idea of such vouchers is to help children attend a local, faith-based private school of their choice,” she said.

“Once enrolled, the child's place is guaranteed, with no debt to pay back, subject to an independent annual fee assessment.”





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Dr Finefter-Rosenbluh said similar initiatives could be found in the United States to allow more children to attend private or charter schools through subsidising all or part of their tuition.

“While scholarships are typically awarded to students to attend a particular school, such voucher initiatives allow the beneficiary of the subsidy to choose where it is spent,” she said.

While the researcher couldn’t reveal which schools the philanthropists were offering “vouchers” for due to ethical constraints, the focus group for the study did include benefactors who donated directly to high fee-paying Melbourne Jewish schools.

Fees are as much as \$43,000 a year depending on the student’s year level at some of these schools, with the

average being about \$41,000 annually.

Donors interviewed as part of the research said the reasons they were attracted to edu-philanthropy was because they wanted to prevent students from experiencing rejection based on their socio-economic background in schools designed to meet their cultural identity needs.

“Their guiding principle is people shouldn’t be denied and no family should be driven into relative poverty to pay religious school fees in a pro-choice society,” Dr Finefter-Rosenbluh said.

One donor who went by the pseudonym Fred, said the idea of “building something more inclusive” was one motivation behind his donations.

“There’s a great willingness to support all the schools so nobody gets rejected,” he said.

“Whether it be in the arts, sports, music, whatever, it’s (our) ability to support schools and solve what needs to be solved.”





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Another edu-philanthropist who went by the pseudonym Aaron said: “It’s one of the hardest nuts to crack but (faith-based) education should be more accessible”.

It comes as the disparity in funding across Australian schools is at crisis point, with the nation’s education system in the bottom third of OECD (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development) countries in equity outcomes for students.

While the research didn’t look at edu-philanthropy at independent non-religious schools, Dr Finefter-Rosenbluh said expanding the voucher system was an important question for donors to consider going forward.

“The work of donors to set-up a voucher system raises important questions about how we, as a community, want our children to be able to access schools, and who has the right and the responsibility to make those decisions,” she said.

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