

Parental Reasons for Sending Children to a Rural Day and Boarding School

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This article reports results from a survey conducted in 1990 on parental views of various aspects of education in a small independent day and boarding school. While the principal focus of the research was on attitudes towards specific areas of the curriculum, this article presents data on two inter-related questions:

1. The main reasons for sending a child to the school.
2. The importance of various possible influences and sources of information in choosing the school.

Most previous Australian research on parental reasons for choosing independent schools has focussed on schools located in metropolitan areas with exclusively or primarily day student enrolment. Data from the present study are drawn from a school located in a rural area. Unlike previous research, comparisons can be made between information provided by parents of three groups of children: day students; boarders who could attend a local school; boarders who do not have access to a local school.

The School and its Context.

The school was established in 1919 and is located in a small inland city in Queensland. Enrolments have always been relatively small and the school has sometimes been in a precarious financial situation, particularly during rural recessions. In 1990, enrolments totalled 323 of whom 306 were in the secondary school. Two-thirds of the students are boarders. Males comprise 60% of the student body and this proportion is similar for both day students and boarders.

While generally well known and respected, the school is less prestigious and considerably less expensive than the major city-based independent boarding schools. Most boarders come from rural properties or country towns and cities in northern and western Queensland, although there is a small number of overseas students (mainly from New Guinea).

Since the mid-1970's the school has had no formal religious affiliation, although its religious 'tradition' comes closest to the Uniting Church. The 1990 "Mission Statement" makes prominent reference to the Christian faith and to encouraging "both a sense of respect for Christian worship and belief and a personal commitment to live according to such a belief".

The Study.

All students, parents and teachers were asked to complete a questionnaire on a range of educational matters. In effect, the purpose of the survey was to review the school's performance and to help provide a basis for planning future developments, particularly with respect to the curriculum.

This paper reports the views of parents on that part of the survey which asked about reasons for choosing to send children to the school. For present purposes, responses from parents living overseas are not included. A total of 208 questionnaires were sent to parents and 132 were

returned, a response rate of 64%. Just over 80% of the questionnaires were completed by the female parent or guardian.

Forty-three responses were from parents of day students, 41 from parents of boarders who could attend a local school, and 48 were from parents of boarders without access to a local school.

The questionnaire included items which previous research had identified as significant or potential reasons for choice of independent schools. For example, Partington's (1989) research, which was actually concerned with reasons for changing schools, notes the importance given to "concern about standards of work and about quality and commitment of teachers". Of less importance in Partington's results, but included in the present questionnaire, are items relating to job prospects, religion, school size and facilities, and social standing. The questionnaire also drew upon criteria used by Morrison (1985) and Tannock, Punch and Figgis (1973, cited in Leinster-Mackay, 1982). Some items, particularly those relating to influences or sources of information such as advertisement, were devised for school-specific purposes.

Results.

The pattern of overall parental responses is presented first and this is followed by a comparison of responses from parents of day students, of boarders who could attend a local school, and of boarders without access to a local school. Analysis of overall responses is based upon mean scores. Multivariate analysis of variance [Manova] was used to compare responses from the three parent groups. Where Manova showed an overall statistically significant difference, individual items with a significant F ratio were further examined using Newman Keul's multiple comparison test to determine which of the three groups of parents differed.

Parents rated each item on a four point scale: 1 = Very Important; 2 = Fairly Important; 3 = Of Some Importance; 4 = Not Important.

"What were the main reasons for sending your child to [the school]?"

The four items rated as most important (means of less than 1.5) were:

- High standards of student behaviour.
- The commitment of the teaching staff.
- The moral standards of the school.
- The academic standards of the school.

Two items rated as important (means between 1.5 and 2) were:

- The relatively small size of the school.
- To increase later job opportunities.

Three items which were rated as somewhat less important (means between 2 and 2.5) were:

- The cultural life of the school.
- The physical facilities of the school.
- Dissatisfaction with local schools.

Three items rated of less importance again (means between 2.5 and 3) were:

- The sporting life of the school
- The prestige of the school.
- The religious affiliation of the school.

The one remaining item was rated as close to "Not Important":

A family connection with the school.

As noted above, Manova was then used to determine whether there were statistically significantly different results among the three groups of parents. The result was significant ($p = .02$) and the four items contributing to this difference are discussed below.

'Dissatisfaction with local schools' ($p = .00$) could be expected to show a significant difference since this would be irrelevant and hence rated as 'Not Important' by those parents whose children did not have access to a local school. However, there was a marked and significant difference between the parents of day students and parents of boarders with access to a local school on this item. It was rated as mid-way between 'Very' and 'Fairly' important for these boarders but as much less important for day students.

'To increase later job opportunities' ($p = .03$) was less important for boarders without access to a local school than for the other two groups. A possible explanation is that most of these boarders are from rural properties and many may be expected to return home after completing their education.

"The moral standards of the school" ($p = .05$), while still given considerable importance by all three groups, was significantly more important for parents of day students than boarders. Almost every day student parent rated this item as 'Very Important'.

'High standards of student behaviour' ($p = .05$) was also important for all three groups but, statistically, was less important for parents of students without access to a local school than for the other two groups.

Thinking back to when you made the decision to send your child to [the school], how important were the following influences or sources of information about the school?

The six items on this question were rated on the same scale of importance as the previous question. The item rated as most important (mean = 1.9) was:

Word of mouth (from friends, for example).

Two items of moderate importance (means of 2.3 and 2.5 respectively) were:

A visit to the school.
My child really wanted to go to [the school].

Items of little importance (means around 3.5) were:

Advertisements in newspapers or magazines.
Family tradition.
A visit from someone who represented [the school].

Results of the Manova show an overall difference in responses among the three parent groups ($p = .00$). This difference is largely accounted for by one item, 'My child really wanted to go to the [school]'. This is regarded as significantly more important by both groups of parents of boarders than by parents of day students.

Discussion.

It is apparent that the most important reasons for choosing this school relate to perceived quality of teaching and academic standards together with high behaviour and moral standards. These results are very similar to those found by Morrison (1985) in his Sydney survey of parental reasons for choosing Anglican schools. Results are also similar to Partington (1989), although concern with morals rated less highly in his parent sample than in the present study.

Also broadly consistent with previous research is the relatively lower importance rating of items relating to sporting and cultural life. It would of course be dangerous to conclude that such factors 'do not count'. It is perhaps more accurate to suggest that adequate provision in these areas is expected and anticipated but they are not in and of themselves likely to be a strong influence on a decision to send a child to the school. Nevertheless, it could be considered somewhat surprising in a rural boarding school which places considerable emphasis upon sport and engages in active competition with other schools in many sporting areas that this item is of such modest importance to parents.

The physical facilities at this school are variable but generally quite good. The data show that parents rate physical facilities, relative to other criteria, as not particularly important. Perhaps this reflects the finding from Lambert's (1975) research that:

The physical plant varied in schools from the lavish to the most impoverished and makeshift. In terms of the school's effectiveness in achieving its aims or pupil commitment, however, the nature of the plant was irrelevant: one of the most lavishly equipped schools had a pupil society basically alienated from its ends and, on the other hand, a poor school housed in make-shift huts and an old Victorian secondary school had one of the most committed groups of students and was one of the effective of all those chosen in our sample. (p.173)

As in other studies of independent schools, parents are disinclined to cite 'prestige' as an important reason for sending a child to the school. For the total sample, 'Family connection' is rated as even less important. This is, however, a school which has an inter-generational enrolment pattern estimated at around 30% and examination of frequencies on this item shows that 23% of parents rated 'Family connection' as 'Very' or 'Fairly' important. Consequently, where a family connection with the school exists, this is often an important reason for choosing the school.

Although there are some differences between attitudes of parents of day students and boarders, these do not challenge the broad consistency of views on the overall pattern of importance of items. At the same time, it is apparent that the one 'negative' item, 'Dissatisfaction with local school(s)' is much more important for parents of boarders who have access to a local school than for parents of day students. It seems that parents of day students choose the school for its perceived positive qualities rather than because of a negative reaction to the alternative government and independent schools in the community. While all parent groups give major importance to behaviour and moral standards, it is interesting to note that these areas are particularly important for parents of day students.

Regarding influences or sources of information about the school, it is apparent that informal communication, 'Word of mouth', about the school's reputation is most important. Of the three items rated as of at least moderate importance, only one can be directly affected by the school itself - 'A visit to the school'. Since some parents of boarders were unable to visit the school and would consequently rate this item as 'Not important', it is reasonable to suggest that 'A visit to the school' becomes more important for those parents who did visit. The frequency distributions support this: 37% of parents rated a visit as 'Very important' and 25% as 'Fairly important'. Provision for visits by prospective parents and students should therefore be regarded as an important facet of the school's enrolment strategy.

While 'Family tradition' was not important for the sample overall, it was a 'Very' or 'Fairly' important influence for 21% of the sample, and this mirrors the previously reported results on 'Family connection'.

In informal discussion about the results of this survey with staff, some surprise was expressed about the lack of importance of advertising as an influence on parental choice. While the school does not conduct a major advertising campaign, it does place advertisements in *Pedals*, the magazine of the Isolated Childrens and Parents Association, and in *Blues Country Mail* which is a rural Queensland newspaper and information guide. In addition, the school places advertisements locally and in various regional newspapers. These advertisements are normally placed in conjunction with a news story on some aspect or achievement of the school. In past years, the school advertised in the Yellow Pages with a special telephone number to monitor the number of enquiries. This facility was infrequently used and has been discontinued.

Such advertising activities would appear to have limited direct influence on parental choice. Moreover, some staff suggested that a concerted advertising campaign can backfire. Apparently there is a view among a number of parents in rural areas that schools only need large advertising campaigns when they are having difficulty in obtaining sufficient numbers of students. Major advertising initiatives can, therefore, be perceived as indicators of a school experiencing decline or internal problems.

The school sends representatives to trade fairs and field days throughout much of its enrolment catchment area. Various informal staff visits and contacts are associated with regional social activities and school reunions. However, very few of the parents in this survey rated visits by school representatives as an important influence on choice of school.

The survey results show that parents felt able to discriminate among a set of possible reasons and influences on decisions to send their child to the school. With minor exceptions, clear and consistent patterns emerge from parents of both day and boarding students about factors which are or are not of importance. At the same time, some caution should probably be exercised in dismissing factors rated as relatively unimportant. A number of these factors may individually be of little importance but are likely to play some role in creating the reputation of the school and it is this reputation, as spread and interpreted by 'Word of mouth' which is central to the parental decisions.

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