Last week I was on a train. In the same carriage was a collection of object studies for parental hope and anxiety. There were the private-school girls in their blazers, box pleats and boaters, their silky ponytails unravelling. There were the labourers falling asleep, heads against the windows. There were the clerks and office workers, and a man in a suit speaking into his earpiece. “That’s the meeting that worries me,” he said, crossing his pinstriped legs. “Clear my diary for that one. It won’t settle. We’ll be going to court.” He must have had good marks at school, I thought. He got into law. And there were the junkies – three of them, clothes draped and belted over their bones. They were teenagers. They stank. One sat next to me. These are the hazards of public transport. Or public anything. You cannot choose your fellow travellers.

I think at heart I am scared, which is in keeping with the times. I am afraid of the future, afraid of difference and afraid for my children. The greatest fear of all. Our children make us hostages to fortune. Naturally we do what we can to bulwark them against risk. But I am considering doing something that most of my peers seem to regard as an unacceptable risk – I am thinking of sending my children to the local high school.

My suburb was built during the Marvellous Melbourne goldrush era – a time even more preoccupied than our own with material wealth and how to get ahead. The main thoroughfare, Mount Alexander Road, was once the route to the goldfields. People threw in their jobs and gave up all manner of small securities to trek with their possessions to the quagmire of the diggings. Or that’s how I imagine it to have been.

It must have seemed, back then, that risk, sweat and a fair measure of luck might just be enough to lift oneself above the drudgery and insecurity of life. It is different now. The statistics show that there is a more certain way to security and comfort. It is education. Post-school qualifications are the most reliable predictor of income, and also of social attitudes. In 2001, university-educated people earned a median of $1,036 a week, compared to just $727 for workers without higher education. The difference between comfort and counting every dollar.
The modern age favours the skilled. Those without post-school qualifications are more likely to be unemployed or under-employed. The evidence suggests low-paid jobs no longer serve as the first step on the ladder to higher-paid ones. Usually, they lead nowhere.

Those without post-school qualifications are more likely to be single and childless. Recent research by Monash University’s Centre of Population and Urban Research shows that almost a third of unqualified men in their thirties are not married or partnered, and therefore usually do not have children. The most likely reason is that they cannot afford them.

For the unskilled, life is lonely and hard. There is no goldrush. There is only education. Education, the sociologists say, is the new proxy for class. So surely any good parent should invest.

Mount Alexander Road has changed since the goldrush. Today it runs through gentrified suburbs, but also past public-housing high-rises. Just down from what real estate agents refer to as the “cosmopolitan cafe and restaurant strip”, two schools face each other. One is Flemington Primary School, where my children are in the middle years. The other is the local high school, Debney Park Secondary College.

The Department of Education and Training puts out graphs that plot schools on axes of advantage and disadvantage – parental income on the left and numbers of parents from non-English-speaking backgrounds along the bottom. Flemington Primary School is in the warm and dense area at the top left – high wealth and low numbers of migrants. Debney Park, on the other hand, is flung out on the right-hand side. Only a few schools in Victoria are more disadvantaged. You can see one school playground from the other but the graph tells us they are, in fact, far apart.

In today’s Australia, social position and wealth are usually correlated with postcode. Disadvantage and advantage are geographic. But in Flemington, so far as schooling is concerned, the divide is the old route to the goldfields. It is Mount Alexander Road.

Among the parents at Flemington Primary I have yet to meet any who are seriously considering sending their children to Debney Park Secondary College.

“Well, I think they have their schools and we have ours,” one parent said to me, as we wrapped presents for the Father’s Day stall last year. I had asked why so few of the public-housing tenants, many of them African refugees, attended Flemington Primary. I wrapped a pair of black cotton business socks in giftwrap and choked down my initial, furious reaction. After all what she said was a simple statement of fact. And it was dressed up with the usual caveats of those parents planning to send their children to
private secondary schools. They are sure, of course, that teachers in the public system do a very good job. But it won’t be for their children.

It is also true, of course, that “our” school has a catchment area covering the well-to-do renovated houses in the leafy streets. The public-housing area falls just outside our catchment area and is served by its own primary school.

It is not that there are no poorer students, no dark faces, in our school. There is a smattering of recent African refugees, their mothers in head-scarves, but they are in the minority and rarely seen at school functions. The leadership of the school and the atmosphere are unmistakably white and middle class. Our school has a nickname in the suburb: “Flemington Grammar”. One of the teachers told me with pride that my children were fortunate – I was getting “a private education without having to pay for it”.

At Flemington Primary there are a thousand things that we do without thinking twice that confirm our comfortable financial situation. We have school concerts in the local theatre with an admission fee of $15 a head. We have a Christmas dinner in a restaurant at the casino that charges $45 each. Hardly a week goes by without the need to shell out money for something or other at school. Recently, a letter came home requesting a $100 donation per family – fundraising towards a new school hall. Our social functions include alcohol and the sausage sizzles are rarely halal, despite all the black Muslim faces across the street.

In another conversation, I was talking to a parent about the eastern suburbs of Melbourne. “Ah yes,” he said. “Balwyn. If you live out there, you can educate your children in the public system and they’ll be ok.” The implication, not conscious or examined, was that one could not do that where we lived.

Instead, the parents discuss the private school options or which government schools – some of them many kilometres away – present an acceptable risk. Nobody even considers the high school across the street.

But I am, or I want to. And hence my fear.

Sometimes it seems that nobody really wants to fight for public schooling anymore. The main message from the Labor Party in recent times has been that we should get over fussing about the distinction between public and private and concentrate rather on minimum standards. It is a predictable stance for a party that needs to win back the battlers who are turning to the private system.

Education unions are accused of being stuck in time, of fighting the battles of the 1960s and 1970s. Mostly this is because they resist giving parents information they clearly want on how schools are performing. They argue that publication of “league tables” would be
misleading and would only entrench disadvantage. They are arguing against a “market” in education, and against market choices. We live at a time of great faith in markets. To work well, markets must be properly informed. So the education unions look very old-fashioned indeed. Refusing parents information, former Labor adviser Andrew Leigh argues in *Getting Smart*, does nothing but protect poorly performing teachers and schools.

In his 1993 book *Education and Public Policy in Australia* (Cambridge University Press), the educationalist Professor Simon Marginson predicted much of what has happened since in education: “While it is not socially acceptable to say so, many parents see private schools as offering relative advantage in the struggle for university places. At the least, private schooling is seen as the safer bet … a growing proportion of parents see good parenting as private-school parenting. They feel guilty if they leave their student children in the public system.”

People talk about a drift to private schooling but drift is the wrong word, implying an unthinking, unwilled movement, when there is surely no other social trend so conscious, so deliberate, so agonised over in dinner-table and pillow talk. Drift also implies a slow movement but there is nothing slow about this.

In the mid-1970s, 80 per cent of parents sent their children to government schools. Now the figure is just 66 per cent. The absolute numbers of children at government schools have declined from 2.33 million to 2.25 despite population growth and greatly increased numbers of children staying on to Year 12. Between 1997 and 2004, enrolments at independent schools grew by 27 per cent and at government schools by just 1 per cent. What is more, a survey by the Australian Council of Educational Research shows that more than a third of parents with children at government schools would shift them to the private system if they could afford to.

For many people still in the public system, sticking with it is a matter of political commitment. Just over half of these parents say they would stay with the public system even if they could afford to send their children to independent schools. These parents, almost always Labor voters, think government schools provide a better “melting pot”, and that private schools are “stuck up”. Liberal voters overwhelmingly favour sending their children to independent schools, while Labor voters favour the state system two to one.

One of the reasons for the growth in private education in recent years is that federal government policy has seen the relative costs of private education decline. The federal government’s funding formulae for private schools, based on socioeconomic analysis of intake, means that some poorer private schools get almost 70 per cent of their costs covered by government, and can charge annual fees as low as $2,000 a child. The Federal Minister for Education, Brendan Nelson, noted in a speech last year that all the growth in the non-government schools sector is now at this lower-fee end.
The executive director of the National Council of Independent Schools’ Associations, Bill Daniels, recently made a blunt assessment of what lay behind the federal government’s funding policy. He said the Howard Government was “buying and regulating” its way into areas that had traditionally been the concern of state governments. It was a “new federalism”, and in education the aim was to use independent schools to “leverage general improvement in all school sectors”. It was, Daniels said, “market ideology applied to schools”.

A more cynical analysis might be that, since it is middle-income Liberal voters – “Howard’s battlers” – who are moving to the private system, it makes sense to support them. Daniels claims that willingness to pay is now more important than the ability to pay in whether or not families choose private schooling. Brendan Nelson asked in a speech recently: “Why are these parents struggling on modest incomes of $30,000, $40,000 or $50,000 a year bypassing what are often very good government schools to spend an average of $2,800 a year on the education of their children? What are they looking for?”

The answer isn’t really hard to find. John Howard is right. It is all about values. In 1998, the National Council of Independent Schools’ Associations commissioned the social researchers Irving Saulwick and Denis Muller to find out what parents wanted from private education. After exhaustive focus-group interviews, Saulwick and Muller concluded that what parents most wanted – more than academic performance – were schools that reinforced the values and culture of the home. “Many were worried by what they saw as a society adrift from core values and discipline. They looked to the future, but many lamented the loss of some of the anchorages of the past,” Saulwick and Muller reported.

Parents wanted schools to instil discipline and respect for others, and they wanted their children to be nurtured with care. They were frightened that the public system wouldn’t do this and they were also concerned that in a fast-changing world, schools had to “teach children how to learn”.

Reading between the lines of the focus groups’ comments, it is easy to see two chief fears – that the future was an unpredictable thing and that school could be a brutalising experience. These parents wanted an environment in which their children, “particularly the timid and gentle”, would be safe and protected. The wanted them to be “taught how to learn” because “the jobs of the future haven’t been invented yet. We don’t know what’s coming.”

More recent studies have tended to confirm these findings. An Australian Council of Educational Research survey last year found parents nominated better discipline and values as key reasons for choosing private schools. Often, educationalists suggest, parents
judge schools through the visible things, rather than a detailed analysis of information which, in the case of government schools, is in any case not always available.

Information that is made available, such as the numbers of students gaining university entrance ranking scores above 90, is, educationalists agree, next to meaningless. It tells you nothing about how many students at the school are performing badly, and nothing about the intake of the school. There is no particular achievement in a school that takes in bright middle-class kids and puts out bright middle-class kids at the other end.

But parents, who want values upheld and children protected against risk, tend to make their choices based on such information. They pay attention to these scores. They want compulsory, smart uniforms. They want children who know how to behave well on public transport. And they listen to playground gossip.

Marginson predicted that the public system might soon become seen as residual, inhabited only by those unable or unwilling to pay for private schooling. “No one wants to stay in a residual system and there is a further flight of enrolments to private education. The public system is further residualised: its role becomes more custodial than academic and it has diminished power over social selection. It is weakened by the loss of active, education-conscious parents.”

My conversations with fellow Flemington Primary School parents have convinced me that most believe this point has now been reached – that public education is not an option or, at the very least, one has to be extraordinarily careful in one’s choice of public schools.

When the tide runs so strongly, one has to ask oneself whether it is stupid to cling to old beliefs. My parents were an earlier version of those who stick with the public system on political principle. I was raised in Adelaide, a city where one of the first questions people ask is where you went to school. Mine is not one of the correct answers. I went to Campbelltown High, then one of the biggest and roughest schools in the state. I had some appalling teaching, as well as some I will always be grateful for. There were drugs and teenage pregnancies, and one teacher who seduced a student and was never punished for it. My parents didn’t know about all of this. What parents do know the full story of a teenager’s experience? My parents thought it would do me no harm, and may do some good, and I have always thought that they were right.

Education, my parents taught me, was one of the most important things – not because, or not only because, it led to better employment and more options in life, but because it was about what it is to be human. It was about broadening one’s outlook. It was not a means to an end, but an end in itself. And they believed that it was wrong for this precious thing to be allocated on the basis of ability to pay.
But are things different now? When I was young, it was much easier to get into university. Now it is hard. Quietly, without fanfare, the number of government-subsidised university places for Australian students has been capped, meaning competition is fiercer.

These days, it seems that everyone who thinks about it wants to abandon the suggestion that there is something wrong with buying educational advantage. In these circumstances, and perhaps most of all when one may be about to sacrifice one’s own tender children on the altar of principle, it behoves one to reassess.

And so I stand in the playground at Flemington Primary and look across Mount Alexander Road to the other playground and wonder: “Do I still believe what my parents believed?” And: “Do I dare?”

The power of education is surely one of the central narratives of the postindustrial age. It is almost an archetypal myth that if one studies hard, then one will be both a better and a wealthier person. Education as a means to social mobility is the premise for a thousand books and movies, from How Green Was My Valley through to To Sir With Love, Educating Rita and even the Harry Potter novels. In the postwar welfare state that formed my parents, it seemed as though these high ideals were being achieved or were about to be achieved.

But today in Australia, there are some simple facts about education. The first is that education, generally speaking, does not overcome disadvantage. Educational achievement – and the life options, incomes and jobs that go with it – is strongly correlated to social advantage. Children from well-off backgrounds with educated parents do better.

Worse, the evidence suggests that, increasingly, the education system perpetuates and reinforces both advantage and disadvantage.

This is so accepted, so much part of the “ground rules” of the education system, that it forms part of the assumptions by which education departments judge the effectiveness of schools. Each school is grouped with other “like schools” on the basis of the socioeconomic status of the intake. Schools with middle-class intakes are expected to produce good academic results. The real measure of achievement is how much better – or worse – a school does than one might expect, given the nature of its intake. On this measure, there are high-performing and low-performing schools in both private and public sectors, and you would not be able to tell any of this from publicly released results. The schools know because they get comparisons of their performance against “like schools”. But the public never finds out. In NSW, it is against the law for such information on government schools to be released.
The comment, “they have their schools and we have ours”, is simply a statement of truth. An Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development study has found that Australia’s education system is highly segregated. Compared with other countries, we have large differences between schools in terms of student achievement. The differences are both geographic and class-related because in our cities the two tend to go together.

A report to the Victorian Government on school effectiveness found that, in 2000, the average tertiary entrance score for Year 12 students in the lowest socioeconomic group was, on a 100-point scale, 22 points below the mean score achieved by students in the highest groups. And while the independent schools might claim that private education is no longer the preserve of the privileged, it is still the case. One Victorian study shows, that independent schools enrol more than 40 per cent of all Year 12 students from the highest socioeconomic groups, even though they account for only 19 per cent of Year 12 enrolments overall. They also have more than 35 per cent of all students from the highest general achievement band – those in the top 20 per cent of General Achievement Test performance.

There could be comfort in this for a parent like me. I could say: “The choice of school doesn’t matter. What matters is what you do in the home.” I could look around at our book-lined rooms and our bookish ways and be reassured that this is all that matters. My children will be ok.

But I would be wrong. Various studies show that the school does make a difference, accounting for as much as 25 per cent of the variation in student outcomes.

So what makes a good school? Disadvantage breeds disadvantage. The opposite is also true. The evidence suggests that the students themselves become a resource in a school. Even after controlling for socioeconomic group and prior academic achievement, students from poor backgrounds who attend middle-class schools do better than one would expect based on their backgrounds alone. The converse is also true. Students from rich backgrounds who attend poor schools do worse than you would expect, given their backgrounds alone. “Segregation in the school system tends to reinforce rather than weaken existing patterns of social inequity,” the Victorian report said.

The researcher Jennifer Buckingham put it more bluntly in a recent report for the Institute of Public Affairs. She said that the relationship between social advantage and student achievement largely disappears when teacher effects are controlled. Multi-level modelling of various influences on student achievement suggests that social advantage on its own accounts for only about 9 to 15 per cent of student achievement, compared with teacher quality, which accounts for about 30 to 60 per cent.
Why, then, are academic results so strongly correlated with social advantage? Buckingham concludes: “It seems that the lower achievement of low SES [socioeconomic status] students is largely attributable to their teachers. One is led to the conclusion that, for a variety of reasons, low SES students are likely to have poorer-quality teaching.”

Since the Victorian report was done, another on Victorian schools by the Centre for Population and Urban Research at Monash University has confirmed that access to university has become an unequal battle. 77 per cent of independent school students are offered university places, compared with 55 per cent for Catholic school students and just 46 per cent for government school students. “The government school sector is no longer serving as a ladder of education opportunity for aspiring students from low socioeconomic groups.”

Again, geography was crucial. The proportion of Year 12 applicants from government schools in Melbourne’s outer south-east who received university offers fell from 46 per cent in 2000 to 29 per cent in 2003. But in the wealthy inner suburbs of Kew, Hawthorn and Camberwell, the figure was 64 per cent. I was reminded, reading these figures, of my fellow parent’s comment. If you live in the wealthy east, you can educate your children in the public system and not feel you are risking disadvantaging them.

And yet, and yet. What does all this mean? How does it relate to that myth, that post-industrial archetype, of the true value of education? The fact is that the whole debate has more than a suggestion of unreality about it. Several studies overseas and locally – most recently one by researchers at Monash University – have confirmed that once they have left school, students from government schools outperform those from independent schools with similar university entrance scores.

What private schools are doing, the research suggests, is not necessarily educating their students better, or (in the words of the Saulwick–Muller focus groups) teaching them “how to learn”, but rather coaching them to pass exams and gain high university entrance scores.

The educationalist Professor Richard Teese has written: “Private establishments – legally free to choose their clients … lower the dependence of individuals on their own talents and present a common front to the hazards of selection by examinations.” The private schools and the selective government schools, he writes, export failure to the rest of the public system. Among educationalists and parents I have spoken to, it is well known that the high-performing government schools regularly “counsel” the less academically inclined to consider other high schools. Often this is done simply by not offering vocational subject streams.
According to Teese, the private and selective schools then excel at teaching the “business” of the classroom and the exam, reducing education to “a series of staged and rehearsed routines”. The syllabus is stripped to include only the academic subjects. Students are given intensive chalk and talk, lots of worked examples, lots of past papers to practise on. The whole system is geared to one end: getting the children into university. This is the unwritten contract between parent and school.

Meanwhile the rest of the schools, which cannot choose their students, must cater for those who are left behind. The Monash University researchers who found that government-school students outperform private-school students after they leave school suggested their results should send tremors through higher education policy-makers. Perhaps adjustments should be made, and university enrolment procedures should allow for the fact that talented government-school students were being disadvantaged – or private-school ones unfairly advantaged.

Nobody is likely to take their suggestion seriously. The political cost would be too high. To suggest that the advantage many parents assume they are buying will be screened out at tertiary level is hardly going to be a vote winner. Anyone from the left who suggested it would be dismissed as a class warrior or accused of practising the worst kind of political correctness – dumbing down for ideological reasons.

The Howard Government, committed to educational renovation through market forces, has no reason to consider it. And meanwhile, parents like me have to consider our children, their future and the road to the goldfields.

crossed the road. I went to visit Debney Park Secondary College and found an encouraging thing – a counter to all those gloomy statistics. This school – the one that no one I know will even consider – is achieving something radical. Debney Park doesn’t show up on any league tables of achievement. Its university entrance scores are creditable, but considered in isolation, unremarkable. Yet it is that most radical thing – a school that actually overcomes disadvantage.

The principal, Michael O’Brien – tall, with a creased face and a crisp shirt, was expecting me. As he ushered me into his office, a girl in black headscarf and ankle-length dress rushed up. “Sir, there’s a fight outside. The girls are fighting.” He blinked.

“Now, sir,” she said.

He apologised and left me sitting in his office, from where I saw him go out into the street, talk to some students and yell at others to stop gawping and get inside. Then he was back in his office and calling the police. He told them that a gang from outside the school had come to threaten one of his girls. “The situation is on a knife edge,” he said.
Then he was off again, driving his car round the suburb to look for one of “his” girls who had gone off with the gang. Through his office window, I saw the police arrive. They cruised around the school in their squad car.

Then O’Brien came back and sat down, apparently unruffled, for our interview. “I feel for you,” I said. “That must be the last thing any principal would want a visiting journalist to see.” He looked surprised. “Oh, that’s just high schools,” he said. “That’s just teenagers. You go to any school and they’ll have occasional blow-ups like that.” The background to the dispute, he said, was some factional problems between the girls. Nobody had been able to get to the bottom of it. It might have been some remark made months ago, or someone pinching somebody else’s boyfriend.

Previously, the former principal of the school, Brett New, had told me that some of the Somali girls had been responsible for bringing up whole families in refugee camps. The assertiveness and aggression they had learned were not necessarily useful in Western environments. Was this an example? Surely O’Brien was kidding when he said any school would have such problems? I was already shrinking from the thought of my children in this mix.

But later that day, a friend reminded me of some of the things that happen at the “best schools”, such as Wesley College – one of the most prestigious and expensive schools in Melbourne. Last year the former tennis coach Gavin Hopper was jailed for having an affair with a fourteen year-old student in the mid-1980s. More recently, two teachers at Wesley were suspended for allegedly helping their Year 5 students cheat at the statewide Achievement Improvement Monitor English tests, on which schools’ effectiveness is measured. And then there was Trinity Grammar in Sydney, where a student had been sexually assaulted only a few years previously. “It could happen in any school,” my friend said. “But why pay so much for it?”

But now O’Brien was telling me about his students. The Somali language has only existed in written form for about the past 30 years, he said, which presented a challenge given that about 40 per cent of the school’s 340 students came from recently arrived Somali and Sudanese families. In their home countries, most had been semi-nomadic peasants. In all, there were 43 different nationalities among the school’s 340 students. With these children, nothing could be taken for granted. Some arrived without ever having held a pen or handled a book. More than half lived in public housing. Some of the children arrived suffering from post-traumatic shock.

And yet – almost beyond belief – the school consistently had about a quarter of its Victorian Certificate of Education students achieving university entrance scores above 80, and there was always a handful of scores in the high 90s. O’Brien looked at my face. “I know,” he said. “People don’t believe it. But it’s true.”
The Victorian Department of Education and Training’s On Track Survey, which looks at what students are doing in the year following secondary study, found that 97 per cent of Debney Park College’s children went on to tertiary education or training. The other 3 per cent got jobs or were in apprenticeships. None was unemployed. Forty-five per cent of Debney’s graduates had been offered university places – in line with the average for government schools in Victoria.

The comparable figures for University High, the state school parents from my neighbourhood do all sorts of contortions to get their children into – moving house, renting apartments in the catchment area and so forth – were as follows: 79 per cent of those who left school in 2004 were involved in education and training and another 10 per cent had deferred their studies. Compared with Debney Park, University High had a higher level of university offers – 80 per cent – but lower figures for tertiary education and training as a whole.

Now, Debney Park Secondary College is trying to persuade ordinary middle-class local parents to consider it on its merits. With consultants from the Boston Consulting Group, it is holding focus groups in local primary schools to present the school’s excellent results. The aim, O’Brien said, is to try to persuade just a small group – perhaps as few as three or four sets of parents – to enrol their kids. This is being done because all other attempts have failed. It is an enormous task. O’Brien doesn’t under-estimate it. The school held an open day earlier in the year. Nobody came. “Clearly we need to try something different,” he said.

There have been a number of studies that have tried to get to the bottom of what makes an effective school, one of the most comprehensive conducted over the past few years in NSW. More than 50 schools identified as “outstanding” were studied by teams of four researchers for four days at a time. They did interviews with the teachers, sat in on the classes and observed the playground.

The schools identified as “outstanding” were not necessarily those achieving the top scores. Rather, they were identified through a combination of standardised test results and factors such as school retention rates.

Team member Professor Stephen Dinham, then at the University of New England, explained “The number of students scoring in the top few per cent in exams is meaningless. A more important consideration is the ‘spread’ of success. Lifting the ‘bottom’ and ‘middle’ bands of students can represent a greater achievement in many cases than improving the performance of the ‘top’. Further, what might be considered poor performance in one school could be considered outstanding achievement in other schools.”
Among themselves, the researchers spoke of trying to identify the “buzz factor” – that hard-to-define quality in classrooms where education succeeds and where children truly learn.

This study’s conclusions mirrored those of similar work done overseas. The single most important component of the “buzz factor” was leadership, usually from the principal of the school but sometimes from the senior staff. Intermeshed with this was the quality of the teaching. Again and again, studies have concluded that the appointment of a single teacher – or his or her loss – could turn an entire school around.

What mattered, the NSW researchers concluded, was not just the traditional and administrative aspects of leadership, but “the ‘human’, ‘symbolic’, ‘educational’, ‘cultural’, ‘adaptive’, ‘transformational’ and ‘moral’ dimensions of the role”. Outstanding leaders tended to be positive about change. They reached out to the communities in which their schools were located and they supported their staff. They had “a bias towards innovation and action … they were seen to be relentless in their quest for enhanced student achievement, allowing nothing to get in the way … They constantly remind students, staff and the community of the core purpose of the school … Their focus on students, their welfare and learning acts as a filter, touchstone or lens for all that happens in the school.”

At Debney Park Secondary College, there have been two principals in recent years. Michael O’Brien, after teaching at the school for fifteen years, recently took over from Brett New, who has been promoted to assistant regional director. I interviewed them both. They talked about many things – how almost every student at the school had an individual learning program, how wonderful the African families were to work with, the excellence of the teachers, the establishment of a culture of learning and, most of all, how they loved their jobs. “It is simply the best environment to work in,” said O’Brien, “the most wonderful job you could ever have.”

O’Brien sent me out into the school. In the yard, groups of African boys stared at me curiously as I walked by. They looked scruffy. Debney Park has no school uniform. Many of these students are on provisional visas that mean they could be moved at any time. No school can ask poor parents to buy a uniform under such circumstances and, in any case, any uniform would have to allow for all the varieties of ethnic and religious dress. The yard was full of black and brown faces, boys in baggy pants and T-shirts and girls in headscarves and hijabs.

The week after my visit, federal member Bronwyn Bishop called for a ban on headscarves in Australian government schools. She said school uniforms were “a leveller – a great sign of a society that is working with different cultures”. The headscarf, she said,
was “being used by the sort of people who want to overturn our values”. It was “an iconic emblem of defiance”.

Bishop, presumably, would have seen a schoolyard full of defiance at Debney Park Secondary College that day. And she might have agreed that the reason parents choose private schools is values.

Or perhaps her views would not have survived the collision with reality. The headscarves were worn a dozen different ways. Some girls were matching the hijabs with full-length, figure-concealing dresses. Three girls were wearing them with tight jeans and off-the-shoulder tops. These girls sat on the steps to the classroom, giggling and flirting like any teenagers. On the wall above them, there was graffiti not yet washed off. “Mr O’Brien go fuck yourself,” it read. Another said: “Police suck.”

The school bell sounded. The girls in the tight jeans joined the rest of a Year 8 class for a lesson in map-reading – preparation for an orienteering excursion in the Otways in a few weeks’ time. The teacher was young, good-looking and scruffier than any of the children in the class. He wore frayed shorts, a T-shirt with a motto and well-worn sneakers. Yet he had total control over the class. The students calculated the distance between points on a map using a scale. They worked out where the mountains were by reading the contour lines. Quiet, settled. A teacher’s aide circulated. She was here, she whispered to me, because quite a few of the students had problems.

Upstairs, Year 10 students were learning about the Australian political system. They knew who the prime minister was. They were less clear on the leader of the opposition. “Is it Mark Latham,” one asked, “the man who wrote the book?” They knew about Steve Bracks, the Premier of Victoria, because of his Lebanese heritage. One student carried on about this so much that the teacher joked with him that he must want to be Lebanese.

“No, miss,” he replied. “I want to be white.”

This class was less settled. The kids talked all the time. The last part of the lesson was spent in groups, planning ways to raise money to fund a scheduled excursion. There was no assumption here that the parents would be able to pay. The only white student in the class was also the most disruptive “I want to sell ice-cream,” he said, and again at regular intervals, “icecream”. The Muslim girls didn’t want him in their group. They wanted to get on with the job. “I don’t want to be with them, either,” he said. “They aren’t interested in ice-cream.”

The Year 11 English class included three students who were fasting for Ramadan. The teacher was attempting to go a little easier on them. The class was studying – by their own choice – the movie 10 Things I Hate About You, a modern take on Shakespeare’s The Taming of the Shrew. The old plot has been rendered into a modern high-school film about
the perils of dating. It is set in a very white, very middle-class American high school where all the students are beautiful, smart and rich. One of the boys who was fasting slumped over his desk. The rest of the class was riveted. In the final love scene, one girl cried.

Afterwards, their teacher asked them to discuss what the main messages of the movie might be, what values – that word again – it was trying to convey.

The sheet she handed out suggested that the central message might be that we should not judge people by appearances or that parents don’t give their children enough independence. But several of the students responded that the main message was that parents have a difficult job raising their children.

The day was over. What values had Debney Park Secondary College displayed? There was the motto over the gate, “Towards Equity & Excellence – Every Child Matters”. But for the most part, it looked like any high school – and quite like the one I attended nearly 30 years ago. Nothing immediately visible, other than the ethnicity of the students, marked it out. Only its results, properly understood, told me it was exceptional.

Debney Park Secondary College might be a corrective to the view that a market economy – giving parents power and choice – can by itself lift educational standards. The figures show, and the Victorian Department of Education & Training knows, that on a “value-added” measure, Debney Park Secondary College is one of the most outstanding schools in the state. And yet middle-class parents like me drive our kids all over town to schools that are filling up while Debney Park Secondary College has places to spare.

Those who put their faith in markets tend to assume that the market will always be well informed – that consumers will know everything they need to know to make rational choices. This raises the question of what sort of information should be published about schools. Education unions and teachers have strongly, and mainly successfully, resisted “league tables”, arguing correctly that these will be misleading if they are based only on university entrance scores without taking context into account.

Recently, Jennifer Buckingham has argued that this is a reason for more information to be released – not less. She suggests that a range of information should be published, much of it based on sophisticated statistical modelling to allow for variation between students.

The data everyone wants is a measure of “value adding” – what the school actually adds to the students who walk through the gates. This is difficult to get, says Buckingham. Isolating the effectiveness of the school involves complicated statistical modelling and, because schools are small samples, the figures are only reliable at the extremes of good and poor performance. Buckingham argues that, even though it may be
that there will be little difference between two-thirds of schools, “it is important for the public to be aware of which schools have been confidently identified as very good and very poor performers”.

To add to this, Buckingham proposes the publication of a huge amount of other information, including the socioeconomic mix of each school’s intake, the number of students from non-English-speaking backgrounds, the total amount of money available to the school, whether from fees or government funding, the qualifications of the teachers, the teacher turnover, the class sizes, the ways in which parents can participate in the life of the school, the numbers of suspensions and expulsions and violent incidents at the school, the retention to Year 12 and the attendance rates, as well as raw scores in external examinations and information on where students go after school. There should also be surveys of parental and student satisfaction, she says, and the results of these should be published.

On the basis of what I know about Debney Park Secondary College, it would brush up well on nearly all of these indicators. If Buckingham’s suggestions were implemented, and free market ideology truly is an effective method of governing education, then Debney Park Secondary College should soon be full and the children from Flemington Primary should begin to cross the road at the end of Year 6.

Perhaps this is so. Perhaps it would happen. But somehow I suspect that the non-market-oriented word in this debate – “values” – is in fact code for something else. Probably it means different things to different people, but I suspect that in some cases at least, it is a word that stands for “not bucking the system”. It stands for “people like us”, for the status quo, for things as they are or as we would like them to be or as we imagine them once to have been.

Debney Park might fail this test, precisely because it is a school that overturns presumptions. What values had Debney Park Secondary College displayed? In truth, the main thing I carried away with me was the very first unscripted impression. Faced with a journalist in his office and a school crisis on his hands, O’Brien had not tried to hide the problem or run from it. Nor had he panicked about the possibility of negative publicity or even put it first in his list of priorities. He had left me to my own devices while he went out to look after his students and he was secure enough in what he was doing to let me see it all.

I had tried to gain access to some of the private schools in my area. None would let me in to observe.
At Debney Park, it seemed to me that all the messiness and contradictions of youth and ethnicity and poverty were on display. There was no escaping the graffiti, the problems, the rattiness and the rebelliousness. There was no escaping from risk. Debney Park Secondary College felt unsanitised. It felt real.

I met one of the fathers from Flemington Primary School at the traffic lights as I prepared to cross the road. He had seen me come out of Debney Park’s gates. Did I teach there? he asked. It told him I was doing research. I said that I had found out that Debney Park Secondary College was an excellent school.

His eyebrows disappeared into his fair hair. “Really?” he said. He had seen the students misbehave – throwing computers over the fence, he said. They looked a very rough lot. “I just assumed that we couldn’t even consider it for our kids.”

He looked at me hard. “Would you consider sending your children there?” he asked. A trifle too truculently, perhaps, I said that I would.

I think I mean it, but my children say they don’t want to go. Their reason is simple. None of their friends will be there.