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Free universal education? Not if your parents are on a 457 visa

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Is it fair that parents on 457 visas need to pay for their children to access public education?
School image from www.shutterstock.com

Last week Western Australian state treasurer Troy Buswell announced as part of his budget that any [temporary 457 visa holders](#) would be charged A\$4,000 a year to send each child to state schools.

Justifying the charge, Buswell stated that the fee, which would start from next January, was necessary because of the “record growth” in student numbers over the past two years, due to a baby boom in the mid-2000s and high levels of immigration from other states and overseas.

Buswell said there were now 8,600 children of workers on 457 visas in government-funded schools in WA, [up from just 290 in 2005](#). “The simple growth in numbers has put massive pressure on the education system and by extension, massive pressure on the balance of the taxpayers,” he said.

The [Migrant Council of Australia](#) have called for these fees to be abolished, while WA Chamber of Commerce and Industry’s James Pearson [stated this week](#) that the added costs “just doesn’t make sense at a time when Australia needs talent wherever it can find it”.

But WA is not the first state to introduce fees for the children on 457 visas.

Free and universal?

In Australia, New South Wales charges between \$4,500 and \$5,500 depending on the school year of a child while the Australian Capital Territory charges up to \$13,900 for the final year of high school.

But immigrant families on 457 visa holders earning at or close to the threshold income of \$53,900, say the addition of school fees for dependent children are too significant a cost to bear. One family of four children recently told ABC radio what [the impact a bill of \\$16,000 will have on them](#).

When you compare Australia's migration support with most other nations, one type of state government support stands out above others: the provision of free public schooling to children of temporary migrants in [the vast majority of jurisdictions](#).

Australia is also a signatory to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, [article 28](#) of which provides that "all children have the right to a primary education, which should be free".

Building connections

The reasons people move from one country to another are of course many and varied. But [international research](#) reinforces again and again that the status of an immigrant greatly impacts on experiences in integrating and in accessing supports and services. Best practice shows that immigrants start to develop social connections through children, and in particular when the children begin to attend school.

Education and schools are a catalyst where new communities are likely to form friendships as a consequence of their children's experiences in school. Integration is often best achieved when families as a unit are allowed to immigrate into a country.

Families on 457 visas in Western Australia must now decide to pay the fees or remove their children from public schools and seek private school alternatives. Depending on [financial realities](#) many families will consider leaving or splitting families with a spouse remaining to work. If this occurs it will also result in more encapsulated immigrant communities who will be less reluctant to engage with the wider community.

Election scapegoats

Employers even within countries who are currently experiencing financial meltdown and recession are [still recruiting abroad for highly skilled workers](#).

In an election year it seems to be "open season" on foreigners, creating an "us vs them" discourse on access to services and rights. While this may be a short term win for politicians, there are lessons from around the world. In Europe, for example, immigration and multiculturalism have been seen as posing some kind of threat or challenge to the welfare state.

This view will not aid Australia in the long term.

With all eyes on the election the broader impacts of these 457 changes may be missed by mainstream media - 457 visa holders don't have a vote and therefore they don't have a voice. But why can't children on a 457 visa be given a fair go?