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Private schools too elite, says PAC head

By Education Reporter JEMMA CHAPMAN

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THE headmaster of one of Adelaide's most prestigious boys' colleges has branded private schools too elite and exclusive.

Prince Alfred College headmaster Stephen Codrington yesterday revealed his personal struggle with "the inequality" of Australia's education system.

"Unfortunately the way we do it in Australia, the choice and diversity comes at an economic price," he said.

"That leads to elitism and I struggle with the way it's done. I think we could overcome that."

Dr Codrington said the way to make private schools "less elitist" was to increase the amount of public funding.

"Because that will then reduce the fees and make them more open to a wider cross-section of society," he said.

Dr Codrington, 50, made the comments during a wide-ranging interview with *The Advertiser* about his resignation from Prince Alfred College to head an esteemed international school in Hong Kong. He was asked for his opinions on recent media debate on education issues, including federal funding increases for private schools.

"First, I don't think there's any doubt at all that there needs to be a substantial increase in the funding of less-well-endowed schools to bring them up to the standards of others," he said.

"The inequality of standards of schooling is going to be a problem if it's not addressed. Having said that, I actually think there are strong arguments for increasing the government funding for schools like Prince Alfred College."

Dr Codrington said New Zealand had been able to achieve a more inclusive independent school system this way.

"They are fully funded by the Government but still free to implement their own individual educational ethos," he said.

"As a result of that, they are not elitist and they are wide open to the general community.

"The only reason PAC charges the high fees that it does, is, bluntly, to meet needs.

"I really struggle philosophically to exclude children from educational opportunity on financial grounds.

"But the reality is there's no choice because we have got to pay the teachers' salaries so the funding has to come privately."

Dr Codrington also weighed in on the debate surrounding Prime Minister John Howard's recent controversial comments that Australia's public schools were "too politically correct" and "values-neutral". "I don't think his comments reflect a deep understanding either of adolescents or the commitment of teachers in state schools," Dr Codrington said.

He also emphasised the importance of boys' education and commended Opposition Leader Mark Latham's comments on Tuesday that intervention, such as mentoring, was needed to improve the situation in which many boys were "suffering from a crisis of masculinity" and to improve boys' school retention rates.

Association of Independent Schools of SA executive director Garry Le Duff agreed "that taking away public funds from high-fee schools will in fact make them more elitist".

A spokesman for Federal Education Minister Dr Brendan Nelson said: "The Government believes that the SES funding model which provides funding to non-government schools, based on the income profiles of the parents whose children attend those schools, is an appropriate model."

Dr Codrington will leave Prince Alfred College at the end of July and start as principal of Li Po Chun United World College on August 1.

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