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New school of thought in private placement website

James Hutchinson

Getting children into private schools has long been seen as a competition, with parents often entering their child's name from birth in an effort to obtain a sought-after spot. But a Melbourne-based start-up is hoping to make private school placements as easy as booking a hotel room or plane flight.

School Places, which is being launched on Tuesday, will collate vacancies at participating private schools, allowing parents to claim a spot at a potential discount of between 10 per cent and 30 per cent of the usual annual fee.

"There are obviously parents who think ahead and put their child's name down from birth but then there are the

other parents who leave it until the last minute – at the time they may not know their financial circumstances – so there is that market for families looking for that last-minute vacancy," said chief executive **Natalie Mactier**, former CEO of News Corp-owned child publication *KidSpot*.

The idea for School Places was hatched by company founder **Jeremy Wein**, 25, who wanted to apply the ease of travel websites such as *Wotif.com* to the complexity and expense of private school placements.

The 50,000-student private school sector is becoming an increasingly prevalent part of Australian education, with enrolments growing from 30.8 per cent of all schoolchildren in 2000, to 34.9 per cent in 2012.

But **Paul Sheahan**, a veteran private school principal who will chair the company, said the idea of waiting lists at many competitive private schools was often a myth.

"In all reality, if people are at all astute they'll understand that everywhere has vacancies," he said.

"I was running a school where competition for places was pretty high and this sort of myth of waiting lists was in fact that ... there were one or two or three vacancies at the school where at the last minute it would have been helpful to fill them."

The website will launch with 11 primary and secondary private schools in Victoria, with about 120 vacancies available, but is aiming to reach 60 private schools across Victoria and NSW by next year. The service will take a commission off the school fee, which is expected to be discounted to allow for greater competition.

Executives at the company said they did not expect the website to replace enrolment procedures at private schools but, rather, supplement them.

The company has received some financial backing from **SEEK** co-founder **Paul Bassat**'s venture capital firm, Square Peg Capital.

"It's not different to a hotel room or airline seats; if a space in year 3 goes missing, that's a large amount of revenue that is lost without an additional cost," he said.

"In today's dollars, if someone comes into kindergarten that wouldn't have otherwise filled that place, [in] the next 10 years that's \$350,000 in revenue the

school gets for one student."

A spokesman for the Independent Schools Victoria said parents should research private schools before applying for a position.

"Our member schools are independently run and we do not provide advice or information to schools on how they should market themselves," he said.

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Paul Sheahan
School Places