

STRUCTURAL FAILURE: Why Australia keeps falling short of our educational goals



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Australian schools have been through many changes over the years, but how much of this amounts to progress is open to question. No doubt there are schools that have made huge progress in how they provide good teaching and achieve results that often exceed expectations. Then there are schools that continue to struggle, often due to inadequate resources and personnel needed to design educational opportunities for the children they serve.

In a big picture Australian education is an outlier – schools in states and territories are more regressive, divided and socially segregated than in most other rich countries. As a consequence, the current Australian school system is concentrating disadvantaged students in disadvantaged schools, with serious implications for overall student achievement. That is a structural failure.

The Gonski Institute for Education put together a small team of quite different experts. Among the authors are two former school principals, one from government schools and now a writer and another from non-government schools and now an academic, a former politician and NSW Minister of Education, and two education researchers and academics. The different experiences and perspectives the authors bring in this report have, I hope, produced a picture of Australian school education that is sensitive to many different perspectives to this highly complex issue.

How does our school system measure up against what we expect schools to be, do and achieve? If we keep falling short on these expectations, what remains to be done? Can we undertake the bigger changes needed for a successful, sustainable and equitable school future? These and other hard questions are at the heart of this policy analysis. Rather than just repeating the problems that we already know, the authors use this report to call for immediate action with some concrete solutions offered up as priority actions.

Understanding the real nature of the problem is critically important in finding sustainable solutions to Australia's current educational challenges. This report can help policy makers, politicians and educational leaders to make more informed decisions in the coming years to keep the central promise made by all governments in the 2019 *Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Declaration*: To reduce educational disadvantage and to achieve excellence with equity in education for each and every child.

Pasi Sahlberg
Gonski Institute for Education

The achievement of excellence and equity remain two central policy goals for Australian school education. The 2019 *Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration* recommits all governments and sectors towards these goals. This report draws from the Declaration, and related international reports, to address two questions:

- What are the purposes of Australian education?
- How well are we achieving those purposes?

The first question is directly answered from the two overarching goals stated in the Declaration. These have remained relatively consistent since the first iteration of national goals in 1989, however, this alone begs the question as to why they remain unachieved.

The declaration identifies seven key objectives that serve as indicators for evaluating progress towards the national goals. Those objectives can be couched as questions:

Do the structures and policy setting of Australian education:

1. Achieve excellence with equity?
2. Reduce disadvantage?
3. Foster inclusion and reduce discrimination?
4. Address student needs?
5. Create a cohesive society?
6. Enable schools to be well-supported?
7. Provide an equitable choice of schools?

This report, *Structural failure: Why Australia keeps falling short of our educational goals* shows that these indicators of equity, inclusivity, and accessibility to excellent learning opportunities continue to deteriorate. Despite national and international advice and recommendations, the deterioration shows little sign of abating. Structural inequity across both government and non-government schooling sectors appears to be increasing. The addition of significant financial resources to education from both state and Commonwealth governments has not reduced inequality.

The final part of this report turns to proposed responses. Greater consensus is required to create new structures which will not only prioritise but will create policy and system frameworks deliberately designed to reduce inequity. Alternate examples are drawn from international comparisons to show our current structures are not, and should not, be seen as the only policy options. The report concludes with nine policy suggestions which can guide new approaches to delivering excellence, maintaining choice while improving equity and reducing disadvantage. Central to this framework is the reassertion of Australia's sense that education is our most fundamental "common good".

1. The purpose of schooling: What really matters?

Good intentions

Although the purposes, goals and priorities of schooling are still a matter for philosophical debate,¹ as far as Australian governments are concerned there is considerable agreement. Around every decade, since 1989, Australia's education ministers gather for a national education conversation and issue a statement on what we want for our schools. Each meeting has spawned a new declaration to reflect changing times. What started in Hobart (1989) with ten goals, and a particular emphasis on specifying curriculum, continued in Adelaide (1999), then Melbourne (2008), and most recently Alice Springs (Mparntwe) in 2019. The *Mparntwe Declaration*² consists of two high level aspirational goals. Both have almost identical wording to the Melbourne declaration and are thoroughly uncontroversial in aspiration and scope:

- Goal 1: The Australian education system promotes excellence and equity
- Goal 2: All young Australians become:
 - confident and creative individuals,
 - successful lifelong learners, and
 - active and informed members of the community

Together, these interconnected goals call all schools and governments to cooperative effort. According to the logic of the declaration, if the goals are achieved, "improving educational outcomes for all young Australians" will follow, and our nation's youth will be equipped to pursue "fulfilling, productive and responsible lives".³

Beyond aspiration, these declarations also provide goals against which we can monitor our progress as a nation. Even a cursory evaluation shows we are far from reaching such lofty aims, and still have a long way to go. Much contemporary debate focuses on the first part of Goal 1 – excellence. Many reports from national and international sources highlight a focus on formally assessed educational outcomes, highlighting deteriorating performance on literacy and numeracy and declining levels of study in mathematics and science.⁴ What is lost in the debate is a focus on equity, and, importantly, equity's linear relationship with excellence. There can be no educational excellence for our nation without equity⁵. In terms of education, equity and excellence are inseparable.

It is also notable that there is rarely an evaluation of student confidence, creativity, or community engagement and activity that is the Goal 2 of the *Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration*. The prospect of attaining such goals for all young Australians, and also making them lifelong learners, is heavily contingent on achieving Goal 1; it is also unreachable if excellence is not matched with equity.

The rhetoric of successive declarations maintains noble aspirations, yet deep-seated structural weaknesses within our school education system limit their realisation. Despite being identified

for many years, many of these structural problems remain largely untouched. Lying in the 'too hard' basket is the tenacious grip that family background has on student achievement. Although all schooling systems face that challenge, few concentrate disadvantaged students within disadvantaged schools to the degree evident in Australia does. Our schools are increasingly characterised less by what they do and more by who they enrol. Our framework of schools has become more regressive, divided, and segregated. As a part-consequence, efforts to improve student outcomes are not delivering on their promise.

A growing correlation between students' family background and their school achievement⁶ is not only a problem in itself. Its impact is especially noticeable in specific localities in Australia such as regional and low Socio-Economic Status (SES) communities, far more than in others. In more recent years, successive declarations have reflected growing concern about many aspects of growing inequity and inequality in schooling. These trends contribute to wider equity issues and social divides, and arguably foster discontent and disaffection at both community and national levels. These are structural and systemic design issues with long history, spirited advocacy, and a seeming unwillingness to give ground, making it hard to align many elements within the current schooling system with the spirit of the national goals.

Statements emerging from the ministers' meetings remain grand aspirations in a country where provision and funding of schools is characterised by political and school sector feuding, dysfunctional federalism, an uneven 'playing field' of schools and decades-old entrenched interests. This reality has mocked the good intentions of goal setters and policy makers for thirty years. It has also presented a tide of increasing challenges to principals and teachers in schools that are disadvantaged, under-funded, residualised, with families and students who have complex needs but few options.

Reiteration of essentially the same goals across the four declarations, and more than twenty years, begs an uncomfortable question: Are we failing to meet them? A related question is how much does the reality match the lofty rhetoric? The most significant of Australia's goals for schooling, arising out of successive declarations, can be summed up as achieving excellence with equity, fostering inclusion and avoiding discrimination, addressing student needs, creating a cohesive society and reducing disadvantage. Other commonly held expectations of schools are also important, including that schools should be well supported in ways that are evidence-driven, efficient, effective and well coordinated. This should engender a diversity of opportunities and pedagogy, in turn supporting an equitable choice of schools. It is time to assess school education in Australia against such benchmarks. This report gathers and analyses the evidence to make that assessment.

Australia's schools: A 2020 snapshot

To assess our framework of schools, we need first to understand its features. In 2019⁷ just over two thirds of Australia's schools were public schools and about two thirds of all students in Australia enrol in these schools that are provided by state and territory governments to give every child to an accessible and inclusive school. Alongside this provision is a large privately managed, fee charging, not for profit, largely government-funded sector, strongly supported by both state, territory, and Commonwealth governments and designed with the objective of providing an element of school choice for parents. This has created a hybrid system, with schools operating under a variety of different rules and obligations, and financially supported

by two separate levels of government using different funding arrangements. By international standards, it is quite a unique arrangement.

Our schools represent considerable diversity in their accessibility, resourcing, focus, accountabilities, operation, and obligations. This diversity and the availability of choice for some families is widely supported, while there is also strong community support for equitable access to a quality local public school.⁸

These structural arrangements exist within a context where:

- I. They are frequently contested, with little consensus on how the public/private mix should work.
- II. The schools and the framework have evolved in a piecemeal fashion and now appear at odds with agreed priorities and longer-term needs.
- III. The expansion of choice is usually welcomed within both the government and non-government sectors, but it is not accompanied by the conditions and safeguards which are usually found in comparable countries.
- IV. The diversity of schools tends to be social as much as educational, creating and worsening a substantial equity problem.
- V. Energy has been poured into school level reforms regarding curriculum, management, pedagogy, assessment, and funding, with less attention given to structural and sectoral issues.
- VI. Criticism of student achievement is frequently directed to the teaching profession, with questions focused on teacher preparation and quality, thereby distracting attention from these wider structural arrangements.
- VII. According to local and international measures, the evolution of Australia's school system has been accompanied by declining levels of student achievement.

These are difficult issues to discuss, never mind address, but the final point demands we must. In this paper we make a start.

2. How do we rate?

Australians are used to reading about how their schools are performing in international testing, but how do we rate against the benchmarks arising out of our own national declarations and intentions over the last few decades, and against community expectations of our school system and its structures?

In order to evaluate equity, we have identified seven points for discussion, all drawn from the intent of the *Mparntwe Declaration*.

I Achieve excellence with equity

“Australian Governments commit to promoting excellence and equity in Australian education”

- Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration

Excellence with equity has become the holy grail of schooling, but Australia is not achieving either. Both are important. We should be striving for *excellence* in its variety of forms and measures. *Equity* in education occurs when all students' education outcomes are not the result of their family backgrounds - domicile, occupations, wealth, or positions.⁹ Most reports indicate that we are falling short in excellence, evidenced by accounts of deteriorating school performance over the last two decades. Since 2009, Australia's performance has declined in absolute terms and relative to other countries.¹⁰ While measurable achievement doesn't represent the whole purpose of schools, and while PISA has major flaws,¹¹ both international (PISA, TIMSS, PIRLS) and domestic (NAPLAN) reports tell a similar story of stagnation, if not decline.

These measures indicate an inextricable link between achievement and equity, with evidence that both are deteriorating. This stagnation and decline have been accompanied by, and possibly contributed to, structural problems around competition and choice, both between and within sectors. The problems are increasingly evident to the point where they can no longer be denied. There is a certain irony in the fact that the My School website¹², originally created to promote competition and choice as a path to school improvement, is now the very tool illustrating many of its own unintentional and regressive impacts.

Foremost among these impacts is the widening socio-educational (gender, age group, language background, neighbourhood socioeconomic status, and learning disability status)¹³ and achievement (standardised test scores in literacy and numeracy) gaps between schools, something which is now measured and displayed on My School to every family in every community. The first key indicator is the website's Index of Community Socio-educational Advantage (ICSEA), which shows the level of advantage of each school's enrolment. The second indicator, NAPLAN, illustrates aspects of student academic achievement as measured by annual standardized tests. From a community through to the national level, the website readily shows

the close relationship between socio-educational advantage and student achievement. The family background of students is clearly a big explainer of achievement.

This has been apparent for some time, including in the research accompanying PISA. In broad terms the socio-economic status of Australian families makes the greatest contribution to student achievement, followed by the SES of the school itself, substantially created by which students are enrolled. School and classroom factors together explain around one-third of variation of students' test scores, and even this includes factors such as school organization and leadership, curriculum, resources, teacher training, quality and distribution.¹⁴

Edward Haertel¹⁵ from Stanford University has estimated based on various studies on teacher effectiveness that teacher differences account for about 10% of the variance in student test scores gains in a single year. If teachers account up to 15% of the variability in student measured achievement in school, as research suggests, then the most opportunities for improving quality of education are found in the system-level conditions, including systemic structure. Similarly, reasons for inadequate performance of education systems are often in out-of-school conditions and how school systems are structured.

Analysis using ICSEA and NAPLAN data, conducted for this report,¹⁶ shows that there is also a changing relationship between the level of advantage of enrolled students and school achievement. The change is consistently heading in one direction: equity gradients have steepened since 2011. Our equity problem is worsening. Significantly, this pattern emerges regardless of school sector and location.

It is the socio-educational status of students, even ahead of the work of schools, which is having an increasing impact on student achievement. Which students are enrolled where is increasingly defining the differences between schools, and there are now large and increasing differences in terms of access, learning culture, opportunities, and achievement. Some students gain; others miss out. Inequity can be found both within and across schools, but it is the latter which is central to our equity problem. It seems that, on both excellence and equity, the first two of our benchmarks, Australia can do much better.

II Reduce disadvantage

"... provide equality of opportunity and educational outcomes for all students at risk of educational disadvantage"

- Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration

Given its impact on student achievement, it is highly likely that a school's level of socio-educational advantage, created by its enrolment, will impact on other things being done to reduce disadvantage. This happens in interconnected ways. In a school "quasi-marketplace"¹⁷ such as that created in Australia, SES has tended to become a proxy for school quality. Families seek the advantage it suggests, helped along by prominent measures of advantage on My School. When students change schools, they tend to move towards schools with more advantaged students, within as well as between sectors. The ICSEA¹⁸ values on My School clearly identify these schools.

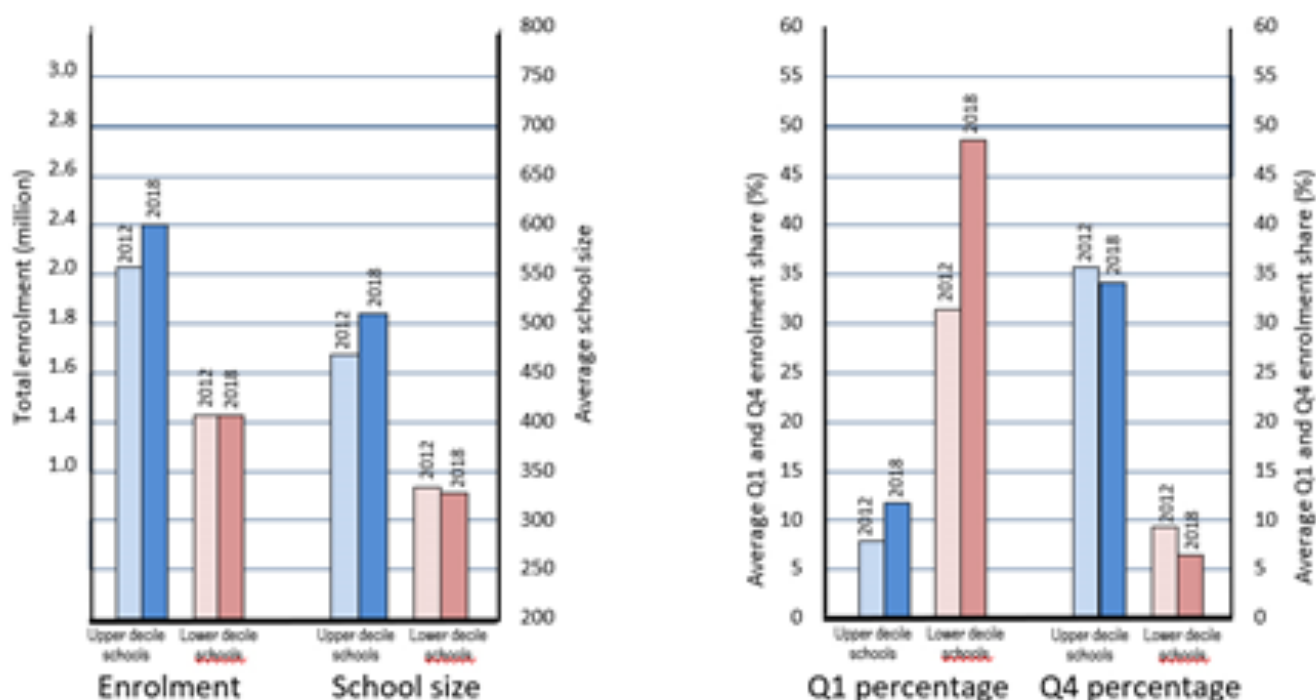
This impacts on features such as school size and composition. In the government sector, for example, higher ICSEA schools are 26% bigger than they were in 2011, lower ICSEA schools

are marginally smaller than they were in 2011. Lower ICSEA Catholic schools are around 10% smaller than they were in 2011.¹⁹ In general, higher ICSEA schools in all sectors are not only growing in size, but they also have an increasing concentration of high SES students. The reverse is happening in lower ICSEA schools. Figure 1 illustrates many of these changes and shows:

- The more advantaged schools have had the greatest growth in enrolments. The enrolments are static in the more disadvantaged schools.
- The more advantaged schools have grown in size, while the more disadvantaged schools show minimal growth in size, despite the rises in school aged population.
- The more advantaged schools show small proportions (<12%) and marginal growth in the proportion of enrolments of students from the most socio-economically disadvantaged quartile. The more disadvantaged schools show high proportions and rapid growth (32 to 48%) in disadvantaged students.
- The more advantaged schools have high proportions (>34%) of students from the highest socio-economic quartile. Among more disadvantaged schools those proportions are low (<10%) and declining.

Thus Figure 1 shows that, rather than reducing disadvantage, the current Australian school system is concentrating disadvantaged students in disadvantaged schools, with serious implications for overall student achievement. We will explain this next in more detail.

Figure 1: Contrasting enrolment patterns between schools in upper and lower deciles of ICSEA



Source: My School 2012 and 2018. Upper decile schools = 50-99, Lower decile schools = 0-49

Students are increasingly on the move. A recent report indicates that nearly half of students at NSW public secondary schools live outside their catchment areas.²⁰ To reduce this problem, the NSW Department of Education has introduced new enrolment caps. Unsurprisingly, the highest ICSEA schools commonly have student numbers which exceed their enrolment caps; in contrast, the lowest ICSEA schools have plenty of empty seats.

Changing SES make-up of school enrolments can be seen in schoolyards. In a recent essay, teacher and writer Tom Greenwell²¹ took a closer look at two adjacent schools in Canberra,²² not usually the place considered to have wide SES gaps between schools.

Marist College and Melrose High are located next to each other in the suburb of Pearce – just fifteen minutes' drive from Parliament House. Both schools, one Catholic and one public, are successful and well regarded – but the differences are clear. 58% of the students at the Catholic school come from the most advantaged quarter of Australian families, in contrast to the 29% at the public school. In the latter school, 14% of students are from the most disadvantaged quarter – in contrast to just two per cent at the Catholic school. Across Australia, such contrasts between nearby schools, have increased since 2011. On average, the proportion of most advantaged quarter students in Catholic schools has risen slightly, but the reverse trend is happening in government schools.

The concentration of advantage and disadvantage at either SES end of schooling in Australia is well researched, including by the OECD.²³ It also shows up in various measures of student achievement, including the Higher School Certificate (HSC) in NSW, the Victorian Certificate of Education (VCE), and the Overall Position (OP) in Queensland. In these states, the distribution of high achievers (students with high standardized test scores) has, over time, increasingly favoured higher over lower ICSEA schools, urban over rural schools, and non-government over government schools.²⁴

Some of these trends are complex, and others have existed for many decades – created, for example, by longstanding SES differences between geolocations. But this doesn't explain worsening recent trends: for example, why have average VCE study scores in regional Victoria dramatically fallen since 2007, or why are a declining proportion of distinguished achievers in the HSC found in schools in regional NSW? The current reality is that while our concern about equity is rising, student achievement in schools disadvantaged on the basis of SES, location and sector is falling.²⁵

The OECD found that around half of disadvantaged students in Australia attend disadvantaged schools, that is, schools where other students tend to be disadvantaged as well. But where they attend advantaged schools, they gain a significant achievement boost. In Australia, the OECD²⁶ concludes, where disadvantaged students attend advantaged schools, they score 86 PISA points higher (OECD average is 78 points higher) than those attending disadvantaged schools that represents the equivalent of 3 years of schooling.

Such effects of student and school disadvantage are compounding, as the OECD explains:

Disparities in student performance related to socio-economic status take root at an early age and widen throughout students' lives. In Australia, the magnitude of the socio-economic gap in mathematics achievement at age 10 (as measured by the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study [TIMSS]) is about 65% as large as the gap observed among 15-year-olds (as measured by PISA), and about 58% as large as the gap in numeracy proficiency among 25- to 29-year-olds (as measured by the Survey of Adult Skills [PIAAC])²⁷

Conversations about disadvantage, and how it can be overcome, overwhelmingly focus on reforming and improving schools. But that conversation cannot be isolated from the impact of concentrated disadvantage in some schools – and these impacts cannot be isolated from a school framework characterised, over four decades, by school competition, choice, and

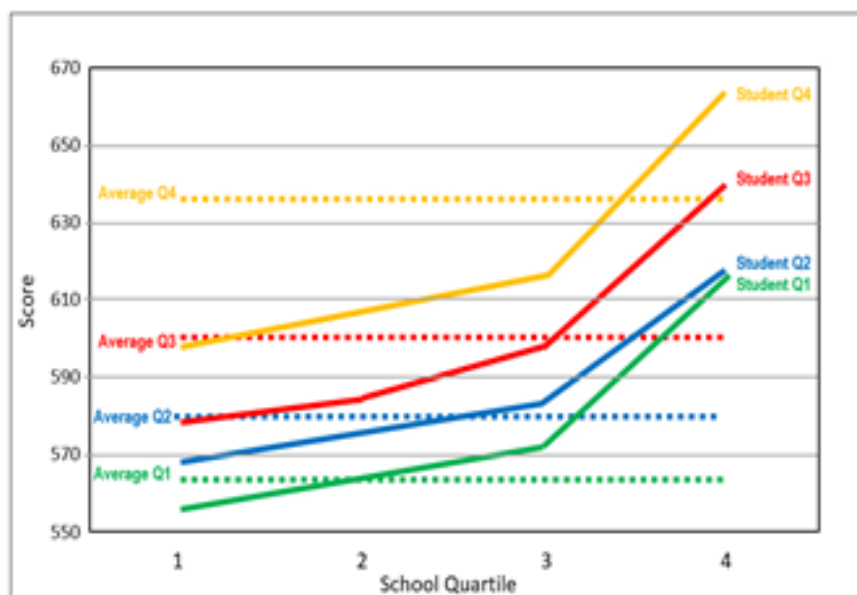
enrolment shifts. Far from improving schools, this framework has instead redistributed students, in the process accentuating enrolment and achievement differences. As My School data readily shows, in almost every community in Australia, school ICSEA values and achievement scores combine to illustrate a socio-educational hierarchy.

On a local level, enrolment shifts towards higher SES schools also means that schools can become more advantaged, or disadvantaged, than their surrounding population. This is especially noticeable in regional centres as illustrated by comparisons of school ICSEA values with equivalent Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) measures for Geelong in Victoria. Students in the campuses of the Northern Bay College in northern Geelong are even less advantaged than are people in most of the adjacent low-income localities. In contrast, students in both government and non-government schools elsewhere in Geelong tend to be more advantaged than are the people in adjacent and relatively high-income localities. In Canberra, the SES differences between suburbs are nowhere near great enough to explain the differences between the school enrolments, suggesting a flight of enrolments to more advantaged schools, while accentuating the level of disadvantage in already disadvantaged localities.²⁸ There are implications of this for the extent and effectiveness of school-community links and for the benefits these links help create.

The increasing disadvantage in some schools is a problem. Here is why: there is a direct impact of family SES on student achievement, but there is also a collective impact created by the SES of a student's peers.²⁹ As school enrolments increasingly diverge on the basis of SES, this collective impact starts to influence more strongly aspects such as parental and student expectations, teacher workload, teacher morale, school resourcing, and the attractiveness of the school to other families.

The effect is noticeable and well-researched. The first Gonski review found that increased concentration of disadvantaged students in certain schools was having a significant impact on educational outcomes.³⁰ Around the same time, New South Wales Department of Education research noted that the performance of low SES students tends to be lower if they attend a school with a large number of other low SES students.

Figure 2: Dynamics between student SES, school ICSEA quartile among Year 9 NAPLAN performance in literacy and numeracy



Source: Chesters & Daly (2017)³¹

Other studies made similar findings, including by Jennifer Chester in a report using data from the *Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Children*.³² The OECD has also identified an impact of average school SES on student achievement.³³ A landmark study from the USA found “the average socioeconomic level of students’ schools had as much impact on their achievement growth as their own socioeconomic status”.³⁴

What amounts to a school composition or peer effect takes two forms:

- Those effects generated by current peer behaviour or outcomes are relatively direct and well-known by teachers. They include the ways in which learning is affected by cooperation and competition between peers, as well as the impacts of student behaviour on classroom management and time-on-task.³⁵
- Contextual effects, including things such as stimulus in the classroom created by higher performers, teacher experiences and expectations, and the range and availability of resources. Schools serving mostly disadvantaged students tend to be organised and operate differently to those serving more-advantaged students, and these effects transcend other school-level differences such as public or private, large or small.

Such effects became well-known in earlier debates about streaming within schools: it may differentially benefit some students, but at the cost of disadvantaging others. As one study concludes, it is not a socially just practice.³⁶ Such an impact is equally unjust if the structural arrangements in the school system act to compound the problems faced by the most disadvantaged. It affects more than measurable achievement: research indicates impacts on such things as student resilience³⁷ and a student’s sense of belonging at school.³⁸ A wealth of educational research now suggests that in addition to being socially unjust and disadvantaging some students, an inequitable system means that the achievement of all students is constrained - the OECD mantra “you can’t have excellence without equity” in education remains compelling.

III Foster inclusion and reduce discrimination

“... provide all young Australians with access to high-quality education that is inclusive and free from any form of discrimination”

- Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration

The way Australia’s schools have evolved raises questions about the extent to which the structure of education in this country, and the government policies which support those structures, are committed to the principles of inclusion and reducing discrimination. School choice, a feature of Australian education, is often presented as the right of parents to choose their child’s school. While some parents have the money and the agency to choose schools, what is less ‘advertised’ as an outcome of the school choice policy is the reality that some schools effectively choose their students. Once again, ‘which schools enrol which students’ significantly defines the character of our schools.

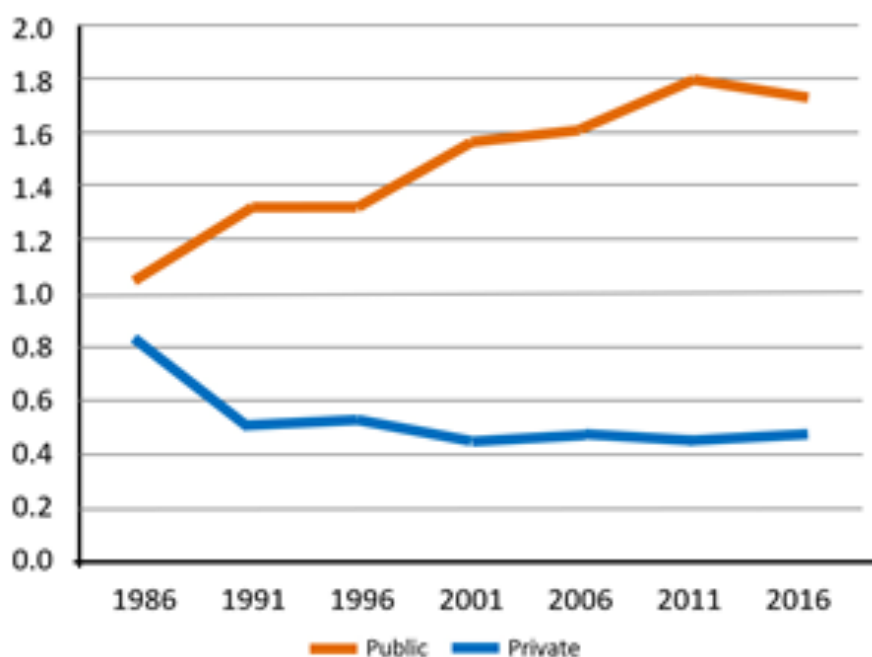
There are schools in every sector which are able to exercise some control - either actively or passively - over their intake of students. Some students may be preferred, on the basis of their ability, by public and non-government selective schools. Schools which charge fees will mainly enrol those with the required financial resources. Some schools seek students who exhibit aspiration, cultural, and social capital.

These cases illustrate the structural reality of Australian education, wherein many schools have the right to choose their students to the exclusion of others, alongside the ability of some parents to choose their child's school. Schools that control their intake can gain a competitive advantage in such areas as school reputation and achievement, an advantage that has more to do with enrolment discrimination than with the schools' intrinsic quality. Such discrimination certainly reduces the capacity of the school framework to achieve the benchmarks of inclusion and the goal to reduce discrimination.

The most direct discriminators are stated entry criteria, including academic. There are about 60 full or part selective government schools in Australia (mainly in NSW) and an unknown number of test-entry non-government schools. Around one third of Australia's students in both the public and private sectors, are enrolled in schools in which academic performance is always considered for admission.³⁹

A less direct but far more widespread discriminator is affordability which manifests itself in the charging of school fees, most prominently in non-government schools. The charging of fees creates a family income divide between schools. Whilst some non-government schools charge very low or no fees, most fees have the effect of excluding some students. As a result, the family income gaps between government and non-government school enrolments are widening. In the secondary years, 26% of government school students are from high income families, against 46% in Catholic, and 54% in Independent schools.⁴⁰ Correspondingly, the concentration of students from low socio-economic backgrounds in government schools has increased since the 1970s. Figure 3 shows the divergence of family income between public and government schools and private and non-government schools since 1986, with public/government schools showing extremely high ratio of low to high income families among their enrolments.

Figure 3: Ratios of low and high family income in government and non-government schools for all secondary schools in each census year 1986 to 2016



This enrolment difference along family income lines is closely aligned to the socio-educational difference described by school ICSEA values. Independent schools have the highest ICSEA average at 1060. Catholic schools are next on 1040, followed by government schools on 983 (government selective schools have an ICSEA of around 1180).⁴¹ An explanation of school ICSEA values is available on the My School website.⁴² Such differences between schools aren't new, but as My School data illustrates, they are widening.⁴³ The existence of schools in all sectors which have enrolment discriminators, alongside those that don't, has obvious impacts on the distribution of student enrolments according to such things as student ability, family income and socio-educational advantage, and a wider impact on the distribution of high achievement.

IV Address student needs

"... provide support that aims to fulfil the individual capabilities and needs of learners"

- Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration

Schooling must support every one of Australia's 3.8 million school students to realise their full learning potential and achieve educational excellence. These were the first words in the Gonski 2.0 report.⁴⁴ Our schools, it went on, should be tailored to individual learning needs ... appropriate to each student's starting point and capabilities. But "Australia still has an industrial model of school education ... it is not designed to differentiate learning ... nor does it incentivise schools to innovate and continuously improve".⁴⁵

From the outset it is clear that particular groups of students are not sufficiently well-served by Australia's schools. We continue to fall short in provision for students who have learning disabilities or are remotely located. Indigenous students are over-represented in schools with the least capacity and resources to support them.⁴⁶ Even in jurisdictions where progress is evident, some schools still don't place a priority on supporting students with special educational needs, including learning difficulties, behavioural and social challenges. The references in the *Mparntwe Declaration* to inclusive education, identifying barriers, individual capabilities and high expectations read as an isolated expression of hope.

There is also a wider context for this problem. Where schools are in competition with each other, they often advertise their capacity to cater for the individual and address personal needs. The resulting diversity of school offerings in Australia is usually considered to be a positive attribute of the system. But what sort of diversity is really being offered and does it reach into educational programs and pedagogy within schools to fulfil individual capabilities and the needs of all learners? It can be argued that the competition between schools for preferred students, explained previously, is limiting the capacity of the system to serve students with a span of needs. Competition can trigger investment in things such as school appearance and resources, in order to attract and retain enrolments, especially of preferred students.⁴⁷ In this context, innovation takes the form of strategies to secure or improve a school's enrolment profile, rather than to generate significant changes to school practice around teaching and learning.

The links between increased competition and educational innovation are weak. A study completed for the OECD concluded that there seems to be "no direct causal relationship between leveraging quasi-market mechanisms of choice and competition in education and inducing educational innovation in the classroom".⁴⁸ It also found that parents do not particularly seek innovative schools; rather, they preference schools higher up a perceived hierarchy of

desirability. Even if a chosen school is underperforming, parents will not seek enrolment elsewhere if the school is still well placed in the hierarchy.⁴⁹

Such findings not only cast doubt on the benefits of school competition but may explain why some schools might be reluctant to serve students with different, and often greater, needs. According to the late Jack Keating, “instead of promoting greater diversity, secondary schools find themselves chasing the same academic pot of gold”.⁵⁰ There is limited incentive in this environment for schools to develop vocational or alternative (or personalised) learning models, as not doing so optimises their market position. As Glenn Savage puts it, “young people are sandwiched... into the same cookie-cutter model of excellence that schools must adopt to retain market competitiveness... rather than the school tailoring provision to meet diverse needs”.⁵¹

Schools still develop and promote some differences – around technology, school organisation, student welfare practices, elective choice and community links – but this often falls short of meeting “the individual capabilities and needs of learners”.⁵² Even these developments stay within the boundaries created by conventional and overt measures of success, including a largely standardised curriculum, and the requirements of external assessments.

The upshot is that we reduce opportunities for the students who do not learn best in competing mainstream schools. Low-performing and high-needs students especially can be seen as liabilities, unable to find a suitable school which, to use the language of rejection, is prepared to ‘cater for their special needs’. Schools that seriously address individual needs and modes of learning may not look like other schools and are not pursuing the same ‘pot of gold’, but they are few and far between.

This creates a serious, yet unaddressed, equity issue. Despite increasing choice, and perhaps because of it, competition can disenfranchise the students who cannot access a school that will deliver for them, leaving them to struggle in the schools that the ‘market’ prefers and provides. It has created a school system that cannot provide, in every location, “support that aims to fulfil the individual capabilities and needs of learners”.⁵³

V Create a cohesive society

“... ensure that education promotes and contributes to a socially cohesive society”

- Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration

Even though Australia’s education ministers have been meeting for three decades, the idea that schooling should contribute to a socially cohesive society that respects and appreciates cultural, social, and religious diversity was only given prominence from the 2008 Melbourne Declaration. Most schools have historically taken in students with wide ranging backgrounds, including different religions, ethnicity, and culture. In this way, schools have acted as agents in the bridging and linking which underpins citizenship, social harmony, and democracy. To what extent is that agency diminished if we continue to reduce the enrolment diversity within schools, while increasing the differences between them?

While more research is always needed, there are certainly many examples of reduced diversity within schools. There are more schools now that cater to specific faiths beyond Catholicism and Anglicanism. Enrolment in Islamic schools, for example, increased by around 50% between 2011 and 2017.⁵⁴ While many faith-based schools work hard to be inclusive, complex enrolment

processes at others can present a barrier alongside the discrimination created by school fees.

There is also evidence of schools dividing, intentionally or otherwise, around ethnicity. Higher ICSEA non-government schools tend to be monocultural hubs for Anglo-Australians, while selective public schools disproportionately attract Asian-Australians.⁵⁵ Australian society has become increasingly multicultural, but cultural diversity is unevenly distributed in our schools. The ethnic diversity of schools is, additionally, less reflective of the diversity of the surrounding neighbourhoods. It seems that the mechanisms of school choice in Australia have enabled many families to enrol in schools with a more preferable ethnic mix.⁵⁶

The risk in such trends is that students in an increasingly homogenous peer group risk receiving an impoverished social or 'informal' education. Enrolment shifts are creating far more bonding of 'like with like', rather than bridging across divides. This limits the capacity of schools to broaden students' social, educational or professional aspirations, or for students to be inspired by diverse role models. According to the Mitchell Institute, growing homogeneity decreases the quality of their experiences and integration in society, leading to outcomes such as a lack of interest in lifelong learning, low aspirations, poor transition to work, and lack of attachment to social, economic, and political institutions.⁵⁷

VI Be well-supported

"... ensure that young Australians of all backgrounds are supported to achieve their full educational potential"

- Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration

At the beginning of this paper, we noted that a commonly held expectation is that schools should be well-supported in ways that are evidence-driven, efficient, effective, and well-coordinated. References to funding or resourcing schools do not appear in successive declarations of goals, but the importance of support to achieve certain priorities makes a belated appearance in the most recent *Mparntwe Education Declaration*.

In raw dollar terms, most Australian schools seem to be well supported by a mix of public and private funding, but the make-up and distribution of this funding is problematic. The first Gonski Review gathered considerable evidence about where funding should be directed to establish equity and improve overall student outcomes. The findings and recommendations argued that additional funding should be allocated on the basis of need, something which, if implemented, would have boosted equity funding to all sectors. But while funding since the Gonski Review pays homage to the language of equity, the data about the overall distribution of funding doesn't tell the same story. Various stated priorities suggest where the funding should go, but following the money trail reveals where it actually ends up.

Since 2011, the percentage increase in government per-student recurrent funding of Australia's low ICSEA (under 1000) schools has been more than the increase to high ICSEA (over 1000) schools. However, funding aggregated from all sources shows less advantaged schools are no further ahead. Irrationally, My School data also shows that Australia's very remote schools, on average, received the same percentage funding increases as major city schools – despite metropolitan areas having clear socio-educational advantage. The public funding of schools by sector also seems to disregard the need criteria, with government schools (average ICSEA

981) receiving much lower per-student funding increases than going to the two non-government sectors (average ICSEA 1051).⁵⁸

The Gonski recommendations included a “sector-blind” approach, with “needs-based funding” providing a rationale and model for equitable resourcing. The 2021 Productivity Commission data make it clear that “government funding for non-government schools continues to grow at a faster rate than for public schools”.⁵⁹ More positively, there is tacit acknowledgement of past failure in regard to true, sector-blind, needs based funding; recent Commonwealth government language has changed and now advocates “students with the same need in the same sector will attract the same level of support”.⁶⁰

Such distortion between the sectors is likely to continue into the future unless structural policy change occurs. A recent study revealed that combined state and federal recurrent funding of non-government schools is close to, and in many cases exceeds, combined government funding of government schools.⁶¹ In effect, the taxpayer saves little by funding competing systems. But *state* governments do save by funding non-government schools ahead of their own schools, while the federal government incurs large costs.

The lack of any logic in such arrangements is just part of the problem. Under current arrangements, the states are required to lift the funding of their public schools to the agreed 80% of the Schools Resourcing Standard (SRS), with the Federal government providing the other 20%. Yet, perversely, the states are financially better off if they fund every new student to attend a non-government school. This has significant implications for the efficacy of the current arrangements that are supposed to have schools in each sector funded to their SRS entitlement. As another analysis revealed, public schools across Australia won’t get there.⁶²

Our support for young Australians also falls well short on other criteria, including the effectiveness and efficiency of this support. On the effectiveness side, a common refrain is that “Australia’s results on international tests have been declining over the past 10 years ... despite continually increased school funding”.⁶³ At first glance this is readily apparent, although closer scrutiny suggests it is more complex than some assert.⁶⁴ The widespread provision and duplication of publicly funded schools has no doubt increased choice, but at the cost of funding efficiency. Examples abound, and it is most obvious in smaller communities with co-located and competing, but small, government and Catholic schools. Per-student funding in these places is usually very high. Combining such schools would still leave the towns with a relatively small school, but with improved economies of scale.

A worked example illustrates how funding such competing schools can come at a price to both families and taxpayers. In 2018 (the most recently published My School financial data), the 68 students at Adelong Public School (ICSEA 946) in NSW attract \$1,084,707 in annual government recurrent funding - \$15,951 per student. The 37 students at St Joseph’s School (ICSEA 1026) in the same town attract \$885,170 – a much larger \$23,923 per student. If the schools’ combined enrolment was funded at the public-school rate the annual cost to governments would reduce from a total of \$1,969,877 to \$1,674,855. The actual saving would be higher, due to some economies of scale and the even lower per-student cost of the more advantaged combined enrolment. In such a scenario, parents of students in the Catholic school certainly wouldn’t be required to pay much, if anything, in school fees.

The casual observer might think it would make sense for governments to pay more to

certain schools or sectors if there was a dividend in terms of student achievement. After all, schools perform at a variety of levels. But research consistently shows that, within a broadly homogenous school system, students with similar levels of socio-educational advantage (or more broadly, SES) achieve at similar levels, regardless of school type or sector.⁶⁵ Once again, which schools enrol which students significantly defines their character and perceived success.

This similarity in school outcomes, when adjusted for family background, also raises questions about the effectiveness of our *total* (government funding plus fees) expenditure on schools. Comparisons of schools enrolling similar students often reveal big differences in the money that goes into producing their quite similar results. Table 1 raises some financial questions. In the 1000-1049 ICSEA range, median per-student funding, from all sources, is \$15,099 in Catholic schools, \$16,666 in Independent schools, and \$13,766 in government schools, yet Table 1 also indicates little difference in NAPLAN results between the sectors. If measurable results are important, then a per-student total spend in excess of \$13,766 for the higher funded students is questionable in terms of both effectiveness and efficiency.⁶⁶

Table 1: Total funding in schools with matched ICSEA and resulting cost implications in 2018

ICSEA RANGE	1. Sector	2. Enrolment	3. NAPLAN Reading Years 3&5	4. Median funding per student (\$)	5. Projected total funding (\$m)	6. Revised funding at gov school cost (\$m)	7. Excess over Gov school cost (\$m)
950-999	Catholic	61,621	450.2	17,507	1,079	934	145
	Government	680,001	452.1	15,160	10,309	1,079	0
	Independent	2,9651	454.4	17,920	531	449	82
1000-1049	Catholic	285,636	469.9	15,099	4,312	3,932	380
	Government	571,718	470.9	13,766	7,870	7,870	0
	Independent	102,732	470.2	16,666	1,712	1,414	298

* All Australian schools with ICSEA values (includes some special schools). Note that the lowest cost providers in each ICSEA range are government schools.

The potential savings created by an allocation of funding at the government school level are indicated in column 7 (Table 1). In these examples the government schools are the lowest cost providers. The implications are significant, data for all schools indicates an overspend running into billions of dollars. All other factors being equal, the excess could be more effective if directed, for example, to fund targeted programs aimed at lifting achievement.

VII Provide an equitable choice of schools

...“all Australian Governments will work with the education community to support all education sectors – government and non-government, secular and faith-based”

- Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration

Choice of schools in Australia is here to stay, something easily confirmed by the growth of the non-government school sector and expanded choice within the public sector. But there is no lasting consensus about the benefits or the cost of choice, with expert opinions inevitably cited by all sides. Various polls indicate how and why parents choose schools and what they think about choice. Yet evidence of a strong preference for a quality local public school ahead of having a choice, also exists.⁶⁷

The OECD makes an interesting observation on school choice:

*Despite what critics might say, school choice, in and of itself, neither assures nor undermines the quality of education...introducing and expanding school choice requires smart policies that ensure that benefits are maximised while risks are minimised.*⁶⁸

There are clearly issues to address if school choice regimes are to be successful. The problem for Australia is that, in expanding school choice, we haven't maximised the benefits that choice is claimed to provide, nor have we minimised, nor seriously evaluated, the risks. Instead, we have allowed competition between, and choice of, schools in Australia to become a primary policy driver. As a consequence, we now have a large number of competing schools: ninety-five per cent of students are in schools that compete with at least one other nearby school.⁶⁹

A closer look reveals additional problems. Under current arrangements, choice of schools is not available to everyone. While it seems widespread, access to many schools is limited by family circumstance, including the level of family disposable income. Australian students have a very unequal capacity to choose schools. Barriers to school choice are found in both the public and independent school sectors:

- Most government schools are usually not available to families outside each school's enrolment catchment – although the rules (and their implementation) around this vary. Hence one of the hidden costs of school choice in the government sector can be the price families must pay for a house close to a desired school.⁷⁰ Zoning might make financial sense for governments and taxpayers, but it still acts as a constraint on choice. The increasing number of selective and specialist schools in government systems offers greater choice, but logistically this cannot expand to reach all students everywhere.
- In addition to charging fees, non-government schools are able to apply a variety of student enrolment criteria. For a number of reasons, including to achieve a better match between prospective enrolments and the school, considerable information might be sought. Many schools also offer special programs, scholarships, and reduced-fee bursaries. The impact of this is not unlike that created by selectivity in government schools: it may benefit those selected, but it still amounts to schools exercising control over which students are to be enrolled.

Regardless of sector, it is certainly the case that high-demand schools are able to exercise greater discretion over enrolments. Within the government school sector there is also great diversity and inequity in relation to school income sourced from parent "voluntary contributions"⁷¹. However, the overriding difference between the sectors is that only public schools are obliged to be available to every family in every circumstance in every location – creating inevitable differences between school sectors in obligations and operation.

The 'playing field', on which schools operate and compete, is very uneven. Our school system fails the fairness test. Mechanisms of enrolment choice between and within all sectors certainly have to be on any agenda to reduce, and even reverse, the increasing segregation of enrolments. We now turn our attention to addressing such issues.

3. Searching for solutions

Australia's hybrid framework of schools evolved in the absence of any consistent rationale and indeed any uniformly agreed purpose. Successive governments bolted on various structural reforms over time and, in so doing, created something that doesn't deliver as well as we might have wished. Instead, the structure of the Australian education system has delivered mounting and arguably wicked problems and we argue it is unsustainable in its current form.

Working through a host of unresolved issues requires a rethink on many fronts. In his book *Changing Australian Education* Alan Reid argues that the resolution of so many problems requires people having a commitment to the collective good, rather than an interest solely in what will benefit the individual.⁷² In education this means creating and maintaining a school system that models such a commitment, requiring a future-focused narrative which would include:

1. A bipartisan political agreement about the purposes, principles, and values upon which Australian education is based;
2. Commitment to using these agreed purposes, principles, and values as the reference point for policy making and practice.

This might seem a mammoth task, but if we don't make a start, our school future isn't hard to predict. The accumulating evidence, including that available in the abundant data about our schools, predicts a decidedly unhappy future. Based on recent trends, we will see:

- Decreasing equity, as indicated by an even closer relationship between socio-educational status and achievement.
- Measurable school achievement continuing to languish, with both "excellence and equity" goals unmet.
- Increasing gaps between advantaged and disadvantaged students and schools.
- Increasing school segregation - higher SES schools growing and enrolling more advantaged students; lower SES schools remaining static while having a larger share of students who struggle or may be disengaged.
- Decreasing interest in joining, or remaining, in the teaching profession, especially while ongoing responsibility for failure is attributed to the profession rather than to structural inadequacies.
- Increasing socio-educational gaps between schools in every community.
- Continuing, and possibly increasing, school segregation on the basis of academic ability, SES, religious, cultural, and ethnic composition of enrolments.
- School funding insufficiently reflecting need and equity, while evidence of inefficient and ineffective allocation of resources remains.

- A mounting 'downstream' cost, for example in welfare support, created by school underachievement and a growing inequality.

If we do not take action now, this school future will be accompanied by many well-intentioned, expensive and misdirected school reforms.⁷³ Following a familiar pattern, these will focus on schools, while failing to address the structural problems illustrated in this paper – problems which governments proclaim to be off limits. Evidence-based school reform is always essential, but unresolved system problems will continue to reduce the impact and effectiveness of everything else we do. Given these structural system failings are at a grand scale, their impact is system-wide and profound, creating a burden with a magnitude that make costly and exhausting gains from local and micro reforms unsustainable. Are there any possible solutions? Specifically, how do other countries reconcile private ownership of schooling with the goals and obligations carried by public systems?

Solution 1: The integration pathway

One example of what might be done is close to hand. Catholic schools in both Australia and New Zealand faced serious financial problems in the 1960s and approached governments for public funding. The Australian response was to begin funding local Catholic schools and eventually all non-government schools, while allowing these schools to continue charging enrolment fees – essential at the time, as the public funding was initially quite small. In contrast, New Zealand integrated its Catholic schools into the government system. In return for getting most of their funding from the state, these schools were not to charge admission fees, but they could maintain their special character as church schools and own their land and buildings. In this integrated approach, all non-government schools are fully funded and operate within the government school system but retain the character and values of their former independent school system. All government and integrated schools in New Zealand now operate as state schools, and all are subject to the same legislation and regulations, including on such matters as the enrolment, suspension, and expulsion of students. Admittedly, it is far from perfect: enrolment regulations are less effective than at first envisaged (1975) and fees have also crept back in, albeit at much lower levels than fees in Australia.

Integrated secular and religious schools are also common elsewhere. Church schools in England joined the state-maintained sector after 1944. In France, schools are subject to a contract of association which, in exchange for funding, imposes strict requirements in curriculum, staffing, admissions policies, inspections, and audits. Most integrated systems provide an element of school choice, but providing local student access to state-funded school education is the priority.

In three Canadian provinces - Alberta, Ontario and Saskatchewan - Catholic schools are part of the public system. As in New Zealand, they have a fully Catholic character in terms of school curriculum and culture, yet enrol all applicants and do not charge fees. The ability of Catholic families to exercise choice within the public system in these provinces partly explains why public-school enrolment share in Canada is well over 90%. Significantly, the dominant place of free, comprehensive schools in Canada means there is much less variation in the socio-economic composition of student populations between schools.⁷⁴ As a consequence, disadvantaged students tend to do much better; the gap between advantaged and disadvantaged students in Canada in 2018 PISA reading scores is 20 points below the gap

in Australia.⁷⁵ Disadvantaged Canadian students also have a stronger sense of belonging to school than their Australian peers. High performing disadvantaged students in Canada expect to complete tertiary education, far more so than their peers in Australia. It is Canada's ability to support its most disadvantaged students that substantially explains why it consistently outperforms Australia in the PISA tests and consistently ranks close to the top in international comparisons.

Proposals to create a more integrated system in Australia have been raised from time to time. Until recently, it was considered too expensive for governments to fully meet the recurrent costs of non-government schools. Public funding for non-government schools, however, has continued to rise and the additional amounts now required are quite low. If governments in Australia funded non-government school students to the level of funding similar students in public schools, the additional cost would be less than 2% of government recurrent funding of all schools.⁷⁶ In financial terms, the majority of non-government schools in Australia are already close to being government schools. Would they want to give up their private status for a small amount of extra money? Integration happened in New Zealand when the Catholic education system was close to bankruptcy.⁷⁷ That situation certainly doesn't exist in Australia in 2021. A possible compromise might be to adopt and adapt some policies and practices in integrated systems, particularly if there is a shared commitment to a better reconciliation of choice and equity.

Solution 2: Reconciling choice and equity

If an integrated school system is a bridge too far, how can we otherwise sustain both equity and choice? A reconciling approach seeks to balance, or control, school choice in order to minimise inequity. Managing school choice is difficult and Australia should learn from the experience of others. Chile, which like Australia has both public and private schools, provides a salutary warning on what can go wrong and how things can be turned around. In 1981, it started to go down Australia's pathway when it funded both public and private schools – in Chile's case, this was via a universal school-voucher system for both elementary and secondary school students, combined with top-up fees in private schools. Private schooling expanded, along with enrolment segregation based on student socio-economic background. The extent of social segregation in Chile's schools became one of the most noticeable in the world, and this trend was accompanied by poor overall achievement.⁷⁸

Efforts to reduce school segregation in Chile began in 2008 with a law that boosted the value of funding vouchers for poorer students. Some schools received additional bonuses based on their enrolment of these students. A new law was adopted in 2016 to restrict and phase out selective admissions (including those based on parent interviews), eliminate for-profit schooling, and abolish top-up fees in subsidised private schools. It included incentives for compliance and additional resources for their poorest students.

The effect of these changes, as analysed by the Brookings Institute, were significant. Student test scores in all types of schools improved, but the improvement was greatest among public and non-fee charging private schools. The size of the income-based test score gap declined by at least one-third.⁷⁹ As the Brookings analysis concludes, the original Chilean experiment with school choice revealed the need to put in place equitable institutional arrangements, and not waste energy on marginal interventions. The lesson in this for Australia seems clear.

While changes to schools in England are controversial, they have included additional resources for the most disadvantaged schools. The Netherlands and Belgium have implemented weighted per-student funding schemes, creating a financial incentive for schools to accept low SES students. Some school districts in the United States are achieving enrolment balance by redrawing zones, assigning schools to families in an agreed 'controlled choice' process, by establishing magnet schools for the purpose of diversity, and by enrolment by lottery.⁸⁰ Variations on these strategies have even been suggested for Australia.⁸¹

Drawing on the experience of other countries, advice given in recent studies by the OECD⁸², seems particularly relevant to Australia:

- The conditions under which private schools are publicly funded influence the ways in which school choice impacts the accessibility, quality, and equity of the school system.
- Where market mechanisms apply, oversight and governance arrangements must be in place to guarantee that every child benefits from accessible, high-quality education.
- Risk to equity can be mitigated if all publicly funded providers adhere to the same regulations regarding educational and enrolment policies, and compliance with these regulations is monitored.

Solution 3: Policy pathways

Australia needs to improve student outcomes by addressing equity problems, while maintaining sufficient choice of schools. There will always be debate about school choice, including what it delivers, who benefits, and where it should lie amongst other priorities.⁸³ However, it is clear that choice should not be the only, or even main, focus of any school system. A 2012 OECD policy review suggested Australia's key focus should be "on reducing inequities by tackling system-level policies which hinder equity in education, including school choice, support or funding."⁸⁴ Other goals won't be achieved until we resolve existing problems around choice and funding.

The following suggestions, with the exception of the final two points, are framed by OECD recommendations from the overview of evidence on school choice.⁸⁵

- 1. Agree on the framework.** Having an element of school choice requires smart policies that ensure that benefits are maximised while risks are minimised. But the starting point has to be cross-sectoral and wider community consultation to establish consensus on the purposes and principles that should underpin our schools, as well as the policies needed at the framework level to achieve these. Such a step may seem obvious, but it has never been taken in Australia.
- 2. Redesign choice for everyone – or no one.** As it is currently structured, school choice lacks even basic fairness: it can only be accessed by those who can pay, either directly or indirectly, or for those who have what is seen as a 'valuable characteristic'. If choice is to be a priority in Australia, we urgently need to consider the range of options implemented overseas, including restructured school zones, controlled choice, and balloted school entry.

- 3. Create meaningful choice.** Choice should be real, such as within and between schools offering innovation and diversity in focus and pedagogy, rather than between schools doing much the same things at different levels in the school social pecking order. Policy and mechanisms need to be revised to maximise the former and minimise the latter. Mechanisms which risk school segregation should be withdrawn or reduced.
- 4. Create a level playing field.** A framework which includes a variety of providers should enable each to participate and compete on a fair and comparable basis. The significant inequalities and inconsistencies in the cost, rules, operation, accountabilities, and obligations of Australia's 'competing' schools need to be reduced. Given that a significant proportion of non-governmental schools are funded to the level of similar government schools, a public charter of operation and obligations needs to equally apply to all funded schools.
- 5. Recreate the ideals of education as a public good.** The OECD argues that publicly funded schools should be obliged to maintain the "public good"⁸⁶ in return for that support.⁸⁷ They should uphold the basic tenets of fairness and justice in their operations, including non-discrimination among applications for places in the school. Aside from monitoring agreed enrolment practices, a combination of carrot-and-stick approaches, including around funding, may be appropriate.
- 6. Create structures which promote and preserve equity.** Properly coordinated funding, strictly on the basis of student need, could have a substantial impact on equity. The bulk of school funding should be on the basis of need, with the process administered by a federal-state-territory authority operating at arm's length from government. Schools with no fees and no discriminators should receive more funding while those which choose to charge fees or apply other discriminators should have their public funding proportionately reduced. There also needs to be a clear focus on equity-related priorities such as inclusion within schools, early childhood education, special education in schools, and wellbeing and health.
- 7. Make education systems more demand sensitive.** The OECD argues that the benefits of school choice "will only materialise in an environment where parents, students, external stakeholders and the local community can participate in the school".⁸⁸ Vital areas impacting teaching and learning, such as curriculum, assessment, reporting, and accountability, need to enable far more school and community participation. This can happen even while some school operations, especially around enrolment and resourcing, are subject to appropriate guidance and, if necessary, regulation.
- 8. Maintain a strong state or central education authority.** At first glance, this recommendation seems to contradict the previous, but the focus is on education authorities developing and maintaining a strategic vision and clear guidelines for education, and to offer valuable feedback to local school networks and individual schools. Major policy development should engage experienced school and community leaders in early design stages, in partnership with system policy leaders.⁸⁹ This should also include maintaining standards and agreed levels of accountability, including appropriate levels of monitoring and compliance with an emphasis on sharing good practice.

- 9. Monitor and evaluate for equity.** There is a recognised need for new metrics to monitor fairness and inclusion in schools and at the level of the education system.⁹⁰ Increased transparency in such analysis and reporting of educational outcomes for equity groups is needed. Australia’s most recent country report from the OECD identifies this as a particular issue: “Countries can also set ambitious goals for and monitor the progress of disadvantaged students, target additional resources towards disadvantaged students and schools, and reduce the concentration of disadvantaged students in particular schools”.⁹¹ Current annual reporting, on the national assessment program, for example, does not disaggregate data by student SES or even school ICSEA. Many important equity groupings should be examined for trends over time, with routine annual reporting. Given that equity is a national aspiration, it seems only reasonable to have clear annual reporting against it.
- 10. Invest and trust in teachers.** One of the by-products of the current structural failings has been increased downward performance pressure on schools, teachers, and students. Over the last ten years, Australian teachers have been subjected to a raft of initiatives, often focused on accountability and compliance, rather than support and capacity building. An excess of data on schools and students is in contrast to a deficit of data on teachers that has made workforce management and planning difficult; as teachers have faced increased workloads, and a range of dynamics and controversies that have contributed to low professional esteem.⁹² Structural reform of Australian schooling needs to be undertaken in consultation with the profession, that are designed to lift their esteem, build professional capacity and trust them to teach within equitable, well-resourced schools.⁹³

Solution 4: Fair school funding model

A good, but underused, solution to address the problems of structures and policies of schooling in Australia was presented in the Review of Funding for Schooling in December 2011.⁹⁴ The panel, led by David Gonski, recommended a new schooling resource standard that “all recurrent funding for schooling, whether it is provided by the Australian Government or state and territory governments, be based on a new schooling resource standard.” This would, among other things, form the basis for general recurrent funding for all students in all schooling sectors and would provide loadings (based on socioeconomic background, disability, English language proficiency, the particular needs of Indigenous students, school size, and school location) for the additional costs of meeting certain educational needs, and be based on actual resources used by schools already achieving high educational outcomes for their students over a sustained period of time.

The Gonski Review suggested that the per student funding, plus abovementioned loadings, would represent the total resources required by a school to provide all its students with the opportunity to succeed over time. Consequently, the Gonski Review believed, that all government schools would be fully publicly funded to the level of the schooling resource standard plus any applicable loadings. These recommendations, which address some of the structural failures in the education system, have never been properly implemented. Part of the solution is, therefore, to implement the original Gonski model to determine school funding levels using the Schooling Resource Standard (SRS).

The above suggestions focus on resolving the structural problems in Australia's existing school framework. But there is much else to do if our schools are to become more effective and efficient. There are, for example, substantial educational, community, and even environmental advantages in ensuring that the closest school is the most attractive option for families. The local school should be resourced and otherwise supported to enable it to provide the quality sought by families who would otherwise seek a school elsewhere, or for those in places where there is only one accessible school. The local school should appeal to, and cater as much as possible for, children from all backgrounds, with all learning styles, with disabilities, special gifts, talents, interests, and beliefs. On a number of grounds, enabling families to have such choices within schools makes far more sense than being forced to make choices between them.

We must improve the efficiency and effectiveness of our investment in schools. One contentious way is to reduce our current duplication of schools. Establishing a level playing field on which schools operate would pave the way for increased cooperation and collegiality between schools and sectors. One way to achieve this in each community is to establish a consultation process aimed at resource sharing between, and even partially merging, competing local schools. In the Adelong example cited in this report, this could provide a considerable dividend each year to invest in local schooling and establish local or regional post-school training and initial employment opportunities. Arising out of the above, cross-sectoral projects could trial such mergers on a larger scale, for example, across adjoining communities or encompassing stages of schooling, beginning with primary schools.

4. Conclusions

It is important to note that this report was first drafted before the COVID-19 pandemic, although it was refined as the situation evolved. Whilst the pandemic has further highlighted many inequities in our education system, it has also shown how Australia can respond to daunting problems, and how much we can achieve as a nation and society when the stakes are high. As one observer recently commented: “Success in fighting the ongoing health pandemic is a result of systematically relying on the best available science and expert knowledge to maximise the effectiveness of treatments while minimising their side effects. We should follow that same principle in education, too”.⁹⁵

Our starting point in this report has been what Australia wants in school education. Decade after decade we have identified and declared what we see as the purpose of schools and what they should deliver. This paper has shown that we have fallen short, and that our various declarations amount to an unfulfilled wish list. Our schools and school systems don't consistently and equitably serve all children, parents and communities. Learning achievement, which should be an outcome of what schools do, is increasingly an outcome of personal and family circumstance. Too many young people underachieve and leave school ill-equipped for both a sustainable livelihood and an enduring contribution to society. Importantly, the inequities in our system are holding back the quality of our education in all schools and jurisdictions. Until we fix these structural challenges our schooling system our stated national goals will remain unrealised, regardless of how many times we reframe them.

More of the same won't work. In 2021, school education ranks alongside other areas of public life facing calls for different thinking. In responding to the pandemic, so many Australians have rediscovered a capacity to subsume personal preference for the greater good; in school education, the past arguments and staked-out positions should belong to yesterday. The education of our young people clearly has a much longer time scale than a pandemic, yet is no less worthy of large-scale effort and change. The possible solutions are within reach and may not even need a substantial new financial investment, but they do need an investment of commitment and imagination, and a courageous determination to transform the mistakes of the past into opportunities for the future.

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