

School solutions in Australia and Quebec: two sources

In March 2025 two quite different reports appeared which cast new light on the existential threats threatening fairness, equity and achievement of school education in Australia and Quebec. The reports point to possible solutions for these two jurisdictions, both of which seem locked into inevitable decline, and both of which have attracted the interest of Australian Learning Lecture, a small but significant innovative group seeking creative and workable solutions.

The first report is *Towards an education system for the common good: desegregating Quebec's schools in a market context* by Vigneault. This forms a chapter in 'Research Handbook on Education Privatization and Marketization', published by Elgar Handbooks in Education and available at <https://www.elgaronline.com/edcollbook/book/9781035311385/9781035311385.xml>

The second is *Systemic Inefficiency of Australian Schools: A Policy and Measurement Review* by Michael G. Sciffer, available at <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/ajs4.70004>



The two writers, Michael Sciffer and Stéphane Vigneault (pictured left) are playing significant roles in increasing awareness about and reforming their respective systems. They met in October 2024 when Vigneault spoke with a group of twelve Australians visiting Canada in search of solutions to very significant and shared problems.

Stéphane Vigneault is the founder and co-ordinator for Quebec education campaign group, *Mouvement L'école ensemble* (the "school together movement").

Michael Sciffer is a PhD student with Murdoch University. He has co-authored a number of articles with Laura Perry and Andrew McConney on the impacts of school enrolment segregation.

This article is a summary of what these two writers reveal about the dimension of the problem and pointers to solutions, especially given the need to reduce the concentration of disadvantage. The sequence is important:

1. Vigneault explains how the movement for reform in Quebec progressed. One of the challenges his team faced has been how to create school boundaries which will create a more even SES spread of enrolments in each school.
2. Sciffer has developed a methodology which would create a more even SES spread of school enrolments in Australia

But firstly a general note on the Australian context. The last few years have seen increasing warnings about the accumulating impact of the socioeconomic composition (SEC) of enrolment on student learning, especially that created by higher concentrations of low SES students – effectively reducing the capacity of the school system to lift not only those students but also overall achievement. In this context Michael Sciffer refers to finding of the

[Productivity Commission](#), and a [subsequent review](#) commissioned by federal minister Jason Clare - as well as numerous research papers and articles. To this has to be added [Choice and Fairness](#) from Australian Learning Lecture, the work of [Michele Bruniges](#) with the Paul Ramsay Foundation, and an ongoing initiative by the [Australian Secondary Principals Association](#). In mid-2025 the report *Lessons from Canada* will be released by Australian Learning Lecture. The genesis of some of this work was created by the book [Waiting for Gonski, how Australia failed its schools](#). In sum, all this focus on the need for serious structural reform of Australia's overall school framework comes at a time when the school funding problem is declared to be solved (that's another story) and within-school reform, while remaining important, is clearly not enough.

1. Stephane Vigneault: ***Towards an education system for the common good: desegregating Quebec's schools in a market context***

In October 2024 a group of twelve Australians had an 'up close and personal' look at the structure of school education in Ontario and British Columbia. While there are differences between Australia and Canada, both countries share similar demographics – suggesting that Canada could offer many solutions to Australia's school problems. But the group also learned that while Canada has much to offer, the province of Quebec is an outlier in that country, instead having more in common with Australia's school settings and the problems which are part of that package.

While Quebec and Australia seem to be in a race to the bottom in terms of school system equity and achievement, Quebec has a potential solution in view - while school reform in Australia has for decades ignored the structural change needed to engineer and accompany a much needed breakthrough. The key to possible change in Quebec could be Stéphane Vigneault and his campaign group, Mouvement L'école ensemble.

The Australians' report on Quebec will be a chapter in *Lessons from Canada* to be released by Australian Learning Lecture in mid-2025. In the meantime Stéphane Vigneault has produced a timely account of how, in just half a dozen years, a grassroots movement in Quebec developed a proposal which has helped shift public opinion in Quebec and is currently knocking on the door of the Quebec National Assembly.

For Australians, the power of Vigneault's account of Quebec's wicked problems lies in the haunting similarity with what has unfolded in Australia. But his movement is firmly about finding solutions. In a very real sense, his account amounts to a 'how to' manual for Australia.

Vigneault and others describe Quebec's school system as three-tiered: subsidised private schools, selective public schools and regular public schools. In his words, they compete for the most profitable students in terms of income and academic results, with the regular public schools inevitably losing out. In response, a small group of parents formed École ensemble in 2017, with the aim of seeking the establishment of an equitable education system by eliminating school segregation.

From the beginning they developed quite different strategies: they understood what was driving parental choice of schools, so they had to approach the question of equity in different ways. Trying to change the system by curbing individual behaviour in the name of the greater good had failed before, and was bound to fail again. What was needed was a collective and political solution.

They realised it wouldn't be easy. Quebec's school framework tended to just evolve, with significant events shaping it over time. Catholic schools were partly funded in 1968, but just as in Australia, were allowed to select students and charge for tuition. Private schooling grew from enrolling five per cent of secondary students to around 20 per cent today. The growth has been partly fuelled by increased public funding, to around 75% of the costs of equivalent students in public schools. As in Australia, fees and charges have become an enrolment discriminator, with the socio-economic characteristics (and corresponding success) of the public and private schools further dividing enrolments. By the 1990s, and in response to this trend, some *public* schools also started to select their students.

Hence rather than oppose the privileges granted to private schools, a portion of public schools (now up around 23% in the secondary years) became selective, with modes of selection mimicking those of subsidised private schools. As Vigneault describes it, this provided a comforting loophole for those parents who wanted the benefit of private-like exclusiveness without leaving the public system. The resulting three tier (private-selective-regular) system has become de facto, rather than official, policy. Vigneault outlines the ongoing consequences of this evolving system for Quebec, the details of which are in his chapter and are certainly familiar to Australians. A relatively recent (2016) review was quite damning, pointing to how Quebec's schools were becoming a system that was perpetuating inequalities.

The changes were accompanied by 50 years of evolving and contorting justifications, and it is worth mentioning some of these. In the earlier years, freedom of school choice was linked to freedom of conscience and religion. Then, with the loss of religious fervour, the narrative changed to a need for private schools to educate an elite, with public schools to be responsible for a more basic education. More recently, support for public subsidies has carried an 'equity' twist, enabling greater access to private schools. At times, private schools have been seen as a counterweight to 'big government' and better able to deliver change and innovation. Over the decades, just as in Australia, school education was increasingly seen as a private rather than public good.

The justification for selective public schools was about using special programs to raise student achievement. Selective schools were seen as public school leaders in the competition with private schools, a view untroubled until recently by the increasingly obvious downsides of this for regular public schools. Again, comparisons with New South Wales in particular are instructive.

Until quite recently, concern about such developments was expressed in terms of opposing what was being created, rather than proposing anything different – the debate on school segregation was quite limited. Politically the issue was considered too divisive, and was

carefully avoided, especially during election campaigns. Suggested solutions were mainly about making regular public schools more attractive, pressing private schools to enrol more special-needs students, or at the extreme, nationalising or defunding private schools.

As Vigneault describes, such solutions might minimise some of the consequences ... while effectively maintaining the problem. Efforts to make *regular* public schools more attractive were an impossible challenge given that the selective schools would continue. The addition of enrolment quotas would likely see the private sector accepting only those low performing students who could pay fees. Vigneault comments to the effect that this solution would hide the important issue of socio-economic inequalities behind the needs of special needs students.

Ideas about defunding private schools resonated with the left of centre parties and unions, but without any explanation about how this might be enacted. Initially, Ecole ensemble fell into line with this approach, but soon understood that selection by public schools was becoming as big a problem as that represented by private schools.

Significantly, by pointing to all three tiers of the school system Vigneault and his colleagues began to widen, and indeed, disrupt, the public versus private debate. This was well received by teachers who felt more able to describe the situation they were enduring, and by parents upset by the pressure of competing with each other. Retired senior civil servants encouraged Ecole ensemble to continue the struggle for equity, while it was mostly ignored by government and attacked by some media commentators.

Issues were raised which Ecole ensemble at first couldn't easily address. Concern was expressed about how changing the system, described in its [Plan for a Common School Network](#) might transition from one system to another without additional strain on public schools, financial problems and the risk of school closures. Parents who were committed to special programs in schools were concerned that these might come to an end. The upside of these concerns was that Ecole ensemble became motivated and equipped to deal with them.

Designing an assignment [enrolment] policy with the potential to put an end to school segregation thus emerged as a central challenge, especially as school choice has been found to lead to school segregation.... A return to the neighbourhood school with its own catchment area was identified as a solution holding considerable potential. Neighbourhood schools have many advantages, including the continuity from preschool to high school, the preservation of the networks forged by parents and children, and the positive community, public health and ecological effects of local school attendance.

Clearly creative solutions were needed, especially given the reality that school catchment areas already reproducing neighbourhood boundaries, hence also reproducing existing residential segregation. How could socio-economic progress made by replacing choice-based enrolment with catchment-based enrolment? Addressing this problem, Vigneault refers to initiatives which link the catchment areas to a socio-economic index, with the aim of obtaining socio-economically similar catchment areas within the same territory.

In short, with a school in an advantaged neighbourhood to the south and a school in a disadvantaged neighbourhood to the north, two school catchment areas are created, one to the west and one to the east.

(This is where Michael Sciffer makes a significant contribution – as indicated in the next report)

Another challenge related to the subsidised private sector. If private schools were left out of the catchment area system, they would still be able to select their clients and hence maintain substantial school segregation. This problem opened the door to the need to include private schools with the public schools' catchments, creating a kind of common network. But to better enable this to happen the private schools would have to be funded to 100% and not be able to charge fees, in effect ending of access to schools based on parents' ability to pay (as well as ending the right for private schools to 'offload' pupils to the public sector).

Stephane Vigneault believes, with some justification, that the issues are the subject of his advocacy along with his colleagues, are now on a widely supported agenda for change. For the purpose of this summary, the [details of Ecole ensemble's proposal](#), outlined in sufficient detail in the Vigneault's full article, are less important than the inspiration, lessons and strategies it suggests for Australians. These include the following:

1. Not blaming parents for entering the selection processes has always been top of mind. The goal is thus to avoid forcing parents to arbitrate between wanting to be a good parent and wanting to be a good citizen.
2. By not entering the blame game and by avoiding individual solutions, the attention was directed where it belonged: to the policies and the elected officials.
3. This has allowed a variety of education stakeholders to partake in the public debate, bringing content to journalists and opposition parties. This is key in an education system without socio-economic data.
4. Problematizing the issue was not enough. École ensemble's role was also to propose a politically realistic solution. The old public/private debate was a dead end. Fresh thinking was required to bring about a new equilibrium.
5. While this pragmatic approach has raised some suspicion, overall it has been met with enthusiasm. The realistic roadmap it provides brings a lot of energy to a debate that was stalled for half a century.
6. This speaks to the role of civil society in the matter of education marketization. Civil society organisations can focus on one issue and take stock of every stakeholder's position. This allows a respectful dialogue and builds trust. This trust is key for an issue where stakeholders' positioning has been entrenched for

so long. Getting everyone to see the benefits of a better education system is crucial for overcoming the last sources of resistance.

... and last but most important “The Plan for a Common School Network is pragmatic, ambitious and innovative. It is the best solution in Quebec’s context - so much the better if, thanks to Vigneault, it can be of service to other educational equity advocates around the world.

2. Michael Sciffer: ***Systemic Inefficiency of Australian Schools: A Policy and Measurement Review***

In focusing on the efficiency of Australia’s schooling framework Michael Sciffer has widened the issues which need to be considered and pressed the urgency of finding solutions. He begins by revealing the scale of our problem, namely where different student equity groups are distributed in Australian schools: low SES students typically attend schools where 41% are also low SES, with just 11% high SES. And as he comments, this sort of information is not reported by governments despite its clear association with inefficient system outcomes. Sciffer also reports, as do others, that international comparisons show Australian schools are highly segregated.

The related problem is that “systemic inefficiency of school segregation as identified by the Productivity Commission occurs alongside insufficient accountability of schools, school systems and governments for the provision of learning to student equity groups”. Yes, The [*Measurement Framework for Schooling in Australia*](#) operationalises the measurement of Australia's schooling system, but the influence of SES on academic achievement is not measured through a single measure like socioeducational advantage - despite being a key focus of international assessments, with decades of research showing it is a key driver of educational inequalities.

As Sciffer describes, the obvious need is for

an initiative for Australian governments to develop measures and reports of school segregation and its effects at national, state and community levels. Such measures could be used to develop a new Measurement Framework for Schooling in Australia to provide an accountability framework of the systemic barriers to student learning and adequately report against the Education Declaration goals.

The irony in all this is that, in comparison with Canada, Australia has good information about student equity groups, the expertise to crunch the data and monitor the impact of reforms – and the mechanism to ensure appropriate accountability and reporting, especially through the My School website. In my words, not Michael’s, it wouldn’t take much to repurpose My School away from being a relatively useless neoliberal artifact into becoming a substantial driver of school framework reform.

To get to this point, the Measurement Framework could be extended

to include school-average socioeconomic status as a predictor of systemic disadvantage at national and state levels. Regularly reporting school SEC effects would enrich educational policy debates by including the role of systemic factors in contributing to social inequalities in Australia's schooling system.

How would this be done? Essentially by measuring the effects of average SEA on achievement growth and using this data to drive a different approach to funding schools in ways that would reduce enrolment segregation. For the mathematically-minded, Sciffer outlines (with reference to various sources) a simple model of student and school-average SEA which would allow for the reporting and monitoring of the impacts of school segregation over time, in effect producing results which can be used to monitor and report systemic inefficiencies in student achievement growth. Critically, academic achievement is decomposed into student and school levels, enabling an estimation of the separate effects of student SES and school SEC on achievement growth in schools in particular places and jurisdictions.

This is where the rubber really begins to hit the road: how funding of schools can be used as a mechanism to encourage some schools to enrol a greater range of students. The most common measure of school segregation is the *Dissimilarity Index*, variously used since the 1960s to identify causes, outcomes and trends of school segregation. It shows the proportion of disadvantaged students who would need to change schools within a geographical area for an even enrolment across schools in the area. We know that a disadvantaged school will enrol higher proportions of disadvantaged students compared to affluent areas, but use of a dissimilarity index could reduce higher rates of segregation due to other schools, to be brutal, 'dumping' on them.

Sciffer shows what Dissimilarity Indices (D index scores) reveal about the enrolment of Australia's secondary schools. He compares their enrolment profile with their local geographical area, essentially the ABS Statistical Area Level 3 (SA3) – being an area big enough to enable school choice, in effect a coherent school choice market.

Using this methodology it is possible to develop measures and reports of the degree to which schools currently contribute to enrolment segregation. In this way,

Individual schools could be accountable for the contribution they make to the segregation of disadvantaged students in their communities to promote more equitable enrolment practices. Reporting on the performance of each school's contribution to educating student equity groups would encourage all schools to improve their performance, and expenditure of public finances, in meeting Australia's education goals of excellence and equity.

Some of the infrastructure to do this already exists, especially the My School website, to enable schools to account for the extent to which they are part of the problem, or part of the solution. In Sciffer's words,

A School Segregation Index (SSI) could be developed from existing ACARA and ABS data. It would measure the degree to which a school enrolls low SES students, in

proportion to school size and the proportion of low SES students within the nearby geographical area. The SSI would allow schools to monitor the extent to which they are fulfilling their role in meeting the national goal for equity and allow governments to account to the community for progress towards achieving national education goals.

The article reveals how the index can be used now to calculate and identify which schools - including by sector, type and location emerge with a more equitable enrolment profile than others. The differences between public schools, selective schools, Catholic and independent schools, revealed in his article, won't come as any surprise to those familiar with the sectors at both local and national levels.

It is very significant. The publication of such information would not only ensure that schools are accountable (especially regarding those they choose to enrol), but it would better enable the setting of enrolment zones, town planning, transport planning and a more informed publication and critique of each school's performance. It would be an essential and long overdue addition to the largely inadequate data currently provided through My School. Might the day arrive when we see league tables of schools on the basis of their contribution to the national educational goal of equity within local contexts?

Michael Sciffer provides an excellent worked example of what the application of dissimilarity indices might reveal in one (anonymised) part of a large city. Existing data shows that the school with the highest SSI score has 67% low SES students, while the school with the lowest SSI score has 1% low SES students. They are both public schools, just 3 km apart by road. If they were to swap students such that the first school became representative of the local population, 254 students would have to be exchanged between both schools. Based on what we know from the established research about peer impact on student achievement, both schools would have a more identical spread, not only students, but of headline-grabbing levels of student achievement. The daily spectre of students travelling past one school to enrol in the other would become less pronounced.

Given the rusted-on character of school enrolment segregation in Australia it is hard to believe that any other forms of intervention will enable the breakthrough needed for improved school equity and student achievement. Something is certainly needed to water down the school compositional effects which for years have diminished the effectiveness of teachers and schools. At the very least, as Sciffer explains,

Accountability for the systemic causes of inequitable student outcomes would extend policy debates about the causes of inequalities from family and community factors to school systems and public policies. Addressing the negative un-intended consequences of school choice and competition policies is likely a more successful pathway to closing equity gaps compared to meeting the complexities of intergenerational family and community social exclusion.

Clearly the value of a School Segregation Index is that it can enable the long overdue reform of the way Australia provides and resources schools. It certainly can operate within school sectors but has an obvious appeal of how a single common framework of schools can work

to the advantage of all families and school sectors. That's a longer journey, but as Stéphane Vigneault points out, a sustained movement in that direction offers clear solutions to the most wicked of school system problems.