

# **Closing the Achievement Gaps in Australian Schools**

**Trevor Cobbold**

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## **Australia has a high quality, low equity school system**

In general, Australia has a very successful school system. It has very high average results by international standards and it ranks consistently amongst the top performing countries in international assessments of reading, mathematics and science.

However, there are large achievement gaps between low socio-economic status, or SES, students and high SES students; between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students; and between provincial and remote area students and metropolitan students. For example, the results from the OECD's Programme for International Student Assessment for 15 year olds, or PISA, in 2006 show that:

- 22-23% of low SES students did not achieve international proficiency standards in reading, mathematics and science compared to only 5% of high SES students.
- 38-40% of Indigenous students did not achieve the standards compared to 12% of all Australian students.
- 24-28% of students in remote and very remote areas did not achieve the standards compared to 12% of metropolitan students while 13-20% of provincial area students did not achieve them.

The gaps in terms of points on the PISA test score scale are also large (about 35-38 points are equivalent to one year of schooling):

- On average, low SES 15 year-old students are 2-2½ years behind high SES students. Low SES students enrolled in schools with a high proportion of students from low SES families are nearly four years behind students from high income families in high SES schools.
- On average, 15 year-old Indigenous students are 2-2½ years behind non-Indigenous students.
- On average, remote and very remote area students are about 18 months in learning behind metropolitan students, and
- Provincial area students are about six months or less behind metropolitan students.

Apart from the large achievement gap between low and high SES students there are also large gaps between Indigenous and provincial and remote area students and high SES students:

- On average, 15 year-old Indigenous students are about 3½ years behind high SES students.
- Remote and very remote area students are about 2½ years behind high SES students.
- Provincial area students are about 18 months behind high SES students.

## **Does inequity in education matter?**

These achievement gaps are the greatest challenge facing Australian education. Large inequities in education are a major concern for several reasons.

They are a grave social injustice. They mean that low SES, Indigenous, and provincial and remote area students are being denied the same educational opportunities as high SES students. Our education system effectively discriminates against low SES, Indigenous, and provincial and remote area families and compounds privilege.

These gaps mean that students from more privileged backgrounds have greater access to higher incomes, higher status occupations and positions of wealth, influence and power in society than students from more disadvantaged backgrounds.

The large disparities in school outcomes also indicate a waste of talents, skills and resources. They are, in effect, a measure of the potential to improve workforce skills and productivity.

The current and former prime ministers have emphasised the need to improve Australia's productivity. Well, eliminating inequity in education outcomes would be a huge boost to productivity. There is also a wealth of evidence to show that it would reduce the costs of health care, social security and crime.

## **What is equity in education?**

We should see equity in education as a dual objective:

- All children should receive an adequate education to participate in adult society;
- Children from different social groups should achieve similar average results.

First, it is a matter of justice and a moral obligation of society that all children should receive a minimum formal education required to make their own way as adults in society and to contribute to society. In today's society, this means that all students should complete Year 12 or its equivalent. Australia is a long way from achieving this goal.

- In 2008, 42% of students from low SES families failed to complete Year 12.
- Some 55% of Indigenous students enrolled in Years 7/8 fail to progress through to Year 12.
- In 2008, 49% of eligible students in remote areas and 40% of provincial area students did not complete Year 12.

However, achieving this minimum level of education for all students is not sufficient to achieve social equity in education. Even if all young people complete Year 12, large inequalities in outcomes will still exist between social groups and affect the life chances of individuals according to their membership of those groups.

Average outcomes of high SES students could still be much higher than for low SES students so that students from high SES families will continue to comprise a disproportionate number of those achieving at the higher levels of attainment while low SES students are clustered just above the minimum threshold. They will remain the favoured social group in terms of access to higher education and the higher paying occupations and status positions in society.

Equity in education therefore also demands that students from different social groups should achieve similar average results as well as the minimum threshold level of attainment expected for all students. There is no reason in principle to consider that the innate intelligence and

talents of low SES, Indigenous, and provincial and remote area students are somehow less than those of high SES students. No social, racial or geographic group of students is innately more intelligent or talented than others.

Achieving social equity in education should be a fundamental goal of public education. This means that low SES, Indigenous, and provincial and remote area students should achieve similar outcomes to students from high SES families. This is a demanding goal given the existing achievement gaps.

### **Where are the educationally disadvantaged?**

So, where are these educationally disadvantaged students? Well, the vast majority are in government schools.

Government schools are the main provider for educationally disadvantaged groups: 77% of low income students; 86% of Indigenous students, 80% of students with disabilities, 72% of students in provincial areas and 84% of remote area students attend government schools.

These students comprise a much larger proportion of government school enrolments than in private schools:

- Students from low income families comprised 40% of government school enrolments in 2006, compared to 25% in Catholic schools and 22% in Independent schools.
- Only 27% of government school enrolments were from high income families compared to 43% of Catholic school enrolments and 53% of Independent school enrolments.
- The proportion of Indigenous and remote area students in government schools is about three times that in Catholic and Independent schools.
- Students in provincial areas comprised 28% of government school enrolments in 2008 compared to 21% of private school enrolments.

Thus, government schools have much more to do with their resources than Catholic or Independent schools. They enrol the vast majority of students with family backgrounds that are associated with low levels of school achievement. In addition, they enrol the large majority of students with disabilities who require higher than average expenditure.

Overall, the extent of education disadvantage in government schools in Australia is about 1.7 times that in Catholic schools and is almost double that in Independent schools.

There is a long-standing perception that Catholic schools serve similar families to government schools. These figures demonstrate this to be a myth. The socio-economic composition of Catholic schools is much closer to that of Independent schools than to government schools. The proportion of students from low income families in Catholic schools is very similar to that in Independent schools for all jurisdictions except the Northern Territory.

### **Private schools are better resourced than government schools**

Given these challenges government schools are severely under-resourced in comparison to private schools.

Total expenditure per student in government schools is much lower than in Independent schools and is similar to that in Catholic schools. Average total expenditure in Independent

schools in 2007-08 was \$15,147 per student compared to \$10,723 per student in government schools and \$10,399 per student in Catholic schools. The average total expenditure for all private schools was \$12,303.

These figures are derived from official figures, but they have been adjusted to remove some incompatibilities between government and private school expenditure in the official figures such as the inclusion of an imputed cost of capital and payroll tax in government school expenditure but not in private school expenditure.

However, even these figures are likely to significantly over-estimate government school expenditure in comparison with private schools for several reasons. For example:

- Expenditure on school transport by governments is included in government school expenditure but not in private school expenditure.
- Private school expenditure does not include government expenditure on administration of funding and regulation of private schools and expenditure on shared government services for private schools whereas these items are included in government school expenditure.

Real expenditure (that is, adjusted for inflation) increased by much more in private schools than in government schools between 1998-99 and 2007-08. Total expenditure in government schools increased by \$1,147 per student between 1998-99 and 2007-08 compared to increases of \$1,739 per student in Catholic schools and \$2,207 in Independent schools. The increase in Independent schools was nearly double that in government schools while the increase in Catholic schools was 52% more.

## **Government funding increases have favoured privilege over disadvantage**

Despite government schools providing for the vast majority of educationally disadvantaged students and being under-resourced in comparison to private schools to meet these challenges, the largest increases in government funding (federal, state and territory) over the last decade have gone to private schools. In other words, Australian government funding policies have favoured privilege over disadvantage.

The most privileged school sector – Independent schools – received the largest increase in government funding. Between 1998-99 and 2007-08, government funding per student in Independent schools increased by 112% and 84% for Catholic schools compared to 67% for government schools. The average increase for all private schools was 89%.

Schools serving the wealthiest families in Australia continue to receive large and increasing amounts of government funding. Many high fee private schools have total expenditure per student which is two to three times that in government schools, yet they receive \$2,000-\$4,000 per student in Federal Government funding. For example, the most expensive private school in Australia, Geelong Grammar with Year 12 fees of nearly \$28,000, will get \$3,456 per student in federal funding in 2010. King's School, one of the most expensive schools in Sydney with Year 12 fees of nearly \$25,000, will get \$3,211 per student.

In contrast, the additional federal funding provided to disadvantaged schools under the Smarter Schools National Partnership program amounts to less than \$500 per student. Thus, Federal Government funding for high fee private schools is 4 to 8 times greater than the additional funding provided to disadvantaged schools.

Moreover, Federal Government funding per student in many elite schools increased by 100-200% and more since 2001 compared to increased funding (federal, state and territory) for government schools of 67% since 1998-99. For example, it increased by increased by 236% for Kings School and 268% for Geelong Grammar.

Thus, huge increases in government funding have gone to the wealthiest and least needy schools in Australia, while those most in need, government schools, continue to be denied the funding they require to provide an adequate education to all their students.

Supporting privilege is seen by governments today as more important than eliminating disadvantage and inequity in education. It is a policy which extends the advantages obtained from a wealthy background rather than reducing them. It effectively places more value on enriching the lives of those from privileged backgrounds than those who are not as well favoured in society.

This is indefensible in a society that calls itself a democracy. A fundamental change in the funding priorities of Australian governments is required to close the achievement gaps in education. A massive funding increase for government schools is needed to transform our high quality, low equity education system into a high quality, high equity system.

This is the challenge for the current review of school funding being conducted by the Gonski inquiry appointed by the Federal Government.

### **Government schools need a massive funding boost**

Overseas research studies show that the additional expenditure required for low SES students to achieve at adequate levels is 100-150% more than the cost of educating an average student.

If average government school expenditure is used as this benchmark, then some 22-33 times the level of funding for low SES government schools provided through the Smarter Schools National Partnership program is needed to close the achievement gap between low SES students and the average for all students in Australia. This amounts to an additional \$6 - \$9 billion a year. Double this amount, or \$13 - \$18 billion, is needed to close the achievement gap between low and high SES students.

An alternative measure of the funding needed to address education disadvantage in Australia is to apply the ratio of targeted equity enrolments in the government and private sectors we saw earlier to the average level of resources in private schools. As government schools have 1.8 times the learning need of all private schools, it could be said that they should receive 1.8 times the level of average private school expenditure. On this basis, additional funding for government schools of \$26 billion per year is required to resource government schools to meet the challenge of education disadvantage.

Whatever benchmark is used, it is clear that a massive funding increase for government schools is needed to close achievement gaps in Australia and turn our high quality, low equity school system into a high quality, high equity system.

It remains to be seen whether this will be the main priority for the Gonski inquiry. The prospects are not good. The committee of five is riven by conflicts of interest. Partisans of private schools are a majority. Its head is the chairman of one the wealthiest private schools

in Australia, Sydney Grammar, where school fees are over \$23,000 and which will receive nearly \$3.5 million in Federal Government funding this year. Yet again, it seems that privilege will trump disadvantage.