Choice or Equity in Education?

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This paper argues that choice has failed the promise of its advocates to improve education outcomes and that it has not only deflected education systems from dealing with the major challenge of inequity in education, but has exacerbated inequity. The result has been to reinforce privilege in education. The paper further argues that while choice in any education system is inevitable and cannot be denied, it should be strictly controlled in order to give priority to improving equity in education. The paper also sets out some fundamental steps to improve equity in education in Australia.

We have a fundamental choice to make in setting the future focus of school education policy in Australia. It is whether the focus is to be choice or equity. Do we continue down the path of making choice the keystone feature of school education in Australia and further develop the market in education or do we develop an education system that delivers successful and equitable school outcomes for all Australians?

1. Choice in schooling is inevitable, at least for some

Choice has long been a feature of education systems in Australia. People can choose private schools, people can choose a school through choice of housing location and in more recent times families have been able to choose among government schools. Families also have the choice of home schooling and it is likely that on-line schools will develop as a further option in the future. Indeed, in remote regions of Australia, on-line schooling is a desirable option.

Choice is part of any education system, no matter what its design. The ultimate resort to choice is through the housing market. Even in the most tightly controlled systems of zoning students to particular schools, choice of school could be exercised by purchasing houses in the catchment areas of desired schools. There is an extensive literature that demonstrates that house prices are influenced by differences in the demand for various schools where zoning is used [for example, see Downes & Zabel 2002; Cheshire & Shepppard 2004; Figlio & Lucas 2004; Kane et.al. 2005; Gibbons & Machin 2006; Davidoff & Leigh 2007]. Housing in the catchment areas of high demand schools attracts a premium.

A feature of choice in Australia is the extent of the private sector. Australia has the largest proportion of students in the private sector of any OECD country except the Netherlands, Belgium and Spain [OECD 2005]. Another feature is that Australia, along with many other countries, has eliminated strict school zoning over the last 20 years although many systems still retain a residence preference criterion, amongst others, for enrolment.

Some choices are more accessible to some families than others. Clearly, not everyone can choose high priced housing in order to access a school of choice. Not everyone can afford to choose a private school and not everyone can afford the transport costs of travelling to a more distant government school of choice.

In Australia, choice of school is mainly exercised by higher income, well-educated families [Beavis 2004; Preston 2007]. However, direct choice of school is probably being exercised by nearly 50 per cent of families in Australia as 33 per cent of all students are enrolled in private schools and a significant but smaller proportion of families exercise choice within government systems.

2.   Choice and competition has trumped equity as a national education priority

Choice of school has been promoted as the "magic bullet" to improve student and school performance. The central idea is that increasing choice will increase competition between schools for students which creates greater incentives to improve student results.

This "competition" or "market-based" approach to improving education outcomes has been the dominant feature of education policy over the last 10-15 years. It has largely blocked out improving equity as a national priority. Equity concerns in education have been sidelined despite the efforts of many.

The Howard Government extended choice and competition largely through increased support for private schools. It increased government subsidies for private schools, reduced restrictions on the establishment of new private schools and established a new type of private school with privileged funding arrangements – technical colleges. Total government funding per student in private schools in Australia has increased by about three times the increase in government school funding in recent years. Between 1999-2000 and 2004-05, it increased in real terms by over 30 per cent compared to an increase of about 10 per cent for government schools [Cobbold 2007].

Choice and competition was also promoted by the introduction of national assessments and reporting of school results. Reporting school results and a range of other school information was made a requirement for federal funding of government and private schools. However, in the light of the defeat of the Howard Government state governments have not fully complied with these requirements.

The Rudd Government is committed to maintaining the choice regime established by the Howard Government. Indeed, it is committed to taking it further by publishing individual school results on national reading, writing and numeracy assessments. This will inevitably lead to the publication of school league tables.

Choice and competition does not have the same focus in the National Goals of Schooling. The strong equity component of the National Goals has been effectively ignored, or at least downplayed, by governments all around Australia. Now the National Goals are being re-written to exclude social equity in outcomes.

While Australia has high average education outcomes it is far from achieving equity in education.

First, a significant proportion of young Australians do not receive an adequate education. Over 30% of all students do not complete Year 12. About 13-14% of 15

year-old students do not achieve expected international proficiency standards in reading, mathematics and science.

Second, there are large achievement gaps between students from low and high socio-economic status (SES) families and between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students. Students from high SES families have much higher education outcomes than students from low SES families:
- 41% of students from low SES families fail to complete Year 12 compared to 22% of students from high SES families;
- On average, 15 year-old students from low SES families are over two years behind high SES students in reading, mathematics and science;
- 22-23% of students from low SES families do not achieve expected international proficiency standards in reading, mathematics and science.

Non-Indigenous students achieve much higher education outcomes than Indigenous students:
- 60% of Indigenous students who start secondary schooling do not go on to Year 12 compared to 25% of all students;
- On average, 15 year-old Indigenous students are over two years of schooling behind non-Indigenous students in reading, mathematics and science;
- 38-40% of 15 year-old Indigenous students do not achieve expected international proficiency standards in reading, mathematics and science compared to 13-14% of all Australian students.

These inequities provide the major challenges facing Australian education today. We need to make improving equity the focus of national education policy and action. To do this we need to challenge choice on its failures. Choice has not delivered on its promise to improve education outcomes and it has exacerbated inequity and social segregation in education. It has facilitated greater social differentiation in education.

3.   Choice has not delivered on its promise

Choice has not led to improvements in student achievement

The weight of evidence from the best designed and most comprehensive research studies around the world is that increasing choice and competition between schools does not improve student achievement once student and family background characteristics are taken into account [see Cobbold 2007]. These studies show that:
- Increased choice and competition between government schools has little impact on student achievement;
- There is little difference between student outcomes in selective and other government schools;
- Student outcomes in charter schools in the United States are more often than not lower than in traditional government schools;
- Private school competition has little to no effect on student achievement in government schools;
- There is little difference between student outcomes in private schools and government schools.

In addition, the few studies available on the impact of charter schools on the performance of traditional public schools show mixed results. Studies of the impact of small voucher programs in the United States that allow students to attend private schools are also mixed. Studies of the large-scale voucher program in Chile show little effect on overall student achievement, but a significant increase in disparities in school performance.

There have been a number of investigations as to whether specialist schools improve student performance [for example, see Schagen & Schagen 2003; Clark 2007; Mangan et.al. 2007; Taylor 2007]. Several have found that specialist school status may lead to a small increase in performance, independently of the level of social disadvantage. Generally, the differences were not large and the order of the gains by the different specialisms differs between the studies. For the most part, however, these studies have failed to take account of the more privileged funding arrangements available for specialist schools compared to other government schools.

While few research studies have been undertaken in Australia, the prima facie evidence suggests that the Howard Government's enhancement of choice and privatisation has had little impact on average levels of student achievement. There has been no improvement in the proportion of students achieving the national literacy and numeracy benchmarks since national assessments were introduced in 1999, allowing for statistical uncertainty associated with the measures.

The results of research on government and private school performance in Australia are mixed once student background characteristics are taken into account. Some show higher student achievement and completion rates in Catholic and Independent schools than for government school students while others show higher university results by students from government schools [see Le & Miller 2003; Evans 2004; Birch & Miller 2005, 2006; Win & Miller 2005; Dobson & Skuja 2005].

At best, the overall evidence on the effects of choice and competition on student achievement is mixed and this is a shaky foundation for making choice the focus of education policy.

Choice has not improved the quality of education

The quality of education does not appear to be improved by more choice and is possibly reduced. A range of research studies, including an OECD review, demonstrate that expectations that competition and choice would foster innovation in education are largely unfulfilled in practice [Lubienski 2001, 2003; Hirsch 2002; Adnett & Davies 2005; Wylie 2006]. Markets in school education appear to contribute to standardization rather than innovation in classroom practice. They tend to strengthen curriculum conformity rather than encourage diversity. Increasing choice and competition between schools also comes at the cost of reducing collaboration and co-operation.

Choice also provides an opportunity to restrict the curriculum. Many religious based schools funded by the taxpayer fail to provide a comprehensive curriculum. Many do not teach sex education and many teach creationism rather than evolution.

Choice has exacerbated differences in school performance

Many studies in different countries have found that there is greater sorting of students by ability between schools where direct choice of school is available [see Cobbold 2007]. Choice of school is used predominantly by better-off families and the strong association between socio-economic background and student achievement means that choice leads to increased academic segregation between schools. This is accentuated where schools are able to "cream-off" high achieving students from other schools and restrict, or "crop-off", the entry of low achieving students. Increased competition in school education tends to re-distribute high achieving students and students from well-off families between schools, thus increasing disparities in school performance.

There is evidence of this occurring in Australia. Several studies show that schools are highly stratified according to student achievement [for example, Keating & Lamb 2004; Lamb et.al. 2004].

4.   Choice has increased social segregation in schooling

Choice and competition between schools has increased social segregation between schools. A range of studies conclude that socio-economic and/or racial segregation in schools has increased in Chile, Denmark, Great Britain, New Zealand, Scotland, Sweden and the United States over the last decade or so and that choice and competition in schooling has contributed to this [see Cobbold 2007]. While some studies dispute this finding, it is supported by the general weight of research evidence.

School choice and competition appears to contribute an additional layer to existing patterns of neighbourhood and school segregation as it offers increased opportunity for high income white flight from socially mixed local schools. Private schools in particular are characterized by strong socio-economic and racial homogeneity.

Social segregation between government and private schools is significant in Australia and it has increased over the past twenty years or more. Government schools are increasingly becoming schools for lower and middle SES families and private schools have increased their enrolments of students from middle and high SES families.

According to the most recent ABS Household Expenditure Survey [ABS 2006], 26 per cent of students at government schools in 2003-04 were from low-income households, compared to 17 per cent of students in Catholic schools and 16 per cent of students in Independent schools. In contrast, 26 per cent of students in Independent schools were from high income households, compared to 16 per cent at Catholic schools and only 8 per cent of students at government schools.

Using different definitions of income levels and using Census data, Preston [2007] found that 40 per cent of government school students in 2006 were from low-income families compared to 25 per cent of Catholic school students and 22 per cent of Independent school students. In contrast, only 27 per cent of government school students were from high-income families compared to 43 per cent of Catholic school students and 53 per cent of Independent school students. About 80 per cent of all students from low income families attend government schools.

Preston also demonstrated that there was an increase in the proportion of students from low income families relative to those from high income families in government

schools since the election of the Howard Government in 1996. The ratio for primary schools increased from 1.21 in 1996 to 1.35 in 2006 while that for secondary schools increased from 1.34 to 1.62. The opposite trend occurred in private schools. In private primary schools it decreased from 0.59 to 0.52 and from 0.54 to 0.48 in secondary schools.

Social segregation between schools also exists within the government school sector. It largely reflects residential patterns. However, the expansion of selective schools and the popularity of some schools has led to greater socio-economic segregation in the government sector.

5.   Choice has exacerbated inequity in education

A recent OECD study states that school choice poses risks to equity and requires careful management to ensure that it does not result in increased differences in the social composition of schools [OECD 2007].

Increased social segregation in schooling arising from increased choice and competition can exacerbate inequity in education in two main ways. First, it increases disparities between schools in student learning needs and the real resources available to meet those needs. Second, increasing concentrations of students from low SES families in some schools tend to lead to lower overall outcomes. In addition, social segregation in schooling can undermine social tolerance, understanding and cohesion.

Increased disparities in learning needs and resources

Socially segregated schools are inherently unequal in terms of learning need and the real resources at the disposal of schools.

Schools with a high proportion of students from low SES families have higher levels of learning needs and other problems than high SES schools because low income is associated with lower levels of student achievement. In low SES schools, the scale of challenges is much larger because of the greater concentration of students experiencing them is greater. They generally have to devote far more time and resources to family and health crises, children with few educational materials in their homes, and many children with very weak educational preparation.

Generally, the resources available to low SES schools are not commensurate with the problems they face. Low SES schools are generally funded on the same per capita basis as other schools, with few allowances for the level of need they have to deal with. They have less real resources because they have higher costs and burdens. The ratio of teachers, counsellors and other staff to the level of education and social need is lower than for other schools. This means that equal dollars cannot produce equal opportunities. This inequality in real resources exists both between school sectors and between schools within the government sector.

In addition, low SES schools also often have less qualified, less experienced teachers, and high staff turnover which makes it more difficult to address high levels of learning and other needs. A wide range of overseas studies show that high poverty schools have less experienced and less qualified teachers [for example, Lankford et.al. 2002; Clotfelter et.al. 2006; Peske & Haycock 2006; Boyd et.al. 2007a]. Students in low SES and majority non-white schools tend to be taught by teachers with the lowest

credentials, such as certification status and exam scores, university admission test scores, ranking of undergraduate college and teaching experience. Several studies also show that teachers are more prone to leave schools serving high proportions of low-achieving, low-income, and minority students for more economically and educationally advantaged schools [Hanushek et.al. 2004; Bonesronning et.al. 2005; Falch & Strom 2005; Karsten et.al. 2006; Boyd et.al 2007b].

These disparities were exacerbated by the funding policies of the Howard Government to promote choice and competition between schools. On average, private schools are better funded than government schools because their lower proportion of higher cost students allows them additional resources for all students. Much needed resources were diverted to the higher SES private schools rather than used to address high levels of learning and other needs in the lower SES government schools.

Overall, private schools which have relatively lower learning needs have received much larger increases in funding than government schools which have relatively higher learning needs. As noted above, total government funding per private school student was increased by three times the increase in government school funding in the six years to 2004. Many high SES private schools have a large per student funding advantage over government schools. About 70 per cent of all private school students are funded beyond the level of entitlement under the so-called SES model and the large proportion of over-funding goes to higher SES schools [SOS 2008]. The increase in funding for privilege in education has effectively denied resources needed to reduce the effects of disadvantage in low SES schools and to improve equity in education.

A flow-on effect is that schools serving disadvantaged communities face increasing difficulties in attracting and retaining well-qualified teachers [Thomson 2002; Mills & Gale 2004; Rice 2006]. There is also anecdotal evidence that disadvantaged schools have been losing experienced teachers to private schools. For example, a couple of years ago one of the poorest primary schools in Victoria lost five of its ten teachers to Haileybury College, a large wealthy Melbourne private school [Milburn 2006]. Talented teachers are often lured to private schools by offers of free or heavily discounted tuition for their children, higher salaries and other perks. The impact is most severe on disadvantaged schools, which had trouble recruiting staff.

Lower average student outcomes

Social segregation in schooling is also associated with large disparities in student outcomes between schools. Educational outcomes in low SES schools tend to be lower in terms of test scores, retention rates to Year 12, secondary school graduation rates and university admission rates.

Much of this is explained by the different family backgrounds of students in low and high SES schools. Many studies show that differences in family background and resources explain much of the achievement gap between students from low SES and high SES families.

However, there is also a school composition effect on student achievement. A range of international studies generally show that schools with a high proportion of low SES students and non-white students generally have lower levels of student achievement

[Rumberger & Palady 2005, 2006; Borman & Dowling 2006; Dronkers & Levels 2007; Oh 2007; Rangvid 2007]. This effect remains even when account is taken of differences between schools in the family background of students. The poverty of a school, as well as the poverty of an individual, determines educational outcomes. A student attending a school where the average SES of the student body is low is likely to have lower outcomes than a student from a similar background attending a school where the average SES of the student body is high. Thus, increasing social segregation between schools is likely to reduce average student achievement.

Furthermore, while the social composition of schools has a significant impact on the achievement of all students, studies show that the impact is greater on low SES and immigrant/minority students [Willms 2006]. There is a "double jeopardy" effect for students from low SES and minority families in that they tend to be disadvantaged because of their circumstances at home, but when they are also segregated into low SES and/or predominantly minority schools they are likely to fare even worse.

Factors contributing to this 'school effect' of concentrated disadvantage appear to include differences in school resources, such as income and teacher quality, and a 'peer' effect on learning from a concentration of students from low SES backgrounds.

Reduced social tolerance and cohesion

Social segregation in schools is also socially divisive as it undermines social understanding and tolerance between different social groups.

Social and religious segregation in schools breeds social intolerance in communities and workplaces and undermines social understanding and cohesion. Schools segregated by class, religion and race make it more difficult for children to develop a real understanding of people of different backgrounds and to break down barriers of social intolerance. Socially segregated schools can feed a lack of social empathy, indeed, social intolerance and an inability of people from different backgrounds to effectively work together and live together.

6.   What should we do about choice?

The case so far is that promoting choice and competition as the fundamental features of education systems doesn't deliver better student outcomes or better quality education and it comes with the considerable cost of greater social segregation and inequity in schooling. It also has considerable resource costs in terms of the duplication of facilities and drawing on taxpayer funds.

This does not mean that choice should be denied to families, but it does mean that the role of choice in our education system should be downgraded and its operation constrained. This should be done in the interest of promoting equity in education as our fundamental priority.

We should not deny choice

It is not possible to deny choice in education. Choice is too pervasive whatever system is used to allocate children to schools. We cannot reject choice because there isn't a system of allocation of children to schools in which choice does not play a role. The issue is how to tame choice or contain it.

We cannot return to the old system of zoning families to schools without choice. This would be a return to a class-based segregation system based on housing choice. Schools were segregated by class because of housing segregation. This still happens. The people who now make most of choice of school are precisely the same people who could take the best advantage under the old system.

In any case, to attempt to deny choice of school is politically unrealistic and would seriously distract education debate from the fundamental challenges facing us.

The issue is whether we continue to promote choice and competition as the key focus of education policy or whether we attempt to modify free choice in the interest of developing a more equitable education system. Equity in education should trump choice as a defining feature of education systems. The goal of improving equity in education places a constraint on free choice and the limits of choice should be institutionalised.

We need both a harm minimisation strategy for school choice and a constructive positive program to address inequity in education outcomes.

We should draw a boundary around the operation of choice

Governments can minimise/reduce the impact of choice by measures that affect the supply and the demand for choice. Choice can be constrained by both regulating the number and type of schools and regulating the demand for schools. Choice is also fundamentally affected by government funding. Some key changes are to:

- Tighten the registration requirements for private schools;
- Stop the rorts of government funding of private schools;
- Reform government funding of private schools;
- Investigate controlled choice models for government schools;
- Review admission policies for high demand government schools;
- Contain the growth of selective government schools;
- Use urban planning and housing policy to develop socially integrated neighbourhoods.

Tighten the registration requirements for private schools

The supply of choice of school is largely a matter for state governments. All governments have registration requirements for private schools and plan the supply of government schools.

There is a strong case to review the registration of private schools. The controls and requirements for government schools are generally much more stringent than those for private schools, despite the fact that private schools receive considerable funding from the taxpayer, in some cases up to 75 per cent of their total funding. For example, few governments set a minimum size of private schools for registration while in practice operating de facto minimum sizes for government schools. Labor governments around Australia have been closing small neighbourhood government schools while maintaining funding for small private schools. The effect of these contradictory policies is to encourage the shift to private schools and deny access to a local school

for many low-income families, thereby increasing their costs of attending school and generally undermining their children's education.

Private schools also have complete control over their enrolments. They can generally choose who to enrol and they are free to exclude students. Private school admission and exclusion policies should be subject to government influence in return for government funding.

Existing regulations regarding curriculum quality and comprehensiveness are either inadequate or not enforced. For example, many Christian schools also fail to properly teach natural history as part of the science curriculum, ignoring or dismissing evolution in favour of creationism. Also, many religious schools fail to provide adequate sex education and information about safe sex. Some curriculum documents of the Catholic school system proscribe information about safe sex, and this may be the case for Islamic schools and Christian fundamentalist schools. It is questionable whether these schools should be registered and provided with public funding while they deny access to basic science and important public health information to their students.

Assessment of the impact of proposals for new private schools or extensions of existing schools is often non-existent or very inadequate, especially since the abolition of the Commonwealth New Schools Policy by the Howard Government. There is a need to develop guidelines for the assessment of the impact of new schools on existing schools across Australia. They are needed to ensure a proper planning process that supports the role of public education. They are also needed to ensure consistency in assessing impact of different proposals and to avoid unnecessary duplication and under-utilisation of existing schools.

Many of the school registration bodies are not independent. Many are dominated by private school representatives and the processes used to assess applications are not fully transparent.

Stop funding rorts by private schools

Action should be taken to stop private schools rorting taxpayer funding. For example, some private schools are rorting government funding by establishing separate campuses of the same school so as to maintain its "funding maintained" status for the new campus. A campus of a schools has the same funding status as the parent school and where the parent school is "funding maintained" this provides an advantage for the new campus. If the campus were established as a new school it would be funded according to its assessed socio-economic status. One private school in NSW has established 12 campuses of the parent school and 11 are from 60 to 600 kilometres away from the parent school [DEST 2007].

Some private schools have been caught out inflating their enrolments to claim more government funding than they were entitled to. One school in Queensland claimed double its number of students to earn extra education funding from the state and federal governments [Noonan & Patty 2008]. Private schools in receipt of government funding should be subject to the same stringent auditing requirements that apply to government schools.

Reform government funding of private schools

Reform of the system of funding private schools is fundamental to controlling choice. The priority is to design a new funding approach.

The SES model should be replaced by a scheme that links government funding to the goals of schooling, the social role of schools and student need. The basic elements of this funding approach are as follows:

- An in-school baseline component that is determined by rating each non-government school against the social role of government schools. This could be determined by criteria such as inclusive enrolment practices, suspension and exclusions policies, curriculum requirements and the level of fees;
- An additional funding component for students with identified learning needs in literacy and numeracy and for socio-economically disadvantaged, ATSI and special education students.

Private schools whose social purpose is assessed as similar to government schools would receive a similar amount of baseline funding as government schools. The maximum baseline government funding entitlement would go to those private schools which did not apply religious, ethnic or academic tests for enrolment; which accepted the same procedures on suspensions, expulsions and transfers as government schools; and which had a minimum level of fees. Schools with more restrictive practices would receive less funding.

However, the maximum funding entitlement would be less than the average baseline funding for government schools because private schools do not perform the same public role as the government system in ensuring local access to schools and to special schools.

However, students with identified literacy and numeracy learning needs, students from low SES families, students with disabilities and Indigenous students in non-government schools would receive the same level of government funding support as those enrolled in government schools. So, private schools that have a higher proportion of these students than in government schools would receive higher funding.

Investigate controlled choice of government schools

The growth of selective schools and other high demand schools in the government sector raises the issue of how best to promote social integration in the sector.

One way is to investigate the use of controlled choice models. Controlled choice attempts to provide choice while maintaining SES, ethnic and racial integration. Controlled choice plans do away with neighbourhood attendance districts, create zones, and allow families to choose within their zone, provided that admitting students to their school of choice does not upset the racial and ethnic balance at that school [see Kahlenberg 2003]. For example, a certain mix range of SES backgrounds could be mandated, thus giving schools limited discretion over enrolments, and over-subscribed schools could be required to use a lottery for admissions. The lottery could be constrained by a rule that a sibling of a child already in the school would be automatically accepted and a weighting in the lottery to help the school achieve a prescribed mix of SES families.

Minor use is made of controlled choice models in the US, largely for racial balance, and there has been recent interest in such models in the Netherlands to reduce segregation of students from immigrant communities [Cunningham 2008].

However, there is a tension between these models and the ideas behind the neighbourhood school which needs to be examined. Moreover, socio-economic integration is not really an option for many urban areas. It is not possible to reduce the number of low-income students in each school below, say 40%, when the suburb or district is 80% low-income. Controlled choice models seem to be limited to small-scale use.

Contain the growth of selective government schools

Another issue to be considered is how to constrain the growth of selective schools in the public system because they add another layer of social segregation and inequity.

A key requirement is that no more fully selective schools be established in the government system. This leaves the issue of what to do with those that have already been established. One approach would be to open them up to enrolments not based on a selective test and use some form of controlled choice model to develop a more socially integrated student profile.

Use urban planning and housing policy for social integration of suburbs

As noted, urban planning and housing policy are also important factors in school choice. It is not impossible to alter the extent to which choice in the housing market translates into school choice. Integration of neighbourhoods could be promoted by incorporating it as a principle of urban planning. Mandates could be placed on new developments and subsidies and incentives used to influence existing neighbourhoods. Zoning boards could regulate neighbourhoods to promote socio-economic segregation by, for example, requiring the integration of affordable housing into each neighbourhood, thus making it harder for parents to find socio-economically segregated neighbourhood schools.

We should resist deepening choice and markets in education

The gravest danger on the horizon is the introduction of league tables. The introduction of league tables will serve to deepen competition and choice.

The first step is to marshal the evidence and the case against league tables. Already, the Rudd Government has used misleading evidence to support its case. For example, the Commonwealth Treasury made its case in the Budget Papers on the basis of selective evidence [Commonwealth of Australia 2008]. It only cites two studies, and one of those doesn't actually show that public reporting of school performance enhances school performance while in the other the effect is miniscule after taking account of differences in demographic and socio-economic composition.

The evidence on the impact of reporting school results on school performance from a range of studies is mixed [see GSEC 2004]. Some studies find a positive effect and others find no achievement effect. However, many studies show that schools often try to artificially boost their results. They use a variety of ways to do this, including:
- 'cream skimming' high achieving students from other schools;

- reducing time and resources devoted to student learning in curriculum areas and experiences not subject to standardised tests;
- devoting more time and resources to students who are close to reporting benchmarks at the expense of both high achieving and very low achieving students;
- excluding low achieving students from the tests by various means such as suspension from school; and
- cheating by helping students in tests and changing answers.

Such strategic and fraudulent behaviour by schools means that reporting of school results can provide a very misleading picture of overall student achievement in different schools.

School league tables are misleading advertising for other reasons as well. Differences in school results and rankings on league tables don't necessarily measure quality differences between schools.

Average school outcomes say more about the catchment areas of schools than about the quality of their programs and teaching. League table rankings may reflect differences in student intake rather than the quality of teaching.

Furthermore, school rankings are not determined by classroom teaching alone. They are influenced by other factors such as student absenteeism, the extent of parent involvement in learning at home, the extent to which students are engaged in after-hours tutoring and the socio-economic and cultural background of families. League tables don't distinguish between the 'value added' by the school and the influence of family background and these other factors.

A recent OECD report states that publication of school results can damage equity in education by compounding the polarisation of "good" and "bad" schools and encouraging social segregation between schools [OECD 2007].

However, monitoring school performance is a necessary part of improving equity in education. It can be done in ways that do not identify individual schools, for example by reporting:
- The number of schools in each state/territory whose average result falls within different score ranges so that the extent of improvement from year to year can be assessed; and
- The proportion of all students, and those from targeted equity groups, whose results fall within different score ranges so as to monitor changes in the degree of social equality in outcomes.

7.   What should we do about equity in education?

It is not enough to draw a boundary around choice in schooling and to oppose extending choice and competition. The real challenge is to change the focus of public debate from choice and competition to improving equity in education. To do this it is imperative to provide an alternative vision and agenda. It involves much more than advocating on behalf of public education. Public education, for all its successes, has not delivered equity in education.

There are some important steps in making improving equity a national education priority:

- We need to have a clear concept of what is equity in education;
- We need to make the case for improving equity as a national priority;
- We need to specify the key challenges for government in improving equity;
- We need to design a comprehensive strategy to improve equity.

The concept of equity in education

A first step is to clarify what is meant by equity in education. This is necessary because there are various interpretations, some of which are inconsistent with others.

The preferred view should be one which focuses on the outcomes to be achieved from schooling. From this perspective, equity has a dual aspect:

- Each child should receive an adequate education to make their own way as adults in society and to contribute to society;
- Students from different social groups should achieve similar outcomes.

Thus, there is an individual and a social component to achieving equity in education. They are challenging goals.

In today's society, an adequate education means successful completion of Year 12 or its equivalent. Those who do not complete Year 12 are to a large extent cut off from further education and training and have limited future employment prospects. This also means that the school system should ensure that all children make satisfactory progress through their school years in order to successfully complete Year 12.

Social equity in education means that students from different social groups should have similar average outcomes from school and a similar range of outcomes. There is no reason in principle to believe that innate talents, motivation and effort to succeed in schooling are distributed differently between the children of different races, ethnic backgrounds or socio-economic background. No social or racial group is innately more intelligent or talented than others. It does not mean that all children should achieve the same education outcomes only that children from different social groups should achieve similar outcomes.

The case for improving equity in education

The case for improving equity in education remains as strong as ever. It is a moral, social and economic case.

Adequacy in education

It is a matter of justice that all children should receive a minimum formal education required to make their own way as adults in society and to contribute to society. Society has a moral obligation to ensure that all children receive an adequate education. Indeed, the moral authority of a society that calls itself a democracy depends, in no small part, on providing all its citizens with an adequate education.

It is also in society's interest to ensure that all children receive an adequate education. Social waste is incurred if some children do not receive an adequate education. It

means that human talents that could contribute to society are not fostered. All children have talents that can be realised through education and formal learning. By failing to develop those talents, society incurs lost opportunities for its development and enrichment.

Further social waste is incurred by the long-term social and financial costs to a society of inadequate education. The social costs of inadequate education are high in that those who are not able to participate socially and economically in society generate higher costs for health, income support, child welfare and security. Inadequate education for some leads to large public and social costs in the form of lower income and economic growth, reduced tax revenues, and higher costs of such public services as health care, criminal justice, and public assistance.

Social equity in education

Principles of fairness and social justice demand that children from different social backgrounds have an equal start in adult life. Ensuring that all children receive an adequate education is an important step in this direction, but it is not a sufficient condition.

Social equity in education would not be achieved even if all students gained the minimum education threshold, such as completion of Year 12. Average outcomes of students from high SES backgrounds could still be much higher than those from low SES backgrounds even though all students in the latter group achieved the minimum standard. Low SES students could be clustered just above the minimum standard while the large majority of high SES students are clustered well above the standard.

Large disparities in education outcomes mean that the social group individuals are born into strongly affects their life opportunities. Large disparities in school outcomes according to different social backgrounds entrench inequality and discrimination in society. 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.

Differential access to education blights a democratic society. In a democracy, education outcomes should not depend on family background and wealth. A democracy should strive to reduce the education advantage and disadvantage conferred according to whether a child is born to rich or poor parents or to a particular race or ethnic background.

Reducing social inequity in education would provide a massive boost to skill levels in the work force. The large disparity in school outcomes also indicates a waste of talents, skills and resources. It is, in effect, a measure of the potential to improve workforce skills and productivity. Employers around Australia are concerned about skill shortages in the workforce. Reducing the achievement gaps in school outcomes would assist in alleviating these shortages.

Improving social equity in education outcomes can contribute to reducing social inequality and injustice in other areas of life. For example, it would help reduce the substantial gaps in health outcomes between rich and poor families and between Indigenous and non-Indigenous families.

Key challenges to improve equity in education

We must specify the key challenges for government policy in improving equity. These challenges are defined by the inequities that exist in school outcomes as noted above. The key challenges facing Australian school education today are to:

- Increase the proportion of students who receive an adequate education;
- Reduce the large achievement gap between students from low and high SES families;
- Reduce the large achievement gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students; and
- Reduce social segregation in schools.

Developing a strategy to improve equity in education

We must design a comprehensive strategy to improve equity in education that takes account of the way inequity in education is reproduced generation after generation both without and within schools. Such a strategy has to acknowledge that there are a range of factors beyond schools that influence school outcomes. Economic and social factors are important factors in education. Early childhood experiences have a significant influence on school education.

There are three important strategic areas for action within the school system to improve equity in education outcomes. These are:

- improved teaching and learning opportunities focused on reducing the achievement gaps;
- providing a range of student welfare, behavioural and learning support mechanisms through full-service or community schools; and
- developing home/school partnerships, particularly with low SES and Indigenous families.

System planning for improvement is critical to improving equity in education outcomes. Each education system should develop a comprehensive plan to ensure that all children receive an adequate education and to reduce the achievement gaps. Similarly, each school should have a plan to reduce the achievement gap in their school. Teachers should have individual student learning and development plans for those who have fallen behind.

Beyond this, improved funding for education is fundamental. This involves both increased funding and a revised funding model for government and private schools.

We need a research program and a nationally co-ordinated strategy to carry this through. We need to bring together individuals and organisations to prepare and advocate for a national equity strategy.

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