

SAVE OUR SCHOOLS

Equity or Privilege in Education?

A Speech to the 2015 AEU Federal Conference

Trevor Cobbold

February 2015

<http://www.saveourschools.com.au>

<https://twitter.com/SOSAust>

The basic proposition that I want to put to you today is that the future of education policy in Australia is about whether we want to improve equity in education or compound privilege. This is the fundamental choice that we face and that choice is going to impact on both the nature of our future society and its economic prosperity.

The most open defence of privilege in conservative circles is that by the UK Prime Minister, David Cameron:

What you have to realise about the Conservative Party is that it is a coalition of privileged interests. Its main purpose is to defend that privilege.

The defenders of privilege in education in Australia are not quite as explicit in stating their goal as David Cameron. Their tack is to deny that there is an equity problem in education. For example:

I don't believe there is an equity problem in Australia. [Christopher Pyne]

Steve, you're the first person who has described the Gonski report as being all about equity.....If it was all about equity then that is news to most people. [Christopher Pyne]

The claim that SES is a significant barrier to educational achievement is “without foundation, and should be ignored”. [Independent Schools Victoria]

Denying that there is an equity problem in education and that low SES is a barrier to educational achievement is tantamount to defending the rule of privilege.

Contrary to what Christopher Pyne says, I will show that the latest NAPLAN results published at the end of last year confirm once again that Australia has a huge equity problem and it is worsening rather than improving – a large proportion of disadvantaged students are not achieving an adequate level of education and there are large gaps of four to six years learning between the results of disadvantaged and advantaged students.

I will further show that despite huge inequity in education, massive funding increases in recent years have favoured the more advantaged school sectors at the expense of the disadvantaged. Privilege continues to rule in the war over school resources.

The latest NAPLAN results show that high percentages of low SES, Indigenous and remote area students in Year 5 & 9 are below the NAPLAN standards in reading, writing and numeracy compared to high SES students [see Chart 1]. Around one-fifth of low SES and remote area students in Year 5 and about one-third of Indigenous students are below the standards. In contrast, only 2 to 4 per cent of high SES students are below the standards. In the case of Year 9, similar proportions of these disadvantaged students are below the reading and numeracy standards and very high proportions are below the writing standard – over one-third of low SES and remote area students and one-half of all Indigenous students. In Year 9, the percentage of low SES students below the reading standard was 9 times that of high SES students; it was 5 times that of high SES students in writing and 7 times in numeracy. The differences were similar for Year 5.

Although not shown in the chart, the situation has worsened since 2008. The percentage of low SES, Indigenous and remote area Year 9 students below the writing standard has increased significantly. It also increased in reading for low SES and remote area students. There was little change in numeracy apart from a reduction in Indigenous students below the standard.

I should point out also that while the percentage of LBOTE students below the standards is similar to the Australian average there is enormous variation in the results of this group. Very low percentages of students of East Asian ancestry are below the standards while very high percentages of students from the South Pacific Islands and some Middle Eastern and African countries are below the standards.

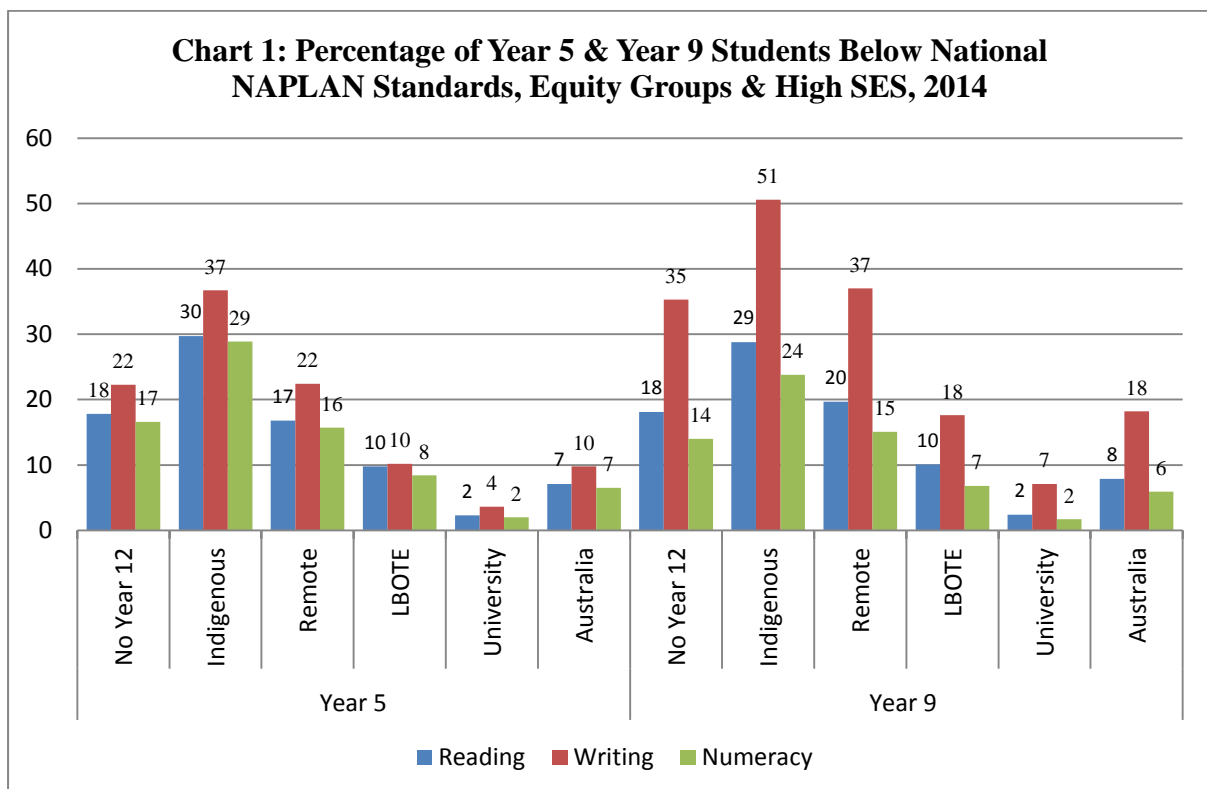
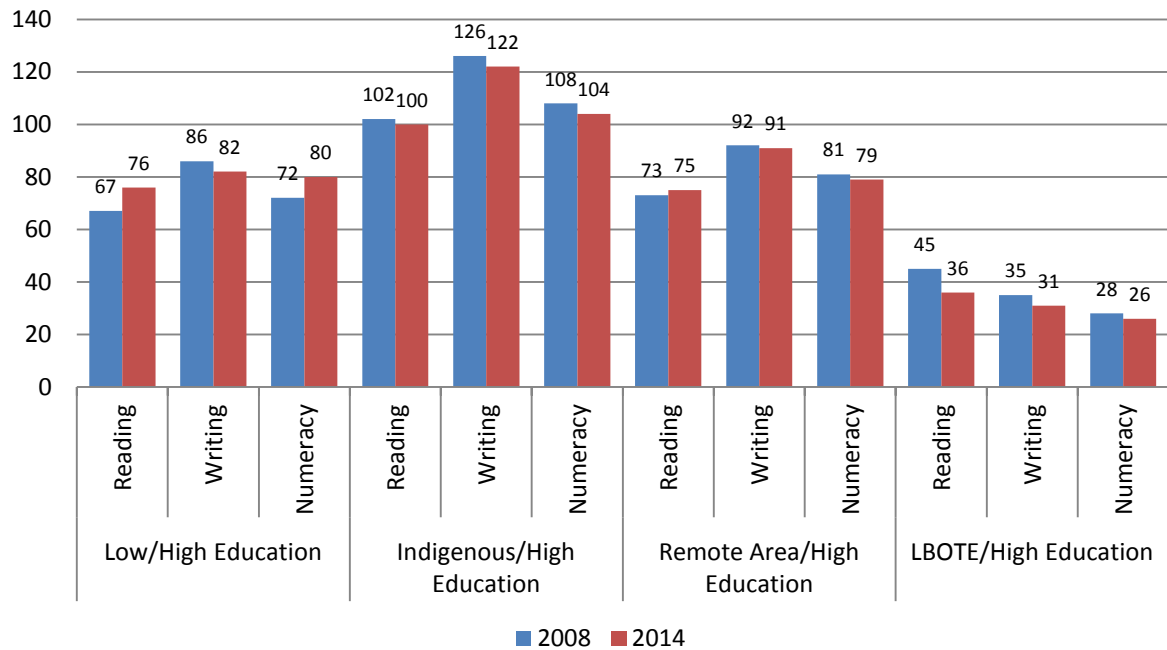


Chart 2 shows the gaps in NAPLAN test scores between disadvantaged students and high SES students in 2008 and 2014 (the writing gaps are for 2011 and 2014). The gaps are very large. At Year 9, one year of learning is equivalent to about 20 points or so on the NAPLAN scale. For example, the achievement gaps between low & high SES students of 76 to 82 points in 2014 were equivalent to about 4 years of learning. For Indigenous students the gaps of 100 to 122 points were equivalent to 5-6 years of learning.

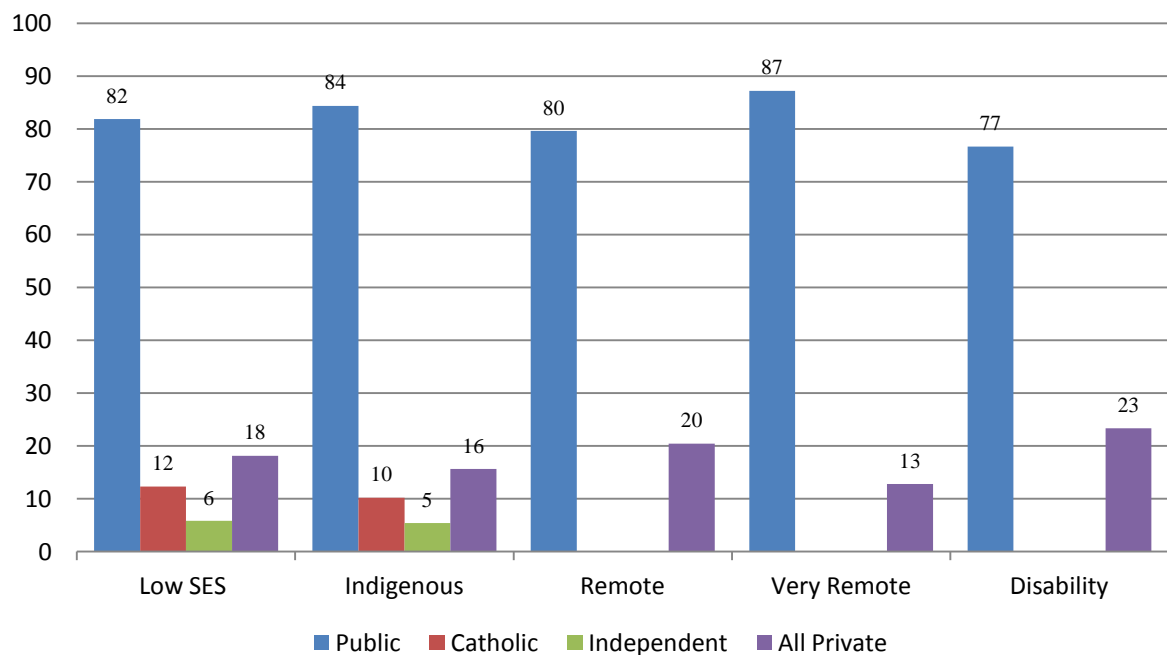
It is also clear from this chart that little or no progress was made in reducing inequity in education since 2008. Indeed, inequity between low and high SES students has increased. The achievement gap increased by 10 points in reading and 8 points in numeracy, but no significant change in writing. There was no significant change in the gaps for Indigenous and remote area students.

Chart 2: Achievement Gaps Between Equity Group & High Education Status Year 9 Students, NAPLAN, 2008 & 2014



The large majority of educationally disadvantaged students are enrolled in public schools. Over 80 per cent of low SES, Indigenous, remote and very remote area students are enrolled in public schools, while it is slightly less for disability students [Chart 3]. Clearly, public schools face far greater challenges than Catholic or Independent schools in getting all students to the national standards.

Chart 3: Enrolments of Disadvantaged Students by School Sector, 2013 (%)

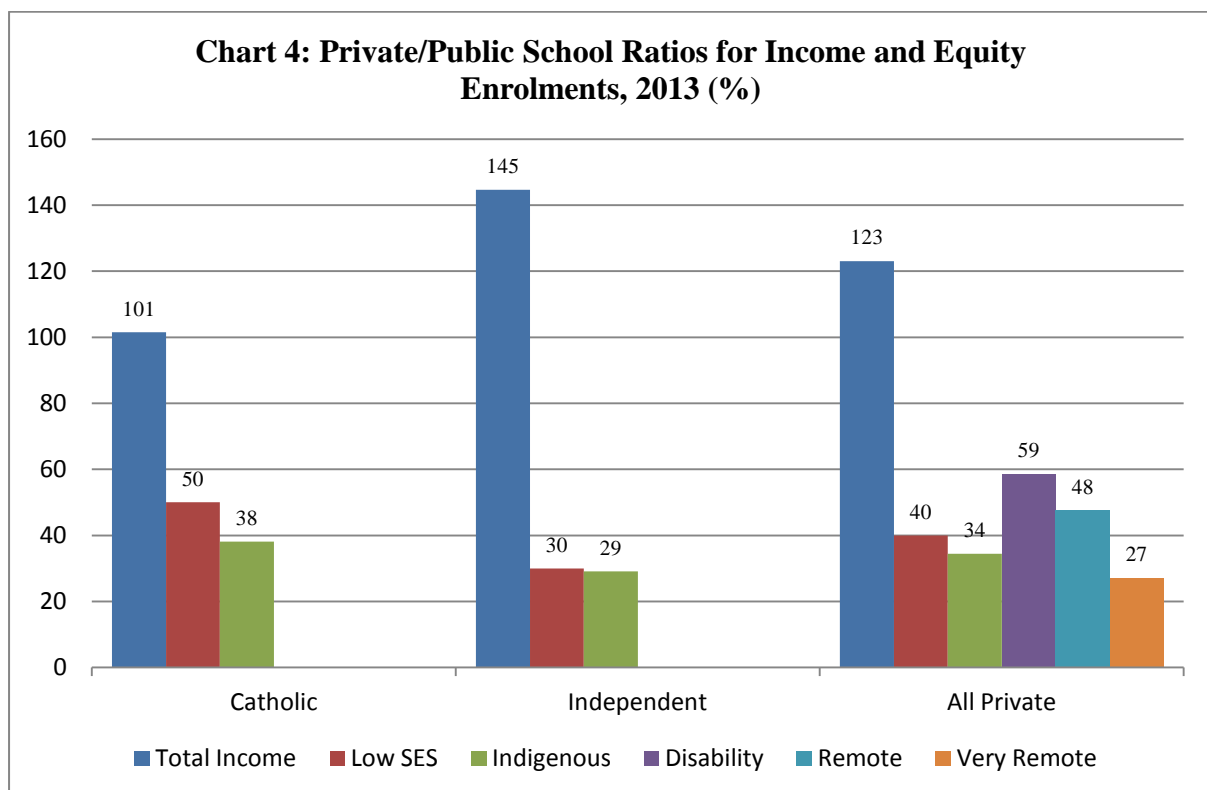


One way to compare the relative burden of disadvantage in public and private schools is to compare the ratio of the total income of private schools to public schools with the ratios of equity enrolments in private and public schools. If Catholic and Independent schools had the same disadvantage burden as public schools their equity enrolment ratios would be similar to their total income ratio. Chart 4 shows that clearly this is not the case. There are huge differences.

For example, the chart shows that the percentage of low SES enrolments in Independent schools is only 30 per cent of that of public schools and 50 per cent for Catholic schools. These ratios are well below the income ratios of Independent and Catholic schools to public schools.

The disadvantage burden of Catholic and Independent schools to public schools can be estimated by comparing the difference between the income and equity enrolment ratios for each sector. The average disadvantage burden of Independent schools is only 20 per cent of that of public schools and for Catholic schools it is only 44 per cent. That is, the burden of disadvantage in public schools is about 5 times that in Independent schools and over double that of Catholic schools.

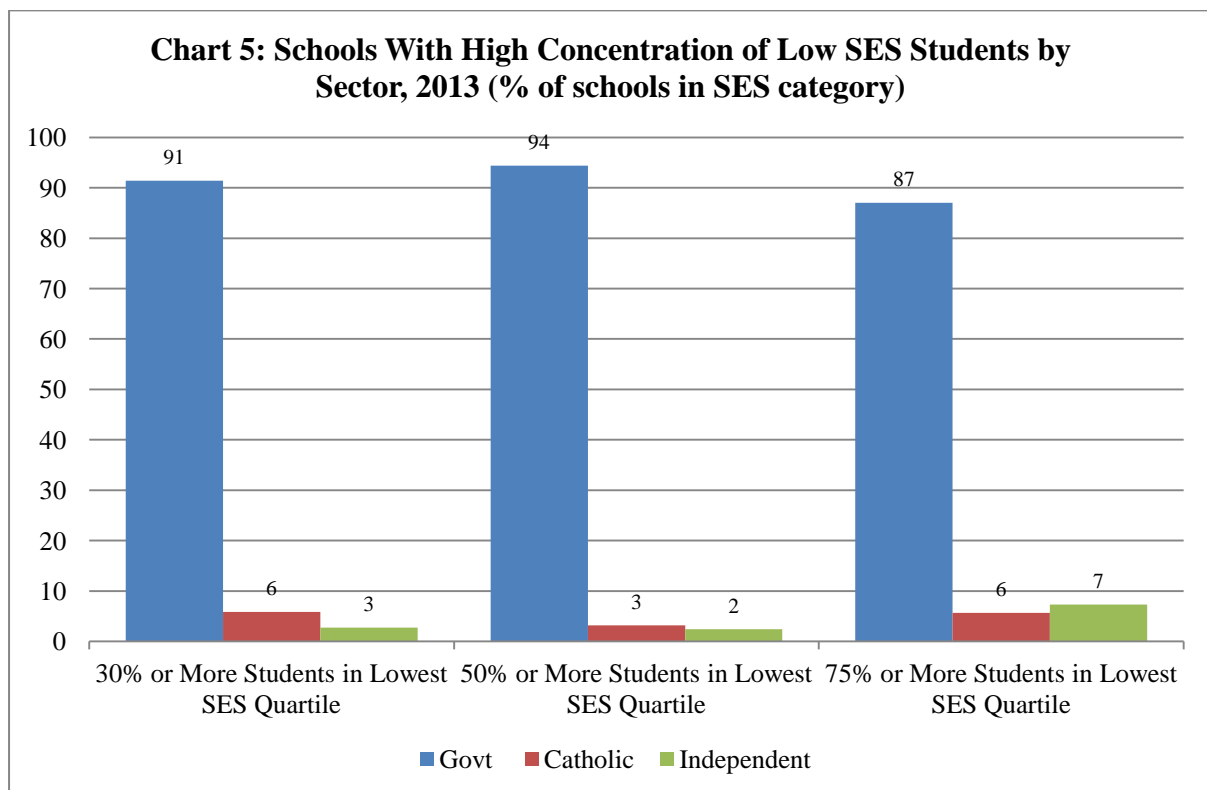
Overall, the disadvantage burden of private schools after taking account of the enrolment ratios for low SES, Indigenous, disability, remote and very remote students is 34 per cent of that of public schools.



Another aspect of the burden of disadvantage in public schools is that they account for the large majority of schools with high concentrations of disadvantage. Social inequity in education is not associated solely with the family background of individual students, but is also the result of concentration of disadvantage in schools. Research studies from overseas and in Australia show that students in schools with high concentrations of disadvantage

achieve significantly lower results than in schools with low concentrations of disadvantage. This applies to all students whatever their family SES.

In 2013, there were 1570 schools that could be identified by school sector with 50 per cent or more students from the lowest SES quartile. Of these, 94 per cent were public schools, only three per cent were Catholic schools and only two per cent were Independent schools [Chart 5]. There are similar patterns for schools with greater and lesser concentrations of low SES students.



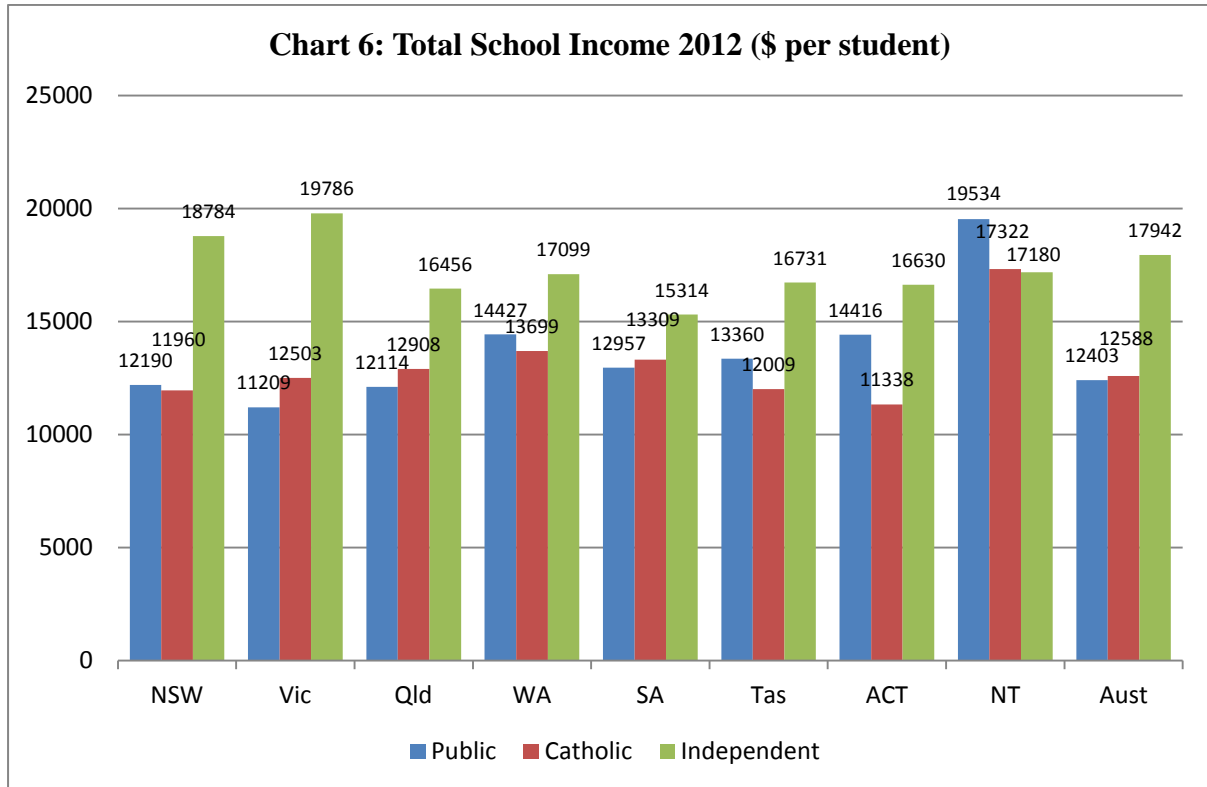
Despite the much greater burden of disadvantaged being carried by public schools, it is the most privileged schools sector that has by far the most resources. Figures recently published by the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority show that the average total income of Independent schools in Australia in 2012 was about 45 per cent higher than that of public schools - \$17,942 per student compared to \$12,403 per public school student – while the total income of Catholic schools is similar to public schools [Chart 6].

The average income of Independent schools was much higher than that of public schools in all states and territories except in the Northern Territory. Independent schools have a huge resource advantage in NSW and Victoria. In Victoria, the average income of Independent schools was a massive 77 per cent higher than that of public schools. These are the schools represented by Independent Schools Victoria who wants to deny extra funding for disadvantaged students.

The average income of Catholic schools was higher than that of public schools in some states and lower in others.

Yet, public schools have to do more with their more limited resources because they have a far heavier disadvantage burden than private schools. The richest school sector has an enormous

resource advantage beyond its large income advantage because it enrolls so few disadvantaged students compared to public schools. Catholic schools are also very well off even though their total income is only similar to public schools. Their burden of disadvantage with the same income as public schools is far lower. In effect, they have significantly more resources than public schools.



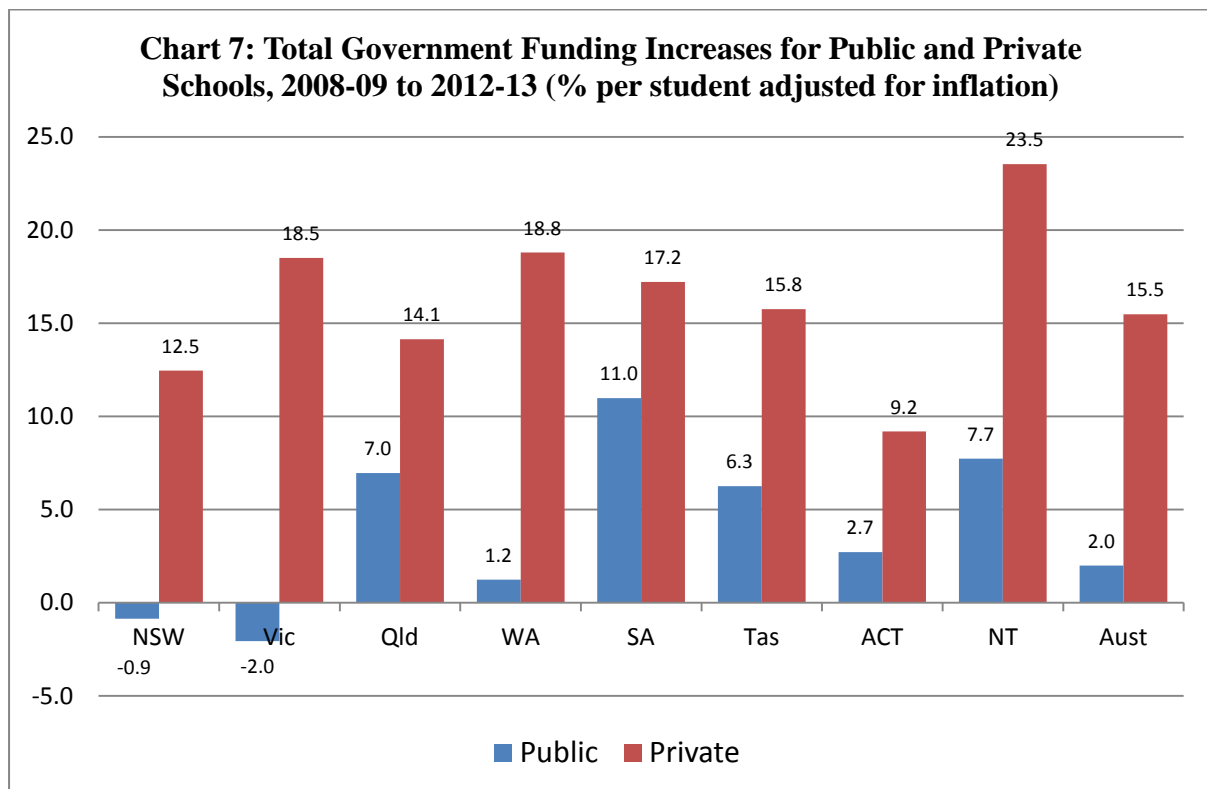
Not only do public schools have fewer resources, but government funding increases have massively favoured Catholic and Independent schools in recent years.

Figures derived from the latest Report on Government Services show that total government (Federal and state) recurrent funding per student for private schools, adjusted for inflation, increased by eight times more than for public schools between 2008-09 and 2012-13 – 15.5 per cent compared to only two per cent for public schools [Chart 7]. The figures have been adjusted to exclude book entry items applied to public schools but not to private school funding.

The differences are enormous across the country. Funding increases for private schools have far outstripped those for public schools in all states and territories. Funding for private schools in Victoria increased by 18.5 per cent per student compared to a decline in public school funding of two per cent while in NSW the increased funding for private schools was 12.5 per cent compared to a decline of nearly one per cent for public schools. In Western Australia, private school funding increased by 18.8 per cent compared to an increase of 1.2 per cent for public schools.

Governments have clearly favoured privilege over disadvantage. Nearly 50 per cent of Independent school students and nearly one-third of Catholic school students are from the top SES quartile compared to only 21 per cent of public school students. In contrast, 30 per cent

of public schools students are from the lowest SES quartile compared to 15 per cent in Catholic schools and nine per cent in Independent schools.



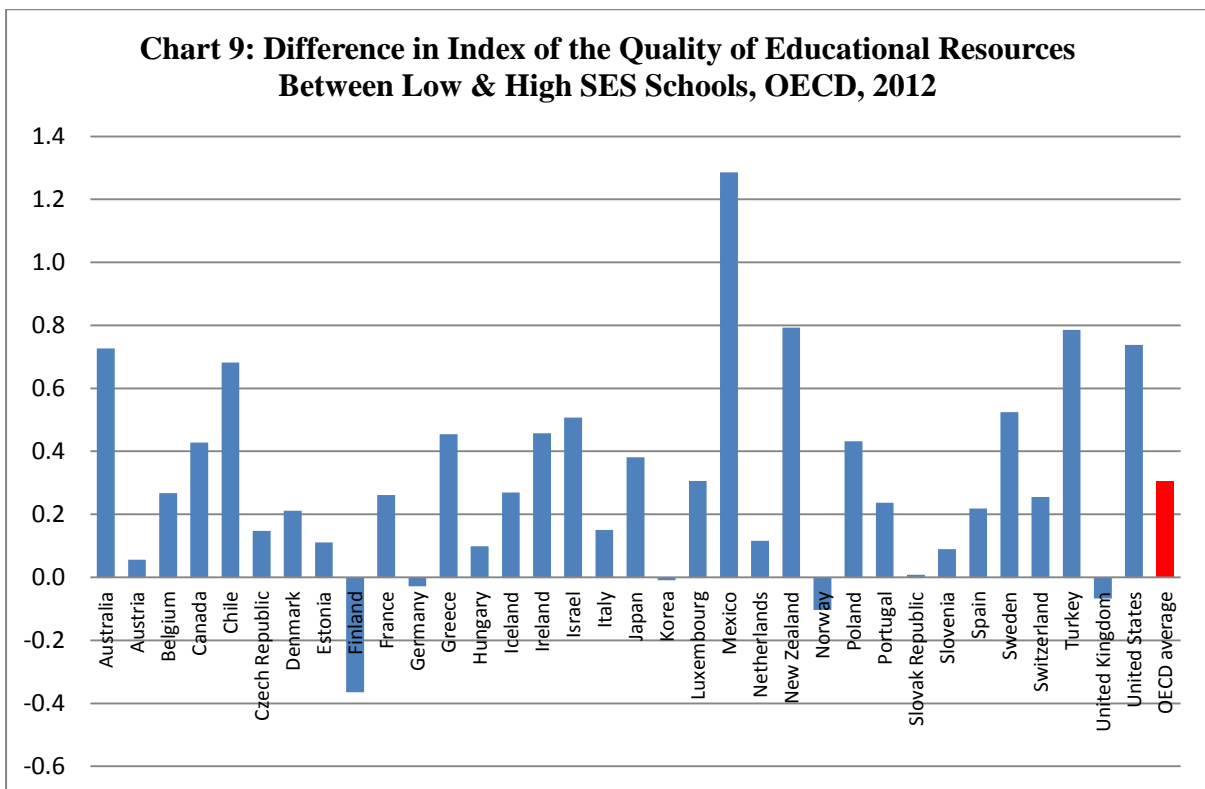
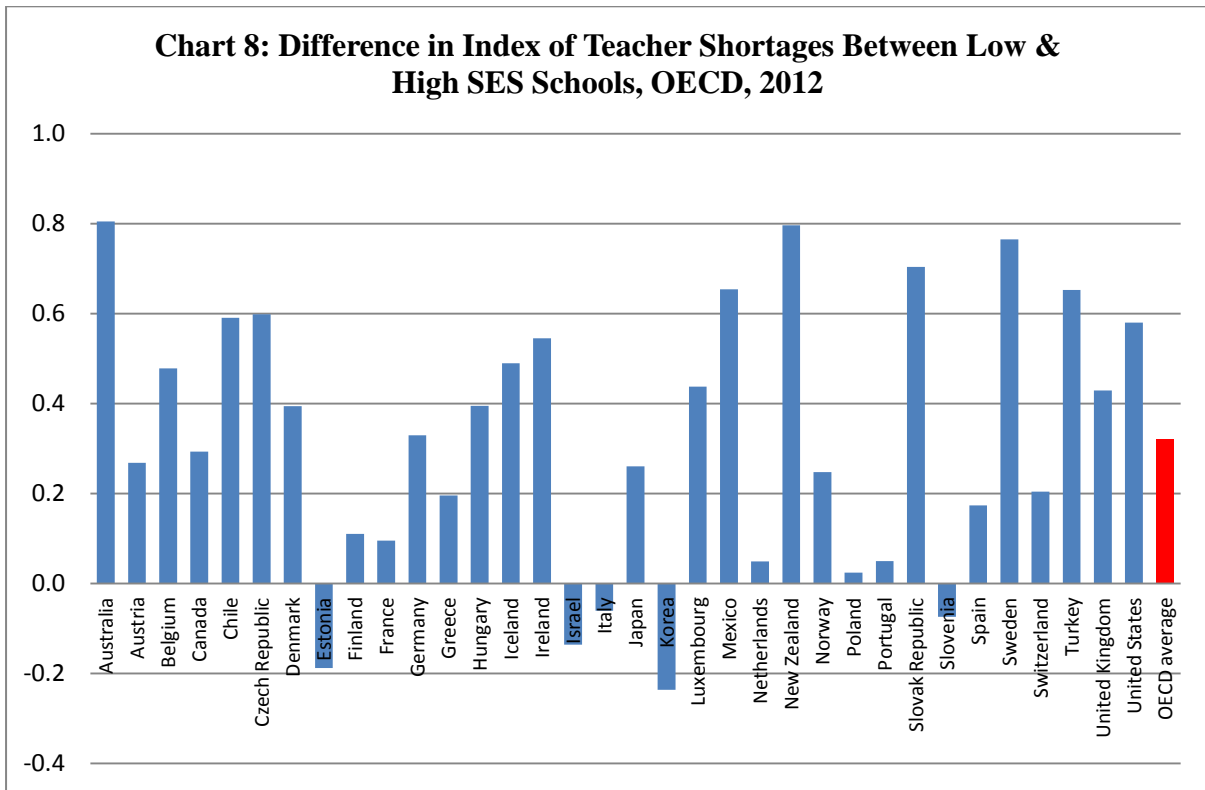
International data on resource disparities between low and high SES schools show just how badly off are low SES schools in Australia. The OECD has labelled Australia a low equity nation in the resourcing of schools because Australia has amongst the largest disparities in the resources available to low and high SES schools in the OECD.

In Australia the student/teacher ratio of low SES schools is actually higher than for high SES schools. Australia is one of only 7 OECD countries where this is the case. Teacher shortages in low SES schools in Australia are high by OECD standards. Only 8 other countries out of 34 OECD countries have higher teacher shortages in low SES schools than in Australia.

Australia actually has the largest difference in teacher shortages between low SES and high SES schools in the OECD, just slightly higher than in New Zealand. Chart 8 shows that the difference is more than double the average for the OECD. In some countries, most notably Estonia and Korea, teacher shortages in low SES schools are actually less than in high SES schools.

The situation is similar in relation to the quality of educational resources such as computer resources, science equipment, textbooks, etc. The difference between low and high SES schools in Australia in the quality of educational resources is the fifth largest in the OECD and exceeded only in Mexico, New Zealand, Turkey and the US [Chart 9]. The difference is more than double the average for the OECD. In contrast, low SES schools in Finland and some other countries have higher quality educational resources than high SES schools.

I should also mention that the OECD data also shows that the difference in the quality of physical infrastructure between low and high SES schools in Australia is also amongst the highest in the OECD.



Clearly, privilege is winning the education war in Australia. Every time public school organisations raise the disparity in the resources available to public schools and private schools compared to their relative tasks, private schools and their political representatives cry “class warfare” and “class envy”. While decrying class warfare they continue their campaign to grab as much government funding as they can, thereby denying public schools and disadvantaged students the resources they need. They complain that private schools get less government funding than public schools. They want private schools to have the same level of government funding as public schools, which would give them an even more massive resource advantage because of their income from fees.



That bastion of privilege in education - Independent Schools Victoria, whose head is the chairman of Geelong Grammar – the richest school in Australia - even denies that low SES students should get more funding. It and other advocates of privilege in education deny that low SES has any impact on student outcomes and want the Gonski low SES funding loadings abolished, despite hundreds of studies that show the large impact of low income and education on student results.

The large disparity in government funding increases for public and private schools shows that private schools are winning the class war. As the notorious business magnate Warren Buffett once said:

There's class warfare, all right, but it's my class, the rich class, that's making war, and we're winning.

The basic choice in the future of school funding in Australia is about increasing equity or compounding privilege in education.

We know where the Coalition stands. Let there be no misapprehension – the Federal Government has sabotaged the Gonski funding plan by not funding the last two years and it plans to review whether even the current model should continue. Its goal is the same as David Cameron's - defend privilege. At the same time, several state governments have failed to fully commit to the plan.

While the Gonski funding model is not without flaws, it offers the only hope for improving equity in education. The plan itself can be improved by increasing the funding loadings for low SES, Indigenous and remote area students because they are far too low to bridge the existing achievement gaps. We need to keep the pressure on the Federal and state governments and opposition parties for a better deal for disadvantaged students and schools by the full implementation of the Gonski funding plan.

The case for increasing equity must continue to be made. First, it is a matter of ensuring that all children receive a minimum adequate level of education, whatever their family background. Second, it means improving the educational and life chances of the poorest sections of our community so that they come to match those of the richest sections of our community. Third, it means improving the nation's economic prosperity by providing a higher skilled workforce.

In conclusion, I would like to leave you with four key messages:

1. Unacceptably high percentages of disadvantaged students do not achieve an adequate education.
2. There are massive gaps in achievement between rich and poor of up to four to six years of schooling.
3. Public schools do the heavy lifting in education but are vastly under-resourced for the challenges they face.
4. It is imperative that the fight for a fair funding system and increased equity in education continues.

Thank you.