

Education Research Brief

Public Schools Do as Well as Private Schools

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Key Points

1. The often-presumed superior test results of private schools compared to public schools is a myth. Public, Catholic and Independent schools with a similar socio-economic composition (as measured by the Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage or ICSEA) have very similar results in nearly all states.
2. Analysis of Year 9 NAPLAN reading results shows that medium ICSEA public, Catholic and Independent schools generally achieve similar results. Mostly, there are only minor differences between the average results of school sectors that are within the margin of statistical error. Medium ICSEA schools account for 60-70 per cent of all schools in all states except the ACT.
3. Public schools in the ICSEA range of 1150 and above in NSW, Victoria and Western Australia have significantly higher results than high ICSEA Catholic and Independent schools in these states while the comparative results are similar in Queensland. These are the only states where all sectors have schools in this ICSEA category.
 - The results of public, Catholic and Independent schools in the ICSEA range 1100-1149 are similar.
4. Little can be made of comparisons of results for low ICSEA schools because there are very few Catholic and Independent schools of this type as low socio-economic communities are largely served by public schools.

Introduction

There are widespread perceptions that private schools achieve higher academic results than public schools. These perceptions are generally based on simple comparisons of test results such as league tables of NAPLAN and Year 12 results published in newspapers and on websites. The top 50 rankings in league tables of school results are disproportionately dominated by private schools as seen, for example, in the rankings for NAPLAN results on The Australian's Your School website¹, rankings for ATAR scores on the Better Education website² and rankings on other Year 12 success measures in NSW³ and Victoria [The Age 2014].

The 2012 PISA study shows that the literacy, numeracy and science test results for public schools are significantly below those of Catholic and Independent schools. For example, students in independent schools scored, on average, 52 score points higher than students in public schools and 27 score points higher than students in Catholic schools.⁴ Students in Catholic schools scored, on average, 25 points higher than in public schools. Similar differences are apparent in reading and science.

Such comparisons create a perception of superior private school outcomes. However, comparing the raw scores of students in different school sectors gives a misleading impression of school quality because public schools enrol the vast proportion of students from low socio-economic, Indigenous, remote area and disability backgrounds who, on average, have much lower results than students from higher socio-economic status families.

Fairer comparisons of school results make adjustment for differences in student and school SES and other background factors. A simple way to do this is to compare the results of schools with a similar advantage/disadvantage composition (as measured by the Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage or ICSEA constructed by the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority, or ACARA). A value on the index corresponds to the average level of educational advantage of the school's student population, relative to those of other schools.⁵ The following charts compare the average Year 9 reading results published on the My School website for public, Catholic and Independent schools in metropolitan areas for high, medium and low ICSEA values in all jurisdictions except the Northern Territory.⁶ Charts for each state and the ACT are provided in the Attachment.

Medium ICSEA schools

The large majority of schools in Australia are in the medium range of ICSEA values, that is, from 950 to 1099. About 60-70 per cent of metropolitan secondary schools are in the medium ICSEA range in all jurisdictions except the ACT, which has a lower proportion.

Apart from a few exceptions, the performance of public, Catholic and Independent schools in the medium range of ICSEA values is very similar in NSW, Victoria, Queensland, Western Australia and South Australia [Chart 1]. There are only very minor differences in average

¹ <http://www.theaustralian.com.au/national-affairs/in-depth/schools/interactive>

² <http://bettereducation.com.au/SchoolRanking.aspx>

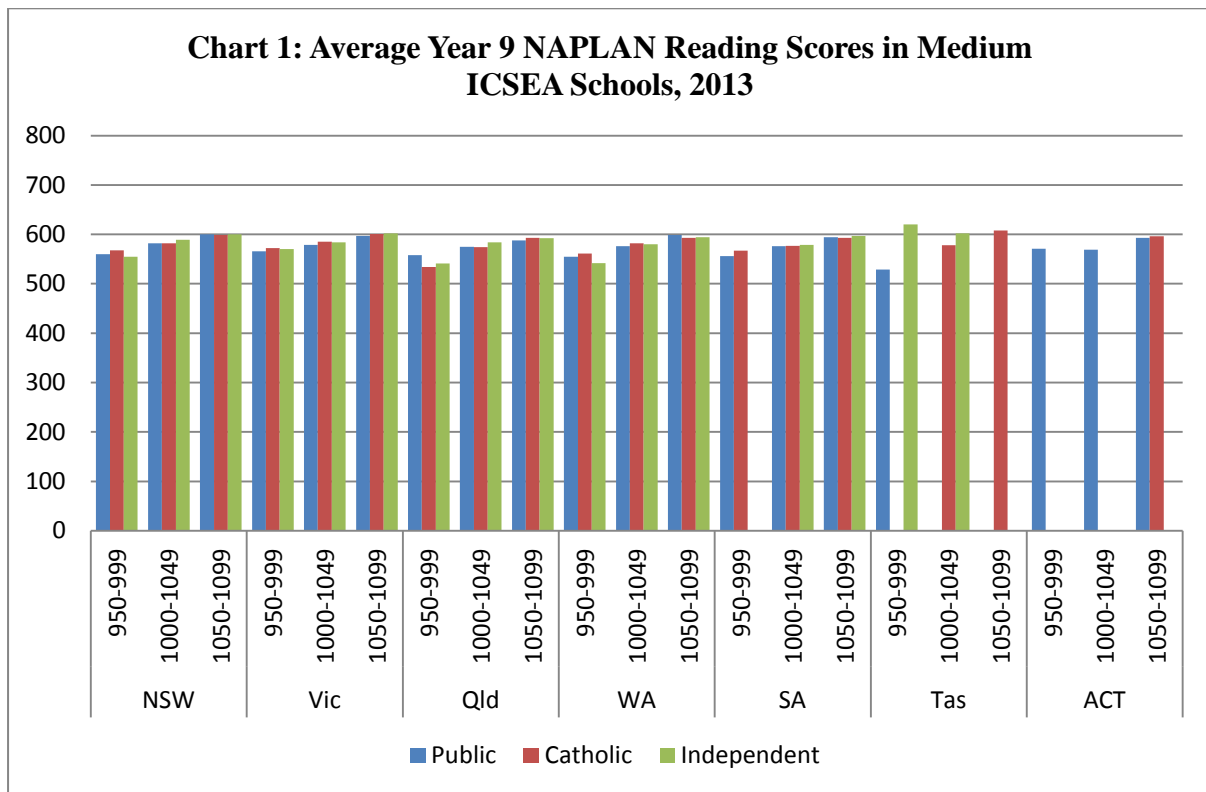
³ <https://www.matrix.edu.au/2013-high-school-rankings/>

⁴ Thomson, Sue, De Bortoli, Lisa & Buckley, Sarah. (2013). PISA 2012: How Australia Measures Up. Camberwell, Australian Council for Educational Research, p. xvi.

⁵ ICSEA values are calculated on a scale which has a median of 1000.

⁶ All schools in the Northern Territory are classified as provincial. Some schools are not included because of inadequate data.

results within each ICSEA sub-group of the medium range. The differences are likely to be within the statistical margin of error, indicating no statistically significant difference between the results of schools in the three sectors.



Note: Metropolitan schools

Source: My School

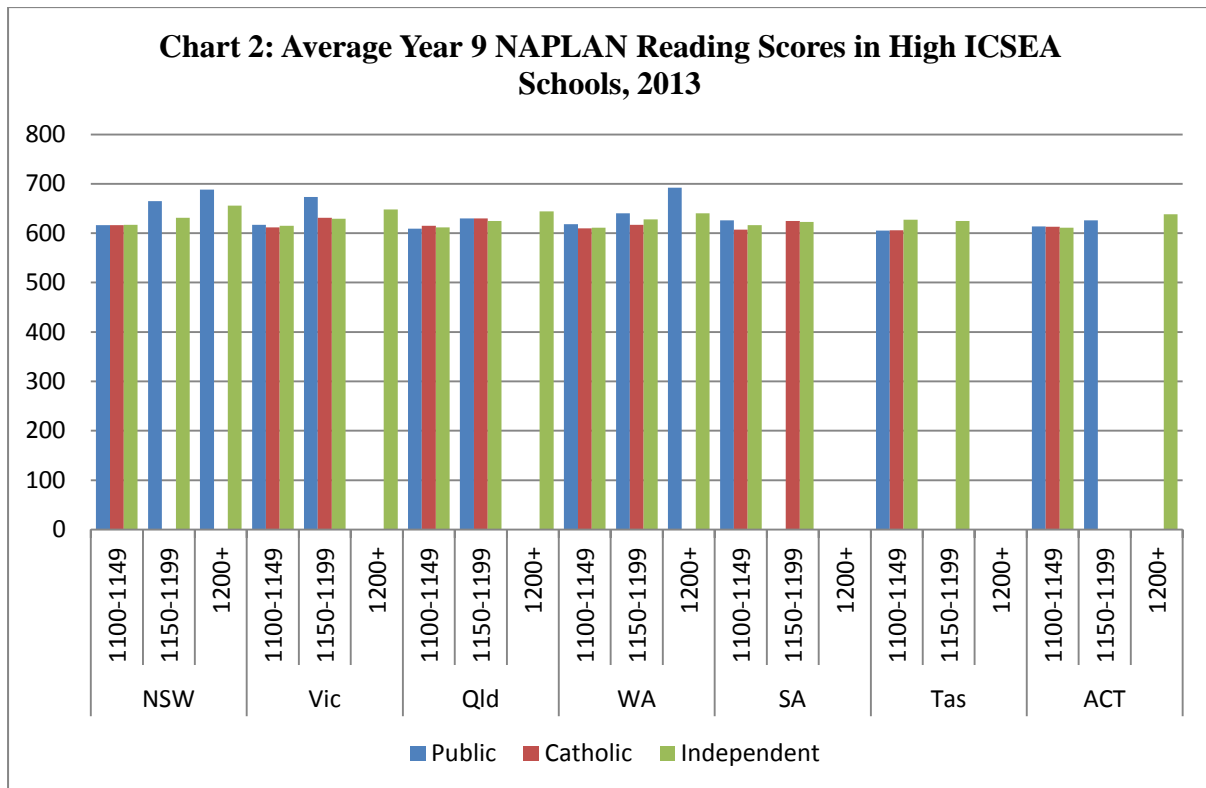
The exceptions are mainly within the 950-999 ICSEA value range where the sector with the highest performance varies between states. In NSW, Catholic schools within this range have a higher average score than Independent schools while Queensland public schools have a significantly higher average than Catholic and Independent schools. In Western Australia, public and Catholic schools have significantly higher results than Independent schools.

In South Australian, Catholic schools have an advantage over public schools within this ICSEA sub-group but there are only a small number of Catholic schools in this range compared to public schools. Although there is a large difference in Tasmania between public and Independent schools in the 950-999 range, the comparison is between six public schools and one small Independent school with few students in Year 9 and an ICSEA value of just below 1000 which is significantly higher than the average ICSEA value of the public schools.

High ICSEA schools

The similarity of performance between public, Catholic and Independent schools is also apparent in the lower sub-group (1100-1149) of the high ICSEA range in NSW, Victoria, Queensland, Western Australia and the ACT [Chart 2]. Once again there are only minor differences that are unlikely to be statistically significant. The only exceptions are that public schools in South Australia outperform Catholic and Independent schools, while Independent schools in Tasmania outperform public and Catholic schools.

Public schools with ICSEA values of 1150 and above have significantly higher results than Catholic and Independent schools in NSW, Victoria and Western Australia⁷. There is little difference in results in Queensland and comparisons between public and private schools are not possible for schools with these ICSEA values in South Australia, Tasmania and the ACT.



Note: Metropolitan schools

Source: My School

Low ICSEA schools

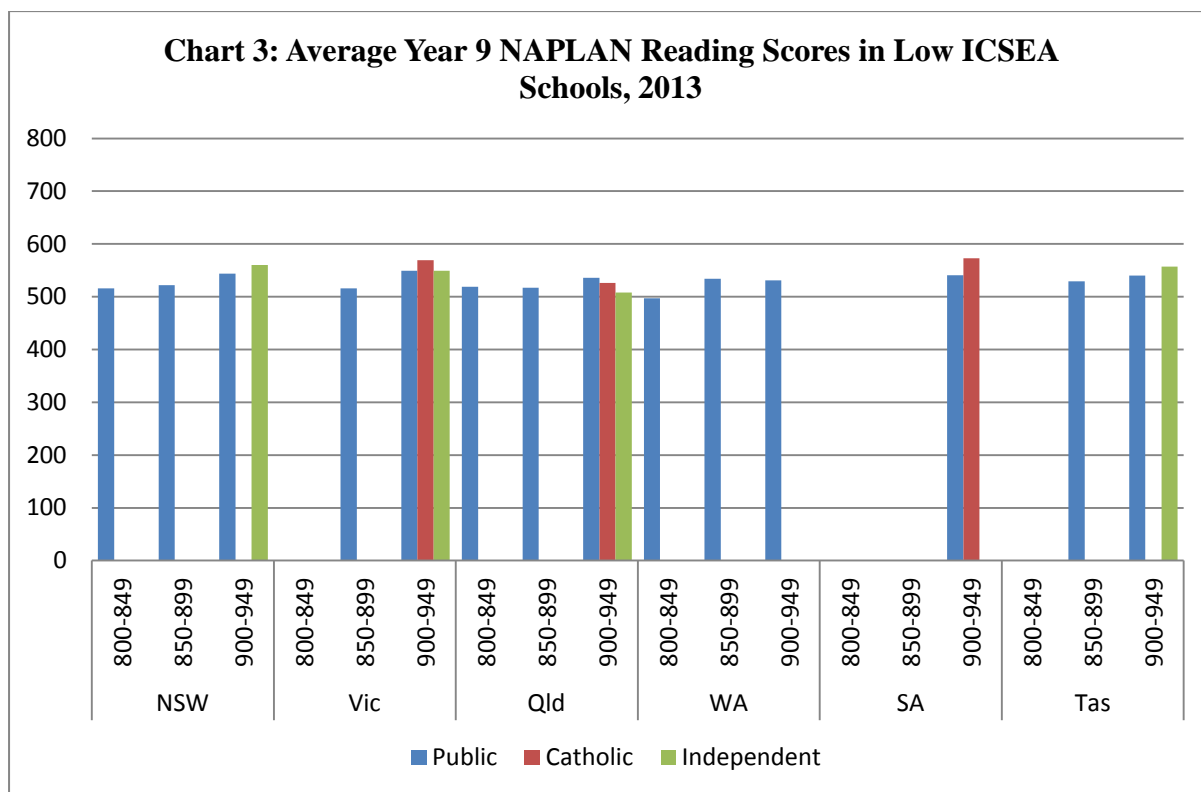
Only limited comparisons between school sectors at low ICSEA values are available because there are very few Catholic and Independent schools with ICSEA values below 950. It is public schools that largely serve this population. There are no Catholic or Independent secondary schools in metropolitan areas with an ICSEA value below 900 for which data is available.

In NSW and Tasmania, Independent schools in the ICSEA range 900-949 have a significantly higher average than public schools [Chart 3]. In Victoria, public schools have similar results to Independent schools in this ICSEA range while Catholic schools have higher results than both. In Queensland, public schools outperform Catholic and Independent schools and in South Australia, Catholic schools have higher results than public schools.

However, these comparisons are of dubious value because only a few private schools exist in this ICSEA range. For example, there are 57 public secondary schools in metropolitan cities in NSW with an ICSEA value in this range compared to only two Independent schools and no Catholic schools. Similarly, in Victoria, Catholic schools have a significantly higher average than public schools, but there are 41 public secondary schools in this range compared to only

⁷ There is only one public school and three Independent schools in Western Australia with ICSEA values of 1200+.

four Catholic schools. In South Australian the comparison is between 12 public schools and only one Catholic school. In Tasmania, the comparison is between one public school and one Independent school and the Independent school is a very small school with few students in Year 9.



Note: Metropolitan schools. There are no secondary schools in the ACT with an ICSEA value below 950.

Source: My School

State perspectives

Another perspective on performance comparisons between sectors is given by comparing the results for low, medium and high ICSEA categories in each state and the ACT (see Attachment for charts).

New South Wales

High ICSEA schools:

- Similar results for public, Catholic and Independent schools in ICSEA range 1100-1149.
- Public school results are significantly above Independent schools with ICSEA values of 1150+ (no Catholic schools in this category).

Medium ICSEA schools:

- Similar results for public, Catholic and Independent schools, except in ICSEA range 950-999 where Catholic schools have a higher average than Independent schools.

Low ICSEA schools:

- Independent schools have higher results than public schools in the ICSEA range 900-949.
- No Catholic and Independent schools in the ICSEA range 800-899.

Victoria

High ICSEA schools:

- Similar results for public, Catholic and Independent schools in ICSEA range 1100-1149.

- Public school results are significantly above Catholic and Independent schools with ICSEA values of 1150-1199 (no public or Catholic schools at 1200+).

Medium ICSEA schools:

- Similar results for public, Catholic and Independent schools.

Low ICSEA schools:

- Public schools have similar results to Independent schools in the ICSEA range 900-949, but Catholic schools have higher results than both sectors.
- No Catholic and Independent schools in the ICSEA range 800-899.

Queensland

High ICSEA schools:

- Similar results for public, Catholic and Independent schools in ICSEA range 1100-1199 (no public or Catholic schools at 1200+).

Medium ICSEA schools:

- Similar results for public, Catholic and Independent schools in ICSEA range 1050-1099.
- Independent schools have slightly higher results than public and Catholic schools in ICSEA range 1000-1049.
- Public schools have significantly better results than Catholic and Independent schools in ICSEA range 950-999.

Low ICSEA schools:

- Public school results have significantly higher results than Catholic and Independent schools in ICSEA range 900-949.
- No Catholic and Independent schools in the ICSEA range 800-899.

Western Australia

High ICSEA schools:

- Public school results exceed Catholic and Independent schools in ICSEA range 1150-1200+.
- Similar results for public, Catholic and Independent schools in ICSEA range 1100-1149.

Medium ICSEA schools:

- Similar results for public, Catholic and Independent schools in ICSEA range 1000-1099.
- Public and Catholic school results are similar in ICSEA range 950-999 and significantly higher than Independent schools.

Low ICSEA schools:

- No Catholic and Independent schools in the ICSEA range 800-949.

South Australia

High ICSEA schools:

- Public school results are significantly above Catholic and Independent schools with ICSEA values of 1100-1149 (no public schools with ICSEA values of 1150-1200+)

Medium ICSEA schools:

- Similar results for public, Catholic and Independent schools with ICSEA values of 1000-1099.
- Catholic school results exceed public schools in the ICSEA range 950-999 (no Independent schools in this category).

Low ICSEA schools:

- Catholic school results exceed public schools in the ICSEA range 900-949 (no Independent schools in this category).
- No public, Catholic and Independent schools in the ICSEA range 800-899.

Tasmania

High ICSEA schools:

- Public and Catholic schools have similar results in the ICSEA range 1000-1149, but those of Independent schools are significantly higher.
- No public and Catholic schools in the ICSEA range 1100-1200+

Medium ICSEA schools:

- Independent school results are well above public schools in the ICSEA range 950-999 (no Catholic schools in this category).
- No public schools in the ICSEA range 1000-1099.

Low ICSEA schools:

- Independent school results are higher than public schools in the ICSEA range 900-949 (no Catholic schools in this category).
- No Catholic or Independent schools in the ICSEA range 800-899.

ACT

High ICSEA schools:

- Public and Independent schools have similar results in the ICSEA range 1100-1149 and which are significantly higher than Catholic schools.
- No comparisons are possible in the ICSEA range 1150-1200+

Medium ICSEA schools:

- Public schools have similar results to Catholic and Independent schools in the ICSEA range 1050-1099 (no Catholic or Independent schools in ICSEA range 950-1049).

Low ICSEA schools:

- No public, Catholic and Independent schools in the ICSEA range 800-899.

Summary

In summary, comparisons of secondary school performance in Year 9 reading show that the often-presumed superiority of private schools over public schools is a myth. Public, Catholic and Independent schools with medium and high ICSEA values achieve similar results. Public schools have a significant advantage in several states for schools with an ICSEA value of 1150 and above. Little can be made of comparisons of results for low ICSEA schools because there are very few Catholic and Independent schools of this type.

Attachment

Charts on Year 9 NAPLAN Reading Results by ICSEA Range by State

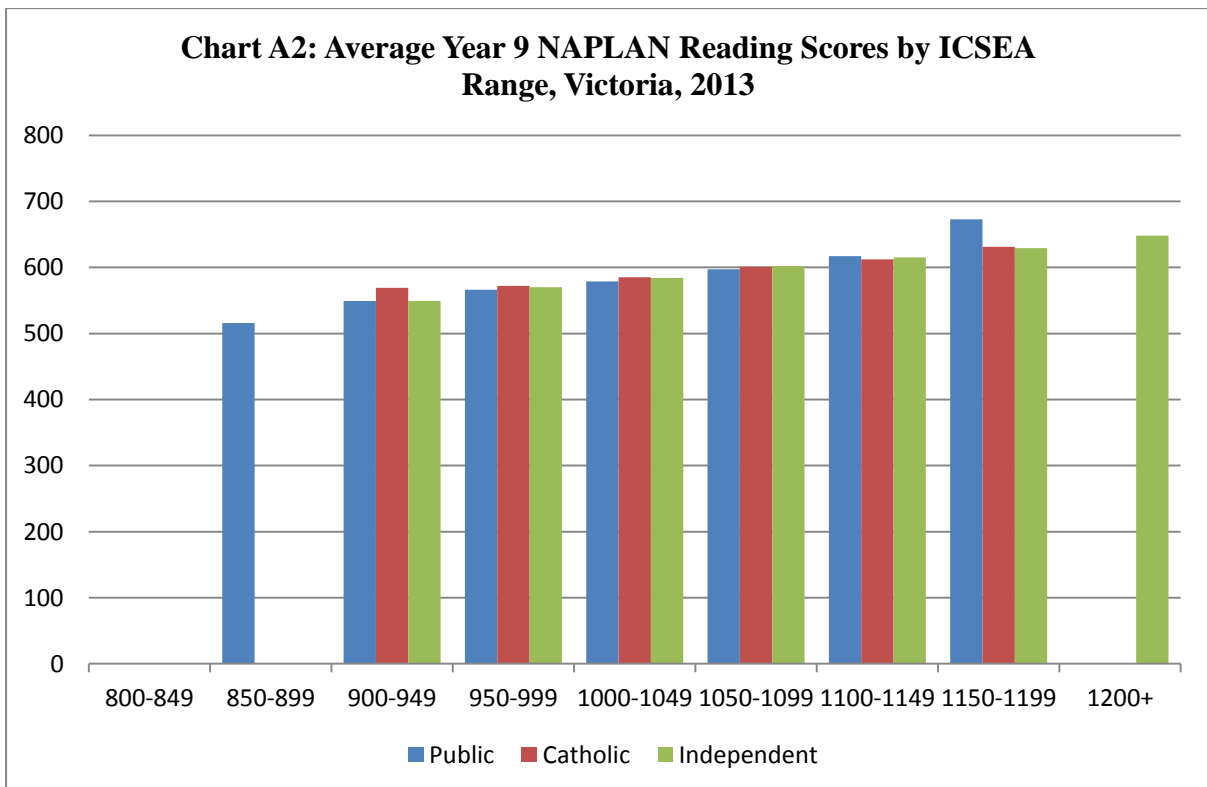
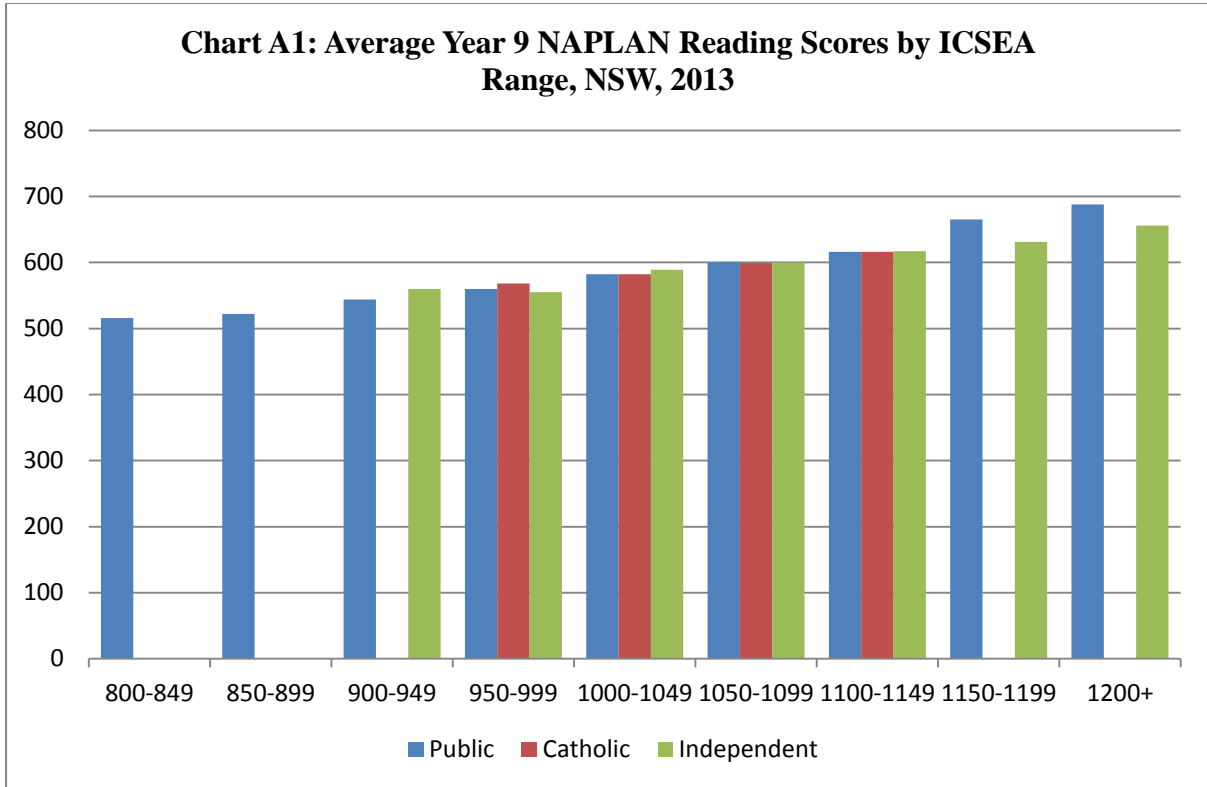


Chart : Average Year 9 NAPLAN Reading Scores by ICSEA Range, Queensland, 2013

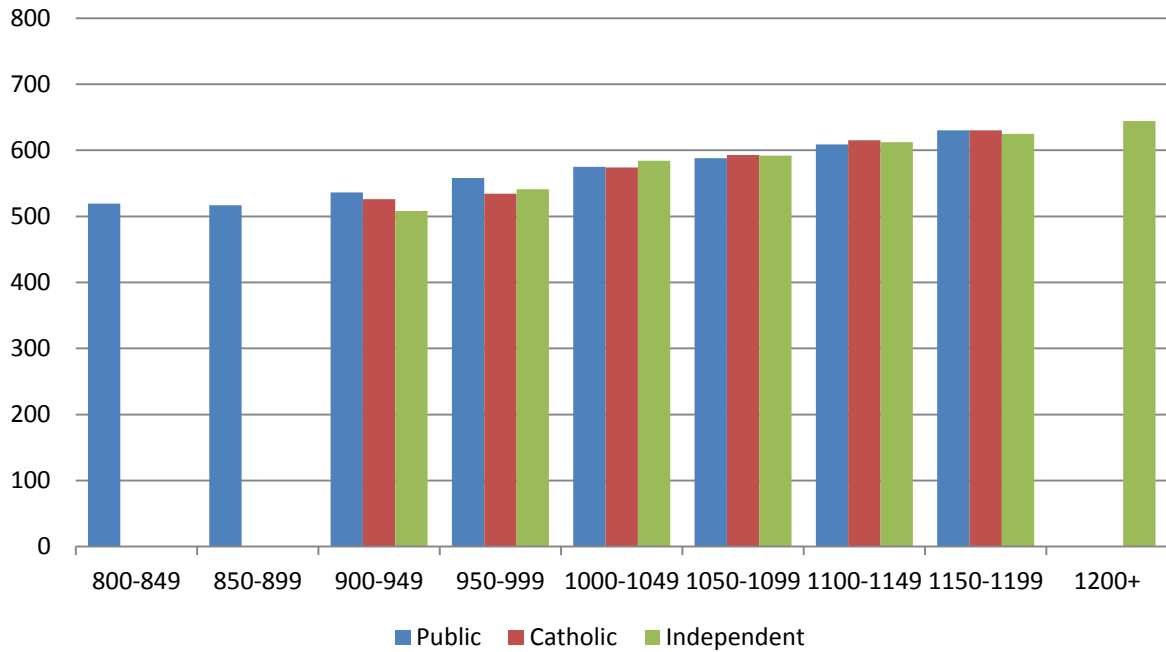


Chart A4: Average Year 9 NAPLAN Reading Scores by ICSEA Range, Western Australia, 2013

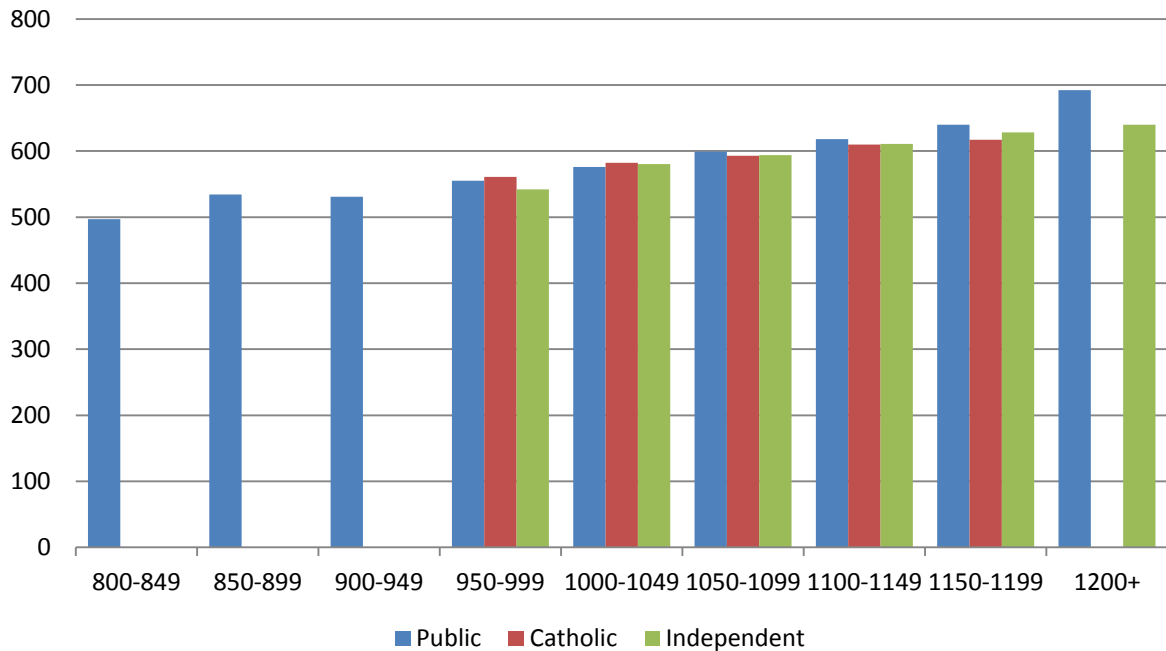


Chart : Average Year 9 NAPLAN Reading Scores by ICSEA Range, South Australia, 2013

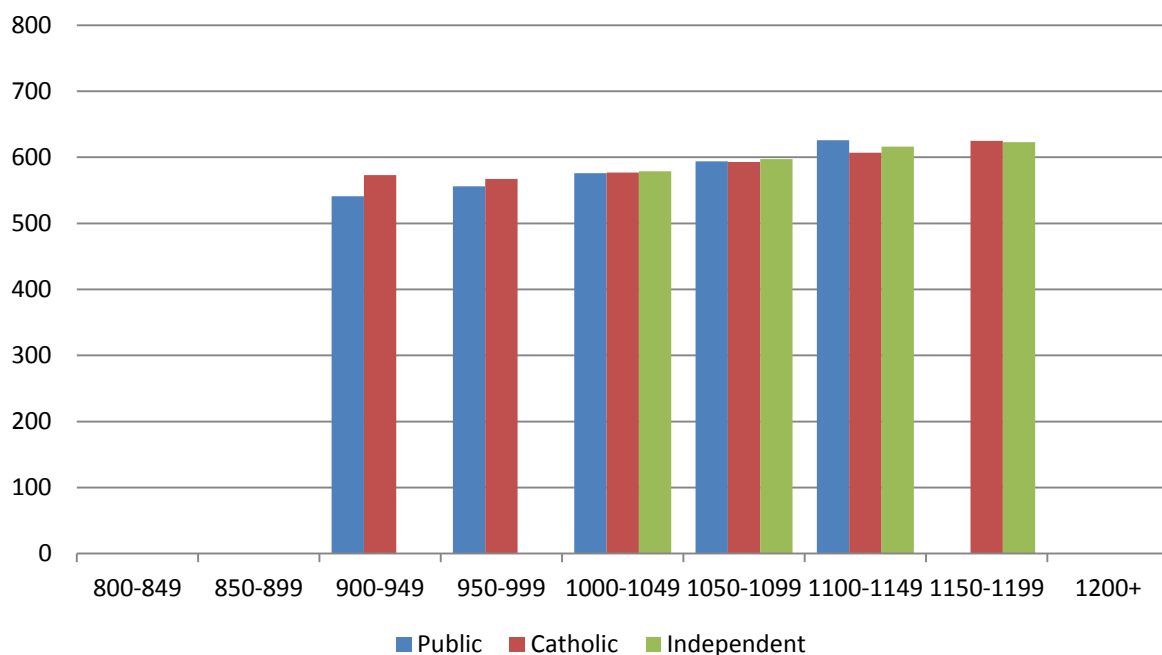
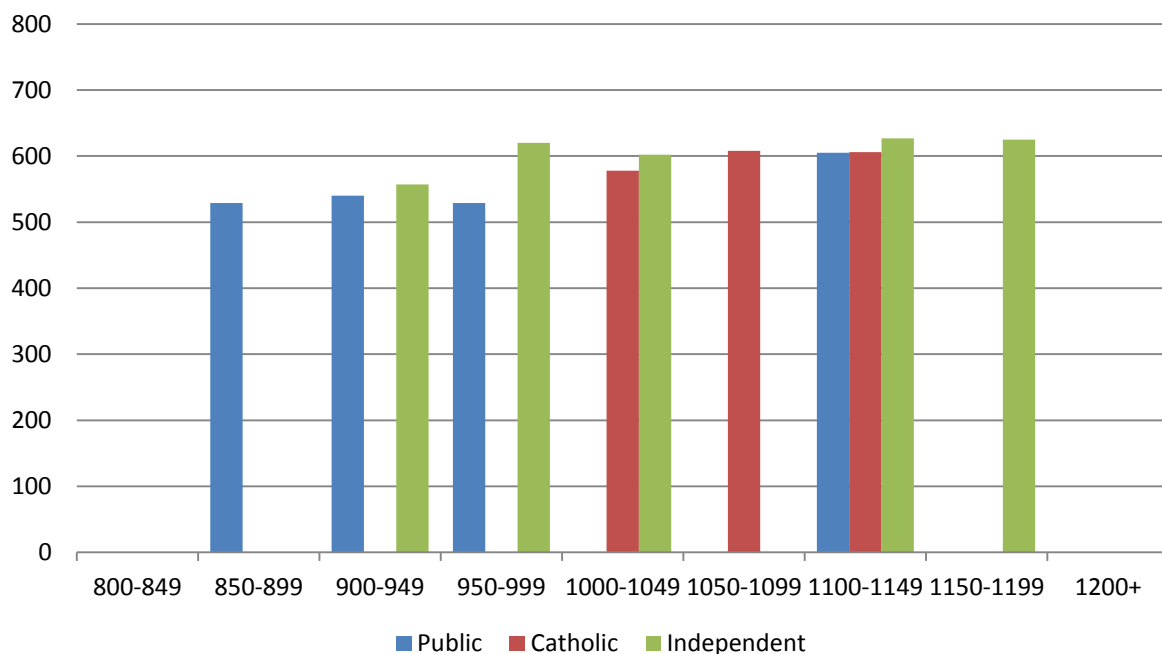
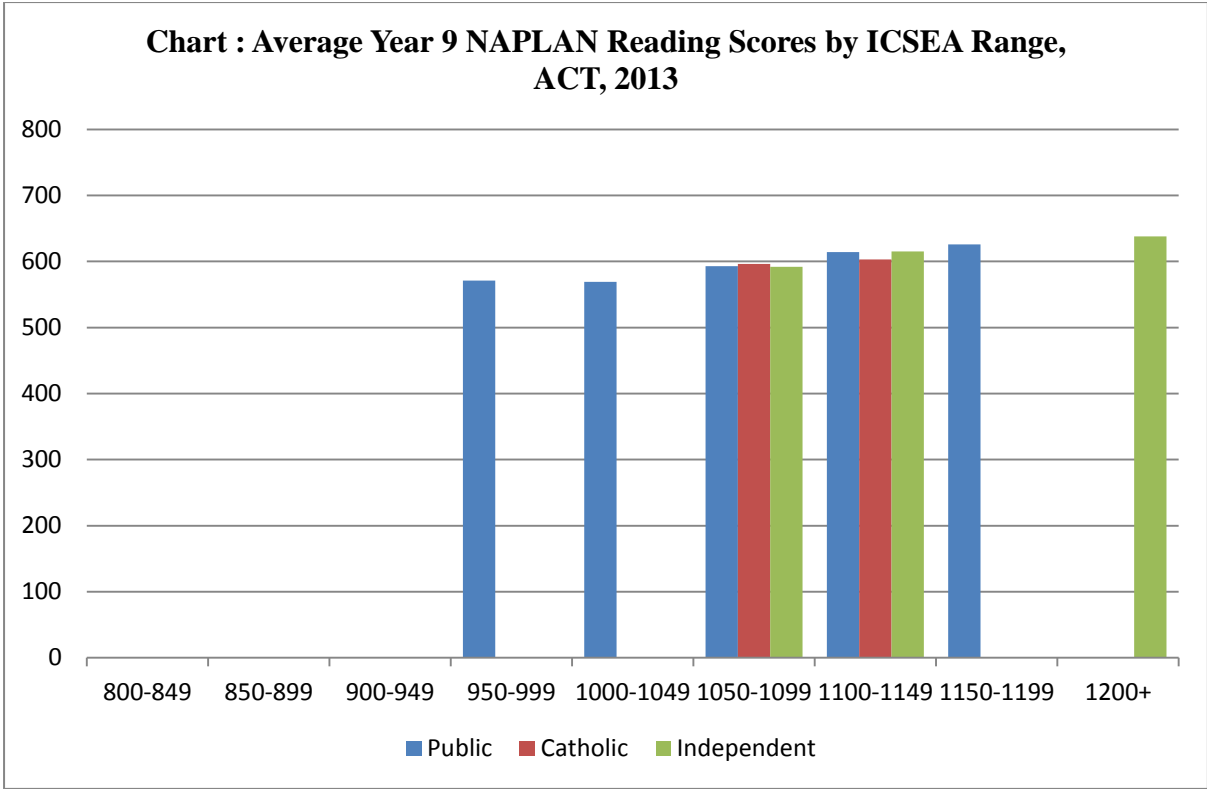


Chart : Average Year 9 NAPLAN Reading Scores by ICSEA Range, Tasmania, 2013





Notes:

1. These charts are for metropolitan schools.
2. About 60-70% of schools are in the ICSEA range 950-1099 in all jurisdictions except the ACT which has a lower proportion.
3. Independent Catholic schools are classified as Independent schools except in the ACT where they are included as Catholic schools.

Source: My School