

WHO'S AFRAID OF A PUBLIC SCHOOL?

Public perceptions of education in Australia

Verity Firth

Rebecca Huntley



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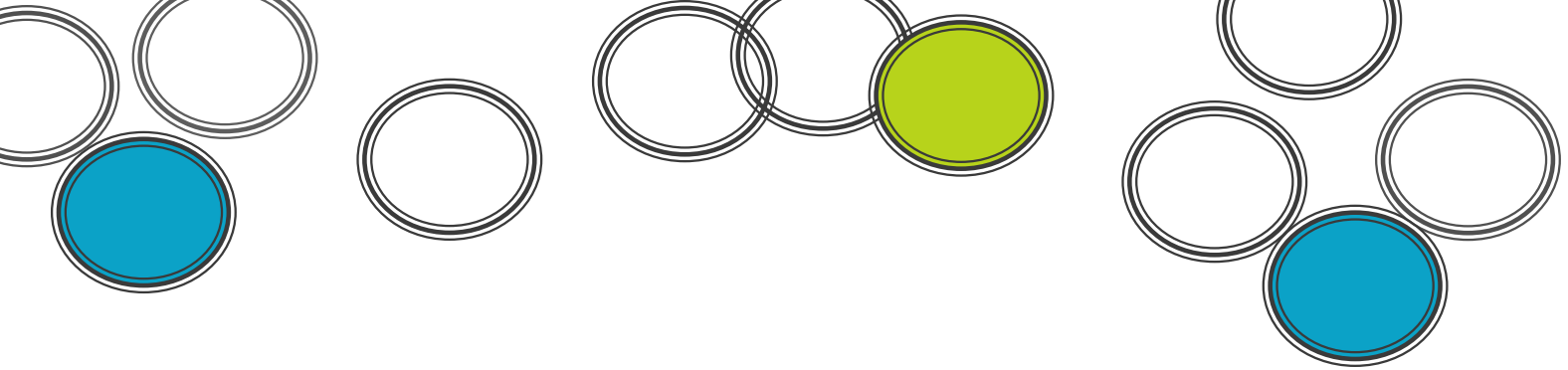


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About the authors

Verity Firth is the Chief Executive of the Public Education Foundation, a philanthropic organisation that provides scholarships and advocates for public education. Ms Firth was elected to the NSW Parliament as Member for Balmain in 2007, and subsequently held a number of portfolios including Minister for Women and Minister for the Environment and Climate Change. In 2008 she was promoted to Minister for Education and Training, a position she held until the state election in March 2011. Before her parliamentary career, Ms Firth was a lawyer with the law firm Slater & Gordon and Deputy Lord Mayor of the City of Sydney.

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About Per Capita

Per Capita is an independent progressive think tank which generates and promotes transformational ideas for Australia. Our research is rigorous, evidence-based and long-term in its outlook, considering the national challenges of the next decade rather than the next election cycle. We seek to ask fresh questions and offer fresh answers, drawing on new thinking in science, economics and public policy. Our audience is the interested public, not just experts and practitioners.

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Introduction

Children's education has become the new *du jour* in Australia, nudging out house prices as a conversation piece at many a dinner party and BBQ across the nation. In the wake of the Gonski Report into school funding and the previous Labor government's National Plan for School Improvement, the public discussion about the quality of Australian schooling is about to claim more of the spotlight. At the heart of all of this is the divide between public and private systems in this country, a sensitive issue for our politicians and an emotive and confusing issue for voters.

It is clear from research done by Ipsos, for this report and elsewhere, that Australians are in an ongoing, as yet unresolved, debate about the value of private versus public education. While the trend is definitively towards greater investment in private education, Australians remain ambivalent about whether private education is in fact better quality, is worth the money and whether going to a private school is a better foundation for career success. What is clear from the qualitative research is that even among Australians who live in areas where there are excellent public schools, there is a question mark over some parts of the public system not just in terms of standards of teaching but in relation to their social environments and their ability to cater to the needs of all children. There seem to be a mixture of emotional and logical drivers behind this anxiety about the quality of public schooling.

This paper aims to do two things. First, it will measure and explore (through both qualitative and quantitative research) the attitudes of Australians towards the relative merits of public versus private education. This section of the paper is authored by Rebecca Huntley, the director of the *Mind and Mood* Report, Australia's longest running social trends study. Second, it will evaluate those findings according to the established literature and data available about actual strengths and weaknesses of the two different systems. This section of the paper is authored by Verity Firth, former Minister of Education in New South Wales and now Chief Executive of The Public Education Foundation. Both authors then combine forces to make some conclusions about public perception of education in Australia and what this means for public policy, particularly for those working within in and around public school communities.

Finally, some background on the research in this paper. The qualitative insights are gleaned from numerous *Mind & Mood* reports conducted from 2008 to 2012. These reports are part of an ongoing syndicated study on Australian social attitudes, which uses an undirected, affinity (rather than focus) group approach as central to its methodology. The quantitative research was conducted the first week of April 2013 with a nationally representative sample of 1030 respondents. The survey was conducted online.

WHO'S AFRAID OF A PUBLIC SCHOOL?

ACCORDING TO THE RESEARCH DONE BY IPSOS, AUSTRALIANS ARE IN AN ONGOING, AS YET UNRESOLVED, DEBATE ABOUT THE VALUE OF PRIVATE VERSUS PUBLIC EDUCATION.



While the trend is towards private education, Australians remain unsure about whether private education is in fact better quality, is worth the money and better foundation for career success.

Australians who live near excellent public schools express doubt whether public schools have good standards of teaching and whether they are able to cater the needs of all children.

THE RESEARCH WAS CONDUCTED ONLINE WITH A NATIONALLY REPRESENTATIVE SAMPLE OF 1030 RESPONDENTS.

SURVEY DATA OF PUBLIC VERSUS PRIVATE EDUCATION



respondents indicated that they went to a public primary school



respondents indicated that they went to a Catholic primary school



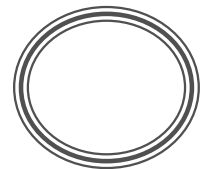
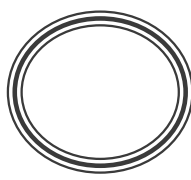
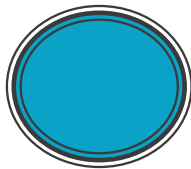
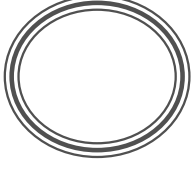
respondents indicated that they went to a private primary school



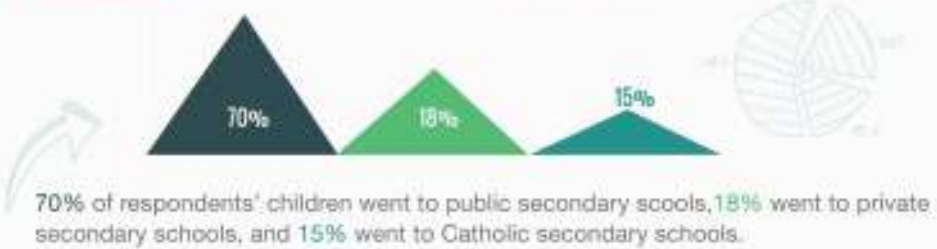
The majority of respondents indicated that they went to a public secondary school (73%)



respondents indicated that they went to a Catholic secondary school and 14% indicated that they went to private secondary school.



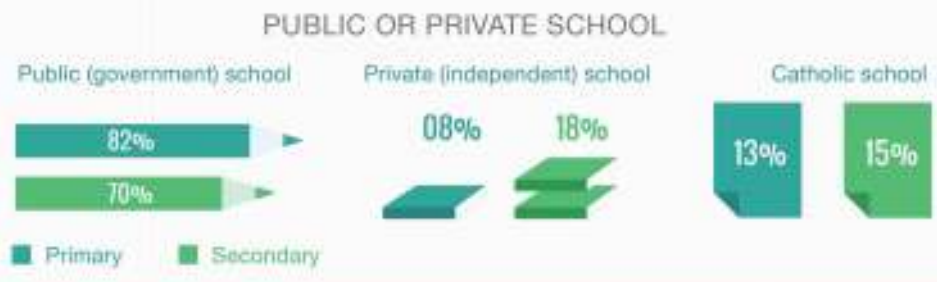
82% of respondents' children went to a public primary school.



PRIMARY AND SECONDARY SCHOOL ATTENDED BY RESPONDENTS

	PUBLIC OR PRIVATE SCHOOL		
	PRIMARY		SECONDARY
1030	100%	Base	100%
849	82.4%	Public (government) school	72.6%
72	07%	Private (independent) school	14.1%
155	15.1%	Catholic school	14.0%
24	2.4%	Did not attend school	3.7%

PUBLIC OR PRIVATE SCHOOL ATTENDED BY RESPONDENTS' CHILDREN





Given the importance of personal experience and peer group to perceptions about the public and private systems, it is worth noting too some of the important demographic aspects of the sample. The majority of respondents to the survey indicated that they went to a public primary school (82%), 15% indicated that they went to a Catholic primary school, and 7% indicated that they went to a private primary school.¹ As for secondary education, the majority of respondents indicated that they went to a public secondary school (73%), while 14% went to a Catholic or private school. Respondents were also asked to indicate whether

their children (if they had any) went to a public or a private school. Overall, the vast majority of respondents' children went to a public primary school (82%), while around one in eight went to a Catholic primary school (13%), and one in 12 went to a private primary school (8%). While the majority of respondents' children went to public high schools (70%), more children went to private (18%) or Catholic (15%) secondary schools than they did primary schools.

1. Note this totals more than 100% as respondents could nominate if they went to both a private and a public institution for primary and secondary schooling.



Research Findings

Australian parents are becoming more and more focussed on education and that focus starts early, at kindergarten if not before.

Education is really important to us at the moment.

A person's beliefs are founded by the time they are seven years old. If you don't have the foundations early, you can't fix it in high school.

This focus on education is being driven by a number of factors, primarily anxiety about standards across all government funded services but also a concern about how our children might fare in an increasingly uncertain and competitive job market. Because of this perceived importance, parents are planning far ahead for their children's early schooling; the family's choice of where to live can be dictated by proximity to the 'right' school.

You have to think about schools before you buy [a house] even if you don't have kids yet.

Man 1: *I wasn't aware there were any good public schools around here.*

Man 2: *There are a couple. There is one that's probably the best school in Victoria.*

Man 3: *That's why houses zoned in that area are \$50,000 to \$60,000 more.*

The qualitative research shows that Australians are in an ongoing, as yet unresolved, debate about the value of private versus public education.

My wife and I are on opposite sides [on private education].

I don't know how you decide between public and private. My husband thinks, 'why would you spend all that money?' He reckons especially for primary school.

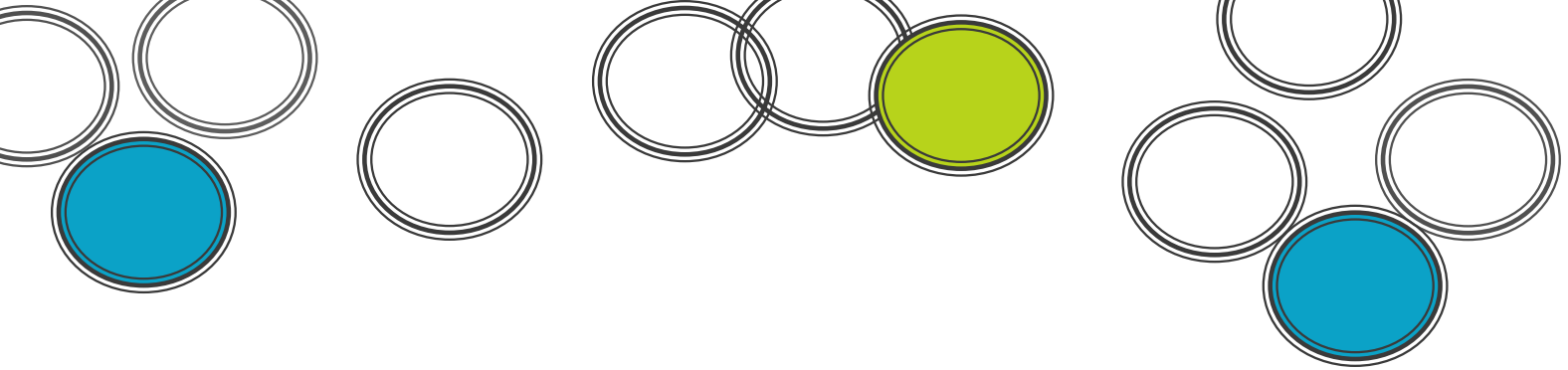
The qualitative research shows that positive attitudes to public education are present but somewhat overshadowed by concerns about the system.

The main perceived benefit of public schooling is financial. Among supporters of public education, there is a view that private schooling, especially at the primary school level, is not worth the money.

If you had \$20,000 every year to spend on your child, would it be better to send them to a good public school and then spend that money on an overseas trip? They would get such an educational experience from that.

It's a huge financial commitment, what with two kids. Fifty grand a year? There are lots of other things you want to do with your life.

I read recently about private schools putting their fees up again. ... I'd love to know the justification for it. It's a chunk of money.



Those with children in private schools have expressed doubts about the value for money offered by the private system.

I've got one boy and I spent \$20,000 a year on his education and his school came twelfth in the tables and my daughter went to a different school that we pay \$1000 a year that came thirteenth.

I'm starting to wonder whether it's worth paying the school fees. I'm not convinced that the differences between public and private are so different that it's actually worth it.

The quantitative research shows that in fact while the trend is towards investment in private education, Australians remain ambivalent about whether private schooling is the key to success in later life. More than half of all respondents expressed that they did not think that the source of education impacted individuals' career success. Only three in ten respondents expressed that they thought that children who attend public schools are less successful than those who attend private schools.

Aside from the financial benefits, supporters of public education also see a social benefit to sending their children to the local school.

I love the idea of sending my kids to the local high school. So good for them to walk there.

I want my kids to go to the local public school so they'll know kids in their community.

Evident is a degree of defensiveness about the merits of public education among supporters of the system, driven perhaps by the realisation that public schools have had bad publicity of late.

I went to a public school and I turned out just fine.

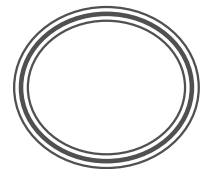
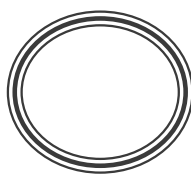
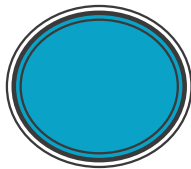
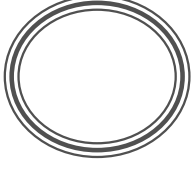
There's no guarantee of good teachers at private schools.

There is recognition that with parents pulling their kids out of the public system, that system suffers. If enough parents persisted with the public system to improve it, then the benefits would flow.

If we all send our kids to the local state high school, that will change it, make it good.

The qualitative research also shows that Australians recognize there is uneven quality in both public and private systems, that a good public school can be better than an average private school. Public selective schools and schools with selective streams with switched-on and energetic principals and good teachers are viewed to be a great option, perhaps even better than an expensive private school. The emphasis on private over public is often cause for comment from respondents in the qualitative research we do who are first generation migrants from Europe, some parts of Asia and America. They do not understand why much of the focus seems to be on financial investment in education prior to university rather than post-compulsory education.

However even parents who want to keep their children in the public school system are questioning what to do if their child's needs aren't being addressed. Hire a tutor? Put more effort in at home? Or simply switch to private?



We kind of like the idea of sticking with the state system, it's just the options are a bit limited.

Woman 1: *My daughter needs that one on one and sit down and doing. And she's not getting it. She has no confidence with her reading and writing. She's great with math, PE. I might have to consider other options. Maybe a tutor?*

Woman 2: *You would think at this age you wouldn't have to worry about a tutor!*

I love the school. The principal is great. But it doesn't necessary mean it's going to work for my child. I would love her to stay there but ...

There is no doubt that some parents who have experienced the public system feel let down. This can be the case with parents whose children are struggling at school but who fall short of having an official disability or learning problem.

I was under the assumption that if your child has a disability you get special funding, but the borderline kids get nothing.

I'm so sick and tired of the school not helping.

My daughter's in Grade 5. I had her assessed. The school's attitude was 'she's on the borderline, she'll be right'. She knows how to read, but she can't tell you the story. How's she going to cope in year 7?

There are those who feel let down by the public system who then pursue the private option, whatever the cost.

I am jumping from public education to private education as of today. I hate the local school.

My girls are getting behind and their confidence is getting lower and lower every year. There is bullying. The school is too big and the teachers aren't supportive. All they do is yell at the kids. It's embarrassing. You go and see the teachers about getting some support for your kids and they don't want to hear it. It's going to be a financial stretch but I have to do it.

A particular criticism of public schools was the perceived poor quality of teachers.

Maddie's mum has taken her kids out and put them into a private Christian college. She loves it. She had lots of issues with the teachers [at the public school]. Her eldest son was taught the 'f-bomb' by the teacher.

We had a parent teacher meeting and they knew nothing about my son. He had moved from yellow to blue books and she had no idea.

It's hard to get rid of crap teachers in the public system.

For those who were pro-private education, the perceived benefits were in the area of improved facilities:

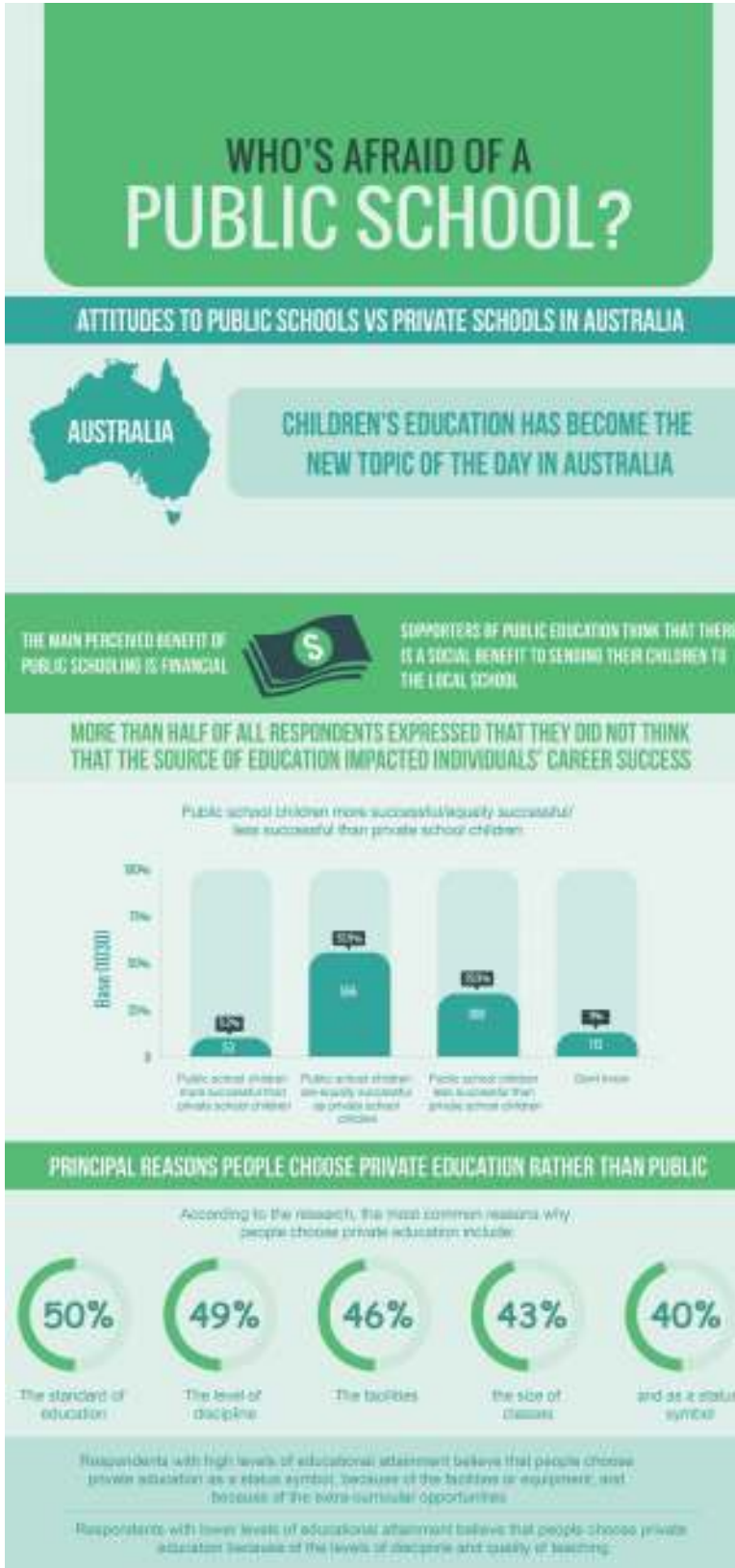
To us it boiled down to facilities. The private school option had the better facilities.

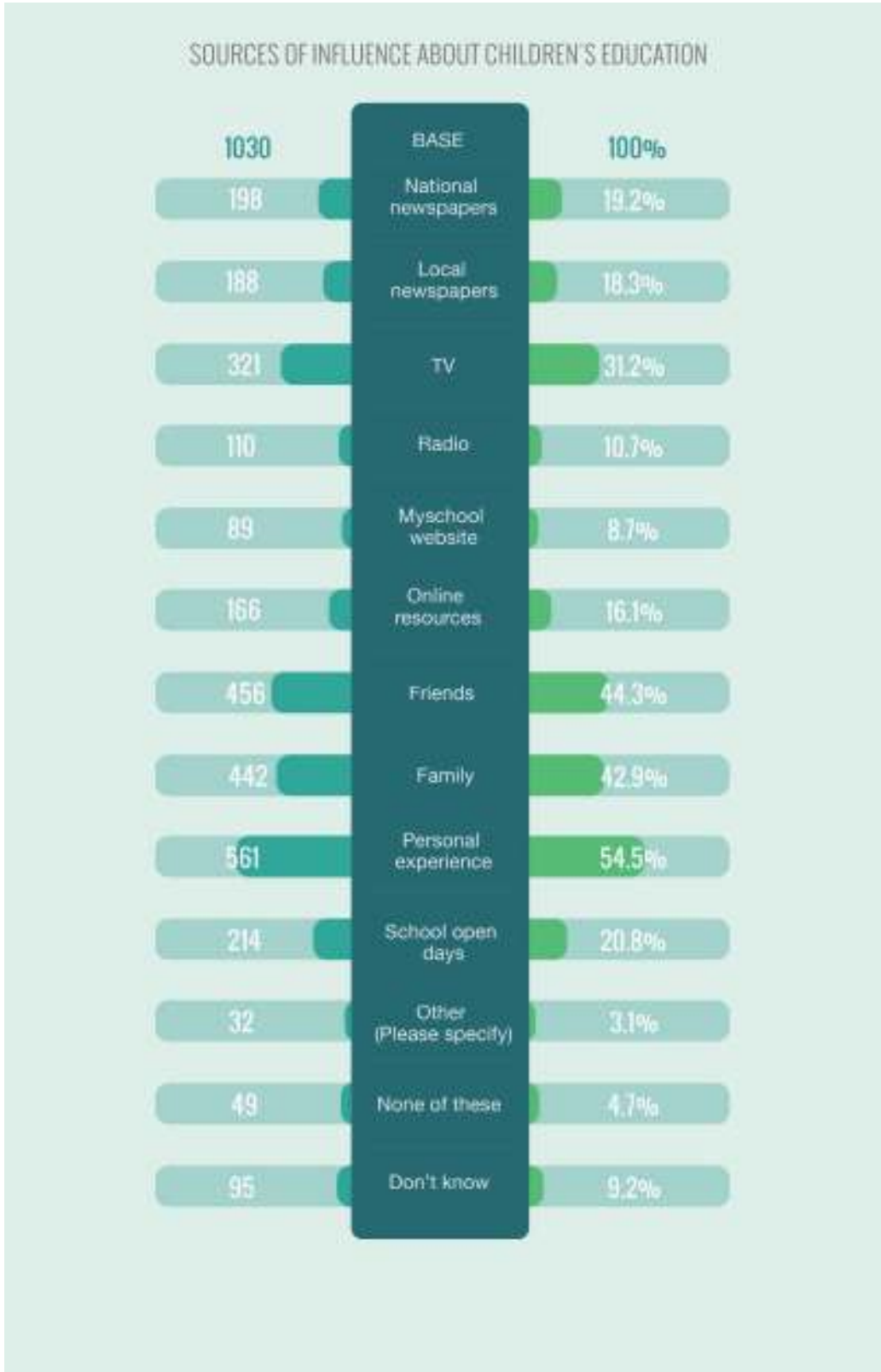
Private schools have better facilities, aids in the classrooms, extension classes, music programs, all those things public schools don't have. They will find something a kid is good at. No kids fall through the cracks.

Values, structure, rules and discipline:

A private school has a system of rules they can enforce more easily.

At a private school there is the discipline. You aren't going to be surrounded by kids who are yelling and screaming.







And quality of teaching:

[At private schools] they consider the best resource to be the teacher and they employ the best teachers available. They don't take the graduates who just passed. When they take on graduates, it's on contract and if they don't measure up, they are gone...

There was a belief in the importance of attending the 'right' school to maximize future career prospects by making connections.

Man 1: *In the United States unis like Harvard and Princeton are the breeding ground for the people who will run all the companies. ... Having the connections all in place.*

Man 2: *But the same thing happens here to a certain extent, like if you go to a private school.*

I went to Christ Church and because I went to Christ Church, all these guys at Arthur Andersen were Christ Church old boys and said, 'oh, you can have a job because you went to Christ Church'. I got straight in although my marks were average, but anyone else, forget it!

The quantitative research mirrors the qualitative research in terms of what reasons people think other people choose private education. The most commonly listed reasons included: the standard of education (50%); the level of discipline (49%); the facilities (46%); the size of classes (43%); and as a status symbol (40%).

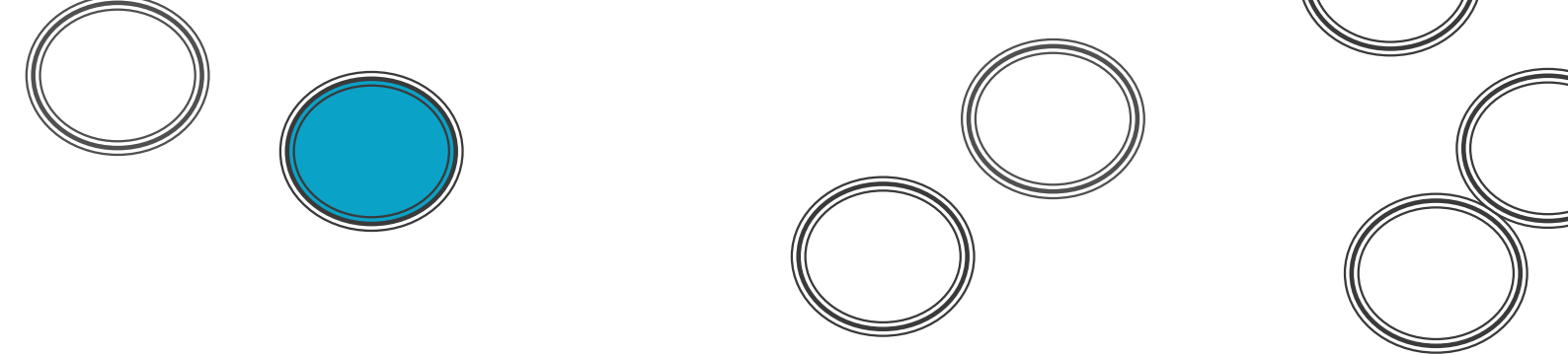
However there were interesting variations in the data on this question; different respondents tended to choose different reasons for why people might choose private education. Beliefs differed according to level of educational attainment of participants. Those with high levels of educational attainment tended to believe that people choose private education as a status symbol; because of the facilities/equipment; and/or because of the extra-curricular opportunities. Conversely, those with lower levels of educational attainment were more likely to have believed that people choose private education because of the level of discipline and/or the quality of teaching. Furthermore, participants' beliefs differed according to whether they had children under 18 years. Specifically, participants without children under 18 years were more likely to have believed that people choose private education because of class sizes, level of discipline, exam results and quality of teaching. On the other hand, people with children under 18 years were more likely to have believed that people choose private education because of their facilities/equipment than would otherwise have been expected (i.e. significantly higher than the average).

This begs the question – do people on lower incomes who may have limited experience with private schooling assume that a better standard of education exists in those schools? And do those on higher incomes know that this may not be the case but see value in the extra benefits such as facilities, extra-curricular activities and social connections?

In terms of sources of information about education, other than personal experience, the qualitative research reflects the important role played by the MySchool website and the final year rankings published in the media.

It just seems to me that in every paper in the past week there's been two or three pages ... dedicated to analysing [the final year] results and profiling schools and students.

Now that they publish the results, there's much more of an examination of how the school is performing. Particularly in the upper school levels they've had to lift their game and get some results.



That being said, word of mouth and conversations among friends are also very persuasive.

It's what people tell you. I have had so many conversations about private education since coming to Australia and moving into this area. Everyone is very private focused.

I have looked up [the MySchool website]. It helps. But you mainly find out about what the best schools are through friends, word of mouth.

The quantitative research reflects the strong influence personal experience and relationships have in terms of choice of education system. The most commonly reported sources of influence about their children's education were personal experience (55%), family (43%), friends (44%) and television (31%). Interestingly those with higher levels of educational attainment tended to have given less credence to information presented on TV, and more to information provided by their friends. Those in professional/managerial jobs tended to have relied more upon accounts from their friends than you would expect.



Reflections on the Research Findings

Our research results confirm a growing anxiety amongst Australian parents about where and how to school their children. And this anxiety now seems to hit us earlier and earlier. As shown above, parents are now even worried about where to send their child to kindergarten. Why is this? Are we more nervous about our children's success than parents in other countries? Is the Australian economy so difficult to predict that it means that unless our kids are in the right pre-school they are not going to get a job?

The answer appears, at least in part, to be explained by the fact that unlike other parents across the OECD, we have genuine schooling choice in Australia. And like all choices that need to be made, the very processes of decision-making can cause considerable anxiety and stress.²

The Australian education system is in many ways globally unique. It is a genuinely 'tripartite' system that gives Australian parents more choice when it comes to different options to educate their children than any other comparable OECD nation.³

On average 14% of schools across the OECD are private. Australia, along with Belgium and Chile, are responsible for inflating this average as most OECD countries in fact have less than 10% private schools. In Australia 36% of our schools are private.⁴ When you compare Australia to the US and Britain, again you can see just how unusual the Australian system is. In Britain around 7% of the population are educated in private schools, in the US it is 10%. In Australia it is at least 34% and rising.

Of this 34%, the Catholic system educates 21% of our children and the 'independent' non-government system the remaining 13%.⁵ Between 1975 and 1998, there was a 13.5% fall in government school enrolment share across our nation.⁶

Our survey respondents' schooling background therefore seems to roughly reflect the divide that would have existed when they were in secondary schooling. 73% of them said they went to a government school, 14% said they went to a Catholic school, and the remainder said they went to a non-government or private school.

The freedom of movement for Australian parents is not just a choice between government and non-government. Australian parents (again almost uniquely in the OECD) are not confined by school boundaries even within the government sector. Thus we see competition between local government high schools and selective government schools, as well as 'good' government schools and 'bad' government schools, all competing in the marketplace of schooling options.

So what does this freedom of movement, this plethora of choice mean for Australian schooling?

Well, like the application of a market mechanism in many spheres, it delivers some excellence and innovation at the top end, and a whole lot of inequality at the bottom end.

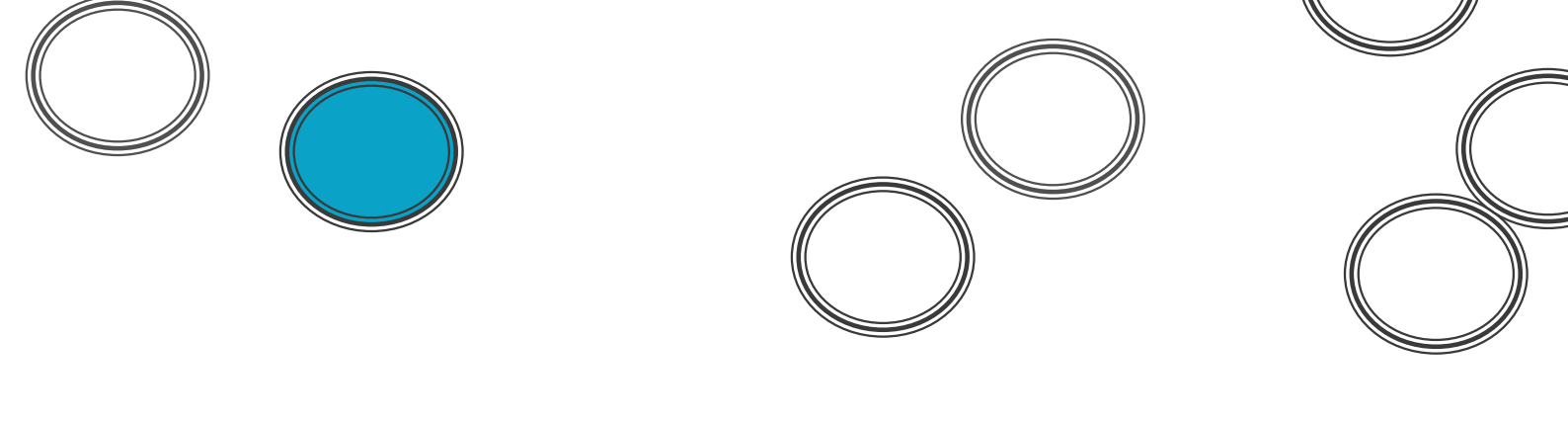
2. It could be argued that the existence of choice encourages active engagement in decision-making around education choices, a positive outcome, along with anxiety, confusion and even fear about the choices available.

3. NOUS Group, 'Schooling Challenges and Opportunities: A Report for the Review of Funding for Schooling Panel August 2011 p. 29 (NOUS Report).

4. OECD (2013), Table C1.4. Figure quoted in Ben Jensen, 'The myth of markets in school education', Grattan Institute, July 2013 p. 7.

5. Australian Bureau of Statistics 2006 Census custom tables.

6. Watson, L. and Ryan, C. (2009) 'Choice, vouchers and the consequences for public high schools: lessons from Australia.'



Those with the most resources are able to exercise the most choice and negotiate the 'best' schooling outcomes for their kids. Those without as many resources cannot exercise the same levels of choice.

Australian education is characterised by concentrations of both advantage and disadvantage. In fact when compared to other OECD countries, Australian schools in particular are characterised by "a relatively stronger concentration of disadvantaged students in disadvantaged schools."⁷

Despite our survey respondents' strong egalitarianism when it comes to whether or not the source of education determines an individual's career success, in the classless land of the fair go, our kids simply don't mix among the social classes as they used to. Just look at the figures. If you compare Australia to the OECD average, our schooling system is increasingly stratified along socio economic status (SES) lines.

In Australia, 38% of our schools are classified with 'average or mixture of SES'. The OECD average is 46% of schools with this class mix. 33% of our schools are considered disadvantaged in SES terms, the OECD average is 28%. And of course we have a higher proportion of schools with 'advantaged' SES as well.

The reason this matters so much is that the research shows us that the biggest determining factor as to how a student will do at school is the SES status of their parents, in other words the student's own background and circumstances. However, the research also shows us that if you are a low SES individual student attending a high SES school, you will do significantly better than at a low SES school.⁸ In fact the results show that the higher the SES status of the school, the better the average results for that school are, and the figures are significant.⁹

Put simply, the economic and social backgrounds of the cohort of kids at a school matters to that school's performance. The segregation of students by socio economic status simply means that kids from disadvantaged backgrounds end up in smaller schools with greater concentrations of disadvantage and with all the requisite challenges that go with teaching in these environments.

So as increasingly anxious parents exercise their choice to send their children to an independent, Catholic or out-of-area selective government high school, the result is that there is a greater concentration of higher SES and aspirational kids all mixing together at one school, and lower SES kids at the other school.

The NAPLAN¹⁰ and PISA¹¹ results demonstrate this. There is no doubt that the non-government sector in Australia, in aggregate terms, gets better results in external tests in every state and territory.¹²

However, does this mean that the objective quality of education is therefore better in non-government schools? Do our government schools deliver sub-standard education? When we look at our survey respondents above, they are definitely nervous about the quality of education in government schools. They appear to believe the teaching is sub-standard, the discipline weak. Is this true?

7. NOUS Report, *op. cit.* p.20

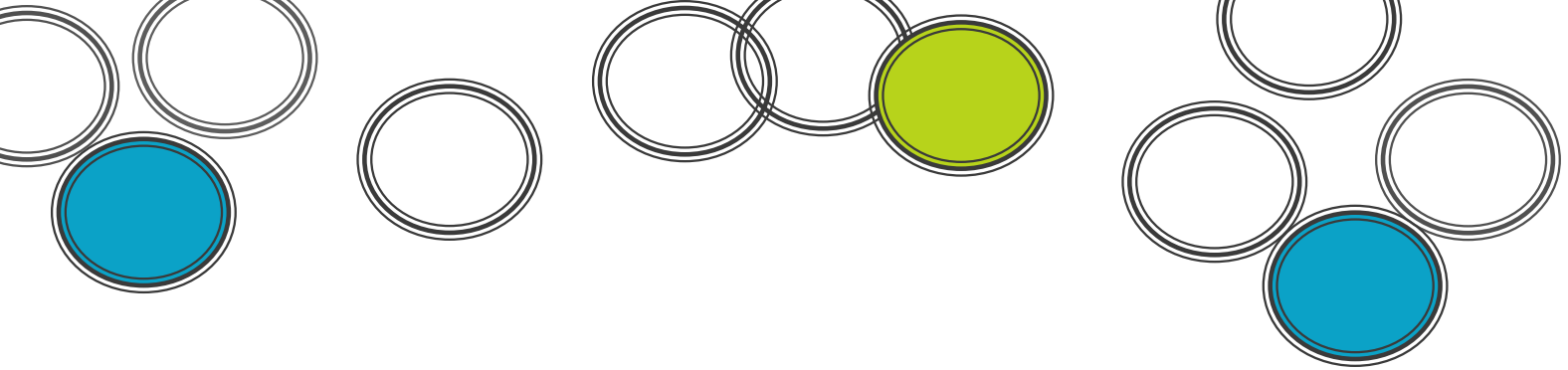
8. NOUS Report, *op. cit.* p.33

9. *Ibid.*

10. The 'National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy' (NAPLAN) is an annual assessment of all Australian students in years 3, 5, 7 and 9. It was introduced in 2008.

11. The OECD 'Programme for International Student Assessment' (PISA) is an international study which aims to evaluate education systems worldwide by testing the skills and knowledge of 15-year-old students. It was introduced by the OECD in 1997.

12. National Institute of Labour Studies, 2009 PISA analysis.



The Gonski Review of Funding for Schooling commissioned a number of very interesting reports to help inform its findings. 'Schooling Challenges and Opportunities' was a significant research paper undertaken by the Nous Group, Melbourne Graduate School of Education and the National Institute of Labour Studies.

The report was significant in that it looked closely at education quality in Australia, and at the impact of our system's 'intensifying stratification along SES lines'.¹³

The report first concluded that the divide is not as simple as government versus non-government. There is a high degree of variability when it comes to education results across all sectors. All sectors have both high and low performing schools.

Their second conclusion was even more striking. The authors of the report looked at the results of independent versus government schools and found that the correlation between the average SES background of the students at the school and the school's results was so strong that the performance differences between government and non-government schools "are halved when the impact of the student body's average socio-economic status is taken into account."¹⁴

But the findings do not stop there. Further,

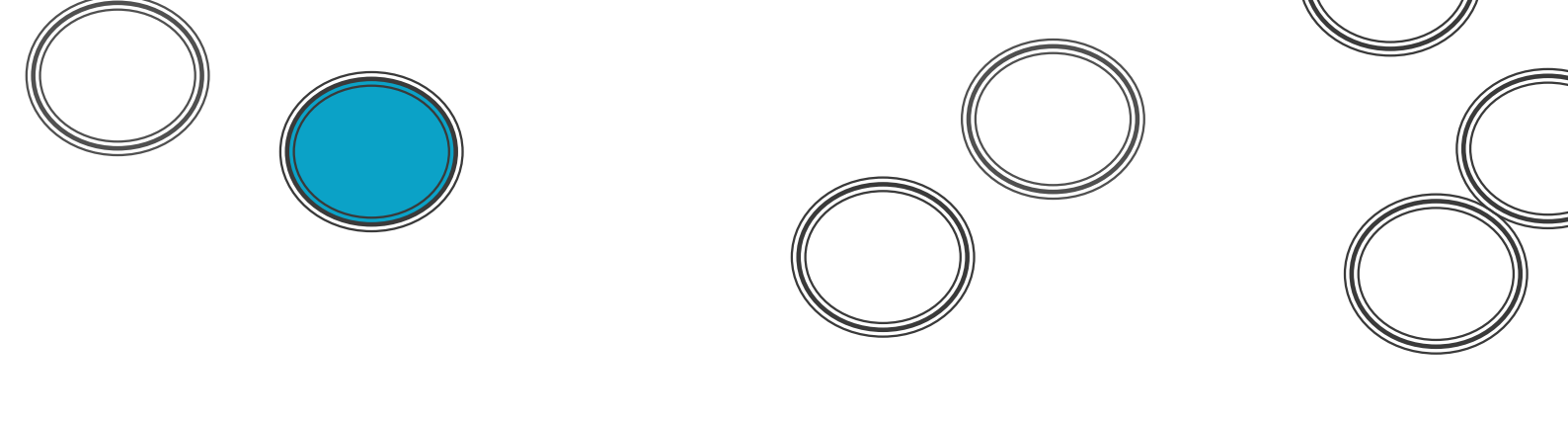
... when the average socio-economic status of the school is considered in addition to the socio-economic status of the individual student, performance differences at the individual level between those attending government and non-government schools disappear. This indicates that a large component of the relative performance advantage of Australian independent schools is a function of the relative clustering of advantage.¹⁵

So if the government high school down the road was given the same cohort of high SES kids as its neighbouring non-government high school, there would be little discernable difference between the two schools when it came to the individual results of its students.

When you start to look at 'value added' results, in general government schools do better than their non-government counterparts, although the results vary. Value added scores are constructed by taking into account the expected performance of the student based on their SES status and track their performance over time. There is an assumed natural trajectory in any student's performance and the 'value add' is the improvement on top of this, the assumption being that this additional improvement was the result of the school.

High performing schools often enrol kids who are already high performing. The value or increase in student performance added by the school for these students is sometimes small in statistical terms. Schools with students from a different demographic can end up achieving huge proportionate gains in student outcomes, demonstrating a real capacity to impact on results for those kids. Some of the survey respondents above express the view that non-government schooling may not always be good 'value for money'. Value added results to some extent support this.

13. NOUS Report, *op. cit.* p. 30
14. NOUS Report, *op. cit.* p.28
15. NOUS Report, *op. cit.*, p.33



However, it is important that public education advocates don't get too pre-determinist. There is truth to the often-used quote about the "soft bigotry of low expectations." Just because the statistics tell us that the impact of poverty and disadvantage are likely to lead to poor education outcomes doesn't mean we should just accept that as a fait accompli. Nor should teachers or principals use the nature of the student cohort at the school as an excuse to justify poor results. All schools and every teacher must have high expectations of their students and aim for academic excellence.

But at the same time it is also not fair to hold that schools alone can overcome the effect of poverty, and more significantly the effect of concentrations of poverty and disadvantage.

So what does this all mean?

The evidence is that when you account for socio economic status, the educational 'quality' of the teaching offered at government and non-government schools do not make a statistical difference.

So what are you purchasing when you send your child to a non-government school? Well you are often purchasing facilities, no doubt about that. You are purchasing better sports ovals and equipment, better 'performance spaces' and possibly more extra-curricular teachers, or sports coaches.

You are definitely purchasing student cohort. You are determining with whom your children will mix and be educated. And the evidence shows, that with the current concentrations of advantage and disadvantage, students are more likely to do well at a school with higher SES.

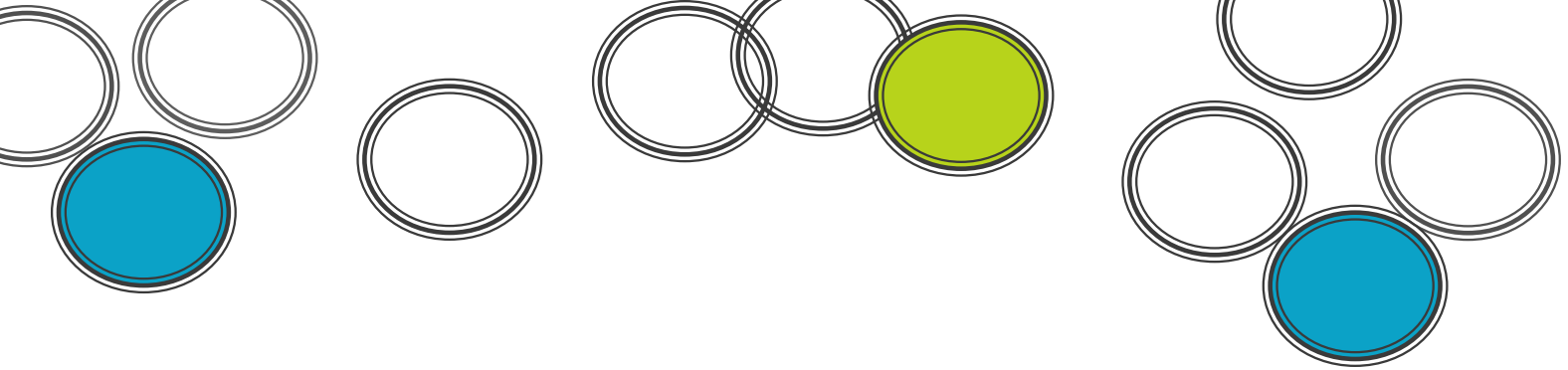
The problem with this is of course, the students that are left behind, in schools with diminishing social capital and teachers who are stretched from dealing with many children with complex needs. What happens to them? Well we know that the concentration of disadvantage means they do significantly worse than they would in a school with either a mix of different SES or a high SES school.

In Australia this segregation between schools has not been limited to SES status alone. Australian schools are increasingly showing evidence of a concentration of culturally and racially similar students in our schools. In a paper written for the UNESCO International Institute of Education Planning about the impact of education privatisation, the authors concluded that:

There is some evidence that – given more choices over schools – families prefer to opt for enrolment in schools that are of the same racial group as their own. Also, many families wish to enrol their children with peers of the highest possible capabilities and backgrounds.¹⁶

We see very stark examples of this happening in Australia already. In country towns there are often indigenous and non-indigenous schools. Religious schools in our suburbs are growing more popular, with low-fee Anglican and Islamic schools proving popular with parents. What does this mean for our capacity as a multicultural nation? What will happen to the famous Australian 'egalitarianism' that allegedly allows us to cross class boundaries and be comfortable with all?

16. Belfield C. and Levin, H. M. "Education Privatisation: Causes, Consequences and planning implications", UNESCO: International Institute for Education Planning, Paris 2002



The conclusion appears to be that in order to deliver social cohesion and increased equality in education outcomes, we need to ask middle and high SES parents to keep their kids in their local government high school for the benefit of others, for a collective, social benefit.

But is this feasible and how do we achieve this? As the parents in the focus groups say - what is in it for them?



Conclusion

There is no doubt that public education is more affordable. It is free to attend and you are guaranteed by law a place at your local comprehensive school.

However, this is clearly not enough. To keep anxious and time-poor parents committed to the public system they need to be confident that the system will deliver for their kids, educationally, culturally and socially.

Public education needs to be great. If public schools are great schools, people will stay. And most public schools are already great, delivering life changing education to a diverse group of students every day.

But not all public schools are great. And this is the problem, because the solution is a circular one. If anxious parents depart the local school, it starts to do worse, forcing more worried families to depart. New families then bypass the local school, either sending their children to an out-of-area government school or to non-government options. But, the local school will only improve if these families stay and new families join the school.

Great public schools require a collective effort. And the problem for parents at the moment is that society is not exactly pushing them towards such public spiritedness.

Many writers and commentators have referred to the 'free-market' thinking about education that has been coming out of the United States and elsewhere for many years.¹⁷

This ideal penetrates public consciousness almost daily. Peter Dreier writes about the consistent theme of Hollywood portrayals of schools from the *Blackboard Jungle* (1955) through to *Mr Holland's Opus* (1995). All of these films portray:

*... an idealistic teacher fighting to service his or her students against overwhelming odds, including uncaring administrators, cynical colleagues, a stultifying required curriculum that crushes the spirits of teachers and students alike, dilapidated conditions, budget cuts, unruly and hostile students, or students suffering from the symptoms of poverty or neglect. The underlying message is that while occasionally a rare teacher can light a spark in a few students, our public schools are failing most of the students they are supposed to serve.*¹⁸

So against all of this, advocates of public education have to encourage middle class parents to have faith in their local school and their local community. They need to invest in their local school, supporting not just their own kids' educations but the education of their neighbours' kids.

It's not as difficult as it seems. Many parents of kids in private secondary education talk about how much they loved the primary school years when they were involved in the local school. Suddenly they knew everyone in their street, their kids played at neighbours' houses, there were fundraising BBQs and a real sense of community. Once high school begins and the kids all scatter to non-government schools and selective high schools with just a handful going to the local comprehensive, these parents say they genuinely miss the feeling of community connectedness that attending the local school provides.

¹⁷ Diane Ravitch, Peter Dreier

¹⁸ Peter, Dreier, 'The Billionaires' War Against Public Education' 8 July 2013, Truthout



The free market is good at many things. Competition is good at keeping prices down and driving innovation and increases in productivity. However, free market competition does not work when it comes to education. Even proponents of market economics and competition policy have now shown that there is no evidence that competition in the school education market in Australia improves school performance.¹⁹

This is because the education system does not operate as a 'pure' market in the economic sense. As Ben Jensen from the Grattan Institute points out, many factors inform the schooling choice of parents, including affordability, proximity to the family home, the school's facilities or its religious status. None of these choice factors can be changed through government policy or intervention in the 'market'. So this means that most of the time schools in the education 'market' are simply not competing on performance. There is no competitive driver to improve performance in order to attract students. The theory that more competition will inevitably improve education outcomes is not justified by the evidence.

'Competition' in the education context really only works for those who have the resources and capacity to exercise real choice.

This leaves the rest of us anxious. It makes us think that we are on our own. We need to concentrate on the survival of our own nuclear family in a market driven world. We need to escape the system that the wealthier families have already escaped before we condemn our own children to a substandard education.

Conservative economist Milton Friedman famously called for a voucher system for schools in America so that...

... Parents could express their views about schools directly by withdrawing their children from one school and sending them to another, to a much greater extent than is now possible. ... In general they can now take this step only by changing their place of residence. For the rest, they can express their views only through cumbrous political channels.²⁰

In response to Friedman, in "Exit, Voice and Loyalty", Albert O Hirschman wrote that this was a "near perfect example of the economist's bias in favour of exit and against voice".

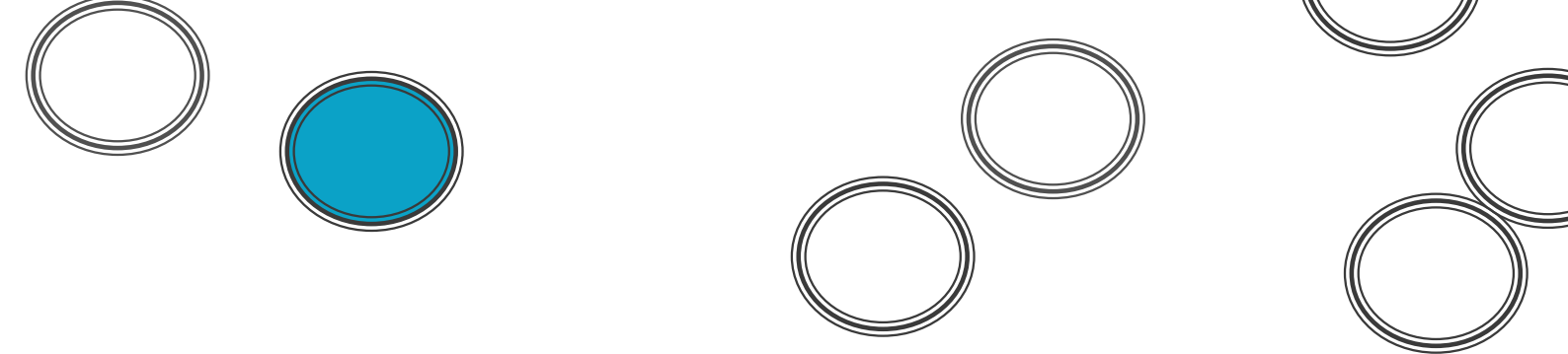
In the first place, Friedman considers withdrawal or exit as the "direct" way of expressing one's unfavourable views of an organization. A person less well trained in economics might naively suggest that the direct way of expressing views is to express them! Secondly, the decision to voice one's views and efforts to make them prevail are contemptuously referred to by Friedman as a resort to "cumbrous political channels." But what else is the political, and indeed the democratic, process than the digging, the use, and hopefully the slow improvement of these very channels?²¹

We need to encourage parents to stay in the public school system and 'exercise their voice'. But this will only happen if parents believe they will be listened to in the first place. There is a sense amongst many parents that the giant, monolithic public education system has very little time for the voices of parents. In fact, parents feel they can more easily 'purchase' voice through the payment of school fees, rather than battle against the inertia of a large bureaucracy.

19. Ben Jensen, *op. cit.*

20. Quoted in Malcolm Gladwell, "The Gift of Doubt: Albert O. Hirschman and the power of failure," 24 June 2013, New Yorker

21. Quoted in Malcolm Gladwell, *op. cit.*



In many ways there is truth to this perception. It has really only been in the last five years that education departments around the country have begun to grapple with the concept of ‘parental engagement,’ and begin to put into practice what many educators have known for years - that involving parents in their children’s learning is fundamental, for both the student and for the school.

There needs to be genuine cultural change across the public education system when it comes to engaging parents. There needs to be explicit teacher training around parental engagement and all school planning should embed parental engagement into the overall strategic plan for the school.

Parents need to feel welcome in their child’s school, they need to know they have the right to an informed discussion about their child’s learning and through this process also recognise that they have a responsibility to support the work the teachers do, and the learning of other students at the school.

The good news for public education is that not only will this cultural shift engage the anxious parents who are thinking of leaving the local school, but in turn it will also produce positive education outcomes for schools serving disadvantaged communities.

Recent research²² has shown that where schools in low SES communities have proper parental engagement, where the school leadership puts a lot of time and energy into welcoming parents into the school and inspiring and informing them about their child’s education, results not only improve for the individual child but for the school as a whole.

Teachers also need a voice. Outside the home environment, the most significant factor to impact on children’s education outcomes is the quality of the teacher in the classroom.

More needs to be done to ensure that teachers are treated as the professionals they are, and given the training and support to truly excel in their teaching.

To do this “teacher appraisal, feedback and development”²³ is vital: in other words where teachers are encouraged when they have done well, mentored and assisted when they need help and recognised and rewarded as they improve professionally.

Our survey findings show that many parents assume private schools have better teachers and better quality teaching. People assume that private schools have the superior tools to be able to impact on teacher quality such as the power to hire and fire.

New research has shown that there is very little difference between ‘autonomous’ non-government schools and centralised government schools when it comes to the sorts of school management practices known to drive quality performance of the teaching workforce.²⁴

In this research, a selection of teachers at government schools and non-government schools were asked to answer a survey around school staffing practices.

22. Smarter Schools National Partnerships National Key Reform Project, ‘Parental Engagement in Schooling in Low Socio-Economic Communities’ Final Report September 2011.

23. Ben Jensen, *op.cit* p. 30.

24. Ben Jensen, *op.cit*.



In terms of positive re-enforcement of quality performance, both non-government and government schools performed poorly. Answering whether there is 'recognition for improving quality of teaching', 6% of government school teachers said 'yes' and 10% of non-government school teachers said 'yes'. The scores were the same for whether there is recognition for innovative teaching.

Over 50% of teachers in both sectors agreed with the statement that "teacher evaluation is just an administrative exercise," and that "teacher evaluation is not linked to staff room teaching." 41% of non-government teachers said that "staff tolerate sustained poor performance", and 50% of government school teachers concurred.

The only real difference in results was when it came to dismissing teachers with sustained poor performance. Here the non-government teachers believed this happened 44% of the time. The government school teachers said it happened 17% of the time. What is interesting here is that even when given the power to hire and fire, non-government schools clearly encounter the same problems faced anywhere when there is a poorly performing member of staff; it is always difficult to dismiss people from their employment.

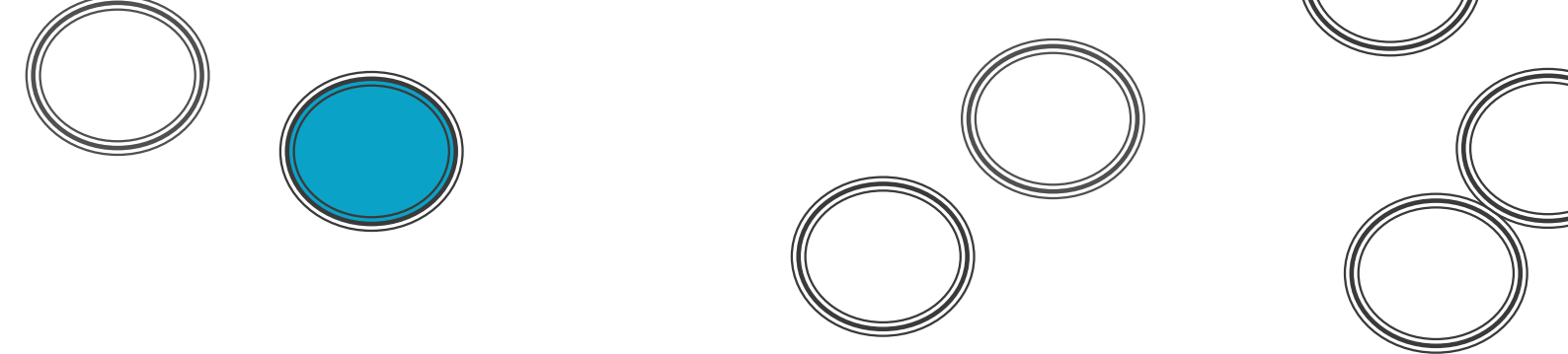
Government schools need to be best practice when it comes to supporting our teachers and nurturing their talent and capacity. Luckily for the government school system there is clearly no truth to the view that government schools are massively worse performers when it comes to promoting quality teaching. In fact what the results above reveal is that both sectors need work at supporting their teachers to excel.

One of the great success stories of the OECD has been the story of the Finnish education system. Finland now routinely ranks as one of the best education systems in the world, in terms of both excellence and equity.

The core component of their success has been the explicit promotion of teaching as a profession with status. Teaching in Finland is a highly-selective and highly-regarded profession where only 120 students are chosen out of 2000 applicants to enter the only teacher education program in the country. Although teacher wages are proximate with other similar countries and are not considered particularly lucrative, the profession is still awarded enormous status within the community, and teachers have considerable personal autonomy around their teaching practice.

This autonomy is earned through intense training and professional development for teachers, including the requirement that teachers achieve a research based Masters Degree in order to teach. Like academics they are given relief time to research and write, again treating teaching as a profession with the same status as doctors and lawyers.

There have been great gains in professional development and teacher standards in the last decade in Australia, but we still do not value and reward our teachers adequately for the importance of the work they do. Government schools, like teaching hospitals, should be the leaders of best practice when it comes to teacher support, professional development and excellence. The government system should drive the high standards of the profession, using its critical mass to make this possible.



Despite the constant refrain of many conservative commentators in this country, funding does matter. It is clear that it matters to parents, who will often scrimp and save to send their children to a school with better per-capita funding and resources. It is clear that it matters to teachers, who understand what extra resources, particularly extra staff, can mean for learning outcomes at a school.

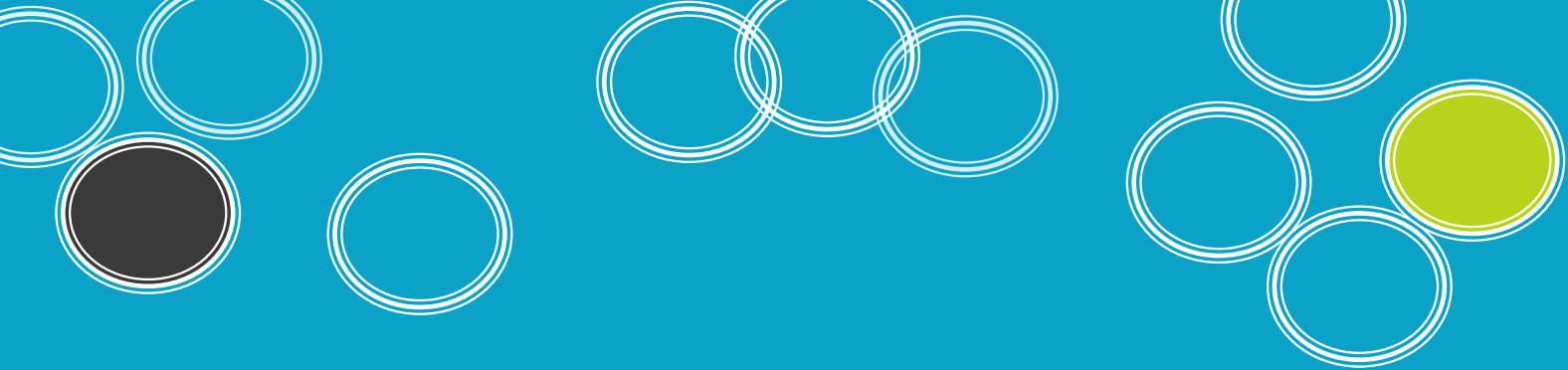
A model of 'needs based' funding is incredibly important for education in Australia. Whether it is the model devised by the expert panel led by David Gonski AC²⁵, or a different model, we need to start funding education based on the needs of students. A genuine needs based funding model would provide a much needed funding boost to government schools. Decent federal funding should also help drive renewed confidence in the public education system.

At present, the federal government has only guaranteed the first four of the six years of funding recommended as part of the Gonski plan. The bulk of the funding - \$6.9 billion of the entire \$9.6 billion - is allocated to flow in the final two years. In a sense, the federal government is only guaranteeing a third of the full funding. Given the importance of a needs-based funding model (whether a Gonski model or otherwise), it is imperative that the federal government commits to delivering the full quantum of funding, \$9.6 billion. As this funding is based on need, the vast bulk of it should flow to the bottom quartile of SES schools, the ones with the highest disadvantage and greatest needs. Finally - given needs-based funding is the way forward and given the need for parents to "exercise voice rather than exit" - could some funding be allocated directly to a consortia of principles, teachers and parents at each school to allow them to determine the best way new funding is used in their schools?

As Australians, we have an image of ourselves as living in a classless, multicultural, egalitarian society. We see ourselves as a society fundamentally democratic in nature. Our own research shows this to be the case. The majority of our survey respondents said that they did not think that the source of education impacted individuals' career success. They overwhelmingly did not believe that children who attend public schools are less successful than those who attend private schools. Perhaps this reflects confidence in the kids in public education. More likely it reflects a view - naive, perhaps even delusional - that Australia is a place where an individual can overcome any educational disadvantage and become a success.

It would be good if this could become a reality.

25. Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations Expert Panel 'Review of Funding for Schooling, Final Report, December 2011.



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