

Submission to Productivity Commission

This submission is from the Australian Learning Lecture (ALL) in conjunction with Chris Bonnor, co-author of *Waiting for Gonski: How Australia failed its schools*, published by UNSW Press and *Lessons from Canada: an equal school system is possible*, published by ALL.

The Australian Learning Lecture is a ten-year initiative by Koshland Education Innovation Ltd designed to bring big ideas and new approaches in education to national attention. The Australian Learning Lecture is built around a biennial lecture. Each lecture introduces a big new idea which is supported by an impact program. The program is designed to show that big ideas are possible in practice, to create awareness of the need for a learning culture and to build engagement with learning.

ALL acts as a hub and a catalyst, working with the world's leading knowledge shapers to drive impact in key areas of need for change. It draws on the input of multiple voices and stakeholders to strengthen the importance of learning for all Australians. ALL is not politically or commercially aligned.

This submission is a response to the interim report, *Building a skilled and adaptable workforce*.

The report's strategy of improving school student outcomes- by improving access to high-quality, accredited curriculum and lesson planning materials and diffusing the best innovations in educational technology across the country – is well-stated in the report.

But by itself the strategy will fall well short of expectations. The problem lies in section one, *The best resources to improve school student outcomes*. This section reflects a range of assumptions and beliefs about school education in Australia that don't match the reality on the ground.

Australian schools form complex socio-educational hierarchies which are evident in almost every Australian community. These hierarchies both create and reflect differences between schools in terms of who they enrol, the obligations they are required to meet, the opportunities they provide to their students and their learning outcomes.

These differences are especially derived from the unequal capacity of schools to determine who enrolls, and in terms of accepted measurable outcomes, who succeeds and who fails.

In particular, the substantial and increasing concentration of disadvantaged students into low SES schools, combined with the well-researched peer impact on student achievement, is neither acknowledged nor considered by the report. This impact has increasingly diminished the success of reforms targeted at the level of schools, while ignoring the need to reform the wider framework within which schools operate.

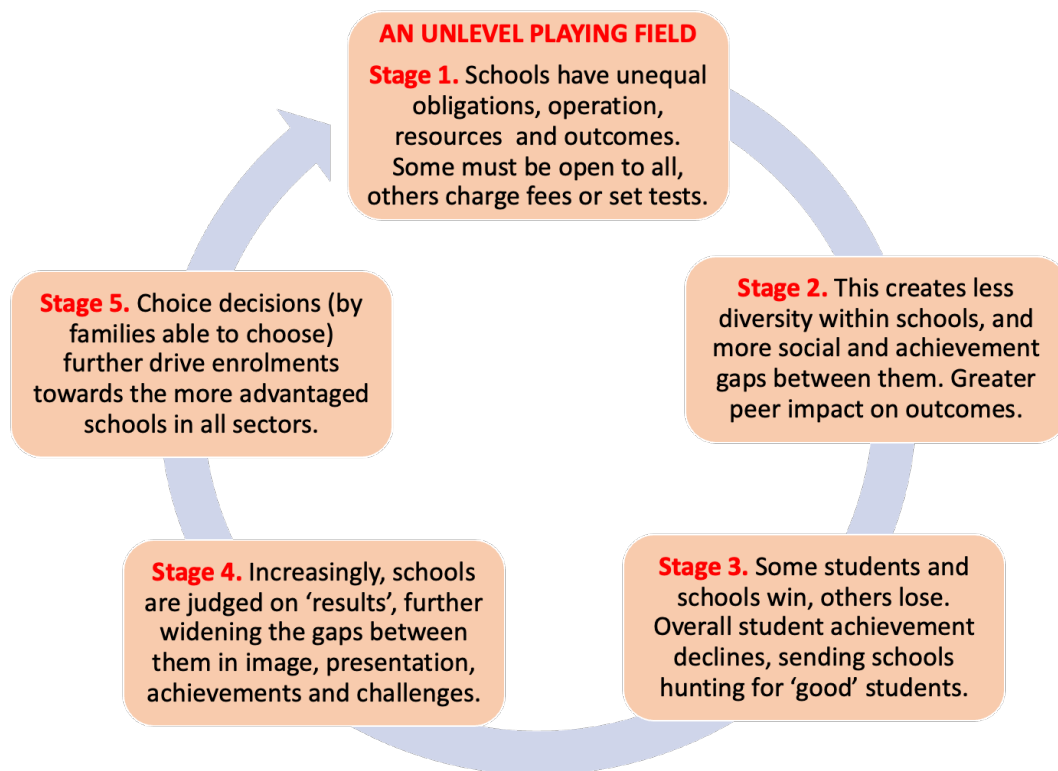
Unless this framework is restructured in ways that reduce the impact of enrolment differentiation and discrimination- and create a more level 'playing field' of schools- the contribution of schools to "building a skilled and adaptable workforce" will remain limited.

Significantly, the Commission itself has previously acknowledged such wider barriers evident within school education. In its 2023 Review of the National School Reform Agreement it identified that the concentration of disadvantaged students into disadvantaged schools is a systemic inefficiency impeding student learning. It acknowledged that peer effects have a significant impact on student outcomes but offered no solutions.

The subsequent Review to Inform a Better and Fairer Education System stated that the current system entrenches educational disadvantage, in the process *making it less likely that other reforms will realise Australia's longstanding ambition of equity and excellence.*

In the light of such revelations, *Building a skilled and adaptable workforce* risks joining a succession of reform interventions which fail to recognise the extent to which the current system falls short in its equity, efficiency, effectiveness and efficacy.

These and other problems which have arisen in the school education sector are explained in the following diagram. The diagram is adapted from *Choice and Fairness: A Common Framework for all Australian schools.*



This regressive cycle is largely self-explanatory and is very evident in the hierarchy of schools in just about every Australian community. In overall terms it has a dominant impact across what is becoming a dysfunctional framework of schools, one which doesn't deliver equity or excellence while acting as a drag on otherwise well-intended interventions such as those proposed in *Building a skilled and adaptable workforce*.

The impact on student learning is complex but is certainly influenced by the socio-educational status of schools and where they lie in the hierarchy. Differences in school and classroom learning culture, 'time on task', teacher experience, expertise and expectations, curriculum focus and diversity, as well as resources all influence learning outcomes – and will affect the adoption of AI in the classroom. On the other hand, it should be noted that the smaller number of schools that focus on interest-based learning would be most likely to be early adopters, given that student learning and success is more individualised rather than subject to the constraints, in mainstream schools, created by lock-step student progression from year to year.

The other significance of the above cycle is that its impact on the school education sector and related agencies and initiatives isn't static. The segregation of school enrolments on socio-educational criteria is continuing to increase. The My School website's student enrolment data, when combined with its index of school socio-educational advantage (SEA), shows an ongoing movement of students from low to high SEA schools, with the latter, on average, experiencing rapid growth. In 2012 43% of schools in the top SEA half were public schools – but public schools formed just 30% of those schools by 2023.

The relevance of these developments to efforts to improve student achievement and hence school productivity is clear. The investigation completed by Michele Bruniges earlier in 2025 is a recent confirmation of an increasing concentration of disadvantage in lower SEA schools. Even the title of another recent review, *The systemic inefficiency of Australian schools: a policy and measurement review*, should raise concern within the Productivity Commission about the links between enrolment segregation and school system productivity. At the very least, the Commission should not assume that enough students, certainly not across the whole range of schools, will benefit from the recommendations in the current interim report.

The Australian Learning Lecture (ALL) is not alone in raising concerns about the way the current structure of school education forms a barrier to improving equity and achievement, and hence productivity. In 2023 it published *Choice and Fairness: A Common Framework for all Australian schools* in which it urged active consideration of other policy options. In 2024 it commissioned an investigation of how school education is structured in Ontario, Quebec and British Columbia. The resulting report *Lessons from Canada, an equal school system is possible*, has just been released and is currently the subject of widespread discussions with stakeholder groups and those working in the policy space.

While the Canada study didn't overtly prioritise school system productivity the contrasts within Canada and between Canada and Australia are clearly relevant. Just like in Australia, school completion rates in Quebec are alarmingly low, an inevitable outcome of poor system equity in both places. Unlike Australia there are moves in Quebec to set a better course.

Both Australia and British Columbia have hybrid public/private systems in which overall equity and achievement consistently falls below expectations. In contrast all publicly-funded schools in Ontario operate within a common framework, with enviable outcomes in both equity and achievement.

In blunt terms, Australia can do better and must address the existing overall structures which act as an anchor on school improvement. Until that happens, essential reforms and improvements will not achieve their deserved success. While strategies around AI will carry an impetus of their own, *Building a skilled and adaptable workforce* risks becoming, at least in part, yet another school reform disappointment.

