THE CENTRE FOR INDEPENDENT STUDIES

One School Does Not Fit All

Jennifer Buckingham
Trisha Jha

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Executive Summary

- School education in Australia is characterised by both school diversity and school choice; there is no such thing as a 'typical' government, Catholic or independent school.
- The diversity of schools within each sector is greater than the differences between the sectors, suggesting broad-brush comparisons between the school sectors based on average results are not useful, either for policy decisions or for parents choosing a school.

Enrolment

- The Australian education system today is the consequence of a historically high amount of non-government involvement.
- In 1994, 71% of students were enrolled in government schools, but by 2014 this had declined to 65%.
- The Catholic and independent school sectors grew both in number and in proportion over the same period — particularly the independent sector which almost doubled in size.
- The number of special schools in the non-government sector has also doubled in the last decade
- The vast majority of schools in the non-government school sector (96%) have a religious affiliation.
- The independent school sector has diversified, but there has been relatively little increase in secular options.
- The number of 'non-denominational' religious schools now exceeds the number of Anglican schools; however Anglican schools still enrol a larger number of students.
- Independent schools play an important role in educational provision for students in non-mainstream circumstances. Even in remote and very remote areas of the Northern Territory, 25% of students are in non-government schools.

Funding

- Funding for non-government schools is based on a combination of need and entitlement.
  - All Australian children are entitled to a base level of government support for their education, and parents have both the right and responsibility to seek the best possible education for their child, including in a non-government school.
  - The amount of funding is then dependent on an assessment of 'need'.

Government funding

- 50% of government schools, 83% of Catholic schools, and 71% of independent schools are in the $6,001-$9,000 and $9,001-$12,000 funding brackets.
- The proportion of government schools in the government funding bracket of >$24,000 per year (12.2%) is more than twice as high as the proportion of independent schools (4.7%) and Catholic schools (2.8%).
- Very small proportions of government and Catholic schools (less than 1%) are in the lowest two funding brackets, while 16.3% of independent schools are in this category.

Total funding

- The total per capita recurrent funding rate is very similar across sectors.
- 47% of government schools, 48% of independent schools and 57% of Catholic schools are in the $10,000-$14,999 funding bracket.
- 94% of Catholic schools, 83% of government schools, and 76% of independent schools have per capita funding levels below $20,000 a year.

School choice

- Though educational provision is becoming more diverse, choice is still limited in several ways for many people, particularly lower-income families due to restrictive enrolment and funding policies.
- There are a few policy options for further expanding school diversity and school choice:
  - Scholarship tax credits and education savings accounts have the potential to be implemented on a small scale and could be especially beneficial for children with special needs.
  - Distance education and home-schooling have the potential to be opened up and regulated more prudently to be of more use to more families.
  - Charter schools could extend school choice within the public school sector and offer a way to turn around chronically-failing schools.
- It is important to acknowledge and value the essential role all three school sectors play in providing quality education to Australian students and the benefits brought about by school choice. Australian families are fortunate to have an array of educational choices available to them; it should not be taken for granted.

Introduction

School education in Australia is characterised by a relatively high degree of parental choice. The roots of this arise from the long period between English settlement in Australia and the establishment of government funded, public schools. In the years prior to public schools, education was provided by churches and through private arrangements — a scenario that has endured through the past century.

A large proportion of children attend a school of choice. More than one in three Australian children attends a non-government school. Non-government schools are almost always schools of choice. Many families choose a public school for their children.[1]

There is wide-spread acknowledgement that parents have the primary responsibility for the welfare of their children, including their education. Funding for non-government schools is based on a combination of need and entitlement — all children are entitled to some level of government funding and the amount is dependent on an assessment of 'need'.

As the number of families making choices about schooling has grown, so has the demand for diversity in provision. The result is a wide range of schooling options, to meet the needs and expectations of a diverse community.

This range is just as evident within the government and non-government school sectors as it is between them. There is no such thing as a typical government, Catholic or independent school. Some government schools more closely resemble high-fee independent schools in terms of their student demographic and level of resourcing than a public school in the next suburb. For example, the Sydney Conservatorium High School — a government school — draws 84% of its students from the top income quartile and 97% from the top half, and has a recurrent annual income of $36,000 per student.[2]

School sector comparisons that look only at averages provide only imperfect information about the quality and nature of individual schools in each sector. The introduction of the National Assessment Program for Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) has made it possible to make more sophisticated statistical comparisons between the school sectors but even this is of limited use given the range and variety of schools. Some analyses of data from NAPLAN and international assessments show negligible differences between the school sectors after controlling for differences in socioeconomic status, while others find an advantage for non-government schools by the end of school.[3] A successful education policy ideally should not result in large disparities in educational quality between school sectors. Nonetheless, these findings still represent averages that mask large differences in educational quality within each of the school sectors.

This report is not concerned with analysing the performance of the government, Catholic and

independent school sectors. It aims instead to challenge the idea that there is such a thing as a 'typical' government, Catholic or independent school by showing the diversity of schools in all sectors.

It starts with a statistical profile of schools in Australia, looking at student demographics and resourcing. This profile illustrates a varied landscape of educational provision both within and between the three sectors. Each of the three school sectors serves students across the geographic, demographic and ability spectrum. Differences in the extent of provision in remote areas, and for students with disabilities, are often due to policy factors such as the availability of funding.

The current policy settings are the consequence of historical events and precedents.

Although many families are able to make educational choices, it is still the case that school choice is restricted for the lowest income families, usually either because they cannot afford the fees to attend a non-government school, or they cannot afford to live in the enrolment zone of their preferred government school. Depending on the jurisdiction, funding and service discrepancies between the school sectors limit the choices of students with disabilities.

The report will present policy options that would extend school choice to more families, especially those whose choices are constrained by geographical or financial circumstances, but also potentially facilitating greater diversity and quality of provision for all families.

Distance education and home-schooling have the potential to be opened up and regulated more prudently to be of more use to more families. Education savings accounts take school choice a step further into 'educational choice' — the ability to choose, with personalised, publicly-funded savings accounts, between different types of educational services. Charter or 'free' schools could improve school choice within the public sector.

The report profiles six schools that exemplify the diversity in schooling provision in Australia. Two schools are profiled from each sector, across three states — Queensland, New South Wales and Victoria. Each of these schools has developed in response to a particular need or demand, and they are by no means outliers. Each of the 9,500 schools around Australia has a unique community to serve. In this way, independent schools are at a particular advantage as they have more autonomy in their operations. Government and Catholic schools, as part of systems, have less local control.

Both the statistical profiles and the individual school profiles also demonstrate that funding levels are not strictly delineated in the way that is often portrayed. The schools profiled have levels of funding that are not widely disparate, but the contribution of government and private funding differs — in ways that might not be expected. The profiled school with the highest level of private income was a public school.

School choice has a long history in Australia. Most families value the ability to make decisions about the best educational setting and provision for their children. Parents know that one school does not fit all. Many parents choose a different school for each of their children, depending what is the best fit for each child. Some students attend different schools at different stages of their schooling, depending on what educational path they want to take.

The argument for choice is both one of principle and one of practicality. No school can be everything to everyone. From late 18th century 'dame schools' that educated poor children whose families could not afford for them to attend school full-time, through to alternative education settings like today's Big Picture approach in which policy allows flexibility in provision, educators are responding to need.

This is not to advocate a laissez-faire approach — it is important to ensure schools are accountable for the quality of education they provide. However, with accountability and support (or closure) of low performance schools — choice and diversity are preferable to centralisation and enforced uniformity. Australian families are fortunate to have an array of educational choices available to them; it should not be taken for granted.

Box 1: School sectors

Government schools: Also known as 'public schools' or 'state schools', government schools are owned and operated by state or territory governments. They are almost entirely funded by taxes and nominally free for students to attend, though schools frequently charge for other expenses.

Non-government schools: Schools that are owned and operated by private, not-for-profit, organisations. The non-government sector includes Catholic schools and independent schools.

Catholic schools: A system of schools owned by the Catholic Church in Australia and operated by the state Catholic Education offices. They receive funding from federal and state governments and charge fees.

Independent schools: Non-government schools that are run by a variety of private non-profit organisations. Most are not part of a system. They receive funding from federal and state governments and charge fees.

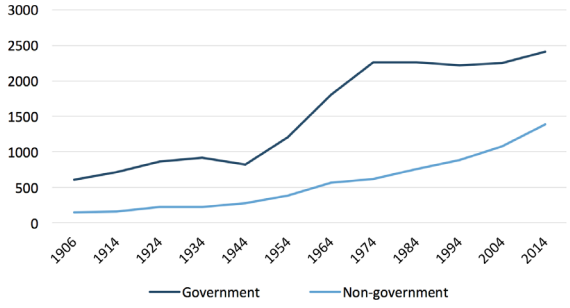
Statistical profile of school history in Australia

Enrolments by sector

Students in Australia have had some degree of choice in schooling since the early years of British settlement (the late 1700s). Initially, schools were run by the Church of England, but free 'charity schools' run by other denominations appeared in the following decades, as well as private commercial schools catering separately for middle-class boys and girls. These schools were not government funded.

In the 1840s, a dual system of state government-funded denominational schools and national schools was established. Victoria was the first state to pass a public education act, followed by the other states over the next two decades. For the next century, Catholic schools struggled to remain viable alongside free public schools. The financial pressures on Catholic schools were alleviated with the introduction of 'state aid' (government funding) in the 1960s.

Figure 1. School enrolments by sector, 1906–2014

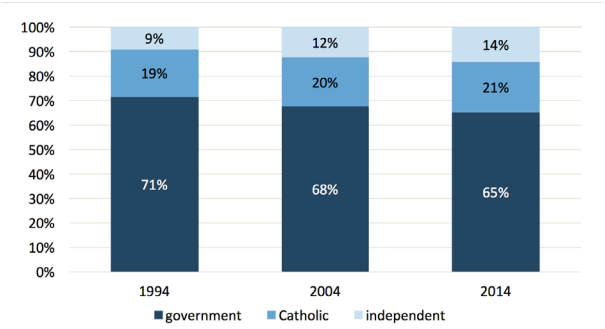


Source: 1906-1954: ABS Yearbook, Australia, various years; 1964-2014: ABS Schools, Australia, various years.

Eventually, government funding was extended to other schools, facilitating the establishment of new non-government schools, and thus increases in enrolments.

Figure 1 shows that the steady growth in enrolments in non-government (Catholic and independent) schools began in the 1940s, well before they began to receive government funding. Enrolments in government schools also increased steeply from the 1940s (the post-war 'baby boom') but stopped in the 1970s and stagnated throughout the 1980s and 1990s, recommencing in the last decade.

Figure 2. Proportion of school students by sector, 1994–2014



Source: ABS, Schools Australia, various years.

A more detailed breakdown of enrolments in recent years is provided in Figure 2. Government schools still enrolled the majority of students in 2014, but even though the number of students in government schools increased from 1994 to 2014, the proportion of the student population this represented declined from 71% to 65%. The Catholic and independent school sectors grew both in number and in proportion over the same period — particularly the independent sector which almost doubled in size from 282,000 students in 1994 (9% of enrolments) to 530,000 students (14% of enrolments) in 2014.

Non-government school affiliations

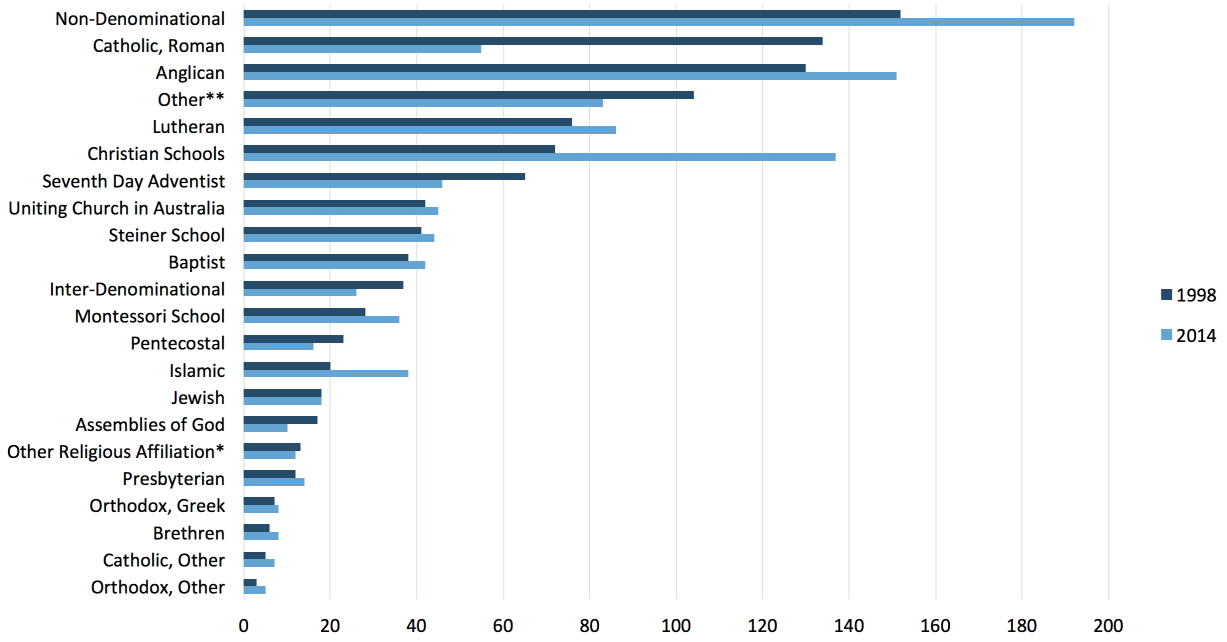
The vast majority of schools in the non-government school sector (96%) have a religious affiliation, although they vary in the degree to which religious instruction and ethos permeate the school curriculum and culture. Figure 3 shows that in 2014, only 163 of the 2753 schools in the non-government school sector did not have an affiliation with a recognised religion. They are Montessori schools, Steiner schools, schools for students with special needs, international schools, Indigenous schools and community schools.

This overall picture of religious schools obscures some significant shifts in the types of religious schools in the non-government school sector, however. Figure 4 shows that in 1976, enrolments in the non-government school sector were predominantly in Catholic and Anglican schools — together accounting for 88% of students. In 2014, Catholic schools had reduced their majority substantially and Anglican schools grown only slightly, together enrolling 70% of students. The 'other' category — students in other religious and non-religious schools — more than doubled to represent one in three students in non-government schools.

The defining trend in the growth of non-government schooling is not just the rise in enrolments in the sector, but also the dispersion of children into religious schools other than the Catholic and Anglican traditions. Figure 3 illustrates the trend in more detail.

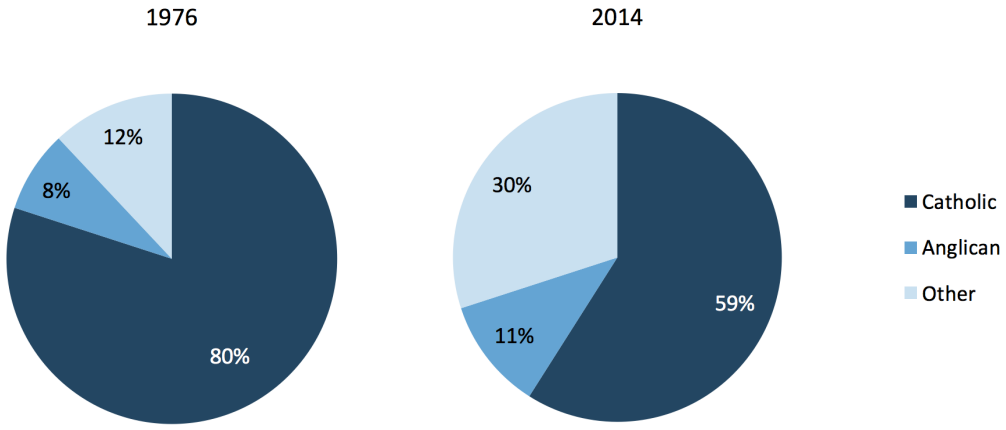
The strongest growth in the independent sector has been in Islamic schools, Christian schools and non-denominational religious schools — numbers of these schools almost doubled in the 15 years from 1998 to 2013. They tend to be low-fee schools located in outer metropolitan areas with high population growth. The number of 'non-denominational' schools now exceeds the number of Anglican schools; however, because Anglican schools tend to be bigger, they still enrol a larger number of students.

Figure 3. Independent schools by affiliation, 1998 and 2014



*Note: 'Catholic' schools included here are independent Catholic schools not part of the Catholic school systems. * Other Religious includes Churches of Christ, Ananda Marga, Hare Krishna and Society of Friends.*
***'Other' includes special schools, international schools, Indigenous schools and community schools.*
Source: Independent Schools Council of Australia, Independent Schooling in Australia Snapshot, 1999 & 2015.

Figures 4 and 5. Non-government school students – Catholic, Anglican and Other, 1976 and 2014.



Source: ABS, Schools Australia (Cat. No. 4221.0), 1976 & 2014.
2014 data for 'Anglican' and 'Other' students from ICSA

Demographics

Student profiles

The government and non-government school sectors both provide education for children from a variety of different backgrounds and with a range of different needs. Table 1 shows the proportion of students enrolled in government and non-government schools by location.

While the overall proportion of Indigenous students across Australia is substantially lower in non-government schools than government schools, this belies the important role of independent schools in educational provision for students from remote and very remote areas of the Northern Territory and Western Australia. A quarter of students from remote and very remote areas of the Northern Territory attend non-government schools.[4]

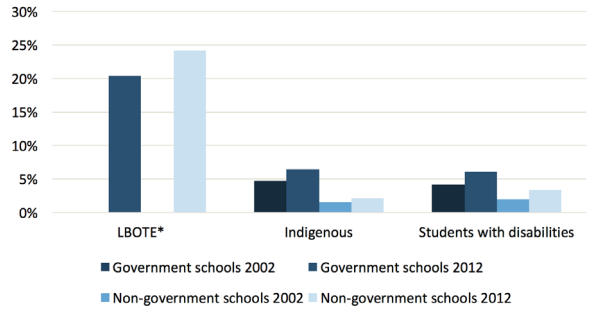
Table 1. Students in government and non-government schools, by rural and remote classification, 2014, percentage

	Government %	Non-government %
Metropolitan	63%	37%
Provincial	69%	31%
Remote	79%	21%
Very remote	87%	13%

Source: ABS, *Schools, Australia*, Cat. 4221.0, NSSC Table 46a

The student profiles of the two school sectors broadly reflect the demographics of the overall student population in other respects. Figure 6 shows the percentage of students from language backgrounds other than English (LBOTE), Indigenous students, and students with disabilities in both sectors. The percentage of Indigenous students and students with disabilities increased in both sectors in the decade to 2012. National aggregate data for LBOTE is not published for earlier years.

Figure 6. Student profile of government and non-government schools, Australia, 2002 & 2012, percentages of students



Source: ABS, *Schools, Australia*, Cat. 4221.0
* LBOTE data are for 2011, which is the latest available.

Special schools

'Special schools' are schools that provide dedicated education and care for students with special needs, such as autism, intellectual disability, or severe behavioural or emotional disorders. The number of special schools in the non-government sector has doubled in the last decade.

Table 2. Special schools, 1999-2014

Sector		1999	2004	2009	2014
Government	No. of schools	312	340	335	330
	% of schools in sector	4.5	4.9	4.9	5.0
Non-government	No. of schools	57	59	80	105
	% of schools in sector	2.2	2.2	2.9	3.5

Source: ABS, *Schools, Australia*, Cat. 4221.0, NSSC Table 34a

The number and proportion of students with special needs is higher in the government sector. This is in part because government financial support for students with special needs is considerably higher in government schools; the funding gap can be many thousands of dollars in school funding and support services.[5] The funding gap differs depending on the type of disability, and is larger in some states than others.

Selective schools

Some government-sector schools in some states and territories have selective entry policies. Students are selected on the basis of their performance in an exam and on their record of achievements.

New South Wales has the largest number of academically-selective schools, including fully selective and partially selective schools (that is, a mixture of selective entry students and local enrolments). In addition to the academically selective schools, it also has several performing arts and sports high schools that have selective entry. Western Australia has one selective creative and performing arts high school in addition to the academically selective school.

Table 3. Academically selective schools in each state and territory

State	Government	Non-government
NSW	21 fully selective; 26 partially selective[6]	2 fully selective; several partly selective
VIC	4 fully selective[7]	None
QLD	3 fully selective; 1 partially selective[8]	None
WA	1 fully selective[9]	None
SA	None	None
TAS	None	None
ACT	None	None
NT	None	None

Socioeconomic status

The Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) constructs an index of socioeconomic advantage/disadvantage for every school in Australia. The Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage (ICSEA) is calculated from parents' self-reported occupation and educational level, the geographical location, and the proportion of Indigenous students in each school. The values are scaled around a mean of 1000, and most schools' ICSEA values fall within the range 600-1300, with lower values indicating greater disadvantage. Special schools and very small schools (five or fewer students) are not assigned an ICSEA value.[10]

Figures 7–9 show the distribution of ICSEA values for government, Catholic and independent schools. They are shown separately for primary, secondary and combined (primary and secondary) schools as there are substantial differences in the distributions for different levels of schooling.

Figure 7. ICSEA values for government schools, by school type, 2013

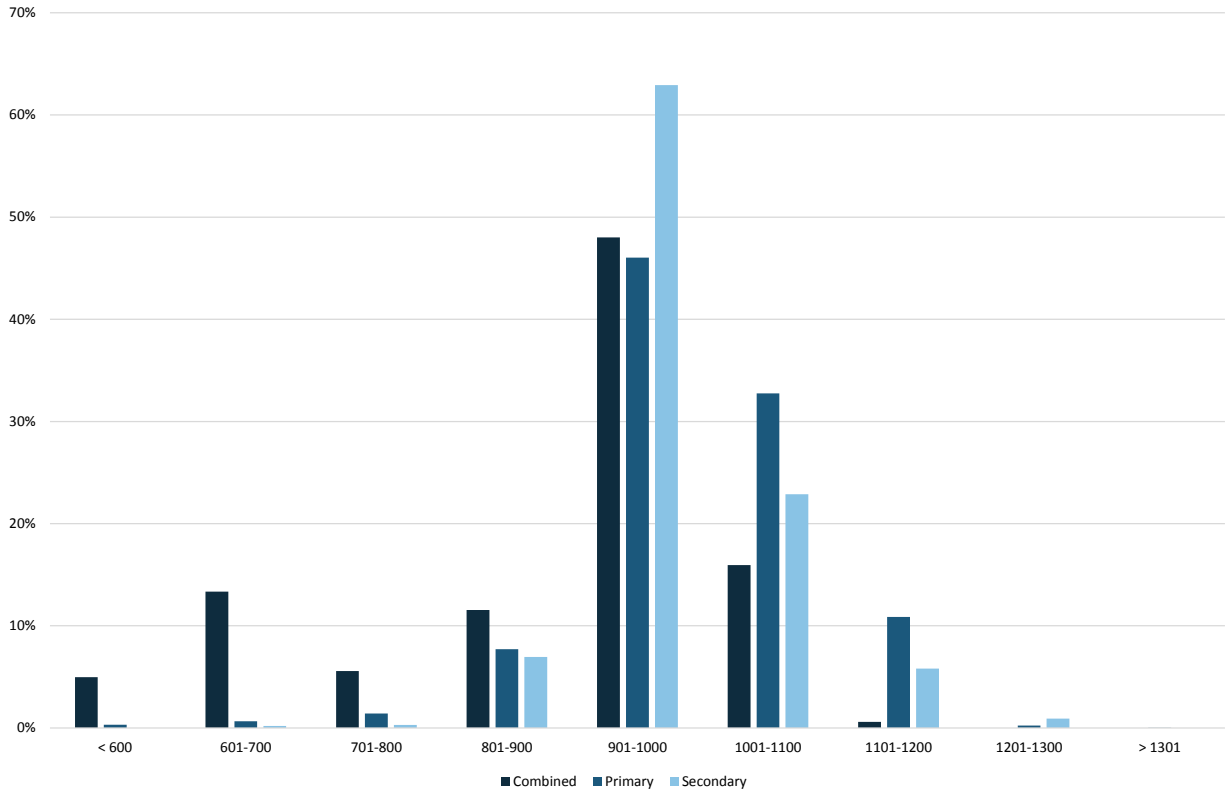


Figure 8. ICSEA values for Catholic schools, by school type, 2013

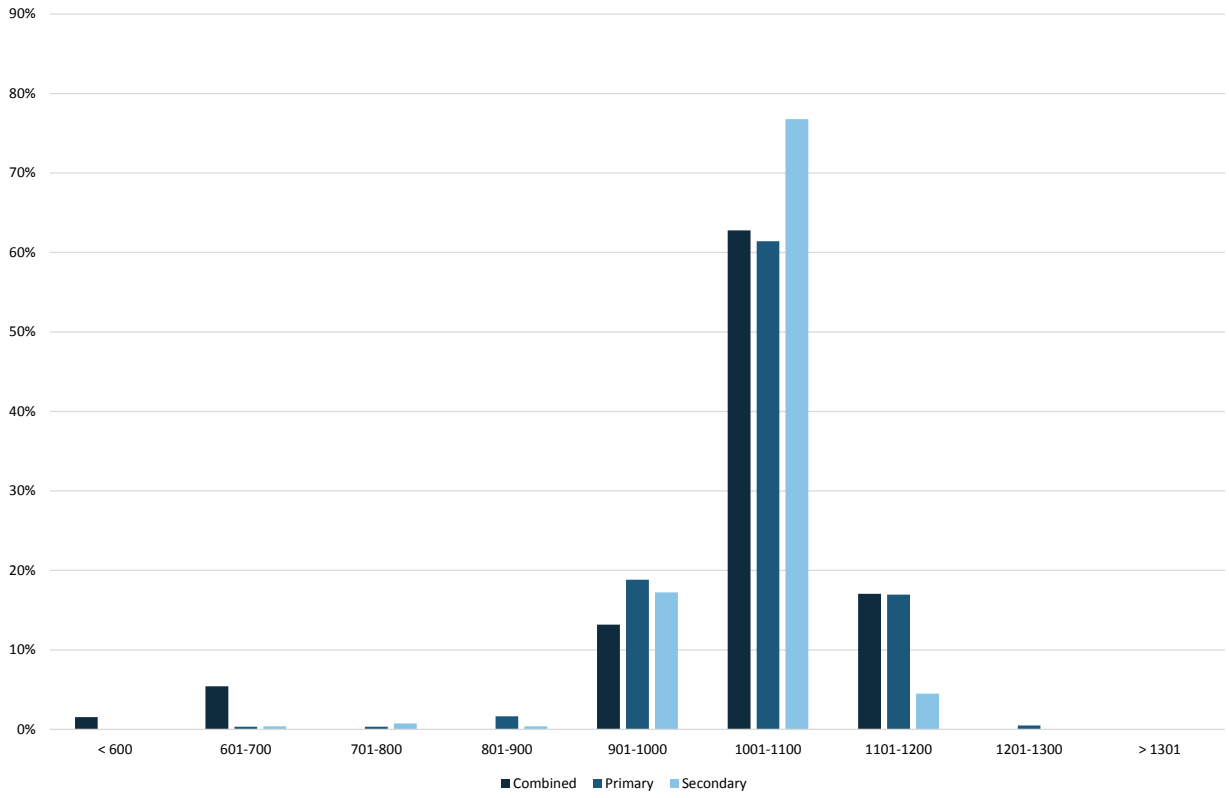
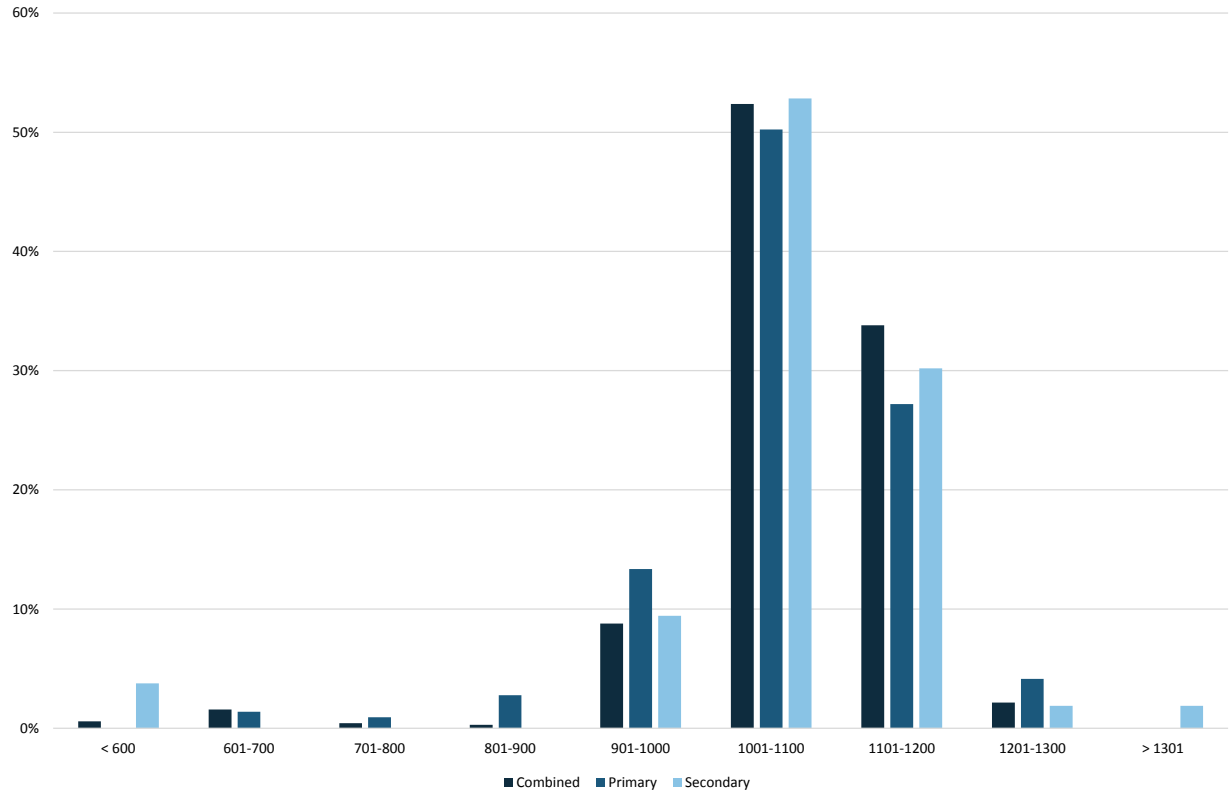
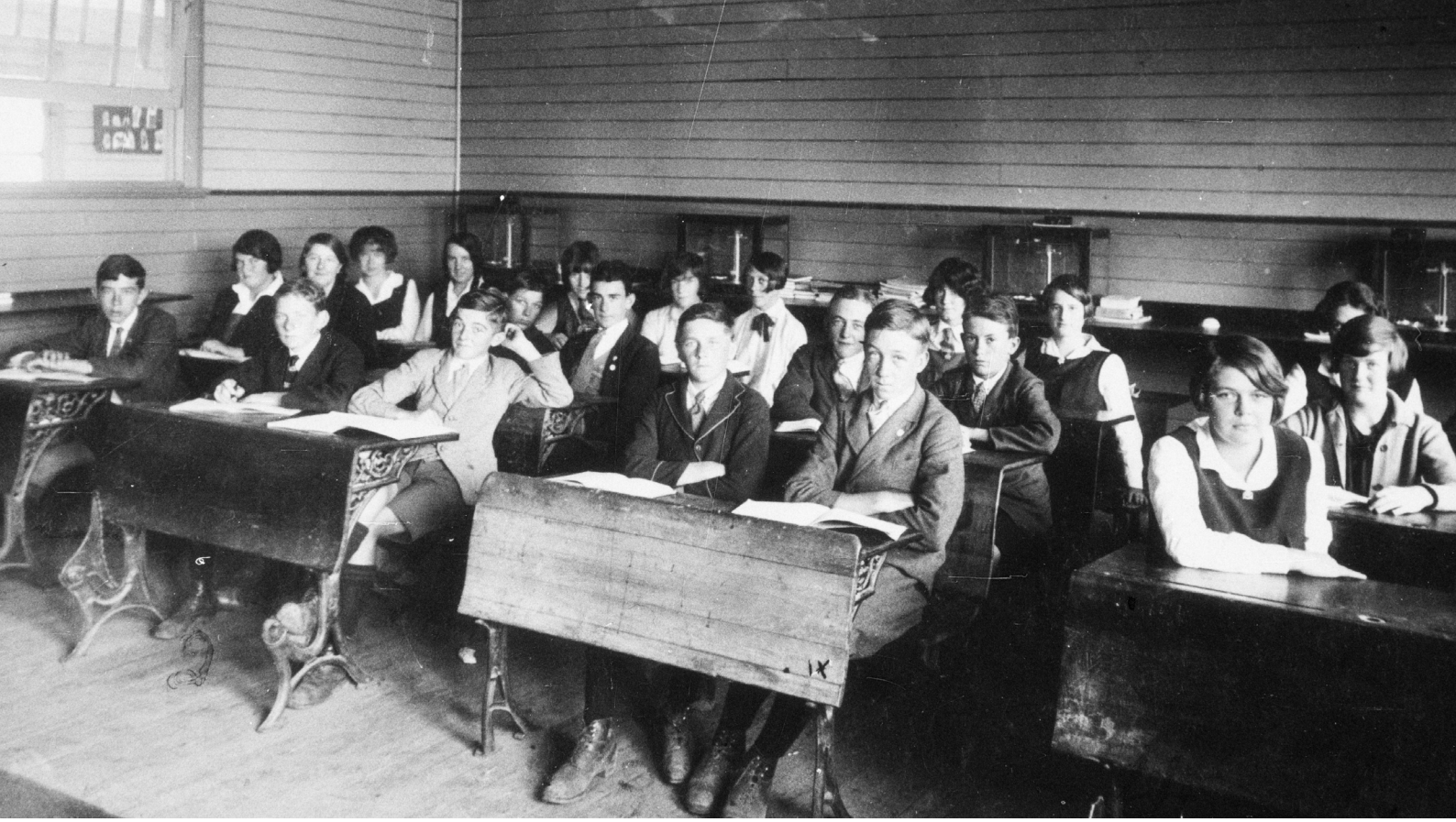


Figure 9. ICSEA values for independent schools, by school type, 2013



There were only two schools in the ICSEA range above 1300 in 2013 — Sydney Grammar School and Tipperary Station School. Sydney Grammar School is a large, high fee, independent school in metropolitan Sydney. Tipperary Station School is a very small government school located on a remote cattle station in the Northern Territory. While they have similar ICSEA scores, the differences between these schools result in very different funding levels. According to ACARA finance data, Sydney Grammar School received government funding of $3,500 per capita in 2013, while Tipperary Station School's government funding equated to more than $44,000 per capita.



School choice in Australia

Non-government schools have been a feature of organised school education in Australia since the early years of British settlement. The first schools in the colony of New South Wales were 'dame schools' and Church of England charity schools. 'Dame schools' were private schools run by women, often widows, in their homes, for children of convicts or poor working families. The first known dame school was in operation in 1789.[11]

Church of England chaplains ran schools on behalf of the colonial government in NSW, funded with a mixture of colonial government funding and grants from Church societies in England. As the colony expanded to include wealthier non-convict families, and the population from religious denominations grew, the types of government-assisted schools available became more numerous. Free charity schools run by clergy were the major providers of education for the first 50 years of settlement.[12]

In the other colonies, the development of schooling ran slightly different courses, depending on the religious denominations and nationalities of the early settlers. However, in each of the colonies there was mixture of schools catering for the various needs of the different parts of society at the time — a scenario described by education historians Craig Campbell and Helen Proctor as a 'developing market' in education.[13]

Victoria was the first state to pass an Education Act, providing for free and secular public education in 1872 — with other states following suit in the next two decades. As new fully government-funded public schools opened around Australia, some states and territories terminated or reduced funding for religious schools. This placed enormous financial pressure on religious denominational schools, particularly the numerous Catholic schools that served a poor and working-class population. Nevertheless, despite a long period without government assistance, non-government schools have always been a major provider of education in Australia.

The modern history of school choice in Australia has similarly been propelled by competing interests and principles. There are ongoing debates over whether the appropriate rationale for school funding is need or entitlement. Initially, government funding to non-government schools was prompted by need — inadequate facilities and insufficient teachers. Therefore funding was in the form of bulk grants for specific purposes. However, the parents of children in non-government schools agitated for an entitlement-based funding system that consistently provided a basic level of per student funding to non-government schools. The principles underlying this reasoning are that all Australian children are entitled to government support for their education, and that parents have both the right and responsibility to seek the best possible education for their child, including in a non-government school.

Current funding models represent a compromise between needs and entitlements. All children in registered government and non-government schools receive funding from both the federal and state governments. Funding is allocated on a per capita basis, with the amount depending on an index of educational need made up of socioeconomic and demographic variables. Children in non-government schools receive between 25% and 90% of the funding available to students in government schools, depending on their socioeconomic profile.

While it may be entrenched in policy, parental choice in education is still not universally accepted. Some opponents argue that choice facilitates socioeconomic and religious stratification and is detrimental to society.[14] Others argue that parental freedom in education is a risk to children because government regulation is necessary to ensure quality and access.[15] The influence of these views has waxed and waned depending on the political and ideological persuasions of the parties in government. Nonetheless, while some governments have sought to curb the growth in non-government schools, there has never been a serious attempt by any government to reduce parental choice in schooling.

There is still a religious factor in school choice, despite Australia being a secular society and an increasing proportion of people dissociating from religion — 22.3% of people stated that they had 'no religion' in the 2011 Census, up from 8.3% in 1976.[16] However, approximately 96% of all non-government schools have a religious affiliation — some historical rather than practical, but many established by new Christian denominations and non-Christian religions. The Catholic school sector, which enrols 21% of all students (Figure 2), is still highly influential in education policy.

'State aid' to Catholic schools has been the driver for school choice policies from the 1960s through to today. Due to the post-WWII baby boom, the number of students in Catholic schools in the 1950s swelled by 5% per annum and funding became a political pressure point, especially when the move to lay teaching staff made it increasingly difficult to meet operating costs. The Menzies Coalition federal government grants to Catholic schools to upgrade science facilities in 1964 were the catalyst, and once Catholic schools started to receive government funding it was impossible to deny funding to other religious schools. By the end of the 1960s, federal and state governments were providing some level of recurrent funding to all non-government schools.[17]

Growth in non-government school enrolments peaked in the first half of the 1980s, growing by 3% per annum. Unlike the 1950s, however, there was no corresponding growth in government school enrolments. The government school sector shrank by an annual average of 0.8% in the same period. This was the beginning of a long-term trend — in the 35 years to 2015, non-government schools enrolments grew by 620,000 students (92%) while government school enrolments grew by only 70,000 students (3%).

The direction of the causal relationship between funding to non-government schools and enrolment growth is not clear-cut. The enrolment spike in the early 1980s coincided with significant increases in funding to non-government schools but the enrolment response to funding increases was not as strong in subsequent periods. Following the Howard government's introduction of the 'Socioeconomic Status' or 'SES' funding system in 2001, which markedly increased federal funding, enrolment growth in non-government schools remained relatively steady at just over 2% per annum. It is likely that the removal in 1997 of the New Schools Policy, which had restricted the establishment of new non-government schools since 1985, was also a factor.[18]

Importantly, as was shown in Figures 4 and 5, increasing enrolments in the non-government school sector have not simply reinforced the dominance of the traditional Catholic and Anglican schools. Catholic systemic schools maintained their enrolment share over the past several decades, but the independent school sector has both grown and diversified. There is now more variety and choice within the non-government school sector, albeit with relatively little increase in secular options.

Parental choice has not expanded to the same extent within the government school sector. In all states and territories, enrolment zones or 'priority enrolment areas' are still enforced. In most states and territories, children are designated to attend one particular government school, determined by the area in which they live. (The exception is the ACT, where some schools share an enrolment area.) All children are guaranteed a place in their zoned school and, conversely, schools must enrol all students in their zone who apply to attend. Parents can apply to enrol their child in an out-of-area school but the school will only offer a place if they have sufficient capacity after accommodating all children within their zone who wish to attend. In most states and territories, enrolling out-of-area children is a decision made by the school, usually taking into consideration whether there are siblings already at the school.[19]

Choice within the government school sector is therefore largely restricted by residence. In metropolitan areas, where there are numerous schools within reasonable travelling distance, some parents go to great lengths to access their preferred school. Competition to enrol in popular schools affects real estate prices, as families seek to purchase or rent properties in the school's enrolment zone.[20] There are reports of parents providing false information about their place of residence in order to enrol children in their preferred school.[21] This demonstrates the desire for parents to exercise choice within the government sector and also the inflexibility of the government school sector to respond to and cater for parental choice.

The exceptions to the residential zoning restrictions are 'selective' schools, which do not enrol students on the basis of their distance from the school — they are open to all students who meet the academic or other entry criteria. Table 3 shows that NSW is the only state where this option is widely available. Enrolment in NSW selective schools is highly competitive: 13,000 students sat the 2015 test for entry into academically-selective schools, competing for 4,200 places.[22]

The introduction of Independent Public Schools (in Western Australia in 2009, and subsequently in Queensland and the Northern Territory) has increased the autonomy of some government schools.* This

* Independent Public Schools differ from other public schools in that more decisions (such as staff hiring) are made at the school level by a principal, with input from a school board. IPS are still expected to comply with all other government legislation.

form of 'school-based management' is the norm in government schools in Victoria. However, IPS have not extended school choice within the government school sector, as they still operate within enrolment zones.[23]

While parental choice between schools has been maintained and expanded, a concurrent development is increasing regulation of non-government schools. From the inception of public education until the 1960s, curriculum was developed by state and territory governments without influence of the federal government. This changed when the federal government began funding schools, eventually leading to the establishment of the Curriculum Development Centre in 1975. There were various attempts to introduce national curriculum frameworks over the following decades.[24] In 2009, the state and territory governments agreed to develop and adopt a national curriculum for the first year of school up until year 10. An approved version of the Australian curriculum is now a condition of government funding to schools and school systems. Furthermore, all schools are required to participate in the national literacy and numeracy tests. There are a small number of exemptions and exceptions to these rules for several individual schools and groups of schools, and some states have negotiated variations. For the most part, however, parents are choosing only among schools using a variation of the same curriculum in each jurisdiction.

Distance education in Australia

Historically, distance education in Australia has taken many forms — 'half-time' schools, correspondence schooling using the postal system, and most recently 'virtual' (online) schools that utilise various forms of technology to deliver lessons in a more customisable fashion.

As in the traditional schools sector, distance education is made up of a government sector and a non-government sector.

Table 4. Students enrolled in government distance education schools and centres, 2013

State	Students	Schools/ Centres
New South Wales (NSW)*	1695	12
Queensland (QLD)	7218	7
Victoria (VIC)	3035	1
South Australia (SA)	1961	1
Western Australia (WA)	797	6
Tasmania (TAS)	307	1
Northern Territory (NT)	455	3

Source: ACARA, My School website, www.myschool.edu.au

* Does not include students in distance education centres located in mainstream schools in NSW as *My School* does not specify the number of distance education students. CESE Statistical Bulletin gives a total FTE enrolment of 2726 including these schools.

As Table 4 shows, the numbers of students engaged in government distance education is small. Similar figures for enrolment in non-government distance education are not available.

The general criteria for eligibility for enrolment in government distance education are mostly consistent among the states and territories, encompassing circumstances such as geographical isolation, medical issues and caring responsibilities.

Access to non-government distance education is less restricted in terms of eligibility criteria; it is open to home schooling families and other students who prefer online learning. According to education researcher Terry Harding, parents choose non-government distance education for a variety of reasons, including educational needs, family values and preferences, and psychological wellbeing.[25]

Government distance education schools receive much more government funding than non-government distance education schools. There is also a great deal of within-sector variation in average per-student funding across the states (ranging from under $10,000 in Victoria, to nearly $40,000 in WA) and within states — in NSW, per student costs range between $11,259 per student at the inner suburban-based Sydney Distance Education Primary School and $53,578 per student at Tibooburra Outback School of the Air.[26]

Both government and non-government distance education schools and centres use a mixture of resources and materials to deliver electronic lesson content. Students communicate with teachers via various online platforms, and complete classwork, coursework and assessments either using interactive software, uploading documents and files to shared storage, email, or via traditional post.

In NSW, distance education is viewed as an 'equity provision' — designed and delivered to give access to education for students whose circumstances make it difficult for them to attend a school (NSW Department of Education and Training, 2010). In other jurisdictions, such as Victoria, distance education is an alternative form of provision. It can be used by choice as well as by necessity.

Virtual schooling and online education gives students, particularly older students, a greater degree of flexibility in their learning, and can enable students to complete subjects that may not be offered at their school. Lessons do not have to be completed at a specified time, and students can work through them at their own pace — either faster or slower. Lessons can be accessed multiple times. Unfortunately, the focus on equity in some jurisdictions has come at the expense of choice, efficiency and effectiveness, and has denied students opportunities they may not have in a traditional school.

Home-schooling in Australia

Home-schooling refers to a practice whereby parents are the primary facilitators of their child's learning in a home setting. There is some degree of overlap between

home-schooling and distance education due to the home being the site of education; the main difference is how much flexibility is allowed, and how involved the parent is in shaping the educational agenda, as opposed to a separate coordinator. The ease with which home-schoolers can access government distance education courses varies across states and territories.[27]

There are several different approaches used in home-schooling. Some mirror educational offerings available in traditional schools — 'school at home' is just like a traditional school, often utilising official curricula and syllabi, except without the school setting.[28] Steiner/Waldorf,[29] Montessori[30] and religious-based[31] home-schooling all have rough analogues within the traditional school sector as well. There is also the Charlotte Mason approach — named for a 19th century English teacher, governess and writer — which focuses on a traditional approach to education and bears some similarity to the subjects and disciplines studied in mainstream schooling.[32]

Data pertaining to home-schooling are limited. Education departments can report only on the number of registered home-schooling students, or those who have successfully been exempted from registration. The NSW inquiry into home-schooling delivered a report in December 2014 outlining that in 2009–10, there were 2,443 students registered for home-schooling. By December 2013, this had increased to 3,238 students.[33] The national figure for registered home-schoolers was more than 12,000 students in 2012.[34] Rural and regional students are over-represented in the home-schooling statistics, with the population of these areas accounting for 36% of the total NSW population but almost 50% of registered home-schoolers.[35]

All parents who wish to educate their children at home are required to register and gain approval from the department of education in their state or territory; however, not all parents do. It is difficult to arrive at a good quality estimate of how many students and parents may be engaged in unregistered home-schooling across the entire country, but some estimates put this figure between 10,000 and 20,000.[36]

There is a lack of Australian research on the efficacy and impact of home education techniques on students' educational outcomes. In NSW, for example, only 10% of home-schooled students undertake any form of standardised testing — such as NAPLAN, the Higher School Certificate examinations or the now-defunct School Certificate[37] — that could provide the basis for an informed comparison between these students and their non-home schooled counterparts.

In all states and territories, the choice of families to home-school does not entitle them to any government subsidies, funding or resources in the way traditional schooling choices do. NSW is relatively strict in how it regulates and supports home-schoolers, not dissimilar to the approach for distance education which makes it more of an equity measure than a choice that is encouraged and facilitated. Victoria's education department, by contrast, offers a '*Guide to Homeschooling in Victoria*' which both outlines the legal requirements and contains useful information designed to help parents and students get the most out of home-schooling.[38] Victorian legislation also allows for home-school children to be 'partially enrolled' in a traditional school to access particular activities or programs, such as languages, sports and arts.[39] It was a recommendation of the Select Committee on Home-Schooling in 2015 that this option be investigated for home-schooled students in NSW.[40]

Funding for the government, Catholic and independent school sectors

School funding data further illustrate that the school sectors are not mutually exclusive in terms of the student populations they serve. Government funding for non-government schools is, in general, inversely related to the level of advantage in the student population — the greater the level of disadvantage, the greater the funding. Funding for government schools is more complex. While most states and territories have moved to student need-based funding models in recent years, some state and territory government school funding models retain elements of funding models based on staffing levels.

This section presents graphs showing government and total recurrent funding to the government, Catholic and independent school sectors using data obtained from the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA). The latest available finance data are from 2013. This report presents only recurrent funding, as it is a more stable representation of the resources available to schools than funding sums that include capital expenditure.

Recurrent funding is funding for school operations. ACARA defines recurrent income as "income received by the school, which is available for expenditure relating to the ongoing operating costs of schools (for example, teaching and non-teaching staff salaries, school operating costs)."[41] It does not include funds spent on the purchase, construction, or maintenance of assets such as equipment, property, or buildings (called 'capital expenditure').

The graphs include primary, secondary and combined primary/secondary schools as well as special schools. The inclusion of special schools skews the numbers at the higher end of the distribution in the government and independent sectors in particular, so care should be taken in viewing the results for the highest income bracket in particular.[†]

Per capita recurrent government funding

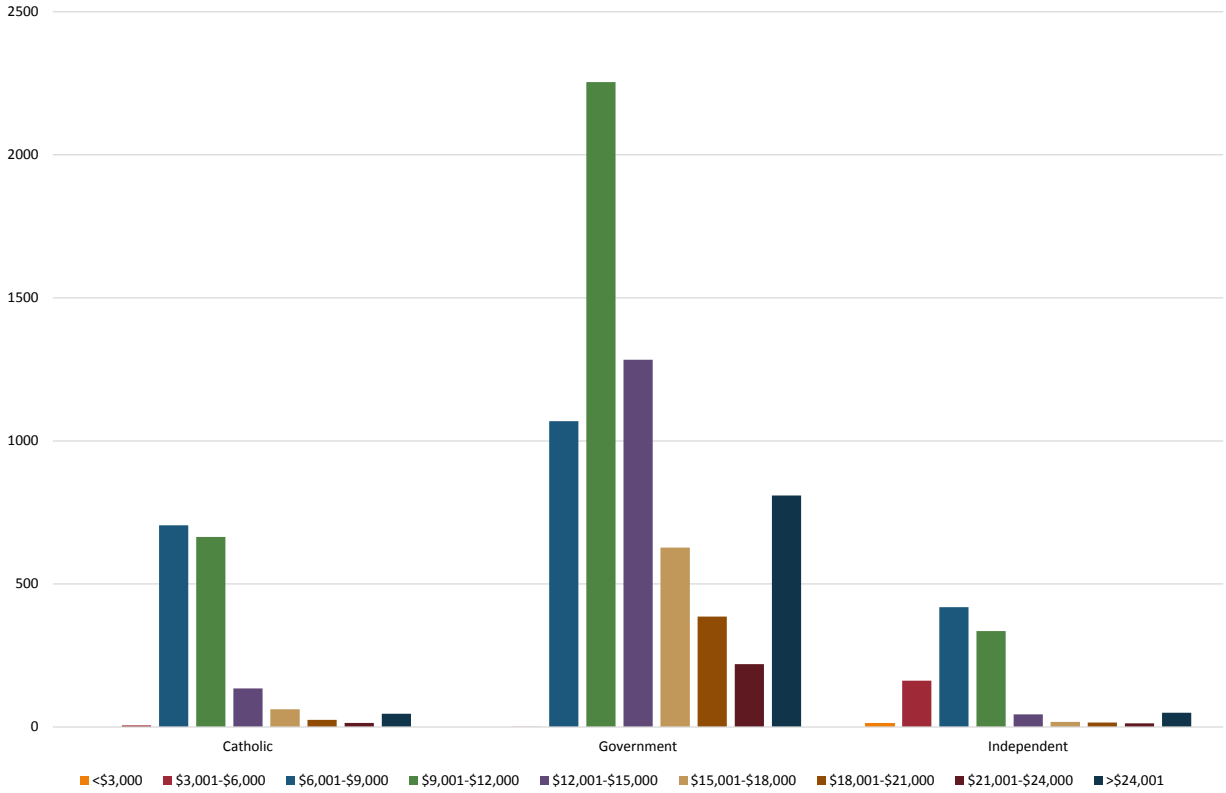
Per capita government funding to all schools from both levels of government (federal and state/territory) varies widely within each sector. In the independent sector, government funding ranges from less than $3,000 per capita to more than $24,000 per capita. Only six Catholic schools and one government school are at the lowest end of this range (below $6,000 per capita[‡]). In all three sectors, the majority of schools are in the $6,001-$9,000 and $9,001-$12,000 funding brackets.

Figure 10 shows the number of schools in each funding bracket in each sector. For example, 2254 government schools are in the $9,001-$12,000 per capita recurrent funding bracket.

† The data supplied by ACARA have some inconsistencies in the designation of special schools. Some special schools are designated as such, while others are designated as primary, secondary or combined schools. Given the potential for additional error in manually investigating and changing the designation where relevant for each of the over 9,000 schools in the data set, it was decided to present the data as supplied with a caution.

‡ The single government school in the $3,001-$6,000 government funding bracket is The Ponds School in NSW. It is a special school that was previously co-located in a high school and only one year of funding data is available, so the accuracy of the funding figure is difficult to determine.

Figure 10. All schools by government per-pupil recurrent funding, federal and state/territory governments, 2013: number of schools by sector



The much larger number of government schools than Catholic and independent schools makes it difficult to compare the distribution of funding in the other two school sectors. Converting the numbers to percentages of schools provides a clearer picture.

Figures 11 and 12 show the percentages of schools in each sector in each funding bracket. These two figures are drawn from the same data but are portrayed differently to show the pattern of funding across the sectors. Figure 11 shows the range of funding levels within each sector, while Figure 12 shows the range of schools within each funding bracket. Both show that per capita government funding rates for Catholic and independent schools are skewed toward the lower end of the range, while per capita funding rates for government schools are more evenly distributed.

The proportion of government schools in the government funding bracket of >$24,000 per year (12.2%) is more than twice as high as the proportion of independent schools (4.7%) and Catholic schools (2.8%). As noted above, many of these schools are very small remote or rural schools, or special schools, but some are mainstream or selective schools in the government sector, such as the University of Canberra High School and the Sydney Conservatorium High School.

At the other end of the funding range, the distribution is reversed. Very small proportions of government and Catholic schools (less than 1%) are in the lowest two funding brackets, while 16.3% of independent schools are in this category.

Figure 11. All schools by government per-pupil recurrent funding, federal and state/territory governments, 2013: per cent in sector

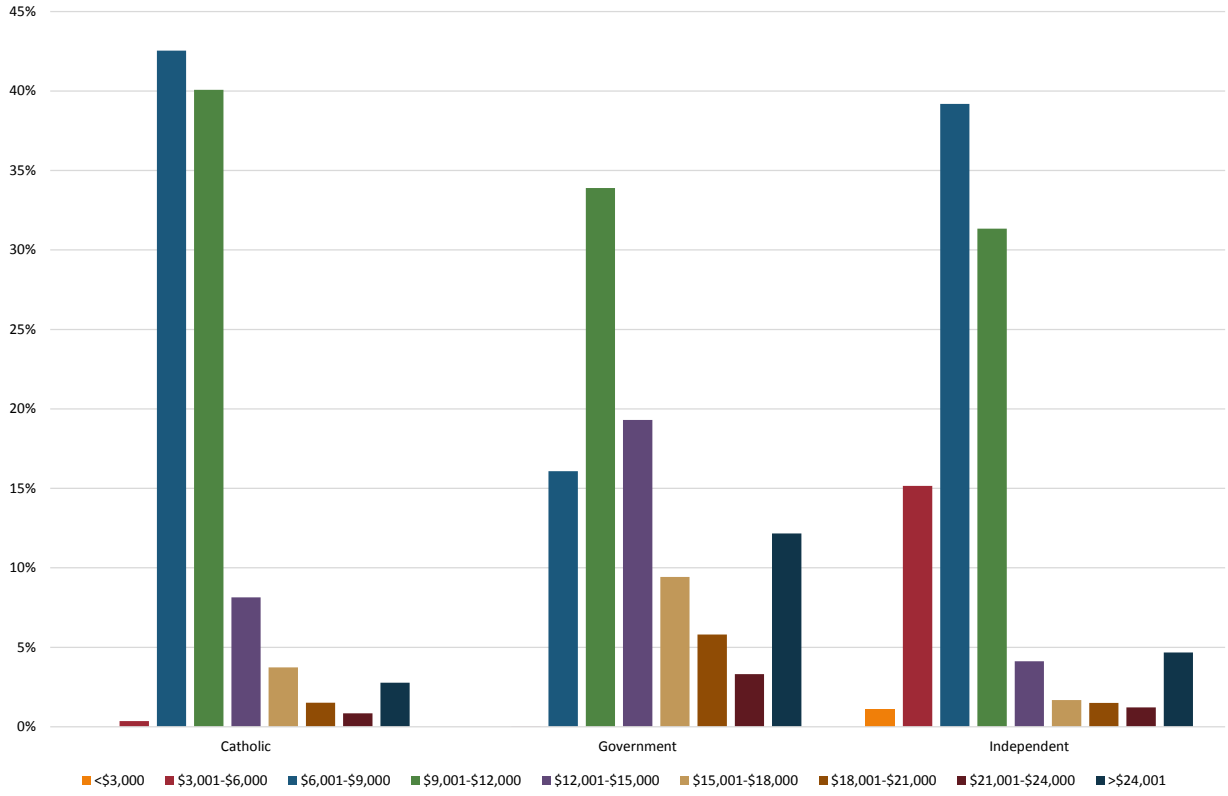
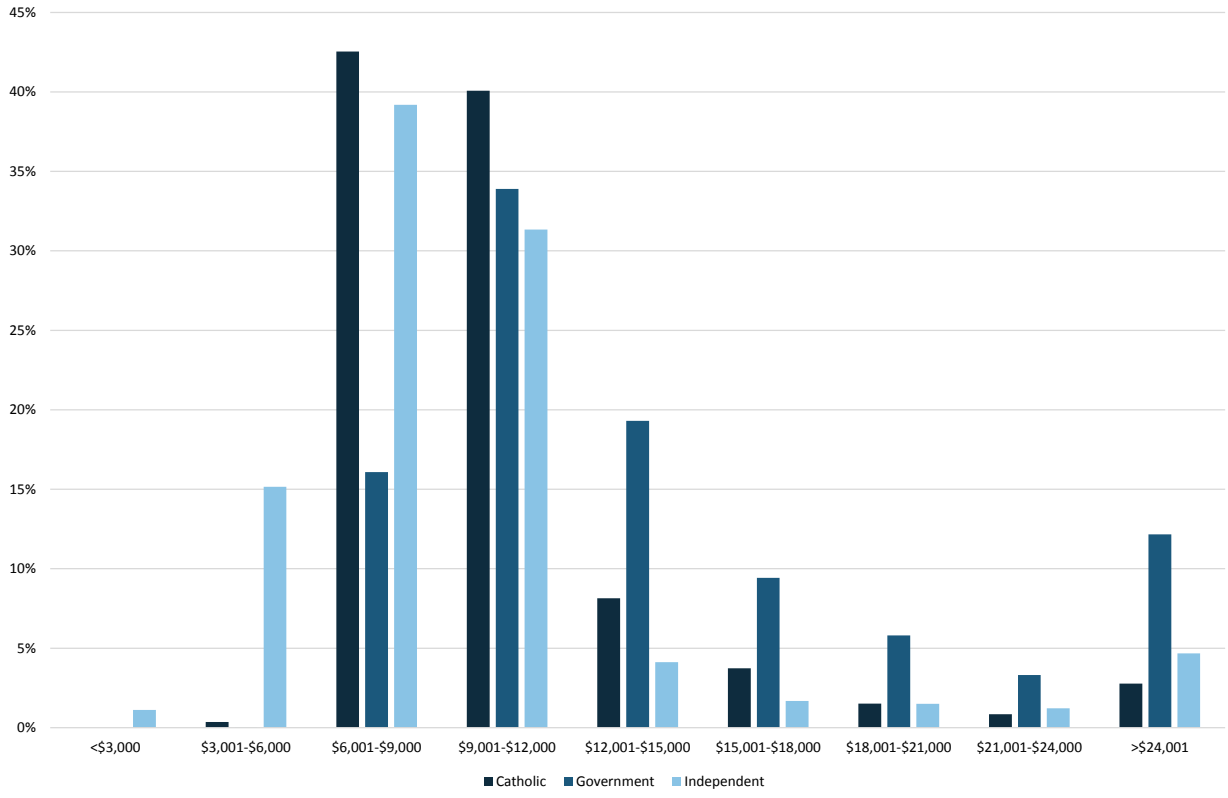


Figure 12. All schools by government per-pupil recurrent funding, federal and state/territory governments, 2013: per cent in bracket



Total (government and private sources) funding

Figures 13 to 15 show the distribution of recurrent funding from all sources — public and private. Funding from private sources includes fees, charges and parent contributions as well as other private income which ACARA defines as "Income received from other sources – donations, interest on bank accounts, profits on trading activities and profits from sale of assets. It includes some private income received for capital purposes and from school and community fundraising activities".[42]

Figure 13 shows the number of schools from each sector in each of the funding categories. In all three sectors, most schools are at the lower end of the distribution.

All but two of the government schools in the lowest total funding category are primary schools. The two government secondary schools with total recurrent funding levels below $10,000 per capita are: Lilydale High School (Victoria) and Narangba Valley State High School (Queensland). These schools were the lowest-funded secondary schools in Australia in 2013 on a per capita basis but have consistently achieved NAPLAN results around state average. They are large schools (more than 2000 enrolments) and their ICSEA scores are close to national average.

Figures 14 and 15 again show the proportion of schools in each sector to facilitate comparison. In all three sectors, the largest proportion of schools — approximately half in each sector — is in the $10,000-$14,999 funding bracket. In fact, very similar proportions of government and independent schools fall into this funding bracket (47% and 48% respectively) with a larger proportion of Catholic schools (57%).

The large majority of schools in each of the three school sectors have per capita funding levels below $20,000 a year — 94% of Catholic schools, 83% of government schools, and 76% of independent schools. Sector differences are most evident at the extremes of the range — there are proportionally more government schools at both the lowest and highest total funding brackets. However, Figures 14 and 15 clearly show that a relatively small percentage (7%) of independent schools are represented at the upper end of the range (more than $30,000 per capita). Some of these are high profile, high fee, independent schools but there are also numerous special schools.

Figure 13. All schools by total per-pupil recurrent funding, public and private sources, 2013: number of schools by sector

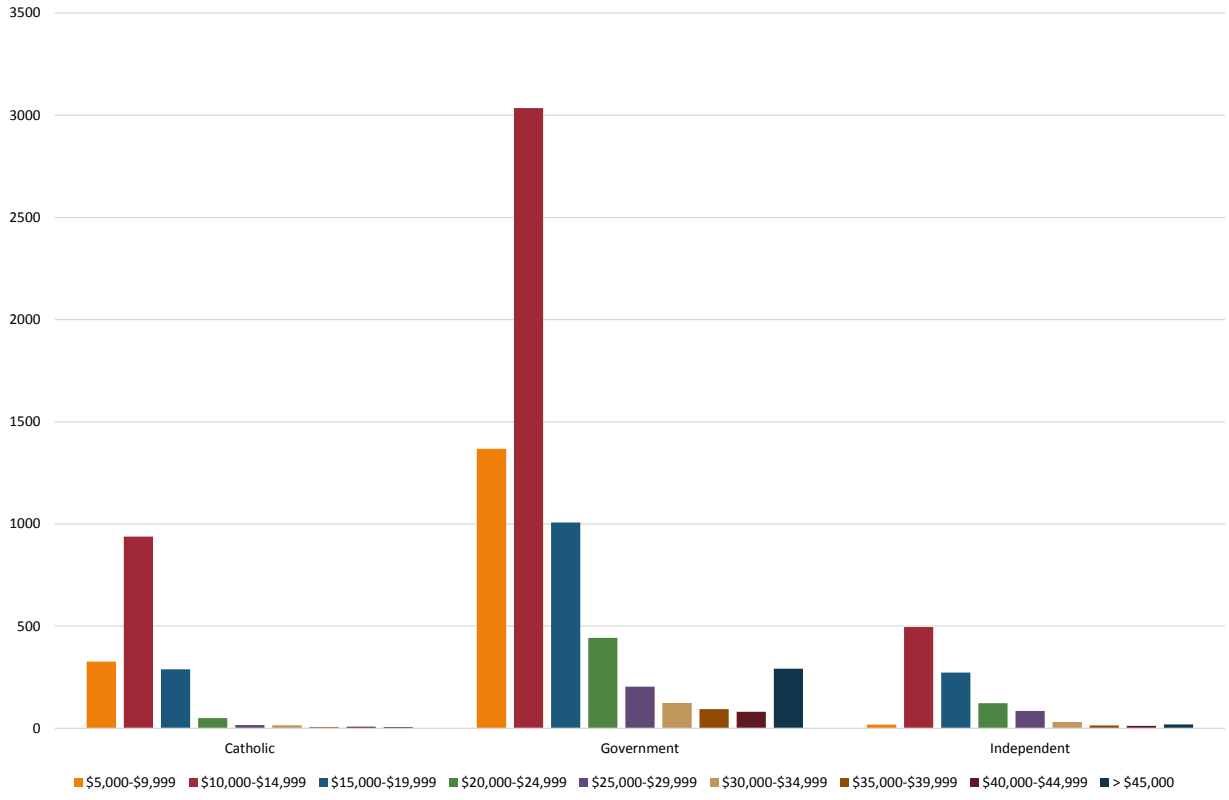


Figure 14. All schools by total per-pupil recurrent funding, public and private sources, 2013: per cent in sector

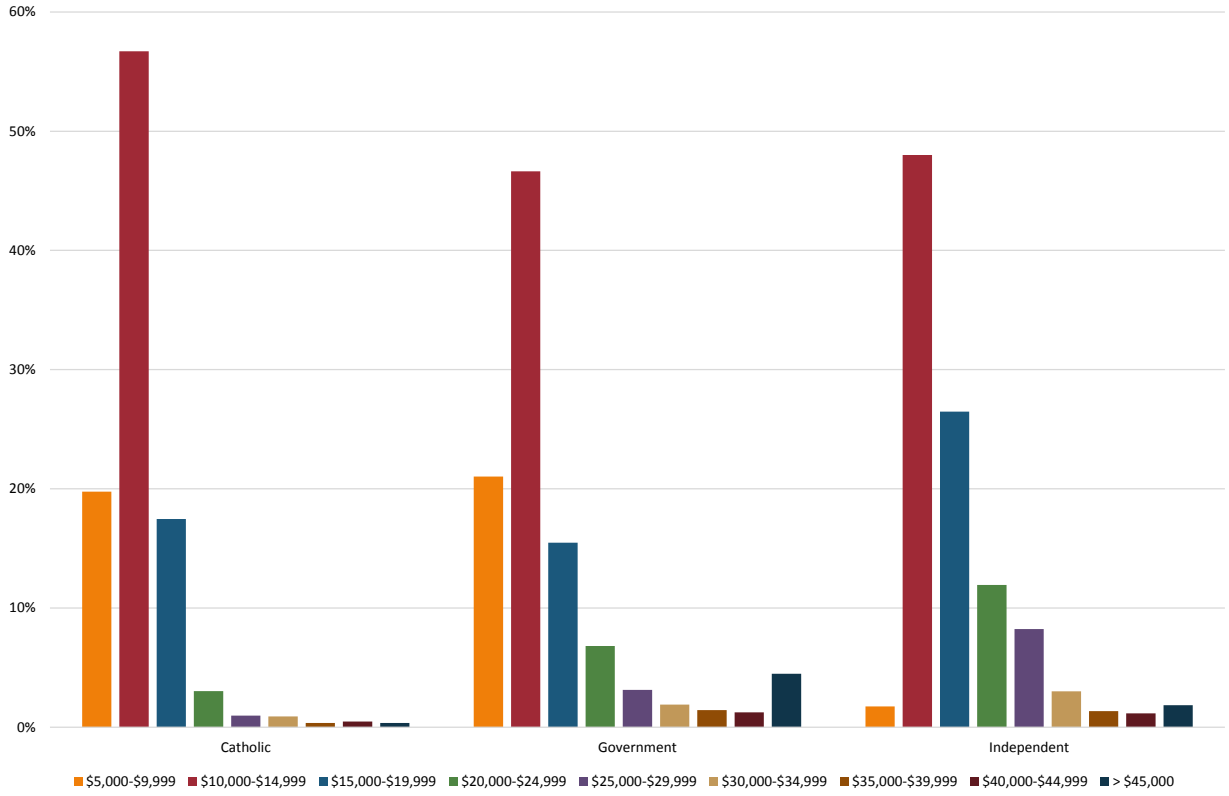
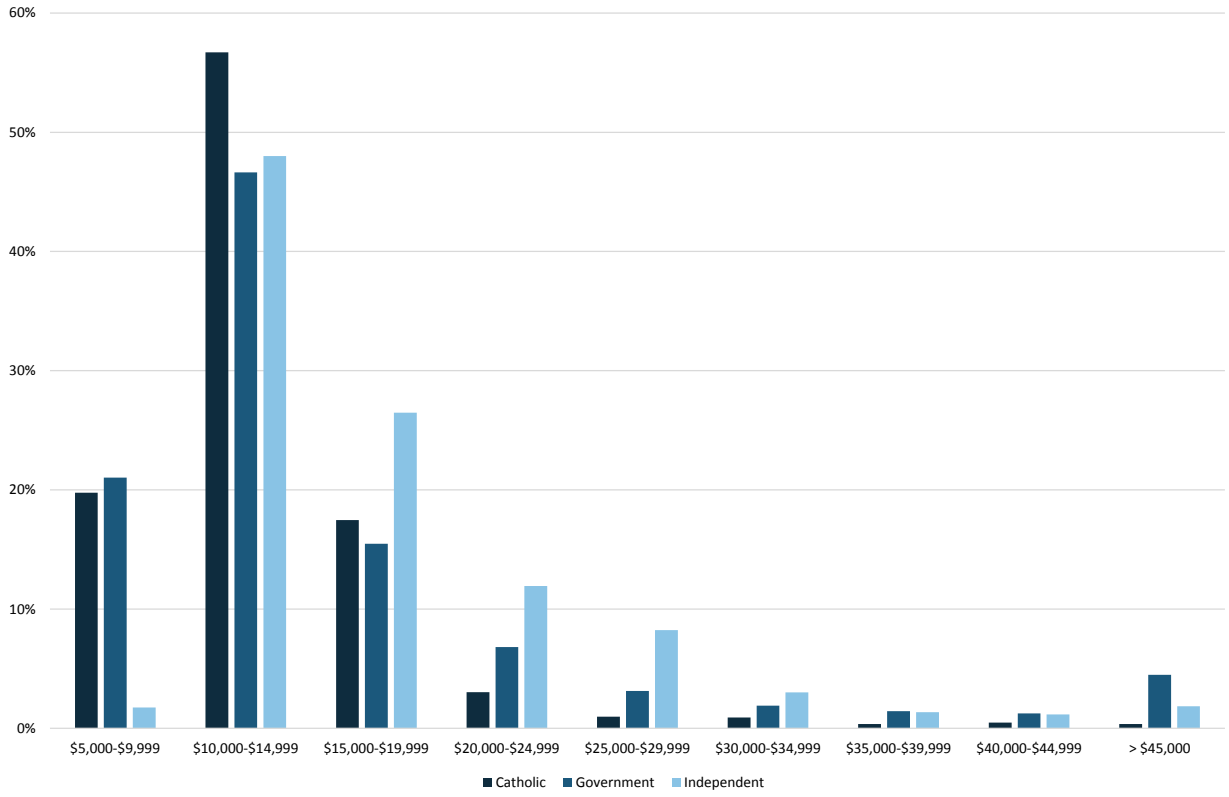


Figure 15. All schools by total per-pupil recurrent funding, public and private sources, 2013: per cent in bracket



School choice policies: an international summary

Over the past few decades, many countries have adopted policies that imbue their school systems with more choice. This is done in a variety of ways, including: the use of vouchers for use in government and non-government schools; creating diversity within the public school sector by embracing different models of education provision in the form of charter schools; and the use of education savings accounts and education tax credits.

This is not an exhaustive list of policies that promote and extend school choice, but a brief outline of the most prevalent types of school choice policies. Nor does it include civil society initiatives and non-government programs — such as scholarships for poor, disadvantaged or gifted students to attend non-government schools which are often prestigious and exclusive. As they are not run by government, these are not 'policies' as such.

School vouchers

Vouchers are a fixed-value educational entitlement that is portable across schools and sectors. First proposed by Nobel prize-winning economist Milton Friedman, vouchers generally correspond with the amount of funding dedicated to each child's education within the public system. This 'voucher' is then used by children and their families to attend any school, in any sector, in any place they choose. Friedman theorised that with a more flexible funding model, different kinds of schools would emerge to cater to new demand, thus enhancing school choice.[43]

Voucher programs have sometimes been combined with policies that encourage more diversity in school provision. Sweden and Chile are good examples of this. Sweden's reforms in the early 1990s involved devolving funding to the municipal level, imposing a voucher system (valid across municipal borders) and new legislation allowing for the creation of *friskola* ('free schools'). Free schools are independent schools funded entirely by vouchers, and the student body of a given school consists of students who choose to attend rather than those who simply live within a certain zone. Swedish free schools cannot charge fees.

Chile introduced voucher policies in 1980 in concordance with legislation that allowed different types of schools to accept voucher students. These schools could be run by not-for-profit (e.g. Catholic schools) or by for-profit companies.[44] Unlike Sweden, schools can charge top-up fees and be selective in their student body, though these characteristics are currently subject to change under Chilean president Michelle Bachelet.[45]

Individual states in the US have also implemented voucher programs, and there are roughly 65 of them, with some states running multiple programs for different people. They can be funded by tax revenue or by tax credits (see 'Education tax credits'). Funding per

student varies (it is usually a percentage of the public school funding for the student), as do the regulations surrounding the admissions policies of the schools. Most voucher programs in the US are targeted — when the Milwaukee voucher program began in 1990, it was limited to students with a parental income below 175% of the federal poverty line but at present the threshold is 300%.[46]

Whether vouchers work to improve student performance (Sweden, Chile and the US all have different experiences) is an open question. The conclusion reached by Epple et al. (2015) in a wide-ranging and multi-country review of the literature is that there is no significant link between voucher programs and student performance on average. Rather, they conclude that since voucher programs usually differ in design — whether they are large- or small-scale, whether additional fees are charged, what kind of restrictions exist on schools that can be attended with a voucher, whether schools themselves are obliged to admit all comers — isolating which factors contribute to a given result and which voucher designs work best is difficult, and more research is needed.[47] Nevertheless, this does not preclude the idea that the ability to choose a school is a good in itself.

Charter and for-profit schools

Charter schools, also called free schools (England) and partnership schools (New Zealand) are public schools but not government schools; they are managed by a private organisation under a legislative contract, or 'charter', with the government. They can be new schools ('start-up'), or former government schools ('conversion') whose management has been given to a charter school operator.[48]

Charter schools extend school choice to those who cannot access it, provide opportunities for innovation in schools, and offer a way to turn around chronically-failing schools. They receive government funding that is the same as, or similar to, the funding provided to equivalent government schools, and they do not charge fees. Enrolment is by application, with lottery often used to select students if a school is over-subscribed.

A review of the empirical literature on charters and their equivalents from various countries reveals the positive educational impacts that charter schools and their equivalents have for students.[49] In the US, charter schools have small positive impacts on average, but there are stronger positive effects of charter school attendance for disadvantaged children. England's free schools and academies are relatively new but the emerging evidence is positive and promising.[50] New Zealand's Partnership Schools are too recent to evaluate their effectiveness.

In the US, the most successful charter schools often follow what is termed the 'no excuses' model,[51] which focuses on high expectations (behavioural and academic) and aims to shrink gaps in educational achievement and college attendance between disadvantaged and non-disadvantaged children.

Education Savings Accounts

Education savings accounts (ESAs) are a relatively new phenomenon in the educational choice landscape. They could be considered a more radical variation of Friedman's school vouchers, as parents are encouraged not to just think of school choice but educational choice — choice between different kinds and combinations of educational goods and services.

Five states in the USA have ESA legislation. Arizona ('Empowerment Scholarship Accounts'), Mississippi ('Equal Opportunity for Students with Special Needs Program'), Tennessee ('Individualized Education Account Program') and Florida ('Personal Learning Scholarship Accounts') have targeted ESA programs.[52] Nevada became the first state to implement a universal ESA scheme for public school students in 2015. Eligibility guidelines and funding allotments differ across programs, but generally, poor and special needs students can access the equivalent of 100% of per-pupil public school expenditure or a higher special needs rate, and other students can access up to 90% of that sum.[53]

There are two main factors driving the expansion of ESAs. One is efficiency, and the other is educational choice. ESAs involve money that is transferred from the government to parents, but given that the money can be used to purchase a variety of education-related goods and services, and that unused funds can be used for college savings, it creates an incentive for value-driven spending, thus driving efficiency. Bedrick and Burke write "parents have the ability and incentive to economize in a manner that more closely resembles their spending of their own money — with both economy and value in mind — which in turn fosters the development of a real education market."[54]

The other is educational choice and diversity. Forthcoming research published by the Friedman Foundation for Educational Choice uses the most recent Arizona Department of Education data to show that while 83% of total ESA spending by parents was used for private school tuition, 7% was used on tutoring and 5% on educational therapy. 28% of ESA users spent funds on multiple goods and services.[55] 'Unbundling' — where different goods and services are combined to deliver a complete educational package — that is driven by the use of ESAs allows for education customised to individual children's needs and can also serve as experiments which drive more innovative approaches to education on a wider scale.[56]

ESAs are a fairly new development on the school choice landscape; as a result there are no data or evaluations about their effectiveness in terms of test scores or other traditional measures of student achievement. There is some survey data on parental satisfaction. A survey of Arizona parents of children with special needs, who had switched out of the public school system to use ESAs, found that 71% of parents were 'very satisfied' and 19% were 'satisfied', and all parents were more satisfied with their ESAs than with the education their children had been receiving in a public school.[57]

Nevertheless, there are some concerns about the tension between the degree of educational choice

afforded by ESAs (particularly Nevada's version, which is universal) and the goal of educational equity — whereby achievement gaps between disadvantaged and advantaged children are narrowed through the pursuit of excellence. Michael J. Petrilli posits that if the goal is improving achievement among disadvantaged students, the 'a la carte' education afforded by ESAs poses risks. He cites the failures associated with 'virtual charter school' companies, which initially targeted relatively well-off home-schoolers with their educational programs before moving towards low-income students, resulting in a very poor track record on student learning.[58]

Education tax credits

Education tax credits are a broad family of programs whereby a party dedicates a particular sum of money to education fees and reduces their tax liability in the process. There are two main kinds of ETC programs: the 'scholarship' model (where educational costs for poor or disadvantaged children are paid for out of the tax liability of a corporation or an individual), and the 'voucher' model (parents paying their children's educational costs out of their tax liability).

An example of the 'scholarship' model is Florida, which has a scheme whereby companies that donate to a privately-administered scholarship fund — designed to assist with private school tuition fees for low-income families — receive a tax credit worth 100% of the donated amount.[59] 69,950 students are enrolled in the Florida program. 16 US states have scholarship tax credit legislation, and two states (Arizona and Pennsylvania**) have more than one. Arizona's Original Individual Income Tax Credit Scholarship Program has close to 100% eligibility across the state and is essentially universal. Approximately 219,000 students across the 16 states have been beneficiaries of scholarship tax credit programs.[60]

The 'voucher' model pertains to parents and families who seek to recoup outlays on their children's education. Such expenses include the private school tuition (which is the most common use), but can also include other related expenses like school supplies and books, tutors, and transport. Five states have tax credit legislation (where the total tax liability is reduced by a maximum allowable amount stipulated by the legislation) and a further four have tax deduction legislation (where tax is not levied on income devoted to educational spending). Illinois and Iowa have universal eligibility for their tax credit programs, and the most generous is South Carolina where the tax credit is worth the lesser of $10,000, or actual education expenses.[61]

School choice in Australia

Each of these policy ideas has varying applicability to the Australian education landscape. Vouchers in Sweden and Chile, as well as other countries that have introduced them, were implemented in a context where the public school system was monolithic and choice was minimal. Given that Australia has had relatively high levels of school choice as a result of some (though not equivalent) public funding of non-government schools, a universal and sector-neutral voucher entitlement may not be the most efficient way to encourage school choice and diversity of provision. A related issue is that such an approach would be extraordinarily expensive and could likely crowd out private investment in education.[62]

The charter school model holds a great deal more promise for Australia†† because it focuses more on choice and diversity within the public school sector. Choice is currently restricted for families who can't afford non-government school fees, or those who do not want a religious education or who do not subscribe to alternative educational philosophies — the majority of non-government schools fit into one of these two categories. Charter schools could remedy this.

It is worth noting that the more innovative and inventive ways of funding school choice — savings accounts and tax credits — have arisen in the US where, unlike in Australia, there is no guaranteed per-student funding for students who attend non-government schools. Additionally, constitutional restrictions relating to the funding of 'parochial' (religious non-government) schools in the United States is one reason why vouchers have been largely supplanted by these other means. Though vouchers may be difficult for Australia due to the complex combination of federal and state funding and governance, scholarship tax credits and education savings accounts have the potential to be carefully implemented on a small scale and could be especially beneficial for children with special needs.

** Arizona has four scholarship tax credit programs, and Pennsylvania has two.

†† See Trisha Jha and Jennifer Buckingham's 2015 report *Free to Choose Charter Schools: How charter and for-profit schools can boost public education* for detailed analysis of how the charter school model may be implemented in Australia.

School profiles: Demonstrating diversity

The schools selected for inclusion in this publication were chosen to demonstrate the diversity in Australian schools. They were not selected on the basis of NAPLAN scores or because they meet a pre-defined criteria of a 'successful' school.

Rather, the schools were chosen because they contradict the stereotypes of schooling provision. There is a tendency to characterise schools in the public, Catholic and independent school sectors in certain ways: the cliché public school is an under-funded comprehensive school serving students at the lower end of the socioeconomic spectrum; the cliché Catholic school has a more privileged population than a public school with a dash of religion; and the cliché independent school is an exclusive grammar school serving the wealthy.

These clichés do not represent the reality. As the statistics presented in this report clearly show, there is a wide range of schools in each sector, serving a variety of needs and choices. The school profiles that follow exemplify this variety.

Travancore School in Melbourne and the Queensland Academy for Creative Industries in Brisbane are both public schools providing secondary education, but they could not be more different.

Travancore School provides education for young people who are receiving treatment for mental health problems at the Royal Children's Hospital in Melbourne. The Queensland Academy for Creative Industries is a highly competitive, selective entry school for students who have shown talent and dedication in artistic and creative areas of the curriculum. What the schools have in common, though, is the ability to meet the specific educational needs of their students, and the flexibility to adapt and evolve as necessary.

Our Lady of Mount Carmel in Sydney and St Joseph's High School in Aberdeen, NSW are both Catholic systemic schools but they serve vastly different student populations.

Our Lady of Mount Carmel is an inner-city Catholic primary school serving a disadvantaged student population, where 90% of students live in public housing. The school is 'unapologetically Catholic' in its character, but simultaneously incorporates the Indigenous culture of many of its students. OLMC mitigates the disadvantage of its students with a strong focus on oral language skills in the early years, and this approach has contributed to excellent NAPLAN results relative to 'like' schools.

St Joseph's High School Aberdeen is a large comprehensive high school at the heart of a rural community in the Hunter Valley in NSW. The school strives to ensure all of its students are connected to the wider world and has high expectations for their success, while at the same time preserving and maintaining its rural identity.

The Berry Street School, Noble Park campus, and Maridahdi Learning Centre strongly counter the stereotypes of independent schools and demonstrate just a fraction of the diversity in this school sector.

The Berry Street School in Melbourne provides a highly structured secondary education for young people who have been marginalised from mainstream education, many of whom are in out of home care — either with foster parents or in supervised accommodation.

Located in Toowoomba, Maridahdi, in contrast, has been established to provide an almost completely unstructured, student-directed learning enviroment. These schools exemplify two key aspects of the independent school sector — meeting particular needs and choices that were not otherwise available to parents and children.

Profile 1: Travancore School, VIC

Travancore School was established around 80 years ago, originally as a residential educational facility for children with intellectual disabilities and for children who could not live with their families.

Since the 1980s, it has been connected to mental health services in Victoria and is one of a number of 'hospital schools' around Australia.

Travancore School works in partnership with the Royal Children's Hospital in Melbourne and Orygen Youth Health to minimise the disruption in the education of young people when they are undergoing treatment for mental illness.

Sector	Government
Year range	Secondary
School type	Special school for young people receiving treatment for mental illness.
Web	www.travancoresch.vic.edu.au
Recurrent government funding (2013)	n/a
Fees and other private income (2013)	n/a

Young people with mental illness are at a high risk of experiencing problems with their education, often becoming disengaged, leading to lower achievement and the risk of early school leaving. Students who need to take time off school for treatment can struggle with the transition back into the classroom, further amplifying their difficulties.

Young people admitted to the Royal Children's Hospital for treatment for mental illness have hospital stays of anywhere between two days and one month, although the average length of time is around seven to nine days.

Travancore School allows students to continue their studies while they are in hospital and maintains a connection with them when they return to their school, helping both the students and the school to re-integrate into classrooms and resume involvement in school activities.

The programs provided by Travancore School include:

- A dedicated classroom within the Royal Children's Hospital for young people who are in-patients for mental health treatment at the hospital.
- A facility providing targeted programs for older adolescents who are clients of Orygen Youth Health, giving them the option of the senior secondary school curriculum or vocational preparation, as well as career planning and transitions to further study.
- A school outreach team that works with school staff and mental health professionals to develop and implement programs for young people with social, emotional and behavioural difficulties.
- An intervention program for 14–17 year olds who have poor school attendance, and are at risk of expulsion or not completing school. The program withdraws students from school three days a week for seven weeks, involving students in activities that develop their sense of individual achievement, personal life skills and connections to community and family.

Profile 2: Queensland Academy for Creative Industries

The Queensland Academy for Creative Industries (QACI) is one of three specialist Queensland academies that are selective entry, senior secondary government schools with specialised curricula.

The academies recently became Independent Public Schools, giving them additional flexibility in governance and school management.

QACI's area of specialisation is Creative Industries. Students are selected to attend the school based on their academic aptitude as well as their talents and achievements in creative and performing arts — namely music, visual arts, theatre, film, or design. QACI is not a 'performing arts' high school, however. Students learn about all aspects of the industry, not just performance or production of art works.

Sector	Government
Year range	10-12
School type	Selective, specialist
Website	www.qaci.eq.edu.au
Recurrent government funding (2013)	$14,998 per student
Fees and other private income (2013)	$3,802 per student

Two key distinctive aspects of QACI are the curriculum and the facilities. Students at QACI undertake the International Baccalaureate (IB) instead of the Queensland senior secondary curriculum and assessments. The IB is a rigorous academic program that is based on a traditional liberal arts curriculum, and which requires a large amount of independent work. QACI students study the core program and focus on the arts courses at the highest level of the diploma.

QACI has a strictly-enforced uniform code and has high expectations for behaviour and work. It promotes a policy of 'earned autonomy', where students are given a high degree of freedom while ever they use it wisely.

The QACI campus is a purpose-built facility that opened in the Brisbane inner suburb of Kelvin Grove in 2007, as a partnership between Education Queensland and the Queensland University of Technology.

QACI is housed in a seven-floor building that more closely resembles a high-tech office building than a school, with electronic pass-card entry and new, modern classrooms and study and meeting spaces. The building also has professional quality theatre, an art gallery and a well-equipped music department, including a recording studio.

Selectivity is not confined to the students. Teaching staff at QACI are appointed on merit, with teachers recruited internationally. The IB is demanding for teachers as well as students. The content of the curriculum is challenging and students are working at a higher level in the specialist courses than students in most other schools.

QACI students have strong achievement — 95% were awarded the IB diploma in 2013 (79% world average), and 55% of students attained an ATAR of 90 or more (17% national average).

Profile 3: Our Lady of Mount Carmel, NSW

Our Lady of Mount Carmel Catholic Primary School (OLMC) is part of the NSW Catholic school system. Catholic schools have a long history in Sydney, especially in working class and socially-disadvantaged suburbs. The school that is now known as OLMC has had a number of evolutions over the past 150 years and is continuing this tradition in the Sydney suburb of Waterloo.

OLMC serves a community with high levels of socioeconomic disadvantage and which presents multiple educational challenges. Over 90% of children at OLMC live in public housing and more than 70% are from Indigenous backgrounds. Approximately one in three students has a diagnosed special educational need (SEN). Around 95% require support for learning English as a Second Language.

Sector	Catholic
Year range	F-6
School type	Comprehensive, low SES
Website	www.olmcwaterloo.catholic.edu.au
Recurrent government funding (2013)	$17,504 per student
Fees and other private income (2013)	$1,244 per student- of which $209 is fees

One of the most significant and successful educational strategies employed to increase language and literacy acquisition is an intensive focus on oral language skills in the initial months of schooling. Teachers and speech therapists implement a program of purposeful, constructive play that develops clear speech and boosts vocabulary. These skills are the foundation of reading and literacy development, but many children begin school with speech and language deficits and difficulties. Reading instruction at OLMC is explicit and systematic.

One measure of success of the school's strategy is its strong results in NAPLAN. OLMC's literacy and numeracy results are consistently well above the average for 'like schools' and are often above the national average — an exceptional performance for a school whose students start with such a high level of disadvantage.

There has been a concerted effort to promote the 'sanctity of learning', according to principal John Farrell. High expectations and incentives are set for attendance, punctuality, and behaviour. Family involvement in the school has been actively encouraged over a number of years — many parents have not had positive experiences of education and have distrust of institutions in general.

The blend of an 'unapologetically Catholic' character with respect for Indigenous culture and perspectives is also an important aspect of OLMC. An example is the schools decision to combine the celebration of Mary McKillop Day and National Aboriginal and Islander Day Observance Committee (NAIDOC) Week on one day. The school has a large non-Catholic population but all students attend regular masses and around half of Year 6 students choose to make vows of confirmation.

Like many schools, OLMC has a breakfast program which runs several days each week. The grounds contain a vegetable garden that the students tend, as well as gymnasium-style equipment for students to use during breaks.

Profile 4: St Joseph's High School Aberdeen, NSW

St Joseph's High School, Aberdeen, is a central part of the Aberdeen and surrounding communities in the upper Hunter region of NSW. The first school on the Aberdeen site was a boarding school for boys run by four sisters from St Joseph's convent at Aberdeen in 1896.

It was run as a boarding school and primary school for over seventy years, when declining enrolments led to its closure and re-opening as a regional Catholic high school in 1972. St Joseph's High School Aberdeen opened with 53 students and now has more than 600. The principal of St Joseph's High School, John Tobin, has been principal for 25 years and has overseen the school's remarkable growth and transformation.

St Joseph's Aberdeen is distinctive in a number of ways, making it sought after by many families in the area, and it has a waiting list in most years. Students travel for up to 90 minutes each way to attend the school. The closest public high school is in Scone, 15 minutes' drive away.

Sector	Catholic
Year range	7-12
School type	Comprehensive, rural
Website	http://www.aberdeen.catholic.edu.au/
Recurrent government funding (2013)	$12,254 per student
Fees and other private income (2013)	$3,693 per student

The student population at St Joseph's High School is representative of the wider community in which it is located — a mix of farming and mining families, as well as families in the energy production and service industries, with varying socioeconomic circumstances. Families working in the mining industry have a high mobility rate, which causes a relatively high level of turnover of students in the school, including families from other countries. This creates both challenges and rewards for the school.

St Joseph's High School is characterised by strong parental involvement, especially financially. The school does not serve a wealthy community — the school has an ICSEA value of 981 (average for all schools is 1000) — yet the school's Parents and Friends committee (P&F) has been a major contributor to the capital works projects required for the school's expansion.

The school has high levels of academic achievement, which Mr Tobin attributes to the emphasis on character, values and service at the heart of the school's ethos. This has generated pride in the school and shared expectations of excellence among staff and students. Students are challenged not to let the school's remoteness be an obstacle to their success and are encouraged to seek experiences beyond the community in which they live. Staff at the school are committed to ensuring St Joseph's students do not miss out on any opportunities available to students in city schools, but they also seek to preserve the rural identity of the school. The steer handling program is a unique aspect of the school that contributes to this identity.

St Joseph's students put their service ethos into action in numerous ways, including running week-long camps for children from St Pius X school at Windale, one of the most disadvantaged schools in NSW, as well as an 'All Stars' camp for people with disabilities. Both of these camps are primarily student-led, both in raising funds and in providing all meals and activities.

Profile 5: The Berry Street School, Noble Park campus, VIC

The Berry St School is a registered specialist secondary school providing a specialised education for students who have not been able to succeed in mainstream education. The school has three campuses located across Victoria.

The school is run by Berry Street Victoria, a charity which supports and works with children, young people and families who are struggling with the effects of trauma, abuse and displacement. Students enrolled at Berry St School have been expelled or excluded from mainstream schools, sometimes on multiple occasions. According to the Statewide Manager of Education at Berry Street, Anne Smithies, if the Berry Street School did not exist, its students would have few, if any other educational options. Very often the Berry Street School is their last option for gaining a secondary education.

The Berry Street School goal is to provide the structures and support to each student so that they develop the confidence and skills to enter further study or employment post school, leading to a satisfying and productive career.

The Noble Park Campus of the school is located in the south eastern suburbs of Melbourne, in a converted factory in a light industrial area. Many of the students enrolled at the campus are living in out-of-home care arrangements — either residential care, foster care or supervised group home facilities — as they are unable to live with their families.

Sector	Independent
Year range	7-12
School type	Special – for students in out-of-home care
Website	http://www.berrystreet.org.au/
Recurrent government funding (2013)	$23,123 per student
Fees and other private income (2013)	$1,219 per student – all other private sources

Berry Street has developed a model for the education of students who are affected by trauma, called the Berry Street Education Model. Sue Nilsen, Manager of Noble Park campus describes this educational approach as guided by research showing that childhood trauma affects brain function, leading to anxiety and aggression. The model provides staff with the training, curriculum and strategies to engage students and to promote cognitive and behavioural change, leading to academic achievement.

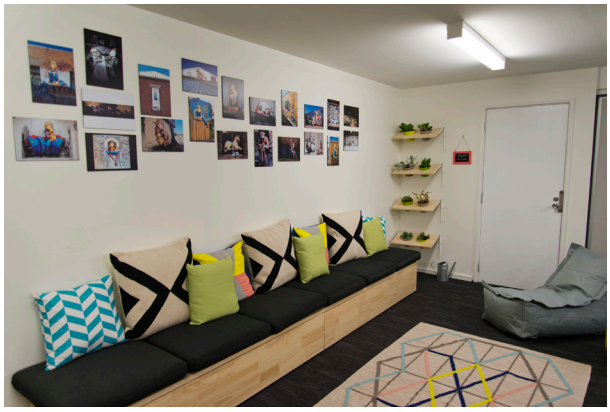
Teaching at Berry Street School is highly structured and routine, designed to give students a sense of predictability, safety and support. Teachers at the Berry Street School use the specialised techniques within the model to provide students with effective tools to regulate their emotions and improve learning.

Due to the often fractured nature of their schooling, many students have low literacy and numeracy levels. Approximately half the school day is devoted to literacy and numeracy. Teachers use explicit instruction methods and the school routines and expectations are influenced by the 'no excuses' approach used in successful US charter school networks like KIPP schools. The theoretical underpinning of the trauma-informed model is that students who are struggling need more support and structure, not greater flexibility.

Student progress in academic achievement and socio-behavioural skills are regularly reviewed and measured. Each day begins with breakfast and a 'morning circle' to discuss character strengths, and reinforce interpersonal behaviour and skills. Students are given help to build their stamina in learning, to fill the gaps in their knowledge, as well as acquiring general life skills.

Beyond literacy and numeracy, there are classes in art, technology, health and physical education. The school offers the Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning (VCAL) to its senior years students. Students engage in a wide variety of TAFE certificates, including Hospitality, Construction, Automotive, and Hair and Beauty.

Art is an important focus; student artwork is featured in all parts of the school.



Profile 6: Maridahdi Learning Centre

Maridahdi Learning Centre is an independent school located in Toowoomba, Queensland. Maridahdi started as an early learning centre for children younger than school age, but later expanded to incorporate a registered school for primary age students at the behest of parents who wanted their children to continue their education at Maridahdi rather than go to a mainstream school.

Maridahdi's approach to education is very different to a typical school. Founder Louis Bradfield describes Maridahdi as being more like 'unschooling' — an educational approach that is becoming more well-known, particularly among home-schoolers, but is still far from mainstream.

Sector	Independent
Year range	F-7
School type	Democratic
Website	www.maridahdi.qld.edu.au/
Recurrent government funding (2013)	$7,827 per student
Fees and other private income (2013)	$3,515 per student

Classes are multi-aged and children move freely around the school. There is very little traditional whole class teaching — students decide what they will work on, either independently or in groups, with teachers guiding their work. Students do not undergo any formal assessments or standardised tests and no grades or marks are awarded for work.

No bells signal the start and finish of the school day, there is no school uniform, children eat whenever they like, and none of the usual structures of school days are evident.

The ratio of adults to children is high — each class has a teacher and teaching assistant, and all parents are expected to spend some time as a volunteer at the school every week.

The Maridahdi philosophy is to 'empower' children, rather than to dictate how they spend their time. The teachers and parents at Maridahdi believe that the physical freedom children have at Maridahdi develops the resilience and emotional stability that children require to be ready to learn, and that their ability to choose how and what to do makes them more engaged and more likely to learn.

According to the teachers at Maridahdi, this form of education is more demanding than traditional teaching. As there is no sequential whole class teaching and no formal assessment, and each child is working on different things at different times, teachers have to be aware of the stage each child is at in the various areas of the curriculum at any given time because there is still a responsibility to cover all of the content and skills.

Maridahdi is a relatively small school with a highly committed and involved parent body, which may play a role in the way the school functions, but Bradfield says the Maridahdi model would work anywhere, with some variation. The reason that more schools do not operate like Maridahdi, he says, is that the traditional school is the dominant paradigm and many people are unaware that there is an alternative, but this is beginning to change.

While Maridahdi's progress has not been smooth — the establishment of the school was resisted for a long time by local residents — and its approach is still considered unorthodox, it now has a waiting list.

Conclusions

In debates over school funding and provision in Australia, comparisons between the three school sectors are often made. A decade ago, such comparisons could be made only on the basis of limited information. The introduction of the National Assessment Program for Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) in 2008 and the establishment of the My School website has allowed more sophisticated analyses to be undertaken. Most analyses of student performance data find minimal differences in the average performance of the three school sectors, after controlling for demographic factors such as socioeconomic status.

However, improvements in the scope and detail of data have also yielded important information about the variety of schools in each school sector and the diverse student populations each serves. There is substantial overlap in the student populations in each sector — none exclusively serves any particular demographic.

School funding data from ACARA show a wide range of school funding levels in all three sectors. The data also show that government schools tend to have higher levels of government funding but, when all sources of income are included, the total per capita recurrent funding rate is very similar in all three sectors. Approximately half the schools in each sector have per capita funding rates in the range $10,000–$14,999. 83% of government schools, 94% of Catholic schools and 76% of independent schools have total funding levels below $20,000 per capita.

The diversity of schools within each sector is greater than the differences between the sectors, calling into question the usefulness of broad-brush comparisons based on average results, whether it be for policy decisions or for parents choosing a school.

This report challenges the stereotypes that exist in the portrayal of government, Catholic and independent schools in the public debate. The report is not intended to compare or analyse the performance of schools in each sector, or of the schools profiled. Given the extraordinary variety of schools in each sector, the schools chosen to profile are a small and necessarily subjective selection, and can only partially reflect the range of provision. Nonetheless, they are not outliers. Each to some extent represents a segment of schools across Australia providing education to children and families with diverse needs, abilities and preferences.

Choice among government and non-government schools and alternative forms of education provision such as home schooling have been a feature of education provision in Australia since British settlement. It is important to acknowledge and value the essential role all three school sectors play in providing quality education to Australian students and the benefits brought about by school choice. Government policy into the future should protect this legacy.

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About the Authors

Jennifer Buckingham

Jennifer Buckingham is a Research Fellow at the Centre for Independent Studies working on school education policy.

Trisha Jha

Trisha Jha is a Policy Analyst at The Centre for Independent Studies working on school education and early childhood education and care.

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PO Box 92, St Leonards, NSW 1590 Australia • **phone:** +61 2 9438 4377 • **fax:** +61 2 9439 7310 • **email:** cis@cis.org.au