

Private Schools And The Education Gap: What's The Answer?



Public schools or Private schools?

Source: [The conversation](#)

Closing the Education Gap: Rethinking Equity in Australian Schools

The growing divide in Australia's education system raises pressing concerns about social equity both within and between societies worldwide. Private school education has gained popularity over the past few decades, with more parents opting for this expensive route to pursue better opportunities for their children. This trend highlights a widening education gap, where economic privilege increasingly determines access to quality education.

Australians commonly believe everyone should have [equal access to education](#), regardless of location, family background, or disability status. However, this ideal is far from the reality as current [school choice policies](#) do not reflect this belief resulting in a noticeable education gap. Federal and State governments actively promote [private school expansion](#) by implementing policies that encourage growth and [competition](#). This has occurred by removing restrictions on the

[number, size, and growth of private schools](#). Secondly, overall [government funding](#) of private schools has grown at very high rates in comparison to public schools. While Government funding per public school student increased by [38.7% between 2007-2008](#) and 2016-2017, funding for each private school student increased by [61%](#) in the same period. With a difference of over 22% in funding, there is clear evidence of favouritism towards private schools.

Individuals from low-income backgrounds have limited schooling choices. This is because private schools use funds to [improve facilities](#) rather than supporting students. Hence, the country's education system does not adhere to egalitarian principles which highlights the education gap in the country.

The Impact of Private School Expansion on Educational Equity

Private schools are becoming a more popular choice for parents than public schools today. Approximately [35% of Australian parents choose to send their children to fee-paying private schools](#). This figure has doubled over the last 30 years. Parents prefer private education over public education because of [smaller class sizes](#) and [access to more extra-curricular activities](#). These benefits are associated with better educational outcomes. Smaller class sizes allow teachers to easily identify students with special needs and [provide them with tailored support](#). Secondly, participation in extra-curricular activities is linked with [improved behaviour, better social skills, and high grades](#).

Hence, creating more opportunities for students from high socioeconomic backgrounds does not guarantee a good future for everyone. This is because there will be fewer opportunities for low socioeconomic status ([SES](#)) [students](#) to enhance their academic performance. A shortage of qualified workers will cause the economic growth of the country to stagnate.

Current Funding Arrangements and the Education gap

Private/Independent schools require parents to pay fees. There are two types of private schools in Australia: religious/independent and special purpose schools.

Religious/Independent schools in Australia [provide religious or values-based education](#). Examples are Catholic and Anglican schools. These schools can also be based on [certain educational philosophies](#), such as Steiner and Montessori. Special-purpose schools cater to [children with disabilities and other specific needs](#). The existence of a variety of private schools allows parents options.

Government agencies allocate funding to both public and private schools for their operations. [Federal, State, and Territory Governments](#) are responsible for this funding. States and territories are the [majority public funder of government schools](#). On the other hand, the Commonwealth is the [majority public funder for non-government schools](#). Currently, the Australian Government provides funding based on the [Schooling Resource Standard](#). This is the amount of public funding needed by each school to meet the educational needs of its students. The Commonwealth Government has agreed to fund 20% of the [operating costs](#) of public schools and 80% of the operating costs of private schools.

The Funding Gap

As shown in the graph below, public schools receive more government funding than Catholic and Independent schools. However, the funding of private schools has [grown at a faster rate](#) than that of public schools. In the past decade, the spending per student in non-government schools [increased by 3.3% per year](#). The spending per student increased by just 1.4% for government schools.

Analysts predict that [private schools will receive AUD\\$6 billion](#) in excess funding by 2029. Meanwhile, [public schools will be underfunded](#) by nearly AUD\$60 billion. An overestimation of the financial needs of [private schools](#) has been mentioned as a reason for this. The financial need of schools is calculated through the [Direct Measure of Income Method](#). The method measures the average family income of the students in a school. It ignores factors such as [school donations and untaxed capital gains income](#). Thus, private schools receive more funds than required. These extra funds could be utilised to provide more resources to and improve the education quality of public schools.

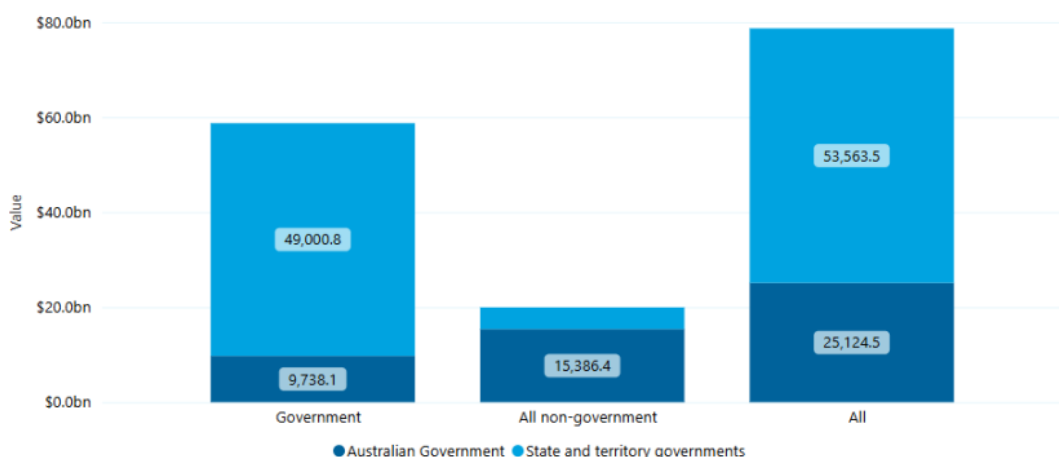
Hence, the current government is shown to be biased towards private education. This is concerning since public schools have a [high concentration of](#)

disadvantaged students. These students miss out on high-quality learning opportunities.

Funding source	Government	All non-government	All
Australian Government	9,738.1	15,386.4	25,124.5
State and territory governments	49,000.8	4,562.8	53,563.5
Total Australian/State/territory government expenditure	58,738.9	19,949.2	78,688.1

2.80%

Government expenditure on primary and secondary education as a proportion of Gross Domestic Product (GDP)



The Funding Gap

Source: [Australian Curriculum, Assessment, and Reporting Authority](#)

Why is this a problem?

The social segregation of students by the Australian education system has led to the 'commodification of education'. This occurs when education is seen as a money-making mechanism, a business, rather than a tool for social development.

Private schools offer the following benefits: sophisticated teaching methods, smaller class sizes, individualised learning experiences, access to special classes, tax concessions, professional networking opportunities, use of technologies, safer social environments, variety of extra-curricular activities and better chances of getting into top universities. Access to these benefits translates into positive social outcomes such as higher grades and higher wages.

However, these opportunities are unavailable to the vast majority. Unlike public schools, private schools have high fees and competitive selection processes. This puts a brake on social development by entrenching a class system. This is because the opportunity for a private education is only accessible to wealthy students. These opportunities can be passed across generations in high SES families since they are more affordable for them. Hence, a cycle of intergenerational poverty

arises in low SES families.

Increasing the funding of public schools is important to equip them with the capacity to provide an all-rounded education to students.

In an era characterised by increased technological developments, we need an agile workforce that consists of a diverse pool of workers. Society is no longer a case of elites running the wheels of industry while the poorer classes operate the machines.

Do Private Schools Always Perform Better?

The belief that private schools [perform better academically](#) than public schools motivates many parents to send their children to private schools. Their 'superior' performance is attributed to greater financial resources, the selection of brighter students, and the characteristics of [private school students and their families](#).

It has been difficult to obtain data that compares the academic results of private and public schools. Data collected from the [Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Youth and Department of Education](#) are not published. However, analyses of available raw data have confirmed this widespread belief. In 1997, Ken Ganicott estimated the probability of success in the NSW Higher Secondary Certificate (HSC), according to school type. He confirmed that students in [Independent Private and Catholic schools](#) had a higher likelihood of success than students in State schools. The superior performance of private schools was also confirmed in a study by the [Melbourne Institute of Applied Economic and Social Research](#).

However, recent analyses of results have challenged this belief. An analysis of My School data and the Victorian Certificate of Education (VCE) results from 2014 to 2018 showed that [public schools have similar results to private schools](#). A 15-year study also showed that [public, private, and Catholic schools produce the same results](#).

Hence, spending more money on students and school infrastructure does not necessarily guarantee superior results. It is the quality of teaching that matters.

How Can Schooling Change to bridge the education gap?

The commodification of education is a barrier to educational equity. The over-funding of private schools has led the Australian government to commodify school education. Private schools receive more support than required. Hence, public schools are left out of opportunities to improve their quality of teaching. Children from low socioeconomic backgrounds are excluded from having a [well-rounded educational experience that supports their character development](#). The commodification of education fosters conditions for social immobility as funds are used to [provide more privileges to the wealthy](#). Hence, the 'inequitable' education model of the Australian government is not sustainable as we move forward as it does not promote social development.

[Phasing out the funding of well-resourced private schools](#) is crucial for addressing educational inequity. Additional funding for private schools must be redirected to public schools to serve the needs of low-income students. This will ensure that all neighbourhoods have excellent schools, regardless of their socioeconomic profile. All schools will have access to the [human and material resources](#) required to provide high-quality learning experiences. This primary measure needs to be supplemented by policies to [reduce staff shortages](#) (e.g. setting quotas for teacher numbers or redirecting funding to support the teaching profession).

To explore more about educational reform and advocate for systemic change, visit [Save Our Schools](#), a campaign dedicated to promoting fairness and equity in Australian education.

Conclusion and cTA (Call to action)

The current funding imbalance between [public and private schools](#) creates a cycle of inequity that limits opportunities for students from low-income backgrounds. To ensure every child has access to a high-quality education, the Australian government must prioritise equity over competition. Redirecting funding from over-resourced private schools to underfunded public schools is not just an ethical obligation but a necessary step for achieving a skilled, inclusive,

and equitable society.

Investing in public education ensures that all students, regardless of their socioeconomic status, benefit from modern facilities, cutting-edge technology, and highly trained teachers. Smaller class sizes and individualised support can empower disadvantaged students to reach their full potential. Addressing these systemic issues will not only improve educational outcomes but also strengthen Australia's workforce and drive [sustainable economic growth](#).

To support these reforms and be part of the change, we encourage you to engage with advocacy initiatives, share your voice in campaigns, and promote educational equity. Together, we can create a system that values every child equally.

Achieving the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

The disparities in Australia's education system pose a significant barrier to achieving [Sustainable Development Goal 4 \(Quality Education\)](#) and [Sustainable Development Goal 10 \(Reduced Inequalities\)](#). SDG4 emphasises equitable and inclusive education for all, while SDG10 advocates reducing inequalities within and among countries. Current funding practices widen the education gap between advantaged and disadvantaged students, undermining these global objectives.

To meet these goals, policymakers must reallocate resources toward public schools, ensuring that they are adequately funded to provide comprehensive learning opportunities. Public schools can then offer smaller class sizes, improved learning materials, and extracurricular activities, which are proven to enhance academic outcomes and social mobility. Achieving these targets is not just about addressing economic disparities but also fostering a society built on fairness, inclusion, and opportunity for all.

A Thrivable Framework

The [THRIVE Framework](#) offers a transformative approach to addressing inequities in education. By applying [systems thinking](#), the framework encourages stakeholders to view education holistically, considering the

interconnected challenges that perpetuate inequality. For example, factors such as resource allocation, teacher shortages, and community engagement must be addressed collectively to [**create sustainable change**](#).

At [**THRIVE**](#), we are committed to promoting equitable education systems through research, advocacy, and [**collaboration**](#). By closing the education gap, we can empower all students to [**thrive**](#), build resilient communities, and ensure a brighter, more sustainable future for generations to come.

Explore our [**blog**](#), [**webinars**](#), [**podcasts**](#), and subscribe to our [**newsletter**](#) to stay informed about innovative solutions for building equitable education systems. Stay connected to be part of a community dedicated to creating lasting change for all. Together, we can create a future where every child has the opportunity to succeed.