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Australian  
Learning  
Lecture

# **CHOICE AND FAIRNESS:** A Common Framework for all Australian schools

## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

**Tom Greenwell and Chris Bonnor**

Full report

<https://all-learning.org.au/equity-publication/>

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# WE NEED A NEW CONVERSATION ABOUT AUSTRALIAN EDUCATION

There are many proposals for school reform put forward. Where money is spent on education does matter. But the proposals usually ignore the framework within which schools operate. The reality is that our current hybrid public/private framework is not fit for purpose. **It is unlike any other framework in the world.** We won't solve Australia's declining education performance and equity if we don't first put in place a new equitable framework of how we fund and regulate our schools.

## WHY A NEW CONVERSATION IS NEEDED

Over the last two decades Australia has experienced a significant decline in overall student achievement. Australian 15-year-olds are a full year of learning behind where they were in 2000 in reading, maths and science according to the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) tests conducted by the OECD. A lack of quality education **for all** is not good for our young people's future nor our prospects as a country.

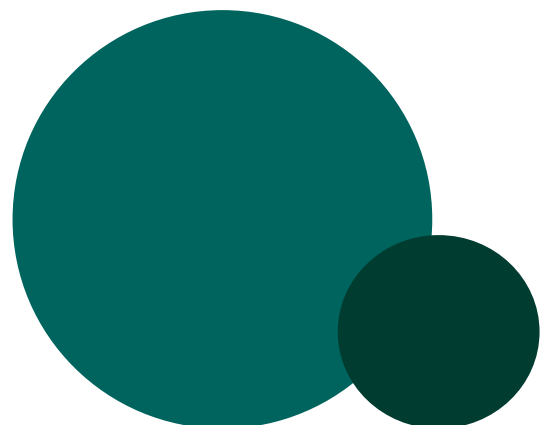
## GROWING DISADVANTAGE AND DECLINING ACHIEVEMENT IS THE RESULT OF THE WAY WE RESOURCE AND REGULATE OUR SCHOOLS

Ten years after the Gonksi Report into fairer school funding we have still not implemented the recommendation that all students are supported with the resources they need to succeed. This failure is not only the fault of our politicians. It reflects the lack of a community consensus about how we resource and regulate our diverse system of schools – a system that does not exist anywhere else in the world.

Disparities in school resourcing are effectively sorting young Australians from advantaged and disadvantaged backgrounds into separate schools. Taxpayer-fuelled funding helps private schools attract high-achieving students, while selective enrolment practices and high fees exclude children from disadvantaged backgrounds from these and other schools. Research indicates that the social composition of a school has as much influence on a student's chances of success as their own family background. The social stratification of our school system is among the worst in the OECD and raises concerning questions for our future around social cohesion and mobility. It also impacts Australia's productivity.

Australia must learn from high performing comparable countries including New Zealand, Canada, Scotland, Belgium and the Netherlands. These countries show that it is possible to provide choice and diversity of schools to parents and students while limiting segregation and maximising equity and effectiveness. In these countries:

- it is common for faith-based and other non-government schools to be fully publicly funded and free;
- public funding must be accompanied by public obligations to maximise equity; and
- public monies do not provide some children with privileges which are not available to others
- the public does not fund schools that are only available to the few.



# OUR PROPOSAL: A COMMON FRAMEWORK FOR ALL AUSTRALIAN SCHOOLS

To turn Australia's educational performance around and close the unacceptable gaps between students from different backgrounds, we need to:

1. fund all schools on the basis of educational need;
2. ensure children from disadvantaged backgrounds have the opportunity to thrive in more socio-economically mixed schools; and
3. create a system where schools compete, not on their ability to attract additional resources and the right students, but on their capacity to help each child achieve a full year of learning, every year, and to realise their full potential.

## WHAT IS A COMMON FRAMEWORK?

A common framework of responsibilities and obligations should apply equally to all publicly funded schools guaranteeing that:

- all schools that receive public funding, whether they're in the government or non-government sector, are free to the user and prohibited from charging fees;
- all schools that receive public funding are open to children of all abilities, and prohibited from excluding children based on entrance tests and other similar discriminators; non-government schools could continue to apply enrolment and other policies necessary to promote their specific religious or educational ethos;
- Independent and faith-based schools that accept these conditions are fully publicly funded to meet recurrent and capital costs on the same needs-basis as government schools; and
- Independent and faith-based schools that continue to charge fees or reject inclusive enrolment obligations would no longer receive any public funding.

## WE CAN AFFORD IT

New evidence shows that a fully funded common framework in Australia is surprisingly affordable. All but the higher fee non-government schools already receive taxpayer funding at levels similar to public schools with equivalent demographics. The annual cost in additional capital and recurrent expenditure to all governments would be approximately \$2 billion. Without significant intervention, we risk increasing inequality and further declines in overall student achievement – with all the social, economic and fiscal costs that entails. We will miss out on the productivity gains that could be derived from improved student outcomes, as the costs of inaction accumulate.

## HOW DOES A COMMON FRAMEWORK VALUE EQUITY AND CHOICE?

Australia's challenge to increase equity and achievement for our young people typically stalls because of entrenched positions on funding to schools. Public education advocates decry the use of taxpayer funds to enable some children to enjoy resource advantages over others, in schools that many are not able to access. Private school parents focus on the fact that sometimes their children receive less taxpayer support than families who enrol their children at public schools. The requirement that they pay out of their own pocket engenders an expectation that they will receive a benefit in return – a better resourced education for their child.

## THE SOLUTION IS TO RECOGNISE THE LEGITIMACY OF BOTH PERSPECTIVES.

A common public framework can support a choice of a range of schools diverse in their religious and educational ethos.

Families should **not** have to pay fees to ensure their child's education reflects their values and preferences.

Parents who choose the non-government option should still enjoy a fully taxpayer funded education.

This solution is a common arrangement in other comparable countries.

# STEPS TO A COMMON FRAMEWORK

## A LEVEL PLAYING FIELD

**1.**  
Fund all schools at 100% of the Schooling Resource Standard

### 1. FUND ALL SCHOOLS AT 100% OF THE SCHOOLING RESOURCE STANDARD

There is widespread commitment to the equity and fairness of the School Resourcing Standard, the needs-based funding formula originally proposed by the Gonski Review in 2011. But on the current trajectory, public schools in most jurisdictions will only reach 90% of their needs-based funding allocation by 2030. All governments should commit to fully fund every Australian school by 2028, the final year of the new funding quadrennium currently being negotiated.

### 2. CREATE A NEW CONVERSATION ABOUT A COMMON FRAMEWORK FOR ALL AUSTRALIAN SCHOOLS

Educators, researchers, policy makers and politicians should start a new conversation focused on creating a level playing field for all Australian schools. This new conversation is required in order to challenge mistaken and outdated assumptions that currently bedevil. The conversation should start with a frank recognition of the problems created by Australia's unlevel playing field (with its resource disparities and unregulated fees and enrolment).

### 3. BRING ALL MAJOR STAKEHOLDERS TOGETHER IN A NATIONAL EDUCATION SUMMIT

A National Education Summit could be a forum in which common interests are identified and areas of agreement are developed. A particular focus should be on a shared commitment to enhancing young people's school experience and school outcomes, as well as ways in which equity and choice can be expanded in a win-win manner. Ultimately, the goal would be to develop options around how a common framework would work, and what it could deliver.

**3.**  
Bring all major stakeholders together in a National Education Summit

### 4. AGREE ON A COMMON REGULATORY FRAMEWORK IN RETURN FOR FULL PUBLIC FUNDING OF ALL SCHOOLS

Building on areas of agreement, governments should then, in a spirit of cooperation and in consultation with major stakeholders, move towards developing a common framework that aligns the full funding of all schools with commensurate obligations and responsibilities.

### 5. ESTABLISH SCHOOL PLANNING AUTHORITIES TO OVERSEE A NEW COMMON FRAMEWORK

Concurrent with all these stages, and in association with the National School Resourcing Board, state, territory and Commonwealth governments should develop agreed and robust mechanisms to better manage the funding of schools, the operation of associated regulation, and required monitoring and evaluation of implementation. This work should include the establishment of school planning authorities in each jurisdiction, and the equalisation of Commonwealth and state funding responsibilities across the school sectors, as recommended by the Gonski Review.

**4.**  
Agree on a common regulatory framework in return for full public funding of all schools

**5.**  
Establish school planning authorities to oversee a new common framework

## SIX IMPORTANT FACTS TO CONSIDER

1.

### AUSTRALIA'S SCHOOL SYSTEM IS AN OUTLIER IN THE WORLD TO THE DETRIMENT OF OUR CHILDREN

Australia is increasingly creating winners and losers amongst our children and families because of how it funds and regulates its schools. Many similar countries, such as Canada, New Zealand, Scotland, Belgium and the Netherlands have ensured a more equitable education for every student, while allowing a diversity of schools to best meet student needs. The experience of these countries, and their success in international education rankings, suggests alternatives for Australia

3.

### WE CAN AFFORD TO PUBLICLY FUND ALL AUSTRALIAN SCHOOLS

All but the higher fee non-government schools already receive taxpayer funding at levels similar to public schools with equivalent demographics. The annual cost in additional capital and recurrent expenditure to all governments in Australia for a common framework would be about \$2 billion. The costs of not addressing educational disadvantage and underachievement are far greater.

5.

### GOVERNMENTS IN MANY OTHER SECULAR COUNTRIES FULLY FUND FAITH-BASED SCHOOLS

Some people object to government funding of faith-based schools on the grounds of secularism. However, many secular countries fully publicly fund church schools. These countries exemplify a pluralistic secularism in which that state doesn't favour any type of school, religious or otherwise. Instead, the state provides a common basis for all schools, and leaves it to parents to decide whether or not they want a religious element in their child's education.

2.

### WE KEEP SPENDING MORE BUT IN ALL THE WRONG PLACES

We keep getting told that we spend more on schools and get less back in results. That is largely true, but not for the reasons commonly assumed. The problem is the distribution of funding. The increase in taxpayer spending over the last decade has favoured already well-resourced schools. Just adding more money brings ever diminishing returns on the investment. On current trends, most public schools will continue to be underfunded into the 2030s.

4.

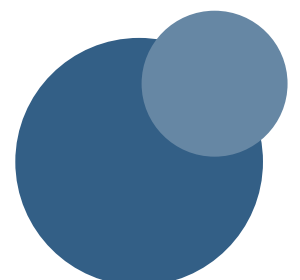
### THE SECTOR OF A SCHOOL MAKES NO DIFFERENCE TO STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT

Everyone knows that school results vary. But when the achievement of students from similar backgrounds is compared, the results across the public and private sectors are much the same. Even local comparisons, using the My School website, show that the results coming out of schools are largely determined by the students walking in each day. The research backs this up. We know that teacher and school quality matters, so shouldn't schools compete on quality on a level playing field, instead of competing for preferred students?

6.

### ALL SCHOOLS AND SECTORS NEED TO BE PART OF THE SOLUTION

It's time to move beyond a public-private school debate. The reality is that the way schools are resourced and regulated varies dramatically - between and within sectors - and is producing social segregation, inequality and educational underachievement. Fees are the main problem, but selective schools and specialist schools in all sectors discriminate in their enrolments, impacting on surrounding schools. We need a common framework for all Australian schools.



## LET'S START A CONVERSATION

The Australian Learning Lecture wants to start a new conversation about improving Australia's education system to truly achieve equity and excellence for all our children.

We welcome your thoughts about our proposal.

Questions, objections, support are all crucial to the conversation we need to have.

**Please download the detailed publication from our website – [www.all-learning.org.au](http://www.all-learning.org.au);**

**Email us on [info@all-learning.org.au](mailto:info@all-learning.org.au)**

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Together, we can design a framework for all Australian schools that will serve the needs and aspirations of all our young people.

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