



Public submission made to the Review to Achieve Educational Excellence in Australian Schools

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Summary

The central thesis of this submission is that policies of school choice have led to unintended, if not unexpected, damaging relationships between sectors and between schools within sectors, advantaging some while residualising others, leading to social and ethnic segregation, and limiting the educational opportunities and outcomes of the most disadvantaged. This has had multi-faceted negative effects on students' school experiences and wider social outcomes of Australian schooling. While needs-based funding is intended to ameliorate damaging effects of choice policies, it cannot be successful without significant additional policies - at school, system, state and national levels. In addition, needs-based funding can also create and exacerbate damaging effects of choice, and there are serious negative effects of choice for which needs-based funding is irrelevant. What students should and do learn at school involves much more than what is specified in formal curricula, and the outcomes of Australian schooling are much more than the sum of students' successes (or otherwise) in formal curricula.

This submission focusses on preventing and ameliorating residualisation and segregation in schools as much as possible, improving educational opportunities and outcomes for all students, especially the most disadvantaged, and improving the outcomes of schooling for the Australian community as a whole.

Recommendations are made regarding

1. School and system accountability and responsibility
2. Curriculum opportunities
3. Institutions and programs for gifted and talented students
4. Ethnic and SES diversity.

Main submission

This submission deals with the submission questions, but does so in a different order, first setting a broad policy and conceptual framework.

Policies of school choice and relationships between school sectors and schools

The central concern in this submission is the *relationships* between school sectors and between schools within systems, and how these impact the experiences and outcomes of schooling for students, communities and the wider society. Policies affecting relationships between schools and sectors are a central responsibility of governments and school authorities, and, since the 1970s, the predominant relevant policies have been based on notions of school choice. The very high degree of school choice in Australia was noted by the OECD (2013), which commented that this “can contribute to segregation of students” and “may undermine equity in the education system” (p. 6).

The main inter-related factors associated with policies supporting choice that have led to damaging relationships between sectors and schools, have been changing funding levels; the school choices of families who are in a position to choose; and the qualitative and quantitative control over enrolments by schools that are able to exercise such control. It is these families and schools that policies supporting school choice advantage. And, concomitantly, such policies disadvantage families who are not in a position to choose and schools that cannot qualitatively or quantitatively control enrolments. Such families and schools tend to be residualised (Preston, 1984).

Specifically regarding Commonwealth funding and the relationships between public and private school sectors, the Interim Committee of the School Commission warned in 1973 that high levels of public funding of private schools would change the relationship between the public and private school sectors, diluting the strength and representativeness of public schooling (p. 12).

This changed relationship is apparent from many data sources. According to the ABS Census, in 1986 there were roughly similar proportions of secondary students from high (top third) and low (bottom third) family incomes in the public and private sectors. However, by 2011 the public sector had almost twice the proportion of secondary students from low income families relative to the proportion from high income families, while the private sector had the reverse – in the Catholic and independent sectors combined the proportion of secondary students from low income families was less than half the proportion from high income families (Preston, 2013, pp. 6-7). Similarly, the public sector’s share of all school enrolments fell from 79% in the late 1970s to 65% in 2016 (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2017b).

Unintended damaging consequences of needs-based funding, selective and specialist schools and zoning

Governments have taken little responsibility for developing policies concerned to prevent detrimental outcomes of such policies, which was the recommendation of

the OECD (2013, p. 6). The Commonwealth's New Schools Policy, operating from 1986 to 1996, had some preventative effect, but was more successful in limiting the inefficient use of Commonwealth funds. Needs-based funding is a policy that can be intended to ameliorate the negative effects of choice (as well as meet needs arising from other causes), rather than prevent them. However, when needs-based funding is applied to schools and systems that can quantitatively and qualitatively control enrolments, the outcome can be an exacerbation of detrimental impacts on schools and systems that do not have such control. The establishment and expansion of selective and other specialist public schools and dezoning within the public system can be intended to (and may) lessen damaging relationships between public and private sectors, but at the expense of creating damaging relationships between schools within the public system (these practices can also have some benefits for individuals, but these tend to be exaggerated, and outweighed by costs to others (OECD, 2010, pp. 35-37)).

Quantitative control over enrolments

Quantitative control over enrolments by some schools (and sectors) but not others is seldom investigated, but can be very important. As the proportion of all enrolments increases in schools that can control intakes, then the impact on schools (and sectors) that cannot also increases. Evidence of the greater impact arises from, for example, primary school enrolments in localities experiencing fluctuations in age populations as those areas are established with younger families (or younger families move in) and peaks in the age profile of the local population passes through primary and then secondary school as the local population ages. Comparisons between public and Catholic school enrolments in such areas show the public sector experiencing much greater fluctuations, with resultant disruptions, inefficiencies and appearances of chaos (Preston, 2011a, pp. 7-9). Similarly, changes in school starting age in a state may involve all sectors, but the consequent severe enrolment fluctuations as a result of a (usually) small cohort moving through primary then secondary levels affects the public sector (and within the public sector, not all schools) much more significantly than the private sectors, especially the independent sector, which can maintain grade level enrolments at much closer to optimal levels. Consequently the public sector experiences much greater fluctuations than those of the state as a whole. Another example of schools being residualised by a the combination of school choice and a lack of quantitative (as well as qualitative) control over enrolments occurs in local public schools in low SES areas that experience a vicious cycle of exodus of higher SES students – further discussed below. A relative lack of quantitative control over enrolments has financial, educational and reputational costs not born by schools and sectors that have such control.

This dominant damaging relationship between and within sectors involves not only an increasing concentration of low SES students in residualised schools and systems, but also a loss of political and social power, status and community esteem, and autonomous control of quantitative as well as qualitative enrolments. The other side of residualisation is, first, the concentration of very high socio-economic students in selective public schools (Ho, 2017, 9 March) as well as high fee private schools, and, second, a general pattern of greater concentration of higher SES students in private Catholic and independent schools of all fee levels and in rural and urban localities (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2017a; Teese, 2011, Chapter 4), and in “desirable” local schools where there is competition between public schools (Ho & Vincent, 2016, 20 January). Selective public schools not only tend to have higher (and increasing) SES levels than high fee private schools, they also tend to a much greater extent than high fee (and other) private schools to select the highest SES students from neighbourhoods with a range of SES levels (Preston, 2011b, p. 6) – students who are among the most academically able and have highly engaged and motivated families.

Residualisation and restricted curriculum offerings

Local schools in low SES areas are the most residualised by more desirable private and public schools. They often cannot provide the subjects, such as advanced mathematics, sciences and English literature, that give access to significant university courses and professions. This was the finding of Perry and Southwell (2014) in their analysis of Perth high schools. They found that only 10% low socio-economic status high schools offered such subjects. Similarly, detailed analysis of the provision of Victorian Certificate of Education subjects in Melbourne Northern Region public secondary schools by Helms, Teese, and Lamb (2009) found that a third of the schools did not offer the highest mathematics subject, “specialist mathematics” (p. 109), and three offered no science subjects at all (p. 108). Not surprisingly the schools with the most limited offerings tended to be relatively small (to have no quantitative control over enrolments), and to have very low SES student populations (p. 110). As Lamb noted, “at the end of 25 years of reform, schools in the poorer areas of Melbourne had become residualised and were a shadow of their former selves, ... denuded of student numbers and resources” (2007, p. 673). This lack of provision of subjects that are essential for many tertiary courses and occupations is clearly contrary to the view expressed in the final report of the Review of Funding for Schools:

Fairness implies that personal and social circumstances are not an obstacle to achieving educational potential. Inclusion is about ensuring a minimum standard of education for all. Fairness and inclusion have been central to the panel’s considerations of equity. (Gonski et al., 2011)

It is important that judgements regarding outcomes of schooling for individuals, communities and Australian society take account of residualisation within sectors as well as between sectors. It is not appropriate to applaud a decrease of residualisation in relationships between sectors (such as relative increases in ATAR scores or SES in the public sector as a whole) if this has occurred at the expense of greater residualisation within a sector.

Ethnic and religious segregation

Choice has also led to very significant ethnic and religious concentrations in some schools, which generally has negative implications for Australian society and the individuals involved. This review is concerned with “school performance and student outcomes”, including “what students should be learning during their time at school, taking into consideration the impact of continuing globalisation ...” (p. 3). In addition to the formal curriculum and its assessment, the review must also take account of what students learn from the environment around them at school – their peers and all aspects of school culture: the hidden curriculum. Private schools with a religious character inherently lead to greater segregation according to religion - though low SES students from all major religions are much more likely to attend public schools (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2017a)). Here I focus on what students learn from the ethnic mix of their peers - “everyday monoculturalism” or “everyday multiculturalism”. Striking ethnic concentrations occur, for example, in many public selective schools and comparable high fee private schools. Ho found that among Sydney’s selective schools more than 80% of students were from language backgrounds other than English (LBOTE), and at James Ruse, the school with the highest SES and ATAR results, 97% of students were from LBOTE. Such high concentrations of students from particular east and south Asian countries have led to what Ho describes as “hyper-racialised” environments, where students’ “interests, abilities and preferences were seen in terms of ethnicity, and even subjects were racialised” (Ho, 2016, 27 October). In contrast, comparable (in term of SES and ATAR results) high fee independent schools are overwhelmingly Anglo-Australian (Ho, 2015), and so too are more “desirable” public primary schools in localities being gentrified by higher SES Anglo-Australians (Ho & Vincent, 2016, 20 January). As Ho and Vincent noted: “rather than being microcosms of the community, schools are increasingly divided by class and ethnicity. This should ring alarm bells for anyone concerned with social cohesion and justice in Australia” (2016, 20 January).

Suggestions and recommendations

1. School and system accountability and responsibility Schools and systems that receive any public funding or have an Australian social license to exist should have accountability and responsibility to the rest of the education sector and to the wider community beyond simple financial and legal accountability. There are many particular ways in which this could be done, and I urge the

review committee to investigate the matter further. Here I make one specific recommendation to

- require sectors and individual schools to appropriately share the impact of major and predictable enrolment fluctuations such as those arising from changing local population profiles (especially over the first two decades after major greenfields developments).
2. Curriculum opportunities and diversity All students should have access to appropriate academic and VET curricula so that no viable opportunities for future study or occupations are closed off. To achieve this, recommended strategies include
- further development of programs to expand important curriculum opportunities where they are currently unavailable though special support for schools, networks among schools, blended learning and distance education (see following) – these must be accompanied by appropriate professional development for teachers, school administrators and support staff
 - development in all states of high quality distance education provision of secondary school subjects, especially subjects such as advanced mathematics that tend not to be available in many low SES schools. Access to such programs should be available to all students, irrespective of their school location (not be restricted to rural schools), and be available according to the same criteria as such subjects are available in other schools.
3. Institutions and programs for gifted and talented students Any consideration of institutions and programs to support gifted and talented students must:
- take account of the effect on students who do not participate in such programs and the effects on the wider Australian society
 - recognise that gifts and talents (as defined by some external measure, by teachers, by parents or by students themselves) are widely distributed and develop and change over time
 - recognise that feasible expansions of selective schools and programs as a proportion of all enrolments will generate more demand for them as their expansion further residualises other schools and thus the opportunities of their students (note that around four out of five students who sit NSW tests for selective programs and schools are not successful)

Some consequential recommendations include to:

- make distance education in advanced (or enriched) subjects available to all Australian students who do not have access to them in their own school (urban as well as rural) – an appropriate model may be the NSW Aurora College (<http://www.aurora.nsw.edu.au/>) (see also regarding general curricula above)
 - generally not support initiatives that further residualise schools by removing academically able students using mechanisms such as scholarships or creation of metropolitan boarding facilities reserved for students assessed as gifted and talented
 - progressively change wholly selective and specialist public schools to partially selective or specialist schools (selectivity to apply to less than 50% of students)
 - further develop curricula, pedagogical practices and professional development for teachers and school administrators so that schools can support and develop gifted and talented students within a comprehensive educational and social framework
 - develop processes for selection for participation in any selective programs that are valid (not a reflection of SES and highly motivated parents) – this is unlikely to ever be perfect
 - develop adequate measures of value-add for schools to inform parents and the community (to counter the misleading measure for school performance of year 12 results and single year NAPLAN results)
 - publicise the negative personal and/or society-wide consequences that are a common result of students attending schools that are highly segregated according to academic ability, SES and ethnicity.
4. Ethnic and SES diversity There should be an adequate level of diversity within all schools according to ethnicity and SES. To achieve this, recommended strategies include:
- Establishment of a process for developing appropriate diversity benchmarks for individual schools. These might take account of the level of diversity in the LGA in which the school is located, and/or the LGAs from which a school draws its students. Schools with a recognised special character based on religion or that have historically charged high fees would have such characteristics taken into account regarding religion and SES respectively. However adequate and increasing diversity on those, as well as other, grounds, should still be expected.

- Assessment of schools against benchmarks, and a requirement that schools not meeting benchmarks develop plans to move towards those benchmarks.

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