Australian Learning Lecture

CONFIDENTIAL
NOT FOR DISTRIBUTION

LESSONS FROM CANADA

An equal school system is possible

FULL REPORT

KOSHLAND INNOVATION FUND

AUSTRALIAN LEARNING LECTURE

The Australian Learning Lecture is a ten-year initiative by Koshland Education Innovation designed to bring big ideas and new approaches in education to national attention. ALL acts as a hub and a catalyst, working with the world's leading knowledge shapers to drive impact in key areas of need for change. It draws on the input of multiple voices and stakeholders to strengthen the importance of learning for all Australians. ALL is not politically or commercially aligned.

KOSHLAND EDUCATION INNOVATION

Koshland Education Innovation Ltd is an incorporated association with charitable status committed to research in education to benefit all children. The Australian Learning Lecture is proudly supported by the Koshland Innovation Extension Fund, a sub fund of Australian Communities Foundation.

LEADING EDUCATORS AROUND THE PLANET

LEAP was formed by two former NSW school principals in 2008 to provide international professional learning experiences for Australian senior administrators and school leaders. LEAP has provided two programs: one being individual short-term reciprocal billeting peer-shadowing programs between Australia and England, Scotland, Wales, Ireland, Finland, British Columbia (Canada), Ontario (Canada), New Brunswick (Canada), Alberta (Canada) and Alabama (USA); whilst the other program has been international group study tours to investigate educational jurisdictions such as Wales, Scotland, Singapore, Finland and Slovenia.

AUTHORS

TOM GREENWELL

Tom is co-author with Chris Bonnor of *Waiting for Gonski, How Australia failed its schools* (UNSW Press 2022) and *Choice and Fairness: A Common Framework for All Australian Schools* (ALL 2023). He has written extensively about Australian education and public affairs and teaches history and politics in the ACT public education system. He previously worked as a research officer for the Australian Education Union.

CHRIS BONNOR

Chris Bonnor AM is a former teacher and secondary school principal. He was a previous head of the NSW Secondary Principals' Council and co-authored *The Stupid Country* and *What Makes a Good School* with Jane Caro. He has served on the Board of Big Picture Education Australia, was the lead author of six Centre for Policy Development papers and has contributed articles to a range of publications and media.

CONTENTS

Unless otherwise indicated, all dollar amounts in this report are expressed in Australian dollars.
Where sources use other currencies, conversion was applied using the exchange rate on 30 March 2025.
On that date, one Canadian dollar bought $AUD 1.11, and one US dollar bought AUD $1.59.

ISBN: 978-0-6450239-2-3 | July 2025 |

FOREWORD

When Prime Minister Albanese spoke to the nation on election night, he held his Medicare card aloft and proclaimed: “this card is not Labor red, or Liberal blue, it is green and gold. It is a declaration of our national values, in our national colours.”

It was a powerful expression of the Australian belief in a fair society where everyone lives with dignity and anyone can succeed.

Like Medicare, Australia’s publicly-funded education system is a national treasure. In towns and cities across the country our schools enrich the lives of our children in immeasurable ways.

But the reality is that our education system does not deliver the same opportunities for every child. The children who need the most support are channeled into the same schools, where teachers face the most pressure. Unacceptable gaps in achievement endure, and political disagreement continues to get in the way.

We need to look at seemingly intractable problems in new ways. That is why the Australian Learning Lecture and Leading Educators Around the Planet commissioned a study tour to Canada. Tom Greenwell and Chris Bonnor have produced an account which challenges us to revisit basic assumptions about how our education system should operate.

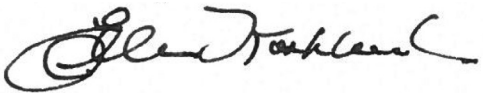
The lesson from Canada is that a common framework of resourcing and regulation for all schools is both achievable and urgently important.

These arrangements can seem surprising to Australians, unthinkable even, but in Lessons from Canada readers will encounter faith-based schools that are free for every child, and public schools that serve faith communities – with both groups of schools equally diverse, inclusive and supported.

The reality is that Canada has been much more successful in creating schools that truly embody the values both our nations share; schools that are anchored in their local communities where all students are able to achieve their full potential.

In Australia, Medicare won out against implacable opposition and entrenched interests to become a landmark in our national policy architecture and in the nation’s psyche.

It is beyond time that we need to replicate that success in school education so every child can succeed regardless of where they are born or who their parents are, in an education system that truly reflects our nation’s values.



Ellen Koshland
Founder
Australian Learning Lecture

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY
How to reduce school segregation and boost student achievement

Australia has one of the most segregated school systems in the developed world and the problem is getting worse.[1] This has a negative effect on national academic achievement, equity of outcomes, and the experience of school.

Multiple years of learning separate the children of the rich and the poor, the white and black, city and country dwellers. Increasingly students are selected or excluded by schools through entry tests, fees and other criteria. This contributes to a concentration of disadvantaged students in low-socio–economic status schools.

An international body of evidence overwhelmingly links the concentration of social disadvantage to low achievement in schools.[2] The 2023 Independent Review to Inform a Better and Fairer Education System reported that, in PISA science testing, disadvantaged students who attend disadvantaged schools are on average three years of learning behind their peers who attend advantaged schools. And low-SES students in low-SES schools are half as likely to achieve at NAPLAN National Minimum Standards than low-SES students in high-SES schools.[3]

Experts have been advising Australian governments for decades that intense levels of social segregation undermine all our schools try to achieve. If we continue to leave the fundamental drivers of this problem unaddressed, our children and our society will suffer.

This long–term policy failure in Australia is resulting in wasted human potential, less fulfilling lives, and a less productive society. How can this be in our national interest?

SEARCHING FOR SOLUTIONS

In searching for solutions, it makes sense to explore how comparable countries design their school systems.

In October 2024 a delegation of Australian educators and researchers visited Canada under the auspices of Leading Educators Around the Planet (LEAP) and the Australian Learning Lecture (ALL) to find out what Australia can learn about creating a school system that enhances equity, opportunity and achievement.

Australia and Canada spend similar amounts on school education and share much in common in terms of history, culture and demography. However, Canada has much lower levels of social segregation in its schools, higher levels of achievement and consistently outperforms Australia in the OECD's PISA tests across all learning domains.

Each province in Canada has a distinct education system as the national government has no responsibility for education. This provides many lessons to learn from Canada's range of school systems. Provinces like Ontario enable Australia to see new possibilities. Other provinces, like British Columbia and Quebec, reflect our own problems back at us, even if in less acute form.

In Australia a high proportion of advantaged students are enrolled in fee-charging non-government schools or selective state schools, leading to a large concentration of social disadvantage in comprehensive public schools.[4]

In Ontario secular and faith–based schools are fully publicly funded. They are prohibited from charging fees and are required to serve students in their local area. Because all schools are prohibited from charging fees and applying academic entrance tests, they are equally accessible to all families. Because all schools are funded on the same basis, none are in a position to use superior resourcing to entice families away from neighbouring schools.

Ontario's schools are more socially mixed than Australia's, and Ontario's school system is more effective. Ontario's 15-year-olds achieve at significantly higher levels than their Australian peers in PISA tests. The individual, social and economic benefits of improved academic achievement more than justify the investment. Ontario's schools are resourced at a similar level to Australia's, and full public funding of both secular and faith-based schools is affordable.

Ontario shows us that consistent funding and regulation across all sectors creates an inclusive system with socio-economically diverse schools.

It also reveals that it is possible to build a broad social consensus in support of an inclusive and fair school system which provides every young person with the opportunity to achieve.

A broad-based coalition of interests across the community, including leaders of religious school systems alongside public education advocates, champion Ontario's arrangements. **Cardinal Thomas Collins, the Archbishop of Toronto, stated: "We are so richly blessed with a system in which the French and English, and the non-religious and Catholic dimensions of our whole education system work together in co-operation to make education a treasure for which all Ontarians may truly be thankful."**

Ontario's arrangements are replicated in Alberta, which is even more successful, but other provinces like British Columbia and Quebec provide public subsidies to non-government schools and allow those schools to charge fees and apply entrance tests – like in Australia. Quebec is the province most like Australia in heavily publicly subsidising largely unregulated private schools, and it has the highest level of social segregation of the Canadian provinces.

So bad is the situation in Quebec that a group of concerned parents are campaigning for change, calling for policies similar to neighbouring Ontario. In early 2025 the campaign gained momentum when its reform proposal was translated into legislative form and introduced into the National Assembly of Quebec.

SOLUTIONS ARE POSSIBLE

Canada shows that it is possible to create a shared framework in which all schools are accessible to all students, no matter their parents' bank balance. It is possible to create a funding system in which secular and faith-based schools are resourced according to the educational needs of the students they serve. Socio-economic diversity can be enhanced – along with access, opportunity and achievement – when governments act to establish consistent resourcing and regulations across diverse school sectors.

And Canada shows that a common, consistent approach to resourcing and regulation in no way hinders the capacity of schools or school sectors to determine their own character, ethos and curriculum.

Now is the time for a cross-sectoral conversation to identify shared problems; to recognise that other countries provide examples that we can learn from; to explore common ground; and to provide politicians with the support they need to take bold action.

> "We are so richly blessed with a system in which the non-religious and Catholic dimensions of our whole system work together in co-operation."[5]
>
> Cardinal Thomas Collins, Archbishop of Toronto between 2007 and 2023, describing Ontario's school system.

FINDINGS

1.

Ontario, Canada's largest province, has a needs-based funding system and no publicly funded schools charge fees.

The first lesson Ontario offers Australia is that funding all schools according to the educational needs of the students they enrol is possible and reform is achievable.

Ontario's needs-based funding system was established in the late 1990s when it was recognised that existing arrangements had failed to provide all young people with an opportunity to realise their full potential.

Today Ontario has a genuinely sector-blind and needs-based funding system in which secular and faith-based schools are resourced to meet the needs of the students they serve.

Across all sectors and systems, one common needs-based funding formula applies equally. The formula includes a baseline per-capita amount and funding loadings which factor in the additional needs of Indigenous students, students with disabilities, and students with low household income; low parental education; lone parent status, or low engagement.

Additionally, the funding formula addresses the greater costs faced by small and rural schools and schools with declining enrolments.

2.

In Ontario secular and faith-based schools belong to one common framework.

Secular and faith-based schools are fully publicly funded, prohibited from charging fees, and operate on a level playing field of rules, regulations and policies.

92 percent of young Ontarians attend schools that are part of the common legislative and financial framework.

At the same time, there is a commitment to diversity within the framework of fully publicly financed schools. Faith-based public schools are free to foster and promote their schools' distinctive religious character, ethos and curriculum as they see fit.

The remaining small sector of fee-charging private schools receives no public funding.

3.

Ontario's schools have low levels of social segregation and support high achievement.

The level of social segregation in Ontario's school system is much lower than in Australia. Ontario's schools are resourced at very similar levels to Australia's, but Ontario's 15-year-olds achieve at significantly higher levels in PISA. This pattern is repeated in Alberta which also has faith-based public schools, low segregation and high student achievement.

Ontario's common framework and needs-based funding system have eliminated the sectoral basis for social segregation that is a distinctive feature of Australia's schooling. The consequence of removing fee barriers, as well as other enrolment discriminators, is that Ontario's faith-based schools serve a much higher proportion of children from low-income households than their counterparts in Australia.

4.

Needs-based funding across secular and faith-based school systems is affordable.

The Australian debate surrounding school funding is often misguided by the false belief that governments cannot afford to fully fund compulsory education.

This is untrue, as evidenced by Ontario, a society similar to Australia in terms of education spending, which successfully provides full needs-based funding across both secular and faith-based school systems.

The alleged taxpayer savings in Australia are exaggerated, and the potential social and economic costs of a school system reliant on parental co-payments are not adequately considered. These costs include increased student segregation without any improvement in overall outcomes, which may outweigh any supposed fiscal benefits.

5.

A common framework of secular and faith-based schools enjoys political support across a widespread cross-section of society.

A striking feature of Ontario's school funding is that it is championed by both faith schools and public education advocates. This strong arrangement, based on a broad social consensus, has proven successful over time. This contrasts sharply with Australia, where conflict between school sectors has consistently hindered and stalled progress.

6.

British Columbia regulates fees in some non-government schools, but others still enjoy significant resource advantages and can actively or passively exclude disadvantaged students.

The challenge for Australians is that education arrangements in Ontario are so different to what we have and challenge many of our basic assumptions.

British Columbia is helpful because it represents a midway point between arrangements in Ontario and Australia. One category of non-government school is publicly funded at 50 percent of neighbouring public schools; and total operating costs cannot exceed the level of public counterparts. A second category of non-government school receives a lower level of public funding (35 percent) but fees at these schools are not capped or otherwise regulated.

Compared to Australia, British Columbia illustrates that some regulation of fees and enrolment practices is better than nothing.

Compared to Ontario this approach contains multiple disadvantages and downsides. British Columbia has a larger non-government school sector than Ontario, yet performed less well in PISA 2022, despite having the most advantaged student population in Canada.

7.

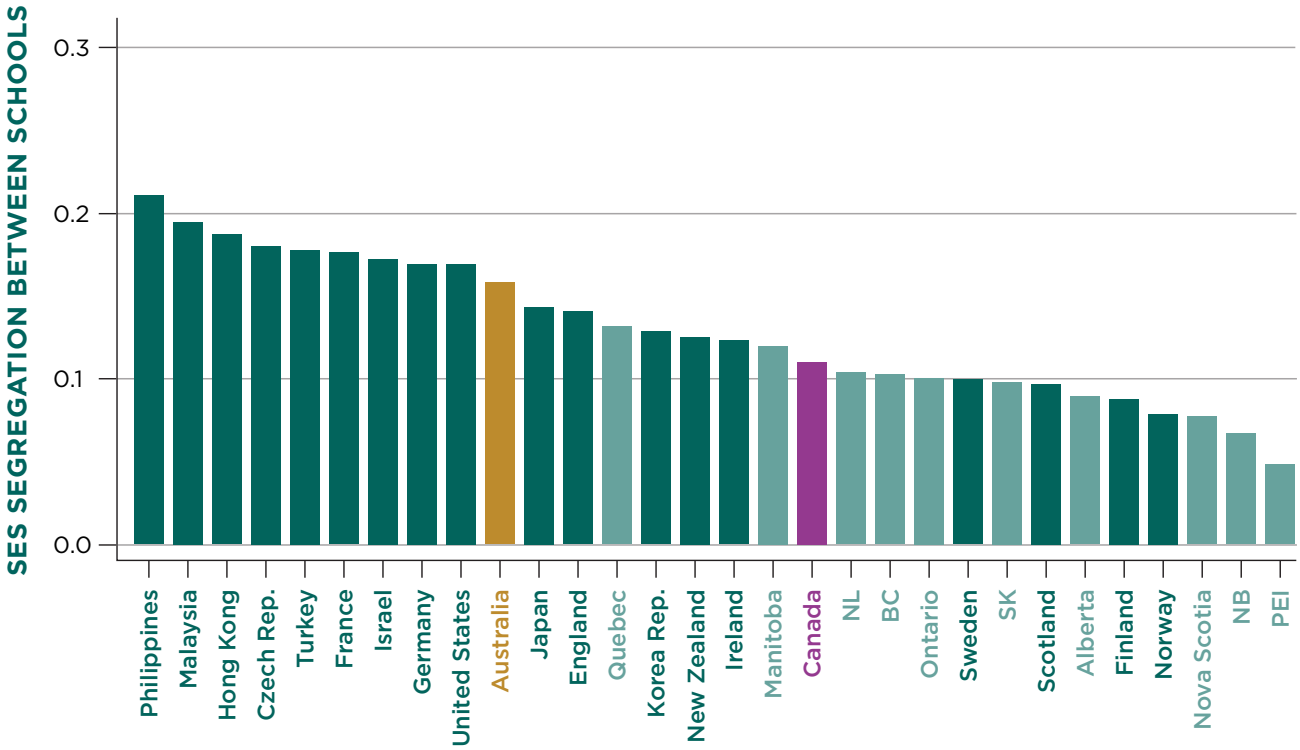
Quebec has similar policy settings to Australia and the same problems.

Like Australia, Quebec heavily subsidises private schools, with public funding as high as **75 percent** of the level received by public schools.

The province does little to regulate fees or enrolment practices. It has a large private sector in Canadian terms, and in response a subset of public schools have staked out a competitive position by adopting forms of student selection and exclusion. Like Australia there is a high level of social segregation across Quebec's schools. The children of high-income families are mostly concentrated in private schools, and selective public schools. The level of social segregation is not as bad as in Australia, but at the same time segregation in Quebec is much worse than any other Canadian province.

FIGURE 1: SEGREGATION – CANADIAN PROVINCES AND AUSTRALIA

SES segregation between schools, selected countries, and provinces (averaged over PISA 2012–2018)



A Chmielewski & S Maharaj 2022, p.17: Socioeconomic segregation is lower in all Canadian provinces than in Australia, but it much higher in Quebec which has similar policy settings to Australia.[6]

8.

In Quebec, a group of concerned parents and citizens are campaigning for a fairer, more inclusive and more effective school system.

École Ensemble (School Together) has developed a plan for a 'common network' of publicly funded schools to address the high degree of social segregation produced by Quebec's three-tier system of private schools, selective public schools and comprehensive public schools. The proposed common network would include public schools and 'contracted' private schools. The latter would be fully publicly financed and free while retaining management autonomy (as is the case in Ontario).

All schools in the common network would be assigned enrolment areas optimised to maximise socio-economic diversity and reduce travel times. To minimise disruption private schools would transition to the common network in a graduated way over a six-year period.

Economic modelling commissioned by École Ensemble reveals that the common network would save the Government of Quebec almost CAD $100 million each year once the transition is completed.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Australia can apply the lessons from Canada to create a more socio-economically inclusive and diverse system of schools which supports social cohesion, enriches academic opportunity and achievement and expands Australia's human potential.

Australia can build a better school system by taking the following actions.

START A CROSS-SECTORAL CONVERSATION TO IDENTIFY COMMON GROUND

Australian governments, system leaders, unions, principal peak bodies and parent groups need to engage in constructive dialogue which puts the national interest first. Australians have unwittingly accepted 'zero sum' assumptions about what is possible. Canada shows policy settings that accommodate the hopes and concerns of diverse groups in our society are possible. Ontario shows that it is possible to promote equity, choice and achievement, and create win-win solutions.

As a matter of urgency, leaders from the public, Catholic and independent sectors in Australia should engage in dialogue to identify potential responses to major areas of structural failure in Australia's school systems. Teacher unions and principal peak bodies have common interests and could take a lead in initiating discussions. This could be a conversation which acknowledges the interdependence of the sectors, the core interests and values of the respective parties, respects red lines, identifies common problems and, above all, focuses on enhancing opportunity and outcomes for all our children – and our nation.

ANNUALLY REPORT ON SOCIO-ECONOMIC DIVERSITY ACROSS AUSTRALIAN SCHOOLS

Policy discussion must be informed by objective, accessible and relevant evidence. In 2023, the independent expert panel commissioned by Federal Education Minister Jason Clare and chaired by Dr. Lisa O'Brien produced the *Improving Outcomes for All* report. It recommended that governments, school systems and approved authorities track and annually publicly report on the socio-economic diversity of schools and systems.[7]

This recommendation remains unimplemented.

It is essential that all governments and political parties commit to annual public reporting on socioeconomic diversity in our school system.[8] This could include the following elements:

- the extent to which highly disadvantaged students (Q1) and disadvantaged students (Q2) attend schools with students from similar backgrounds
- the extent to which the student profiles of Australian schools are representative, in socio-economic terms, of the communities in which they are located
- the proportion of students from priority cohorts enrolled in the public, Catholic and independent sectors respectively
- the impact on student learning of concentrations of disadvantage in the Australian education system.

The *Improving Outcomes for All* report pointed out that high concentrations of social disadvantage are generally found in the public system, and that non-government school fees and enrolment practices can be prohibitive for low-income families. Accordingly, annual public reporting on socio-economic diversity could include measurement of:

- changes in compulsory fees and charges over time as well as the impact of compulsory fees and charges on the accessibility and affordability of schools for students from low-income and/or disadvantaged backgrounds
- the impact of selective enrolment practices on the accessibility of schools for students from low-income and/or disadvantaged backgrounds.

These findings should be prominent in reports by, and inform the action of, all relevant government agencies. They should be given the same status as the annual release of NAPLAN data and be accompanied by corresponding public scrutiny and debate.

IDENTIFY INTERVENTIONS THAT SUCCESSFULLY ENHANCE SOCIO-ECONOMIC DIVERSITY IN COMPARABLE COUNTRIES

The *Improving Outcomes for All* report recommended that the Federal Government commission a new review into the right combination of interventions required to increase socio-economic diversity in the Australian context.[9]

Lessons from Canada reveals how a visit to a single comparable country can provide multiple possible approaches that have the potential to significantly enhance educational delivery in Australia. It underscores the value of the expert panel recommendation in *Improving Outcomes for All* which currently remains unimplemented. The proposal to optimise enrolment areas to maximise socio-economic diversity is an example of a sophisticated, but relatively easy and costless, initiative that could make a significant difference. The examples of Ontario and British Columbia both indicate ways that it is possible to regulate or remove fees as well ensuring that corresponding public obligations are attached to public funding.

ENHANCE DIALOGUE BETWEEN AUSTRALIA AND CANADA TO CHALLENGE UNEXAMINED ASSUMPTIONS ABOUT HOW OUR SCHOOL SYSTEMS WORK

Policy debates in Australia can only be enhanced by continuous active engagement with comparable countries like Canada. Too often public conversation in Australia is limited by unexamined assumptions about how things must be.

Core features of Australian schools and education systems are not inevitable, necessary or effective – and are far from best practice. We need to create forums in which Australians hear about both secular and faith-based schools in Canada.

Additionally, much could be gained from hearing how concerned parents in Quebec are responding to problems similar to our own. By viewing our situation through foreign eyes, we will better be able to identify what is possible in Australia. Journalists, as well as policy makers, have a responsibility to scrutinise unexamined assumptions and actively consider unfamiliar approaches.

COMMISSION INDEPENDENT RESEARCH ON THE FISCAL IMPACTS OF EXISTING PUBLIC SUBSIDIES

Ontario is a comparable jurisdiction with similar educational expenditure to Australia – and it can afford to fully fund 92 percent of its schools, a third of which are faith-based schools. This challenges the premise of much debate in Australia that there is no fiscal alternative to our existing approach of subsidising, but not fully funding, private schools. A mythology about the extent of taxpayer savings generated by publicly subsidising private schools hampers debate about education policy in Australia.

To support an informed discussion, there is a need for robust analysis produced by independent experts. Such analysis should identify the level of net savings, if any, that are generated by the subsidy system. But it should also adopt a more granular approach which distinguishes cases where subsidies produce savings from cases where they fail to.

Independent analysis should also weigh up any fiscal benefits against the social, economic and fiscal costs of existing policy settings. Even if the private school subsidy program is saving governments a small amount in the short term, is it also exacerbating social segregation, thereby causing underachievement, inequity, social disharmony and a loss of talent? If the subsidy scheme undermines life outcomes in the long term, does it ultimately cost governments more than it saves them? These complex questions should be investigated by independent educational and economic experts to enable Australians to have an informed conversation on the best path forward.

WHY CANADA?

In October 2024 a group of Australian principals, teachers, researchers and stakeholders visited Canada under the auspices of Leading Educators Around the Planet (LEAP) and the Australian Learning Lecture (ALL). The Australian delegation visited schools, spoke with senior system leaders, talked to professional associations and heard from advocates.

Underlying all these activities was a basic question: what can Australia learn from Canada about creating a school system that expands access to opportunity and achievement?

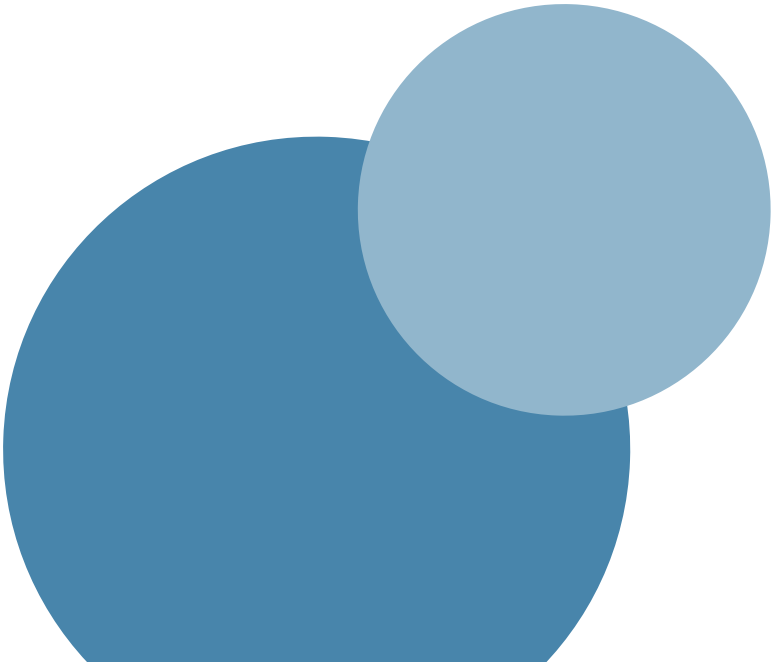
One day on that visit the Australians met with the leaders of a Catholic school system in Toronto. As had been the case across a range of meetings, our hosts were preoccupied with the ways in which the government's funding formula did not adequately account for all the costs their schools faced.

A distinctive feature of Catholic schools in Ontario is that they are fully publicly funded and cannot charge fees, and before long one of the Australian delegates asked the question that had occurred to many of us as we listened: "Well, would you like to be able to charge fees?" In a single beat this non-government school leader shot back, dismissing the suggestion as incompatible with their system's commitment to equity.

It was a moment that offered a revealing glimpse into a different educational culture. This blanket rejection of an additional revenue stream came, after all, from a non-government school system leader ultimately responsible for balancing the books. At around the same time, his counterparts in Australia were planning fee hikes twice or even triple the rate of inflation.[10]

This report rests on the belief that Australian educators and policy makers must revisit our basic assumptions and beliefs about how schools and school systems can and should work.

When our nation consistently fails to provide many children with the educational opportunities that should be their birthright, and when repeated attempts at systemic reform over a sustained period have failed, or remain unrealised, it is incumbent on us to be open to what international experience can teach us.



THE NEED FOR NEW IDEAS

The *Better and Fairer Schools* agreement, forged by the Australian Government and the states and territories, shows that the two levels of government can work together to formulate a cohesive policy direction, centred on widely supported principles concerning fair and adequate funding for schooling. But while the agreement marked a breakthrough of sorts, the ten-year timeline to fund public schools at the minimum resource standard yet again delays the delivery of full needs-based funding for another generation of our children. And that is accepting the courageous assumption that the plan survives intact through numerous election and budget cycles at both federal and state levels between now and the mid-2030s.

As many schools continue to be left ill-equipped to serve the students in their care, an equally pressing problem has come into focus. Competition and choice are big in Australia, but they play out on a very unlevel playing field in which different schools face markedly different obligations and regulations. Over time, more students have been selected or excluded by entry tests, fees and other criteria, contributing to an increasing concentration of disadvantaged students in low-socio-economic status (SES) schools.

The body of evidence establishing a link between concentrated social disadvantage and low achievement is now overwhelming.[11]

- In 2011, the Gonski review found that: "Many international studies, as well as research using PISA and NAPLAN data, confirm that concentrations of students from certain socioeconomic groups within a school has a strong impact on the educational outcomes achieved by all students at the school. Importantly, research also suggests that this impact is more significant than the effect of an individual student's own socioeconomic status on outcomes."[12]
- In 2017, analysis of Australia's PISA results by the Australian Council for Educational Research found that: "The social composition of schools had just as strong an impact on the likelihood of being a low achiever as a student's own family background."
- In 2018, the OECD charted the percentage of disadvantaged students in disadvantaged schools in countries across the globe. It found that Australia has one of the most segregated school systems in the OECD with a higher level of social segregation than both Russia and Tunisia.[13]
- In 2022, the Productivity Commission conducted an analysis of NAPLAN data which found that: "students from priority equity cohorts demonstrated, on average, less learning growth if they attended a school with a high concentration of students experiencing disadvantage." In reading ability, a Year 3 student in a disadvantaged school will be an average 8 months of learning behind a peer from the same background in a more advantaged school, the Commission's analysis found.[14]
- In 2023 the Commonwealth education minister commissioned an independent expert to conduct the Review to Inform a Better and Fairer Education System. It found that "Compared to similar Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries, Australian schools have some of the highest levels of social segregation, and this trend has worsened over time."[15]
- The expert panel further reported that "this has a direct impact on outcomes: students from educationally and socio economically disadvantaged backgrounds are more likely to be behind in learning when enrolled in schools with high concentrations of disadvantaged students than when enrolled in schools with a more diverse student profile."[16] The review noted that "The SES profile of the school may be a stronger predictor of academic achievement than the student's individual family socio economic status."[17] It presented evidence that in PISA science testing, disadvantaged students who attend disadvantaged schools are on average three years of learning behind their peers who attend advantaged schools. The report also described how low-SES students in low-SES schools are half as likely to achieve at NAPLAN National Minimum Standards than low-SES students in high-SES schools.[18]

- At the 2025 *Sydney Morning Herald* Schools Summit, Michele Bruniges, the former Secretary of the NSW and Federal Departments of Education, presented research conducted with the support of the Paul Ramsay Foundation and the University of Technology, Sydney. Bruniges found that between that 2017 and 2023 the number of students in schools with a high concentration of disadvantage grew from 430,000 to 555,000, an increase of 125,000 students attending a high concentration school Australia-wide in just six years.[19]

The continuing concentration of disadvantaged students in schools which are inadequately resourced for the extremely challenging task they face has produced inevitable consequences.

The stark reality is that demography has become destiny.

Multiple years of learning separate the children of the rich and the poor, the white and black, the city dwellers and the country folk. Education Minister Jason Clare observed in July 2024, "The number of kids finishing high school is going backwards. In the last seven years it's dropped from 85 percent to 79 percent."[20]

That's in a context in which the Australian Government projects that nine in 10 new jobs will require post-school qualifications.[21]

Nuance is essential when we talk about Australian schools and, in many respects, we have a very successful education system.[22] For instance, it has gone largely unreported that in results released in 2024 Australia ranked fourth in the world in creative thinking, only behind Canada and two other countries.[23] As Professor Pasi Sahlberg has observed, Australia has one of the best education systems in the world: "but only for some children."[24]

Across our society the accumulated effect of public policy failure is immense untapped human potential: educational experiences less rich with opportunity, individual lives less prosperous and fulfilling, and a society less productive and cohesive than it could be. In the face of the series of seemingly entrenched and intractable problems besetting Australian schools, the imperative to glean what wisdom we can from comparable societies around the world is especially urgent.

CANADA AND AUSTRALIA: SIMILAR SOCIETIES, DIFFERENT EDUCATIONAL OUTCOMES

As Australia searches for a way out of this mire, Canada is a natural place to turn for inspiration. In the late 1990s, when Australia was doubling down on its sector-*based* school system, Canada's largest province, Ontario, successfully executed a large-scale reform program, fully implementing a sector-*blind* needs-based funding formula. Not only has that funding model endured the test of time, but it has done so with the enthusiastic support of diverse social groups, sections of society that in Australia continue to be at loggerheads.

Canada reveals how needs-based resourcing can be delivered in practice, and more. School systems in all the Canadian provinces exhibit markedly less social segregation than in Australia: young Canadians are much more likely to meet and mix across class and cultural divides at school than their Australian peers.

Research by Professor Laura Perry about Canada, indicates that **74 percent** of students attend a high school whose **only entrance requirement is local residence.**[25]

In Australia, where students from affluent and educated backgrounds tend to gravitate towards each other in fee-charging non-government schools and state selective schools, the figure is just **29 percent**.

Consequently, local, comprehensive public schools in Australia are likely to have a preponderance of disadvantaged students, forming the lowest level in a stratified social hierarchy. Compared to the OECD average, Australia has a significantly higher percentage of disadvantaged students attending schools where most students are also disadvantaged. In Canada, that percentage is significantly lower than both Australia and the OECD average.

“Canada reveals how needs-based resourcing can be delivered in practice, and more. School systems in all the Canadian provinces exhibit markedly less social segregation than in Australia: young Canadians are much more likely to meet and mix across class and cultural divides at school than their Australian peers.”

FIGURE 2: HIGHER CONCENTRATION OF SOCIAL DISADVANTAGE IN AUSTRALIAN SCHOOLS THAN CANADIAN SCHOOLS

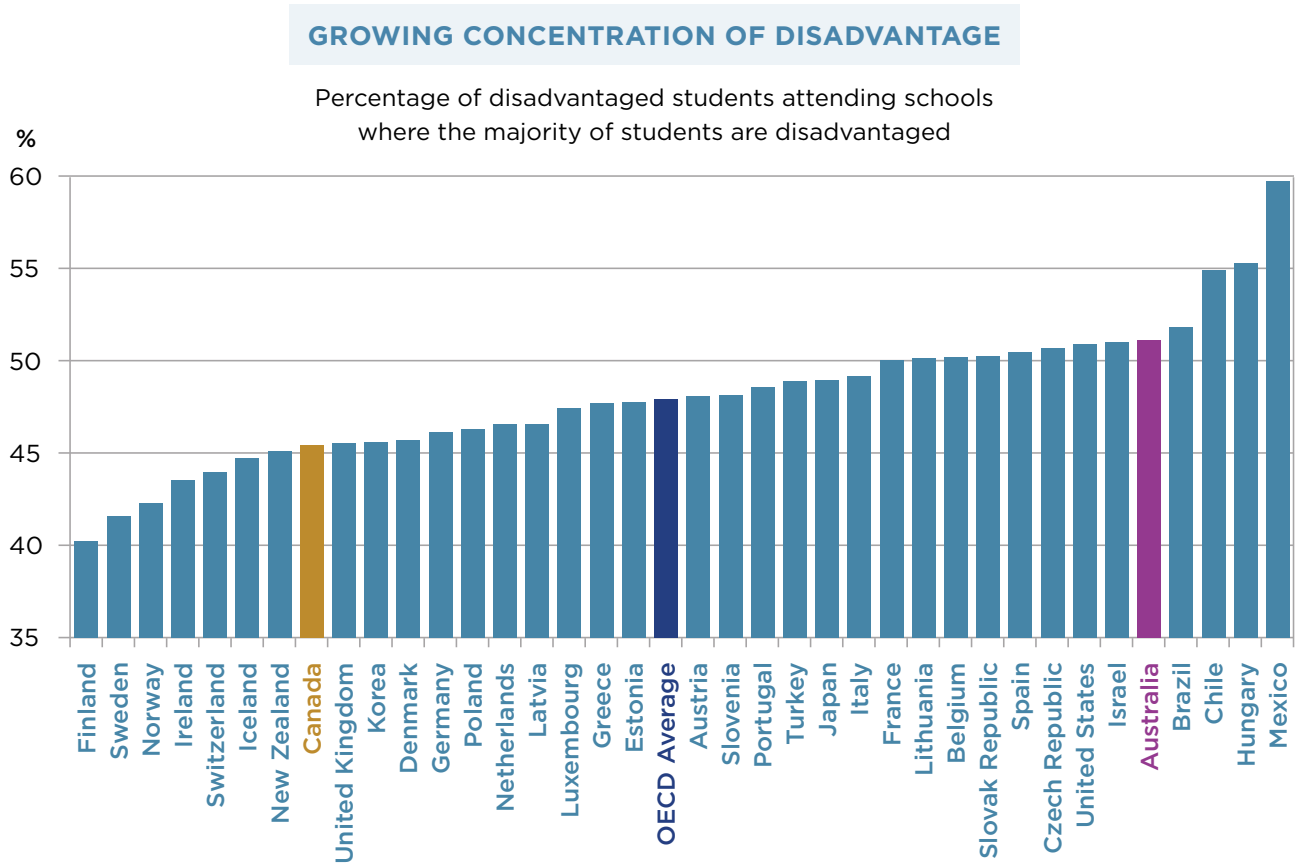


Figure 2 show a high concentration of disadvantaged students in Australian schools compared to the OECD average.[26]

These different structural conditions are accompanied by an enviable record in terms of measurable academic outcomes. Canada outperformed Australia in all subject areas in the 2022 Programme for International Student Assessment tests run by the OECD, just as it has in every round of PISA since the test's inception at the start of this century.[27]

The differences in Canada and Australia's scores equate to approximately half a year of learning in each domain.

- In mathematics the Canadian average (497) was 10 points higher than Australia's (487).
- In reading the Canadian average (507) was 9 points higher than Australia's (498).
- In science the Canadian average (515) was 8 points higher than Australia's (507).[28]

Mathematics was the focus of the 2022 PISA tests, and the results are indicative of the broader difference between the two countries. Figure 3 shows how Canada attained higher average achievement than Australia, *and* a student's socio-economic background was less predictive of academic achievement in Canada than in Australia.

On average a much smaller gap separated the results of advantaged and disadvantaged students in Canada (76 points) compared to Australia (101 points).[29] Evidence like this suggests that Canada's schools are both better and fairer.

FIGURE 3: STRENGTH OF SOCIO-ECONOMIC GRADIENT AND MATHEMATICS PERFORMANCE

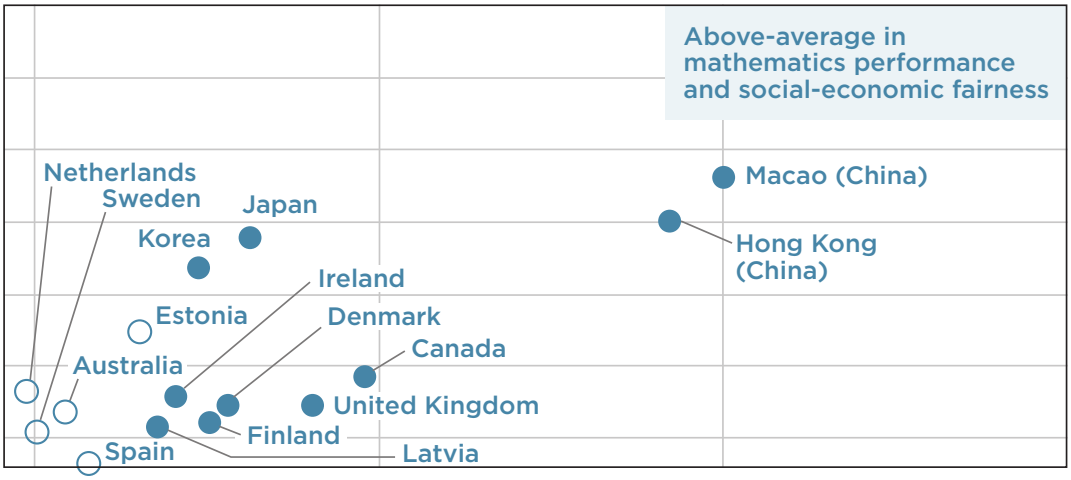


Figure 3 displays the quadrant of countries that are both above average in maths performance (Y axis) and above average in socio-economic fairness (X axis), (PISA 2022 Volume I, p.106). Australia is close to average on both axes; Canada has higher average maths achievement than Australia, and socio-economic background is less predictive of individual student achievement.[30]

The OECD advises that the exceptional circumstances of the pandemic led to difficulties collecting data for PISA 2022, and low school and student participation rates mean that caution is required in interpreting data from Canada.[31] However, it is important to recognise that Canada has significantly outperformed Australia in reading, science and maths in every single round of PISA since the test began. In the earlier rounds of PISA when non-response was a less prominent concern Canadian results were even stronger.

While there are several high-profile countries that shine in international standardised tests, many are very different to Australia historically and socially; they are often highly homogenous and in the case of East Asia, heirs to a Confucian cultural tradition.

More meaningful comparisons between countries are made on a 'like-with-like' basis, and Canada and Australia are remarkably similar societies. Each has a diverse population thinly spread across huge land masses; each educates a large proportion of students from immigrant backgrounds as well as an Indigenous student population affected by the legacies of European conquest and colonisation. When the OECD reports PISA data it ranks countries in terms of the Index of Economic, Social and Cultural status (ESCS).

Out of 79 participating countries and economies, Canada and Australia are next to each other, ranking equal third, with the same mean score (3.8).[32]

Spending on education in Australia and Canada is similar. [33] In fact, the cumulative per student expenditure on education is ever so slightly higher in Australia than in Canada.

Australia spends around **$520** more per student each year.[34] Spending on all primary and secondary education amounted to **3.8 percent** of GDP in Canada in 2020/21; in Australia the proportion is **3.9 percent**.[35]

The significant differences in educational outcomes between Canada and Australia exist even though Canadian society looks much like our own, and spending on education is very similar. This means that it is much more likely that education policies are responsible for the differences, rather than factors outside the school gate which policymakers do not directly control.

BUT WHICH CANADA?

As soon as any visitor seeks to understand education in Canada, they are confronted with a simple question: which Canada? Canadians are quick to point out that there is no single Canadian education system, and, in fact, there is no national minister for education or national education department. Each province has an exclusive constitutional responsibility for all levels of education, and each province funds and regulates its schools independently of each other and the federal government.

The resulting diversity is reflected in the ways schools are funded and organised. For example, Ontario doesn't provide any funding to non-government schools; other provinces do. Ontario and Quebec both have French-language and English-language public schools; other provinces don't. Catholic schools are fully publicly funded in Ontario, Alberta and Saskatchewan, but not in other provinces. British Columbia began funding private schools in the 1970s, but with accompanying regulation. As far as education goes, Canada is more akin to a union of different nations than a federation of ten provinces and three territories.

Additionally, there is significant variation in expenditure on schools across the provinces. The table below compares public expenditure on primary and secondary educational institutions per full-time equivalent student (2021) converted to Australian dollars. It reveals that, while school spending is similar between Australia and Canada at the national level, there is significant variation between the Canadian provinces.

FIGURE 4: GOVERNMENT INVESTMENT IN PUBLIC SCHOOLS IN CANADA & AUSTRALIA

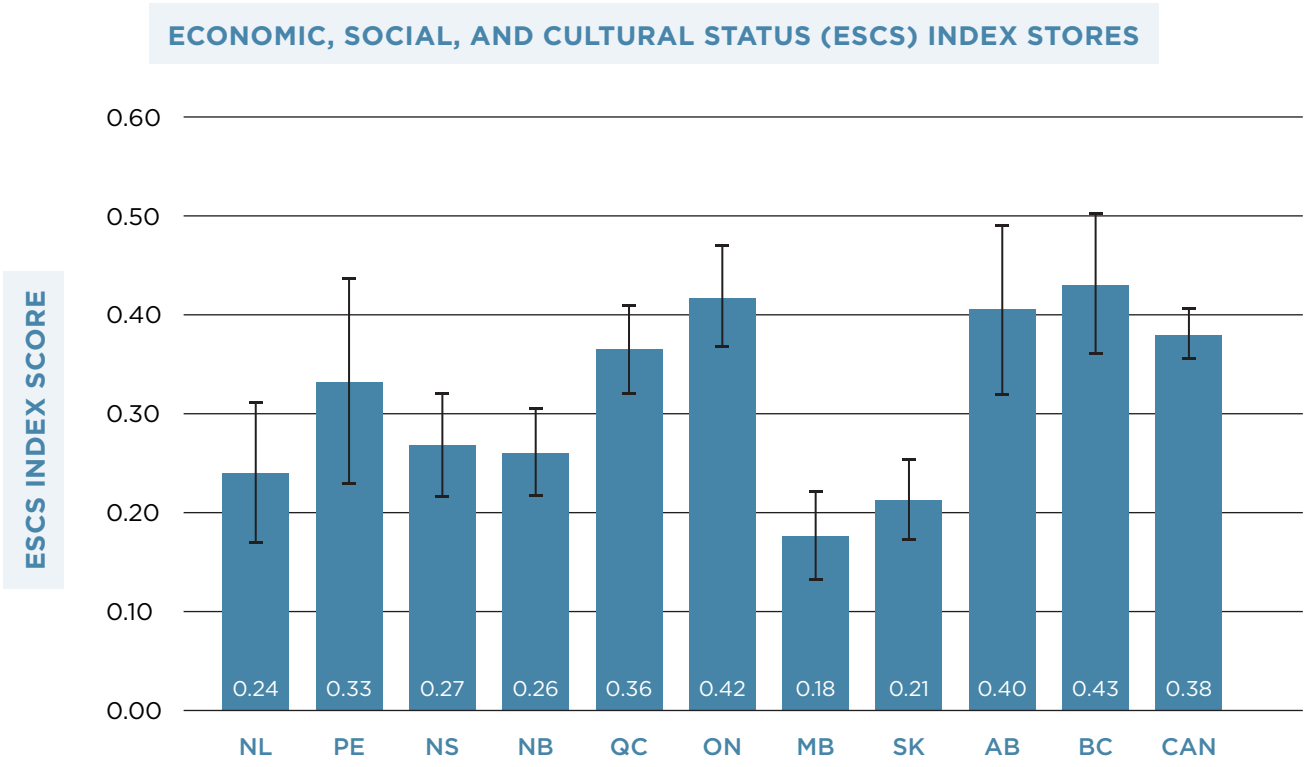
PROVINCES IN DESCENDING ORDER OF EXPENDITURE	AUD PER STUDENT EXPENDITURE IN PRIMARY AND SECONDARY SCHOOLS
Manitoba	$ 23,797
Quebec	$ 23,606
Nova Scotia	$ 22,107
Saskatchewan	$ 21,923
Ontario	$ 20,215
New Brunswick	$ 20,152
Prince Edward Island	$ 19,977
Alberta	$ 19,454
British Columbia	$ 18,808
Australia	$ 24,857

The variation in spending on schools across the Canadian provinces in 2021. Only public expenditure in public schools is reported. The OECD doesn't provide the funding data for Newfoundland. The Australian figure is for financial year 2022/23.[36]

In addition to the different levels of resourcing for schools in each jurisdiction, it is important to be conscious of the socio-economic diversity across Canada. Figure 5 indicates that Canada's overall score on the OECD's Economic, social, and cultural status (ESCS) index is 3.8, the same as Australia's. But just like Australian states and territories, there is also a significant variation in the socio-economic profiles of the various Canadian provinces, with greater average prosperity found in British Columbia and Ontario compared to relatively disadvantaged provinces like Manitoba and Saskatchewan.

> “The lesson from Canada is that successful school systems have a strong focus on the common good.”

FIGURE 5: STUDENT SOCIO-ECONOMIC STATUS ACROSS CANADIAN PROVINCES



The variation in the socio-economic profile of students between Canadian provinces.[37]

While acknowledging the social and economic differences across the provinces, the diversity of provincial education systems represents a bonus for Australian observers. It allows us to see how a range of different educational structures, policies and settings have played out in a series of jurisdictions that are broadly like our own. This report does not seek to provide an exhaustive overview of all this diversity. Instead, it focuses on three provinces that are of particular relevance to Australia. **Ontario, British Columbia and Quebec** offer Australians a glimpse of both where we are now, and what, if we put our minds to it, we could become.

The lesson from Canada is that successful school systems have a strong focus on the common good, on creating inclusive and diverse schools which cultivate respect and understanding across social divides, and which foster shared mutual commitment amongst all members of society.

Canada teaches us that it is possible to forge a common framework which promotes cohesion, equity and achievement, but it also shows that such a framework is best supported by a foundational respect for difference and diversity, ensuring that all sections of society feel they are truly part of a shared endeavour.

THE MINIMAL ROLE OF THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT IN CANADIAN EDUCATION

Under the Canadian constitution provincial governments have exclusive responsibility for all levels of education. Canada doesn't have a federal department or national system of education.

The most significant caveat concerns federal responsibility for Indigenous affairs, including education on reserves.[38] Schools on First Nation reserves are largely funded by the federal government, through the department of Indigenous Services Canada (ISC), and are typically operated by local First Nations.

There are over 500 First Nations-operated schools across Canada, educating over 120,000 First Nations students living on reserve. First Nations schools are outside of the jurisdiction of provincial governments, which often class them as independent schools.

500 First Nations-operated schools across Canada which are educating

120,000 First Nations living on reserves.

124 First Nations schools are classified as independent schools in Ontario.

For statistical purposes the Government of Ontario classifies 124 First Nations schools as independent schools. Around two thirds of all First Nations school students in Canada attend First Nations operated schools, mostly or wholly funded by the Government of Canada, while approximately one third are enrolled in a provincial school system.[39]

The federal government can be involved in a less visible way through a range of special-purpose subsidies, generally to independent schools. Borwein et al (2023) document how the Government of Canada provides funding to support French immersion programs, and recognises many independent schools as charities, allowing parents to write off tuition fees as tax deductible donations.[40]

While this is an important phenomenon, in Australian terms the financial support provided by the Government of Canada is minor.

Although the federal government has a minimal role there are still two levels of government directly involved in Canadian schools: provincial governments and locally elected district school boards (see p. 33).

LESSONS FROM ONTARIO

"Ontario offers a real-world example of a common framework of publicly funded schools that are resourced according to need and regulated on a consistent basis but are diverse in their character, curriculum, ethos and governance."

ONTARIO AT A GLANCE

- Ontario introduced and fully implemented a **needs-based funding system** over 25 years ago.
- **Faith-based schools are fully publicly funded** and are not permitted to charge fees or exclude students on the basis of prior achievement or engagement.
- **Schools that charge fees receive no public funding** and enrol 7 percent of students.
- Ontario has **lower socio-economic segregation** and **higher equity and achievement** than Australia.
- Ontario spends slightly less than Australia on education as a proportion of GDP.

TOTAL POPULATION

16.1 million[41]

STUDENT POPULATION

2.1 million

SPENDING PER STUDENT

AUD $20,215

PUBLIC SCHOOL ENROLMENT SHARE

92%

FEES IN PUBLICLY FUNDED SCHOOLS

No

FUNDING OF PRIVATE (FEE-CHARGING) SCHOOLS

No

OECD INDEX OF ECONOMIC, SOCIAL AND CULTURAL STATUS (ESCS)

4.1 (Australia = 3.9)

Faith based public schools educate almost a third of the province's **2.1 million** school children.

ONTARIO – 25 YEARS OF NEEDS-BASED FUNDING

Australia has been trying to implement a fair school funding system since the 1970s and has thus far failed. Ontario's needs-based funding system has been in place for over a quarter of a century.

In Ontario, needs-based funding is sector blind, meaning that schools serving similar students in comparable contexts receive the same total resourcing per student regardless of the sector they belong to.

In Australia, some schools enjoy significant advantages in total income per student over other comparable schools, because of the combination of public funding and private admission fees. Bi-partisan government policy ensures that even the wealthiest schools which charge fees two or three times the schooling resource standard continue to receive significant taxpayer funding.

In Ontario schools that charge fees receive no public funding.

In Australia, regulations around enrolment practices, public reporting and accountabilities differ across the school sectors.

In Ontario, there is a level playing field in which all publicly funded schools are regulated on a common basis and face the same public obligations.

Because Ontario's schools operate on a level playing field in terms of resourcing and regulation, there is much less social segregation than in Australia, and Ontarian schools are less likely to be characterised by acute concentrations of social disadvantage.

In Ontario 92 percent of students attend public schools. In Australia less than 64 percent do.

Ontario is a high achiever in international standardised tests and has consistently out performed Australia in all domains of the PISA tests.

Public debate in Australia is often characterised by entrenched animosity between the school sectors. In Ontario, faith-based school communities, including parents, educators and peak bodies, actively defend and promote existing arrangements because they guarantee the opportunity of a faith-based education for those who seek it.

In Australia, policy settings pit schools in zero-sum competition for resources and students. In Ontario diverse systems have significant autonomy but operate on a consistent basis that promotes the common good.

Ontario offers a real-world example of a common framework of publicly funded schools that are resourced according to need and regulated on a consistent basis but are diverse in their character, curriculum, ethos and governance.

Thus, Ontario offers a powerful example of how, in practice, it is possible to accommodate and support a diverse range of views about the character of education in a manner that promotes equity, achievement and socio-economic diversity across all schools.

How does Ontario do it? What better place to start than in a school.

CASE STUDY:
Notre Dame High – A faith-based public school

Notre Dame High School is only ten minutes' drive west from the Canadian National Parliament in Ottawa, but it could easily be mistaken for any culturally diverse public school in Western Sydney or Melbourne. From the outside, the visitor is greeted by a plain brick two-storey building, accompanied by a nondescript oval. Inside, students clad in white polo shirts, navy cargo pants and tartan skirts bestride lino-floored hallways lined with battered metal lockers, as teachers shepherd them to their next class.[42]

Notre Dame *is* a public school which is fully publicly funded. It is a genuinely comprehensive school, "a place for everyone" in the words of the school motto.

Notre Dame does not charge any admission fees, nor is it permitted to.

Reflecting the modest circumstances of much of the parent community, the annual voluntary contribution is levied at just CAD $30.

There are no academic entrance tests or interviews: students living within the catchment area have a right to attend the school.

The school's attendance boundaries take in some of Ottawa's most disadvantaged neighbourhoods, and the school community reflects this, with almost twice as many students from low income households as the Ontario average, and nearly triple the number of children with parents who did not complete high school.[43]

The Government of Ontario's Urban and Priority High School's Initiative supports students with significant numeracy and literacy challenges, or experiencing poverty, facing suspension or expulsion, or conflict with the law: almost three quarters of Notre Dame's Grade 9 – 12 students qualify for support from this program.

In many respects, Notre Dame is like Australian public schools. But there is a difference.

Notre Dame is a public school that is also a Catholic school. Religion forms an integral part of the school's curriculum; school life is shaped by Catholic services and rituals; and it is governed by the Ottawa Catholic School Board, led by trustees who are elected by Catholic ratepayers in metropolitan Ottawa, and who must themselves be Catholic.

The day begins with a prayer over the loudspeaker, students attend mass, and the school has a focus on faith formation. All students participate in religious studies as part of the curriculum but, according to principal Jean-Paul Cloutier, "every lesson is a religion lesson".

In other words, Notre Dame is as Catholic in character as any Catholic school in Australia.

Cloutier exudes a no-nonsense commitment to meeting the needs of every student in his care. From practices as simple as greeting students at the classroom door to home visits and community-wide attendance campaigns, Cloutier and his team have implemented a range of initiatives to create a genuinely inclusive community.

The school recently partnered with the YMCA to deliver an 'alternative suspension' program which aims to prevent suspensions causing further disengagement, instead turning them into opportunities for personal growth and reconnection with education. Cloutier reels off significant signs of success including reduced absenteeism and improved levels of course completion.

The testimony of one parent of three Notre Dame graduates is equally demonstrative. "It is considerably smaller than other schools in the area. It has a reputation as a rough school however in my observation, it has a strong sense of community and purpose." And perhaps most tellingly: "My kids definitely wanted to stay at Notre Dame."

Notre Dame High School principal Jean-Paul Cloutier with students. Photo by Charlie Senack. https://kitchissippi.com/2024/01/25/five-things-you-should-know-about-jp-cloutier-notre-dame-high-schools-principal/

What Cloutier and his team are doing is clearly admirable. They are providing rich opportunities for some of the most disadvantaged students in Ottawa.

But their efforts would not be possible without the structural conditions that support them. If Notre Dame was not fully publicly funded, if it had to charge fees, or if it was allowed to charge fees, it would not be accessible to many of the students it currently serves.

Notre Dame High School is not an isolated example. It is:

1 of 2,000

similar faith-based public schools in Ontario, educating **almost a third** of the province's

2.1 million

school children.

1,500 → 575,000

There are around **1500** English-language Catholic public schools in Ontario, like Notre Dame, serving approximately **575,000** students.

300 → 76,000

A further **300** French-language Catholic public schools in the province enrol around **76,000** students.

Every one of these faith-based schools is fully publicly funded and fee-free.

It is this feature of Ontario's system which is most eye-opening and revealing for Australian visitors. Walking through the hallways and classrooms of a free, fully publicly funded, inclusive and highly disadvantaged Catholic school like Notre Dame, it is strikingly apparent that Australia's policy settings are not inevitable. They are the product of a long series of decisions made in the past, choices that we continue to make and could choose not to.

Because faith-based schools in Ontario are publicly funded on the same needs-basis as secular schools, and face the same enrolment regulations, they are equally accessible to families of all income levels.

The consequence is that, compared to Australia's highly stratified system, schools in Ontario are much more likely to include a mix of students from diverse socio-economic circumstances – and, overall, Ontario performs much better in terms of equity and achievement.

How does Ontario succeed in facilitating choice amongst diverse schooling options, meeting the needs of the varied communities who make up the province? And how does it do this in a way that ensures fair treatment of all schools, preventing choice from producing social stratification?

The first part of the answer can be found in the way the province resources schools.

MICHAEL SCIFFER – FOCUSING ON WHAT REALLY MATTERS

Michael Sciffer is a school counsellor and PhD candidate researching the drivers and outcomes of the segregation of low SES and Indigenous students. Sciffer noticed that the policy settings in Ontario mean school leaders and teachers approach their roles in a different way to their Australian colleagues.

"Australian public, independent, and Catholic schools compete like businesses for high status customers in an attempt to raise institutional reputation and enrolment share. Advertising HSC results, scholarships for high achieving students, curricula and extra-curricula offerings, and an infrastructure arms race are all marketing tools Australian schools use to purchase the cultural capital of elite and middle-class families. Yet at the same time, the performance of high achieving students has been declining in international assessments.

Schools in Ontario operate very differently. Each public sector has the same financial resources and seem confident in their enrolment shares. This allows principals and schools to focus on what really matters, the learning and wellbeing of all students within their schools. I think this is a big part of why the academic performance of Ontario's schooling system is well ahead of Australia's on both excellence and equity."

NEEDS-BASED FUNDING IN ACTION

Up until the late 1990s Ontario's schools were funded through local property taxes. Historically, school districts had the power to determine the level of the local tax that was their main source of revenue. The inevitable consequence was that schools in wealthy areas were better resourced than others, particularly compared to those in the poorer rural, northern parts of the province.

By 1997 a new consensus had emerged that these arrangements were ineffective and counterproductive, and so the Government of Ontario assumed direct responsibility for funding the province's schools. It introduced a new common Core Education Funding formula for the 1998-99 school year and continues to distribute funds to District School Boards on this basis.

The common formula consists of a per capita baseline amount in addition to loadings to meet the educational needs of students facing specific forms of disadvantage: low household income; low parental education; lone parent status, recent immigration, and for students who are, or at risk of being, suspended or expelled.

The formula includes resourcing for specialised programs, services and equipment to support students with disabilities. It also provides additional funding to support the academic success and well-being of Indigenous students, and to build Indigenous knowledge of all students and educators, including the teaching of Indigenous languages.

Additionally, the core funding formula accounts for the greater costs associated with rural settings and low population densities, with additional funding for District School Boards with small student populations and highly geographically dispersed student populations. In recognition of the effect that population fluctuations can have on school communities, the Declining Enrolment Adjustment Allocation softens the impact, mitigating against cycles of residualisation.[44]

Approximately two thirds of the funding delivered through the Core Education Funding formula is allocated on a per capita basis, and one third is made up of the various needs-based funding loadings. In 2024-25

$32.35 billion

of recurrent funding was delivered through the Core Education Funding mechanism. This includes a School Facilities Fund that finances recurrent costs like Building Services Officers, heating and cooling, electricity, and repairs and minor renovations.

Additionally,

$17.8 billion

is set aside for a Building, Expanding, and Renewing Schools fund which provides for all capital expenditure, including construction, purchase, additions, major renovations and debt servicing.

The operation of the core funding formula can be illustrated using the municipality of Halton as an example. Halton is located on the western shore of Lake Ontario and is one of the most expensive and affluent parts of the Greater Toronto Area.

Over 2024/25:

$14,273

per student was received by the Halton District School Board.

$40,678

per student (three times as much) was received by CSD Catholique des Aurores Boréales, a French-language Catholic School District which covers a vast stretch of territory in the northwestern part of the province.[45]

This is needs-based funding in action.

For Australians, needs-based funding has begun to feel like a mirage. It was first proposed in the Karmel report, commissioned by the Whitlam Government in 1973. It received a shot in the arm with the Gonski report in 2011 and the ensuing public campaigns. However successive governments have repeatedly delayed implementing the policy they are ostensibly committed to – typically, until a point after the nearest election or budget forecast. The pathway to full funding now extends well into the next decade.

Arriving in Ontario, the apparently impossible suddenly all seems so simple. What remains for Australians an aspiration is an accomplished fact – no longer a distant and impossible vision but just the way things are.

Moreover, what Ontario reveals is that even the goal we are nominally pursuing in Australia is not really a needs-based funding system, but a hybrid model which seeks to reconcile the contradictory principles of educational need and user-pays.

The result is less a compromise than what has been characterised by commentator, Dean Ashenden, as “a funding system at war with itself” in which fee-charging schools enjoy significant taxpayer-fuelled advantages in total income per student compared to equivalent public schools.[46]

NEEDS-BASED FUNDING APPLIES EQUALLY TO SECULAR AND FAITH-BASED SCHOOLS

Ontario has a funding system designed exclusively around the principle of educational need in which needs-based funding is applied equally and consistently across both secular and faith-based schools, and no publicly funded schools are permitted to (or required to) charge fees.

A fully publicly funded education is provided in the same manner to families with children enrolled in French-language and Catholic schools as it is to English-language secular schools.

For example, in 2024/25 the Ontario Ministry of Education provided:

$15,173 per student

to the Ottawa Catholic School Board and

$15,288 per student

to the secular Ottawa-Carleton School Board.

The minor difference between the boards reflects the slight difference in the socio-economic profile of the students they enrol. But the Ottawa Catholic Board is fully publicly funded. This is the case for every Catholic school board in Ontario, whether English or French-language, incorporating almost two thousand schools.

In the words of the Ontario Ministry of Education, the Core education funding formula "operates in a fair and non-discriminatory manner between the public and Catholic school boards in both the English-language and French-language systems."

Consequently, within the publicly funded system which serves over 90 percent of students, all schools are equally resourced to meet the educational needs of their students. This is critical to the effective functioning of the common framework in operation in Ontario. It means that even prior to rules around student enrolment and other elements of the common regulatory environment, such competition for students as exists occurs between equally resourced schools.

This is in stark contrast to Australia where enrolment competition centres on some schools deploying their taxpayer-fuelled resource advantage to attract families away from other less fortunate schools.

This phenomenon does not exist within the publicly funded system in Ontario because each school has the same resourcing as other schools serving comparable student communities.

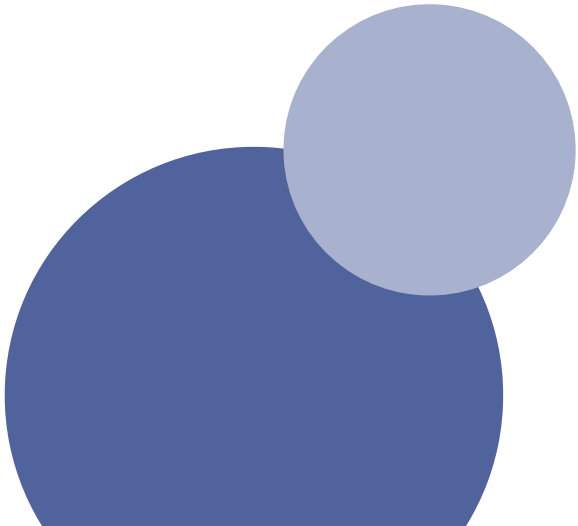
FULL PUBLIC FUNDING REMOVES FEE BARRIERS

Publicly funded schools in Ontario, whether secular or faith-based, are **not** permitted to charge fees. Schools can request contributions for a prescribed range of 'supplemental activities' such as international programs but cannot charge for anything that is related to the curriculum, including field trips. Schools are prohibited from excluding students from an activity if they are unable to pay. The influence of admission fees as a form of enrolment discrimination is entirely absent.

In the non-government sectors in Australia, a measure of parental financial capacity is employed to estimate the ability of different parent communities to pay directly for their children's education. On this basis, the proportion of the schooling resource standard that governments deliver to those schools is determined, ranging from 20 percent for very wealthy parent communities to 90 percent for the lowest income non-government school communities.

In Ontario, a no 'capacity to contribute' test is applied to families with children enrolled in the Catholic and French-language school systems, and there is no requirement for those parent communities to pay for school education out of their own pocket.

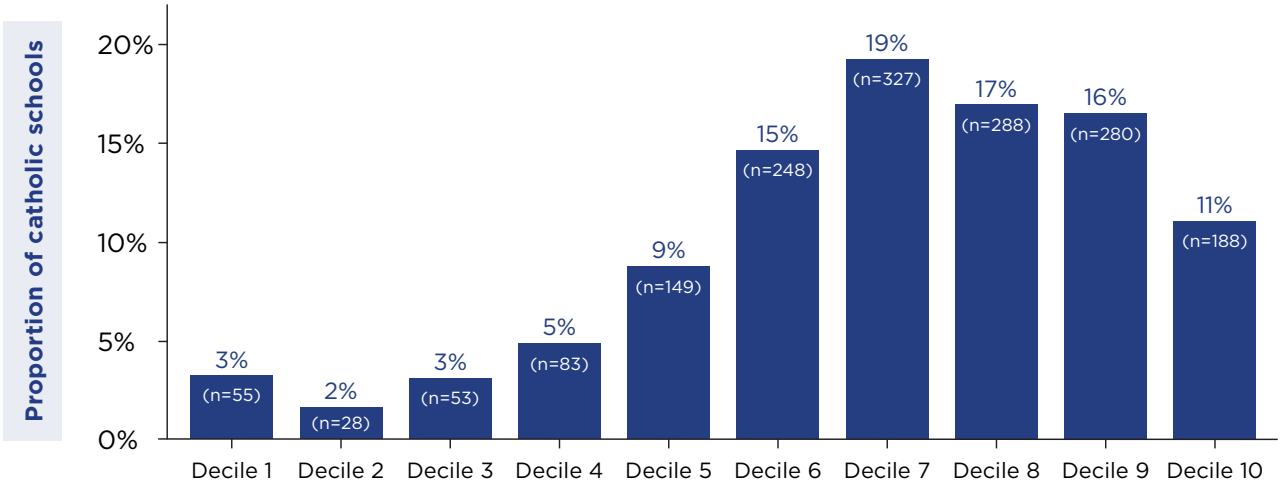
The question for Australians is whether defining the entitlement to a fully publicly funded education in the way we have is fair or helpful?



The consequence of not fully publicly funding religious schools – as per Australia's 'capacity to contribute' model – is that they are required to charge fees. The consequence of charging fees is that those schools become less accessible for low-income families. The result of these arrangements is that school choice leads to a high degree of social stratification. As a result, religious schools also become de facto middle-class schools that exclude the poor.

This is particularly apparent in Australian Catholic schools where historically the (Irish) Catholic population comprised one of the poorer and most disadvantaged sections of the community. Once Catholic schools reflected this reality. Today their schools systematically exclude the poor, and most poor Catholics are educated in secular public schools.[47]

FIGURE 6: DISTRIBUTION OF CATHOLIC SCHOOLS IN AUSTRALIA BY SOCIO-ECONOMIC DECILE IN 2022.

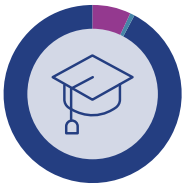


Decile 1 is the most disadvantaged decile. Only 13 percent of Catholic school students are in schools in the bottom four deciles of all Australian schools in terms of socio-economic status. Source: Nous Consulting analysis of ACARA school profiles data.

The contrast with Canadian Catholic schools is revealing. In a context where full public funding is extended to Catholic schools and a 'capacity to contribute' test is not imposed; Catholic schools take all-comers and are representative of the broader population in socio-economic terms. Notre Dame High School is a perfect illustration of this different reality. In creating a common framework which provides full public funding to both secular and faith-based schools, Ontario has removed the fee barriers that are prohibitive for low-income families.

The question for Australia is why we are so committed to existing policy settings that we are prepared to live with the high degree of social segregation they entail, and forgo the greater socio-economic diversity that is exhibited in Ontario's school system?

FEE-CHARGING PRIVATE SCHOOLS RECEIVE NO PUBLIC FUNDING



- Public schools
- Private schools
- Home schooling

Approximately **92 percent** of Ontario's elementary and secondary school students attend public schools; while **7 percent** are enrolled in private schools; and **one percent** of students are home-schooled.

Unlike in Australia, the Government of Ontario does not provide public funding which, in conjunction with fees and other private income, gives Australian private schools a resource advantage over other comparable schools.

In Ontario private schools do not receive any government funding. Apart from inspecting schools that offer a secondary diploma, the Government of Ontario does not regulate, license or otherwise oversee the operation of private schools.

Upper Canada College (UCC), founded in 1829 before the Dominion of Canada was created, is one of Ontario's most exclusive and elite all-boys independent schools. The annual fees for Year 11 and 12 students are $49,000 – and that's after applicants pay a one-time 'registration fee' of $11,120.

The school's admission guide emphasises that "Upper Canada College seeks to admit well-rounded students who stand out from the crowd in a variety of ways – through academic performance, involvement in co-curricular activities, and demonstrated social skills."

Upper Canada College has its Australian counterparts of course, but there is one central difference. Upper Canada College, like all private schools in Ontario, receives no public funding.

Upper Canada College is one of Ontario's most exclusive private schools. It receives no public funding.

It's possible to make several observations about these arrangements.

→ **Firstly,** Upper Canada College continues to be financially viable despite the absence of public subsidies. For those who place a premium on saving taxpayer dollars, Ontario clearly beats Australia in this respect.

→ **Secondly,** the absence of any taxpayer support is demonstrative of the fact that educational need is the single coherent principle which underlies the way the Government of Ontario allocates resources to schools. UCC's fees are three to four times what their needs-based funding entitlement would deliver.

→ **Thirdly,** while a small sector of private schools prosper in Ontario, government policy does not act to compound their resource advantage, and competitive advantage, as it does in Australia.

This is a critical consideration in our understanding of why Ontario's private school sector is around a fifth of the size of Australia's. Whereas in Australia over the last half century there has been a close correlation between increased taxpayer support for private schools and their growing enrolment share, in Ontario such subsidies have been entirely absent.[48]

A CLEAR, COHERENT AND COMPREHENSIBLE FUNDING SYSTEM

For all its complexity, Ontario's core funding formula has just one underlying principle: educational need.

By contrast, Australia continues to attempt to create something that exists nowhere else in the world: to both fund some schools according to need and subsidise others on a means-tested basis, permitting those schools to also charge fees, and requiring some parent communities (but not all) to make a private contribution to their child's education.

It could be that the relative simplicity of Ontario's arrangements at least partly explains why they have been actually implemented in practice – and, critically, have widespread public support.

Nevertheless, Ontario's needs-based funding system is far from perfect. School system leaders readily point to a series of features of the Ministry of Education's funding formula which they regard as inadequate.

For example, staff absenteeism has significantly increased since the pandemic. The funding for relief teachers has not kept pace. The allocation of additional funding for students with disabilities is based on general population averages rather than the actual profile of students enrolled by a school system. School boards are currently facing increasing costs across the economy, such as higher salary demands from school bus drivers, but the formula has not adapted appropriately. These and other components of the funding formula are subject to ongoing scrutiny and debate.

Beyond complaints about these specific elements, two more significant weaknesses are apparent. As in Australia, block funding is provided by the Government of Ontario to each district board. The government's funding allocation reflects the needs of the students in each system, but boards have discretion to allocate funding to schools as they see fit. Theoretically at least, the funding received by individual schools may not reflect the educational needs of their students. However, typically it does. Boards use additional funds to provide extra teachers to schools in low socio-economic neighbourhoods and deliver reading or math interventions where schools have underperformed on standardised provincial testing.

Because the governance of school systems includes elected trustees who represent a local ward containing a relatively small number of schools, there is a significant degree of democratic oversight. This helps to ensure that school systems are accountable to all schools in their district, and do not unfairly favour some schools at the expense of others.

A further structural weakness of the core funding formula arises from the data which is fed into it. According to the Technical Guide for School Boards, 2024-25, "The number of students facing barriers is estimated by mapping student postal codes to census data," (p.70).[49] Given significant variations in socio-economic circumstances within postcodes, as well as the time lag from census data captured once every five years, there is a serious possibility that this data does not accurately reflect the character of actual school populations.

In this respect, Ontario could learn from various innovations in Australia which have made our funding system less reliant on averages of census districts and more informed by individual student-level data.

While Ontario's needs-based funding system is not perfect, the difference with Australia is that it exists. Central to the Ontarian settlement is a recognition that different religious and linguistic groups have diverse preferences about the character of their children's education, along with an accompanying commitment to accommodate these preferences within the public system.

ANDY MISON – A COMMON FRAMEWORK CAN ADVANCE THE 'FAIR GO'

Andy Mison is the President of the Australian Secondary Principals' Association, a director on the board of the Australian Institute of Teaching and School Leadership and has served as a teacher and principal in three jurisdictions. Visiting Canada convinced him of the urgency of establishing a common and fair regulatory and funding framework for all Australian schools.

"While the Ontario system is not perfect, the key difference in my mind is that the funding and regulatory conditions imposed by the provincial government and the education system are more efficient at mitigating choice and equity problems than ours. For Australians, Ontario challenges long-held assumptions and opens our eyes to different ways of structuring and funding schools.

The emphasis on equity, the commitment to the common good, and the shared belief in fully funded public education for every student are lessons that remind us of the 'Fair Go' and to put our kids first when designing education policy. We carry this reminder back to Australia."

FOUR SCHOOL SECTORS, SEVENTY-TWO DIVERSE SYSTEMS, ONE COMMON FRAMEWORK

At the heart of school education in Ontario is a delicate balance of power, responsibility and accountability between the Government of Ontario and local self-governing school systems.

The Ministry of Education provides a common framework of resourcing and regulation which applies equally to all schools. The local school systems, operating within this framework, determine their own character, ethos, and curriculum in response to the needs and preferences of their local communities.

It is clearly possible to create a set of governance arrangements in which distinctive sectors and systems operate on the basis of common resourcing and regulation, and in which the diverse character, curriculum, and ethos of schools is promoted and preserved. It also shows that pluralism and diversity, when thoughtfully and carefully fostered, need not undermine the common good, but can help advance it.

Ontario's schooling framework is a distinctive response to a unique cultural and historical context. Some elements of this response may not be either viable or attractive or translatable to Australia.

But the existence of a flourishing system of faith-based public schools, exemplified by the likes of Notre Dame High School, fundamentally challenges the basic premises on which Australia's school system is designed, in which it is taken for granted that public schools must be secular, and faith-based schools must charge fees.

The case of Ontario clearly offers much that Australians can learn from and provides an opportunity to revisit some of our basic assumptions and ask how well they are serving us.

DISTRICT SCHOOL BOARDS IN ONTARIO – SELF-GOVERNING SCHOOL SYSTEMS OPERATING UNDER A COMMON FRAMEWORK

While the Government of Ontario is responsible for determining the overarching legislative and financial framework for Ontario's school system, made up of:

4,000 **elementary schools** and almost

1,000 **secondary schools**, operational responsibility for the province's schools is delegated to

72 self-governing school systems called **District School Boards**.

Boards are distinct legal entities governed by locally elected trustees and are responsible for operating a network of schools in a municipal or regional area. Boards hire teachers and other staff; determine the number, size and location of schools; build, equip and furnish schools; determine and publish enrolment zones; supervise the operation of education programs and determine curriculum within guidelines provided by the Ministry of Education.

For example, Notre Dame High School in Ottawa is fully publicly funded; admission and attendance is free for all students; and it is regulated by the Government of Ontario on the same basis as neighbouring schools. But Notre Dame is not part of one public system, and nor is it integrated into a public system. It is part of a distinctive school system, the Ottawa Catholic School Board. Notre Dame's principal, Jean-Paul Cloutier, and his staff are employed by the Ottawa Catholic School Board, not by the Government of Ontario.

Recognising the power of district school boards as self-governing school systems is essential to understanding how schools across Ontario, like Notre Dame High, can be both public and faith-based at the same time.

District school boards vary greatly in the number of schools they operate, their student populations, budgets and geographical size.

- → The most populous board in the province, the Toronto District School Board, operates 600 schools serving nearly a quarter of a million students. In student numbers, if not area, it is a similar size to the Western Australian public education system.
- → The Ottawa Catholic District School Board, which operates Notre Dame High School, is considerably smaller. With 89 schools, and around 50,000 students and 5000 staff, it is a similar scale to the A.C.T. public school system.

In rural Ontario, boards are often much smaller again. Grand Erie District School Board in western Ontario is about one tenth the population of Toronto, educating a total of 28,000 students.

District School Boards are governed by trustees, elected every four years as part of municipal elections. Boards generally comprise of around a dozen trustees who each represent a local ward and have specific responsibility for the schools in that neighbourhood, as well as providing direction for the system as a whole. Trustees receive an honorarium for their work, which varies from board to board but is generally in the vicinity of $27,000 per year. Additionally, many boards also have student trustees who are elected by their peers on an annual basis and contribute a student perspective to the board's decision-making.

Ontario's boards run school systems. In regular meetings, held in open session, trustees make budget decisions, set policies at a local level, and attempt to resolve issues raised by local school communities, while concerned parents and citizens watch from the public galleries or view proceedings via livestream. As well as providing a forum for local participation in decision-making about neighbourhood schools, elected trustees, with a mandate from their community, can be a powerful voice demanding that the Government of Ontario delivers for their district.

THE FOUR SCHOOL SECTORS IN ONTARIO

Each of Ontario's seventy-two district school boards belong to one of four sectors serving distinctive religious and linguistic communities: English-language secular; English-language Catholic; French-language secular; or French-language Catholic. The four sectors reflect the creation of the Dominion of Canada in the nineteenth century through the union of Quebec with its French-speaking Catholic majority, and Ontario with its English-speaking Protestant majority. The Canadian constitution guaranteed that the religious and linguistic minorities in each province would continue to be able to access free education.

Today in Ontario:

1.3 million young people attend schools in one of the

31 English-language secular boards.

29 English-language Catholic boards collectively enrol around half a million students.

Additionally, there are:

8 French-language Catholic boards and

4 French-language secular boards serving Ontario's much smaller Francophone population.

Local residents are eligible to vote for the local English-language secular public school board. However, to be eligible to vote for the local Catholic school board, a local resident must be a Catholic and indicate this is the board they want to support when they complete their taxes.

Non-Catholic parents cannot vote for Catholic school board trustees – even in cases where they have a child attending a Catholic school.

Participants in French-language school board elections must meet the criteria for "French-language rights holder" set out in the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms.

Anybody qualified to vote in a school board election is also eligible to run for election as a school board trustee.[50]

A CATHOLIC SCHOOL BOARD IN ACTION

One of the most consequential decisions that trustees make is the appointment of an education director to lead the school system on a day-to-day basis.

The Director of the Ottawa Catholic School Board (OSCB) is Tom D'Amico, an engaging and innovative educational leader. D'Amico is responsible for managing the board's budget of approximately $800 million and overseeing the hiring and management of its 5000 employees – the teachers, principals, superintendents and other administrators that staff and serve the board's schools.

In addition to dealing with ongoing challenges associated with increasing costs, staff shortages, students with increasingly complex needs, and increasing violence in schools, AI is currently top of mind for D'Amico, as it is for so many educators around the world. It's a topic about which D'Amico is obviously energised. While acknowledging that plagiarism is a serious issue, he also says it can be overstated; D'Amico is more focused on preparing students for a future in which AI is pervasive, and thinking through how AI can be used to streamline his staff's work, minimising time spent on repetitive generic tasks.

The OCSB 80/20 Rule positions AI as a capable assistant to educators. The general guideline to staff in using AI to generate things like basic lesson plans and formative tests "is that up to 80 percent of the verified output from AI can be used and the [teacher] supplements the work with at least 20 percent of their own thinking."

D'Amico has also taken a particular interest in homeschooling, which he believes is likely to become more common, driven by factors including mental health issues and racism, as well as participation in elite sport. He has championed the OCSB Home Personalized Learning Program for students who want to partially or wholly withdraw from the school system, allowing students to remain enrolled at school to participate even in a very limited way, perhaps for one subject only, or to participate in school but not sit tests.

For these and other decisions about the board's strategic direction, D'Amico is accountable to the Ottawa Catholic School Board of Trustees, the body who hires him – not the Ontario Ministry of Education. While the system is fully publicly funded and part of a common regulatory environment, it is autonomous in the same manner as any state-based Catholic system in Australia.

This self-governing structure also ensures the distinctive religious ethos of the system. The faith character of the board's schools is most obviously apparent in its religious studies curriculum. That curriculum is not designed, reviewed or approved by the Ontario Ministry of Education. It is produced by the Institute for Catholic Education on behalf of the Assembly of Catholic Bishops of Ontario, and implemented by the Ottawa Catholic School Board.[51] Accordingly, the curriculum, which also includes a 'family life' course, reflects Catholic doctrine.

As well as stand-alone subjects, a focus on faith formation pervades the curriculum and culture. In practice this means, for example, that digital literacy is taught through a unit called 'Samaritans on the digital way' in which the ethics of responsible use of digital technologies is taught through reference to Jesus' parable of the Good Samaritan.

Staff hiring policy is another important way in which the faith character of the system is promoted. To work in any Catholic school board in Ontario, teachers and school leaders must themselves be Catholic. This is verified by both a baptismal certificate and a letter from a local priest confirming an applicant belongs to the local church community.

A question that has caused controversy in many Catholic school boards in recent years is whether to fly the Pride flag during Pride month. In 2021 eight Catholic school boards, including OCSB, voted to fly the Pride flag outside the board's offices and/or schools for part or whole of the month. When Toronto Catholic District School Board (TCDSB) voted for the Pride flag to be raised, director Brendan Browne said, "If this is something that makes even one student feel safe and feel included, this is something we're committed to doing."[52]

This disposition is not shared by many of Browne and D'Amico's colleagues. Most Catholic Boards across Ontario have elected not to adopt this practice, and some Catholic leaders have been outspoken in their opposition. "To say 'I want to live a life according to what the gay pride flag and movement promotes,' well, I'm sorry, that's not in line with our Catholic teaching," Archbishop Marcel Damphousse of Ottawa-Cornwall said in 2021.[53] Immediately to the north of the Toronto Catholic Board, the York Catholic School Board has rejected the flying of the Pride flag, with the most recent vote against the proposal occurring in May 2024.[54] In January 2025 the Dufferin-Peel Catholic School Board, which serves another part of the city, voted 10-1 against flying the flag.[55]

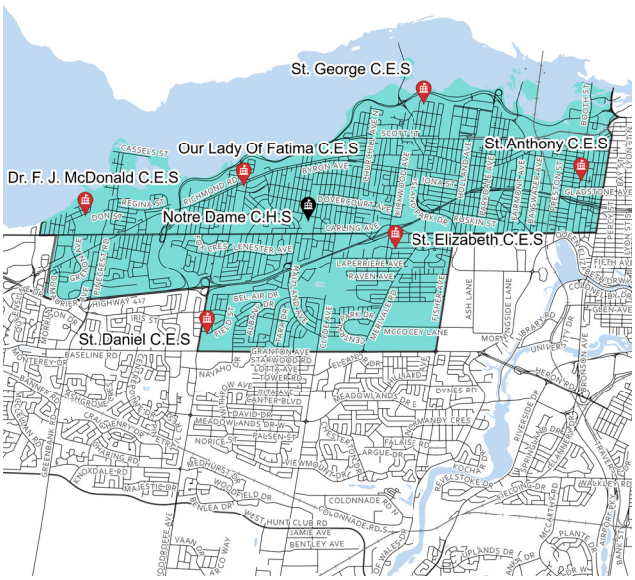
For all the controversy the issue has generated in the province, one thing is clear. These decisions are entirely the responsibility of the school boards concerned, and nobody suggests they have been influenced in any way by the provincial government. Irrespective of the rights and wrongs, it is the school boards who decide. Just as Catholic education offices in different states in Australia adopt different policies from time-to-time, so too have Catholic boards in Ontario adopted distinct postures on the Pride flag. In both jurisdictions, numerous autonomous school systems operate within each sector, but the existence of full public funding in Ontario does not constrain the actions or decisions of Catholic school boards on matters like these.

THE RIGHT TO ATTEND A LOCAL SCHOOL

Ontarian citizens are considered to have a right to attend their local school in the board that their family supports, including transportation to and from that school. Schools in the French-language boards, secular or Catholic, are only available to Ontarians for whom French is their first language. Generally, to attend an elementary Catholic school (Years K- 8) a child or one of the parents must be Catholic. Families can be required to provide a child's baptismal certificate upon enrolment. Some Catholic school boards also opt to accept students of any faith if there is additional space available.

Attendance boundaries are drawn up and published by the local district school boards, which also provide transport to and from school. Generally, if a student is accepted into a school outside their normal attendance boundary, transport is not provided. From time to time, boards rezone schools to manage enrolment pressures, or to reduce concentrations of students from low socio-economic backgrounds, or for other reasons. Parents visiting the Ottawa Catholic School Board website are provided the following information. "A student's designated school (or "home" school) is determined by their home address and grade level."[56] The map on this page, posted on the website, sets out the boundaries for Notre Dame High School along with its feeder elementary schools.

FIGURE 7: ATTENDANCE BOUNDARIES FOR NOTRE DAME HIGH SCHOOL AND ITS FEEDER ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS



Acceptable reasons listed for requesting a cross-boundary transfer in the Ottawa Catholic School Board include:

- "A medical professional recommends in writing that it is in the best interests of the student to attend a different school".
- "A student attended their elementary school on a cross-boundary transfer and wants to remain in that family of schools as they enter high school".
- "A student is in their final years of high school and moves outside their "home" school boundary and would like to stay at their school."

Unacceptable reasons include:

- "Extra-curricular activities are offered at one school but not another".
- "A student's group of friends is at another school".
- "Dissatisfaction with school policies, procedures or facilities such as: split classes, uniforms, portables, music or drama rooms, etc."

In Years 9 to 12, Catholic schools have the capacity to enrol non-Catholic students. This has only been the case since 1984 when the Government of Ontario extended full public funding to Catholic high schools and, when it did, it did not include the requirement that students must be Catholic. On its website, the Ottawa Catholic Schools Board states "Children of all religions are welcome to join the Ottawa Catholic School Board. Our approach to educating your child is inclusive... respecting all beliefs, in keeping with our Catholic social teachings."

This is a focus for criticism for some, with critics claiming that 6 percent of students in the Ottawa Catholic Board, and 8 percent across Catholic boards in Ontario, are non-Catholic.[57]

NEW SCHOOLS AND SCHOOL CLOSURES

Currently, Ottawa Catholic Board is facing significant enrolment pressure and is relying heavily on demountable classrooms to meet demand in some areas. In the short and medium term, attendance boundaries can be altered to respond to changing enrolment patterns, alleviating some of the pressure from excess demand. Over the longer term, boards decide the number, size and location of schools in their district, but to receive funding for these projects, they must successfully make a business case to the Ministry of Education.

Ottawa Catholic Board Director, Tom D'Amico, notes that this means that an inevitable part of his job involves lobbying the government to secure new funding, and the evidence suggests he can be persuasive. Ottawa Catholic Board opened four new elementary schools in 2024, and received $130 million to build a new high school, two more elementary schools and an elementary school addition.

While decisions about school closures are normally a matter for boards, there is currently a provincial moratorium on closing small schools put in place by the Government of Ontario, in response to the political sensitivities involved. This is something of a sore point for district school boards, which continue to bear the cost of running schools which may no longer be economically viable.

CAROLINE DAVID – A FAITH PERSPECTIVE

Caroline David is the Principal of Woonona High School, and Vice President of the NSW South Coast Secondary Principals' Council. She is a PhD candidate at the University of Sydney investigating how Australian education policy architecture is entrenching inequality. David reflects on the position of Catholic schools in Ontario compared to Australia.

As a person of faith, I often feel confronted by the insular, exclusive nature of faith-based schools in Australia. Their tendency to serve students whose families can part with sums of money large and small seems at odds with their faith's mission statement to be inclusive of all. Nor does enough thought appear to go into the implications for the schooling of those students who are not accepted – or subsequently excluded – from their schools. It would be wonderful if there was a time in Australia when faith based schools were committed to sharing the education of all young Australians, particularly those that are disadvantaged so that we could reflect the Ontario experience and have our faith leaders also report "We are so richly blessed" to have co-operation between the sectors – and a shared commitment to equity in words and deeds."

A FAILED ATTEMPT TO EXPAND FULL PUBLIC FUNDING TO ALL FAITH SCHOOLS

It may seem illogical that Ontario provides full public funding to Catholic school boards but not to schools of other faiths or Christian denominations. Indeed that's what John Tory, former leader of Ontario's opposition party, argued at the 2007 provincial election.[58] The historical explanation is that the law passed by the British parliament in 1867 to create the Dominion of Canada only protected existing schools that served either Protestant or Roman Catholic communities.[59] Tory presented his plan to provide full public funding to other faith schools, including Islamic, Jewish, Christian and Hindu schools, as a matter of basic fairness.[60] Noting that there were 53,000 students outside the public school system in Ontario at the time, Tory described his plan as "a huge investment in public education". Bringing those schools inside the publicly funded common framework would ensure that they were subject to the same standard of oversight and inspections as public schools, he contended.

Tory failed to convince his fellow Ontarians. The policy created internal division within the Progressive Conservative party, and is now widely viewed as a significant factor in his election loss.[61] While a section of the community was in favour, another took the opposite view, arguing that funding should be withdrawn from Catholic schools. Polling suggests that a slim majority supports the status quo, however illogical it may seem to privilege one faith over others.[62]

If an Ontario-style model were to be adopted in Australia, it would make sense for it to apply to all existing non-government schools regardless of faith or educational philosophy. Anything less would be unfair, and it would fail to produce a completely level playing field in which social stratification and segregation is eliminated while choice and diversity is supported.

THE GOVERNMENT OF ONTARIO PROVIDES A COMMON FRAMEWORK FOR SECULAR AND FAITH-BASED SCHOOLS

While district boards are autonomous systems able to determine and promote their own distinctive characters, they are all part of one common framework of resourcing and regulating overseen by the Government of Ontario.

At the centre of the common framework is the core funding formula which determines each school's overall funding using a common needs-based formula which applies equally across all schools.

The Ministry of Education administers and ensures compliance with the Education Act which defines a common regulatory environment for all publicly funded schools. It sets out directions and guidelines to school boards to promote the consistent application of enrolment policies and practices across the province. It establishes agreed maximum and average class sizes across the province, ranging between 20 to 30 students per teacher depending on the year level.

The Ministry of Education also negotiates the collective agreements which define the salaries and conditions of educators and other employees. Experienced teachers in Ontario earn around AUD $130,000 and principals earn approximately $175,000. The Ministry of Education is also responsible for developing curriculum and setting the requirements for student diplomas and certificates.

Ontario's school boards ultimately derive their powers, duties and authority from the Ontario Education Act. That sets out a series of provisions about how boards can operate such as financial guidelines that stipulate a maximum deficit of one percent and balanced budgets over the medium term. Based on the Act, the provincial government conducts enrolment and financial audits, as well as monitoring student achievement.

A statutory body, the Education Quality and Assessment Office (EQAO), conducts standardised literacy and numeracy assessments across Ontario in Years 3, 6, 9 and 10. The Ministry of Education publishes a My School-style website with individual school results from the EQAO assessments, measured against provincial averages, as well as graduation and course completion rates, and a range of key socio-economic indicators for both schools and the province as a whole. Boards are required to publicly report on achievement of learning outcomes in core academic skills; success in preparing students for the future; and student engagement and well-being.

A FULLY FUNDED COMMON FRAMEWORK IS AFFORDABLE

> "Australians find it hard to imagine that governments could fully fund primary and secondary education, without additional co-payments by some parents. But Ontario exemplifies that a common framework is fiscally viable. In fact, Ontario's expenditure on primary and secondary education is slightly lower than Australia's. According to the OECD, in Ontario spending on primary and secondary education in 2021 amounted to 3.8 percent of GDP, compared to 3.9 percent in Australia."[63]

Teacher salaries and class sizes in Ontario and Australia are not exactly the same, but they are comparable. Salaries in Ontario are defined by the collective agreement negotiated between the provincial government and the Ontario Teachers Federation and are consistent across the province. The salary scale has ten increments, according to years of experience.[64] As of September 2024, a beginning teacher with an undergraduate degree and Masters earned AUD $76,000 while the most experienced teachers earned AUD $130,000 (assuming an exchange rate of 90 Canadian cents for an Australian dollar).

New South Wales and the ACT have the best paid teachers in Australia. As of October 2023 the New South Wales salary scale ranged between AUD $85,000 for beginning teachers to $122,000 for the most experienced, and $130,000 for Highly Accomplished and Lead teachers.[65]

FIGURE 8: CLASSROOM TEACHER SALARY SCALE IN ONTARIO AND NEW SOUTH WALES

Years of experience	Ontario Teacher Salary ($ AUD)	New South Wales Teacher Salary	
Beginning	$ 76,018	$ 85,000	
10	$ 130, 139	$ 122,100 (Step 7)	$ 129,948 (Highly Accomplished/ Lead Teacher)

Assuming an exchange rate of 90 Canadian cents for an Australian dollar, teacher salaries in Ontario range between AUD $76,000 for beginning teachers and $130,000 for the most qualified teachers – similar to what Australian teachers earn.

Class sizes in Ontario are also legislated by the provincial government and are broadly similar to class sizes across Australian jurisdictions. All Kindergartens have a teacher and an early childhood educator for each class, and the maximum class size is capped at 29 students. For Grades 1 to 3 there is there is a hard cap of 20; however, the government allows for the maximum to increase to 23 for 10 percent of classes. In Grades 4 to 6: there is no maximum class size, but the system average must be 24.5 across all junior and intermediate classes; for Grades 9 to 12 the average class size must be 23. Class sizes and teacher salaries are the essential drivers of government recurrent expenditure on school education, and both class sizes and salaries are similar in Ontario and Australia. And yet the Government of Ontario is able to fully fund secular and faith-based schools without requiring parental co-payments from school communities. This challenges the unexamined assumption in Australia that governments simply could not afford to fund all schools in a common framework.

FIGURE 9: CLASS SIZES IN ONTARIO – LEGISLATED BOARD-WIDE AVERAGES AND MAXIMUMS

Year level	Average	Maximum
Kindergarten (one teacher and one Early Childhood Educator for each class)	26	29 (10 percent of classes in a board can go up to 32 in special circumstances)
Grades 1 – 3		20 (10 percent of classes in a board can go up to 23)
Grades 4 – 8	24.5	
Grades 9 – 12	23	

https://www.ontario.ca/page/financial-accountability-education-system

SELF-GOVERNING SYSTEMS OPERATING WITHIN A COMMON FRAMEWORK

From time-to-time commentators and politicians in Australia float the idea of the Commonwealth Government withdrawing from involvement in school education. Superficially the fact that schools are a purely provincial responsibility in Canada could be viewed as providing support for such a proposal. However, there's an obvious reason why this argument is a non-starter. There are two levels of government involved in education in Ontario – and throughout Canada: the provinces and the boards led by popularly elected trustees.

Some of the specific terms of the common framework in Ontario would be unlikely to be accepted in Australia, and nor would there necessarily be a strong policy rationale for adopting them. In Ontario, the collective agreements that define teachers' salaries and conditions are negotiated between teacher unions and the Government of Ontario. This means boards hire teachers on terms negotiated by the province. In Australia, continued control over matters like teacher salaries and class sizes and other elements of work organisation is likely non-negotiable for the Australian non-government sectors. Moreover, such decentralisation can allow for a healthy degree of diversity, innovation and experimentation in the organisation of the work of teaching and learning.

The significance of Ontario is that it shows that the existence of a common framework and full public funding of faith-based schools need not qualify or constrain the distinctive character of those schools.

Just as school boards are self-governing and fully publicly funded in Ontario, so too could Australia's non-government schools join a common framework without compromising their identities.

Just as the Government of Ontario ensures common funding and regulation of district boards across each of Ontario's school sectors, so too could Australian governments create a level playing field for all Australian schools.

A LEVEL PLAYING FIELD: LOW SEGREGATION, HIGH EQUITY AND HIGH ACHIEVEMENT

SECULAR AND FAITH-BASED SCHOOLS SUPPORT DISADVANTAGED STUDENTS EQUALLY

Ontario's common framework and needs-based funding system has eliminated the sectoral basis for social segregation that is such a defining feature of Australia's educational landscape. In socio-economic terms Catholic schools and secular schools in Ontario enrol essentially the same kinds of students. This was made starkly apparent to the Australian delegation when it visited the Ottawa Catholic School Board and the secular Ottawa-Carleton School Board in successive days. Directors of both systems, whose schools neighbour each other throughout the suburbs of the Canadian capital, each independently testified that there is no difference in the socio-economic profile of the students their boards serve.

Anna Katyn Chmielewski is Associate Professor at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, an expert in quantitative analysis of large-scale data and is currently conducting a multi-year investigation into school choice and social segregation in Ontario. Chmielewski says "Catholic schools have never played a big role in socio-economic segregation in Ontario. They accounted for one to two percent of segregation of low-income students in 2006-07, less than one percent now. The proportion of students from low-parent-education families is essentially identical in [secular] public and Catholic schools."

Chmielewski points out that despite the relatively small role of Catholic schools in socio-economic segregation in Ontario, Catholic schools do play a more substantial role in segregation of students with a language other than English.

This is a far cry from Australia in which even modest fees are prohibitive for low-income households, and the overwhelming majority of disadvantaged students attend public schools.

ONTARIO HAS LOW LEVELS OF SOCIAL SEGREGATION COMPARED TO AUSTRALIA

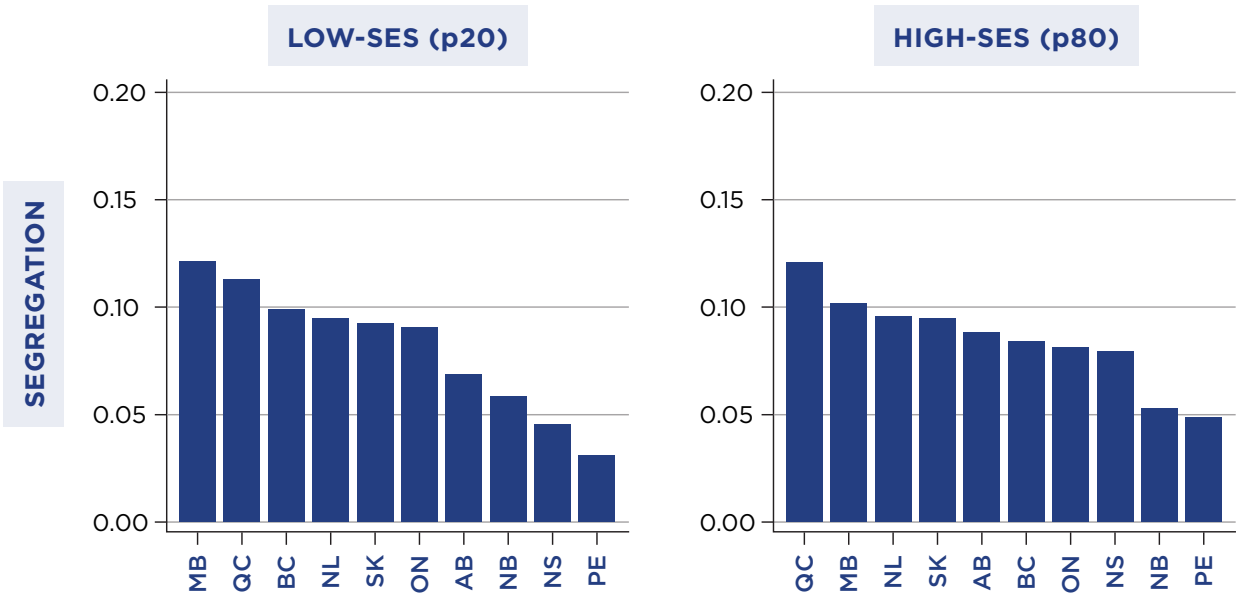
The consequence of establishing arrangements in which secular and faith-based schools bear equal responsibility for educating students across all ranges of educational (dis)advantage is that Ontario's schools exhibit greater socio-economic diversity than Australia's.

With her colleague Sachin Maharaj from the University of Ottawa, Anna Katyn Chmielewski has analysed the extent of segregation in each Canadian province, and examined how the Canadian provinces compare to countries like ours. Chmielewski & Maharaj found that Canadian schools as a whole, and Ontario in particular, exhibit low levels of social segregation, similar to Norway and Sweden (Figure 10).

The importance of removing fee barriers to enhancing socioeconomic diversity is further evident in a comparison of Canadian provinces. Quebec is unusual in the Canadian context in that it has a large, publicly subsidised, fee-charging private school sector. Even though Quebec lies just across the Ottawa River from Ontario, it is much closer to Australia in the way it resources and regulates its schools. And unsurprisingly, Chmielewski and Maharaj find that Quebec has much higher levels of social segregation than Ontario, a level much closer to Australia's. The researchers further conclude that "In Quebec, a large portion of segregation is between public and [fee-charging] private schools."[66]

Meanwhile Australia is similar to societies like the United States and Turkey where advantaged and disadvantaged students are concentrated in different schools to a much greater degree.

FIGURE 10: ESTIMATED SEGREGATION OF LOW-SES AND HIGH-SES STUDENTS ACROSS CANADIAN PROVINCES



Source: Chmielewski & Maharaj 2022. Compared to Australia, social segregation is low across the Canadian provinces, but it is lower in Ontario (where fee barriers have been removed) compared to Quebec (which like Australia publicly subsidises private schools while permitting them to charge fees).[67]

ENROLMENT COMPETITION BETWEEN SCHOOLS IN THE COMMON FRAMEWORK

Concerns about school choice and segregation in Ontario do not focus on the distinctive sectors. Instead, conversation rapidly turns to the role of **specialised programs** in facilitating out-of-area enrolment in highly sought after schools, within both secular and Catholic boards. Many English-language schools offer French Immersion programs where a significant proportion of the curriculum is taught in French. The International Baccalaureate is also common; and in other instances, schools offer specialised sporting or artistic programs.

A widespread perception across Canada is that such programs serve a dual purpose. They can enrich educational opportunities and provide significant intrinsic educational benefits. They also provide a rationale for families to bypass their local school and seek access to a school which is preferred on other grounds.

A central concern is that families who apply for out-of-area schools to access specialised programs are typically educated and affluent. In practice, if not design, specialised programs become a mechanism by which families congregate together according to class. Anna Katyn Chmielewski says "French immersion and other specialized programs do play a large role in segregation within Ontario. French immersion plays a bigger role at the elementary level, while other specialised programs such as IB play a bigger role at the secondary level."

In British Columbia and Quebec, specialised schools are a deliberate public education response to the expansion of private schools. In Ontario they need to be seen as a more measured response of school boards to the inevitable interest by many parents in securing some level of advantage for their children.

Various levels of concern were expressed to the visiting Australian delegation:

- The Ontario Principals Council acknowledged an element of stratification between schools but attributed this more to people changing their residence to access a preferred school.
- Norah Marsh, a former Director of the Durham School Board in Ottawa, reflected that French immersion programs, in particular, represented a form of streaming.
- Pino Buffone, current Director at the Ottawa-Carleton District School Board reported that many parents use these programs as a pathway to what they see as better opportunities, both at school and beyond. In his words, "we have to raise our equity lens and lower the privilege lens". His Board has initiated a review, currently underway, to assess the programs.

Specialised programs are a significant feature in Ontario, and their impact should not be discounted. However, there are a number of mitigating factors which both constrain the extent of social segregation and sharply distinguish Ontario from Australia.

Firstly, all Ontarian families possess the right to enrol their child in the local school. So even a highly sought-after school with a specialised program that acts as a magnet to privileged families from beyond its attendance boundaries still has to make a place for every child from the local area, including children from households with low-income and low parental education.

Secondly, as the Ottawa Catholic School Board exemplifies, enrolment policies are purposeful, publicly visible and transparent.

Thirdly, the provincial government can and does conduct enrolment audits to ensure that enrolment policies are implemented in a manner consistent with the Education Act.

Finally, this competition occurs between equivalently resourced schools. Middle class families may believe an out-of-area school offers an advantage for their child and enrol them in that school, but that school will be resourced according to the same needs-based funding formula that their home school is.

Ontario's common framework means that schools cannot market a resource advantage, made visible in opulent buildings and smaller classes, to attract high-income families, as some Australian schools can. All these factors put important countervailing pressure against the tendency towards social segregation.

DENISE LOFTS – REMOVING FEES IS A GAME-CHANGER

Denise Lofts is President of the NSW Secondary Principals Council and principal of Ulladulla High School in NSW. She is a doctoral student at the University of New South Wales researching philanthropy and equity in NSW rural education.

I was struck by the way leaders of Catholic school systems immediately dismissed the idea of charging fees. I walked out of our meeting, ruminating on the clear conviction, delivered with such clarity and honesty, that charging fees did not align with the mission of offering all young people access to the educational opportunities provided by Catholic School Boards. 'Wow, what a refreshingly altered view of the possibilities,' I reflected. This unsolicited view was, to me, a game changer. It illustrated how lived values of inclusion and equity of educational access underpin schooling in Ontario Province.

HIGH STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT IN ONTARIO

Ontario's student population is slightly more advantaged than Australia's, but they are still similar. Ontario's schools are resourced at similar levels. But Ontario's 15-year-olds achieved at significantly higher levels in PISA 2022. In Mathematics the Ontario average (495) was 8 points higher than Australia's (487). In Reading the Ontario average (512) was 14 points higher than Australia's (498). In Science the Ontario average (517) was 10 points higher than Australia's (507).[68] Moreover, the 2022 PISA results reflected a consistent pattern over two decades.

In making such comparisons it is important to be cautious, conscious of the multiple variables at play, and to be thoughtful about their meaning. Indeed, the OECD has advised that caution is required in interpreting data from PISA 2022 from Canada due to low participation rates. Nevertheless Canada and Ontario have significantly outperformed Australia in every round of PISA.

It would be a mistake to imagine that if we imitate Ontario, we will inevitably enjoy a 'PISA bounce'. Education, and education systems, are too complex to indulge the hankering for silver bullet solutions.

A much better way to think about Ontario is as an example of a policy framework which provides the structural conditions for success – and not just success in international standardised tests, but in building social cohesion, in providing a rich and happy schooling experience, and enhancing opportunities for young people to flourish across the spectrum of academic, vocational and extracurricular pursuits.

Australians are aware, based on an abundance of evidence, that acute concentrations of social disadvantage in some schools are fundamentally undermining all that those schools exist to achieve. Ontario, a society similar in so many ways to ours, offers an example of arrangements that have succeeded in significantly reducing such concentrations, and maximising socio-economic diversity across its schools. Additionally, there is evidence that in promoting this diversity, Ontario appears to have weakened the link between concentrated social disadvantage and diminished educational outcomes.

Chmielewski & Maharaj find that the Canadian provinces with high social segregation have larger student achievement gaps, but in provinces like Ontario those gaps are less pronounced.[69]

There is a widespread understanding in Australia that a necessary condition of a successful education system is that schools are adequately resourced for the educational task they face, and that the appropriate level of resourcing will vary dramatically depending on the students a school enrols. Again,Ontario exemplifies what a fully implemented and genuine needs-based funding system looks like in practice.

Establishing the structural conditions for success does not substitute for continuous in-school reform and pedagogical innovation, it supports it. Australia's unlevel playing field is characterised, on the one hand, by schools that John Hattie has described as "coasters".[70] They focus their energies on the competition to enrol already-high achieving students – and then without really doing a lot in the way of adding value they enjoy the plaudits. On the other hand, there is an equally large number of schools characterised by overwhelming disadvantage, staff shortages and enrolment decline where the work of even the most determined, energetic and imaginative educators is undermined by the vicious cycle of residualisation. Creating a level playing field, like Ontario's common framework, provides the conditions for innovation and excellence to flourish across an entire school system.

If we want less social segregation in our schools, not more; if we want educational opportunity to be unleashed, Ontario shows us how to go about it in practice.

ALBERTA AND SASKATCHEWAN

Further confirmation of the association between a level playing field, low segregation and high student achievement is found in Alberta. Like Ontario, Alberta's Catholic schools are fully publicly funded and free, and they serve around 30 percent of students in that province. Only around 8 percent of Alberta's students are enrolled in private or charter schools that charge fees; the remaining 92 percent attend fully publicly funded fee-free schools.[71]

The level of social segregation of students in Alberta is even less than in Ontario and markedly below the level seen in Quebec, let alone Australia. Alberta is an outstanding performer in the PISA tests. In 2022, it topped Canada in reading and when national and subnational jurisdictions were compared, it ranked second in the world behind Singapore. Alberta also topped Canada in science, ranking fifth in the world. In maths, it ranked second in Canada.[72] Alberta was the only Canadian province to score above the national average in all three learning domains.

Alberta's socio-economic profile is even closer to Australia than Ontario's and it spends less per student and yet, Alberta's students were around a year of learning ahead of Australia's in science, reading and maths.

The counterexample is Saskatchewan which also has public Catholic schools and low segregation but ranks poorly in terms of academic achievement. But not only is Saskatchewan a much smaller province, it is very disadvantaged.[73] Its relatively poor student achievement is unsurprising when this is considered.

Ultimately, the lesson from Ontario is that there is an urgent need for Australians to re-examine the foundations on which our schools operate, as well as the premises upon which conversation about our school system takes place. Ontario shows us what a genuine needs-based funding system looks like. It also illustrates how a common framework can provide a coherent regulatory environment for schools that are distinctive in character and autonomous in their governance. With these structural conditions in place, Ontario's schools exhibit much greater socio-economic diversity than Australia's, along with greater equity and achievement to match.

It is one thing to identify the optimal policy settings, it's another to achieve the requisite community consensus to implement them in practice. And this is where Ontario is so important:

Ontario does not just offer insight into how to design a common framework that promotes the common good; it also shows the way to a political settlement that can make these arrangements possible.

CREATING THE SOCIAL CONSENSUS UNDERLYING THE COMMON FRAMEWORK

Cardinal Thomas Collins was the Archbishop of Toronto from 2007 until his retirement in 2023. This is how Cardinal Collins describes Ontario's common framework. "We are so richly blessed with a system in which the French and English, and the non-religious and Catholic dimensions of our whole education system work together in co-operation to make education a treasure for which all Ontarians may truly be thankful."[74]

In elaborating on why Ontario's arrangements are so positive from a Catholic perspective, the archbishop explained, "The key element of Catholic education is its integration of faith and academic development, which encourages students to realize their full potential as individuals created in the image of God. Thanks to public funding of Catholic schools, every year hundreds of thousands of students from diverse backgrounds receive an excellent education in a supportive environment."

As the Cardinal observed, Ontario's common framework offers its Catholic communities the education they want for their children with the full public funding which, in Australia, is reserved for secular schools.

Any concerns expressed by Catholic leaders and educators in Ontario tend not to relate to the status quo but to threats to it. They know that a change in the law could undermine the system of schools to which they are deeply attached, and they are aware that there are vocal elements in Ontario calling for the dismantling of the separate Catholic system and its replacement with a single bi-lingual system of secular schools.[75] This is a threat that Catholic educators are aware of, and in response they have mobilised the case for the status quo.[76]

The politics of school funding in Ontario is radically different to Australia's. For the most part faith-based and secular school communities are on a unity ticket when it comes to supporting needs-based funding for all schools, and a common framework of regulation and responsibilities.

In essence, when it comes to public education a core set of interests unite 92 percent of Ontarians. This is obviously a hugely powerful political bloc committed to free public education.

In Australia, the capacity of politicians to implement the policies they're ostensibly committed to is severely limited by the differences and divisions between free and fee-charging schools, and the communities attached to them.

As non-government schools must charge fees, they seek a level of public subsidy that will provide them with the net resource advantage that can attract families away from free schools. When some parents pay out of their own pockets, they tend to expect that they will receive a material advantage in return. If these expectations are to be all accommodated – and it's hard for any politician to ignore one third of the community, especially the most privileged and powerful third – the result won't look much like a needs-based allocation of resources. We have been trying and failing to reconcile this contradiction for half a century, and under the most recently minted plan, legislated in late 2024, we are committed to at least another decade of failure.

A core element of Ontario's genuinely needs-based funding system is that fee-charging schools receive no public funding. This is politically possible in a context where those schools represent 7 percent of the student population.

But let us imagine for a moment that Ontario's Catholic schools were not part of the common public framework and had to rely on charging fees as their sole source of revenue. When a politician in Ontario was met with the demand that fee-charging schools receive some kind of public subsidy, they might have to stare down a quarter of voters, or more. That starts to look very politically costly.

With faith-based schools as part of the common framework, the fee-charging sector remains marginal, and the coalition of interests which underpin free education form a decisive majority.

Telling a win-win story

In supporting the status quo in Ontario, politicians can tell a win-win story about arrangements that promote both equity and choice. As suggested by Cardinal Collins, Ontario's arrangements enable genuine choice in a way Australia's do not. Catholic schools in Ontario are much more accessible to all members of the Catholic community than fee-charging faith-based schools in Australia which tend to systematically exclude children from poorer households.

By contrast, any Australian politician who seeks to implement needs-based funding risks alienating a political bloc representing one third of voters and confronting accusations that they are pursuing equity at the expense of choice. Historically, Cardinal Collins' Australian counterparts have not been on the side of would-be reformers. Just ask Mark Latham, or Julia Gillard, or Simon Birmingham.

Ontario shows us that the happy consequence of creating a public framework which accommodates a diverse range of cultural groups is that it enjoys the political support of a widespread cross-section of society. That makes implementing arrangements that promote cohesion, equity and achievement so much more possible.

THE ONE SCHOOL SYSTEM MOVEMENT IN ONTARIO

One School System is a community group in Ontario which advocates for the abolition of public funding to Catholic schools and the creation of a single, secular school system for each official language. It is not a major force in the province, but it represents a strand of public opinion. The group believes that it is wrong for publicly funded Catholic schools to be able to preference Catholics over non-Catholics when they enrol students and hire teachers.

Catholic advocacy groups respond that, "Catholic boards need Catholic teachers in order to succeed in their mission."[77] Likewise, they say, preferential enrolment of Catholic students is essential to creating an educational community based on a shared collective identity.

To the One System proponents who claim that eliminating Catholic boards would create financial savings, they respond that funding is based on per-pupil calculations, and boards already form into local consortiums for the purposes of purchasing services like transportation and energy.

For Australia, the significant difference an Ontario-style common framework would make is that church schools that already receive very extensive public funding would be able, and required, to be much more inclusive of students from low-income families.

This would impact the place of privilege in Australia's education system, but it would not substantially change the role of religion. Ontario fully funds faith-based public schools and remains an admirably secular and tolerant society.

JENNY WALKER – A COMMITMENT TO THE VALUE OF EDUCATION, EQUITY AND INCLUSION

Jenny Walker has been an educator for more than 42 years with the NSW Department of Education, the last 29 years as a principal. She has served as a Director of Education (Schools), Director of Aboriginal Education in school leadership and coaching positions.

"My observations during our time in Ontario, Canada, revealed a strong belief in the importance of education as a foundation for a cohesive society, ensuring that all students have access to equal educational opportunities in their local schools. Education is highly valued across the community, reflecting a moral commitment to equitable funding.

The pursuit of equity, aimed at providing opportunities for everyone, is a notable strength observed across the various sectors in Ontario. It builds the social capital that is essential for society to prosper. While there are significant strengths in this pursuit, challenges also exist, including factors related to school boards, government priorities, political influences, individual student needs and legislation. The collaboration among different sectors enhances education for all, and presents a thought-provoking perspective for Australian systems, sectors, and governments."

LESSONS FROM BRITISH COLUMBIA

"While British Columbia performs well on international standardised tests, its record is less impressive in a Canadian context. It begins with the most advantaged student population amongst the provinces in terms of socio-economic background, but it is not in the top-ranking provinces in terms of achievement. In this respect, the lesson from British Columbia could be: 'don't go there, educationally speaking'."

BRITISH COLUMBIA AT A GLANCE

- Most non-government schools in British Columbia are entitled to **50 percent of the public funding** of neighbouring public schools. In return the school's total operating costs cannot exceed those of public schools in their area.
- Another category of non-government school is officially **subsidised at 35 percent** of public school funding and faces **no cap on total operating costs**.
- In practice a range of loopholes mean taxpayer funding of private schools is higher than the stated policy.
- British Columbia has **one of the largest private school sectors in Canada** but is still much smaller than the private sector in Australia.
- British Columbia has the **most advantaged student population** in Canada but student achievement does not reflect this.

TOTAL POPULATION

5.7 million[78]

STUDENT POPULATION

577,024
total students in public schools

86,201
total students in independent schools[79]

SPENDING PER STUDENT

AUD $18,853

PUBLIC SCHOOL ENROLMENT SHARE

87%

FEES IN PUBLICLY FUNDED SCHOOLS

Category 1: Total operating costs cannot exceed the level of neighbouring public schools

Category 2: Unregulated

FUNDING OF PRIVATE (FEE-CHARGING) SCHOOLS

Group 1: 50% of operating costs of neighbouring public schools

Group 2: 35%

OECD INDEX OF ECONOMIC, SOCIAL AND CULTURAL STATUS (ESCS)

4.3 (Australia = 3.9)

THE BRITISH COLUMBIA SOLUTION?

If Ontario is the gold standard for needs-based funding and schooling equity, the other Canadian provinces are likely to have less to offer as whole solutions to Australia's schooling problems – but they provide a wider Canadian context which helps to understand Ontario's success.

On the surface, some aspects of British Columbia's school framework look appealing to an Australia mired in widening gaps between students and between schools. From the 1970s the province's measured delivery of public funding to private schools has stood in stark contrast to the mistakes and neglect evident in Australia. As a consequence, the Australian study tour paid close attention to policy and practices which could inform moves towards establishing a workable common school framework.

The changes needed for Australia's schooling go well beyond policies and practices to the very structure needed to provide a fair go for all. While British Columbia has fared better than Australia, transplanting what might work in British Columbia would fall short of the scale of reform needed. Structural reform is hard work, something which explains why it has not been embraced by Australian governments. Picking and choosing isolated attractive features of other systems carries the risk of incremental improvements.

For Australia, any consideration of what seems attractive in British Columbia has to be seen in the context of its benefits and alongside its enduring deficiencies. What can Australia learn from this province about creating school systems that advance the common good, and what British Columbia does well – alongside how and why it still falls short?

Is British Columbia at least a step towards a school framework as enduring and successful as demonstrated by Ontario?

Ontario and British Columbia are far apart, both geographically and in the origin and pathway taken by their schools. While religious-based schools were legally guaranteed in Ontario before 1867 and have been fully funded, British Columbia was not part of the Confederation bargain at the birth of Canada. For over a century secular public schools remained the province's main education offering until the 1970s when the small number of private schools began receiving some public funding.

Australia and British Columbia began funding private schools around the same time and in response to similar pressures. For a century until the 1970s Catholic schools in both places remained largely outside the framework of free, inclusive and secular public schools. The advocacy for funding Catholic schools was then led by the church and eventually agreed by governments.[80]

In an early echo of what was to happen in Australia, this advocacy included a symbolic closing of two Catholic schools in 1950 to attract recognition to their financial plight. This was followed by minor and incremental concessions to Catholic schools on matters such as student transport, health services and taxation concessions. In the mid 1960s Catholic and independent schools formed an umbrella group, the Federation of Independent Schools Organisations – and serious lobbying for funding support took shape.

In 1977 British Columbia began funding 'private' (described as independent – a category which includes Catholic) schools. Critically, and this is significant from an Australian perspective, their public funding was set as a percentage of the per-student funding going to public schools in the same district.

Their initial funding was relatively low at 30 percent but rose to 50 percent of local public school funding from 1989. Variations of this arrangement also developed in other provinces, including Saskatchewan, Manitoba and Quebec where, in the latter case, independent schools are funded to at least 60 percent of the public school per-student amount.[81]

The funding in those Canadian provinces was, and still is, conditional on the schools meeting criteria which are more rigorous than applied in Australia in the 1970s – and ever since.

The British Columbia funding conditions are wide-ranging, and the detail clearly shows the thought given to how, and how much, public funding should be provided – and what regulations should apply.[82]

All independent schools are regulated, but the extent of these regulations is closely linked to which one of four groups each school is classified under the Independent Schools Act:

- Group 1 schools receive 50 percent of the per-student operating grant provided by district school boards to public schools. Group 1 independent schools employ British Columbian certified teachers, have educational programs consistent with ministerial orders, provide a program that meets the learning outcomes of the British Columbian curriculum, meet various administrative requirements, maintain adequate educational facilities, and comply with municipal and regional district codes.
- Group 2 schools meet the same requirements as Group 1 schools and receive per-student operating grants at the 35 percent level, because the school's per-student operating costs exceed the grants paid to local public schools.[83]

A small number of independent schools fall into two further categories.

- Group 3 schools receive no funding and are not required to employ British Columbian certified teachers or have educational programs consistent with ministerial requirements. They must maintain facilities that meet all municipal and regional district codes.
- Group 4 schools are non-funded schools that cater mainly to non-provincial students. They meet the same educational program requirements as Group 1 and their graduates are eligible to receive the British Columbia Certificate of Graduation (Dogwood) if all teachers are British Columbia certified.

There are incentives and penalties in this arrangement.

Most independent schools **(71 percent)** are in Group 1 and have an incentive to remain in that group. They tend to be religious schools or cater to a specialist niche in some way; receive **50 percent** funding and charge fees for the extra revenue needed to meet their operating costs.

While the funding isn't generous by Australian levels, most independent schools gain a benefit by still being 'private' – and from everything that goes with the label. For example, St John Brebeuf is a Catholic high school in the regional town of Abbotsford which is typical of Group 1 independent schools in British Columbia. It charges annual fees ranging from around AUD $6,000 for parishioners to $11,000 per for non-Catholic students.[84]

However, for those independent schools which exceed the resourcing level of local public schools, they are recategorised into Group 2, with their public funding falling to **35 percent**. Group 1 can only avoid this happening if they cap their costs and subsequently cap their other income, especially from fees.

Schools less concerned about losing public funding, such as most 'elite' schools (originally conceived as university preparatory schools) have long been in Group 2.[85] Given their significant capacity to raise income from fees, a small loss of some public funding evidently makes overall sense financially. For example, St George's School in Vancouver is an elite, private school for boys which charges annual tuition fees of around AUD $38,000.[86] In addition, as a Group 2 independent school it benefits from a public subsidy of AUD $4,000 per year per student from British Columbia taxpayers. Furthermore, the highly significant donations to the school's foundation, which is set up as a charity, can be made on a tax-deductible basis.

Group 3 and Group 4 schools aren't publicly funded because they choose to operate outside even the minimal conditions imposed on Group 2 schools, but they make up only **two percent** of all independent schools in the province.[87]

… WHICH DOESN'T ALWAYS WORK AS INTENDED

An important question is whether the British Columbia public/private mix supports equitable access to opportunities and achievement. The success of the framework relies on agreed and transparent regulation of all funding going into schools, but problems have arisen as a consequence of additional funding, outside the regulated funding limits, going to independent schools.

Recent research has established that British Columbia independent schools are receiving increasing levels of financial support "via tax expenditures tied to their charitable status—a 'not hidden but not visible' shift in public expenditure." In the Canadian Journal of Political Science, Borwein et al (2023) explain that:

"Although tuition fees are not intended to be tax deductible, tuition fees paid for religious instruction may be deducted… a deductible amount could be more than half of tuition costs… in the case of Vancouver College, a private Catholic school for boys, the tax receipt issued covers 80 percent of the cost of tuition to parents. Schools connected to a registered charity also issue charitable tax receipts for donations to schools' endowment and capital funds."[88]

This matters in British Columbia where:

40% of independent schools are registered as charities.

The research shows that the default formula-based funding of $328 million provided in 2016-2017 to independent schools by the Government of British Columbia was supplemented with:

$129 million

in grants from three levels of government and

$119 million

in tax-deductable private (charity) donated to independent schools in the same year, amounting to a combined **75%** top-up of public formula funding.

Even in Canada, private school funding can be varied by less visible combinations of local property taxes, charitable donations, endowments, occasional federal grants, tuition, and auxiliary parental spending. This additional funding undermines the intent of the funding framework. It also compounds inequity within the private system because much of the extra funding only goes to those schools with charitable status.

Other funding variations within British Columbia can increase the funding of independent schools beyond the 50 percent/35 percent limits.

Independent schools are now given the same funding as public schools for students with special needs in categories that receive funding based on identification. This may explain the relatively high rates of enrolment of these students in some independent schools (see Figure 13). According to the British Columbia Teachers Federation, students in independent schools offering Distributed Learning (a form of remote learning) programs receive 63 percent as much as the provincial grant to districts per student for public school Distributed Learning programs.[89]

Regulations can also fall short of expectations. A requirement of funded schools in most Canadian provinces is that they are subject to outside inspections. As described in the British Columbia legislation, British Columbia independent schools are inspected in what the legislation describes as "a comprehensive exercise that examines the school's program, facilities, curriculum, operations and teacher certification to ensure that the school meets all basic statutory requirements."[90]

The frequency of inspections varies, depending on concerns which may be held about a school. Charles Ungerleider, a former Deputy Minister of Education, believes that such inspections are "light" except in instances where physical or emotional harm is thought to exist. They are certainly not inspected for equity, their mix of students, or the number of students which might be excluded.[91]

Any problems relating to independent schools' funding and regulations add fuel to an ongoing yet intermittent debate in British Columbia about whether they should be funded at all, with conflicting arguments similar to those which have characterised the debate around Australia for over half a century.

The British Columbia Teachers Federation points to how the funding should instead be used for often poorly funded public schools. Occasional public opinion polling lends support for this view. On the other side, those supporting funding the independent schools claim (as they also claim in Australia) that it represents a saving to the taxpayer.

WHY HAS THE DEAL FOR BRITISH COLUMBIA'S INDEPENDENT SCHOOLS ENDURED?

The funding and regulatory framework for British Columbia's independent schools is more restrictive than its advocates might prefer. But there are good reasons why it has generally endured. The 1977 Schools Act fundamentally altered education in British Columbia by extending public funding to independent schools for the first time in provincial history. It committed, then and now, a majority of independent schools to some significant conditions – at least to the extent needed to mute potential opposition, bestow legitimacy on all schools and established a settlement of sorts between them.

Over time the Federation of Independent School Associations (FISA) has advocated for (and secured) increased funding – while resisting efforts to wind back the clock.[92] In 2000 it successfully fended off even a minor reduction in its funding.

There are also practical limits to its advocacy for more funding, frequently revealed in polling which reflects a continuing commitment to British Columbia's public schools – arguably reinforced by the district boards where this commitment is expressed and transmitted to each community.[93]

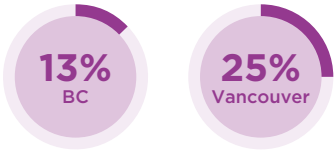
Why would Group 1 independent schools want to stay with the regulations and funding restrictions applying to that group?

According to Cardus, a non-partisan Christian think tank, they see the requirements as straightforward and common sense.[94] Most in Group 1 are religious (especially Catholic) schools and don't want to lose their students if fees become too high – which would be the case if they were in Group 2. The Group 2 schools are often elite, British-style schools like St George's. They can, and do, charge what they like.

In short: while far from being fully funded, they are still taxpayer supported and private, able to be religious, specialise in some way and inevitably attract students from relatively more advantaged families and, consequently, gain a higher academic profile and generate even greater demand.

SECTORAL COMPETITION AND SOCIAL SEGREGATION IN BRITISH COLUMBIA

Despite the downsides, there are aspects of the British Columbia framework which would inevitably attract interest in Australia. It has facilitated private school growth, without marginalising public schools to the extent increasingly visible in Australia.



13% of **British Columbia** students attend independent schools

25% of students attend independent schools in **Vancouver**, the province's largest city and its most contested school market.

The **13 percent** figure is amongst the highest in Canada and well above Ontario's non-government school enrolment but well below the one-third of students attending Australia's private schools.

At the same time, the British Columbia framework has placed limits on that growth, creating what some Australians might see as a more appropriate balance between the public and private sectors.

The growth of private schooling in British Columbia has been particularly challenging for public schools. For reasons which are familiar to Australians, independent schools dominate the upper achievement ranks of British Columbia's elementary and secondary schools. Notwithstanding occasional exceptions, independent schools enrol students from more advantaged families, almost by definition because they charge fees. In contrast to Australia there is less readily available data, including across the sectors, something illustrated by the gaps in Figure 12.

As in Australia there are noticeable differences between public and independent schools. Figure 12 includes the independent schools which are located closest to the listed District 44 (North Vancouver) public secondary schools. A field left blank indicates no available data. The enrolment of high-needs students in independent schools is usually below the representation of these students in the public schools. Independent schools also enrol students in these categories, something that might reflect the higher funding that comes with these students, regardless of sector.

Just as in Australia, the enrolment of advantaged students in fee-charging schools helps explain why they are more prominent at the higher end of school league tables. This is reflected in the 'rank-order' column in the table, an indicator of socio-educational status as much as anything else.

FIGURE 12: PUBLIC AND INDEPENDENT SCHOOL COMPARISONS IN NORTH VANCOUVER

School	Enrolment of students with disabilities or diverse abilities (percent)	Enrolment of Indigenous students (percent)	'Rank'/252* https://www.fraserinstitute.org/
Argyle Secondary School	20	2.4	98
Carson Graham Secondary	18	6.4	98
Handsworth Secondary	16	1.3	50
Sutherland Secondary School	23	2.6	191
Windsor Secondary School	20	5.3	72
Seycove Secondary School	27	5.8	107
Public school average	**16 percent**	**3.7 percent**	**103**
St Thomas Aquinas School	13		31
Collingwood School	6.9		10
Mulgrave School	6.0		10
Independent school average	**8.6 percent**		**17**

NOTES:

Unless indicated otherwise, all data is from https://studentsuccess.gov.British Columbia.ca/
* Rank' refers to position in a league table compiled by the Fraser Institute.
https://www.compareschoolrankings.org/

Figure 12 provides a glimpse of differences between the public and independent sectors, but the gaps indicate that much data isn't readily available. In contrast, official school data in Australia enables sophisticated comparisons between schools, albeit comparisons which haven't slowed the segregation of student enrolments.

WARREN MARKS – PUBLIC EDUCATION IN BRITISH COLUMBIA

Dr Warren Marks jointly initiated and served as co-director of LEAP (Leading Educators Around the Planet), an innovative leadership program facilitating international peer-shadowing programs and study tour programs. His experience includes researching, designing, managing and implementing educational leadership programs.

"Generally, British Columbia public schools are egalitarian and do not promote social segregation. This aspect is interesting as it is almost an unconscious aspect of the British Columbia school system. Communities in British Columbia just see that you attend your local community school (that's what people have always done) and this allows you to be part of your local community. When I discuss that this is now not necessarily the norm in Australia, principals and teachers are generally surprised and somewhat bemused.

British Columbia schools traditionally have a high commitment to social equity and social justice. This is part of the culture and British Columbia educators are somewhat surprised when this is mentioned as being a laudable approach. Historically Vancouver is a multi-cultural city and British Columbia a frontier province. These aspects have produced very strong unions which sustain vigilance in relation to social justice and social responsibility.

British Columbia is also the national leader in Indigenous education. British Columbia accepted and implemented the recommendations of the Truth & Reconciliation Commission to a far greater extent than other provinces. Initiatives in Indigenous ways of learning and co-designed curriculum were born in British Columbia.

Through their curriculum British Columbia schools place high values on social competencies (communication, cooperation, collegial decision making). Within schools, "additional areas of responsibility" are shared by teachers without extra remuneration as part of one's sense of duty to the school. In Australia these would be usually paid middle management & aspiring leaders' roles.

HOW DO THE PUBLIC SCHOOLS FUNCTION AND FARE?

How has British Columbia public education fared? Are there policies and practices in the management of British Columbia public education which should be seriously contemplated in Australia?

The availability of data has helped Australians become more aware of differences between its public schools which can't be fully explained by location and the socio-economic status of communities. Significant numbers of students, up to 40% in Australia's cities, do not enrol in their local school – creating enrolment distortions to the point where the idea of a 'local school' has lost much of its meaning.

CASE STUDY:
District 44 in Northern Vancouver

The northern side of Vancouver (District 44) is somewhat detached from the rest of the city but not immune from the vagaries of school competition. It is a relatively high family income area, but diverse in key measures of lone parent families and families with post-secondary qualifications. There is a diversity of residential areas and inevitable differences between the public schools.

Choice of schools is available in North Vancouver but is subject to some regulation. Seeking enrolment in a school beyond the local catchment requires an application to the district school board. Even if approved, the costs of school transport must be met by parents. Such relatively strict rules reinforce the viability of local schools and their communities. Schools overwhelmingly share equal and inclusive obligations in what seems to be an atmosphere of mutual support and consultation.

As a consequence, the differences between schools relate less to school choice and more to the demographics of the local community. There seem to be fewer differences created by students commuting past their local school to a preferred public school somewhere else.

This is well-illustrated by the two schools visited by the Australian team. Handsworth and Carson Graham Secondary Schools are different in some respects, but each school closely resembles their family of feeder schools.[95]

At a superficial level, this is indicated by overall rating data from the libertarian Fraser Institute which drives a school choice agenda throughout Canada by ranking all secondary and elementary schools in each province. The ranks almost certainly influence school choice, not because they are sufficient or meaningful, but because such information is targeted at families making a choice of schools.

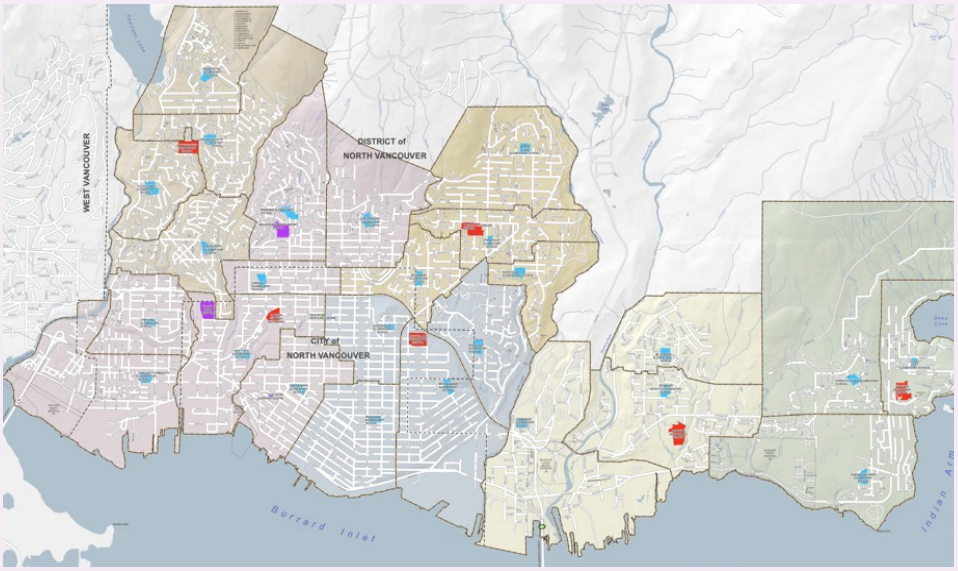
By these crude measures the two visited schools are different. One 'ranks' much higher than the other. But the two secondary schools closely represent the demographics of the feeder schools in their respective catchments. Handsworth Secondary ranks in the top **20%** of British Columbia's secondary schools – and its feeder schools rank (on average) in the top **24%**. Carson Graham's rank **(39%)** is almost identical to the average for its seven feeder schools at **41%**.

More important, the enrolment of students with special needs in both schools, while higher in Carson Graham, is also close to the average for their feeder schools. Carson Graham Secondary also has a significant enrolment of First Nations students, something which has enhanced the school's curriculum offerings – in the form of a course of study, open to all students, of the unique language and culture of the Squamish Nation.

Despite the differences between the two secondary schools, the students from each elementary school join others in their local high school, seemingly without creating any 'reputational' damage or boost for that school. Even the enrolment numbers in both secondary schools are similar, and their enrolment change over time has reflected the trend across the whole district. There is little if any evidence of the demographics of the two secondary schools being distorted by an influx of students into one 'preferred' school, while avoiding the other.

FIGURE 13 – NORTH VANCOUVER SCHOOL DISTRICT #44

Map of North Vancouver School District #44 Catchment Areas and School Sites



HANDSWORTH AND CARSON GRAHAM SECONDARY SCHOOLS

SUE FRENCH – TRUTH AND RECONCILIATION IN ACTION

Programs for First Nations people in British Columbian schools have made considerable progress, something noted by **Sue French**, a member of the visiting team from Australia. Sue is a NSW school principal and a Birpai woman from the NSW mid-north coast who has watched this progress close up.

A breakthrough for First Nations people was created by the Canadian Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) which investigated the Indian Residential Schools system.[96] The TRC recommendations included supporting the reclamation, revitalization, maintenance and strengthening of Indigenous languages, as well as initiatives in health, justice and the legal system, history and commemoration.

District 44 schools provide ample evidence of programs and initiatives to support Squamish and other local First Nations people. Three of Carson Graham's feeder schools, Norgate Elementary (with a 21 percent Indigenous enrolment), Queen Mary and Capilano Elementary offer the International Baccalaureate (IB) in the Primary Years.

Carson Graham continues the International Baccalaureate, giving students many opportunities to engage with Indigenous ways of knowing and cultural teachings. In addition, Carson Graham Secondary has a dedicated Indigenous Education classroom, staffed by an Indigenous support teacher and an Indigenous support worker. The school also works to embed Indigenous language, culture and First Peoples Principles of Learning into its teaching, in the process reaching out to its First Nations community.[97]

BALANCING INCLUSION AND CHOICE?

While the demographics of the public schools broadly reflect their location, the wider system management structure and/or policies face challenges – especially over the need to maintain a balance between system equity and school choice.

British Columbia's public schools are funded and broadly administered by the British Columbia Ministry of Education, but as is common in Canada they are grouped into separate districts, with the schools in each district governed by a board of elected school trustees.

All of the public schools in Figure 12 form part of the North Vancouver School District (District 44). One role of the boards is to establish a catchment area for each school within its district – and they are given the authority to amend these areas as needed. British Columbia students can be enrolled in a school outside their catchment, but only if spaces are available.

This is less common in rural British Columbia, but 40 percent of students in the central Vancouver school district (District 39) attend schools outside of their catchment area. The 40 percent out-of-area figure is unusual for British Columbia, but close to that evident in the larger Australian cities.

Responding to the private pressure

Two decades ago, the British Columbia government responded to a perceived need for more choice by loosening restrictions on changing schools within the public sector, notably by making it easier for parents to opt out of their neighbourhood school. This provided an impetus for greater choice, accompanied by an increase in programs of choice and even schools of choice in the public sector.

British Columbia public schools have increasingly offered opportunities such as French and other language immersion, Montessori, fine arts, outdoor education, gifted programs, International Baccalaureate, STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Math), trades/apprenticeships programs, alternative schools, and programs for students with specific learning, behavioural, or social needs. They have attracted the attention of families, as well as the interest of researchers and commentators.

As reported by conservative Canadian think tank, the C.D. Howe Institute, this move towards 'open enrolment' raised questions about the extent to which increased public school choice affects student achievement, concentrates minority students in enclave schools and promotes cream skimming.[98]

Subsequent research undertaken by the C.D. How Institute concluded that open enrolment did impact on public school choice opportunities and "contributed to the development of important academic skills", but mainly in the higher populated Lower mainland southwest corner of the province (Vancouver and surrounds). It also highlighted that open enrolment "did little to either segregate or integrate Lower Mainland students according to their cultural and ethnic backgrounds. There is also little evidence that popular schools engaged in cream skimming high-achieving students".

The British Columbia Principals and Vice-Principals Association (BCPVPA) seems quite at ease with the growth of choice programs and schools. Most programs are free or low cost (mainly for materials used) hence BCPVPA officers don't believe that there is any noticeable increase in the numbers of students from advantaged families in choice programs and choice schools.

Some safeguards are in place to manage and limit any possible segregation of public school enrolments. While schools with available space can enrol out-of-area students, there is a lottery system – not uncommon in some countries – for Vancouver schools which are over-subscribed. Participants in such lotteries tend to be more advantaged families (who can also afford the transport costs to a more distant school), but there still remains some element of school choice for students who aren't selected in this way.

The challenges created by the relatively open enrolment are well articulated by Charles Ungerleider who[99] explains how underpinning social and economic policies and equitable school funding have long played a role in minimising the achievement gap between schools. And he warns that "social segregation, worsened by school choice policies and residential patterns, has deepened divisions within the education system – [with the result that] efforts to improve academic performance at scale have largely been unsuccessful."

Ungerleider is critical of 'open enrolment' as a mechanism for school improvement, stating that it is primarily symbolic for the individual parent, satisfying the parent's consumer preference – while in reality 'choice schools' perform about as well as the schools from which their clientele are recruited.[100] For him, social equity requires changes at the Ministry level and that policy makers and educators should regularly assess and address any disparities in enrolment, resources, and outcomes between different student groups.

On the other hand, the British Columbia Schools' Trustees Association (BCSTA) seems more concerned about the risks, even of limited choice. Like others, the BCSTA can see the need for public schools to counter the drift towards private schools. They are concerned that higher SES families were disproportionately accessing the specialist programs.

Teresa Downes for the Superintendent's Association sees programs such as French Immersion as a form of streaming, and to offset this, superintendents have helped install the program in less advantaged schools.

There are parallels with Australia, specifically in the way NSW has increased the number of its partially selective schools. In both jurisdictions it is quite evident that, in Teresa Downes words, that "layers of inequity are baked into" the school system.

SOME MAJOR LESSONS FROM BRITISH COLUMBIA

WHAT LESSONS CAN AUSTRALIA LEARN FROM, OR EVEN TEACH, BRITISH COLUMBIA?

Private school growth: The initial decisions to publicly fund private schools in British Columbia seemed appropriate in an era when the contribution and value of public schooling was clearly understood as being essential. But changes over time to British Columbia's public and independent schools show that good intentions to sustain equity in a properly regulated system will come under siege, if and as relatively advantaged families see education as a personal and positional, rather than public good.

The public school response: Deterioration of overall equity has been incremental and a product of both private school growth and the public school response, but in comparison with Australia the expansion of choices within British Columbia public education have been relatively cautious and benign. Given that increasing school choice in Canada as a whole is still largely contained within public education systems (broadly defined), to what extent should this be a priority for Australia?

Setting directions: Regardless of ongoing governance arrangements, British Columbia, just like Australia, illustrates the need for critical decisions about school structures and funding to be as independent as possible from political processes. This need also extends to school purpose – there doesn't seem to be much evidence of big-picture thinking about directions for public education in the province (or for that matter, in Australia). In the words of one local observer, Canada has made scant progress "because we hold misconceptions about the purpose/mission of public schools."[101]

Setting boundaries (literally): Careful management of the administration of school catchments has ensured that school enrolments in both elementary and secondary schools in British Columbia are quite representative of their localities. Combined with some restrictions on changing schools (also contributing to a better balance of enrolments) a focus on maintaining a diverse enrolment in each school is a strength of British Columbia and Canadian schools and should be a priority in Australia.

Counting and measuring: In comparison with Australia there is little readily available contextual data about each school, making it difficult to investigate any change in enrolment segregation over time and related issues around equity and achievement. In this context Australia's My School website can be clearly seen as both a blessing and a curse. It provides much of the required data, but has arguably contributed to enrolment segregation, especially in the absence of policies to reduce this.

Sharing the knowledge: The Australian visitors accumulated a wealth of impressions and perspectives in British Columbia and elsewhere, and there are good examples of comparative research.[102] It is interesting that peer impacts on learning, along with the considerable impact on overall student achievement, was mentioned just once in presentations in British Columbia – and only obliquely elsewhere. This may reflect the relatively low level of enrolment segregation – but given current trends, Canadian school authorities might need to catch up with the inherent risks.

ADOPT, ADAPT OR ABANDON? IMPLICATIONS FOR AUSTRALIA

Given the demonstrated advantages of Ontario's common framework, it is easy to conclude that British Columbia falls short of what has been proven to be possible elsewhere in Canada and in many other countries.

In British Columbia the result of ratcheting up public subsidies over the decades has been the increasing enrolment share of independent schools. British Columbia has one of the largest private school sectors in Canada, proportionally twice the size of Ontario's.

This in turn has impacted on the character of the public system. As competition from private schools with growing resource advantages has intensified, the public sector has responded by introducing mechanisms of choice and selectivity to foster its own internal competitive advantage.

While British Columbia retains a strong public education system, there is still pressure created by affluent and aspirational families who bypass the local school in pursuit of a private school or 'desirable' public school.

Notably, social segregation in British Columbia is higher than comparable provinces like Ontario or Alberta, although still lower than in Australia.

While British Columbia performs well on international standardised tests, its record is less impressive in a Canadian context. It begins with the most advantaged student population amongst the provinces in terms of socio-economic background, but it is not in the top-ranking provinces in terms of achievement. In this respect, the lesson from British Columbia could be: 'don't go there, educationally speaking'.

British Columbia represents a regrettable departure from the needs-based funding system found in Ontario.

Group 2 independent schools can charge fees at whatever level they please but still receive 35 percent of the funding of neighbouring public schools. That is an even higher level of public subsidy than is received by some of the most expensive Australian private schools and helps many highly exclusive Group 2 independent schools realise significant resource advantages over other neighbouring schools.

Nominally, the public funding and fees of Group 1 schools are capped so as not to exceed the average total income per student at neighbouring public schools. In practice, including all forms of taxpayer support, Group 1 schools may enjoy a level of resourcing that exceeds what should be a needs-based entitlement.

Despite that, even Group 1 independent schools are inaccessible for many families. In Catholic high schools in Vancouver, for example, fees are levied at around AUD $5000 or $6,000 per year for parishioners, and they are significantly higher for non-parishioners and non-Catholics. The inevitable consequence is that British Columbia independent schools serve families with significantly higher average income than at public schools.[103]

The basic dynamics which drive social segregation in Australia can also be found in British Columbia, if in somewhat muted form.

However, there is a certain clarity in the categorisation of British Columbia independent schools into four groups. We know that Australian private schools are diverse, but the British Columbia grouping clearly indicates that, while there are differences within the sector, some schools will operate in quite similar ways to public schools, while others won't be publicly funded at all, as is the case in most of the OECD world.

British Columbia's private school groupings make the obligations, operation and accountability of private schools at each level quite clear, including in critical areas such as enrolment and funding. While many schools attract additional funding from outside the framework, the system displays a degree of fairness that has stood the test of time.

In both British Columbia and Australia, a much greater portion of overall funding could be needs-based. There should be clear funding incentives for private schools to enrol more challenging students.

The private school groupings also make it clear that some schools are simply not funded at all, just as they are not in Ontario. Around two percent of independent schools in British Columbia are in category 3 and 4 and receive no public funding.

Cutting public funding to Australian private schools above ICSEA 1150 would release up to AUD $1.5 billion in recurrent funding each year, money which would better support needs-based funding in any sector.[104]

The example of British Columbia serves to remind Australians of imperfections in private school funding and aspects of school operations. School funding in both places is topped up by practices which are poorly monitored, if at all. Inspections of schools either don't measure up to stated requirements or become quite token where such requirements barely exist. All funded schools should be subject to the same inspection regimes. And given that the Australian total recurrent public funding bill for all schools is around $86 billion, it should be expected that obligations and accountability in response to this huge spend should be the same across all sectors.

British Columbia's system of capping public subsidies, as well as the fees that can be charged by recipient schools, is highly flawed. But it is better than nothing.

While regulation in British Columbia works to minimise resource disparities to some extent, Australia has reached a point where as many as half of non-government schools receive more taxpayer funding than at least half of comparable public schools.[105]

Even though increasing public subsidies in Australia have been continually justified on the basis that they promote choice and affordability, for decade after decade private school fee increases have outstripped inflation.[106] To this extent, Australia could usefully learn from British Columbia's example of regulating publicly subsidised private schools.

> "In contrast to Ontario, British Columbia's framework has created too many compromises and internal inconsistencies. A common framework based on the Ontario experience still represents the best pathway available if Australia is to restore school equity and achievement."

LESSONS FROM QUEBEC

"When we look at Quebec we see our own situation reflected. In both Australia and Quebec a stratified three-tier system predominates, students are heavily segregated based on their background, and this has an especially deleterious effect on the most disadvantaged. And in both jurisdictions, calls for fundamental structural change are growing louder."

QUEBEC AT A GLANCE

- The Government of Quebec provides large subsidies to non-government schools, as much as **75 percent of the funding delivered to public schools**.
- Quebec's publicly subsidised private schools are permitted to charge high admission fees and enrol on a selective basis.
- Quebec has a **large number of selective public schools**.
- Quebec's schools have the **highest level of social segregation** in Canada.
- École Ensemble (School together) is a movement of concerned parents and citizens campaigning for a common network of public schools and 'contracted' private schools.

TOTAL POPULATION

9.1 million[107]

STUDENT POPULATION

1 million (Public schools)[108]

SPENDING PER STUDENT

AUD $23,606

PUBLIC SCHOOL ENROLMENT SHARE

87%

FEES IN PUBLICLY FUNDED SCHOOLS

Yes, up to AUD $5,500

FUNDING OF PRIVATE (FEE-CHARGING) SCHOOLS

Up to 75% of equivalent public schools

OECD INDEX OF ECONOMIC, SOCIAL AND CULTURAL STATUS (ESCS)

3.6 (Australia = 3.9)

ONTARIO AND QUEBEC – A BRIDGE APART, A WORLD OF DIFFERENCE

The neighbouring provinces of Ontario and Quebec are separated by the Ottawa River, and the walk over one of the many bridges that span it takes barely ten minutes. As close as these two provinces are geographically, a world of difference separates their schools. Indeed, in educational terms Quebec is much closer to Australia than to the rest of Canada.

Like Australia and unlike Ontario, Quebec heavily publicly subsidises fee-charging private schools and allows those schools to vet potential students according to whatever criteria they determine. Like Australia, these competitive advantages have enabled the private sector to increase its enrolment share dramatically over recent decades, and disproportionately amongst the wealthy and advantaged sections of the community.

Quebec's private school enrolment share at the secondary level has grown from **5 percent** in 1970 to **21 percent** today. In Montreal the proportion of secondary students at private schools is **39 percent**.[109]

Quebec's public school system has responded to the regulatory advantages afforded the private sector by cultivating its own set of de facto selective schools with their own internal competitive advantage.

Quebec has a three-tiered school system in which the subsidised fee-charging private sector and the selective public sector successfully compete to recruit the children of the most affluent and aspirational families. Comprehensive public schools inevitably suffer by comparison, and have been gradually beset by the inexorable dynamics of residualisation.

This formula for social stratification has had the inevitable consequence that the level of segregation across Quebec's schools is far greater than anywhere else in Canada – and much closer to Australia's.

THE WINDS OF CHANGE ARE BLOWING

In 2017 an increasing awareness of the impact that the dynamics of segregation and residualisation were having on schools and children, stimulated by a growing body of independent evidence and analysis, moved a group of Quebecois parents to launch a campaign for root and branch reform of the province's education system. They called it École Ensemble: school together.

The parents' campaign to address Quebec's structural failures is centred around a Plan for a Common Network, subtitled 'learning together at last'.[110]

Under the proposal, private schools could choose to enter into a 'contracted' status. This would see them fully publicly funded, prohibited from charging fees and no longer able to select students. Instead, they would serve a geographical enrolment zone. Alternatively, private schools could decide not to join the common network, and they could continue to charge fees, select students and maintain their existing management autonomy but would lose all public funding.

École Ensemble's plan for a common network represents a sweeping challenge to the existing mode of resourcing and regulating schools in Quebec and reflects the profound structural problems the province's school system faces.

As ambitious as their plan is, École Ensemble's proposals are not so different to what already exists in neighbouring Ontario. It begs the question: how have the two neighbouring provinces ended up in such different circumstances?

A QUIET REVOLUTION AND AN UNFORESEEN CONSEQUENCE

Surprisingly, perhaps, Quebec and Ontario started from a similar point. The great bargain embodied in the British North America Act, which created the Dominion of Canada in the nineteenth century, guaranteed that religious and linguistic minorities in each province would be protected.

Just as Catholic and Francophone communities in Ontario would be served by public schools responsive to their needs, Quebec was also required to provide public schools for its relatively small English-speaking, Protestant population. And so it did all the way until the late 1990s, at which point Quebec had jettisoned its faith-based public schools and established a purely secular but still bilingual public education system.

This decision can only be understood as a long-term outcome of what is called the Quiet Revolution. Until the 1960s, most of the province's public schools, those serving the majority French Catholic population, were directly run by the Catholic Church. The Catholic Church in Quebec was so powerful that the provincial government had no education department, or social services department, or health department. These were all the direct responsibility of the clergy.

The Quiet Revolution is the story of how this curious protrusion of the nineteenth century into the second half of the twentieth ultimately produced an equal and opposite reaction.

The reformers of the sixties, led by the Liberal prime minister Jean Lesage, asserted the power of the state and assigned the church to the more peripheral status it had already become accustomed to elsewhere. In 1964 the Government of Quebec established a Department of Education, and the first Minister of Education since 1875 was appointed. As the state assumed direct responsibility for the province's schools it set about trying to reform a system widely viewed as lacklustre and outmoded with some of the lowest literacy and secondary completion rates in Canada.[111]

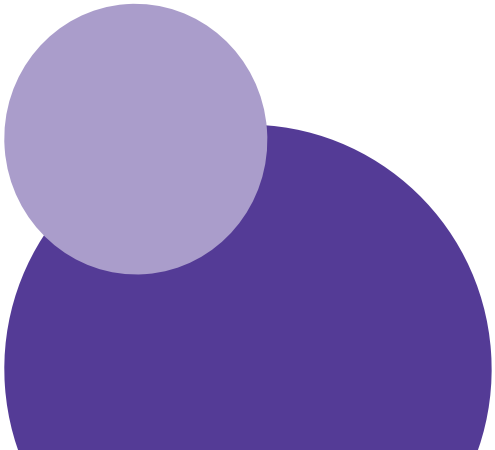
Over the ensuing decades Quebec transformed from the most traditional and religious part of the country to Canada's most secular and progressive province. Not only was the institutional power of the church increasingly diminished, but a more pervasive decline in religiosity set in. In this light, denominational schools, whether Catholic or Protestant, came to be seen as a special privilege, one that unfairly discriminated against people of other religions or no religion at all.

With the passing of the Québec Charter of Human Rights and Freedoms (1976) and the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms (1982), denominational schools were increasingly viewed as existing in tension with provisions guaranteeing equal rights and freedom of conscience and religion.

This new mentality culminated in the creation of a taskforce on the place of religion in schools in 1997 which would ultimately recommend the abolition of denominational public schools, and their replacement with French-language and English-language secular systems.

In the words of the taskforce's lead author, Professor Jean-Pierre Proulx, "We think that the moment has come to change the system actually, because we think that there is a large consensus among the Quebecers to respect fully the principle of equality of all citizens concerning the schools."[112] The Government accepted and implemented the recommendation.

With this, the Quiet Revolution had now culminated in the removal of religion from the public education system altogether.



One group that could have been expected to oppose the transition to secular language-based school systems was the Protestant minority. After all, denominational schools owed their existence to provisions that had been designed to protect and preserve their identity as a minority community in Quebec. But in addition to the general tide of secularism, there was a more immediate reason why even the Protestant school systems enthusiastically supported the reforms. The mostly English-speaking Protestant communities of Quebec had never been as large proportionally as the Catholic population of Ontario. By the final decades of the twentieth century, the anglophone population of Quebec entered a precipitous decline.

In 1971:

256,000

students were studying in Protestant denominational schools in Quebec

In 1997:

114,000

students were studying in Protestant denominational schools in Quebec, about **5%** of the total student population.[113]

Removing the religious element had the potential to put the English-language school system on a firmer footing. In the words of one representative body at the time, "Linguistic boards represent an historic opportunity for the English school system to become a viable network, to begin focussing on gain rather than drain at a time when the system itself is unlikely to grow."[114]

Thus, Quebec's system of Catholic and Protestant public schools transformed into a system of secular French-language and English-language schools.

The changing face of private schools

In the meantime, the private sector was rapidly expanding. In keeping with the marked decline in religiosity in Quebec, few of its private schools today are religious in character, even nominally. Instead, they are generally "autonomous not-for-profit organizations, managed by a board of directors comprised of alumni, parents, and community members."[115]

In some cases, they were originally church schools but were handed over to an independent organisation; in other cases, they are non-profits or co-ops established by parents, teachers or others seeking to create a distinctive kind of school.

"The main difference between independent school and public school is autonomy," according to Quebec's private school peak body; autonomy which they say enables personalised support, diverse extra-curricular activities, better staff and superior facilities.

50 **Today only 50 non-government schools in Quebec are still religious in character, and that's including Catholic, Evangelical Protestant, Muslim, Jewish and Orthodox schools.**[116]

Religious or otherwise, the position of Quebec's private schools today is sustained through heavy public subsidies, a perhaps unintended consequence of the turmoil of the sixties. At that time, private schools were mainly old, highly academic schools, known as les collèges classiques, through which the children of Quebec's elite proceeded to university. While some opposed state support for these schools, amid the broader upheaval a spirit of compromise prevailed on this question. As in Australia, the presence of public subsidies and the absence of corresponding regulation set the scene for the inexorable expansion of the private sector in the ensuing decades.[117]

FUNDING AND REGULATION OF QUEBEC'S PRIVATE SCHOOLS

Today, Quebec's private schools are heavily subsidised by the provincial government. Officially, private schools receive a per pupil subsidy amounting to **60 percent** of the average cost of educating a student in the public system.[118] However, this figure likely significantly understates the extent of government funding of the province's private schools.

There are numerous challenges calculating the real levels of private school funding and making comparisons with public schools. Stéphane Vigneault, the coordinator of École ensemble, points out that the 60 percent figure disguises reality because: "It does not acknowledge the higher cost of supporting special needs kids who are overrepresented in the public system, and it does not acknowledge that because public education is a universal commitment, all kids must have access to it and all teachers must be paid fairly, regardless of population density or location."[119]

The public system not only includes a greater proportion of students with learning difficulties and other characteristics that involve additional expense, but it also provides more schools which are comparatively costly because of their rural and regional location and smaller student populations.

Vigneault cites findings by a group of experts who estimated in 2014 that the cost to the state of a subsidized private student was 74.8 percent of that of an equivalent public student in high school, 63.9 percent in elementary school and 63.6 percent in preschool.[120]

Moreover, the Government of Quebec provides additional support to private schools over the basic per pupil grant, including allowances for special programmes and educational services as well as subsidies for school transport. The committee of independent experts observed that "a student in the public network who chooses a school other than the one in their area cannot demand the school transportation service, whereas they could benefit from financial assistance for this service if they attended a private establishment.[121]

Adding to the impact of direct subsidies, the province also supports the private sector through tax credits for donations to private schools. Eve-Lyne Couturier from Institut de Recherche et D'informations Socioéconomiques (IRIS) points out that private schools draw their clientele from wealthier families who can afford the tuition fees, and that high-income families are often able to claim payments to private schools as a charitable donation for tax purposes.[122]

Couturier argues that all taxpayers thus find themselves paying twice for private schools, first through direct government funding and then through the estimated loss of between **$24 – $40 million** in charitable tax credits.

This substantial state support for private schools, while not as extensive as in Australia, far exceeds levels elsewhere in Canada. In combination with tuition fees, it gives private schools a distinct resource advantage over the public schools they compete with. Subsidised private schools are permitted to charge fees up to around $5,500 with average annual fees set $3,891.[123]

According to the Fédération Des Etablissements D'enseignement Privés, the small proportion of private schools, around **7 percent**, which forego public funding charge annual fees, averaging **$8,894 per year**.[124]

EXPANSION OF THE PRIVATE SCHOOL SECTOR IN QUEBEC

As in Australia, Quebec's private schools gain a significant competitive edge by levying substantial fees on top of generous public subsidies. Correspondingly, private school growth has been greater in Quebec than in the other provinces. The private school market share at the secondary level has risen from 5 percent in 1970 to a significant 22 percent in 2022 – compared with the Ontario provincial average of 7 percent.

By far the greatest growth has occurred in the secondary years and in the cities. The private school portion in Montreal is at least 35 percent and 42 percent in Quebec City, figures similar to Australian cities.[125]

Enrolments in public schools have declined by around 5 percent over the past 20 years while enrolment in private schools has jumped by almost 20 percent.[126]

Unsurprisingly, high-income and advantaged families are overrepresented in the movement towards the private sector. The admission fees that provide private schools with a resourcing edge over public schools, attracting the affluent, also mean that those schools are much less accessible to children from low-income households. This sorting effect is exacerbated by the application of explicit selection criteria at the point of student enrolment. As in Australia, Quebec's publicly subsidised private schools use academic results, entrance exams and applicant interviews to determine admission.[127]

AND THE PUBLIC SYSTEM RESPONSE

Enrolment competition with the private sector has slowly transformed the nature of the public education system itself. As parent and activist, Stéphane Vigneault, explains, "rather than opposing the fiscal privilege granted to subsidized private schools, public institutions and education ministers instead decided to compete with private schools on their own turf: selection."[128]

Over a third of Quebec's public schools now offer specialist programs including the International Baccalaureate and Fine Arts, Music and STEM programs, as well as sports studies. They have become a primary means by which public schools seek to retain students who might otherwise be lured away to the private sector.

Just as in Australia and to an extent in British Columbia, these programs create another level of segregation within public schools when they are reserved for, or taken up by, higher-achieving students from advantaged families.

Around three quarters of these programs involve fees for parents, the level of which varies widely depending on the type of program. The average parental contribution is $1,350, but fees can be as high as $15,560.[129]

An expert report to the Minister of Education in 2020 observed that "Sports projects, particularly those associated with hockey, tennis, downhill skiing and figure skating, are the most expensive, whether they are offered in Sports-studies or Concentration type projects."[130]

In addition to the selective nature of many of the specialist programs, the significant fees mean that they tend to be accessed only by students from privileged socioeconomic backgrounds.

A THREE-TIER SCHOOL SYSTEM

Quebec think tank, the Institut de Recherche et D'informations Socioéconomiques (IRIS), describes what has been created as a three-tier school system, made up of private schools, public schools with specialist and selective programs, and regular public schools.[131] IRIS estimated that approximately:

- 14 percent of secondary school students were enrolled in one of these programs within the public network in 2013-2014.
- that proportion grew to at least 19 percent in 2020-2021.

Quebec's own education ministry concludes that:

- More than 20 percent of *primary and secondary students* are in such programs, over 200,000 students.[132]

In overall terms:

- At least 40 percent of secondary students are enrolled in either specialist public schools or private schools.

The consequence is that comprehensive public schools are left with a disproportionate share of children who experience learning difficulties and social disadvantage.

As Anne Plourde, a researcher with IRIS, explains, "In one system — where you pay thousands out of pocket — the kids are high achievers from families of means; they have a good support system and almost none have special needs. In another, you have students from the poorest families, students in crisis, students with learning disabilities and the children of immigrants who may not be able to speak French.

> "School is supposed to be the tool that we use to close the gap between rich and poor. Instead, it's widening that gap."[133]
>
> Anne Plourde, a researcher with IRIS.

MOUNTING PROBLEMS TOO GREAT TO IGNORE

Given Quebec's three-tiered school system functions to sort students according to their social background, it is not surprising that the province has the highest level of social segregation in Canada. Chmielewski and Maharaj compare social segregation between Canadian provinces, and with other OECD countries. They find that social segregation is generally low in Canada but Quebec, which has a large, publicly funded, fee-charging private sector, has much higher levels of social segregation than any other province.

In contrast, there are significantly lower levels of social segregation in Ontario, Alberta and Saskatchewan where there are fully publicly funded fee-free non-government sectors. Australia has an even higher level of social segregation than Quebec, but Quebecers might best read this as a warning rather than a source of comfort. Chmielewski and Maharaj find that "private school enrolment is highly correlated with segregation" and "In Quebec, a large portion of segregation is between public and private schools."[134]

Separate research by Anne Plourde found a significant over-representation of students with disabilities in the public system and a corresponding underrepresentation in private schools: "Our results confirm our hypothesis that private schools choose the "best" students, leaving out students with difficulties, who are thus concentrated in greater proportion in public school classes."[135]

The consequence is vividly portrayed by a Quebec fourth grade teacher with decades of experience. In her class of 22 students no less than 17 have learning disabilities or behavioural problems. "Every day when I get to work, it's like stepping on a banana peel and then slipping until the day is over," she reflects.[136]

Fee barriers and selective enrolment practices are a major driver of segregation between the public and private sectors in Quebec, but there is also significant diversity within schools belonging to the same sector. Chmielewski and Maharaj point out that "in all provinces, the majority of segregation occurs among schools in the same sector (i.e., among different public schools and among different private schools)."[137]

In the case of Quebec this is where the increasing proportion of high-SES students entering selective programs in the public system plays a decisive role, in addition to the broader role of social geography. The implication for policy solutions in both Quebec and Australia is that they must address both the 'within' and 'between' sector problems.

Quebec's position as an outlier in Canadian terms has long been recognised in Quebec itself.

In fact in 2016, the Conseil Supérieur de L'éducation, an independent advisory body, issued a stinging report on the state of Quebec's schools, titled *'Steering the Course Back to Equity in Education'*.[138]

The report highlighted how policies pursued by successive governments had produced an unusual degree of segregation, which was in turn impacting student achievement. "The stratification of the offer in compulsory education — brought about by a proliferation of selective special programs and private schools — is leading to an unequal treatment that tends to favour the more fortunate," the authors of the report wrote.

> "Rather than reducing social inequality... the Quebec education system operates in ways that contribute in some extent to perpetuating it. Children from disadvantaged backgrounds and those with learning disabilities are overrepresented in public classrooms, and this is creating environments less conducive for learning (and teaching)."
>
> Conseil Supérieur de L'éducation, 2016

It included a statement with a compelling logic: "Since it is possible to improve the educational system's overall performance without harming the best students, it is in the best interests of governments to explore all the options available to them in order to promote greater social diversity within classes and schools".

HOW QUEBEC RATES IN SCHOOL ACHIEVEMENT

> “The most striking indicator of educational achievement in Quebec is its rate of high school completion. According to the Institut Du Quebec, Quebec’s graduation rate of around only 69 percent “presents the worst performance at the Canadian level”.[139] In fact, Quebec has the lowest rate of secondary school completion across both Canada and the United States – and is even lower than Australia’s poor and declining rate of 79 percent.”[140]

In reporting these figures, the Institut Du Quebec comments that, “the graduation rate in Quebec public schools is still very low, and above all it has been stagnating for several years.” The report further highlights the dramatic contrast with the public system in neighbouring Ontario where the rate of successful completion of secondary school is 20 percent higher, a gap that expands to 25 percent for boys.[141]

It is important to acknowledge that Quebec has had historically low rates of high school matriculation associated with lower outcomes for Canada’s Francophone population.

However, within Quebec itself there is a large gap in rates of successful school completion between the private and public sector, with a graduation rate of just 64 percent in the public sector compared to 87 percent amongst private school students.[142]

And then there is a statistical contrast of another kind captured by Pierre Canisius Kamanzi, a professor at the Faculty of Education at the University of Montreal. Kamanzi compares the proportion of students who go to university from the private school sector, compared to the specialist public schools and comprehensive public schools. In the case of private schools, 60 percent of students continue to university. There is a slight drop for specialist public schools where the figure is 51 percent. But for comprehensive public schools, just 15 percent of students go to university. It is striking evidence of systemic failure.[143]

In a world in which life opportunities are becoming increasingly dependent on post-school qualifications, Quebec’s school system is failing a very high proportion of its young people. The burden of that failure is falling heavily on the students who are part of the least privileged layer of the province’s highly stratified school system.

30% of school dropouts do not participate in the labour market;

The consequences are confronting: 30 percent of school dropouts do not participate in the labour market; they make up nearly two thirds of individuals who go through the prison system; average income is 31 percent lower than those who complete a secondary school diploma; and their life expectancy is 7 years lower than the norm.[144]

The Institut Du Quebec points out that overall funding of schools in Quebec has significantly increased over the last decade. In fact, of the major Canadian provinces Quebec is now one of the biggest investors in its school system, spending considerably more than provinces like Ontario and Alberta (Figure 4). Additionally, as Stéphane Vigneault observes, "social programs in Québec are considered to be more generous than in other provinces."[145]

If resourcing is not the issue, an explanation for Quebec's low level of school completion is suggested by the findings of an exhaustive literature review presented to the Government of France in late 2023. It concluded that "In the medium and long term, the effects of diversity on students' academic trajectories are more significant, particularly for students from disadvantaged social backgrounds and the weakest students academically. For the latter, exposure to peers more socially advantaged, or of a better educational level, significantly improves the probability of completing secondary education as well as access to higher education."[146]

Evidence of the impact of peer effects on students' fortunes at schools comes from Quebec itself where Alain-Guillaume Marcotte-Fournier from the University of Sherbrooke found a significant 14 percent difference in achievement "for two students of the same gender, who obtained the same grade in sixth grade and who have the same level of material deprivation" but who were alternately placed in a highly advantaged or disadvantaged class.[147]

The evidence concerning levels of high school completion in Quebec are clearly damning, and there is good reason to believe that the province's uniquely high level of social segregation is a significant cause of the problem. But there is also what looks like an important piece of counterevidence. As shown in Canada's impressive PISA performance.

PISA results not always what they seem

Quebec is the highest achieving province in Mathematics, and while less strong in Reading and Science, still compares well to Australia. Quebec also came top in maths in the most recent Pan-Canadian Assessment Program for which results are available.[148] However, caution is required in relying on the PISA data. Quebec has had a uniquely low rate of participation in PISA historically, potentially skewing results.

In their analysis of the impact of non-response bias, Anders et al write: "The school response rate was particularly low in Quebec (40 percent before replacement) … in Québec… statistically significant differences were observed, and it is reported that the non-response bias analysis 'revealed potential bias'.[149]

Anders et al also observe that in the previous PISA round non-respondents had performed below average in provincial tests. The non-response issue compounds the potential impact of very high school dropout rates in the province. This makes for a confusing picture.

What is unambiguous is that Quebec exhibits the same high levels of social segregation and acute concentrations of social disadvantage as Australia, and an extensive body of evidence indicates that this significantly harms student achievement.

A PLAN FOR A COMMON NETWORK

In Canada, education is a provincial responsibility and presents a diverse array of school systems from which Australia can learn. Quebec and Ontario combined have approximately the same population as Australia as a whole.

When we look at the two provinces, we see a split image: in Ontario we gain a glimpse of unrealised possibilities; while in Quebec we see our own situation reflected. In both Australia and Quebec, a stratified three-tier system predominates, students are heavily segregated based on their background, and this has an especially deleterious effect on the most disadvantaged. And in both jurisdictions, calls for fundamental structural change are growing louder.

In 2017, the year after the Conseil Supérieur de l'Education had dropped its bombshell report criticising segregation and inequity in Quebec's schools, Stéphane Vigneault was a communications consultant living in a middle-class suburb of Gatineau, just across the river from Ottawa. By his own admission, he had not really thought a great deal about Quebec's education system. But that year his daughter, then aged seven, was invited to take an academic test for a selective public school which, if she was successful, would also demand annual admission fees starting at $550.

"Suddenly I was hit by the inequality of a system that encourages that children are taken out of their local neighbourhood schools and placed in unequal, exclusive schools" Vigneault said in an interview in 2020.[150]

Vigneault appealed to other parents in his neighbourhood, reflecting on how they had shared the burdens of being young parents and bringing up their children together. "I said to other parents that this is wrong, we should want our children to stay together and learn together at their local school."

But increasingly he noticed that other parents were putting their energy into shopping around for the right school, including looking at private options. "In Quebec now, the private but subsidized network is normal," Vigneault says. "It is like an elephant in the room that nobody sees anymore."[151]

Vigneault wrote an opinion piece for the Montreal newspaper *La Presse*, setting out his concerns about how the school system was dividing local communities and allowing some schools to choose students, but not others. This prompted a reaction from other parents who shared his concerns and agreed that something had to be done.

École Ensemble ("School Together") was born

First the movement relied on support from individual donors. In 2020 it received critical support from the Lucie and André Chagnon Foundation, enabling Vigneault to go full-time as the campaign's co-ordinator. As the rapidly expanding parent movement raised the red flag about how school choice was driving segregation in the province, they also absorbed the extensive literature on the problem and reflected deeply about a better alternative.

Ironically, perhaps, one source of inspiration in this quest was the seminal 1960s report, authored by Monsignor Alphonse-Marie Parent, which had first recommended that the Government of Quebec establish a department of education. Even back then the *Parent Report* had observed: "The terms 'private institution' or 'private sector' of education no longer seem to us accurately to describe the position and the function of the institutions which will be asked to play a part in educational development plans, to help inaugurate educational reforms and to benefit by financial assistance from the state."[152]

The report went even further, recommending reciprocal public obligations in return for public funding: "A semi-public institution which receives from a public body grants equivalent to the expenditures authorized in the public sector must in return accept admission standards comparable to those of the public institutions with which it collaborates. In practice, this means that it must accept all pupils who apply to it in order to receive the education it dispenses, provided that these pupils meet the requirements fixed in the agreement and live within an area which has been jointly defined."[153]

Drawing on perspectives like this, École Ensemble developed its own detailed, positive proposal to address the problems facing Quebec's schools.

Authored by Vigneault, they called the proposal *A Plan for a Common School Network*. The essential element of the common network is that schools:

- Do not compete for students
- All students attend their local school: "one address, one catchment area, one school."

The proposed common network is made up of:

- Public schools and 'contracted' private schools.
- Contracted private schools would be fully publicly financed and free.
- Private schools would be assigned an enrolment zone and required to take all-comers from their local area.[154]
- Contracted private schools would not be able to offload students with poor academic results to public schools.
- Contracted private schools could not enrol students on the basis of gender or religion.

The essential difference between public and contracted private schools is that the latter retain management autonomy, including their own board of directors; a chief executive hired by the board; as well as independent hiring of staff, collective agreement negotiation and work organisation.[155]

FIGURE 13 – ÉCOLE ENSEMBLE'S PLAN FOR A COMMON NETWORK

<table>
<tr><th colspan="2">Common Network</th><th>Education Market</th></tr>
<tr><th colspan="2">Public Schools | Contracted private schools</th><th>Non-contracted private schools</th></tr>
<tr><td colspan="2">100 percent public funding</td><td>No public funding</td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="2">Schools located close to home</td><td>Schools potentially remotely located</td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="2">Free elective courses for all students</td><td>Paid and selective elective courses</td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="2">Allocation of students based on equitable school map</td><td>Selection of students</td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="2">Collective agreements remain valid</td><td>Collective agreements remain valid</td></tr>
<tr><td>Management by School service centre or school board</td><td>Management autonomy</td><td>Management autonomy</td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="2">Free education</td><td>Unsubsidised tuition fees</td></tr>
</table>

Under École Ensemble's *Plan for a Common Network* private schools could choose to be 'contracted' and fully publicly funded, or 'non-contracted' and non-funded.[156]

Outside the common network, non-contracted private schools would no longer receive any public subsidy, either directly or indirectly. They would continue to be able to charge fees at the level they determine and select students free of any enrolment zone.[157]

The École Ensemble's plan respects the right of private schools to exist indicated in both international human rights law and the Quebec Charter of Human Rights and Freedom, but equally it affirms that neither of these sources of law propose any inherent right to state subsidies.

To meet the demand for extension courses and curriculum specialisations currently provided by selective public schools, the École Ensemble plan proposes a reorganisation of the timetable. In all secondary schools:

- A designated period each day would be devoted to electives.
- Each student selects two elective courses each year and the classes are on alternating days.
- There are no fees or academic selection tests.

The report offers an example of a school where this model has already been offered successfully. At École Secondaire Sainte-Marie: "The courses are varied and respond to the needs expressed by the students and their parents (e.g., performing arts, enriched French, Spanish, computer science); the personal skills of the teachers (e.g., a teacher who is a former ping-pong champion); and the environment of the school (e.g., proximity to a swimming pool or a forest)."[158]

Vigneault and his collaborators recognised that to a significant extent school populations reflect the wealth or poverty of their local neighbourhood.

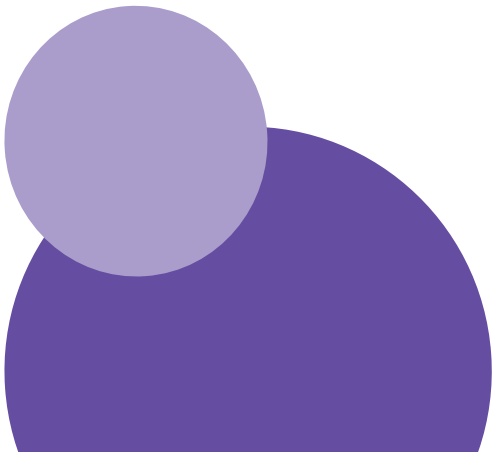
Commissioning equitable and economic modelling

In response the movement commissioned researchers from the University of Zurich and the Université de Montréal, as well as the Swiss firm, Ville Juste, to develop a plan for a more equitable distribution of students.

The researchers examined how enrolment zones could be created that maintained proximity for students travelling to school, adhered to existing capacity, but also maximised socio-economic diversity.

In the catchment areas the researchers designed for Laval, north of Montreal, the average distance between home and school is four kilometres, probably less than current travel distances although they are not known with any precision. Critically, the attendance boundaries ensured maximal socio-economic diversity across the city's schools. Taking families where at least one parent has a university degree as the proxy, all schools bar one were within 5 percent of the city average.

The research showed that optimised enrolment areas, preferably supervised by a third-party regulatory body, independent of school authorities, could significantly improve socio-economic diversity and help mitigate against the impact of residential segregation – in Australia as well as Quebec. Even with robust regulation of enrolment practices, concentrations of privilege and poverty will remain, especially in some outer metropolitan, rural and remote contexts. In these contexts, needs-based funding is especially critical.



École Ensemble commissioned an economist from the University of Sherbrooke, François Delorme, to model the impact of their plan on the provincial government's budget.[159] Delorme assumed that there would be the same proportion of students enrolled in non-contracted private schools as are currently enrolled in private schools in Ontario – around 7 percent.

The modelling determined that the province of Quebec would face an additional cost of **$460 million** to fund contracted private schools. That cost would be more than offset by the savings of **$570 million** from removing subsidies from non-contracted schools.[160]

The research showed that the common network would deliver a fiscal saving of almost $110 million per year. It's a further indication, in addition to the policies already in place in Ontario, that a common framework is affordable.

École Ensemble's *Plan for Common Network* also sets out a detailed and compelling plan for grandfathering new arrangements in a way that minimises disruption. The plan proposes:

- A five-year transition period in which a catchment area would begin to apply to newly enrolled students in contracted private schools.
- Subsidies would be withdrawn for new students at non-contracted private schools.

Students entering high school in Year 1 of the plan would do so on the terms of the common network while students already in high school will continue as they were until the completion of their school career. Thus, the new system could be introduced in a way that minimises any fee shock to existing private school parents.[161]

The Plan for a Common Network is a detailed, pragmatic and imaginative proposal and it has had a major impact on the conversation in Quebec including an enthusiastic endorsement from former Premier of Quebec, Pauline Marois.[162] In early 2025, École Ensemble's plan was drafted into legislative form and introduced into the National Assembly of Quebec by the leader of the Québec solidaireparty, Ruba Ghazal.

It remains to be seen whether the government will allow the bill, *An Act to establish acommon school network to guarantee equal opportunities,* to proceed to a vote.[163] However, the momentum is growing. According to polling commissioned by École Ensemble, their proposals are also popular, with three quarters of respondents supporting "a school that welcomes children from all socio-economic backgrounds" in 2022 polling and support for the common network proposal increasing to **85 percent** in 2024.[164] With numbers like these, Vigneault has his eyes firmly set on the next provincial elections, due by October 2026.

Reflecting on the contribution made by the movement he leads, Vigneault has written: "École ensemble's role was also to propose a politically realistic solution… the old public/private debate was a dead end. Fresh thinking was required to bring about a new equilibrium in Quebec's education system".

While this pragmatic approach has raised some suspicion (especially on the left, where abolishing private schools has been an old dream for many), overall, it has been met with enthusiasm. The realistic roadmap it provides brings a lot of energy to a debate that was stalled for half a century."[165]

Whether or not Quebec ultimately adopts the common network, the work of Vigneault and all those involved in École Ensemble offers critical inspiration for Australia. Like the reformers in Ontario in the 1990s who successfully introduced a needs-based funding system for both secular and faith-based schools, they demonstrate what is possible when we critically examine things we have taken for granted and reject the dogma that there is no alternative. They show that with courage and imagination it is possible to design a school system that better meets the needs of all students and successfully accommodates diverse perspectives across the community. They show us that if we put our minds to it change is possible.

SUZANNE LAZENBY – A COMMON FUNDING FRAMEWORK IN AUSTRALIA?

Dr Suzanne Lazenby jointly initiated and served as co-Director of LEAP (Leading Educators Around the Planet), facilitating internationalised professional development for senior school leaders. She is a former elementary school principal and university lecturer, with internationally published research.

There are many similarities between the existing situation in Quebec and Australia: complexities and contradictions in funding and regulation have grown over time and developed like topsy. École Ensemble's proposed funding model for Quebec has a lot of merit and could be transferable to Australia.

The proposed model will save the government money. There is a transition plan suggested over five years and private schools which elect to contract into the common network will gradually phase out their current student selection process so that they are eventually drawing from their local community for enrolments. Optimised catchment areas for schools would be similar to those operating in Switzerland, with three components to consider: school capacity, distance from home to school, and a maximum socio-economic diversity in each catchment area. Census data will be used to guide these decisions.

Under the proposed plan schools can fundraise, but the money raised goes to the district school board, not the school itself. Non-contracted private schools are to have their public subsidies gradually removed across the transition phase. Part of their proposal is a one-off historical payment to endeavour to match private schools' foundations assets and to compensate for past inequities.

CONCLUSION

"If Australia is to build on the progress of recent years, and avoid backsliding, Canada offers a vital source of inspiration and instruction... The opportunity for Australians is to create a more socio-economically inclusive and diverse system of schools which supports social cohesion and belonging and enriches academic opportunity and achievement."

- Ontario, Canada's largest province, has a **needs-based funding system** and **no publicly funded schools charge fees**.
- In Ontario secular and faith-based schools belong to **one common framework**.
- Ontario's schools have **low levels of social segregation** and **support high achievement**.
- **Needs-based funding** across secular and faith-based school systems **is affordable**.
- A common framework of secular and faith-based schools enjoys **political support** across a widespread cross-section of society.
- British Columbia **regulates fees** in some non-government schools, but others still enjoy significant resource advantages and can actively or passively exclude disadvantaged students.
- **Quebec has similar policy settings to Australia and the same problems.**
- In Quebec, a group of concerned parents and citizens are campaigning for a **fairer, more inclusive and more effective school system**.

IT'S TIME TO CONFRONT STRUCTURAL FAILURE

The lesson from Canada is that the structures within which schools operate, including the way they are funded and regulated, directly impact student learning as well as the capacity of schools to innovate and improve over time.

Where some schools can charge fees as well as collect significant public subsidies, as is the case in both Australia and Quebec (and British Columbia to a lesser extent), the resulting resource disparities drive social segregation. And where there are unequal obligations to provide access to all-comers, segregation is further compounded by prohibitively expensive fees and exclusive enrolment practices.

The consequence is that both Quebec and Australia's schools are much less inclusive, equal and successful than they could be.

Ontario illustrates how a common framework of resourcing and responsibilities for all schools promotes socio-economic diversity and supports enhanced equity and achievement.

Ontario exemplifies how broad-based community support for such an approach can be achieved when the desire for diverse schooling options is successfully balanced with the imperative of ensuring all young people have equal opportunity to access everything that education offers. The movement for change in Quebec further illustrates that we need not be prisoners of history. We can find common ground and work together to realise a better future.

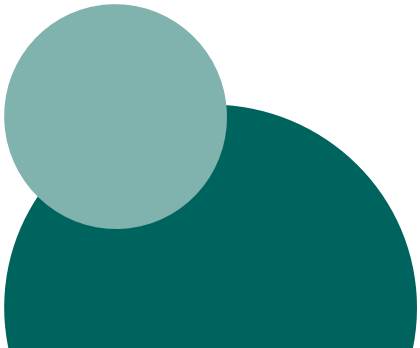
In Australia, the *Better and Fairer Schools* agreement, forged by the Commonwealth along with the states and territories, has shown how the two levels of government can work together in the best interests of our children. They have succeeded in aligning the ambitions of public policy with widely supported principles concerning fair and adequate funding for schooling. Noteworthy is the enhanced Commonwealth contribution and the intention to remove indefensible loopholes in the way state governments fund public schools. It is also hugely significant that where existing funding of non-government schools currently exceeds their entitlement it is being gradually but methodically reduced over time. On numerous fronts, sensible and rational policy is replacing arbitrary and self-interested deals.

None of this would have been possible without a significant organisational layer made up of teacher unions, peak bodies, think tanks and advocates that have relentlessly championed the case for change. The organisational muscle and policy acumen embodied in this loosely connected movement represents a resource with the potential to drive further reform.

But this is no time to rest on our laurels.

The new funding agreements are far from perfect. The most glaring issue is the ten-year timeline to fund public schools at the minimum resource standard. In 2013 a previous government secured legislation that set out a six-year timeline to get to the same point. Will the inevitable oscillations of electoral politics, along with significant budgetary pressures and incessant lobbying sour the present plan as they did the previous one? If the past is prologue, we should prepare ourselves for disappointment.

There is also a risk in focusing too narrowly on money, to the exclusion of other core features of our school systems. The money that pays for educators and infrastructure is indispensable to educational success in all its forms, as is its appropriate allocation. But, as this report has made clear, regulatory settings determine the distribution of a similarly vital resource – a student's peers.



Where government policy produces concentrations of social disadvantage in certain schools, as it does in Quebec just as it does in Australia, the consequences are deeply harmful and act as blocks to progress on multiple fronts. Needs-based funding is imperative but so too are policy settings – like Ontario's common framework – that promote socio-economic diversity across the school system. Public education advocates need to continue to champion both fundamental objectives in order to establish a level playing field on which all schools are able to flourish.

Another sentiment that encourages complacency – and, if not curbed, could induce us to take a backwards step – is the belief that now the "funding wars" have been disposed of, policy makers can focus on "what works" in schools. Advocates of this approach typically have a particular reform to promote, often with a back-to-basics flavour, which they present as a silver bullet solution. The flaw in this thinking is its either/or character. In reality we need to continue to improve our education system at both the macro and micro levels, both the overarching system design and leadership in schools and as well as pedagogical practice in classrooms. *Both* levels significantly impact on the opportunities and outcomes our students' access. Moreover, well-designed systems support effective teaching and learning in the classroom just as structural flaws undermine even the best teachers; overwhelm the most formidable principals; and diminish the impact of even the most powerful programs and curriculum. It's simply a fallacy to view the two levels of reform as mutually exclusive, a mistake usually borne of a superficial understanding of how schools work in practice. Without both, each is diminished.

If Australia is to build on the progress of recent years, and avoid backsliding, Canada offers a vital source of inspiration and instruction. Ontario shows that needs-based funding is not only possible, but necessary to maintain a flourishing education system. Moreover, it illustrates how genuine needs-based funding can apply equally across school sectors, and that it's possible to forge a common framework in which consistent resourcing and regulation applies to schools that are diverse in their mission and character. In so doing, the province has largely eliminated the sectoral basis for social segregation in its schools.

The opportunity for Australians, if we choose to learn from this example, is to create a more socio-economically inclusive and diverse system of schools which supports social cohesion and belonging and enriches academic opportunity and achievement.

APPENDICES

APPENDIX A: THE AUSTRALIAN DELEGATION

Leading Educators Around the Planet (LEAP) and Australian Learning Lecture (ALL) put together a diverse group of ten educators, including school leaders, as well as writers, PhD candidates and someone with journalism experience. The tour in from the 6th to the 16th of October 2024 had a specific focus on the overall framework of schools in Ontario, Quebec (briefly) and British Columbia. The focus was on how each province achieves both equity and achievement. The participants were:

Dr Warren Marks OAM. Warren jointly initiated and served as co-director of LEAP (Leading Educators Around the Planet), an innovative leadership program facilitating international peer-shadowing programs and study tour programs. His experience includes researching, designing, managing and implementing educational leadership programs.

Chris Bonnor AM is a previous head of the New South Wales Secondary Principals' Council. He has co-authored books on Australia's schools, including *Waiting for Gonski, how Australia failed its schools* (2022). He recently co-authored *Choice and Fairness, a common framework for all Australian Schools*.

Caroline David is the Principal of Woonona High School, and Vice President of the NSW South Coast Secondary Principals' Council. She is a PhD candidate at the University of Sydney investigating how Australian education policy architecture is entrenching inequality.

Sue French PSM is a Birpai woman from the NSW mid-north coast. She is Principal in Residence for the NSW Department of Education and has been principal of two schools, as well as being a founding member of Big Picture Education, Australia.

Tom Greenwell is a teacher, writer and presenter. He co-authored *Waiting for Gonski, How Australia failed its schools* and *Choice and Fairness: A Common Framework for all Australian schools* (2023). He teaches history and politics at Hawker College, a senior secondary school in the ACT.

Dr Suzanne Lazenby jointly initiated and served as co-Director of LEAP (Leading Educators Around the Planet), facilitating internationalised professional development for senior school leaders. She is a former elementary school principal and university lecturer, with internationally published research.

Denise Lofts is President of the NSW Secondary Principals Council and is principal of Ulladulla High School in NSW. She is a doctoral student at the University of New South Wales researching philanthropy and equity in NSW rural education.

Lindsay Luck is Principal at St Stanislau's College in Bathurst, NSW. He has led primary, secondary and P-12, day and boarding schools catering to domestic and international students in Queensland, Northern Territory and now New South Wales.

Andy Mison is the President of the Australian Secondary Principals' Association. He is a director on the board of the Australian Institute of Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL) and has served as a teacher and principal in three jurisdictions and as CEO of an organisation delivering vocational education.

Michael Sciffer is a a school counsellor and PhD candidate. His research interests include the drivers and outcomes of the segregation of low SES and Indigenous students, school compositional effects, and the impacts of social contexts on school effectiveness.

Penny Underwood is a journalist and strategic communicator currently with the Australian Learning Lecture. She has worked in print and radio for UK and international media, and with governments, NGOs, and professional associations delivering communication strategies that have delivered results and impact.

Jenny Walker has been an educator for more than 42 years with the NSW Department of Education, the last 29 years as a principal. She has served as a Director of Education (Schools), Director of Aboriginal Education in school leadership and coaching positions.

While **Ellen Koshland** was not part of the travelling team, she played a pivotal supporting role. Ellen established the Koshland Innovation Fund to stimulate new thinking about education in Australia. The Fund established the Australian Learning Lecture to bring innovative ideas and new approaches to learning to national attention. The Australian Learning Lecture strongly supported the Canadian research tour and the compilation of this report.

APPENDIX B: CANADIAN HOSTS AND PRESENTERS

Coordinators

In Ontario, the team was supported by **Ralph Cuthbertson**, a former Superintendent of Education with the Toronto District School Board, and **Doris McWhorter**, the former Director of the Education Research and Evaluation Strategy Branch of the Ontario Ministry of Education.

In Vancouver, the team was supported by **Kit Krieger**, former Superintendent of Appeals at the British Columbia Ministry of Education, as well as by **Liz Bell**, former Director of Professional Learning and Development with B.C. Principals' & Vice-Principals' Association, and **Nancy Roberts**, former secondary deputy principal.

Toronto

Andrew Davis, Assistant Deputy Minister, Ontario Education, Labour and Finance Division.

Rashmi Swarup, Peel District School Board Director and **Jaspaui Gill**, Associate Director Operations

Cathy Montreull, former Deputy Minister Nova Scotia, and Assistant Deputy Minister, Student Achievement, Ontario

Alison Osborne, President, and **Nadine Trepanier-Bisson**, Executive Director, Ontario Principals Council.

Brendan Browne, Director, and **Ryan Putnam**, Chief Financial Officer, Toronto Catholic District Board

Ottawa

Tom D'Amico, Director of Education, Ottawa Catholic School Board

Norah Marsh, Former Director Durham School Board, Ottawa-Carleton District.

Jean-Paul Cloutier, Principal, Notre Dame Secondary School

Pino Buffone, Director, and **Amy Hannah**, Superintendent, Ottawa-Carleton District School Board.

Stéphane Vigneault, Co-ordinator for Quebec education campaign group, École Ensemble

Vancouver

Shannon Behan, President, **Magdalena Kassis**, Executive Director, and **Andrea McComb**, Director of Professional Learning, British Columbia Principals' & Vice-Principals' Association

Suzanne Hoffman, CEO, and **Carolyn Broady**, President, British Columbia School Trustees Association

Teresa Downs, President, British Columbia School Superintendents' Association

Amber Shilling, Executive Director of Aboriginal Education, British Columbia Ministry of Education

Sarvi Brent, Executive Director, Teacher Regulation, British Columbia Ministry of Education

Charles Ungerleider, Professor Emeritus at University of British Columbia and former Deputy Minister of Education for British Columbia.

Cary Hungle, Principal of Handsworth Secondary School

Kim Jonat, Principal of Carson Graham Secondary School

Additional interviewees

Anna Katyn Chmielewski, Associate Professor of Educational Leadership & Policy, Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto.

Sachin Maharaj, Assistant Professor of Educational Leadership, Policy and Program Evaluation, University of Ottawa.

Charles Ungerleider, Professor Emeritus at University of British Columbia and former Deputy Minister of Education for British Columbia.

Andy Hargreaves, Visiting Professor at the University of Ottawa and Research Professor at Boston College.

Véronique Grenier, Banting Postdoctoral Fellow, Institut national de la recherche scientifique (INRS)

The Australian team expresses its deep appreciation of the quality and professionalism of our hosts and presenters. Of necessity, the focus of our visit was specific to the structures within which Canadian and Australian schools operate. Our hosts helped our team critically explore and analyse their systems, adding value to our project to enhance equity and fairness in Australia.

APPENDIX C: THE (MUCH DEBATED) ROLE OF LOCAL ELECTED TRUSTEES IN GOVERNING CANADIAN SCHOOL SYSTEMS

District school boards – local council-like bodies led by elected 'trustees' – are a critical part of the Canadian educational landscape. Proponents contend that boards are an essential forum for local participation in decision-making, and a necessary counterbalance to the power of technocrats in the provincial governments. Suzanne Hoffman (CEO) and Carolyn Broady (President) of the School Trustees Association in British Columbia, point to the way boards are positioned between government and schools, something which gives them substantial independence and influence.

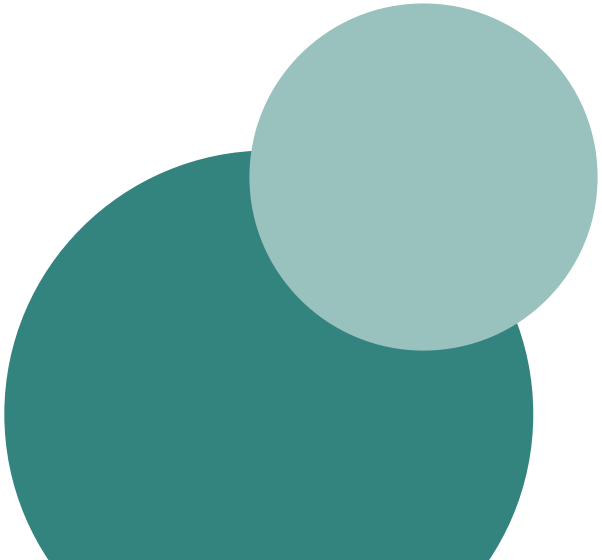
Elected trustees are responsible for the politics, including fighting for better funding, giving schools more space to focus on what matters. Additionally, boards are advocates for, and sustain trust in, local public schools and help promote commitment to publicly funded education generally. Conversely, critics complain that trustees are often elected unopposed, lack sufficient expertise or use the position as a stepping stone to a political career.

In 2020 a review of the Peel District School Board in Toronto reported serious concerns about racism, organisational dysfunction and problematic governance. When the Board failed to adequately respond to a series of directives from the Ontario Minister of Education it was placed under supervision for a period of two and a half years. Supervision by the Ministry only ended in January 2023[166] after a range of interventions had been implemented.[167]

In Nova Scotia, allegations of misconduct by trustees in 2018 became a catalyst for the abolition of the province's seven school boards and their replacement with regional superintendents directly under the control of the education department.[168] But that move has its critics too. They contend that mooted public accountability counterweights never materialised, school councils have withered, and student achievement has flatlined.[169]

Appreciating the place of boards, and how they are viewed, is important to understanding education in Canada.

For Australians there are already significant challenges arising from the involvement of two levels of government in school education, a third major layer of governance and bureaucracy does not seem viable or attractive. Nor is it at all likely that government or non-government school systems would be willing to devolve power in this way.



APPENDIX D: LABELLING SCHOOLS

The labels given to different kinds of schools vary from country to country, often making international comparisons quite difficult.

Public schools in Australia are schools that are owned, operated and fully funded by governments. Hence, they are also called government schools. While this is true in Canada, the additional complexity is that public schools are owned and operated by **district school boards**, distinct legal entities governed by locally elected trustees (see p.27). This provides school systems with significant autonomy from provincial governments. In Ontario, Alberta and Saskatchewan around one third of public schools are **faith-based public schools** governed by Catholic district school boards (elected by Catholic residents).

In this report **non-government school** and **private school** are used as synonyms to describe schools that are owned and operated by non-government organisations, mostly churches but also not-for-profits and co-ops. While we use **private school** from time to time, it is something of a misnomer because in Australia, Quebec and British Columbia these schools receive very substantial public subsidies. Indeed, many Australian "private" schools receive more taxpayer funding than public schools serving comparable students.[170] In these cases it is the ownership and operation that places the school in the non-government or private category, not the funding.

In Australia, **Catholic** and **Independent schools** are two kinds of non-government school. **Catholic schools** belong to systems operated by Catholic Education Offices in each state and territory. **Independent schools** are not part of a system and are owned and operated independently. They tend to be Protestant schools. In parts of Canada, like British Columbia, **independent school** is a term used for all non-government schools.

ENDNOTES

1 L O'Brien et al, *Improving Outcomes for All: The Report of the Independent Expert Panel's Review to Inform a Better and Fairer Education System*, 2023, p.73 https://www.education.gov.au/review-inform-better-and-fairer-education-system/resources/expert-panels-report

2 L O'Brien et al 2023, *Improving Outcomes for All, The Report of the Independent Expert Panel's Review to Inform a Better and Fairer Education System*, pp. 77 – 80; T Greenwell & C Bonnor 2023, 'Choice and Fairness: A Common Framework for All Australian Schools', Koshland Innovation Fund, pp. 14 – 24; T Greenwell & C Bonnor 2022, *Waiting for Gonski: How Australia failed its schools*, UNSW Press, pp. 77–85

3 ibid.

4 US dollars in original source: Manitoba 14,997; Quebec 14,877; Nova Scotia 13,932; Saskatchewan 13,816; Ontario 12,740; New Brunswick 12,700; Prince Edward Island 12,590; Alberta 12,260; British Columbia 11,853. OECD (2024), *Education at a Glance 2024: OECD Indicators*, p.259, OECD Publishing, Paris, https://doi.org/10.1787/c00cad36-en. See also Statistics Canada. Table 37-10-0211-01 Public and private expenditure on educational institutions as a percentage of GDP, by level of education, DOI: https://doi.org/10.25318/3710021101-eng. ACARA, *National Report on Schooling 2023*, p.10, https://acara.edu.au/reporting/national-report-on-schooling-in-australia

5 Archdiocese of Toronto 2022, 'The Ontario Provincial Election and the Catholic Church', https://www.archtoronto.org/siteassets/media/archdiocese-of-toronto-main-site/files/resources/backgrounder-education-03.pdf

6 Chmielewski, A. K., & Maharaj, S. (2022). Socio-economic segregation between schools in Canada. p. 17 https://utoronto.scholaris.ca/server/api/core/bitstreams/8b0814c2-a260-4e0e-8faa-65d80c5be57f/content

7 L O'Brien et al 2023, *Improving Outcomes for All, The Report of the Independent Expert Panel's Review to Inform a Better and Fairer Education System*, p. 88 https://www.education.gov.au/review-inform-better-and-fairer-education-system/resources/expert-panels-report

8 Sciffer, M.G. (2025), The Systemic Inefficiency of Australian Schools: A Policy and Measurement Review. Aust J Soc Issues. https://doi.org/10.1002/ajs4.70004

9 Ibid.

10 J Hare 2023, 'Private schools raise fees at three times rate of inflation', Australian Financial Review, https://www.afr.com/work-and-careers/education/private-schools-raise-fees-at-three-times-rate-of-inflation-20250103-p5l1vk

11 L O'Brien et al 2023, *Improving Outcomes for All, The Report of the Independent Expert Panel's Review to Inform a Better and Fairer Education System*, pp. 77 – 80; T Greenwell & C Bonnor 2023, 'Choice and Fairness: A Common Framework for All Australian Schools', Koshland Innovation Fund, pp. 14 – 24; T Greenwell & C Bonnor 2022, *Waiting for Gonski: How Australia failed its schools, UNSW Press*, pp. 77–85

12 D Gonski et al, *Review of Funding for Schooling, Final Report,* 2011, p. 124

13 OECD (2018), *Equity in Education: Breaking down barriers to social mobility*, p.122, https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/education/ equity-in-education_9789264073234-en

14 Productivity Commission 2022, Review of the National School Reform Agreement, Study Report, Canberra, p.74/5

15 L O'Brien et al, *Improving Outcomes for All: The Report of the Independent Expert Panel's Review to Inform a Better and Fairer Education System*, 2023, p.73 https://www.education.gov.au/review-inform-better-and-fairer-education-system/resources/expert-panels-report

16 ibid.

17 L O'Brien et al, p.80

18 ibid.

19 C Harris (2025), 'Schools must level the playing field: expert', *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 5 March 2025, p. 1 & 7

20 J Clare, 'Media release – Better and fairer schools agreement', 31 July 2024 https://ministers.education.gov.au/clare/better-and-fairer-schools-agreement;

21 D Lloyd, 'Ease cost of living now to get skilled workers of tomorrow', Universities Australia, 13 March 2024

22 H Georgiou & S Larsen (2023), 'Are Australian students really falling behind? It depends which test you look at', *The Conversation*, 6 December 2023 https://theconversation.com/are-australian-students-really-falling-behind-it-depends-which-test-you-look-at-218709

23 OECD 2024, PISA 2022 Results (Volume III), p.81, https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/pisa-2022-results-volume-iii_765ee8c2-en.html

24 P Sahlberg 2019, 'Australia must fix school inequity to create a top education system', ABC News, 14 August 2019, https://www.abc.net.au/news/2019-08-14/australia-must-fix-school-inequity-for-top-education-system/11412438

25 L Perry 2015, 'The lesson from Canada: why Australia should have fewer selective schools', *The Conversation*, 19 February, 2015, https://theconversation.com/the-lesson-from-canada-why-australia-should-have-fewer-selective-schools-35534

26 P Sahlberg 2024, 'Could Australia have a better and fairer education system?' Faculty of Education Dean's Lecture Series, University of Melbourne, 11 September 2024; Also see OECD 2023, *PISA 2022 Volume II,* p.147, https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/pisa-2022-results-volume-ii_a97db61c-en.html

27 S Thomson 2019, 'Aussie students are a year behind students 10 years ago in science, maths and reading', *The Conversation*, 3 December, 2019, https://theconversation.com/aussie-students-are-a-year-behind-students-10-years-ago-in-science-maths-and-reading-127013

28 OECD 2023, *PISA 2022 Results (Volume I): The State of Learning and Equity in Education*, p. 52, PISA, OECD Publishing, Paris, https://doi.org/10.1787/53f23881-en. Australia ranked above Canada in TIMMS 2023 but some Canadian provinces did not participate and TIMMS is confined to maths and science at the Year 4 and Year 8 levels – see CMEC n.d., https://www.cmec.ca/756/TIMSS_2023.html

29 OECD 2023, PISA 2022 Results (Volume I and II) – Country Notes: Canada, 5 December 2023, https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/pisa-2022-results-volume-i-and-ii-country-notes_ed6fbcc5-en/canada_901942bb-en.html; OECD 2023, PISA 2022 Results (Volume I and II) – Country Notes: Australia, 5 December 2023, https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/pisa-2022-results-volume-i-and-ii-country-notes_ed6fbcc5-en/australia_e9346d47-en.html

30 OECD 2023, *PISA 2022 Results (Volume I)*, p. 116

31 OECD 2023, PISA 2022 Results (Volume I and II) – Country Notes: Canada, 5 December 2023, https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/pisa-2022-results-volume-i-and-ii-country-notes_ed6fBritish Columbiac5-en/canada_901942bb-en.html

32 OECD 2023, *PISA 2022 Results (Volume I)*, p. 112

33 OECD 2023, *PISA 2022 Results (Volume I)*, p. 137

34 In original source US $330 more. OECD 2023, PISA 2022 Results (Volume I and II) – Country Notes: Australia, 5 December 2023, https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/pisa-2022-results-volume-i-and-ii-country-notes_ed6fbcc5-en/australia_e9346d47-en.html; OECD 2023, PISA 2022 Results (Volume I and II) – Country Notes: Canada, 5 December 2023, https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/pisa-2022-results-volume-i-and-ii-country-notes_ed6fbcc5-en/canada_901942bb-en.html

35 Statistics Canada. Table 37-10-0211-01 Public and private expenditure on educational institutions as a percentage of GDP, by level of education, DOI: https://doi.org/10.25318/3710021101-eng; OECD n.d., Expenditure on educational institutions as a percentage of GDP, by level of education (2021), https://oecdch.art/74c4836b46

36 US dollars in original source: Manitoba 14,997; Quebec 14,877; Nova Scotia 13,932; Saskatchewan 13,816; Ontario 12,740; New Brunswick 12,700; Prince Edward Island 12,590; Alberta 12,260; British Columbia 11,853. OECD (2024), *Education at a Glance 2024: OECD Indicators*, p.259, OECD Publishing, Paris, https://doi.org/10.1787/c00cad36-en. See also Statistics Canada. Table 37-10-0211-01 Public and private expenditure on educational institutions as a percentage of GDP, by level of education, DOI: https://doi.org/10.25318/3710021101-eng. ACARA, *National Report on Schooling 2023*, p.10, https://acara.edu.au/reporting/national-report-on-schooling-in-australia

37 The Council of Ministers of Education, Canada (CMEC) 2023, *Measuring Up: Canadian Results of the OECD PISA 2022 Study*, p.38, https://www.cmec.ca/Publications/Lists/Publications/Attachments/438/PISA-2022_Canadian_Report_EN.pdf

Note: The OECD average of the ESCS Index is 0.00, with a standard error of 0.0. Results for Canada and most provinces (except Prince Edward Island, New Brunswick, and Saskatchewan) should be treated with caution because one or more PISA technical standards were not met (see Appendix A for further details).

38 S Fryer and O Leblanc-Laurendeau 2019, 'Understanding Federal Jurisdiction and First Nations', Parliamentary Information and Research Service, Parliament of Canada, 29 November 2019, https://lop.parl.ca/sites/PublicWebsite/default/en_CA/ResearchPublications/201951E

39 Assembly of First Nations 2023, https://afn.bynder.com/m/583fa08a55428449/original/K-12-Factsheet.pdf

40 S Borwein, J Farney, I Khovrenkov, LA White. 'Not Hidden but Not Visible: Government Funding of Independent Schools in Canada', *Canadian Journal of Political Science.* 2023; 56 (3): 698 – 714. doi:10.1017/S0008423923000471

41 Ontario Ministry of Finance and Statistics Canada 2024, 'Ontario Demographic Quarterly: highlights of second quarter', https://www.ontario.ca/page/ontario-demographic-quarterly-highlights-second-quarter, Retrieved 22 February 2025

42 This account draws on A Mison 2024, 'A Canadian Education Story: Equity, Choice and the Common Good', https://www.aspa.asn.au/post/a-canadian-education-story-equity-choice-and-the-common-good

43 Ministry of Education, Government of Ontario n.d., https://www.app.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/sift/schoolProfileSec.asp?SCH_NUMBER=809020&x=20&y=18

44 Government of Ontario, Education Act, Ontario Regulation 348/24, Core Education Funding — Legislative Grants For The 2024-2025 School Board Fiscal Year, https://www.ontario.ca/laws/regulation/240348#act-verion

45 Government of Ontario 2024, Core Education Funding Projections for the 2024-25 School Year, https://www.ontario.ca/files/2024-09/edu-2024-25-school-board-projections-en-2024-09-05.pdf

46 D Ashenden, 'The educational consequences of the peace', 28 July 2016, https://insidestory.org.au/the-educational-consequences-of-the-peace/

47 G Pell, 'Religion and Culture: Catholic Schools in Australia', keynote address to the 2006 National Catholic Education Conference, Sydney, 28 September 2006.

48 L Watson & C Ryan, 'Choosers and losers: The impact of government subsidies on Australian secondary schools', Australian Journal of Education, vol. 54, no. 1, 2010, p. 93. https://research.acer.edu.au/aje/vol54/iss1/6/

49 Ministry of Education, Government of Ontario 2024, 'Core Education Funding: Technical Guide for School Boards 2024–25, Revised September 2024, https://efis.fma.csc.gov.on.ca/faab/GSN/2024-25_Technical_paper/Technical-guide-for-school-boards-2024-2025-revised-September-2024_EN.pdf

50 Ontario Education Services Corporation 2022, 'Ontario Municipal and School Board Elections, Who can vote', https://elections.ontarioschooltrustees.org/Voters/WhoCanVote.aspx

51 Institute for Catholic Education n.d., 'Ontario Catholic Curriculum & Related Resources', https://iceont.ca/curriculum/

52 E Mauro 2021, 'Some Catholic schools in Ontario fly rainbow Pride flag for 1st time', *CBC News*, 1 June 2021, https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/catholic-schools-pride-flag-1.6046609

53 K Jones 2021, 'Ottawa archbishop: Some parents say flying LGBT flag 'hijacks' Ontario Catholic schools', *Catholic News Agency*, 3 June 2021, https://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/247892/ottawa-archbishop-some-parents-say-flying-lgbt-flag-hijacks-ontario-catholic-schools

54 E Lenti 2024, 'When schools won't raise the Pride flag, the message is clear — and damning', *TVO Today*, 5 June 2024, https://www.tvo.org/article/when-schools-wont-raise-the-pride-flag-the-message-is-clear-and-damning

55 Q Amundson, Pride flag won't fly at Dufferin-Peel board, *The Catholic Register*, 23 January 2025, https://www.catholicregister.org/item/1632-pride-flag-wont-fly-at-dufferin-peel-board

56 The Ottawa Catholic School Board n.d., 'Boundaries', https://www.ocsb.ca/our-schools/boundaries/

57 One School System n.d., http://www.oneschoolsystem.org/fast-facts.html

58 M Campbell 2007, 'Public funds for religious schools? Let the debate begin', *The Globe and Mail*, 23 June 2007, https://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/national/public-funds-for-religious-schools-let-the-debate-begin/article723888/

59 Government of Canada n.d., The Constitution Acts 1867 to 1982, https://laws-lois.justice.gc.ca/eng/const/page-3.html#h-23

60 CBC News 2007, 'Tory vows to study public funding for Ont. faith-based schools', *CBC News*, 23 July 2007, https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/ottawa/tory-vows-to-study-public-funding-for-ont-faith-based-schools-1.668143

61 S Paikin, 'How the toxic mix of politics, religion, and education boiled over in the 1890s', TVO Today, 11 January 2023, https://www.tvo.org/article/how-the-toxic-mix-of-politics-religion-and-education-boiled-over-in-the-1890s

62 T Greenwell 2020, 'Why do Canada's schools outperform Australia's?, *Inside Story*, 9 April 2020

63 OECD n.d., 'Total expenditure per full-time equivalent student in primary, secondary and tertiary education (2021)', https://oecdch.art/36603ad1d2

64 Ottawa Carleton Elementary Occasional Teachers' Association n.d., https://oceota.com/lto-salary-grid/

65 New South Wales Industrial Relations Commission 2023, Industrial Gazette, *Crown Employees (Teachers in Schools and Related Employees) Salaries and Conditions Award 2022*, http://www.lawlink.nsw.gov.au/irc/IRCGazette.nsf/(PublicationsByTitle)/BF7D011C857027D2CA258A73007CFD8D?OpenDocument

66 Chmielewski, A. K., & Maharaj, S. (2022). Socio-economic segregation between schools in Canada. p. 17 & 24 , https://utoronto.scholaris.ca/server/api/core/bitstreams/8b0814c2-a260-4e0e-8faa-65d80c5be57f/content

67 Chmielewski, A. K., & Maharaj, S. (2022). Socio-economic segregation between schools in Canada. p. 18 https://utoronto.scholaris.ca/server/api/core/bitstreams/8b0814c2-a260-4e0e-8faa-65d80c5be57f/content

68 OECD (2023), *PISA 2022 Results (Volume I): The State of Learning and Equity in Education*, PISA, OECD Publishing, Paris, https://doi.org/10.1787/53f23881-en, p.66, 68 & 70

69 Chmielewski & Maharaj 2022, p.23

70 J Hattie 2016, '*Shifting away from distractions to improve Australia's schools: Time for a Reboot*', p. 14

71 Government of Alberta, 'Student population statistics', https://www.alberta.ca/student-population-statistics. Accessed 20 March 2025

72 OECD (2023), *PISA 2022 Results (Volume I): The State of Learning and Equity in Education*, PISA, OECD Publishing, Paris, https://doi.org/10.1787/53f23881-en, p.66, 68 & 70

73 Council of Ministers of Education, Canada (CMEC) 2023, *Measuring Up: Canadian Results of the OECD PISA 2022 Study*, p.38, https://www.cmec.ca/Publications/Lists/Publications/Attachments/438/PISA-2022_Canadian_Report_EN.pdf

74 Archdiocese of Toronto 2022, 'The Ontario Provincial Election and the Catholic Church', https://www.archtoronto.org/siteassets/media/archdiocese-of-toronto-main-site/files/resources/backgrounder-education-03.pdf

75 One School System for Ontario n.d., http://www.oneschoolsystem.org/

76 Ontario Elementary Catholic Teachers' Association 2016, 'Preserve the Catholic System', https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IWfO5UxueJE

77 The Ontario Association of Parents in Catholic Education (OAPCE) n.d., 'About OAPCE', https://oapce.org/about/

78 BC Stats 2024, 'Quarterly Population Highlights', Reference date: October 1, 2024, Issue: #24-03 Released: December 18, 2024, https://www2.gov.bc.ca/assets/gov/data/statistics/people-population-community/population/quarterly_population_highlights.pdf

79 Government of British Columbia 2024, 'Education by the numbers', 5 September 2023, https://news.gov.bc.ca/factsheets/education-by-the-numbers

80 Catholic Independent Schools of Vancouver Archdiocese n.d., 'History of Catholic Education', https://cisva.bc.ca/info/history/

81 The Our Kids Guide to Private Schools n.d., 'Provincial funding for private schools', https://www.ourkids.net/school/provincial-funding-for-private-schools

82 Government of British Columbia 2024, 'Grants to Independent Schools', 2 August 2024 https://www2.gov.bc.ca/gov/content/education-training/k-12/administration/legislation-policy/independent-schools/grants-to-independent-schools

83 Government of British Columbia n.d., 'Overview of Independent Schools in British Columbia', Ministry of Education Office of the Inspector of Independent Schools, https://fisabc.ca/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/Independent-School-General-Info.pdf

84 St. John Brebeuf Regional Secondary School, The Catholic Independent Schools of Vancouver Archdiocese, Retrieved 22 February 2025 https://stjohnbrebeuf.ca/tuition#tuition

85 D Hunt & D Van Pelt 2019, 'Who Chooses Independent Schools in British Columbia and Why?', Cardus, 21 August 2019 https://www.cardus.ca/research/education/reports/who-chooses-independent-schools-in-british-columbia-and-why/

86 P Bacchus 2025, 'Increased public funding for private schools is dividing us, and needs to stop', Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, 5 February 2025, https://www.policyalternatives.ca/news-research/increased-public-funding-for-private-schools-is-dividing-us-and-needs-to-stop/

87 Government of British Columbia n.d., 'Overview of Independent Schools in British Columbia', Ministry of Education Office of the Inspector of Independent Schools, https://fisabc.ca/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/Independent-School-General-Info.pdf

88 Borwein S, Farney J, Khovrenkov I, White LA. Not Hidden but Not Visible: Government Funding of Independent Schools in Canada. Canadian Journal of Political Science. 2023;56(3):698-714. doi:10.1017/S0008423923000471, https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/canadian-journal-of-political-science-revue-canadienne-de-science-politique/article/not-hidden-but-not-visible-government-funding-of-independent-schools-in-canada/F54F219A0ADD15A2B88E1806E67063EA

89 British Columbia Teachers Federation 2019, 'Research: The Many Faces of Privatization', 2 March 2019, https://www.bctf.ca/news-and-opportunities/news-details/2019/03/01/the-many-faces-of-privatization

90 Government of British Columbia 2024 'External Evaluation and Inspection for Independent Schools' 5 July 2024, https://www2.gov.bc.ca/gov/content/education-training/k-12/administration/legislation-policy/independent-schools/external-evaluation-and-inspection-for-independent-schools

91 Interview, with Sarvi Brent, Executive Director, Teacher Regulation, British Columbia Ministry of Education, 16 October 2024

92 P Froese 2010, *Political Action Through Consensus A Case Study of the Federation of Independent School Associations of British Columbia*, The University Of British Columbia, https://open.library.ubc.ca/media/stream/pdf/24/1.0069119/1

93 BC Humanist Association 2016, 'Religious and Secular Attitudes 2016', 13 June 2016, https://www.bchumanist.ca/religious_and_secular_attitudes_2016. J R Miller, 'Residential Schools in Canada', The Canadian Encyclopaedia, 10 October, 2012; also see W Rees (2018), 'Restoring Canada's First Nations', *History Today,* Volume 68 Issue 9 September 2018, https://www.historytoday.com/archive/history-matters/restoring-canadas-first-nations

94 D Hunt & D Van Pelt 2019

95 North Vancouver School District, 'Families of Schools (feeder schools)', retrieved 22 February 2025 https://www.sd44.ca/Schools/Families%20of%20Schools/Pages/default.aspx#/=

96 Government of Canada 2021, 'Indian Residential Schools Settlement Agreement' https://www.rcaanc-cirnac.gc.ca/eng/1100100015576/1571581687074

97 Kim Jonat, Principal, email to Chris Bonnor, 19 February, 2025.

98 J Friesen, B Cerf Harris & S Woodcock 2015, 'Expanding School Choice through Open Enrolment: Lessons from British Columbia', C.D. Howe Institute, Commentary No. 418, p.10, https://www.cdhowe.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/Commentary_418.pdf

99 C Ungerleider 2022, 'Hard truths: choice and equity are incompatible', *On Education Canada*, 2 November 2022, https://oneducationcanada.blogspot.com/2022/11/hard-truths-choice-and-equity-are.html

100 C Ungerleider 2022, 'Open enrolment is bait and switch', *On Education Canada*, 12 October 2022, https://oneducationcanada.blogspot.com/2022/10/open-enrolment-is-bait-and-switch.html

101 C Ungerleider 2023, 'Are we still failing our kids?', *On Education Canada*, 17 May 2023, https://oneducationcanada.blogspot.com/2023/05/are-we-still-failing-our-kids.html

102 Perry, Laura & McConney, Andrew. (2013). 'School socioeconomic status and student outcomes in reading and mathematics: A comparison of Australia and Canada'. *Australian Journal of Education*. 57. 10.1177/0004944113485836. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/258124095_School_socioeconomic_status_and_student_outcomes_in_reading_and_mathematics_A_comparison_of_Australia_and_Canada

103 J Clemens, S Parvani & J Emes 2017, 'Comparing the Family Income of Students in British Columbia's Independent and Public Schools ', Fraser Institute, 30 March 2017, p.1, https://www.fraserinstitute.org/sites/default/files/comparing-family-income-of-students-in-BCs-independent-and-public-schools.pdf

104 ACARA 2022, MySchool

105 AEU Federal 2024, 'A decade of inequity' 6 September 2024, https://www.aeufederal.org.au/news-media/news/2024/decade-inequity

106 J Hare 2025, 'Private schools raise fees at three times rate of inflation', *Australian Financial Review*, https://www.afr.com/work-and-careers/education/private-schools-raise-fees-at-three-times-rate-of-inflation-20250103-p5l1vk

107 Statistics Canada. Table 17-10-0009-01 Population estimates, quarterly, https://doi.org/10.25318/1710000901-eng

108 Statistics Canada. Table 37-10-0007-01 Number of students in regular programs for youth, public elementary and secondary schools, by grade and sex, DOI: https://doi.org/10.25318/3710000701-eng

109 S Vigneault 2022, *A Plan for A Common Network*, École ensemble, p.7 https://assets.nationbuilder.com/coleensemble/pages/114/attachments/original/1652344700/E%CC%81COLE-ENSEMBLE_Plan-re%CC%81seau-commun_2022_EN_web.pdf?1652344700

110 S Vigneault 2022, *A Plan for A Common Network*, École ensemble, https://assets.nationbuilder.com/coleensemble/pages/114/attachments/original/1652344700/E%CC%81COLE-ENSEMBLE_Plan-re%CC%81seau-commun_2022_EN_web.pdf?1652344700

111 D Gutnick 2017, 'Are Quebec's private high schools creating a segregated society?', CBC, 27 October 2017, https://www.cbc.ca/radio/sunday/the-sunday-edition-october-29-2017-1.4374949/are-quebec-s-private-high-schools-creating-a-segregated-society-1.4374965

112 CBC News 2005, 'Not all religions treated as equals in Quebec schools', 9 February 2005 https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/montreal/not-all-religions-treated-as-equals-in-quebec-schools-1.567192

113 E Freeland 1999, 'Education Reform and the English Schools of Quebec, *McGill Journal of Education,* Volume 34, No. 3 Fall 1999, p. 244; C Cadrin-Pelletier 2006, *Secular Schools in Québec, A Necessary Change in Institutional Culture*, Brief to the Minister of Education, Recreation and Sports October 2006, Comité sur les affaires religieuses, Gouvernement du Québec, p.7 https://www.education.gouv.qc.ca/fileadmin/site_web/documents/ministere/organismes/CAR_Avis_LaiciteScolaire_ang.pdf

114 G Chambers et al, *The Reorganization of School Boards Along Linguistic Lines – Bill 107 An English Perspective*, Report to the Minister of Education of Quebec, June 1994, Advisory Board on English Education, p.105 https://www.education.gouv.qc.ca/fileadmin/site_web/documents/ministere/organismes/CELA_Rapport_ReorganisationCommissionsScolaires_ANG.pdf ; see also C Cadrin-Pelletier 2006, p.9

115 Fédération des établissements d'enseignement privés n.d., 'Quebec Independent and Private Schools - Frequently asked questions', https://ecolespriveesquebec.ca/en/private-school/faq/

116 CTV News 2024, 'CAQ refuses to end public funding for Quebec's religious schools', CTV News, 24 October 2024, https://www.ctvnews.ca/montreal/article/caq-refuses-to-end-public-funding-for-quebecs-religious-schools/

117 S Vigneault 2020, 'Quebec's (sadly) distinct education system', *Policy Alternatives*, 3 February, 2020, https://www.policyalternatives.ca/news-research/quebecs-sadly-distinct-education-system/

118 P. Champoux-Lesage et al 2014, *Rapport du comité d'experts sur le financement, l'administration, la gestion et la gouvernance des commissions scolaires*, p.125, https://www.education.gouv.qc.ca/fileadmin/site_web/documents/PSG/politiques_orientations/rapport_comiteCS_mai2014v3p.pdf; D Van Pelt, S Hasan & D Allison 2017, *The Funding and Regulation of Independent Schools in Canada*, The Fraser Institute, p.8, https://www.education.gouv.qc.ca/fileadmin/site_web/documents/PSG/politiques_orientations/rapport_comiteCS_mai2014v3p.pdf

119 S Vigneault 2020

120 P Champoux-Lesage et al 2014, p.128

121 P Champoux-Lesage et al 2014, p.129

122 P Saint-Arnaud 2024, 'Quebec public schools turn to philanthropy, but private sector cashes in', *City News*, 23 September 2024, https://montreal.citynews.ca/2024/09/23/public-schools-philanthropy-private-sector/amp/

123 D Gutnick 2017; Fédération des établissements d'enseignement privés n.d.

124 Fédération des établissements d'enseignement privés n.d., 'Quebec Independent and Private Schools – Frequently asked questions', https://ecolespriveesquebec.ca/en/private-school/faq/

125 S Vigneault 2022, 'A plan to tackle school segregation in Quebec', UNESCO World Education Blog, 7 September 2022, https://world-education-blog.org/2022/09/07/a-plan-to-tackle-school-segregation-in-quebec/

126 A Plourde 2022, 'Où en est l'école à trois vitesses au Québec?', *IRIS*, 19 October 2022, https://iris-recherche.qc.ca/publications/ecole-a-trois-vitesses/

127 Fédération des établissements d'enseignement privés n.d.

128 S Vigneault 2020

129 Ministry of Education of Quebec 2021, *Collection of data on the inventory of specific educational projects*, General Directorate of Educational Resources and Supervision, 24 February 2021, p.17 & 18)

130 ibid

131 A Plourde 2022, 'Où en est l'école à trois vitesses au Québec?', *IRIS*, 19 October 2022, https://iris-recherche.qc.ca/publications/ecole-a-trois-vitesses/

132 Ministry of Education of Quebec 2021, p.3

133 C Curtis 2022, 'The Segregation of Quebec's Schools', *The Rover*, 9 November 2022, https://therover.ca/the-segregation-of-quebecs-schools/

134 Chmielewski, A. K., & Maharaj, S. (2022). *Socio-economic segregation between schools in Canada*. p. 18 & 24, https://utoronto.scholaris.ca/server/api/core/bitstreams/8b0814c2-a260-4e0e-8faa-65d80c5be57f/content

135 E Shaker 2022, 'How public funding for private options reinforces school segregation in Quebec', Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, 5 July 2022, https://www.policyalternatives.ca/news-research/how-public-funding-for-private-options-reinforces-school-segregation-in-quebec/

136 C Curtis 2022

137 Ibid, p.20

138 Conseil supérieur de l'éducation 2016, 'Steering the Course Back to Equity in Education, Report on the State and Needs of Education 2014-2016', September 2016, p.1, https://www.cse.gouv.qc.ca/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/50-0494-SU-cap-sur-lequite-REBE-2014-2016.pdf

139 M Homsy, M & S Savard 2018, *Décrochage scolaire au Québec: dix ans de surplace, malgré les efforts de financement*. P.3, IDQ, Institut du Québec. https://institutduquebec.ca/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/201804-IDQ-Decrochage-scolaire-au-Quebec_IDQ_BR-002.pdf

140 B Goodman 2018, 'Quebec has lowest high school graduation rate in North America', https://bonniekgoodman.medium.com/quebec-has-lowest-high-school-graduation-rate-in-north-america-674e5bf826f; ACARA 2023, 'Apparent retention rates for students, Year 10 -12 by state/territory and school sector 2023', https://www.acara.edu.au/reporting/national-report-on-schooling-in-australia/apparent-retention

141 M Homsy, M & S Savard 2018

142 Ibid, p.3 & p.10

143 Kamanzi, P. C. (2019). 'School market in Quebec and the reproduction of social inequalities in higher education'. *Social Inclusion*, 7(1), p. 22. https://doi.org/10.17645/si.v7i1.1613

144 Institute Du Quebec & Foundation of Greater Montreal 2020, '2020 Vital Signs Report', p.61, https://institutduquebec.ca/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/202007-IDQ-SIGNESVITAUXLONGENG.pdf

145 S Vigneault 2020

146 P Charousset, M Monnet & Y Souidi, 2023, Ségrégation sociale en milieu scolaire: appréhender ses causes et déterminer ses effets, Document de travail n° 23-02 — Novembre 2023, p.7, Conseil d'évaluation de l'École

147 A Marcotte-Fournier 2015, *Curricular differentiation, school segregation and student success: analysis multilevel in the Quebec school context*, Faculty of Education, University of Sherbrooke, p.8

148 D Allison 2022, 'PISA results—a breakdown by province', The Fraser Institute, https://www.fraserinstitute.org/commentary/pisa-results-a-breakdown-by-province

149 J Anders, S Has, J Jerrim et al 2021, 'Is Canada really an education superpower? The impact of non-participation on results from PISA 2015', *Educational Assessment, Evaluation and Accountability* 33, https://doi.org/10.1007/s11092-020-09329-5

150 L Radstone-Stubbs 2020, 'The Interview: Stéphane Vigneault', Private Education Policy Forum, 14 September 2020, https://www.pepf.co.uk/opinion/the-interview-stphane-vigneault/

151 D Gutnick 2017

152 Quoted in S Vigneault 2022, A Plan for A Common Network, École ensemble, p.14, https://assets.nationbuilder.com/coleensemble/pages/114/attachments/original/1652344700/E%CC%81COLE-ENSEMBLE_Plan-re%CC%81seau-commun_2022_EN_web.pdf?1652344700

153 ibid

154 S Vigneault 2022, A Plan for A Common Network, École ensemble, p.12, https://assets.nationbuilder.com/coleensemble/pages/114/attachments/original/1652344700/E%CC%81COLE-ENSEMBLE_Plan-re%CC%81seau-commun_2022_EN_web.pdf?1652344700

155 Ibid, p.13

156 Ibid, p.35

157 Ibid, p.15

158 Ibid, p.26

159 Ibid, p.12

160 F Delorme, C Boutin-St-Amant & F Ouellet 2022, Plan Pour Un Réseau Scolaire Commun : Estimation Des Impacts Budgétaires De La Réforme Proposée, François Delorme Consultation (FDC) Inc., May 2022, https://assets.nationbuilder.com/coleensemble/pages/114/attachments/original/1652084678/Re%CC%81seau_scolaire_commun_-_Rapport_technique.pdf?1652084678

161 S Vigneault 2022, p.17

162 P Marois 2022, 'Une nation riche est une nation qui apprend', *Le Devoir*, 15 June 2022, https://www.ledevoir.com/opinion/idees/722967/education-une-nation-riche-est-une-nation-qui-apprend

163 National Assembly of Quebec, 'An Act to establish a common school network to guarantee equal opportunities' https://www.assnat.qc.ca/en/travaux-parlementaires/projets-loi/projet-loi-895-43-1.html, Accessed 20 March 2025

164 CROP 2022, *Opinions on The Primary and Secondary Education System In Quebec – Survey Of Quebec Parents*, Produced for École ensemble, March 2022, https://assets.nationbuilder.com/coleensemble/pages/113/attachments/original/1651777641/22-9894_-_Rapport_sondage_aupre%CC%80s_des_parents_-_E%CC%81cole_ensemble_9_mars_2022_exclusivite%CC%81_me%CC%81dia.pdf?1651777641 , 'L'école à trois vitesses en perte d'appui au Québec', *Le Journal de Montréal*, 18 February 2025, https://www.journaldemontreal.com/2025/02/18/lecole-a-trois-vitesses-en-perte-dappui-au-quebec

165 Zancajo, A., Fontdevila, C., Jabbar, H., & Verger, A. (Eds.). (2025). Research Handbook on Education Privatization and Marketization. Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar Publishing, p. 410. https://doi.org/10.4337/9781035311385

166 I Teotonio 2023, 'Province ends supervision of Peel Public School Board', *Toronto Star*, 23 January 2023, https://www.thestar.com/news/gta/province-ends-supervision-of-peel-public-school-board/article_7a18135e-a958-5438-96d0-d45b67b7cf6a.html

167 Government of Ontario 2023 *Peel District School Board supervision: final report* https://www.ontario.ca/page/peel-district-school-board-supervision-final-report, 23 January 2023

168 Government of Nova Scotia 2018, 'News release – Education Reform Act', https://news.novascotia.ca/en/2018/03/01/education-reform-act, 1 March 2018

169 P Bennett 2022, 'Education Bureaucracy Shake-Ups: What Makes the System Go Round?', *EduChatter*, 12 October 2022 https://educhatter.wordpress.com/2022/10/12/education-bureaucracy-shake-ups-what-makes-the-system-go-round/

170 I Ting, R Liu & A Palmer 2018, 'Counting the cost of the education revolution', *ABC News*, 22 November 2018, https://www.abc.net.au/news/2018-11-22/counting-the-cost-of-the-education-revolution/10495756; AEU Federal 2024, *A decade of inequity How Australian governments have funded private schools above public schools since 2013*, 6 September 2024, https://www.aeufederal.org.au/news-media/news/2024/decade-inequity

CHOICE AND FAIRNESS: A COMMON FRAMEWORK FOR ALL AUSTRALIAN SCHOOLS

In 2023 the Australian Learning Lecture published its proposal for a common framework for all Australian schools. It argued that to turn Australia's educational performance around and close the unacceptable gaps between students from different backgrounds, Australia needs to:

1. fund all schools based on educational need.
2. ensure children from disadvantaged backgrounds have the opportunity to thrive in more socioeconomically 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.

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.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The tour of Canada that gave birth to this report would not have happened without the generous support of Ellen Koshland. Ellen's support of the trip reflected her decades-long commitment to advancing equity in Australian education, in particular through Australian Learning Lecture. The organisational acumen and extensive international network of Dr Warren Marks and Dr Suzanne Lazenby were also absolutely critical to the success of tour. Warren and Suzanne also wrote an initial version of the findings and recommendations. We give our heartfelt thanks to Ellen, Warren and Suzanne.

This report has been a team effort, beginning with the wonderful conversation and camaraderie amongst the study tour group. Thank you to everyone who took part in the trip for your expert insights, rich perspectives and continuing friendship. The vignettes shared in the report speak for themselves. Particular thanks are owed to Penny Underwood, Caroline David and Denise Lofts whose notes from the trip were of immense value as we attempted to capture all we had learned.

We have benefitted greatly from feedback on various iterations of this report. Ellen and Penny have been a constant source of advice and support. Andy Mison, Michael Sciffer and Denise Lofts helpfully responded to an early version. Feedback from Canadian friends including Stéphane Vigneault, Tom D'Amico, JP Cloutier, Charles Ungerleider and others was hugely helpful. Andrew Hiskens picked up many a typo while also stimulating our thinking on multiple matters of substance. Kathe Kirby focused our minds on the big picture. Caroline David, Jenny Walker, Penny Underwood and others gave invaluable granular feedback. We record our deep appreciation to everyone involved. We take responsibility for any errors in the final report.

Tom Greenwell and Chris Bonnor

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 invite parents, educators, researchers and policy makers to share the full report which comprehensively documents what we discovered in Canada:

Download at: https://all-learning.org.au/lessons-from-canada-publication/

We welcome your thoughts about our proposal.

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

Follow the discussion on:
Facebook @AusLearning
X ALL_learnAU

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

all.
Australian
Learning
Lecture

www.all-learning.org.au
info@all-learning.org.au
Facebook – @AusLearning
X – ALL_learnAU
LinkedIn – AustralianLearningLecture
#lessonsfromcanada

KOSHLAND
INNOVATION
FUND