

EDUCATION POLICY BRIEF

Fully Funding Private Schools is No Solution to Inequity in Education

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Summary

The proposal of Tom Greenwell and Chris Bonnor to fully fund private schools, subject to them not charging fees and not enrolling students on the basis of ability, abrogates key long standing principles of public education, namely, that public schools are secular and do not discriminate on the basis of student background. The proposal explicitly permits private schools to promulgate their religious beliefs and values and to discriminate against students and teachers who do not share these beliefs. This is anathema to the founding principles of public education. Public schools must remain secular and take all comers, whatever their background, to provide access to education for all and to promote understanding and tolerance between different social groups.

Nor would it eliminate social segregation between schools as Greenwell and Bonnor claim. Government funding of private schools that charge fees and restrict entry is not the only cause of social segregation between schools. A basic cause is the economic and geographical segregation of households. Fully funding private schools will not eliminate the extensive social segregation between schools in the western and eastern suburbs of Sydney and Melbourne or between remote regions and prestigious suburbs of metropolitan cities.

Greenwell and Bonnor state that families should not have to pay fees to ensure their child's education reflects their values and preferences. This represents capitulation to private school lobby groups. Families pay fees to access the special ethos and character of private schools, whether it be religious education, social status or an "old school tie" network. The role of government funding for private schools is not to subsidise the costs of such choices. It should only support the learning needs of students in under-resourced schools. Parents, not taxpayers, must bear the costs of choosing a "special ethos".

Greenwell and Bonnor argue that Australia must follow the models of other countries that fully fund private schools; Belgium, Canada, Netherlands, New Zealand and Scotland. However, the evidence on average student results, equity and segregation is far from compelling. Apart from Canada, these countries have not performed significantly better than Australia in terms of average outcomes or equity in outcomes. Some have performed worse than Australia on several measures.

Closer investigation of Canada's performance also shows that it is not a model for fully funding private schools. Only three of Canada's 10 provinces – Alberta, Ontario and Saskatchewan - fully fund Catholic schools and they do not systematically outperform some other provinces on average outcomes or equity. Alberta and Ontario are high performing systems but Quebec has similar or better results on some measures while Saskatchewan is one of the lower performing provinces.

Other factors are the more likely explanation of Canada's apparent success. The socio-economic status of all students and those in the lowest quartile is higher than in other countries that fully fund private schools and in Australia. Similarly, these measures are higher in Alberta and Ontario than other provinces.

Funding per student, adjusted for inflation, in public schools has increased by much more in Canada compared to Australia between 2001-02 and 2016-17 - 37% compared to only 12%. Funding in Alberta and Ontario has also increased by much more than in Australia.

Canada also appears to be manipulating its PISA results. It has a much higher exclusion rate from the tests than other countries that fully fund private schools and then Australia. It also has the lowest coverage of eligible students in the OECD.

There is an alternative way forward to increase equity in education. It is to introduce a Gonski Plus funding model. It would involve re-estimation of the base Schooling Resource Standard (SRS) and increased loadings for various categories of disadvantaged students and schools. Government funding for private schools would only be provided to fill the gap between private income and a revised base SRS. It would reduce social segregation between schools because it would end the over-funding of private schools and force them to increase fees which would likely lead to a greater number of advantaged students being enrolled in public schools.

Introduction

Australia has one of the most highly segregated school systems in the OECD. Low socio-economic status (SES) and other disadvantaged students are heavily concentrated in some schools while high SES students are heavily concentrated in others. It is particularly apparent in the social composition of public and private schools; where public schools are composed of much higher proportions of disadvantage students than private schools.

Social segregation in schools presents a major policy challenge because it exacerbates inequity in education outcomes. Numerous international and Australian studies show that social segregation in schools compounds the effect of individual socio-economic background on achievement and exacerbates gaps between rich and poor. There is a “double jeopardy” effect for students from low SES families. They tend to be disadvantaged because of their circumstances at home and they are likely to fare even worse when they are also segregated into low SES schools.

Social segregation is a common feature of school systems in OECD and other countries. A major factor is urban planning and housing policies which separate population geographically according to income. School choice policies have also contributed by allowing more well-off families who can afford transport to choose schools with a similar demographic profile. Some systems also channel students into different types of schools such as grammar schools, gymnasiums, and vocational schools.

In the case of Australia, government funding policies have added to the mix. Government (Commonwealth and state) funding policies have long favoured private schools, especially following the introduction of the Howard Government’s so-called SES funding model. The current funding system is heavily biased in favour of private schools. Large increases in private school funding have enabled families who can afford to pay subsidised fees to shift to private schools.

Tom Greenwell and Chris Bonnor propose that the solution to social segregation is for taxpayers to fully fund Catholic and other private schools, subject to certain conditions. They have detailed their proposal in their book, *Waiting for Gonski* (2022) several articles and more recently in a paper titled *Choice and Fairness* (2023).

Under their proposal, private schools would be fully funded for recurrent and capital expenditure by governments as long as they agree not to charge fees and are open to children of all abilities. Schools would be prohibited from excluding children on the basis of entrance tests and other similar discrimination. However, schools could continue to apply enrolment and other policies necessary to promote their specific religious or educational ethos. Schools would remain under the control of private school authorities such as Catholic Education Commissions and the Catholic Church.

In support of their proposal, Greenwell and Bonnor point to other countries that fully fund private schools. They argue that Australia must learn from high performing comparable countries including New Zealand, Canada, Scotland, Belgium and the Netherlands. They say that these countries show that it is possible to provide choice and diversity of schools while limiting segregation and maximising equity and effectiveness:

The proposal abandons fundamental principles of public education, namely, that public education is secular and non-discriminatory in enrolling students and hiring teachers. Moreover, the evidence from overseas systems that fully fund private schools does not provide robust support for the proposal. Apart from Canada, these countries have not performed significantly better than Australia in terms of average outcomes or equity in outcomes. Several perform worse than Australia. Closer

investigation of Canada's performance also shows that it is not a model for fully funding private schools.

Fully funding private schools would abrogate key principles of public education

Greenwell and Bonnor propose that fully funded private schools would be permitted to continue to apply enrolment and other policies necessary to maintain their special religious and educational ethos. They also propose that schools could continue to give priority in enrolments to families whose faith aligns with that of the school. Presumably, this would also apply to the employment of staff which is legally permitted at present as an exemption under anti-discrimination legislation.

This would jettison two key principles of public education, namely, that it is secular and non-discriminatory. It would introduce a new structural contradiction: some fully funded schools would be secular and others absolutely non-secular; some schools would be prohibited from discrimination in hiring staff while others would be allowed to discriminate. It is baffling how erstwhile advocates of public education are so willing to subvert key principles of public education.

Secular education

Fully funded private schools could continue to impose compulsory religious teaching and observance. The curriculum of religious schools includes topics that reflect values associated with their particular religion such as teaching creationism and literal interpretation of the Bible, immorality of same-sex relationships and marriage, abstinence from sex before marriage, male headship and female submission. It is totally abhorrent that schools should be fully funded by the taxpayer to indoctrinate students with such obnoxious values as part of their "special ethos".

Religious education is contrary to one of the founding and enduring principles of public education. Secularism was one of the founding principles of public education in Australia over 150 years ago [Campbell & Proctor 2014]. It was intended to overcome bitter and disruptive division between Catholic and Protestant religions and promote greater social tolerance and unity. The idea behind secularism was that state funded education would bring children of different religious backgrounds together and promote greater mutual understanding and tolerance.

Secular public education has been instrumental in making Australia relatively free of intense religious divisions and intolerances. The principle is just as relevant today in Australia's multicultural society that includes people of many different religions. Public education has a key task to facilitate inter-cultural understanding and tolerance among all faiths.

The fact that other secular countries take this risk is no argument for Australia to do so as well. It is critical to avoid or minimise the disruption and prejudice of religious intolerance apparent in many western countries that have funded religious schools within the public system.

Non-discrimination

Greenwell and Bonnor propose that full funding would be available to private schools that agree not to charge fees, are open to children of all abilities, and prohibited from excluding children on the basis of entrance tests and other similar discriminators. Other than this, schools could continue to apply enrolment and other policies necessary to promote their specific religious or educational ethos. This includes giving enrolment priority for families whose faith aligns with a school's religious values. They state:

To foster the character of school communities, priority enrolment for families from faith backgrounds that align with a school's mission could be ensured.

This means that children of families of a different faith to that of a school or who have not particular faith will be discriminated against in access to a school that is fully funded by the taxpayer. They would also be able to continue to lawfully discriminate against students on the ground of their sexual orientation, gender identity, marital or relationship status or pregnancy and because of their parents' sexual orientation or gender under exemptions to the Sex Discrimination Act.

Maintaining the special ethos of a school would also mean that fully funded private schools would be permitted to continue to discriminate in hiring staff. Religious schools are exempt from anti-discrimination legislation and can discriminate against staff who do not accept or act in accordance with the religious faith and beliefs of the school. It is a common practice of religious schools to only employ staff who accept the religious beliefs and values of the school. Catholic, Anglican and other Christian schools assert that preferencing teachers of their faith is a 'religious right' [Wootton 2021, Koziol 2021, Visentin 2021].

All this breaches the long-standing principle of that public schools take all comers without regard to religious or other backgrounds. This is the principle of universalism. Public education is for everyone, irrespective of social background or beliefs. Public schools provide a common ground for children in a diverse society to learn to live together. Some children should not be given priority over others in access to a public school in their area because of the beliefs of their parents. Similarly, teachers should be employed on the basis of their expertise rather than their beliefs. Discrimination is the antithesis of universal education. It should never be accepted in public education.

Parents pay fees for the special ethos of private schools

Greenwell and Bonnor state that 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 is a remarkable position for erstwhile supporters of public education to adopt. It puts them in league with private school organisations. David Zyngier, Associate Professor at Southern Cross University has called it "capitulation" [2023]. They fail to understand the different roles of public and private education and the role of fees in private schools.

Families pay fees to access the special ethos and character of private schools. It covers a myriad of ways in which private schools distinguish themselves to attract families willing to pay fees. They include religious values and teaching, social status, selective student peers, a particular education philosophy, special curriculum such as creationism, narrow sex education as well as extra-curricular opportunities in the arts, sport, debating, etc. They also paying to buy into an 'old school tie' network to enhance future employment. In effect, Greenwell and Bonnor propose that governments take responsibility for funding the special ethos of private schools.

The role of government funding for private schools is not to subsidise the costs of such choices made by parents. It should be only to support the learning needs of students in under-resourced schools to ensure that all students receive an adequate education. Parents must bear the costs of choosing a "special ethos". This is particularly the case with religious teaching and values and the large majority of private schools in Australia are religious schools.

The argument that government funding of private schools currently supports discrimination and a religious curriculum and values may be valid. But this is not a reason to continue or extend government funding of such practices. It is a reason to look for an alternative method to fund private schools.

Social segregation cannot be fully eliminated

Greenwell and Bonnor assert that fully funding private schools will “eliminate” social segregation between schools. This argument is absurd. They ignore the fact that government funding of private schools that charge fees and restrict entry is not the only cause of social segregation between schools. A basic cause is the economic and geographical segregation of households.

There are huge differences in income and wealth within cities and between regions which affects where people can afford to live. Those with high income and wealth can afford to buy in more prestigious locations. This is exacerbated by urban planning and housing policies. For example, public housing for low income and immigrant populations is usually located in poor neighbourhoods. The outcome is high social segregation such as that between the western and eastern suburbs of Sydney and Melbourne. It is equally ludicrous to expect that fully funding private schools will eliminate the pattern of social segregation between remote regions and the wealthy suburbs of metropolitan cities. It is inevitable that high concentrations of advantaged and disadvantaged students will persist in suburbs and regions despite the best will in the world to reduce it.

Greenwell and Bonnor also ignore the fact that the *raison d’être* of private schools is to promote social segregation. They charge fees to provide their “special ethos” and to exclude. The higher fee schools will never give up their privilege to self-segregate. Had the Catholic Church and other religious systems been interested in a fully needs-based funding system, the Gonski formula should have been welcomed. Instead, they demanded and received special funding deals that allowed them to achieve and maintain a resource advantage over public schools. Moreover, the Catholic Church insisted that it have a central fund which it would then allocate internally. This was not done on the basis of Gonski equity principles but by investing in Catholic schools in higher SES areas. It wanted to assure its share of the high SES market rather than fully support disadvantaged students.

Comparative performance of countries fully funding private schools

The OECD’s Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) is commonly used to compare school results of different countries. However, PISA results should not be accepted uncritically as they are subject to much expert criticism [for example, Yong 2020]. Many factors, such as student demography, school funding and how hard students try on low stakes standardised tests, influence student outcomes and these factors differ between countries. Also, there is potential bias if schools or systems selectively exclude low performing schools or students, or if there are differential patterns of school completion.

Canada’s PISA results in 2018 were significantly higher than for Australia. However, other countries that fully fund religious schools perform no better than Australia in terms of average results and equity. Indeed, they perform worse than Australia on some measures.

Canada stands out with significantly higher reading, mathematics, and science results in PISA 2018. It had higher results than other countries that fully fund private schools. Belgium, Netherlands, New Zealand and Scotland had statistically similar results to Australia, [Table 1]. There were some significant differences across the domains. For example, Australia’s reading score was much higher than Belgium and Netherlands but much lower than those countries in mathematics. Australian also had much higher science results than Scotland.

Reading, mathematics and science scores all fell in each country. Netherlands and New Zealand experienced similar declines in reading as in Australia while New Zealand had similar declines in mathematics and science. Belgium and Canada also had significant declines but they were smaller than for Australia. It is notable that there was little change in Australia’s reading and mathematics

results from 2015 to 2018 while Canada had slightly large declines and there were larger declines in the Netherlands.

Table 1: Mean Reading, Mathematics and Science Scores in PISA 2018

Country	Reading	Maths	Science	Average	Change in Reading 2000-2018	Change in Maths 2003-2018	Change in Science 2006-2018
Australia	503	491	503	499	-26	-33	-24
Belgium	493	508	499	500	-14	-21	-12
Canada	520	512	518	517	-14	-20	-16
Netherlands	485	519	503	502	-28	-19	-21
New Zealand	506	494	508	503	-23	-29	-22
Scotland	504	489	490	494			

Source: OECD 2019a.

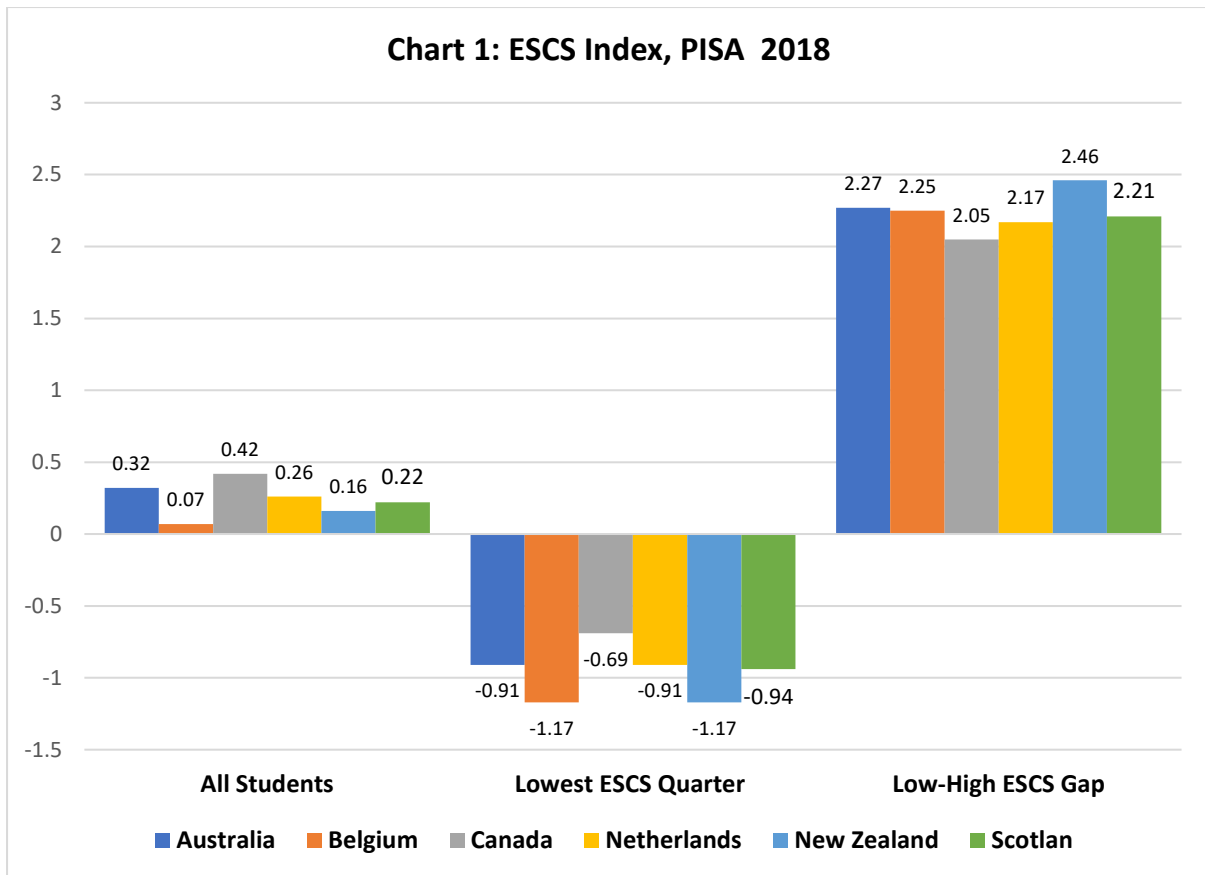
Table 2: Comparative Equity Performance

Country	Gap in Reading – High to Low ECSC	Low ESCS Mean Reading Score	% Low ESCS Below Level 2 Reading	Socio-economic Gradient for Reading	Index of Isolation of Low ECSC Students From High Achieving Students	Immigrant Mean Reading Score	Index of Segregation of Immigrant Students
Australia	89	460	312	38	0.62	511	0.34
Belgium	109	440	37.1	48	0.72	445	0.42
Canada	68	485	21.7	32	0.58	522	0.38
Netherlands	88	448	34.4	39	0.72	426	0.44
New Zealand	96	462	30.7	39	0.62	510	0.32
Scotland	72	472	-	32	0.58	514	0.45

Source: OECD 2019b, O’Grady et. al. 2021

In terms of equity indicators, Australia also performs as well as or better than other countries that fully fund private schools except for Canada and Scotland (Table 2). The achievement gap between the top and bottom quartiles of the Index of Economic, Social and Cultural Status (ECSC) is large in Australia but it is less than in Belgium and New Zealand and similar to that of the Netherlands. The mean reading score of students in the lowest ECSC quartile and immigrant students in Australia was significantly higher than in Belgium and the Netherlands and similar to that of New Zealand. Similarly, Australia had a much smaller proportion of low ESCS students at Level 2 or below on the PISA scale than Belgium and the Netherlands and a similar proportion to New Zealand. The association between reading outcomes and socio-economic background (socio-economic gradient) is significant in all countries. However, it is far higher in Belgium and similar for Australia, the Netherlands and New Zealand. The gradient is lowest in Canada and Scotland.

Differences in the socio-economic status of students appears to be a significant factor in the better performance of Canada. The ESCS score for all students is much higher in Canada than the other countries that fully fund private schools and Australia (Chart 1). It is also much higher for students in the lowest ESCS quartile. The gap in the ESCS index scores between high and low ESCS students is also much lower in Canada than the other countries and likely contributes to the smaller achievement gaps in Canada.



Source: OECD 2019b.

A major impact of social segregation is that it tends to isolate low SES students from high achieving students. It is notable that while there is high social segregation in Australian schools, the isolation of low SES students from high achieving students is similar to that of Canada, New Zealand and Scotland and significantly lower than in Belgium and the Netherlands. For example, PISA results and research studies show that there has been no progress in reducing inequality in the Netherlands and its class-based education system remains as entrenched as ever. For example, the selective Dutch gymnasia have flourished under government sponsored pro-choice, pro-market policies and are highly socially segregated [Merry & Boterman 2020].

Immigrant students in Australia and New Zealand are less segregated from other students than in other countries, including Canada. These students are highly segregated in schools in Belgium, Netherlands and Scotland. For example, schools in the Netherlands are commonly known as “black” or “white” schools. The former has high concentrations of students from immigrant families while Dutch whites congregate in “white” schools [Vedder 2006; Ong 2014; Hamilton 2015; Boterman 2018].

In summary, Canada is only one of the fully funded private school systems nominated by Greenwell and Bonnor that does better than Australia in PISA results. Australia’s overall and equity performance is as good as, or better, than that of Belgium, Netherlands, New Zealand and Scotland. This is not a convincing case for fully funding private schools in Australia. It suggests that fully funding private schools is not the key explanatory factor behind Canada’s performance. However, Canada appears to be the best performing country on in terms of overall results and several equity indicators. It is therefore worthwhile investigating the extent to which its success is due to fully funding private schools or other factors.

Canada’s PISA results are not compelling evidence of success in fully funding private schools

Three of Canada’s 10 provinces fully fund Catholic schools – Alberta, Ontario and Saskatchewan – where they are considered to be part of the public system. These provinces account for 55% of all public school enrolments in Canada [Statistics Canada 2022]. Ontario alone accounts for nearly 40% of enrolments. Therefore, their funding policies are likely to have a significant impact on Canada’s school results. Some 23-30% of students in the three provinces attend Catholic schools [Chmielewski & Mahara 2021: 7].

The results from PISA 2018 show that there is no systematically superior performance by the provinces that fully fund Catholic schools. While Alberta and Ontario are two of the best performing provinces in reading, Quebec’s results were equivalent to Alberta’s and slightly better than Ontario’s (Table 3). On the other hand, Saskatchewan had amongst the lowest results of the ten provinces.

Table 3: Mean Reading, Mathematics and Science Scores, Canadian Provinces, PISA 2018

Province	Reading	Mathcs	Science	Average	Change in Reading 2000-2018	Change in Maths 2003-2018	Change in Science 2006-2018
Alberta	532	511	534	525	-18	-38	-16
British Columbia	519	504	517	513	-19	-34	-22
Manitoba	494	482	489	488	-35	-46	-34
New Brunswick	489	491	492	491	-12	-20	-14
Newfoundland & Labrador	512	488	506	502	-5	--21	-20
Nova Scotia	516	494	508	506	-5	-21	-12
Ontario	524	513	519	518	-9	-17	-18
Prince Edward Island	503	487	502	497	-14	-13	-7
Quebec	519	532	522	524	-17	-4	-9
Saskatchewan	499	499	501	495	-30	-31	-16

Source: OECD 2019a.

Alberta, Ontario and Saskatchewan all experienced significant declines in results. The declines in Alberta and Saskatchewan were much larger overall than in Ontario and were amongst the largest in Canada, only exceeded by Manitoba. Quebec had the smallest overall declines of any province and which were far smaller than the three provinces that fully fund Catholic schools.

There is also no evidence of any systematic superior equity performance by the provinces that fully fund Catholic schools. Their equity results were worse than several other provinces and similar to others.

The three provinces fully funding Catholic schools have not been any more successful than other provinces in reducing achievement gaps. Alberta had the equal largest achievement gap in reading between the lowest and highest ECSC quartiles of the ten provinces while Saskatchewan had the 3rd

largest. The gap in Ontario was less, but similar to that of British Columbia, New Brunswick and Nova Scotia and higher than that of Newfoundland and Labrador (Table 4).

Table 4: Equity Performance of Canadian Provinces, 2018

Province	Gap in Reading – High to Low ECSC	Low ECSC Mean Reading Score	Socio-economic Gradient for Reading	Index of Isolation of Low ECSC Students From High Achieving Students	Immigrant Mean Reading Score	Index of Segregation of Immigrant Students
Alberta	76	492	38	0.55	533	0.33
British Columbia	61	483	31	0.56	535	0.31
Manitoba	58	468	24	0.55	500	0.31
New Brunswick	63	460	29	0.54	519	0.45
Newfoundland & Labrador	55	491	26	0.55		
Nova Scotia	63	480	31	0.51	521	0.40
Ontario	63	492	27	0.57	529	0.31
Prince Edward Island	76	472	36	0.55	488	0.32
Quebec	71	482	36	0.63	500	0.48
Saskatchewan	74	465	33	0.57	494	0.33

Source: OECD 2019b; O’Grady et. al. 2021

Nor have the three provinces been any more successful in reducing the association between socio-economic background and student achievement. Alberta had the highest socio-economic gradient while Saskatchewan had the 3rd highest. Ontario’s gradient was higher than for Manitoba and Newfoundland and Labrador.

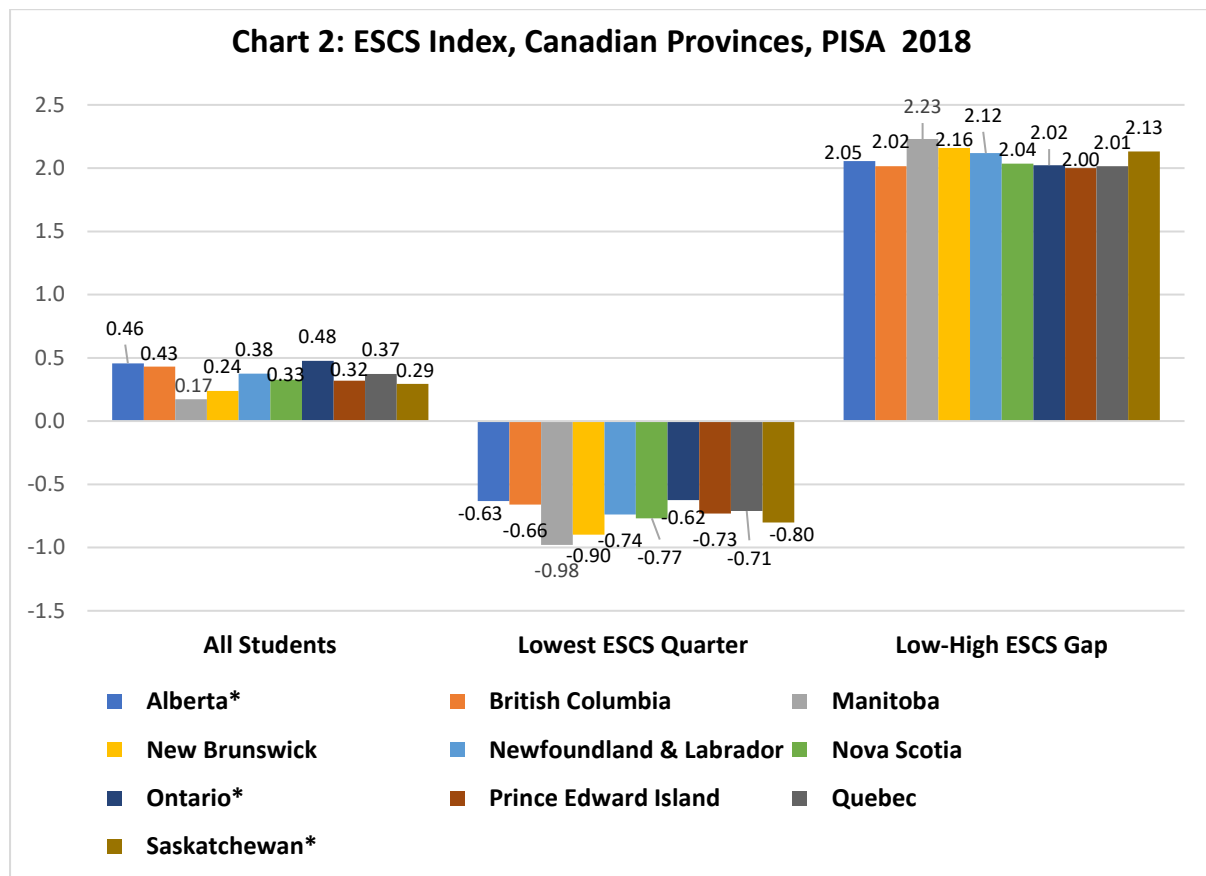
It is also not evident that fully funding Catholic schools in the three Canadian provinces has reduced social segregation in schools. While social segregation in the three fully funded provinces is lower than in some provinces, it is higher than in others and it has not decreased since 2000 [Chmielewski & Mahara 2021: 17, 22]. Moreover, students in Catholic schools in Ontario come from higher-income and more educated neighbourhoods compared to their counterparts in secular public schools [7].

The isolation index of the lowest ECSC quartile was similar in the fully funded provinces to several others and it was lowest in Nova Scotia (Table 4). Alberta had the 2nd highest reading score of immigrant students and Ontario the 3rd highest. However, Saskatchewan had the 2nd lowest in the country. Segregation of immigrant students in Alberta, Ontario and Saskatchewan was similar to that of several other provinces including British Columbia.

This evidence indicates that fully funding Catholic schools in Alberta, Ontario and Saskatchewan is not a significant factor in Canada’s overall apparent success in PISA. Differences in the socio-economic status of students also appear to exert a strong influence on the comparative results of Canadian provinces. The average ECSC index for students in Alberta and Ontario were the highest of the ten provinces [Chart 2] and they had the highest average reading scores, the 2nd and 3rd highest mathematics scores and the 1st and 3rd highest science scores in PISA 2018.

They also had the highest average ECSC index for the lowest ECSC quartile (that is, the least negative index score) and the highest reading scores for students in the lowest quartile (mathematics and

science scores are not available at this level). On the other hand, Saskatchewan had the 3rd lowest ESCS score and achieved the 3rd lowest results in reading and science and the 2nd lowest in mathematics. It also had the 3rd lowest ECSC index for students in the lowest ECSC quartile and the 2nd lowest reading score.



Source: OECD 2019b.

This apparent relationship between socio-economic background and achievement in Canadian provinces is confirmed by a recent study of trends in provincial social-economic gradient over the PISA cycles from 2000 to 2018. It concluded: “Our analysis clearly reveals the presence of a strong SES gradient across the country that is stable over time” and that all provinces have “similar SES gradients” [Haeck & Levfevre 2021: 104, 105]. This suggests that fully funding Catholic schools has not been successful in overcoming the strong relationship between socio-economic background and student achievement.

Other factors have influenced Canada’s results

Apart from the influence of the higher socio-economic status of families, Canada’s superior reported performance is also associated with other factors such as much larger increases in funding and higher exclusion of low-achieving students from PISA than in Australia.

Differences in funding are also likely to have contributed to the higher student performance in Canada compared to Australia. Between 2001-02 and 2016-17, funding per student in Canadian public schools, adjusted for inflation, increased by about three times that for public schools in Australia – 37% compared to only 12% for public schools in Australia. The increases in Alberta, Ontario and Saskatchewan were even higher at 45% or more [Haeck & Levfevre 2021: 93].

Canada's reputation as an "education superpower" has been questioned because it had a much higher student exclusion rate in PISA and lower coverage of eligible students. Analysis by researchers at the Institute of Education, University College of London, have revealed that Canada had one of the highest exclusion rates for PISA in the OECD and it was larger than for Australia, Belgium, New Zealand and Netherlands [Ankers et.al. 2021]. Furthermore, it had the lowest coverage of eligible students in the OECD with a coverage of only 53% compared to the average coverage across the OECD of 78%, 72% in Australia and 75% in Netherlands.

The analysis showed that if Canada had similar exclusion and participation rates to other high achieving countries, its average PISA scores would fall below those of these other leading systems and be similar to Australia's. Its achievement gap between the 90-10th percentiles would increase to be close to the OECD average and the difference in achievement gaps between Canada and Australia would be halved.

Greenwell and Bonnor say that Australia must learn from Belgium, Canada, Netherlands, New Zealand and Scotland, but there is not much to learn. It is far from the truth that these countries are "maximising equity" as they assert. There is little compelling evidence that fully funding Catholic schools within the public system will improve Australia's school outcomes, reduce inequity in education or "eliminate segregation" as they claim. Greenwell and Bonnor have failed to sustain their case.

There is another way forward

There is an alternative approach that addresses disadvantage in learning directly rather than indirectly, and futilely, by attempting to change the social composition of private schools. The more effective way forward is to build on the foundations established by the Gonski report.

The Gonski approach was to provide substantial additional funding that could be used for additional teachers or teachers' aides and other student support measures to minimise this the effect of concentrations of disadvantage. It is clear that this sort of solution has not failed, because, as is now well documented, the Gonski reforms were never properly implemented, and the current situation is that public schools are operating well below their School Resource Standard (SRS).

Therefore, the first step is to fully fund public schools, especially disadvantaged schools. The overall shift in funding in the last decade, that has seen funding for private schools increase more rapidly than for public schools, can only make the disadvantages facing low SES students worse. This shift has enabled private schools to compete more effectively for both high-performing students and teachers.

Fully funding public schools has to be done in a well-designed way, with transparency of funding allocations and clear assessment of outcomes against targets. If equity group is defined as students from families where the parents have limited educational achievements, then the target would be for the school to increase outcomes for this group of students. Regular review (say every two years) will show if the school has made progress, and where this has happened, successful strategies can be identified and popularised. Where schools are stagnating or going backwards, further additional funding may be required. Similar processes can be applied to programs for any target equity group. Schools should be supported centrally in this task. Special equity units staffed by high level and experienced professionals should be established at the Commonwealth and in every State and Territory level to support schools in improving outcomes for students in the priority equity cohorts.

However, full funding of public schools under the current model is insufficient to make large inroads in reducing inequity. A Gonski Plus funding model is required in the longer term. It would involve re-

estimation of the base SRS and increased loadings for various categories of disadvantaged students and schools.

The estimation of the base SRS should be revised because the current method over-estimates the base SRS. The schools used as a benchmark include a large proportion of high cost private schools. This inflated benchmark gives unwarranted base funding to many schools. Instead, the base SRS should be set as the cost of highly successful public schools with minimum disadvantage.

The disadvantage loadings should be increased significantly in line with research evidence. Instead of being about 20 per cent of the base SRS as at present, they should be 100% or more as indicated by numerous research studies [Cobbold 2014, 2022]. This would provide a significant funding boost for public schools because over 80% of disadvantaged students attend public schools and over 90% of disadvantaged schools are public schools.

The basic principle behind government funding of private schools in a Gonski Plus model is that no school operates with less total resources than the base SRS. Government funding for private schools should only fill the gap between private income and a revised base SRS. It would not assess parent capacity to contribute. Schools whose private income is above the base SRS should not be entitled to government funding because it extends their resource advantage over public schools. Disadvantaged students would be entitled to various funding loadings.

The full difference between the basic SRS and private funding would only be available to schools that adopt inclusive, non-selective enrolment practices and provide access to a comprehensive curriculum. A discount factor would apply to the base SRS which varies according to the extent to which each private schools meets the same social obligations as a public school.

This model would provide the funding increase needed by public schools to deal with the challenges they face and eliminate the massive over-funding of private school. It would be a genuine needs-based funding model and would better achieve a central goal of Greenwell and Bonnor, namely, reduction in social segregation in schools. It would result in a more balanced student profile in public schools because it would end the privileged over-funding of private schools and force private schools to increase fees which would lead to a greater number of advantaged students being enrolled in public schools. This is a much preferred way to reduce social segregation than to entice disadvantaged students into private schools by fully funding them. It also avoids governments fully funding religious instruction of students and discrimination in hiring staff.

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