

SAVE OUR SCHOOLS

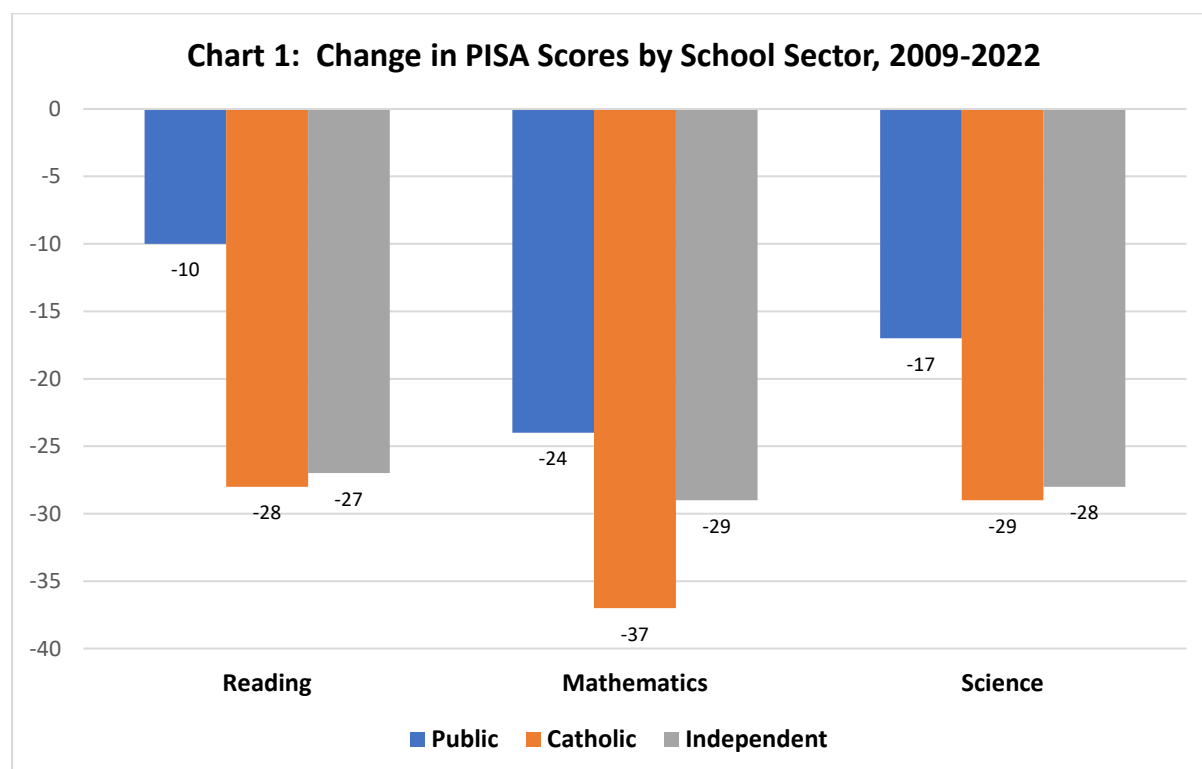
Education Policy Comment

Private Schools Had Biggest Decline in PISA Results

Catholic and Independent schools had the biggest declines in the OECD's Programme of Student Assessment (PISA) test results since 2009. Their students lost 1½ to nearly two years of learning in reading, mathematics and science. The falls in test scores were far bigger than for public schools.

The learning loss in Catholic and Independent schools occurred even though they were heavily favoured by government funding increases since 2009. Government (Commonwealth and state/territory) funding, adjusted for inflation, increased by \$2,697 per student in Catholic schools and by \$2,310 in Independent schools between 2009 and 2021 compared to \$1,062 in public schools.

The reading learning loss in Catholic and Independent schools was nearly three times that in public schools. Catholic reading results fell by 26 points and by 27 points in Independent schools compared to 10 points in public schools [Chart 1]. The learning loss in private schools was almost equivalent to 18 months of school compared to six months in public schools. Mathematics results fell by 37 points in Independent schools, which is equivalent to nearly two years of learning, and by 29 points in Catholic schools compared to 24 points in public schools. The learning loss in science in Catholic and Independent schools was nearly 18 months. Science results fell by 28 points in Independent schools and by 29 points in Catholic schools compared to 17 points in public school.



Source: De Bortoli, L., Underwood, C., & Thomson, S. (2023). PISA in Brief 2022: Student performance and equity in education. Australian Council for Educational Research

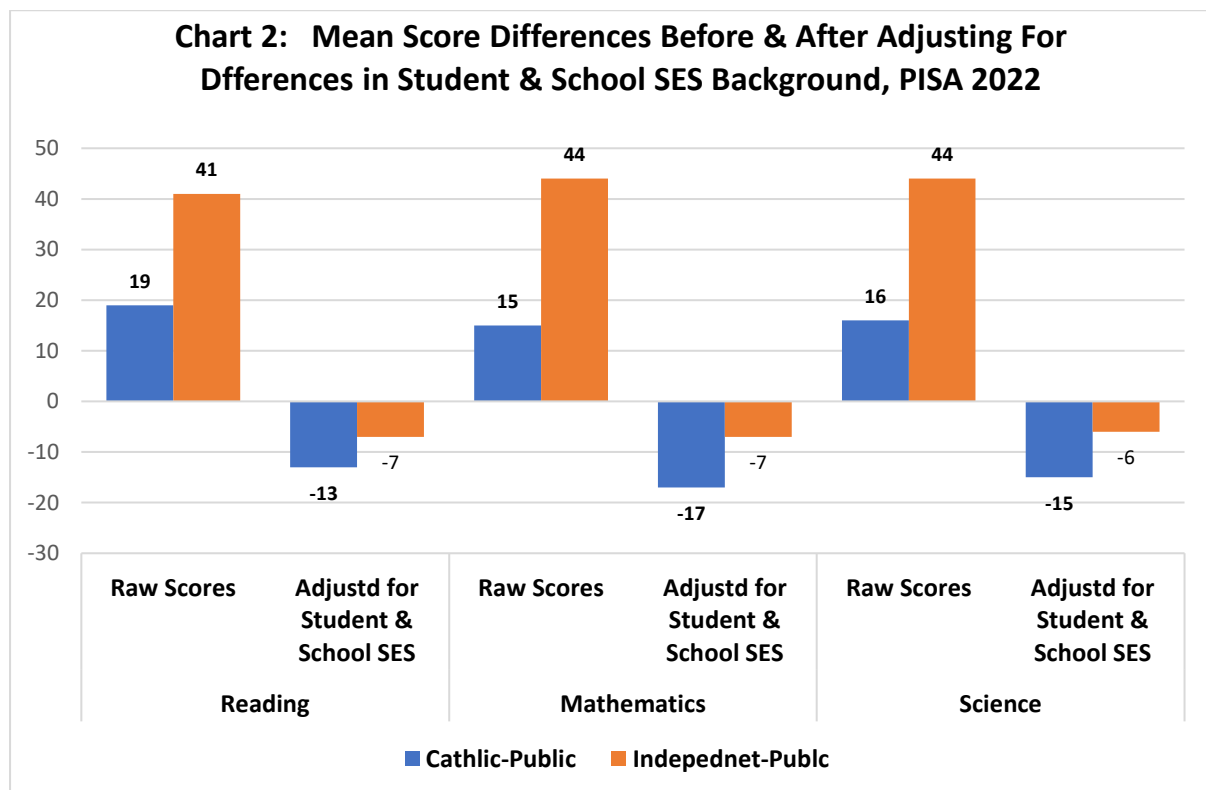
The new PISA results refute claims that private schools have better results than public schools. The report on Australia’s PISA results shows that higher raw scores for Catholic and Independent schools are solely due to their more advantaged student demographic profiles.

The report shows that public schools have nearly double the proportion of students from low SES families as Catholic schools and nearly three times the proportion in Independent schools (the respective proportions are 33%, 18% and 12%). At the same time, public schools have a much smaller proportion of students from high SES families – 18% compared to 29% in Catholic schools and 40% in Independent schools.

These differences in socio-economic composition impact on school results and the impact is particularly large in Australia compared to many other countries. The socio-economic gradient in Australia in mathematics is 45, meaning a 45 point increase in mathematics results for every one unit increase in the PISA measure of SES. It is significantly higher than the average for the OECD of 39 while Singapore had the highest gradient of 51.

The report adjusted the raw PISA scores for difference in the SES composition of the school sectors. It found that public schools outperform Catholic schools after adjusting for differences in the socio-economic status (SES) of students and schools. The adjustment shows that public school results exceeded that of Catholic schools by 13 points in reading, 17 points in mathematics and 15 points in science [Chart 2]. The differences amount to more than six months of learning.

While the adjustment for SES student and school background show that public schools outperformed Independent schools by 6-7 points in each subject, this is not statistically significant. Clearly, public schools are performing at least as well as, if not better than independent schools.



Source: De Bortoli, L., Underwood, C., & Thomson, S. (2023). PISA in Brief 2022: Student performance and equity in education. Australian Council for Educational Research

Note: Figures in bold are statistically significant.

These are remarkable results given that Independent schools have a massive resource advantage over public schools, partly due to their huge increases in government funding. In 2021 income per student in Independent schools 46% higher than in public schools while it was 12% higher in Catholic schools. Even the right-wing [Centre for Independent Studies](#) acknowledged that public schools “really do punch above their weight”.

In view of these results, the question governments and taxpayers should be asking of private schools is what they have done with their highly privileged funding increase. There appears to be much wasteful expenditure amongst Catholic and Independent schools. It is apparent that the large increases in government funding have allowed them to devote much of their fee income to the arms race in gold-plated facilities such as well-being centres, ornate libraries, extravagant music and drama theatres, more swimming pools and ovals, buying up properties, etc. Many of these schools have exhortative salary packages for principals of up to \$1 million and have extensive marketing budgets. None of this appears to be better educating their students.

It is a credit to public school teachers that they have achieved such success under the duress of massive under-funding and the resource advantage of private schools. Public schools enrol over 80% of all low SES, Indigenous and remote area students but are only funded, on average, at 87.3% of their Schooling Resource Standard (SRS) while private schools are over-funded at 105.5% of their SRS.

However, the under-resourcing of public schools is having a disastrous impact on the education of low SES, Indigenous and remote area students, over 80% of whom attend public schools. The new PISA results show large achievement gaps between rich and poor in reading, mathematics and science of five or more years of learning at age 15 and the gaps have widened since 2006.

The failure to fully fund public schools is a major factor contributing to inequity in education outcomes. The chronic severe under-funding of public schools must end if progress is to be made on closing the achievement gap between rich and poor. The Federal Education Minister, Jason Clare, told [ABC RN Breakfast](#) last week that “I want to close the funding gap and close the education gap”.. This is a strong commitment, but the question is “when”. To date, he and his state/territory counterparts remain silent on when public schools will be fully funded. Their rhetoric must be matched by action which is long overdue.

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