

SAVE OUR SCHOOLS

The Disadvantage Burden of Public Schools is Three Times That of Private Schools

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Summary

Public schools have to do much more than private schools with far fewer resources. New figures show that public schools continue to bear the large burden of education disadvantage. Enrolments of disadvantaged students in public schools are over double that in private schools but public schools have far less income. The burden of disadvantage for public schools is three times that of private schools when their lower income is considered.

The circumstances in which public schools have to operate are abominable and deplorable. Society expects public education to deliver a quality education for all students. Yet, governments continue to starve public schools of the resources they need to meet the challenge of disadvantage. Public schools are vastly under-funded for the challenges they face while private schools are vastly over-funded for what they do.

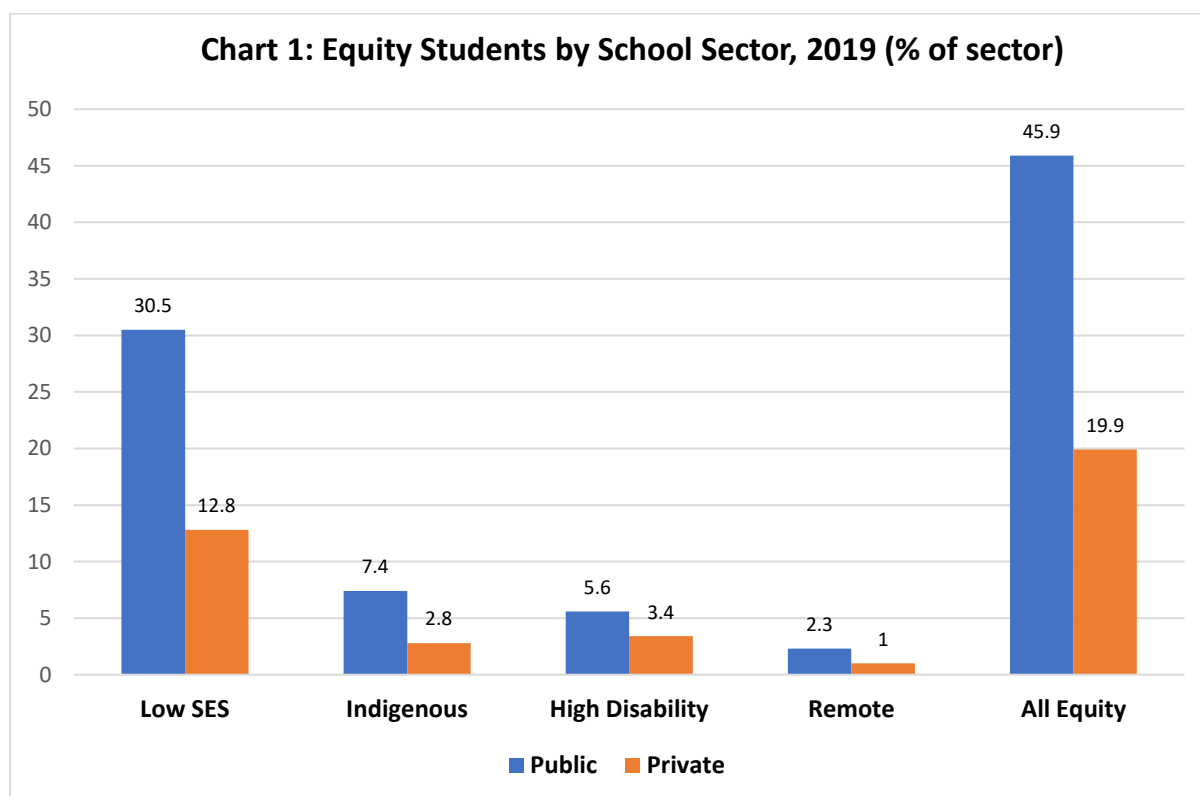
This is likely to continue for the rest of the decade under current Commonwealth and state government funding arrangements which heavily favour private schools. It will mean continuing failure to address disadvantage in education and reduce inequity in education outcomes. Australia's school funding system should be completely overhauled to focus on improving education outcomes for disadvantaged students and increasing equity in education instead of supporting privilege in education.

Disadvantage enrolments

New figures published by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) and the Productivity Commission earlier this year show that disadvantaged students account for 46% of public school enrolments compared to only 20% in private schools. Low SES students comprise 30.5% of public school enrolments compared to 12.8% in private schools and Indigenous students account for 7.4% of enrolments in public schools compared to 2.8% in private schools [Chart 1]. High disability (extensive and substantial) students comprise 5.6% of public school enrolments and 3.4% of private school enrolments while remote area students comprise 2.3% of public school enrolments compared to 1% of private school enrolments. The overall proportion of disadvantaged students in public schools is 45.9% compared to 19.9% in private schools.

The overall proportions of disadvantaged students in the two sectors are likely to be over-estimates of the actual levels because there is significant overlap between the different disadvantaged groups. For example, many Indigenous students are also low SES and many live in remote areas. However, they are an indicator of the compounding effects of multiple sources of disadvantage and this is clearly much larger in public schools than in private schools.

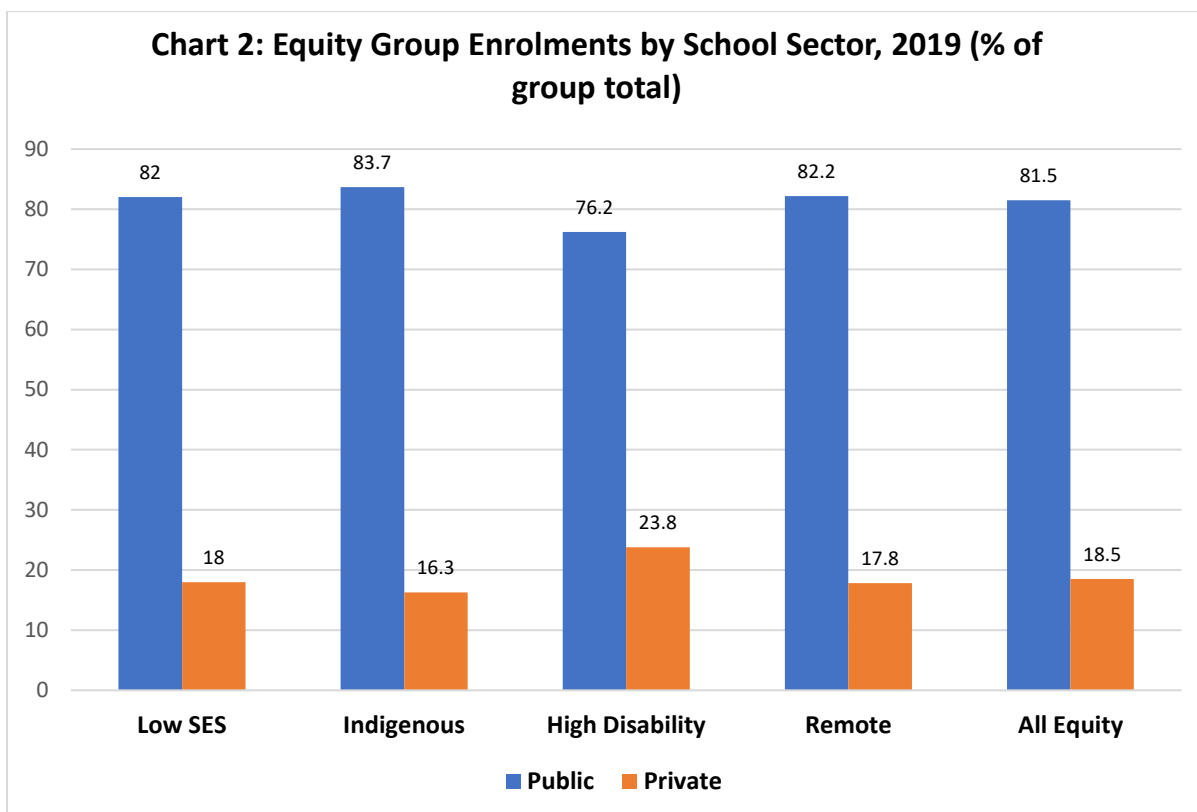
Over 80 per cent of all disadvantaged students attended public schools in 2019. Some 82% of low SES students, 83.7% of Indigenous students and 82.2% of remote area students were enrolled in public schools compared to only 18%, 16.3% and 17.8% respectively in private schools [Chart 2]. The proportion of high disability students in public schools is slightly lower at 76.2% while 23.8% were enrolled in private schools.



Sources:

ABS, Schools Australia 2020.

Productivity Commission, Report on Government Services 2021.



Sources: See Chart 1.

The following sections describe enrolments of low SES, Indigenous and remote area students by state. State data for disability students under the new classification is not published by the ABS or the Productivity Commission, nor is state data available for low SES and remote area students in Catholic and Independent schools.

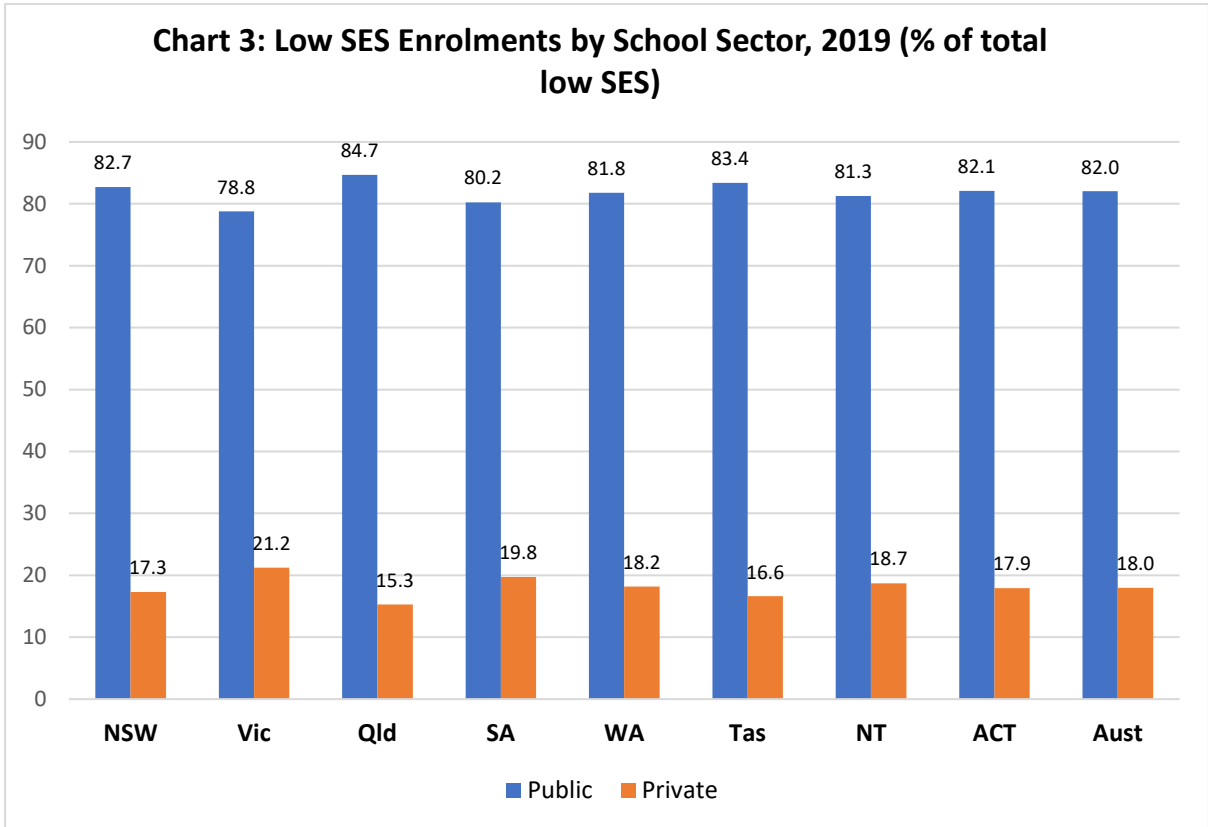
Low SES students

The pattern of low SES enrolments is similar all across Australia. In 2019, about 80% or more of low SES students attended public schools in all states [Chart 3]. The highest proportion was 85% in Queensland and the lowest was 79% in Victoria. The percentage of low SES students enrolled in public schools was over five times that in private schools in Queensland and about five times that in private schools in NSW and Tasmania. In the other states the percentage in public schools was over four times that in private schools, except in Victoria where it was slightly less than four times.

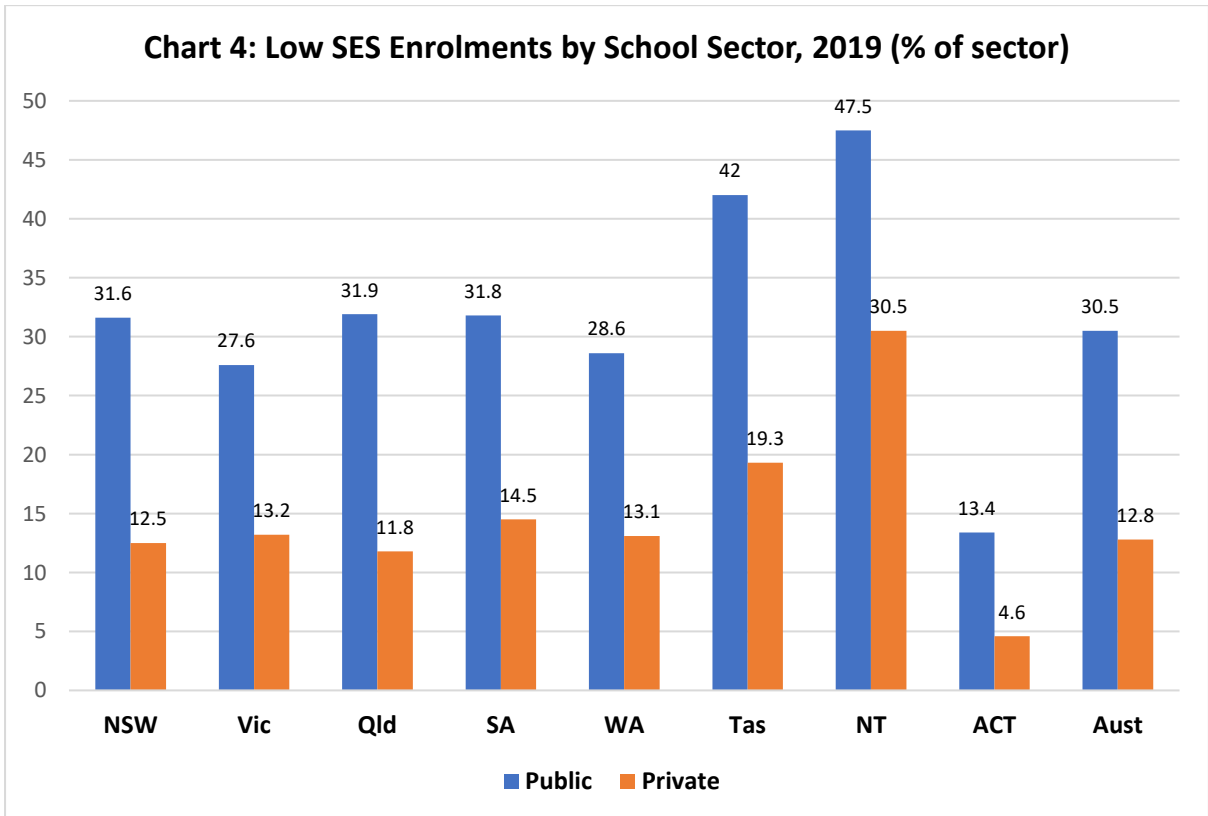
Low SES students constitute a much higher proportion of public school enrolments than in private schools in all states [Chart 4]. The proportions vary considerably between states. Low SES students comprise 47.5% of students in public schools in the Northern Territory and 42% in Tasmania, but only 13.4% in the ACT. In the other states the proportions are similar to the Australian average of 30.5%.

Indigenous students

The large majority of Indigenous students attend public schools. In 2019, over 80% of all Indigenous students attended public schools in all states [Chart 5]. The highest proportion was 88% in South Australia and the lowest was 77% in the ACT. About 10-11% attended Catholic schools in most states, the exceptions being 18% in the ACT, 14% in Tasmania and only 6% in South Australia. In most states in 2019, the proportion of Indigenous students in total public school enrolments was three times higher than in private schools [Chart 6]. It was two to three times that in Catholic schools in most states and three to four times that in Independent schools.

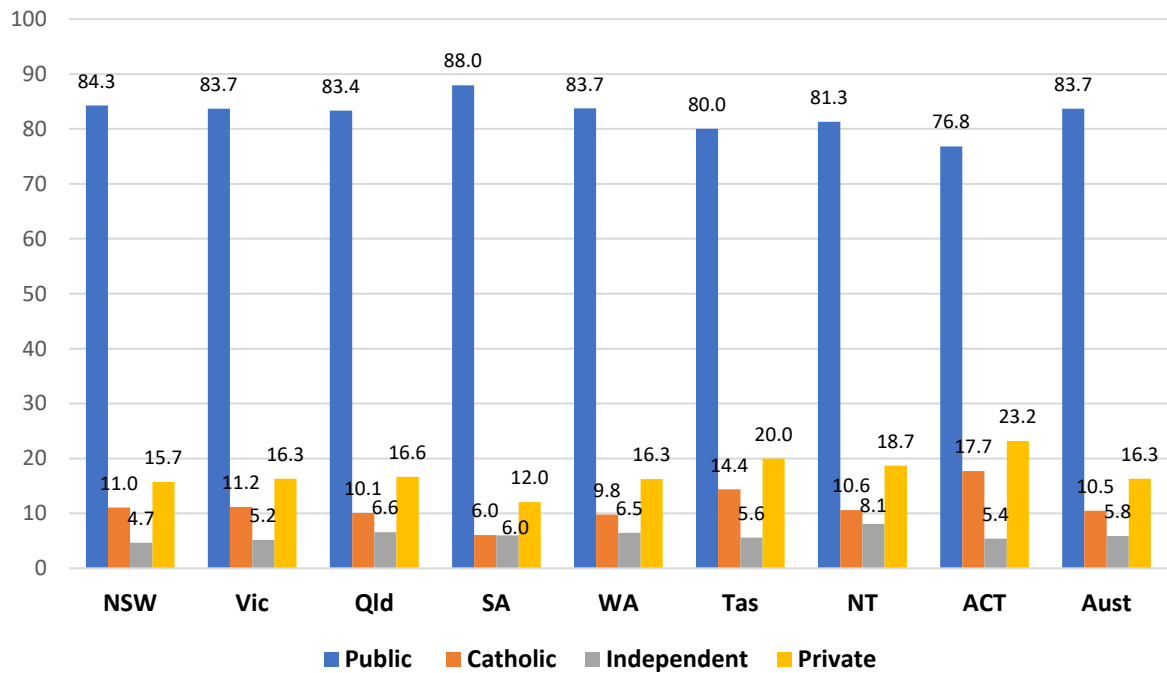


Productivity Commission, Report on Government Services 2021



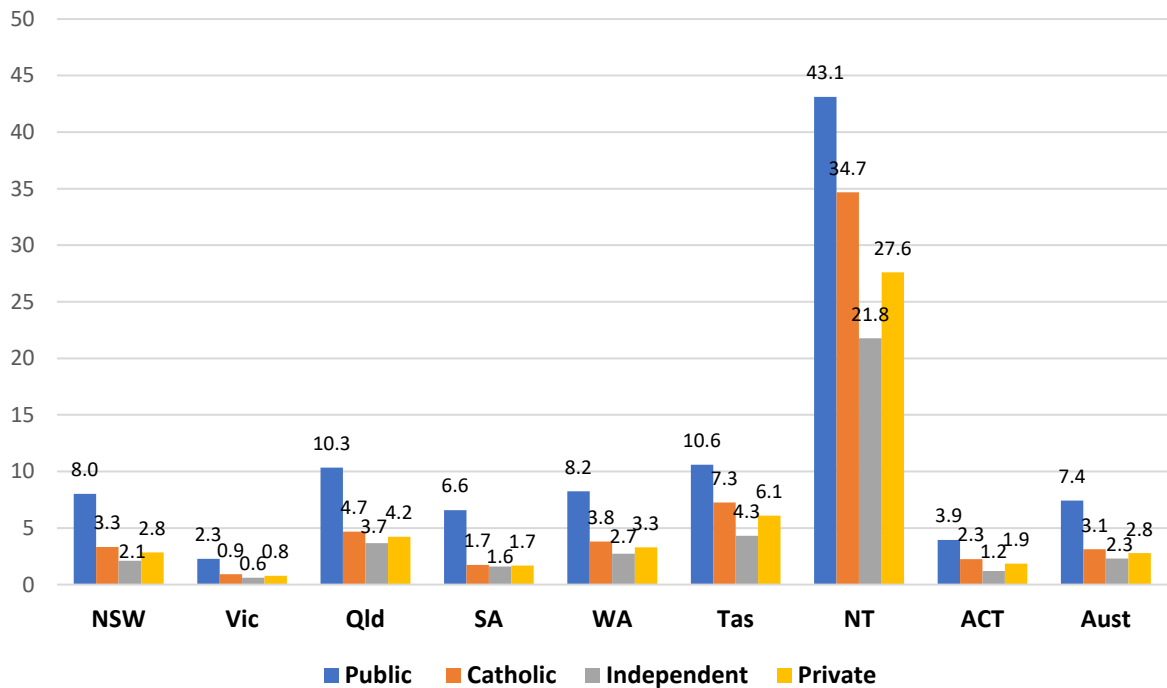
Source: Productivity Commission, Report on Government Services 2021

Chart 5: Indigenous Students by School Sector, 2019 (% of total Indigenous)

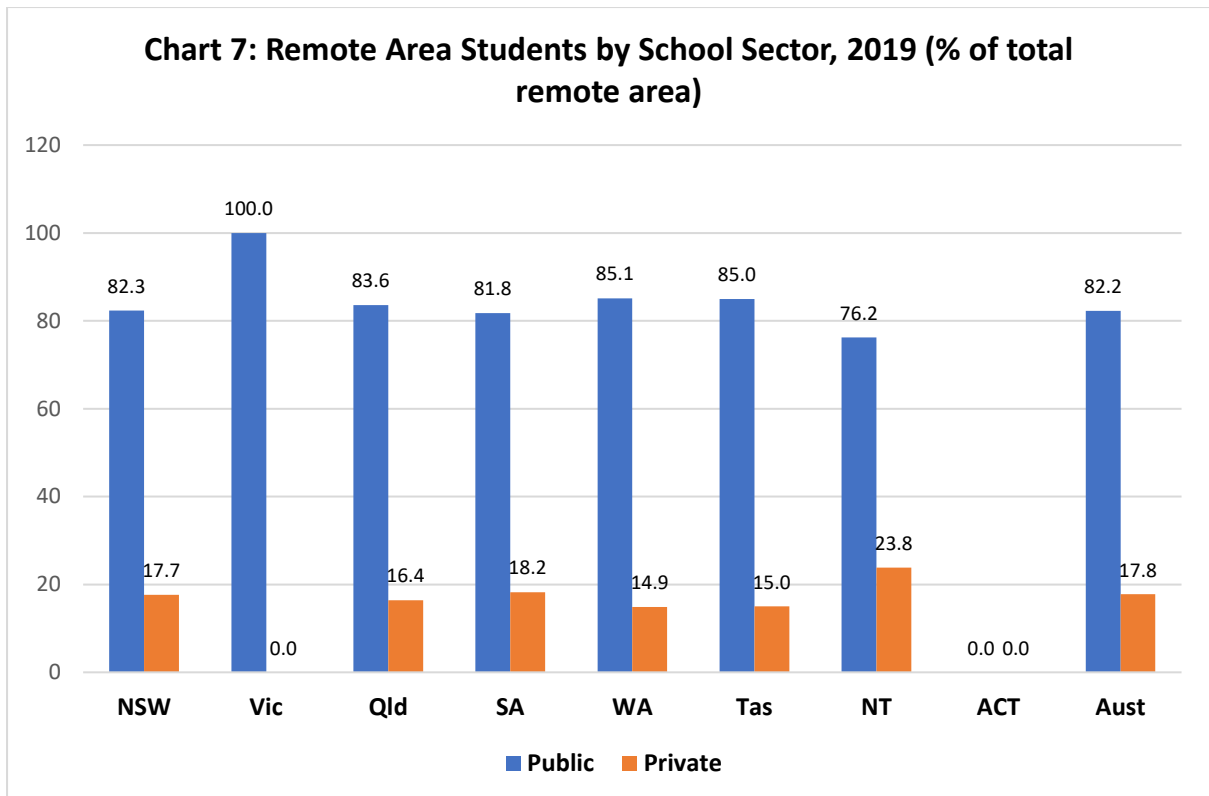


Source: ABS, Schools Australia

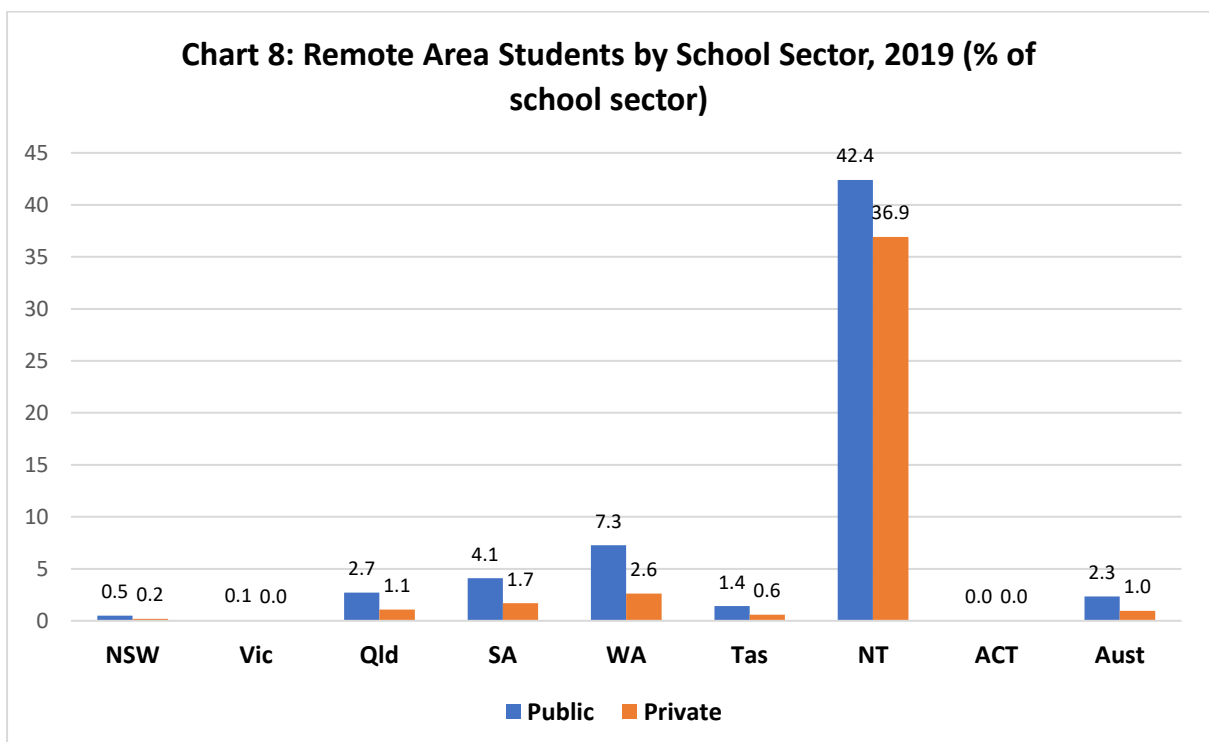
Chart 6: Indigenous Students by School Sector, 2019 (% of sector)



Source: ABS, Schools Australia



Source: ABS, Schools Australia



Source: ABS, Schools Australia

Remote area students

The large majority of remote area students also attend public schools in all states. In 2019, over 80% of remote area students attended public schools in all states except the Northern Territory where 76% attended public schools [Chart 7]. The highest proportion was 85% in Western Australia and Tasmania (there are no remote areas in the ACT). Remote area students also comprise a much higher proportion of total enrolments in public schools than in private schools except in the Northern Territory [Chart 8]. The proportion enrolled in public schools is over double that of private schools in all states except the Northern Territory.

Public schools do more with less resources than private schools

Public schools enrol the vast majority of students with family backgrounds that are associated with low levels of school achievement. In addition, they enrol the large majority of students with disabilities who require higher than average expenditure. As noted above, the proportion of enrolments of disadvantaged students in public schools is over double that in private schools.

Public schools have to do much more with their resources than private schools, yet they have significantly less total income per student than private schools. The income per student of Catholic and Independent schools is [much higher than for public schools](#). In 2019, income per student in Independent schools was \$23,956 per student and \$17,153 in Catholic schools compared to \$15,520 per student in public schools. That is, the income of public schools is only 65% of that of Independent schools and 90% of that of Catholic schools. The income of public schools was 80% of the average of private schools of \$20,088 per student.

Income per student in Catholic and Independent schools has increased six to eight times, respectively, that of public schools since 2009. The increasing resource advantage of private schools is mainly due to much larger government funding increases than for public schools.

The relative income of school sectors should also be considered in assessing the burden of disadvantage because the availability of resources is a key factor in responding to disadvantage. This can be done by comparing the ratio of income per student in public schools to that in private schools with the ratios of equity enrolments in public and private schools. If private schools had the same disadvantage burden as public schools their equity enrolment ratios would be similar to their total income ratio.

This is clearly not the case as shown in Chart 9. There are huge differences between the income and disadvantage enrolment ratios. For example, the income of public schools is only 80% of that of private schools but the proportion of low SES enrolments in public schools is 2.4 times that in private schools. Their proportion of Indigenous and remote area students is 2.7 and 2.4 times, respectively, that in private schools while the proportion of disability students is 1.7 times that in private schools.

Overall, the proportion of all disadvantaged students in public schools is 2.3 times that in private schools, yet their income is only 0.8 of that of private schools. Public schools have to do more with less income and their overall burden of disadvantage is about three times that in private schools (2.3/0.8).

The circumstances in which public schools have to operate are abominable and deplorable. Society expects public education to deliver a quality education for all students. Yet, governments continue to starve public schools of the resources they need to meet the challenge of disadvantage. Public schools are vastly under-funded for the challenges they face while private schools are vastly over-funded for what they do.

This is likely to continue under current Commonwealth and state government funding arrangements. The resource advantage of private schools [is projected to accelerate over the rest of the decade](#) to 2029. Commonwealth funding for private schools will increase under special deals not available to public schools and bilateral funding agreements between them and the Commonwealth allow the states to continue to under-fund public schools.

Unless there is a dramatic change in enrolment patterns and/or much increased funding for public schools, the disadvantage burden of public schools compared to private schools is likely to increase. It portends continuing disadvantage in education and huge gaps in education outcomes between advantaged and disadvantaged students. The only solution to this prospect is to completely overhaul Australia's school funding system to focus on increasing education outcomes for disadvantaged students and improving equity in education instead of supporting privilege in education.

