

SAVE OUR SCHOOLS

Education Policy Comment

Stuart Robert's Duplicities on School Funding and Outcomes

Education is the forgotten issue of the Federal election campaign. Yet, it hasn't stopped the promulgation of highly misleading statements about school performance and funding by the Acting Education Minister, Stuart Robert. He claimed on the [7.30 Report](#) last week that the Government has increased funding for public schools by 113 per cent and 86 per cent for private schools yet Australia's international results have decreased. Both claims are highly misleading.

The Minister did not provide the basis for his statement about the school funding increase. It is not clear whether he referred to aggregate increases or per student increases and whether it is in current dollars or adjusted for inflation. However, new figures just released by the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) clarify the comparative increases in government funding for public and private schools.

The new figures show that Federal Government funding for Catholic and Independent increased by far more than for public schools since 2013. Funding per student for Catholic schools, adjusted for inflation, increased by \$1,760 per student and by \$2,226 for Independent schools compared to only \$702 per public school student [Chart 1]. That is, the Federal Government increased funding for Catholic schools by \$1,058 per student more than for public schools and increased funding for Independent schools by \$1,524 per student more than for public schools.

Nevertheless, the overall state of school funding must include state/territory government funding because the states have primary responsibility for funding public schools. Chart 1 shows that total government funding, adjusted for inflation, increased by \$1,830 per student in Catholic schools and by \$2,304 per student in Independent schools compared to just \$1,076 in public schools. In percentage terms, government funding for Independent schools increased by 34 per cent and by 22 per cent for Catholic schools compared to only 10 per cent for public schools. This is a far cry from 113 or 86 per cent.

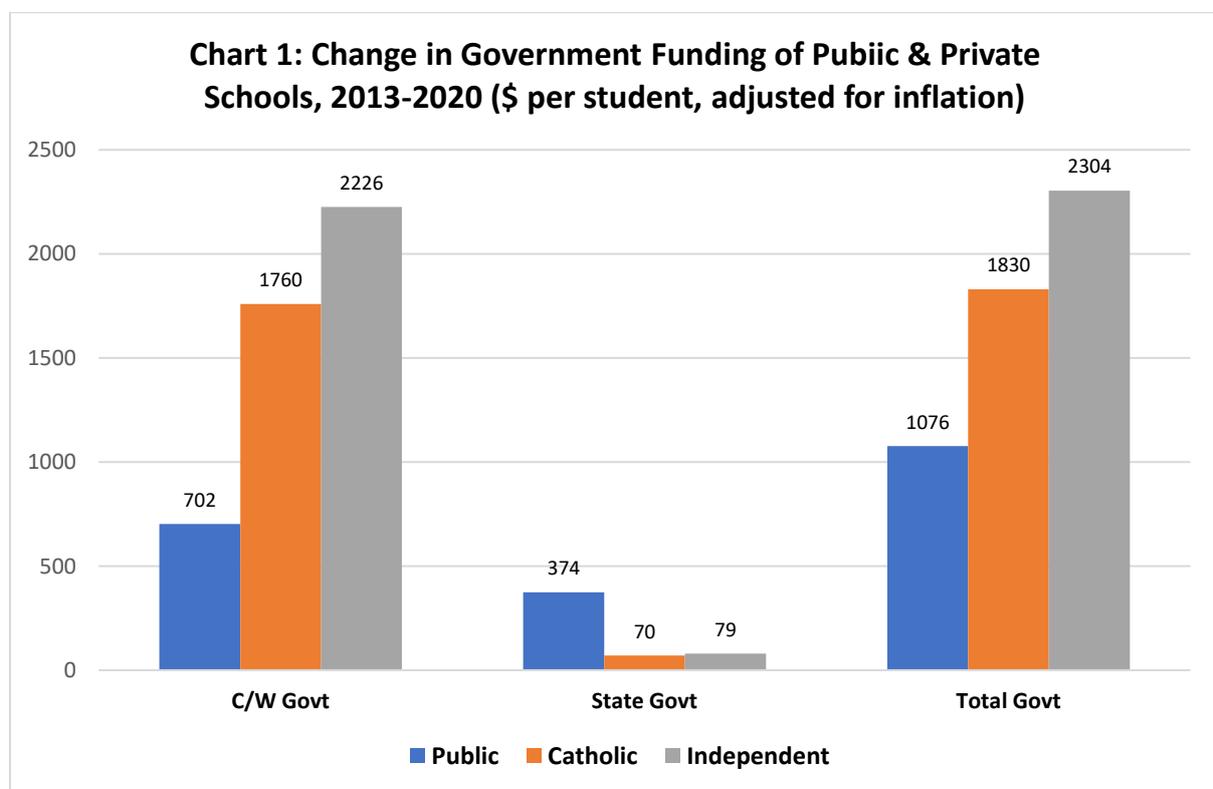
The much larger increase in government funding for private schools has ensured that their total income now far exceeds that of public schools. In 2020, the total income of Independent schools was \$24,338 per student compared to \$16,030 in public schools. The income of Catholic schools at \$17,821 per student is also much higher than for public schools.

The falsehood by the Minister for Education obscures the fact that under the Coalition Government funding increases have heavily favoured the school sectors least in need. The large majority of disadvantaged attend public schools – 82 per cent of low SES students, 83% of Indigenous students and 82% of remote area students. In addition, The National Project Manager for PISA in Australia and Deputy Director of Research at the Australian

Council for Educational Research (ACER), [Sue Thomson](#), recently revealed that 41 per cent of public schools are classified as disadvantaged schools, compared with 3 per cent of Catholic schools and less than 1 per cent of independent schools.

These proportions mean that there are 2,744 disadvantaged public schools but only 53 disadvantaged Catholic schools and 11 disadvantaged Independent schools at most. In other words, 98 per cent of all disadvantaged schools in Australia are public schools.

It is scandalous that Coalition Governments have directed huge funding increases to the school sectors that account for only 2 per cent of all disadvantaged schools and enrol less than 20 per cent of all disadvantaged students. They have favoured the privileged over the under-privileged. As [Tony Abbott notoriously said](#) in relation to Liberal Party support for private schools, “It’s in our DNA”.



Source: ACARA [National Report on Schooling data portal](#). The ACARA figures are adjusted for inflation here by a combined Wage and Consumer Price Index.

The Acting Minister also said that student achievement is declining despite increased government funding. Unfortunately, this is a widespread belief that relies wholly on the OECD’s PISA results for 15 year-old students. It ignores other evidence of increasing student achievement and also ignores the unreliability of PISA as a measure of national education performance and international rankings.

The PISA picture of declining education performance is contradicted by improving Year 12 results. Year 12 completion rates have increased significantly over the past 20 years as shown in the Productivity Commission’s annual [Report on Government Services](#). Average

completion rates increased from 68 per cent in 2001 to 76 per cent in 2020 and completion rates for low SES students increased from 64 per cent to 72 per cent.

The [ABS Education and Work](#) survey shows that the proportion of 20 to 24-year-olds who attained a Year 12 or equivalent qualification increased from 73 per cent in 2004 to 85 per cent in 2020. The proportion who attained a Year 12 or Certificate II qualification increased from 81 per cent to 90 per cent.

[OECD data](#) also shows that Australia had one of the larger increases in the OECD in the proportion of 25-34 year-olds who attained at least an upper secondary education. It increased by 20 percentage points from 71 per cent in 2001 to 91 per cent in 2021.

These are all indicators of an improving education system, not a deteriorating one. It seems that bad news is more reportable than good news.

A major problem in relying on PISA as a measure of Australia's education performance is that nearly three-quarters Australian students did not fully try in the tests in 2018. [The ACER reported](#) that "...the majority of Australian students (73%) indicated that they would have invested more effort if the PISA test counted towards their marks". It is difficult to accept the PISA results as an accurate measure of Australia's education performance when three-quarters of students didn't fully try.

While there are no time series data on student effort in PISA, the PISA surveys also reveal increasing student dissatisfaction at school which may show up in reduced effort and lower results. For example, the proportion of Australian students who feel unconnected with school [increased fourfold from 8 to 32 per cent](#) between PISA 2003 and 2018. This was the 3rd largest increase in the OECD and is likely to have contributed to declining effort and results.

It also found high variation between countries in the proportion of students not fully trying also calls into question the validity of league tables of countries based on PISA results which attract so much publicity and commentary. Rankings can move up and down depending on student effort. [The OECD has acknowledged](#) that differences in student effort across countries will affect country results and rankings [p. 198].

These results suggest that PISA is not the accurate, reliable, and valid measure of educational quality assumed by the Acting Minister and many commentators. As the renowned international education scholar [Yong Zhao has observed](#), the PISA tests have become the "false idols of educational excellence for the world to worship".

The irony is that the PISA results that the Acting Minister for Education relies on actually show the results of Catholic and Independent schools have fallen more than for public schools. The National Project Manager for PISA in Australia and Deputy Director of Research at ACER, [Sue Thomson](#), has reported that reading achievement in Catholic and Independent schools declined by the equivalent of half a year of schooling between 2009 and 2018 while achievement in public schools did not change significantly. The decline in science in Catholic

and independent schools was even bigger and much more than in public schools. The decline in mathematics was similar in all sectors.

On the Acting Minister's own logic then, these results show that the huge increase in government funding for private schools has proved to be a complete waste of money. He would have to conceded that public schools make more efficient use of government funding than private schools.

Nevertheless, there is one common feature of PISA, NAPLAN and Year 12 results. It is large achievement gaps between advantaged and disadvantaged students. Overcoming these gaps is the fundamental challenge facing education policy and funding. It is a challenge ignored by the Morrison Government and its predecessors. Funding increases were mis-directed to those in least need ad the expense of those most in need. A new government must reverse this and ensure that schools most in need are fully funded to mee the learning needs of their students.

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