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Chris Bonnor and Bernie Shepherd

Chris Bonnor and Bernie Shepherd look at My School and find some new, surprising, and significant lessons for teachers and our system.

I must admit I had a privileged education. I went to school each day with the kids of shopkeepers and solicitors, the aspirant and the indolent. It was a country town and we all went to the local school, living out Henry Parkes' vision by learning side by side. The teachers were terrific, still are – and the schoolyard represented the full social and cultural mix. As I say, a privileged education.

That doesn't mean there was a golden age when all schools were creatures of their local community. After all, our schools were provided by a distant bureaucracy in the capital city. But they looked like the local community: we would see the same kids in the streets, in the clubs and maybe even in the churches. Fifty years later, the kids of shopkeepers and solicitors certainly go to different schools.

- *Chris Bonnor*

As former teachers and principals we have lived and worked through an incremental yet seismic change in our framework of schools. In more recent years we have progressively documented what has happened and why – and what our country must do to achieve a preferred future, rather than the unhappy one currently being created. Our main resource is the data which lies behind the My School website.

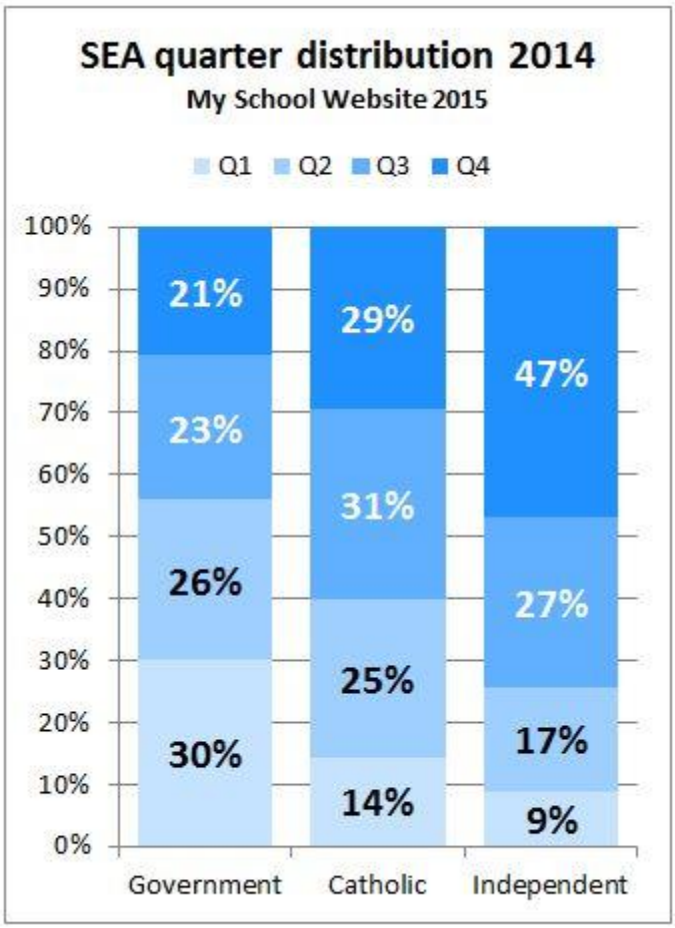
My School has never lived up to its hype but the data that 'lies beneath' the website is gold. Until now most available data has only allowed general analysis of schools: state by state, by sector and location. My School not only provides much more information but it includes a measure of socio-educational advantage (SEA) for each school's enrolment. This is presented as a numerical *Index of Socio-Educational Advantag*e (ICSEA), as well as in four SEA "quarters" of the nation that are represented in each school.

We can now answer questions which have eluded us for years: which students go where, how are their schools resourced, what does it cost and who benefits? Then bigger questions: What sort of school system are we creating, are we winning the battles for equity and achievement, on current trends what will our school future look like? The answers provided will inform, excite and concern – and along the way, bust quite a few urban myths.

Students: who goes where?

Around 73% of Australian students are in metropolitan schools, 24% in provincial and the remainder in remote or very remote schools. They are also spread unevenly across sectors: the graph below shows that 30% of students in government schools are from the most disadvantaged SEA quarter (Q1), the equivalent Catholic school figure is 14% and Independent schools 9%. As we indicate in *Equity in Australian Schools* , the proportion of Q1 enrolments in Catholic and Independent schools has dropped considerably since 2010. The schools which have the highest ICSEA value (average 1192) are government selective schools. They are followed, in approximate ICSEA order, by Anglican, Catholic non-systemic, Lutheran systemic, Catholic systemic, Christian and finally government schools. We have ended up with a social hierarchy of schools created around the extent of family advantage. It is almost as if we are creating or replicating social class through our schools. Certainly, the days are long gone

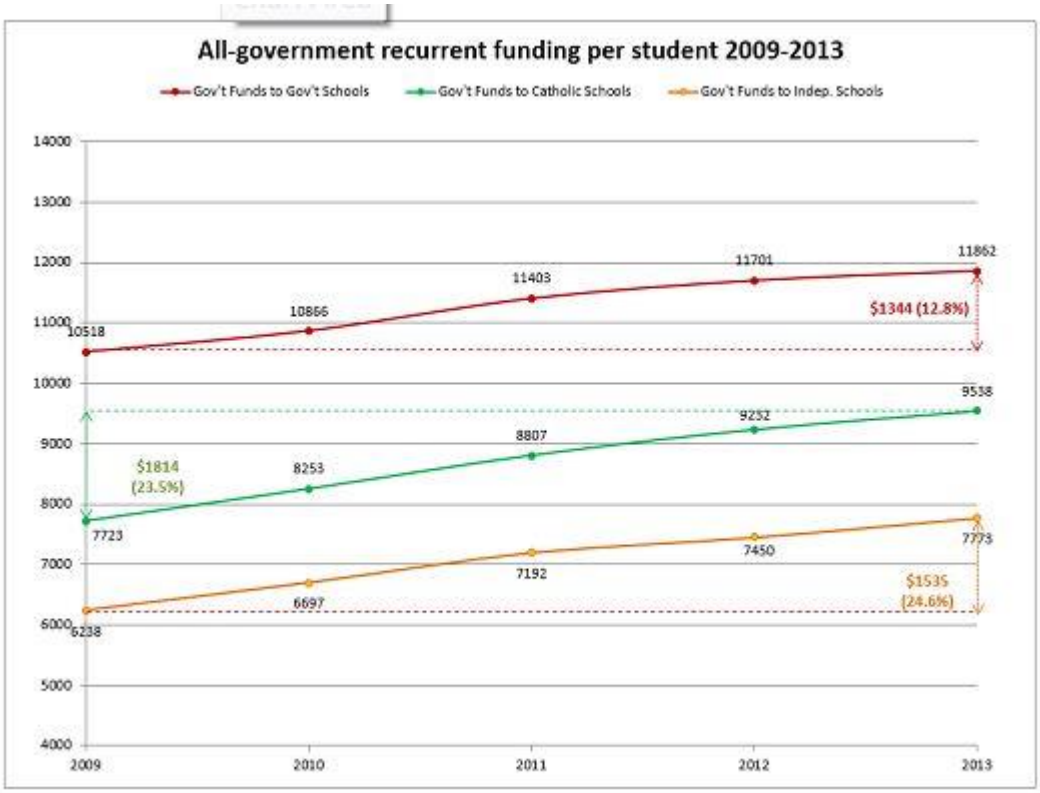
when almost all students attended their local school: only 10% of today's schools have an enrolment which reflects the socio-educational make-up of their local community.



SEA quarters distribution by school sector, 2014. Source: My School

…and why? Much of this hierarchy can be explained by the strong link between choice of schools and family income. Much has been written and spoken about choice of schools – but essentially those who get choice are those who can pay school fees. This capacity to afford school fees is certainly limited to higher income families. In a forthcoming article we show how and where school choice operates if we compare school private income figures on My School with household disposable income figures provided by the ABS. In places like Goulburn and Orange, for example, two parent families on median incomes cannot choose a non-government school for any of their secondary age children. Those on median family incomes in Sydney's wealthier suburbs can enrol six children in the lowest fee local Catholic or four children in the lowest fee local Independent school. It seems that conversations about school choice are somewhat an indulgence for the better off.

The better off are now … even better off. We've spent a few years talking about increasing funding for schools and students in need – but My School data about school funding shows that it is just that: talk. Yes, the funding has risen and disadvantaged schools do get more per student. But in *My School, Gonski and the education market* we show that the increases in recurrent funding (2009-2013) for students in more advantaged schools have outpaced increases for the disadvantaged. The changes in funding by sector are even more unusual, as indicated in the graph below. The government sector enrols more higher needs students - but its funding per student, 2009-2013, has only increased by 12.8%. Increases to the Catholic and Independent sectors are 23.5% and 24.6% respectively. Clearly, by continuing to fund schools by sector, rather than on the basis of need, we are just widening the gaps.

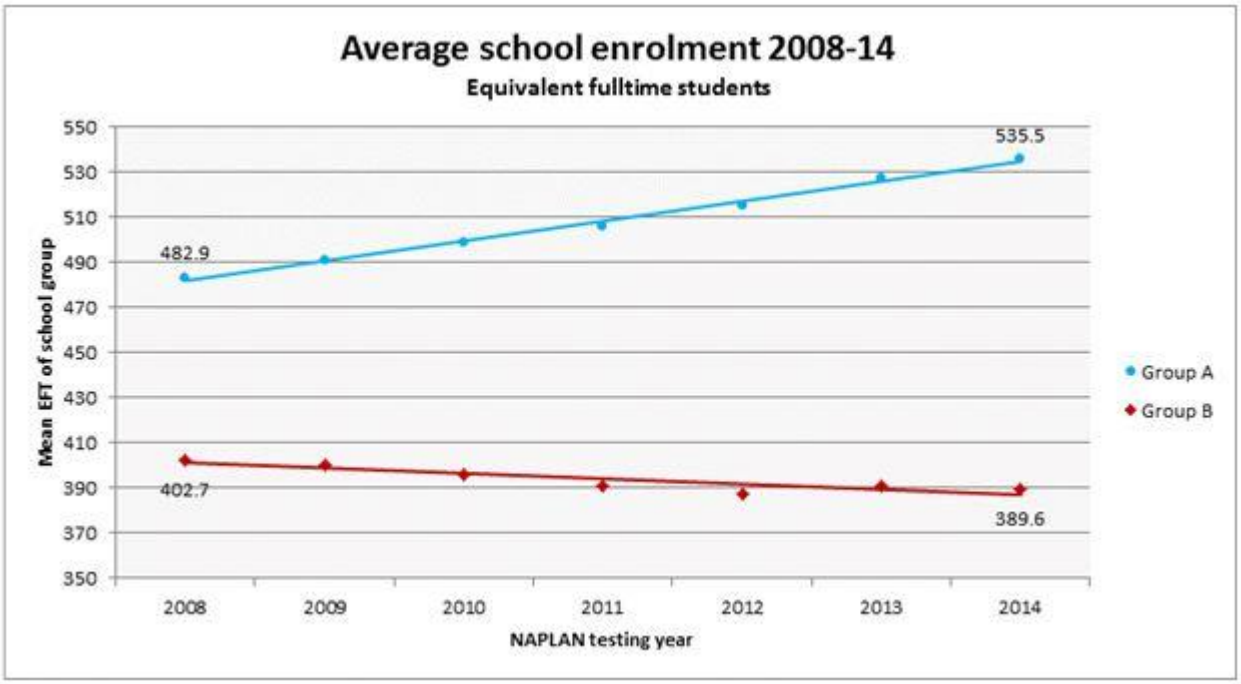


Student achievement. It might be possible to justify our weird and inequitable funding if student achievement levels were holding up or improving, but they aren't. Most reports about student achievement refer to Australia's international ranking and whether test scores go up or down. These create headlines as we lurch from one moral panic to the next. But there is a bigger problem that doesn't attract headlines: when we track changes in student achievement by level of school SEA we find that student achievement scores have slightly risen in schools with higher SEA enrolments – but they have noticeably fallen in schools with lower SEA enrolments. This diverging trend, explained in *Gonski, My School and the Education Market* was also most noticeable in middle secondary school – and it

is measurable even in the space of a few years. It isn't hard to join the dots between the way we fill and fund schools… and how well our students are achieving.

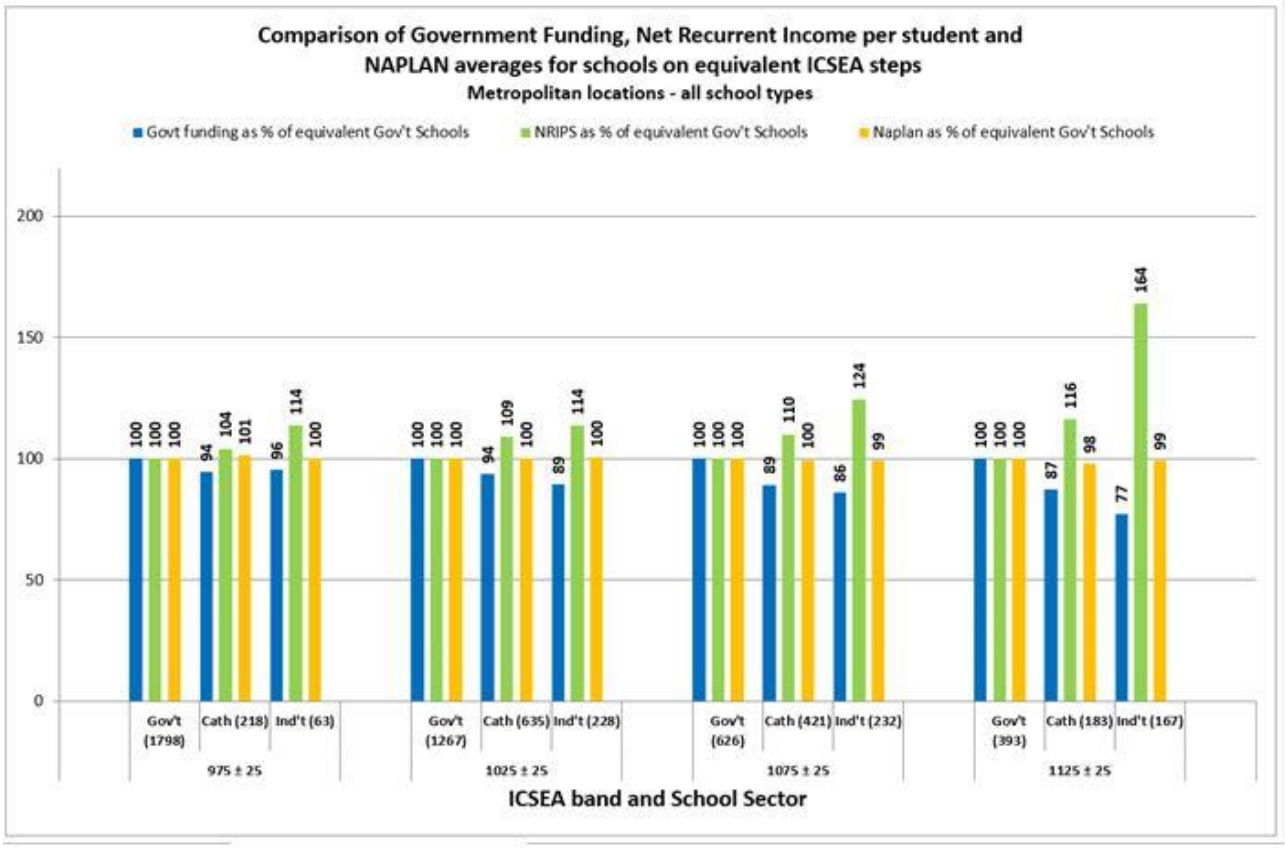
The disadvantaged: in a class of their own. Perhaps this is the problem: by OECD standards Australia has a large proportion of disadvantaged students in disadvantaged schools. As others have shown such concentrations of low SEA and high SEA students in different schools impact on such things as school culture, resourcing, curriculum, teacher expectations - and it can elevate or depress student achievement. The Gonski review clearly pointed to the impacts of such concentrations, but things have worsened since the Gonski panel first sat around the table. We have found that the proportion of students from lower SEA families has continued to rise in more disadvantaged schools – and fall in the more advantaged schools. The disadvantaged are increasingly in a class…with their own peers.

School growth – and decline. The concentration of the achievers and strugglers in different schools is impacting on school size and growth. My School shows that average school enrolments in higher SEA schools have risen; enrolments in lower SEA schools have fallen. The changes are not dramatic and there are always exceptions, but the trend is clear. Those with the means to exercise choice have moved to higher SEA schools – especially, but not only, to non-government schools. The search for a peer group perceived to be more desirable has long been a significant driver of school choice – and we know who actually gets this choice. Interestingly, there is much talk about parachuting the 'best' teachers into low SEA schools to improve the results. Fine in principle, but the 'best' students continue to head out the back door.



The slippery equity slope. The Gonski review published social gradients for various countries, showing the relationship between student achievement and level of advantage. Australia has one of the steeper gradients, indicating that we are a low equity country compared with other higher achieving countries. We used My School data to calculate equivalent gradients in Australia and have found that they have steepened in just a few years. For more information see *Equity in Australian Schooling*. The socio-educational standing of the school community seems to have had a greater impact on school performances in 2014 than it did in 2010; In other words, differences in education outcomes seem to be increasingly impacted by "differences in wealth, income, power or possessions." The gradient was particularly steep and worsening for metropolitan and for secondary schools.

Good schools can be, and are, everywhere. Far too often the word 'good', in relation to schools, really describes who goes there and not what the school does. 'Good schools' end up being those which can largely determine who enrols by setting entry tests, charging fees and even offering scholarships. My School enables comparison of schools enrolling similar students – although individual school comparisons are still problematic. But one of the stark findings of the data is that student achievement shows little variation between schools in different sectors serving similar students: the yellow NAPLAN columns on the graph below, are almost the same height for each group of schools shown (to enable comparisons the height for government schools in each group is set at 100). This similarity in achievement also holds true for HSC results in NSW, as illustrated in *The public and private of student achievement*. It doesn't mean that all schools are the same – just that their quality doesn't line up with any label.



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Money: feast and famine. The graph above rewards a closer look. The green (government funding) and blue (total funding per student) columns are certainly not the same for each sector. Despite what is sometimes claimed, governments pay most of the operating costs of Catholic schools and a majority of the costs (on average) of Independent schools. When other funding is added, mainly through fees, the two private sectors are more highly resourced than are the public schools. In the past, concern about this was written off as the politics of envy. But think about it: If there is little sector difference in student achievement the excess spent on the non-government sector is a poor investment, regardless of who is paying – their students don't do any better. In one calculation the excess involved each year is around $3.3 billion. Raising this matter isn't about envy, it's about efficiency and foregone equity. For more details see *School funding and achievement – following the money trail*

Our school future

When we started looking at My School data we were surprised at the extent of measurable change it showed over just a few years. The indicators of achievement and equity tell a story that will be with us for some time to come. In one sense My School provides a five year snapshot of what has been happening over decades – but like all incremental change it rarely creates a headline and impetus for action. The Gonski review was an exception, but over time the Gonski recommendations might just become a historical benchmark of what we should have done.

The school future it points to will be characterised by ever widening achievement gaps in a dysfunctional hybrid of public and private schools – all fuelled by ad hoc and regressive policy and funding. The current costs are high, particularly as a consequence of misdirected funding. The downstream costs are going to be higher as Australia struggles to pick up the increasing numbers of young people emerging – often far too early – from increasingly marginalised schools. Some states will do better than others and it will be interesting to see, in a few years, the extent to which NSW will benefit from its commitment to Gonski. The data will be there for all to see.

In the meantime it is useful to ponder the ways in which teachers and schools might create a better future for all their students. What are the things that matter?

Good teaching and school leadership matters… Some might conclude that all these external problems, illustrated by My School data, mean that lifting student achievement is beyond the capacity of teachers and principals. But My School also shows that schools which enrol similar students aren't all the same: differences arise, in part, from variations in the quality of teaching and school leadership. If teachers and principals don't believe they can improve student outcomes, even against the odds, they are in the wrong profession.

… with the right support. But those making decisions about schools have a responsibility to work on the problems that pile up on the other side of the school fence. Solving those beyond-school problems, especially in the way we provide and fund schools, is essential if we want to boost the effectiveness of teachers and schools. In the absence of long term solutions the effort being made, especially by teachers working with the strugglers, borders on the heroic.

Doing school better … matters. Alas, heroism isn't enough – we need to revisit the way we do school itself. More students, representing a range of ability levels, are struggling in schools which were

designed in a different century. There is a gathering commentary which points to the deficiencies of mainstream secondary schooling. Too often, the structure, pedagogy and curriculum is just not engaging young people in learning - in school and for later life. In response, schools are adopting and adapting various intervention strategies – with some going much further to redesign the school around personalisation of learning, combined with other proven and linked strategies. The stand-out example, with the success record to match, is Big Picture learning.

Money, how much and where it goes, matters. If you trace the policy initiatives of successive governments over the last few decades you'll soon find many relatively useless reforms. They tend to have in common a populist streak, a focus on what schools are apparently doing wrong and avoidance of what the evidence suggests. And they don't cost much. We know enough about the real costs and benefits of school improvement and we know that properly targeted investment delivers. Gonski was forced to deliver equity through increased funding for all schools. In the funding-starved future there will be increased pressure to achieve those equity objectives by redistributing the funding that already goes to schools.

Finally, **equity matters, more than we ever knew**. The greatest achievement of the Gonski review was to shift the debate and irreversibly link the twin objectives of excellence and equity. The data from My School shows that in the immediate post-Gonski era the lessons are still to be learned by most of those who shape our school future. Never before has it been more urgent for teachers to step up to the mark and insist that the Gonski findings and recommendations remain front and centre until they are implemented.

Chris Bonnor and Bernie Shepherd

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Bernie Shepherd AM FACE is a retired principal** with a long career in teaching and curriculum development in Science and was the founding principal of the first public senior high school in NSW. He continues to be active in educational matters as **a researcher, writer, consultant and mentor.