



RESEARCH REPORT SNAPSHOT

THE CENTRE FOR
INDEPENDENT
STUDIES

One School Does Not Fit All

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School education in Australia is characterised by both school diversity and school choice. This report aims to challenge the idea that there is such a thing as a 'typical' government, Catholic or independent school by showing the diversity of schools in all sectors.

It finds the range of schools within each sector is at least as great as differences between the sectors, questioning the usefulness of broad-brush comparisons between the school sectors based on average results, whether it be for policy decisions or for parents choosing a school.

The Australian education system today is the consequence of a historically high level of non-government involvement. In the early years of settlement, each of the colonies had a mixture of schools catering to the various needs of different parts of society—a 'developing market' in education.

For example, 'dame schools' were private schools run by women (often widows) in their homes, for children of convicts or poor working families. Free charity schools run by clergy were also major providers of education.

Key findings on school funding

Government funding

- 50% of government schools, 83% of Catholic schools, and 71% of independent schools are in the \$6,001-\$9,000 and \$9,001-\$12,000 funding brackets.
- The proportion of government schools in the government funding bracket of >\$24,000 per year (12.2%) is more than twice as high as independent schools (4.7%) and Catholic schools (2.8%).
- Very small proportions of government and Catholic schools (less than 1%) are in the lowest two funding brackets, while 16.3% of independent schools are in this category.

Total funding

- The total per capita recurrent funding rate is very similar across sectors.
- 47% of government schools, 48% of independent schools and 57% of Catholic schools are in the \$10,000-\$14,999 funding bracket.
- 94% of Catholic schools, 83% of government schools, and 76% of independent schools have per capita funding levels below \$20,000 a year.

Enrolment and sector changes

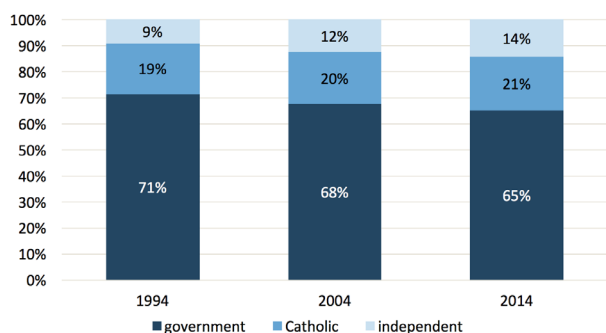
In 1994, 71% of students were enrolled in government schools, but by 2014 this had declined to 65%. The Catholic and independent school sectors grew both in number and in proportion over the same period—particularly the independent sector which almost doubled in size, from 282,000 students in 1994 (9% of enrolments) to 530,000 students (14% of enrolments) in 2014 (Figure 1).

The independent school sector has also diversified. There is now more variety and choice within the non-government school sector, albeit with relatively little increase in secular options. The vast majority of schools in the non-government school sector (96%) have a religious affiliation.

The proportion of students attending schools affiliated with the Catholic and Anglican churches decreased from 88% to 70% between 1976 and 2014 (Figures 2 and 3).

Independent schools play an important role in educational provision for students in non-mainstream circumstances. A quarter of students from remote and very remote areas of Western Australia and the Northern Territory attend non-government schools. The number of special schools in the non-government sector has also doubled in the last decade (Table 2).

Figure 1. Proportion of school students by sector, 1994–2014



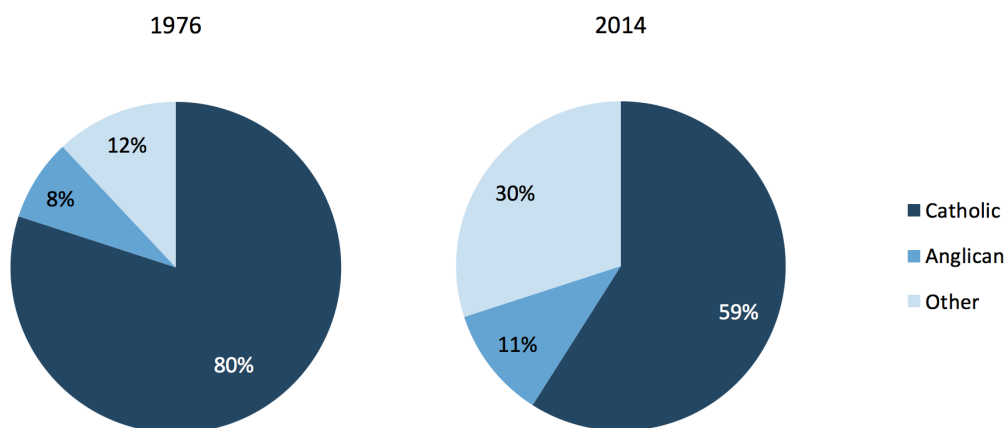
Source: ABS, Schools Australia, various years.

Table 2. Special schools, 1999–2014

Sector		1999	2004	2009	2014
Government	No. of schools	312	340	335	330
	% of schools in sector	4.5	4.9	4.9	5.0
Non-government	No. of schools	57	59	80	105
	% of schools in sector	2.2	2.2	2.9	3.5

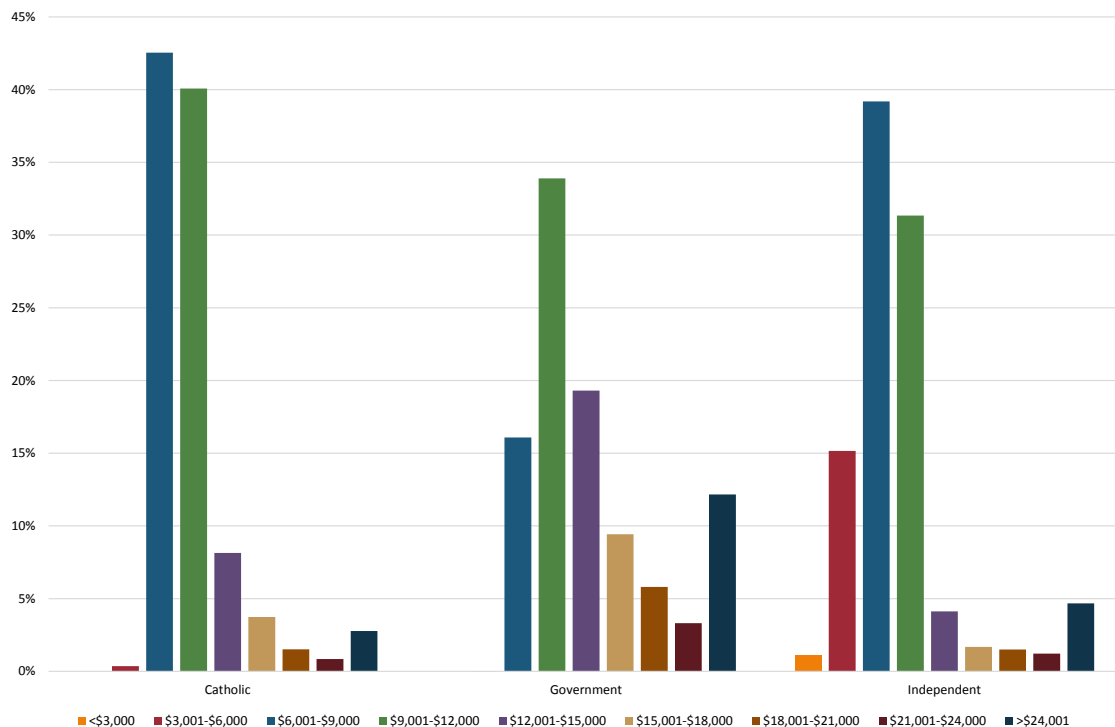
Source: ABS, *Schools, Australia*, Cat. 4221.0, NSSC Table 34a

Figures 2 and 3. Non-government school students – Catholic, Anglican and Other, 1976 and 2014.



Source: ABS, Schools Australia (Cat. No. 4221.0), 1976 & 2014. 2014 data for 'Anglican' and 'Other' students from ICSA

Figure 4. All schools by government per-pupil recurrent funding, federal and state/territory governments, 2013: per cent in sector



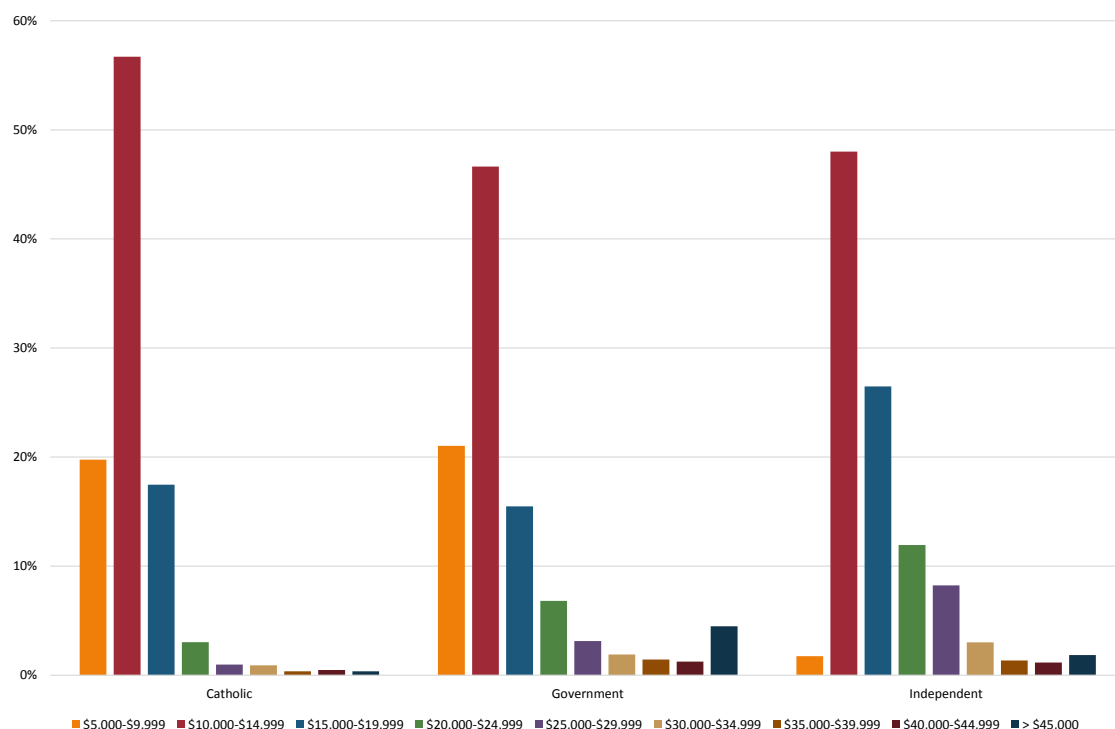
School funding

Funding for non-government schools is based on a combination of need and entitlement. All Australian children are entitled to government support for their education, and parents have both the right and responsibility to seek the best possible education for their child, including in a

non-government school. The amount of funding is then dependent on an assessment of 'need'.

Analysis of data for *government funding* of schools shows the majority of schools are in the \$6,001-\$9,000 and \$9,001-\$12,000 funding brackets across all three sectors (Figure 4).

Figure 5. All schools by total per-pupil recurrent funding, public and private sources, 2013: per cent in sector



The proportion of government schools in the government funding bracket of > \$24,000 per year (12.2%) is more than twice as high as the proportion of independent schools (4.7%) and Catholic schools (2.8%). Very small proportions of government and Catholic schools (less than 1%) are in the lowest two funding brackets, while 16.3% of independent schools are in this category.

Analysis of data for *total funding* (from government and private sources) of schools shows the total per capita recurrent funding rate is similar across sectors (Figure 5).

In all three sectors, the largest proportion of schools—approximately half the schools in each sector—is in the \$10,000-\$14,999 funding bracket. Very similar proportions of government and independent schools fall into this funding bracket (47% and 48% respectively) with a larger proportion of Catholic schools (57%).

The large majority of schools in each of the three school sectors have total per capita funding levels below \$20,000 a year—94% of Catholic schools, 83% of government schools, and 76% of independent schools.

School diversity and choice

The schools profiled in this report present a small segment of schools across Australia providing education to children and families with diverse needs, abilities and preferences:

- Travancore School in Melbourne and the Queensland Academy for Creative Industries in Brisbane are both public schools providing secondary education. Travancore is a hospital school for mental health patients and QACI is a competitive selective-entry college.
- Our Lady of Mount Carmel in Sydney and St Joseph's High School in Aberdeen, NSW are both Catholic systemic schools. OLMC serves a disadvantaged inner-city population and St Joseph's a diverse mix of rural families.

- The Berry Street School, Noble Park campus, and Maridahdi Learning Centre in Toowoomba counter the stereotypes of independent schools. The Berry St School is a highly structured environment for students coping with trauma and Maridahdi is a completely de-structured student-led discovery learning environment.

Though educational provision is becoming more diverse, choice is still limited in several ways for many people, particularly lower-income families, due to restrictive enrolment and funding policies. There are ways school choice can be expanded.

It is important to acknowledge and value the essential role all three school sectors play in providing quality education to Australian students and the benefits brought about by school choice.

Australian families are fortunate to have an array of educational choices available to them. It should not be taken for granted.

Expanding school diversity and school choice: some policy options

- Scholarship tax credits and education savings accounts have the potential to be implemented on a small scale and could be especially beneficial for children with special needs.
- Distance education and home-schooling have the potential to be opened up and regulated more prudently to be of more use to more families.
- Charter schools could extend school choice within the public school sector and offer a way to turn around chronically-failing schools.

Authors

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