

# ONE SCHOOL DOES NOT FIT ALL

Australia's diverse school sector.

It is virtually impossible to be involved in debates on private schools, school choice, and school funding, without encountering stereotypes and generalisations.

Some government schools are full of poor and underprivileged students, and no doubt don't receive enough funding to educate their students well. But the government school sector also includes competitive, selective-entry schools that serve a relatively privileged student population and receive high levels of public funding to do so.

Some independent schools educate the privileged elite, and charge fees to match. But the independent sector also includes special schools, schools for students who have undergone trauma and dislocation, and schools in Indigenous communities.

Catholic schools are perceived as being somewhere in the middle, with religious indoctrination thrown in. But just like the other school sectors, Catholic schools are diverse, and range from inner-city schools for students who live in public housing, to regional schools serving a diverse mix of local families, to exclusive schools which more closely resemble the stereotypical independent school.

Australian families take advantage of this diversity of educational offerings. In 1994, 71% of students were in government schools, 19% in Catholic schools and 9% in independent schools. In 2014, this had shifted to 65%, 21% and 14%, respectively. Just over a third of Australian students are in non-government schools.

Nor has this growth merely increased the dominance of Catholic and Anglican schools. The proportion of students attending schools with these religious affiliations decreased from 88% in 1976 to 70% in 2014. Other non-government schools are

affiliated to other Christian denominations, other religions like Islam and Judaism, and 'alternative' styles of education like Steiner and Montessori. The number of Christian schools has nearly doubled from 72 to 137, and the number of Islamic schools from 20 to 38, between 1998 and 2014.

The number of non-government schools which are designated 'special schools' for children with special needs is growing — it doubled between 1999 and 2014. Furthermore, a quarter of students in remote and very remote areas of Western Australia and the Northern Territory are in non-government schools.

There is diversity in the government school sector as well. Many states and territories have schools which are selective on the basis of academic and other attributes. These schools are most common in New South Wales, which has 21 fully academically-selective and 26 partially academically-selective government schools, as well as several performing arts and sports high schools with selective entry.



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Australia is one of only a few countries in the world that has a school system which provides financial support for parents' choices of school (though this only applies for schools which are approved for funding by governments). This is a consequence of historical events and the development of educational provision in Australia's early history.

The first schools in the colony of New South Wales were 'dame schools', private, home-based schools run by women (often widows) for children of convicts and poor working families. Alongside dame schools were schools run by the Church of England on behalf of the colonial government, partially funded by the government and by church grants.

Other colonies had different experiences based on their unique circumstances, but in all of the colonies there was a mixture of schools catering for the various needs and preferences for different parts of society — a scenario described by education historians Craig Campbell and Helen Proctor as a 'developing market' in education.

In spite of a strong track record of facilitating choice between schools, it is still limited in several ways for many people.

Within the government school system, choice is largely restricted by residence. All children are guaranteed a place in their local, zoned school and schools must enrol all students in their designated zone who apply to attend. Parents can attempt to enrol their child in an out-of-area school, but this is contingent upon the school having sufficient capacity and being willing to do so.

Some families cannot afford non-government school fees or to move to the enrolment zone of their preferred government school. Most non-government schools either have a religious character or subscribe to alternative educational philosophies, which may not be suitable for everyone.

Over time, non-government schools have also become more regulated. National curricula and assessment plans mean most parents, regardless of school sector, are choosing only among schools using a variation of the same curriculum.

Restriction of choice is also evident in the way that the different states and territories regulate and govern distance education and home-schooling.

Distance education includes 'half-time' schools, school by correspondence and virtual schools. There is a government and a non-government sector. Much like with traditional schooling, government distance education receives more funding than the non-government sector.

Access to government distance education is generally limited to people who are geographically isolated, have caring responsibilities or medical issues. Non-government distance education is more accessible, including by families who choose to home-school.

In NSW, distance education is viewed as an 'equity provision' — designed to give access to education for students whose circumstances make it difficult for them to attend a school. In other jurisdictions such as Victoria, distance education is an alternative form of provision. It can be used by choice as well as by necessity.

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A similar pattern exists for the regulation of home-schooling: some regulations facilitate choice more than others. Home-schooling is similar to distance education in that the home environment is the site of education, but it differs in that usually the parent is much more involved in directing and shaping the educational agenda as opposed to merely facilitating it. Many home-schooling curricula are available for purchase in the private market and mirror offerings of traditional school, such as religious focus, or Steiner and Montessori curricula.

In all states and territories, families' choice to home-school does not entitle them to any government subsidies, funding or resources. NSW is strict in how it regulates home-schoolers and offers them no institutional support. In contrast, Victoria offers a *Guide to Homeschooling in Victoria* which both outlines the legal requirements and contains useful information designed to help students and parents get the most out of home-schooling. Legislation also allows for home-schooled children to be partially enrolled in a traditional school to access particular activities or programs. It has been

recommended by a NSW parliamentary committee that this be investigated in NSW.

Though few people would discount or denigrate the fact that a relatively extensive number of options are available to parents for their children's education, the discussion on funding is where it tends to become acrimonious.

Funding for non-government schools is based on a combination of need and entitlement. All Australian children are entitled to a base level of government support for their education, and the amount of funding is then dependent on an assessment of 'need'. Children in non-government schools receive between 25% and 90% of the funding available to students in government schools, depending on their socioeconomic profile.

Analysing funding schools receive from governments shows that most schools receive between \$6,000 and \$12,000 per student. Fifty per cent of government schools, 83% of Catholic schools and 71% of independent schools are in this category. On average, secondary schools receive more funding than primary schools.

Education savings accounts allow families to access a portion of funding that governments would have otherwise set aside for their child's education.

But 12% of government schools receive more than \$24,000 per student, compared to 5% of independent schools and just 3% of Catholic schools.

Very small proportions of government and Catholic schools (less than 1%) receive less than \$6,000 in funding from both levels of government. In comparison, 16.3% of independent schools are in this category.

Analysing total funding (from governments, fees, and other private sources such as fundraising) again shows that per student funding is remarkably consistent across school sectors.

In all three sectors, the largest proportion of schools — approximately half of all schools in each sector is in the \$10,000-\$15,000 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 per capita funding levels below \$20,000 a year — 94% of Catholic schools, 83% of government schools, and 76% of independent schools.

The diversity of schools within each sector is greater than the differences between the sectors, calling into question 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.

There are also a few policy options for further expanding school diversity and school choice.

Charter schools — publicly funded and privately managed schools — could be introduced under the public sector umbrella. These schools would be schools of choice, but not charge fees or be selective in their students, and could offer a way to turn around chronically failing schools.

Scholarship tax credits and education savings accounts are both policy innovations from the United States and have the potential to be carefully implemented in Australia on a small scale. Scholarship tax credits enable taxpaying entities such as businesses to reduce their tax liability by paying money into a scholarship fund, for poor and disadvantaged children to put towards education expenses at a private school. This happens in a private capacity: the most prominent example is the Australian Indigenous Education Foundation. Combined with the base level of government funding that exists under Australian arrangements, a scholarship tax credit program could help remove the financial barrier families face to accessing non-government schools.

Education savings accounts allow families to access a portion of funding that governments would

have otherwise set aside for their child's education. These savings accounts can be used by parents to purchase a range of educational options for their child — from private school fees to personalised curricula. The savings account mechanism more closely resembles spending one's own money than most other school choice option, creating an incentive for value-driven spending and driving efficiency. ESAs could be especially beneficial for children with special needs, whose educational needs can often exceed what traditional schooling systems can provide.

Distance education and home-schooling also have the potential to be opened up and regulated

more prudently to be of more use to more families, with a focus on choice and access as well as equity.

Under law, parents have both a right and a responsibility to seek the best possible education for their child. Sometimes this involves a government school, and sometimes a non-government school. For some families, it can even involve home-schooling or distance education.

It is important to acknowledge and value the essential role of choice, between schools and between educational options, in providing quality education to Australian students. Australian families are fortunate to have an array of educational choices available to them. It should not be taken for granted.