



RESEARCH REPORT SNAPSHOT



Overcoming the Odds: A study of Australia's top-performing disadvantaged schools

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On average in Australia, students from disadvantaged social backgrounds perform worse academically than more advantaged students.

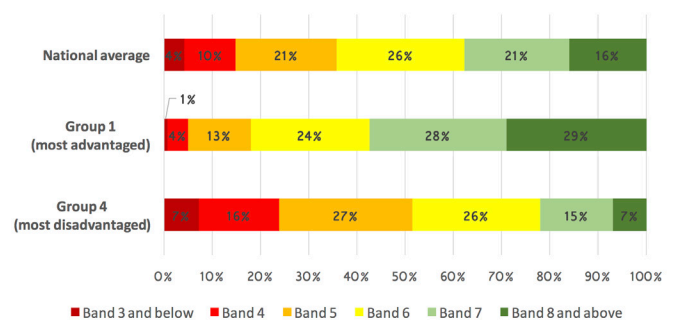
For example, Figure 1 shows that students with parents from the most advantaged occupations are much more likely to be in the higher NAPLAN achievement bands than those with parents from the least advantaged occupations.

The educational inequity associated with socio-economic status in Australia is about the same as the OECD international average, or slightly lower. Some students and schools from low socio-economic backgrounds are successful, but limited research has been done on how that success has been achieved.

This research investigated Australia's top-performing disadvantaged schools, with the aim of finding any common policies and practices that have led to their success.

On the basis of NAPLAN literacy and numeracy test results, 18 top-performing disadvantaged primary schools were identified, 12 of which are in Victoria. These high-achieving schools do not receive more funding than other similarly disadvantaged schools.

Figure 1: 2017 NAPLAN Year 5 reading results by proportion of students from parental occupation groups in each achievement band



Six common themes across nine high-achieving disadvantaged schools

Nine of the top-performing disadvantaged schools agreed to participate in this study (the other nine schools were either not permitted by their system authorities to participate or declined the invitation) and were visited by a researcher. The research involved interviews with school principals and staff, and observations of literacy and numeracy lessons.

Each school achieved success in their particular context using different methods, but six common themes were found in the nine schools.

1. School discipline.

"School discipline is a key to our success. To be able to teach, you need to have an orderly and safe classroom and learning environment, and that's something that we've put a lot of work into, as a precursor to the learning, so that the learning can take place." — Principal of School A

The clearest common theme across the nine high-achieving disadvantaged schools was their success in cultivating a positive school environment with effective discipline. Every school principal highlighted generally positive student behaviour in and out of class as a key reason for their success.

While there was a wide range of school discipline policies across the nine schools, there were some shared practices and approaches: high expectations, a clear set of consistently applied classroom rules, and a consistently applied whole school behaviour policy.

2. Direct and explicit instruction.

"We haven't got time to muck around for kids to discover things by themselves, we have to actually teach them." — Principal of School D

Direct instruction is a teaching method with a focus on teachers clearly explaining new content to students in a systematic and methodical way. Every principal said direct instruction was a central part of their school's approach to teaching, especially in literacy and numeracy

The most common features of lessons observed were:

- a defined and stated lesson objective;
- immediate feedback;
- review of previously taught content;
- clear and unambiguous language;
- teacher frequently checking for student understanding;
- teacher demonstrating the knowledge or skill to be learnt; and
- students practising new skills with teacher guidance.

3. Experienced and autonomous school leadership.

"I can work my way through the school budget in whatever way I want...I have complete autonomy to select staff in whatever way I choose and is best for the school." — Principal of School G

More experienced school principals will generally have a greater practical understanding of how to increase school

effectiveness, and positive changes driven by a principal will likely take several years to flow through into improved literacy and numeracy results

Table 1 summarises the leadership experience of the principals at the nine high-performing disadvantaged schools.

Table 1: Experience of school principals at high-achieving disadvantaged schools

School	Number of years current principal has held the position
School A	20
School B	4 (and previously assistant principal at the school for 7)
School C	3 (and previously assistant principal at the school for 8)
School D	31
School E	13
School F	6
School G	8
School H	1 (previous principal had been at the school for 5)
School I	1

The median tenure for these school principals is 6 years, and the average is about 10 years, which is considerably higher than the national average of approximately 4.8 years for primary school principals

It appears greater autonomy allows experienced principals to lead schools effectively in order to cater for the specific needs of their disadvantaged students. Victoria has a relatively high level of government school and principal autonomy, especially with respect to hiring school staff and controlling school budgets, which may be an explanation for why Victoria has such a high proportion of Australia's top-performing disadvantaged schools.

4. Data-informed practice.

"We collect data for every student by year level... then discuss the students we have concerns about... but also celebrate the successes of the students who have been high-achieving, and look at why and what we've done for them, so that it can be shared across the school." — Principal of School C

Using data to inform teaching, track student progress, and intervene to help underperforming students was common to all nine high-achieving disadvantaged schools. Data was collected and analysed at the student, class, year, and school level.

A common theme was a focus on using data for specific purposes — such as tracking individual student progress and improving teaching of particular subjects — and not collecting data simply for the sake of it.

Given the relatively high proportions of students from disadvantaged and non-English speaking backgrounds across these schools, there was an emphasis on using data to track the growth of underperforming students. Test results are used to identify underperforming students in literacy and numeracy, and then facilitate and evaluate interventions.

In addition to teacher-developed assessments, all nine schools used data from two standardised tests: NAPLAN and the Progressive Achievement Tests (PAT) from the Australian Council for Educational Research.

5. Teacher collaboration and professional learning.

"Teachers always talk professionally: professional approaches to the data, and to the kids – that's the focus of their work." — Principal of School A

The nine high-achieving disadvantaged schools all had a positive and professional culture among the school staff. Teachers collaborated extensively with each other and specialist support staff outside of lessons, meeting after school hours to plan lessons for the next day, review individual student progress, and discuss how to help struggling students.

Given the complex needs of many disadvantaged students at these schools — including any number of combined factors such as limited vocabulary, a non-English speaking background, emotional wellbeing issues, and family violence — a coordinated approach involving all relevant staff is required to be able to help all individual students.

The schools generally took a pragmatic approach to professional development. Professional learning specifically on improving teacher instruction of the fundamentals of literacy and numeracy seemed to be prioritised across the nine schools. Teacher peer lesson observation was practised formally on a consistent basis across all nine schools, at least four times per year for each teacher.

6. Comprehensive early reading instruction.

"The students have to be really strong in early reading. Because if they're not, it holds them back in everything." — Principal of School G

Reading ability is crucial in the early years of school and strongly influences later literacy and achievement across subject areas. According to decades of research, there are five essential elements of effective early reading instruction:

- Phonemic awareness.
- Phonics.
- Fluency.
- Vocabulary.
- Comprehension.

School principals and teachers all answered that they explicitly covered these five aspects of reading throughout the early years of primary school.

The importance of vocabulary was highlighted by many principals and teachers, in particular for their students from disadvantaged and non-English speaking backgrounds. The schools had a focus on explicitly teaching new words every day, especially more complex words, and words that are not part of everyday experience for children. In addition, the majority of schools use a whole class or intervention program with a structured explicit phonics component.

Policy implications

These six school practices and policies are potentially effective ways to significantly boost the achievement of students from low socio-economic backgrounds in Australia, without necessarily requiring more taxpayer funding.

The implications for education policy regarding disadvantage are:

- The ongoing public debate about school funding should shift from how *much* money is spent to *how* it is spent.
- School systems should consider giving extra incentives and support for experienced principals to stay longer at disadvantaged schools, conditional on school improvement.
- State and territory school systems should consider emulating the greater autonomy given to principals in Victoria, especially regarding selecting school staff and deciding exactly how school budgets are spent.
- Sources of comparable data — like the NAPLAN and PAT tests — should be kept and continually refined, to facilitate schools tracking student and cohort progress, and intervening to help underachieving students.
- Disadvantaged schools should consider prioritising the development of effective school discipline practices, school-wide direct instruction initiatives in literacy and numeracy, and comprehensive early reading instruction involving the five keys for reading.
- There should be a renewed focus on teacher professionalism and collaboration, especially in the context of catering for the often-complex needs of disadvantaged students.

This study was limited by several important factors — for example, there was no control group of low-performing schools for comparison — so care should be taken about inferring implications for other disadvantaged schools. Nevertheless, all the findings are consistent with the existing research on high-performing schools and disadvantaged students, from both Australia and overseas.

The success stories of the schools in this study show that — given the right set of policies and practices — it is possible for students from disadvantaged backgrounds to be high-achievers.

Author

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