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ACHIEVING A BRIGHT FUTURE FOR ALL YOUNG AUSTRALIANS



Achieving a brighter future for all young Australians

How do we best educate our children? Is it at a government, non-government or Catholic school? What about class sizes? Co-ed or single sex? There's no doubt education is one of the most hotly discussed topics in the family home. Our survey shows Australians want equity in education - and believe significant reforms need to be made so quality education is accessible for all children, whatever their background. It's not a case of class warfare; it's more a matter of Australians recognising the need to better educate all of our children to succeed in a rapidly changing world.

Recently, the world-renowned UNICEF found the Australian education system to be among the most unequal in the wealthier part of the world. Other international comparisons, for example OECD's PISA study, reveal our schools have one of the biggest performance gaps between top and bottom ranked students. They are statistics not to be proud of, prompting the Gonski Institute at the University of NSW to conduct research on equity in Australian education. After surveying more than 2000 people across all demographics in NSW on equity in education. Significantly, most respondents, regardless of their political views, believed equity in education was vital - and that "rigorous, measurable indicators" of educational equity in Australia should be developed, rating our school system a lack-lustre "OK" for its present ability and willingness to achieve equity.



A Hub for Excellence in Education

The Gonski Institute, established in 2018 by the University of NSW, is headed by Professor Adrian Piccoli, a former education minister in NSW. Its core mission is to examine the growing inequality in Australian education and find effective ways to fix it. The Institute believes all students should have a fair go, regardless of their home background, and be offered equal access to high quality education.

"Our aim is for UNSW to be the national centre for excellence in school leadership, system and political leadership, and a global hub for scholars, policy-makers and thought leaders interested in research and practice in educational excellence, access and equity," Professor Piccoli says. "Our mission is to fix the equity problem in education by understanding the problem, undertaking and communicating research with direct impact, advocating for change and empowering decision makers."

What is Educational Equity?

Different values - specifically those of fairness and inclusion - define equity in education. Put simply, educational equity occurs when all students' education outcomes are not the result of their family backgrounds - domicile, occupations, wealth or positions. If a greater rate of equity was achieved in Australia, Annie, who lives in the country and whose family earns the minimum wage, would have the same education opportunities as Bella, who comes from a wealthy family and lives in one of Sydney's wealthiest suburbs. During the recent lockdown due to the COVID-19 pandemic, Bella could quickly move to online learning through her well-resourced fee-paying non-government high school; whilst Annie was left floundering as her local public high school did not have the resources or personnel to quickly prepare for such an event. The move to several weeks of remote learning from home clearly highlighted the disparity between schools in Australia. Many students already disengaged with school were further distanced; while those supported at home through school and a solid family background enjoyed a different way of learning. Politicians around the world strive to achieve better equity to lay the foundation for a democratic society and allow their country to reach its best economic potential.

Although none have managed to achieve full equity in education, some have come close, notably Finland and Canada. Finland - which has no private schools and only a handful of independent schools - reached the top of the OECD's Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) in the early 2000s and since then, educators from around the world have studied its school system. Canada has a similar education structure to Australia, and has been able to accomplish school systems with higher student learning and greater equity than Australia.

Although there is no easy answer to why the Finnish and Canadian systems are so successful, they do perform better than most comparable countries in terms of equity in education outcomes. In Finnish schools teachers are empowered to adapt the Finnish National Core Curriculum to suit students' particular needs and strengths of the school. Canadian schools have strong pedagogical leadership that emphasizes student wellbeing as much as their academic achievement. A high performing school is one where all students perform beyond expectations in a wide range of knowledge and skills - the greater the equity, the better the school is regarded. Schools develop their curricula to formulate values and goals with equity, inclusion and fairness as central principles of the declared work of the school.

"AUSTRALIAN EDUCATION SYSTEM IS AMONG THE MOST UNEQUAL IN THE WEALTHIER PART OF THE WORLD." - UNICEF IN 2018

Why Does Equity Matter?

Do Australians care about equity in education? Are their opinions based on their political beliefs, with left-leaners believing in equality and liberal thinkers saying it is up to the individual to succeed? Not according to the findings of the Gonski Institute's recent survey. Fundamentally, nine out of 10 respondents with varying political beliefs firmly believe equity in education is important. When two main dimensions of equity, fairness and inclusion, were asked in separate questions, 78 and 86 per cent respectively supported these factors for education in Australia, showing a high level of endorsement for educational equity in our school system. Moreover, the majority of respondents believed a student's backgrounds should not be an obstacle to academic success and that all students should be able to achieve basic literacy and numeracy.

So overall, the findings strongly show that Australian society values equity as an important principle for its school system - not only is a fair education a human right, getting the best out of our children leads to boundless social and economic benefits. On the world stage, academic studies have found equity is a significant predictor to how people perform when they leave school in the vital areas of employment, financial security, health, well-being and even civic participation.

The UN General Assembly in 1948 declared education was a human right as it was essential for people to fully develop and participate in society. Therefore, persistent educational inequity that denies some students equal opportunities to learn and achieve - and therefore undermines societal development - has been a pressing concern for both the public and governments.

Significantly, according to the OECD's 2018 PISA survey, there is a large and persistent gap in the performance of students from advantaged and disadvantaged backgrounds across OECD countries. On average, the gap in reading scores is 141 score points, that is equivalent to about three years of school, between the 10 percent most advantaged students and the 10 percent most disadvantaged. This gap has remained unchanged in the last decade. One major factor which contributes to the inequality in student's academic performance is inequality among schools. The UNICEF Office of Research (2018) highlighted that one fifth of the variation in children's reading scores was explained by differences between schools. Socioeconomically disadvantaged students tended to attend schools with less than ideal conditions, such as having a large proportion of underperformers, a lack of education material, poor physical infrastructure or a lack of experienced teaching staff. In comparison, well-resourced and high performing schools tended to be located in wealthier neighborhoods, making it difficult for students from low income families to attend those schools.

In 2012 the then Prime Minister Julia Gillard set an ambitious goal for education in Australia - that our nation be ranked, by 2025, in the top five countries in reading, mathematics and science. Not only are we a long way from that, if Australia's performance on the world stage does not improve - and indeed continues its downward spiral - we could see some disadvantaged students not being able to complete schooling in the future.

Further, the global COVID-19 pandemic has exposed the existing frailties and inequalities in the Australian system when it comes to accessing technology for use in online education environments and in ensuring that students receive sufficient support in transitioning to this new way of learning.

Who is Responsible for Fixing the **Equity Problem**?

If a child is struggling with maths at his local public primary school, is it up to their parents or carers to find another school which is better resourced to help students who struggle in this subject? Should the parents or carers campaign at the school for extra maths tutoring? Not according to our survey, which found Australians believed equity should not be managed at the micro level by students, parents, or even by the schools; but at the macro-level, by the Government and education sectors. While society is responsible for ensuring the achievement gap amongst students is closed, the majority interviewed said the Government or educational authorities held the primary responsibility to ensure education is equitable and fair for all. Many respondents agreed that there are large inequalities in school resources across Australia and think the Government should provide more funding to schools in disadvantaged areas and additional assistance for disadvantaged students and schools. Our survey shows that Australians want better investment in public education, and targeted help for struggling students, as opposed to specific programs which only help disadvantaged students.

Primary Responsibility to Ensure Educational Equity



The government was selected as the most responsible entity by 42% of respondents.

Educational Equity and School Resources



70% strongly agreed or agreed that large inequalities in school resources are unfair

Additional Assistance for Students with Higher Needs



80% strongly agreed or agreed with providing extra assistance to students in need.

Achieving Educational Excellence



70% believed that supporting underachieving students is a way to achieve educational excellence in Australian society.

How Can We Achieve Greater Equity In Australian Schools?

Achieving greater equity in our nation's schools involves not only changing the funding system to dramatically reduce large inequalities, but to also ensure schools have tools and resources to deliver fairness and inclusion. Australia has one of the biggest proportions of children studying in non-government schools among OECD countries, with almost two out of five students attending non-government schools. Public schools educate more than 80 percent of students in the lowest rank of socioeconomic status, many of whom are indigenous students, students in remote and rural areas, students with a funded disability and the vast majority of students with English as a second language. "As a consequence...public schools continue to suffer from the unfair social stigma of serving these disadvantaged children, rather than carrying the inspiring connotation of providing a unifying, high quality education for all," says Professor Pasi Sahlberg, Deputy Director of the UNSW Gonski Institute for Education. .

Although parents can choose where to send their child, some schools can decide which students they want.

Non-government schools offer scholarships but they are mostly awarded to students at the top of the academic or sporting tiers. So the system then leads to a majority of children from a low socioeconomic background congregating in a public or low fee non-government school. Australia has one of the largest proportions of its underprivileged children going to a disadvantaged school amongst OECD countries. This, together with chronic funding deficiencies, makes more equitable education increasingly hard to accomplish.

As Professor Piccoli says, the huge structural problem of schools in Australia is not an easy political problem to resolve - but parents are voters and want to ensure children get the best schooling possible. Politicians, he says, often raise the issue of teacher quality when Australia's flailing education system is in the public eye as it is politically difficult to go to the real and concrete issue of the structure and funding of the nation's school system. However, the Equity in Australian Education survey findings makes it very clear the public wants the equity issue resolved. "There is a high level of endorsement...of the importance of educational equity in the Australian school system," the survey says. "There appears to be sufficient levels of public support for the government or societal actions to implement public policy measures for promoting educational equity. There is also evidence... that equity issues have not been sufficiently dealt with in the school system so far." Professor Piccoli, who has authored a book for parents on school education in Australia, says policy makers need to take notice of the fact educational equity is very important to Australians.

"I expect anything policymakers do to promote equity in education, economic or social policy would be well received by the public," he says. "Whilst the hard policy decisions needed to be made to fix inequity are, on the surface, politically difficult as we are talking about a redistribution of money and power, there are many social, economic and political rewards in doing that.

"TO MAKE THE EDUCATION SYSTEM MORE EQUITABLE, YOU NEED A FUNDING SYSTEM THAT DISTRIBUTES MONEY TO WHERE IT IS NEEDED MOST."
- ADRIAN PICCOLI

So how does Australia move forward? First and foremost, education authorities must be held accountable for proper policies and funding for enhancing equity through teaching and learning in schools. Presently, educational performance is measured through school-based assessments and the annual national standardised test (NAPLAN); but new metrics are needed to monitor fairness and inclusion in schools and at the level of the education system. This would start by the Government having a national strategy for equity in education, and schools across Australia then being given resources and autonomy to implement that strategy.

Presently, Australia has a unique way of funding where all schools - even top end wealthy private schools - receive public funds, allowing them to invest more in education and infrastructure than many public schools, making the gap between private and public even wider. If Australians really want to have world class education for all of its children and thereby a more equitable school system, it needs to be funded and resourced in a very different way than what we see now.

Any move to change funding arrangements would, of course, be hotly debated; but it appears Australians are not only ready for a debate; they are demanding such a discussion to ensure the school system is fair for every student. It has been repeatedly spelled out that the individual needs of students and schools must be the primary determinant in the allocation of funding for education, a point made very clear in the 2011 Gonski Review.

Professor Sahlberg says in light of international data, it appears the actual problem in our country's education is eroding equity and increasing segregation in education - especially in remote and rural parts of Australia and many urban areas in larger cities.

"What would be required to improve educational performance in Australia is to flip the education policies to focus more on equity," he said. "In other words, focus on fair funding, inclusion and children with special educational needs, and less on narrowly measured academic test scores and excellence as the key indicators of educational success.

"Believing that back to basics, that means giving priority to literacy and numeracy in school, would make Australia's education system the best in the world, is a poor strategy. Australia should flip the system by empowering schools to lead the way towards more equitable education," he says.

Australia has many advantages to build great schools for all of its children, with cultural richness and substantial national wealth creating a unique platform for improvement that places it ahead of many nations.

So, when we discuss hot topics like public, independent, selective or private schools, class sizes and whether co-ed or single sex is best, let's not forget the strategic and moral importance of educational equity - and let's keep having the conversation long after we have chosen a high school for our children.



"THE EVIDENCE AROUND THE WORLD SUGGESTS THAT THE HIGHEST PERFORMING EDUCATION SYSTEMS ARE ALSO THE MOST EQUITABLE. THIS SHOULD BE SEEN AS A ROAD MAP TO STUDENT IMPROVEMENT IN AUSTRALIA."

- PASI SAHLBERG



Mission Possible: Fix Inequalities

Australia has a world class education system – but not for everyone. National data and international comparative reviews show that educational inequality is perhaps the most significant threshold that separates us from the pack of leading education nations in the world today. We deserve better as a nation, but moreover, we need to educate all our children so that they are given the tools to thrive and are capable of coping with the challenges that they may face in their lives. Some say that effecting meaningful change in an education system is too complicated and slow. We disagree and urge that as parents, caregivers, education stakeholders, policymakers, teachers and leaders, that we all can do better than we do now. But it takes all of us together to work for that better future and to implement small, but meaningful changes in our ingrained systems. Here are some examples what we all can do.

Mission for policymakers

Make equity a priority in education policy

Equity doesn't happen by chance. Effective and targeted policies can drive better practices. Policies should ensure that all schools have sufficient resources and enough trained personnel to make teaching and learning happen. Policies can also make clear what more equitable education would require schools to do. We know that quality education is easier to have with stronger equity. Consider these: High quality early childhood education for all, wellbeing as an essential outcome of schooling, and special needs education as an inclusive service to all children.

Mission for schools

Make wellbeing a cornerstone of a great school

Children learn better when they are healthy and happy. In recent times, the wellbeing of young Australians has been in steady decline. Similarly, teachers and principals are increasingly stressed, tired and burned-out. Health and wellbeing are particular concerns among underprivileged children. Therefore, care for children's health and mental wellbeing should be part of the work of every school. Sufficient time for recess, physical activity, music, arts and play can positively affect students' and teachers' wellbeing in school and make it a better place for all.

Mission for parents and caregivers

Host a school improvement BBQ

All parents and caregivers want to send their child to the best school. In Australia, unlike many other countries, much time and effort is spent selecting these best schools. What is best for one child may not be for others. Parents and caregivers play an essential role in supporting the school and can make significant contributions to the school community. Supporting your child's school could be as easy as organising a fun gathering with friends to talk about how ways of improving the school to better serve different children, not just your own child/children. Challenge each other to do one concrete thing for the school community.

Mission for businesses

Ask for excellence and equity

Employers know it: Well educated employees are the heart of successful business. This often leads to expectations for schools to raise levels of excellence at any cost. But inequality can be very expensive for companies and taxpayers. Advocate for high quality education in your local community. Don't stop there, insist that education system must deliver these high results in equitable ways. Establish new partnerships with high performing schools in both quality and equity of learning outcomes.

Mission for teacher educators

Give all new teachers a course: "Equity in Education 101"

Teachers play a key role in schools to make all students learn beyond expectations. Initial teacher education can provide new teachers with a broader mindset and approach to student learning in school. Design a course for all students in initial teacher education that provides new teachers with the basic knowledge, values and skills to work in a school and education system that promotes greater equity.

Mission for children

Look after one another

Because we all are different, so are the children in our schools. Some students find school a comfortable place to be and learn, others don't. We can do much better in every school to help each and everyone to think that school is their favourite place. Find someone who looks lonely and doesn't have many friends in school. Go and talk to a fellow student you don't know yet. Create a culture in your school that ensures helping everyone to succeed is the norm.

Mission for journalists

Tell the success stories

Media plays an important role in improving education systems. Too often, however, bad news stories are reported because this content seems to garner more attention. Australia has world class education writers who not just report the news of others but often investigate their own information for their stories. Write a story about a school or a community that has done extraordinary things in helping all children succeed in school, collect real stories from children and parents and encourage inspiring school leaders and teachers to communicate what is possible in our schools.

Mission for artists

Help every school to become an art school

Australian schools have a long tradition of teaching children about the rich culture of arts, music and drama. Still, success in school is determined by grades or test scores in a select few academic subjects. Arts subjects offer most children opportunities to actively engage in learning in school and that is a condition for greater equity in education. Work with students to teach them the work of an artist. Create a project with a school to use traditional storytelling and music that includes all children. Make every school in your community an art school.

Mission for politicians

Listen to the experts

When the going gets tough, we often turn to expert advice. When politicians in Australia were coping with the global health pandemic in 2020, they systematically relied on the experience of health specialists and the top national and international scientists. Now, when you continue to develop Australian education systems to provide world class teaching and learning for all our children, make your decisions after listening to the advice of your top experts and practitioners. Communicate to schools and school leaders an overall direction and trust them to lead the way. Equitable education can't be created by force.

