

SCHOOL SEGREGATION: OPPORTUNITY OR SAFETY NET

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Michael Sciffer highlights the issues related to school segregation in Australia and challenges us to commit to the development of an Australian education system in which education exists for the common good, not individual advancement...

In May 2007 Prime Minister John Howard said that public education was a “safety net” for families who could not afford private school fees. The Howard federal government (1996-2007) transformed the structure of the Australian schooling system such that school segregation is increasing at the second-fastest rate in the OECD (O’Brien et al., 2023) to make us the 7th most segregated system (Gutiérrez, 2023). The Howard government’s four policies to shift enrolments from public to private schools were:

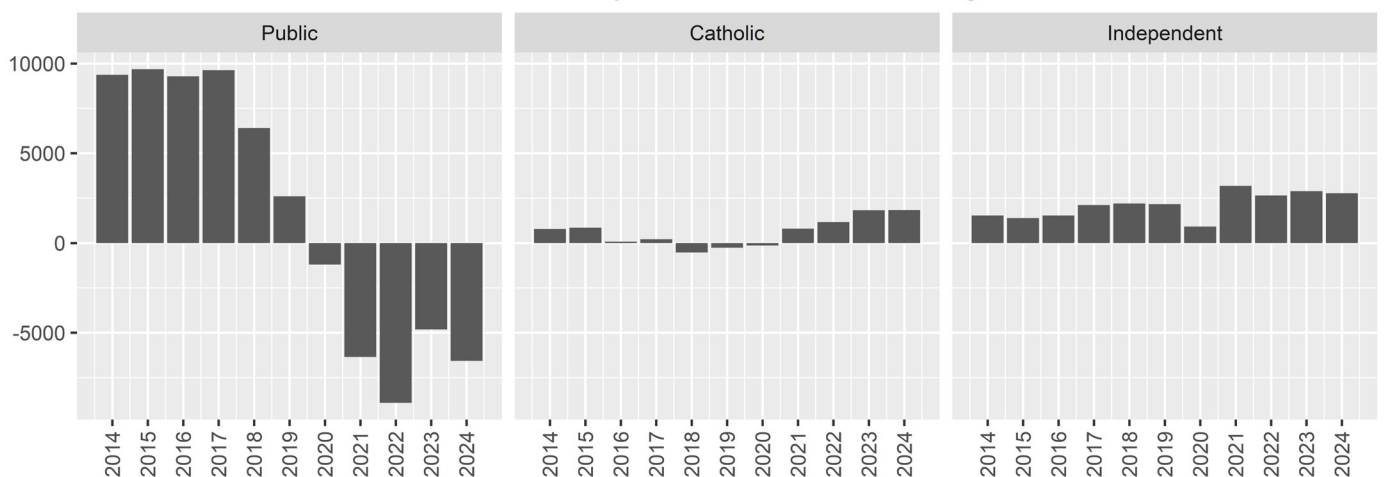
1. Very large increases in federal government funding to private schools
2. Deregulating the creation of low-fee private schools
3. Starting a culture war against the values of public education
4. Targeting parental anxieties to pressure families to believe “school choice” is a requirement of good parenting

The outcome was to accelerate the shift of middle-income families from public to low-fee, government-dependent, private schools. This has changed the enrolment composition of public schools, residualising many traditional neighbourhood public schools.

In the years since the Howard government NSW public schools have shown very little growth, resulting in the public education system shrinking in relative size compared to independent schools. This has undermined the authority and prestige of the public system in educational decision-making.

In recent years, a concerning new trend has emerged of NSW public primary schools losing enrolment numbers as shown in *Figure 1*. From 2020 public primary schools have lost 27858 students while public secondary schools have only gained 3626 students (ABS, 2025). At the same time, Catholic and independent primary and secondary schools have increased by 16394 and 32605 students respectively.

NSW Primary School Enrolment Changes



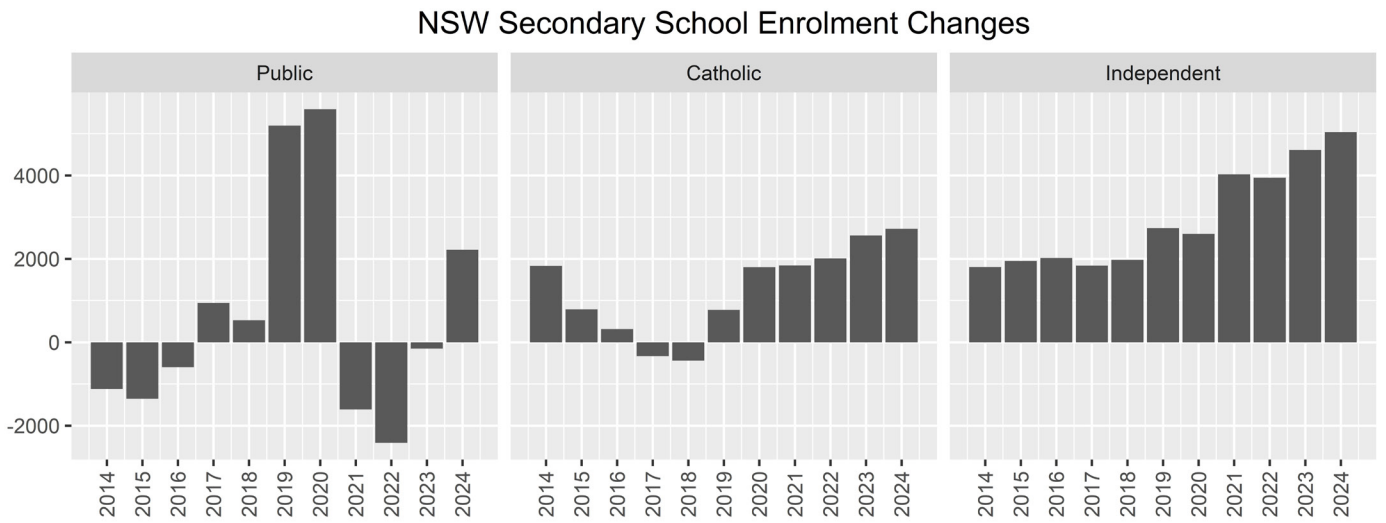


Figure 1. Enrolment changes in NSW schools 2014-2024

WHAT IS SCHOOL SEGREGATION?

School segregation is the separation of students into different schools based on social characteristics such as socio-economic status (SES) or class. Segregation is often measured by how unevenly socially disadvantaged students are enrolled across schools within an area or school system. In Australia, school sectors have very different socioeconomic enrolment profiles as shown in *Figure 2*. The public system over enrols low-SES students, systemic Catholic schools over enrol middle-SES students, independent schools over enrol high SES students, while selective schools enormously over enrol high SES students. As no school sector is representative of the community Australia’s schooling system is educating children with a skewed perception of society.

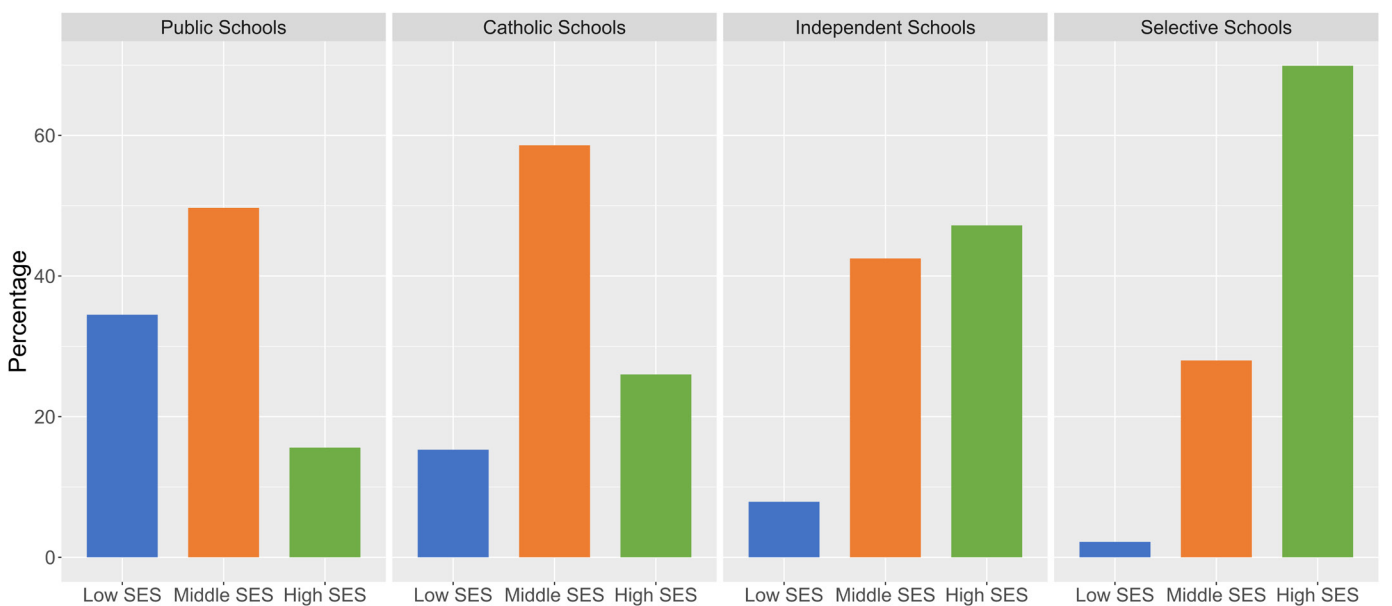


Figure 2. The 2019 socioeconomic profile of Australian secondary schools

WHY DOES SCHOOL SEGREGATION MATTER?

School segregation matters because it multiplies social disadvantages. The Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration (Education Council, 2019) sets Australia's schools the twin goals of educational excellence and equity. But research shows that segregation diminishes the capacity of schools to achieve academic excellence for socially disadvantaged students. The socioeconomic status of a student's peers, measured as the average SES of a school, is just as important to their learning as the SES of their parents in predicting academic achievement. This is called the school compositional effect.

The school compositional effect is shown in *Figure 3* from our research (Sciffer et al., 2022). It shows that both the SES of a student's family and their school predicts academic achievement. Our research found that a low SES student in a low SES school was two times less likely to achieve minimum NAPLAN benchmarks than the same type of student in a high SES school.

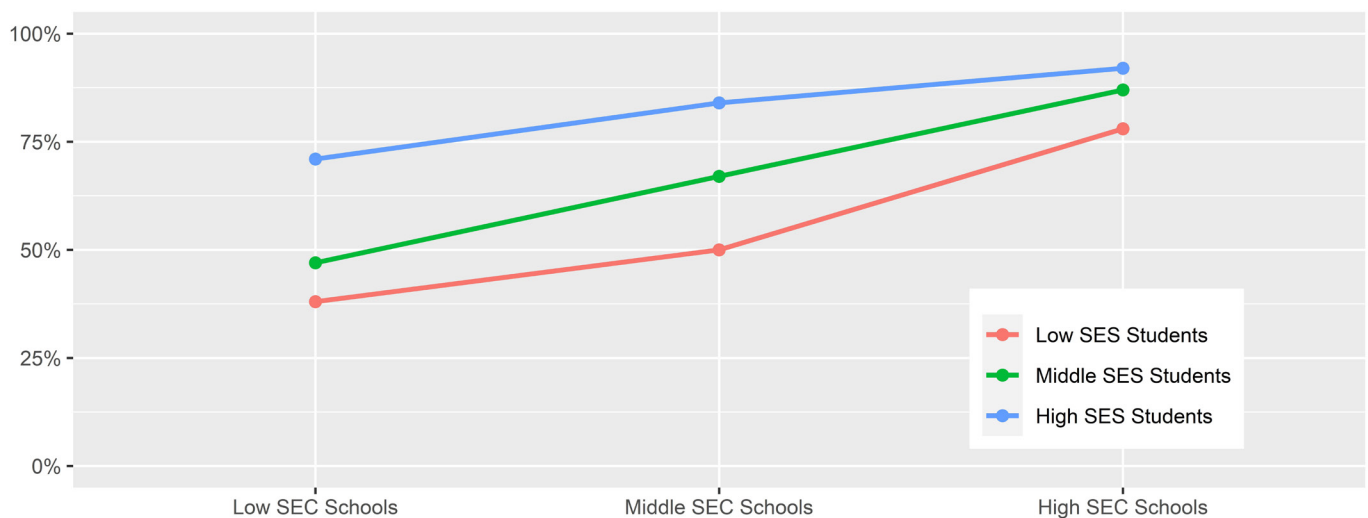


Figure 3. Proportion of students achieving all NAPLAN benchmarks by family and school socioeconomic status

School composition influences more than academic achievement. It has negative effects on high school graduation and access to university (Chesters, 2019; Palardy, 2013, 2015) and social cohesion (Molina & Lamb, 2022).

WHAT CAUSES SCHOOL SEGREGATION?

International research has shown a range of factors are associated with school segregation. In the US where most students attend public schools, neighbourhood segregation largely drives school segregation. This is less of a factor in Australia because of lower rates of income segregation and a much higher degree of school competition. Thus in Australia, more relevant factors are parental decision making, school marketisation reforms, and the enrolment practices of schools.

Parental choice is often identified as the cause of school segregation in Australia (Larsen, 2024; Munro, 2018). Blaming parents for school segregation makes sense in a free-market society that views people as consumers free to make decisions in their own self-interest. An alternative explanation is that Australian parents are driven by anxiety to protect their own children from the harms of a hyper-individualistic society. Where once the education of children was part of the common good guaranteed by government, it has been privatised to an artificially limited commodity (Astin, 1992). Many parents who "choose" private schools report they would prefer neighbourhood public schools but feel compelled to purchase private schooling because of the inadequate resourcing of public schools (Campbell et al., 2009).

School marketisation reforms have caused segregation in every country in which they have been implemented (Lubienski et al., 2022; Zancajo & Bonal, 2022). Governments have argued that school competition and choice will raise quality as it does for consumer products like cars and mobile phones. But school markets fail because they are constrained (Astin, 1992). When consumer products are popular, production is expanded to increase sales and profit, allowing more consumers to benefit from the product. Otherwise, a competitor will take market share. But when schools are popular, they cannot substantially increase enrolments because of physical and geographical constraints. Instead, they put up fees or drive up nearby housing prices. Popular schools are thus able to entrench their privilege over generations.

School market reforms increase the power of popular schools to choose their students. Enrolment and exclusion practices allow schools to select high achieving compliant students who are cheap to teach. This enables the marketing of high academic achievement and orderly learning environments without investing resources into teaching quality nor student wellbeing. The outcome is that Australian schools compete based on enrolment profiles, not teaching quality. This is exemplified in the media's annual reporting of HSC results which predictably follow socioeconomic enrolment profiles. Selective schools come first, followed by high fee private schools, then low fee and comprehensive public schools. The only insight this reporting provides is as a class analysis of metropolitan Sydney.

WHERE TO NEXT?

Substantial reforms to the structure of Australia's schooling system are required if we are to achieve the goals of academic excellence and equity. While low SES students are excluded from academic excellence, Australia's schooling system will continue to languish by international standards. To address school segregation requires confronting the fundamental contradiction at the heart of Australian education policy, between equity and competition. Segregation can only be addressed if there is a shared commitment to the education of all children and young people. That is, education for the common good, not individual advancement. Such a commitment would require:

- Every school being resourced from all income sources

according to need, and

- Every school contributing to the learning of all social groups.

In such a system, there would be no need for families to jostle for schools. Families enjoy such a right with schooling systems in countries like Finland and Canada. These countries prioritise the common good in education. It will take a substantial and sustained struggle from public education supporters, in particular from the union movement, to refashion the schooling system to serve the effective functioning of a democratic society.

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Michael Sciffer is a school counsellor in Armidale, having taught and counselled across many public schools in the Riverina and Northern Tablelands. He is a PhD candidate of Murdoch University and has published a range of research papers across diverse international journals. His research interests are in school segregation and compositional effects. In particular, the role of public policy settings in determining the social contexts of schools.