

# New research highlights social inequality in Australian schools

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A report published on October 26 demonstrates that a student's social class is a major factor determining education outcomes. It verifies that the ever-widening social inequality in Australia continues to have the most detrimental consequences for the working class.

The report, *Educational opportunity in Australia 2015: Who succeeds and who misses out*, examined junctures, or milestones, in a student's educational experience. The report's head author, Professor Stephen Lamb, is the director of the Centre for International Research on Education Systems (CIRES) at Victoria University in Melbourne.

The first juncture was the preparedness of children to begin school. In the highest socio-economic quintile—the wealthiest 20 percent—15.2 percent of youth had not reached the expected developmental milestones to enable them to successfully undertake their school life. In most cases, their families have the material means and level of education to take remedial measures.

Among the poorest 20 percent, however, Lamb found that the rate of children unprepared for school soared to 31.7 percent. Indigenous students, who represent one of the poorest sections of society, were the worst affected, with 43.2 percent lacking the necessary pre-school prerequisites.

The next juncture examined was at Year 7, a critical year because it is the transition from primary to secondary education. Using the standard of education reached by a child's parents to assess a student's socio-economic status, the report states that “patterns of achievement by parental education in the primary years suggest a widening gap between learners with different levels of advantage in their home and family background.”

The proportion of students whose parents have university degrees, who were not meeting reading milestones, increased by 4.3 percent from when they began Year 3 in 2010, to when they started Year 7 in

2014. For students whose parents had not achieved Year 11, however, the increase was 10.5 percent. Similar figures were cited for numeracy levels.

According to Lamb, “this suggests that the Australian education system does not adequately mitigate the adverse effects of lower parental education levels on educational opportunity, and in fact, appears to exacerbate them.” In other words, the education system reinforces class divisions.

The report used NAPLAN (National Assessment Program—Literacy and Numeracy) data to draw this conclusion. The Labor government of Prime Minister Kevin Rudd imposed the NAPLAN testing regime in 2008, under the direction of education minister—and later prime minister—Julia Gillard. Annual standardised tests were imposed for all Year 3, 5, 7 and 9 students.

The NAPLAN data is used to rank schools on the government's MySchool web site. The regime follows similar programs in the US and Britain, where education has been substantially narrowed and restricted to “teaching to the test.” In both countries, so-called failing public schools have been targeted for closure or takeover by private operators. A similar process is well underway in Australia, with parents abandoning “under-performing” schools if they can afford to do so.

As a by-product of NAPLAN, teachers at public schools in working class areas are being left to cope with a growing proportion of students with complex and difficult learning problems, often without much-needed professional assistance and educational support staff.

The teachers' trade unions played a critical role in imposing the NAPLAN regime, by stifling opposition among teachers. The momentum among teachers in 2010 for a NAPLAN boycott was suppressed after the unions were incorporated into a government inquiry. With the unions' agreement, the system was then implemented largely unchanged, compelling teachers to administer the

tests.

Lamb's report, while uncritical of NAPLAN, does point to one of its consequences—an accelerating privatisation of education. The proportion of students attending private, fee-paying secondary schools grew from 38.5 percent in 2011 to 40.7 percent in 2014. According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics, the proportion of students educated in private schools at all levels increased from 22 percent in 1970 to 35 percent in 2014.

Lamb observed: “There is a clear social division across sectors. Independent schools tend to draw from the top and middle of the SES [socio-economic status] quintiles, while government schools disproportionately draw from the bottom quintiles and the Catholic schools more from the middle, but also from the top.” The report shows that 77.5 percent of children from the lowest quintile attend public schools.

The movement of students from “aspirational” families to more desirable private and government schools has left some schools with a concentration of students from poorer families, making it more difficult for the school to satisfactorily meet their needs. The report labels this “residualisation.”

Federal governments have enforced this process through the disproportionate funding of private schools. According to Lamb, total government expenditure on private schools increased by 107 percent between 1991 and 2000, while for government schools there was a 52 percent increase. The share of funding to private schools increased from 16 to 21 percent.

Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority data indicates that federal government funding to private schools grew by 23 percent from 2009 to 2013, while there was only 12.5 percent growth in funding for government schools over the same period.

The channelling of public money to the wealthiest private schools was stepped up in 2001 by Prime Minister John Howard's Liberal-National Coalition government and continued by subsequent Labor and Coalition governments.

Social inequality is a major factor in why many students do not attain the Year 12 standards required for access to university. On 2014 statistics, approximately 25 percent of 19-year-olds failed to complete Year 12.

Lamb stated: “The risk factors most strongly associated with completion of Year 12 or its equivalent are being indigenous, being male, and coming from a low-SES background.”

Compared to other Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) countries, Australia's socio-economic gap in learning is large. Throughout the OECD, a better-off student is one year ahead in mathematics in learning, on average, compared with less advantaged students. In Australia, students in the lowest decile (10 percent) of SES are approximately one year behind the OECD average in mathematics and 2.8 years behind students in the highest decile. Similar figures register for reading and science.

At the end of their schooling, 41.1 percent of young people from the lowest SES decile are not in full time study or work. This compares to just 16.9 percent for the highest decile.

The impact of social inequality continues after secondary school. Over 25 percent of low-SES students who do complete Year 12 and begin higher education fail to complete their studies, compared with less than 20 percent of high-SES students.

The CIRES report assists in puncturing the lie that “teacher quality” is the single most important factor in education outcomes. This claim has been used to scapegoat teachers for students failing to achieve in working-class schools, and to deny that the problem stems, above all, from inadequate funding to address teacher-student ratios and special needs assistance.

The stated aim of CIRES is to “investigate the origins and consequences of low achievement in education and to work with governments and education providers to improve opportunities and outcomes.” As its findings indicate, however, governments, both Labor and Liberal, aided and abetted by the teachers' unions, have entrenched and widened class divisions and inequities between schools.



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