

Report documents education inequality in Australia

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A recent report released by the Centre for International Research on Education Systems at Melbourne's Victoria University further lays bare the gross social inequality in Australia and how it is intensified by the education system.

Educational opportunity in Australia, 2020 indicates wide gaps in critical skills and capabilities between children from poorer families, those with an indigenous background, and those from regional and remote areas in Australia.

Using data from a variety of sources, including international testing, census information and longitudinal studies, the report examines educational outcomes for young Australians. It applies benchmarks for academic attainment and other key indicators for children starting school, moving through their education, and up to 24 years of age.

Without seeking to analyse the reasons for the results, the report concludes: "Our education and training systems are dogged by inequality. No matter which way you turn, which measure you use, parts of our population are missing out and falling behind. Young people from poorer backgrounds, Indigenous Australians, and rural students experience high rates of non-completion of school, and poorer outcomes. For these Australians, our systems are not functioning well, raising a question about the quality of education and the capacity for meeting the needs of all young Australians."

The report uses PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment) and National Assessment Program—Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) results uncritically among other measures to draw its conclusions. Imposed by the last federal Labor Party government of Kevin Rudd and Julia Gillard, NAPLAN is a high-stakes testing regime that narrows

the curriculum, seeking to align school education with corporate interests. Academics and statisticians have raised significant doubts about the validity and reliability of such tests, including PISA.

Nevertheless, the report's results are stark. They point to long-term impacts on young people of a two-tiered system of education that perpetuates inequality. The report notes: "Schools serving disadvantaged communities and in remote areas often face greater teacher shortages, have fewer learning resources and sometimes are not able to offer the same breadth of learning opportunities as schools in more affluent areas or in major cities."

Many students are not attaining critical developmental and academic milestones. The report found that more than 21 percent of five year olds are not developmentally ready on entry to school. Almost 25 percent of students are not meeting minimum literacy and numeracy skills in the middle years, nearly 28 percent of 15 year olds do not meet international benchmarks for science, numeracy and reading, and more than 28 percent of 24 year olds do not have the skills needed to become confident in themselves or in the future.

The fact that the gap widens from the start of school to the end of school demonstrates that the education system is failing to provide students with the support they need to catch up to their peers. While these numbers are shocking in themselves, it is when the data is broken down into sub-groups that the picture of entrenched disadvantage is revealed.

Comparing young people from High Socio-Economic Status (SES) and Low SES backgrounds there is almost a 20 percent difference in their developmental readiness for school as five year olds. Even when low SES children are assessed as being developmentally ready

for school, 20 percent of those children end up struggling by the time they reach the middle years. This gives rise to a 40 percent difference between high and low SES in the numbers of students who attain minimum standards in literacy, numeracy and science.

For 24-year-old young adults, there is a 30 percent percentage difference between high SES and low SES groups in terms of being engaged in full-time education, training or work, and the attainment of post-school qualifications.

Among indigenous youth, less than half are likely to be engaged in full-time education, training or work at 24 years of age. That may partly reflect both SES and geographic location. Young people living in remote areas are less likely to be engaged. Other studies have shown that youth who are disengaged at 24 will struggle in the long term to find work or go back into education.

On nearly every measure of academic attainment, the data shows an almost linear SES-based increase in the percentage of students who have met the minimum standards. And the pattern is repeated for other key indicators across four age groups. Children from high SES backgrounds are much more likely to develop the skills and attributes they need to become successful adults than those from low SES backgrounds.

Summarising its main findings, the report notes that its results are consistent with research that demonstrates that social class is a key predictor of educational and future success.

The report does not probe the connection to the policies pursued by both Labor and Liberal-National governments at state and federal levels. But the biggest fall in Australian PISA results occurred after the Rudd and Gillard governments of 2007 to 2013 introduced NAPLAN and their “Gonski” funding model, which favoured wealthy private schools.

As the WSWS has analysed: “Together, Gonski 1.0 and NAPLAN bear major responsibility for the current school education crisis. In the majority of schools—above all, the most disadvantaged and needy—any ongoing orientation to the development of creativity, play, sports and the arts, or to new and stimulating experiences and social interactions, has been removed. At the same time, any conception of developing student ‘well-being’ as a school priority has been abandoned.”

The class inequality that this report lays bare is just one expression of the social regression being caused by the capitalist system, which seeks to subordinate every aspect of life to corporate profit. The Committee for Public Education, established by the Socialist Equality Party, is urging teachers, students, parents and the working class as a whole, to take matters into their own hands and develop a unified political struggle against the destruction of public education. Such a struggle requires a socialist perspective where high-quality education, based on a scientific understanding of teaching and learning, is viewed as a *social right* for all.



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