

## Briefings

Thought leadership for the independent schooling sector

Volume 22 Issue 3 • April 2018

### SCHOOLS FUNDING – CONTINUING DIVISIVE MEDIA COVERAGE AND UNCERTAINTY

#### From the Executive Director

The diversity of schools within the independent sector and the modest budgets many of them operate within are inconvenient truths regularly ignored or overlooked by media reporting on school funding. Recent media reports have continued to perpetuate the myth that the independent sector is only comprised of high-fee schools which receive funding at the expense of state and Catholic schools. This type of “cut-and-paste” reporting is not only inaccurate, but also squanders valuable column space which could have been used to make a meaningful contribution to public policy debate about schooling and how it is funded.

Most of this negative sector-based reporting which often is divisive in terms of independent schools compared to Catholic schools has occurred in Sydney and Melbourne. Fortunately, in Queensland the collegiate partnership between the independent and Catholic sectors remains strong. Federal Education Minister Simon Birmingham witnessed this first hand recently when he addressed an Independent Schools Queensland (ISQ) hosted non-government schools forum of senior leaders and representatives from Queensland independent and Catholic schools.

However, news is borderless, with many of these interstate stories making their way into people’s newsfeeds and inboxes. Therefore, the facts need to be put on the record, starting with independent school facilities.

In the independent sector, parents, not governments, fund 89% of the cost of capital (and for high SES schools, it is mostly 100%). Parents raise the funds for such facilities as a matter of choice. Recent interstate articles attacking the high quality of independent school facilities have failed to acknowledge that similar facilities can be found at many state and Catholic schools.

The review of the socio-economic status (SES) measure used to determine the capacity of parents to contribute to non-government schooling costs has also been used to pit sector against sector. Some articles about the SES

measure have argued that Catholic schools are disadvantaged by it in the Gonski 2.0 funding model<sup>1</sup>. These articles ignore the fact that the same SES was used in the original Gonski model introduced in 2014. SES was not raised as an issue in that model and has been used in Commonwealth funding models since 2001 for independent schools and from 2004 for Catholic schools.

An objective analysis of the arguments for and against the SES may have revealed that critics of the SES view it as a flawed measure because it is now being applied equally to all non-government schools, instead of just some. Perhaps the consistent application of SES as the measure for capacity to pay to both primary and secondary students as compared to the previous special arrangements for primary schools might also be explored as a driver of the recent campaign against the SES measure.

Articles comparing selected schools have also been surface deep in many cases. For example, a recent story<sup>2</sup> compared the SES of two independent schools (The Kings School and Geelong College) to two Catholic parish primary schools in Melbourne (one unnamed and the other Holy Rosary School, Kensington). Any argument based on just four schools out of the more than 10,000 in Australia is always going to be difficult to prosecute but let’s look at the facts about these schools in Table 1.

Firstly, putting aside the argument about whether SES is an appropriate

1 Gonski 2.0 refers to the funding model legislated by the Australian Government in 2017 and implemented from 2018. The original Gonski model refers to the funding model legislated by the ALP Government and implemented from 2014.  
2 “Funds bias hurts Catholic schools” in *The Australian* 14 April 2018.

## SCHOOLS FUNDING – CONTINUING DIVISIVE MEDIA COVERAGE AND UNCERTAINTY

Table 1 – School Data 2016

SCHOOL	SCHOOL TYPE	SES	PARENTS IN THE TOP TWO QUANTILES OF SOCIO-ECONOMIC BACKGROUND %	AUSTRALIAN GOVERNMENT FUNDING PER STUDENT \$	FEES PER STUDENT \$
Holy Rosary Primary	Primary	119	80	6,515	1,413
The Kings School	Primary/ Secondary	116	94	4,219	28,690
Geelong College	Primary/ Secondary	108	89	6,114	21,895

Source: My School

measure, how can a school with an SES score of 119 receive more Australian Government funding per student than schools with lower scores of 116 and 108<sup>3</sup>? Whilst an individual school's Australian Government funding level will be impacted by a range of factors including the characteristics of its student population, SES is the key determinant. An independent school with an SES of 119 would expect to receive Australian Government funding of around \$4,000 per student. This is a typical example of the inequities that have existed in funding for schools for many decades.

Secondly, whilst it can be problematic to compare school fees<sup>4</sup>, the difference in fee income per student is so significant an objective article might have explored the concepts of willingness to pay as opposed to capacity to pay. It would be fair to conclude that any school that has over 50% of its parents in the top two quartiles of socio-economic background might have parents with the capacity to make a higher contribution.

The article contended that “many of these elite (independent) schools would have no problem whatsoever meeting the entire school resource standard through their private income, with plenty of change left over for that new architect-designed library” with the implication that such schools should not receive government funding. Independent school fees come from the choice of parents on how they spend their after-tax income and any reduction in government funding would be a disincentive for private investment in schooling at a time when we should be encouraging more contributions from parents.

The article also argued that families who send their children to independent schools have higher incomes than the SES score would suggest and families who send their children to Catholic schools have lower incomes than the SES would suggest. No data is presented<sup>5</sup> to support this view which is based on the myth that all families who choose independent schools are wealthy.

The Independent Schools Queensland research report *Income Levels of Families with Students in Queensland Schools* (November 2017)<sup>6</sup> demonstrates that independent schools cater for families at every income level, dispelling the perception that only high earning families can afford an independent education.

Further, the report confirms that independent and Catholic schools in Queensland serve similar communities. For high income earners<sup>7</sup>, 28% choose a Catholic school whilst 22% choose an independent school (the remaining 50% choose state schools).

The article went on to claim that “some members of the Coalition, including in all likelihood the Education Minister, have always opposed the right of the Catholic school system to determine the allocation of government funding across the schools within their system”. This statement ignored the fact that it was the Coalition which legislated this funding redistribution right in the *Australian Education Act* just as recently as July 2017.

Finally, the article entered into political commentary, claiming “it takes a special skill for a federal minister to decide that an additional \$19 billion or so will be spent on schools across the next decade, then turn this decision into a huge political defeat”. This was an odd statement that ignored the strong support for the Gonski 2.0 funding model across the independent sector and the fact the legislation to enact the model was passed by the Federal Parliament in July 2017. This would hardly suggest a political defeat given the number of pieces of government legislation that had not made it through the Senate up to that point.

School funding is a key issue for Federal Shadow Minister for Education and Training, Tanya Plibersek. Over the past six months, Ms Plibersek has held

3 The data relates to 2016 and therefore reflects the original Gonski funding model (although it was in a transition phase at that time). The difference in funding is underestimated in the case of these three schools given Holy Rosary is a primary school compared to the other schools which are primary-secondary.

4 Individual school fees will vary in terms of what they include (for example, capital levies).

5 Sloan does refer to a report by ACIL Allen Consulting which apparently concludes in areas with SES scores greater than 105, on average, families in independent schools have incomes that are 5 per cent higher than the average within their statistical area for all families that attend non-government schools.

6 Available at [www.isq.qld.edu.au](http://www.isq.qld.edu.au)

7 Families with income in excess of \$2,346 per week.

numerous press conferences in which she has consistently said the Australian Labor Party (ALP) will restore the \$17 billion in “cuts” to Commonwealth schools funding. An objective reading of these “cuts” reveals they simply represent the difference between the original ALP Gonski scheme, that was not budgeted for, and the current funding arrangements and therefore cannot be considered cuts.

The Shadow Minister’s press conferences are normally held at a school (sadly, never an independent school) with the local ALP Federal Member of Parliament. As the key body representing Queensland’s more than 200 independent schools and their 120,000 students, ISQ is working to create greater political understanding of the makeup and contribution of the independent sector to the nation’s economic and social capital. To that end, ISQ has invited Ms Plibersek to address Queensland non-government schools and take their questions at a future education forum.

Given Ms Plibersek has committed to the restoration of years five and six of the original Gonski, this presents an interesting prospect for Queensland which did not sign-up to the Gonski plan<sup>8</sup>. Will the ALP negotiate an arrangement with the Queensland Government (remembering that the original Gonski required the states to contribute one-third of the additional funding required whilst the Commonwealth would provide two-thirds)?

By going back to years five and six of the original Gonski plan, it would be assumed that the concept of schools being either ABOVE, BELOW or ON the Schooling Resource Standard (SRS) would be restored. This was the benchmark which determined the indexation and real funding increases for schools during the first four years of Gonski from 2014 to 2017.

*The review of the socio-economic status (SES) measure used to determine the capacity of parents to contribute to non-government schooling costs has also been used to pit sector against sector. Some articles about the SES measure have argued that Catholic schools are disadvantaged by it in the Gonski 2.0 funding model. These articles ignore the fact that the same SES was used in the original Gonski model introduced in 2014.*

Ms Plibersek has rejected the Gonski 2.0 concept of the Commonwealth providing 20% of the SRS for Government schools and 80% for non-state schools. She described this as “baked-in unfairness” and “we will never agree to that”<sup>9</sup>.

Ms Plibersek has also confirmed that every state and territory and every school system should get to 95% of the SRS but avoided the question as to whether this would result in special deals for individual states and territories.

The Shadow Minister linked the ALP’s increased funding to educational reforms claiming the current government had abandoned previously legislated reforms.

Significantly more details would be required to be able to make any overall assessment of what an ALP funding model might look like. It is hoped that further details will be released well before the next federal election.

Based on current polls, a change of government at the next election is a clear possibility. Although there continues to be speculation about a 2018 federal election, it is more likely to be in 2019, possibly before May.

Even with a 2018 election, it would be difficult to see a new ALP federal funding model implemented prior to 2021.

A significant issue for the ALP if they form government will be that any new funding model will require amendment of the *Australian Education Act*. It is unlikely that the next government, no matter which political persuasion, will control the Senate. Any changes to existing funding arrangements, including going back to the original Gonski plan, will need to be negotiated with the Senate cross-benchers.

In this context, the outcome of the next federal election will be significant for schools.

The Gonski model (whether the original or Gonski 2.0) has failed to achieve bipartisan support, so we can expect a continuing period of uncertainty and divisive debate about schools funding.



**DAVID ROBERTSON**  
*Executive Director*

8 In fact only three states and territories actually completed the necessary agreements in relation to the original Gonski funding model.

9 Interview on Sky News 8 April 2018.

# NAPLAN: WHAT ARE HIGH GAIN AND HIGH ACHIEVING SCHOOLS DOING?



**JOSEPHINE WISE**  
*Director (Education Services)*

*“We do not send our students to schools to maintain the average; we do not ask teachers to teach to the average. But we do expect schools to add value to what students bring to school”.*

**(Laureate Professor John Hattie, 2017, para. 4)**

## The Challenge

Laureate Professor John Hattie states that “Australia’s overall performance continues to stagnate or decline in international tests such as PISA. In particular, results for students at the top end of national performance are slipping – relative to other countries and we are not growing sufficient numbers of students into the top end” (2017, para. 20).

Whilst many independent schools outperform schools in other sectors in Australia’s national assessment program (NAP), it is becoming increasingly clear schools achieving the highest gain are motivated by notions of continuous improvement for all students. Schools with this focus can be found in all three sectors. High achieving and high gain schools support teachers to make responsive and informed decisions about how to most effectively teach students, using timely and rich data on each individual student’s progress (Hattie, 2017).

Australian public policy recognises that to mitigate intergenerational inequality (and the potential political divisiveness that may result), high-quality, comprehensive education opportunities for all are essential. The Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) defines those with socio-

economic disadvantaged backgrounds as “students from families with lower levels of education or from families that are affected by chronic unemployment, low paid jobs or poverty” (OECD, 2016).

A recent review of PISA 2012 data found that an economically disadvantaged student in Australia was six times more likely to be a low performer than an advantaged student. After taking into account several other factors influencing school performance such as gender, immigrant and language background, family structure, urban or rural location, pre-primary education and grade repetition, a socio-economically disadvantaged student is still five times more likely to be a low performer than an advantaged student. Countries have managed to reduce the influence of socio-economic background on performance over time (OECD, 2016).

Independent schools support many disadvantaged students and our schools will continue to be challenged to change the trajectory for socio-economically disadvantaged students by improving educational outcomes. Independent schools are also tasked with developing future community leaders who understand the value of a socially just community that provides quality education and support an inclusive society for all.

*Independent schools support many disadvantaged students and our schools will be continually challenged to change the trajectory for socio-economically disadvantaged students by improving educational outcomes.*

Schools will also continue to be influenced by broad community concerns related to national educational achievement because Australia relies on education as a critical export market. “Education is Australia’s largest service export and third overall behind iron ore (worth \$62.8 billion in 2016-17) and coal (\$54.3 billion). It is larger than gas (\$22.3 billion) and gold (\$19 billion)” (Dodd 2017).

Australians also understand that being the ‘smart country’ is the only way for us to continue to ensure our young people, their families and communities can access all that a globalised world can offer. In 2017 PricewaterhouseCoopers Consulting released a report that clearly states “Australia’s education system – from early childhood learning to post-secondary education and lifelong learning – has long been a pillar of this country’s economic growth and social advancement. Education leads to innovation, increases productivity and has a direct impact on an individual’s health, wellbeing and social mobility” (PricewaterhouseCoopers, 2017, p. 3).

## The question is how?

While governments and parents invest in schools to meet the educational expectations of the local and global communities, at the heart of the work are teachers and students in classrooms. Students trust that every teacher will know them and how they learn, know the content and how to teach it and know how to assess them to determine what they know now, and what they need to know next (AITSL, 2017).

Independent Schools Queensland (ISQ) has begun a long-term research project to assist Queensland independent schools to understand how some schools are sustaining long term achievement and most importantly increasing their gain above and beyond minimum expectations for growth, using NAPLAN as a

**Table 1: Characteristics of Selected Independent Schools**

School characteristics	Category	Number of schools	Percent for each category
ICSEA score	Moderate low (1000–1050)	2	10
	Moderate (1051–1100)	5	25
	Moderate High (1101–1150)	8	40
	High (1151–1200)	5	25
Location	Metropolitan	16	80
	Regional	4	20
Gender	All Boys	1	5
	All Girls	4	20
	Co-Educational	15	75
Year Level Range	Prep–Year 12	20	100

measure. The purpose of this research is to further understand how high achieving, and particularly high gain schools, support teachers to make responsive and informed decisions about how to most effectively teach students, using timely and rich data on each individual student’s progress (Hattie, 2017).

Discoveries made through a focused investigation into the literacy and numeracy, leadership and data use practices in these schools can then be shared more broadly to support the improvement to schools across and beyond our community.

## The research method

The first research cohort was identified in 2017. Twenty high achieving, high gain Queensland independent schools participated in a mixed methods research study. The schools were selected based on two NAPLAN tests (reading and numeracy) using data extracted from ‘My School’. The selected schools represent the diversity of the sector (see Table 1).

The overarching research question and sub-questions aimed to understand if there were common instructional practices inherent in the 20 schools, contributing to high or improved student gain in literacy and numeracy.

The research methodology was designed with support from Griffith University’s Dr Helen Klieve, from the School of Education & Professional Studies.

The overarching question was:

- What can be learned from the literacy and numeracy instructional practice of independent schools with sustained high achievement or high growth in NAPLAN?

And sub-questions:

- What instructional practices contribute to literacy and numeracy success in the selected schools?
- Are there common instructional practices in the selected schools associated with literacy and numeracy success?
- How do the selected schools sustain literacy and numeracy success, as measured by NAPLAN, through their instructional practice?

All 20 schools completed an online survey. This survey asked principals, leaders and teachers to respond to 29 questions arranged within six educational themes. The themes were developed from a review of recent literature into school improvement focused on literacy and numeracy. Using Yes/No and open response questions, more than 800 responses were collated across all six themes.

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The themes were:

1. Mission
2. Leadership
3. Data
4. Preparation
5. Literacy
6. Numeracy

Schools were invited to participate in interviews using a semi-structured interview design developed from initial survey responses; three schools agreed to take part. All survey responses were analysed using SPSS (Statistical Package for Social Sciences) and all interviews transcribed using NVivo (text organisational and analysis software). The interviews sought in-depth information and perspectives about school pedagogical practices which may have contributed to either high results or highest growth in literacy and numeracy NAPLAN results.

Schools participating in the semi-structured interview selected their own school-based personnel for the (approximately) one-hour interview. Schools were provided with the interview questions in advance and asked to consider inclusion of personnel who could provide considered responses to the attached questions. The semi-structured interview questions constituted the basis for the interviews conducted at each of the three schools.

## The Learning

The following is a brief summation of the survey findings:

- Survey findings aligned to interview findings indicating high performing schools relentlessly focus on the

use of all forms of data to inform teaching practices in numeracy and literacy.

- Though high performing schools prioritise numeracy, literacy receives greater priority in terms of teaching and learning practices and professional development.
- Though not specific, data exists to suggest schools recognise and value parent engagement and involvement as an important factor in school success.
- Interview findings supported survey findings indicating the importance of explicitly teaching numeracy and literacy skills.
- There appeared no reliance on one instructional practice or resource in a school, but rather combinations of measured and considered approaches and resources that best meet the learning needs of the student and each school's strategic direction in regards to instruction.

The analysis of the first cohort's data has led to the establishment of the following six observations that require further analysis and review in coming years to test their reliability. Whilst they are observations only, they do resonate with much current literature around school improvement. The observations are detailed in Figure 1 (page 7).

## Conclusion

Whilst not a conclusive study in these early stages, it can be argued that this first attempt to uncover practices that high achieving and high gain schools employ may be useful to all Queensland independent schools and warrants further research.

The methodology however, had some limitations and the following recommendations will be taken into consideration when the study continues in 2018:

- Narrowing the focus of the study to only research the practices of high gain schools.
- Focusing on one specific curriculum area per year i.e. 2018 focus on Reading only, 2019 focus on Writing, 2020 Numeracy, using the same methodology each year.
- Applying more qualitative methods and carrying out more intensive and in-depth visits targeting grades, and interviewing teachers and leaders where significant growth is taking place.
- Looking for opportunities to report on Indigenous perspectives, boys-only perspectives, etc.
- Broadening the focus beyond numeracy and literacy practices to consider more variables that lead to improved student learning outcomes.
- Consultation with the parents of students in the classes where growth is significant.
- Comparisons of research findings with literature in this area.
- Non-consideration of schools with high NAPLAN withdrawal rates.

The report from the Review to Achieve Educational Excellence in Australian Schools, chaired by David Gonski will be released shortly. The review will "examine evidence and make recommendations on the most effective teaching and learning strategies and initiatives to be deployed" (Australian Government, n.d., p. 1). The review will focus on the effective and efficient use of funding to:

- Improve student outcomes and Australia's national performance, as measured by national and international assessments of student achievement.

**Figure 1: Observations of high gain independent schools**

1

### Systemic Pedagogical Frameworks

Teachers from all three interviewed schools talked about and outlined distinctive pedagogical frameworks. The following approaches were fundamental in driving teaching practice in participating schools:

- Explicit learning pillars and philosophies e.g. (differentiation, challenge, connection, engagement);
- Explicit Teaching;
- Inquiry Learning;
- Guided Learning;
- Response to Intervention Model;
- Taxonomy of Learning: Surface, Deep, Deepest;
- Second-chance learning.

2

### Multi-faceted Teaching & Learning Approaches

No one pedagogical approach appeared to dominate in the participating schools. Within and across classes, combinations of approaches were present – for example, Explicit Teaching, Inquiry Learning and Guided Learning may all be utilised and accepted by teachers. The specific or combination of approach employed was determined by students’ developmental needs, teacher expertise and the pedagogical framework.

3

### Differentiated Learning & Differentiated Learning Resources

These schools made specific mention of the following characteristics:

- Early intervention to address literacy and numeracy gaps. Supported by comprehensive data analysis (standardised, diagnostic, formative), quality intervention programs and quality monitoring, support structures and parental engagement and support.
- Combinations of mixed ability and ability grouping often within an age cohort, usually evident in the early secondary years.
- Opportunities for students to attain improved results as a result of specific testing feedback and needs-based tutoring and teaching using Second Chance Learning.
- Three-level approach to learning and assessment. Providing differentiated (mainly by content and process) learning activities and tasks based on existing student achievement levels.
- Identification and extension of the ‘gifted and talented’ learner.

4

### A Relentless Focus on Data

- Survey and interview data indicated that these schools make extensive use of all data forms to profile and address the needs of individual students.
- Reviewing teaching practices by undergoing various, voluntary external school reviews (Independent Schools Queensland, Australian Council for Educational Research).
- Longitudinal data mapping using extensive data input and sophisticated data management systems.
- Employing educational data experts and development of data teams (professional learning teams) who lead and facilitate data discussions.

5

### Student Ownership of Learning

- Many schools utilised an extensive array of data to inform students of their existing progress and achievement, leading to the development of student specific learning goals, developed in association with parent(s), the student and the teacher(s) to track these learning goals over time.
- All schools interviewed had sophisticated learning management systems in place to best facilitate student ownership of learning.
- Sharing weekly/fortnightly learning activities with parents, allowing parents to support their son/daughter at home.

6

### Culture & Capacity Building

Staff at the interviewed schools talked about the development of a learning culture, highlighting the importance awarded to the professional development of all staff. To elaborate:

- Teacher feedback (from the three schools interviewed) was considered an important element of staff capacity building. Most feedback was in the form of peer observation, feedback and reflection; learning walks to identify strengths, concerns, future professional development needs; and more formalised visits by leadership and management teams. One school ensured cross-curricula or cross-team feedback visits. Another school utilised video to provide teacher feedback.
- Two schools were making a conscious effort to move away from ‘siloed’ departments in the secondary school, to cross-curricula departments.
- Extensive and comprehensive professional development linked to the school’s strategic and teaching and learning directions. This included extensive external networking to surround school staff with the ‘right’ people to develop capacity and expertise.

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- Improve the preparedness of school leavers to succeed in employment, further training or higher education.
- Improve outcomes across all cohorts of students, including disadvantaged and vulnerable students and academically-advanced students ('gifted' students).

To support these recommendations, the review will also:

- Provide advice on related institutional or governance arrangements to ensure the ongoing identification and implementation of evidence-based actions to grow and sustain improved student outcomes over time.
- Propose related transparency and accountability measures that support the effective monitoring, reporting and application of investment.

ISQ will compare the findings from this research to the conclusions and recommendations proposed in the Gonski report to determine if what educational 'experts' propose resonates with the practices of our high gain independent schools.

This research to understand what works in the context of independent schooling will be useful in demonstrating the value the independent schools sector contributes to the advancement of educational achievement in Australia. It demonstrates that independent schools are implementing practices and processes that value add, challenge 'coasting' mindsets and seek to achieve gain even where there is continued high performance.

Hattie (2017) affirms that Queensland is a state where gain has been achieved over time. "We're all off to understand the Queensland miracle, which has a growth effect-size of 0.45+, which means Queensland's Year 5s in 2017 are working 13 months ahead of the Year 5's in 2011" (para. 10).

Independent schools are part of the greater Queensland success story. However, Hattie is clear that "tests such as NAPLAN and PISA provide a useful 'big picture' view of student learning trends across Australia and the world, but these data have limitations at the classroom level" (Hattie, 2017, para. 22). It falls to independent school leaders to enable continuous improvement by championing evidence-based curriculum, pedagogy and assessment practices that are revealed through research and inquiry.

### FURTHER INFORMATION

ISQ will be providing further updates on this research project throughout 2018. For further information, please contact

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APRIL 2018  
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