



PARENTS INCOME AND ATTENDANCE AT PUBLIC AND PRIVATE SCHOOLS

Analysis of the data from the 2001 Census shows a very clear connection between the income of the families from which students come and whether they attend public or private schools.

In her paper “The Social Make-up of Schools” Barbara Preston¹ considered the issue in a number of different ways. Her findings consistently showed that for any group of students, the higher the income of the family, the more likely they are to attend private schools. Whilst this is most true in regard to independent schools, Catholic schools also have higher proportions of students from medium and high income families. Even amongst Catholic families, attendance at Catholic schools is more likely if the family has medium or high income.

Students from low income families

- At both primary and secondary levels, public schools have a large proportion of students in low income families, while both Catholic and other private schools have a small proportion of their students in low income families.
- In public schools 42 per cent of students are in low income families, whilst in Catholic schools, only 27 per cent of students are in low income families and in other private schools only 23 per cent of students are in low income families.

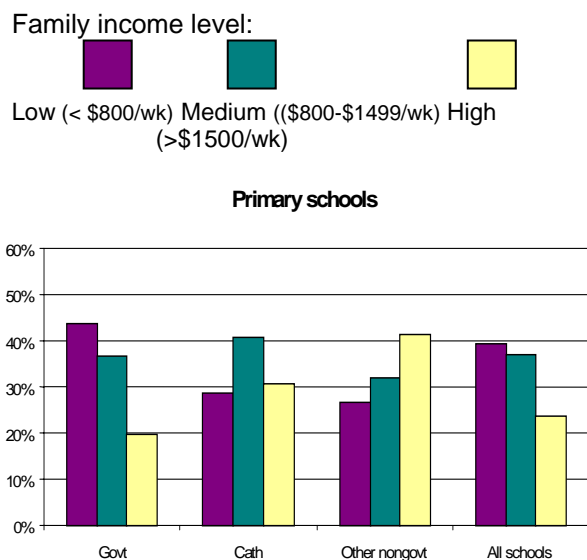
¹ Barbara Preston , 2003, The Social Make-up of Schools: Family income, religion, Indigenous status, and family type in government, Catholic and other non-government schools” available at <http://www.aefederal.org.au/Debates/bprestonsch.pdf>

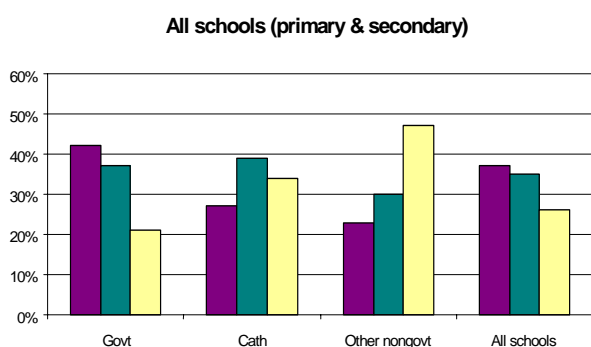
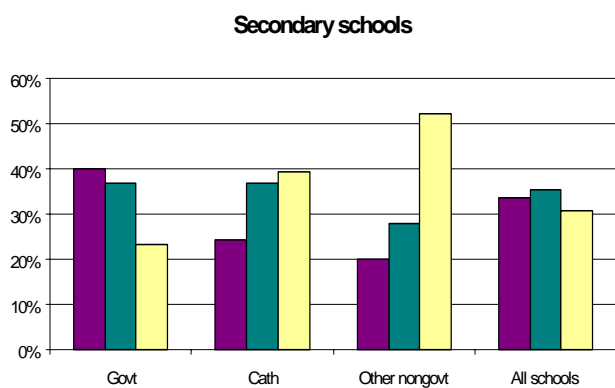
Students from high income families

- Public schools have a small proportion, non Catholic private schools a large proportion and Catholic schools are between them.
- In public schools only 21 per cent of students are in high income families. In contrast, in Catholic schools, 34 per cent of students are in high income families, and in other private schools 47 per cent of students are in high income families.

The pattern is most pronounced at the secondary level. More than half the students in independent secondary schools are in high income families, while in public schools less than one quarter are in high income families.

Graph 1 Percentage of students in each of Australian public, Catholic and other private primary and secondary schools with low, medium or high family incomes, 2001





Indigenous Students

- The proportion of students in each family income range who are Indigenous in public schools is two to three times the proportion in either Catholic or other private schools.
- In all family income ranges the proportion of Indigenous students in public primary schools is 4.6 per cent, compared with 1.7 per cent in Catholic schools and 1.5 per cent in other private schools.
- In all family income ranges the proportion of Indigenous students in public secondary schools is 3.4 per cent, compared with 1.1 per cent in Catholic schools and 0.9 per cent in other private schools.

Students in one parent families

- Students in one parent families are much more likely to attend public schools if the family income is low, especially if it is in the very low ranges of families solely reliant on public benefits.
- Catholic school attendance is most likely for students in single parent families in the medium family income range.
- Attendance at other private schools is most likely for students in single income families in the high income range.

Conclusion

It is clear that there is a relationship between parental income and whether a student attends public, Catholic or independent school. This relationship holds true for the subgroups of students of Indigenous and one parent families.

The government has sought to obfuscate this fact by claiming that 20% of students in private schools are from low income families. Aside from the fact that the ABS accepts that this is the most unreliable category of income (because it includes those who have a high real income but can arrange their affairs to minimise taxable income), even if it is true, it simply substantiates the fact that those with low income are statistically underrepresented in private schools, since 32% of all students go to them.

What should be of even greater concern is that things are actually getting worse. In a later paper, Preston² compares the data from the 1991, 1996 and 2001 Censuses and finds:

- There was little variation between 1991 and 1996.
- Since 1996 private schools have substantially increased their share of enrolments of students with high family incomes, and decreased their share of enrolments of students with low income families.
- This has been most pronounced at the secondary level.

In other words, the Howard government justification of its bias to private schools – that it is extending choice to less well off families – is totally contradicted by the evidence. Private schools are becoming more, not less segregated on income grounds.

Money directed at private schools cannot create greater equity

For more detailed information on these and other issues see the other Fact Sheets in this series at:

<http://www.aefederal.org.au/Debates/schoolscampaign.html>

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² 'Choice for a few handicaps many', The Australian p. 16, 22/3/04.