



## **Submission**

**to the**

### **Senate standing committees on community affairs inquiry into the extent and nature of poverty in Australia**

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# **Australian Education Union**

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#### **Introduction**

The Australian Education Union (AEU) represents 198,000 members employed in the public primary, secondary, special, early childhood, TAFE, Adult Migrant Education and Disability Education sectors throughout Australia.

This submission to the Senate standing committees on community affairs inquiry into the extent and nature of poverty in Australia is made on behalf of AEU members. For the purposes of this submission, the AEU focus is on the impact of poverty on individuals in relation to education outcomes (c)(iv) and public education as a key mechanism to address and reduce poverty (f).

It is commonly understood that education has the power to transform lives and provides the opportunity to close poverty gaps for children and subsequent generations. Research by Oxfam and UNICEF indicate that in high- and middle-income countries such as Australia the reason that poverty is not eradicated is political choice rather than inevitability.<sup>1</sup>

To quote Concern Worldwide, one of the main causes of poverty is educational inequity. “Education is often referred to as the great equalizer: It can open the door to jobs, resources, and skills that help a person not only survive, but thrive. This is why access to quality education is a globally recognised solution to poverty. Education helps to remedy many of the other issues that can keep people, families, and even whole communities vulnerable to the cycle of poverty and when tailored to the unique needs of marginalized communities — can be used as a lever against some of the systemic barriers that keep certain groups of people furthest behind.”

The solution is multi-faceted, but properly funding public education from early childhood, through primary, secondary, and tertiary levels is an established and economically viable avenue for governments to meaningfully reduce poverty in a lasting way. Investment in public education delivers benefits to students and communities now and into the future. Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) data shows the cost benefit of every dollar spent on public education can return two to six-fold in high income economies and the positive outcomes for children can last throughout their adulthood and compound through future generations. For example, according to the 2020 OECD Education at a Glance report, Australia has by far the highest return per public dollar invested in upper

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<sup>1</sup> <https://policy-practice.oxfam.org/resources/the-commitment-to-reducing-inequality-index-2018-a-global-ranking-of-government-620553/>

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secondary education, with \$US4.90 return per dollar invested for men (more than double the OECD average of \$US2.20) and \$US1.90 return per dollar invested for women (above the OECD average of \$US1.40). Completing upper secondary study in Australia can mean an additional \$US252,000 in post-tax lifetime income for men and \$US173,900 for women.<sup>2</sup>

As UNICEF executive director Catherine Russell said in relation to the January 2023 release of the report *Transforming Education with Equitable Financing*: “Investing in the education of the poorest children is the most cost-effective way to ensure the future for children, communities and countries.”<sup>3</sup>

The report shows public education spending is more likely to reach learners from wealthier households, with high income countries such as Australia averaging 1.6 times more spending on the wealthiest 20 per cent of students than the poorest 20 per cent.

Investment in Australia’s future through public education would also lead to substantially reduced fiscal expenditure and increased tax revenues for many decades to come. The *Australian Schooling – The Price of Failure and Reward for Success* report commissioned by the AEU in 2016 showed that an increase in the average PISA score of 25 points, would deliver huge long term economic benefits through improved skills, life outcomes and a lower requirement for government assistance. The report found that such an improvement would result in huge returns, including:

- An average \$65 billion in increased economic benefits each year until 2095, an additional benefit of approximately 5 per cent of gross domestic product (GDP).
- A future economic benefit of AUD \$5.2 trillion (discounted for inflation) until year 2095 - An economic benefit that is 335 per cent of current GDP.
- A GDP level that will be 29 per cent higher in 2095 due to the reform.<sup>4</sup>

An investment in recurrent public school funding to achieve a minimum 100 per cent of the *Schooling Resource Standard (SRS)* for all public schools will not only lead to better life outcomes for individual students but enormous long-term benefits to society, the economy, and the entire country.

While spending on schools provides a direct and immediate economic stimulus, the long-term benefits to students and communities are arguably even more valuable. Properly funded public education provides every child with the opportunity to reach their full potential. It improves health and employment outcomes, boosts informed participation in society, and promotes equality. Yet Australia continues to underfund public education, setting back entire generations from opportunities to leave poverty behind and to fully participate in society through greater economic participation and overall wellbeing.

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<sup>2</sup> [https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/education/education-at-a-glance-2020\\_69096873-en](https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/education/education-at-a-glance-2020_69096873-en)

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.unicef.org/reports/transforming-education-equitable-financing>

<sup>4</sup> Rorris, A., *Australian Schooling – The Price of Failure and Reward for Success*, 2016, p.6 retrieved from <http://www.aeufederal.org.au/application/files/3814/6172/5096/Rorris2016.pdf>

## Funding Public Education to Fight Poverty

The latest OECD Education at a Glance report shows Australian public education expenditure was cut by nearly 2 per cent from 2019 to 2020, by comparison the OECD average rose by around 1.5 per cent.<sup>5</sup> Most countries increased their public education spending during the pandemic to help offset the more dire consequences of the pandemic on the most vulnerable, which has seen the gap between the rich and poor further widen, yet of OECD countries, Australia was one of only two that instead reduced their spending.

Add to this, based on analysis of the Productivity Commission's Report on Government Services, private school funding in Australia has increased at five times the rate of public schools when comparing combined Commonwealth and State Government funding for schools in 2009-10 to 2019-20. By doing this, Australia is actively widening the poverty gap. Over that decade government funding for independent schools increased by \$3,338 a student, compared with \$703 more per student for public schools.<sup>6</sup>

Valuing and properly funding quality public education - where two thirds of all children and the vast majority of children in low socio-economic status (SES) households receive their education - reduces inequality and closes poverty gaps. Free and properly resourced public education is the strongest tool we have towards eradicating poverty now and into the future.

Yet not only are governments underfunding public education to the tune of \$20.3 billion dollars over a six-year period, Australia has one of the highest costs to the families for public education in the OECD<sup>7</sup> and in 2017 ranked 39 of 41 countries in this measure of public education funding<sup>8</sup>. The high cost of education is one of many reasons children from low-SES families may not attend preschool or school, which is remedied by funding public schools to be free and supporting families for better access to schools. As reported in the Futurity Investment Group cost of education index, the costs associated with a government education has reached a national average of \$87,528.<sup>9</sup>

Governments should also support structures to alleviate other factors of poverty that affect educational outcomes – such as free lunches, free healthcare and wellbeing services, heated and cooled places to study and play, internet and computer access, free public transport and more. These services can be offered to all students so as to not single out students in need of additional support. The estimated 750,000 children living in poverty are being denied full access to a high-quality public education by the failure of successive governments to properly and fairly fund public education.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> <https://www.oecd.org/education/education-at-a-glance/>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2022/feb/16/private-school-funding-has-increased-at-five-times-rate-of-public-schools-analysis-shows>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.vu.edu.au/mitchell-institute/schooling/australians-pay-more-for-education-than-the-oecd-average-but-is-it-worth-it>

<sup>8</sup> [https://www.unicef-irc.org/publications/pdf/RC14\\_eng.pdf](https://www.unicef-irc.org/publications/pdf/RC14_eng.pdf)

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2023/jan/25/free-public-education-costs-as-much-as-100000-in-parts-of-australia-report-finds>

<sup>10</sup> <https://bcec.edu.au/publications/behind-the-line-poverty-and-disadvantage-in-australia-2022/>

## Human Rights Considerations

The denial of funding necessary for public education to achieve 100 per cent of the Schools Resourcing Standard (SRS) and to rebuild TAFE, also ignores our responsibilities on human rights and our international commitments.

The Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Declaration states “Education has the power to transform lives. It supports young people to realise their potential by providing skills they need to participate in the economy and in society and contributing to every aspect of their wellbeing” and that “education plays a vital role in promoting the intellectual, physical, social, emotional, moral, spiritual and aesthetic development and wellbeing of young Australians, and in ensuring the nation’s ongoing economic prosperity and social cohesion.”<sup>11</sup>

Considering the commitment of all Australian Governments to the Declaration, the decision to not properly fund public education disregards the essential role that education has in eradicating poverty and providing a pathway to equity.

As a signatory to the United Nations (UN) 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, adopted by all United Nations Member States in 2015, Australia also has an international responsibility to properly fund public education as a matter of urgency. According to the UN: “The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic reversed the steady progress of poverty reduction over the past 25 years. This unprecedented reversal is being further exacerbated by rising inflation and the impacts of the war in Ukraine.” The UN Global Goals state: “We believe that ensuring quality education for all is not only central to the achievement of all of the Global Goals but in particular the goal to end extreme poverty.”<sup>12</sup>

According to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) – specifically SDG 4: Quality Education, Australia must ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all<sup>13</sup>. However, entrenched inequities in education have only worsened during the pandemic. The Sustainable Development Goals Report 2022 states that: “The confluence of crises, dominated by COVID-19, climate change, and conflicts, are creating spin-off impacts on food and nutrition, health, education, the environment, and peace and security, and affecting all the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)”. The Report details the reversal of years of progress in eradicating poverty and hunger, improving health and education, providing basic services, and much more. Key targets for which Australia is not on track include: Target 4.1 - By 2030, ensure that all girls and boys complete free, equitable and quality primary and secondary education leading to relevant and effective learning outcomes; Target 4.5 - By 2030, eliminate gender disparities in education and ensure equal access to all levels of education and vocational training for the vulnerable, including persons with disabilities, indigenous peoples and children in vulnerable situations; and Target 4.a - Build and upgrade education facilities that are child, disability and gender sensitive and provide safe, non-violent, inclusive and effective learning environments for all. The

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<sup>11</sup> <https://www.education.gov.au/alice-springs-mparntwe-education-declaration/resources/alice-springs-mparntwe-education-declaration>

<sup>12</sup> <https://sdgs.un.org/goals>

<sup>13</sup> <https://sdgs.un.org/goals/goal4>

Australian Government through the Department of Education has a responsibility to implement these goals by 2030.

### **Students from low SES backgrounds are being left behind in Australia**

Economic disadvantage leads many students to struggle with school, and this often compounds to have inter-generational impacts on literacy and numeracy. This inter-generational impact demonstrates exactly why the Commonwealth should prioritise resourcing for all levels of public education. However, despite the obvious immediate and lifetime gains that could be made by increasing investment in preschool and schools to facilitate high levels of literacy and numeracy, particularly among disadvantaged communities, there is growing evidence that the gap is in fact widening. The most recent Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) results in reading and maths demonstrate the growing gap between socio-economically advantaged and disadvantaged students in Australia. These results reveal that students from low socio-economic status (SES) households are highly segregated from their more advantaged peers and up to three years behind them and that socio-economic segregation in results and residualisation of low SES students is more prevalent in Australia than the OECD average:

- Australia's isolation index score of 0.20 for disadvantaged students is higher than the OECD average of 0.17 and higher than 51 of the 78 countries and economies included in PISA. This means that disadvantaged students are more concentrated in schools with other disadvantaged students in Australia than in most countries in the OECD and indicates a level of economic segregation in Australian schools.
- Across all domains, students from high SES backgrounds performed better than those from low SES backgrounds.
- The proportion of students performing highly increased and the proportion of students performing lowly decreased with each increase in SES quartile.
- In reading the variance between average scores of highest and lowest SES quartiles was 89 points, with 30 points equivalent to one year of schooling, so the difference is three years of schooling.
- In maths the variance between average scores of highest and lowest SES quartiles was 81 points, with 30 points equivalent to one year of schooling, so the difference is two and two-thirds years of schooling.<sup>14</sup>

Across reading and maths in PISA 2018, students from the highest SES quartile performed on average, about three years of schooling higher than students in the lowest quartile.

- Reading: The variance between average scores of highest and lowest SES quartiles was 89 points, with 30 points equivalent to one year of schooling, so the difference is three years of schooling.

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<sup>14</sup> Thompson, S, De Bortoli L, Underwood C & Schmid, M. *PISA 2018, PISA in Brief: Student Performance*, Australian Council for Educational Research, 2019, p.18

- Maths: The variance between average scores of highest and lowest SES quartiles was 81 points, with 30 points equivalent to one year of schooling, so the difference is two and two thirds years of schooling.

Thirty-one per cent of low SES students are classed as “low performers” in reading, 37 per cent in maths, whilst only 6 per cent of low SES students are “high performers” in reading, and only 4 per cent in maths.

**Table 1 Australian PISA results 2018 by socioeconomic background<sup>15</sup>**

Socioeconomic background	Mean score	SE	Confidence interval	Low performers		High performers		Students who attained the National Proficient Standard (%)
Reading literacy								
Lowest quartile	460	2.3	455 – 464			31	6	43
Second quartile	490	2.4	485 – 495			21	10	55
Third quartile	519	2.7	513 – 523			15	15	66
Highest quartile	549	2.3	544 – 553			10	24	76
Mathematical literacy								
Lowest quartile	451	2.3	446 – 455			37	4	36
Second quartile	480	2.4	475 – 484			25	7	49
Third quartile	506	2.8	499 – 511			17	13	61
Highest quartile	532	2.8	526 – 537			11	20	72

The 2019 Trends in International Maths and Science Study (TIMSS) results present an identical picture to PISA 2018 of the progress of Australia’s students being held back by socio-economic inequity. In terms of international benchmarking, between 68 per cent and 78 per cent of Australian students achieved the TIMSS Intermediate international benchmark—the nationally agreed proficient standard – compared to more than 90 per cent of students in the highest achieving country, Singapore.<sup>16</sup>

There were increases in mean performance seen in TIMSS 2019, however these were mainly due to an increase in the proportion of high performing students rather than the results of improvement across the board – there has been no improvement in the proportion of low performing students since 2015. TIMSS shows that the gaps between high and low performing students have widened, and students of low socio-economic status, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders students and students in remote schools are significantly overrepresented among low achieving students and those who do not meet proficiency benchmarks, demonstrating the continued social stratification of school education in Australia.

<sup>15</sup> Thompson, S, De Bortoli L, Underwood C & Schmid, M. *PISA 2018, PISA in Brief: Student Performance*, Australian Council for Educational Research, 2019, p.18

<sup>16</sup> Thomson, S., Wernert, N., Rodrigues, S., & O’Grady, E. (2020). *TIMSS 2019 Australia. Volume I: Student performance*. Australian Council for Educational Research. p.xvi

In terms of student equity, it is clear that socio-economic status has a significant impact on whether benchmarks are met. Dr Sue Thompson, Deputy CEO of Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER), who wrote the TIMSS 2019 report, noted that:

*However, as always, we need to note that these results are not uniform, and that there is still a solid tail of underachievement that needs to be addressed. Acknowledging that the primary underlying factor behind poor achievement is socioeconomic background and finding ways of redressing the imbalance in opportunities and resources available to these students, will help lift achievement for all Australian students.*<sup>17</sup>

## **How Education Alleviates Poverty**

Data from The UNESCO Global Education Monitoring Report<sup>18</sup> and the International Commission on Financing Global Education Opportunity's The Learning Generation Report: Investing in Education for a Changing World<sup>19</sup> provide important evidence on the impact of education on individual's earnings and economic growth. They found high quality education makes the likelihood of higher incomes and lower poverty much greater and estimated extreme poverty could be halved if universal primary and secondary education were achieved.

UNESCO estimates that each year of schooling raises earnings by around 10 per cent for men and up to 20 per cent for women and if workers from poor and rich backgrounds received the same education, disparity between the two in working poverty could decrease by 39 per cent.<sup>20</sup>

According to Oxfam's Sept 2019 report The Power of Education to Fight Inequality<sup>21</sup>: A high-quality public education is liberating for individuals. It can also be an equalizer within society. This report shows the unparalleled power of public education to tackle growing inequality and bring us closer together. To achieve this, education must be both of high quality and equitable; it should be free, universal, adequately funded, with well-supported teachers, and accountable public oversight. The report also suggests fairer taxation of the wealthiest can help pay for it – a prescient recommendation considering approximately \$255 billion cost of the forthcoming Stage Three income tax cuts including \$118 billion for the highest earning individuals in Australia.

Significant increases in inequality of both income and wealth are leading to larger gaps between rich and poor, men and women. This is creating serious obstacles to overcoming poverty and exclusion. The AEU is heartened by the Albanese Government's recent position prioritising equality for women, but policy needs to address the systemic issues and early

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<sup>17</sup> ACER, Press release, 8/12/2020, retrieved from <https://www.acer.org/au/discover/article/australia-lifts-its-performance-on-global-mathematics-and-science-test>

<sup>18</sup> <https://www.unesco.org/gem-report/en>

<sup>19</sup> [http://report.educationcommission.org/wp-content/uploads/dlm\\_uploads/2022/06/Learning\\_Generation\\_full\\_report\\_v2.pdf](http://report.educationcommission.org/wp-content/uploads/dlm_uploads/2022/06/Learning_Generation_full_report_v2.pdf)

<sup>20</sup> <https://uis.unesco.org/en/blog/data-deliver-women>

<sup>21</sup> [https://www-cdn.oxfam.org/s3fs-public/file\\_attachments/bp-education-inequality-170919-summ-en.pdf](https://www-cdn.oxfam.org/s3fs-public/file_attachments/bp-education-inequality-170919-summ-en.pdf)

interventions that can make generational change. In Australia women are much more likely to be living in poverty than men, with over a quarter of single parents are in poverty, with one in ten experiencing severe poverty. A recent report *Behind The Line - Poverty and disadvantage in Australia 2022*<sup>22</sup> found a gender gap in poverty that is more pronounced for young women and women approaching retirement. With women substantially over-represented in the ranks of the poorest, this is also reinforcing gender inequality, blocking progress on women's rights.

As the Oxfam report says: "inequality is not inevitable. It is a political choice. It is the result of deliberate policy choices made by governments. Inequalities of income are compounded with other inequalities of gender, ethnicity, disability and geography to form a suffocating web of exclusion. Conversely, good-quality public education for all can be a powerful engine for greater equality."

It suggests that governments can take the cost of a quality public education away from families, with an immediate impact on the income gap between rich and poor, as the cash benefit is proportionately far greater for families on lower incomes. Government investment in free and accessible public education is crucial for building equity because it gives every child a fair chance, not just those who can afford to pay, and found fees of any kind at pre-primary, primary and secondary level exclude the poorest from education.

Whilst the report has a global focus, it echoes much of what the AEU has been calling on Federal, State and Territory governments to address and recommended the following:

- When publicly delivered education works, the scale and speed of its impact cannot be matched. Many public education systems face challenges in terms of learning outcomes, but the answer is adequate investment. Public-private partnerships (PPPs) and for-profit schools are a dangerous diversion from what is needed to deliver education for all.
- An empowered and professionally trained teacher has been shown to be the biggest contributor to ensuring quality education. Public school teachers, the majority of whom are women in most regions, are often underpaid, under-supported and portrayed as part of the problem. Yet they are the backbone of every school system.
- Education and teaching have to address the unique learning needs of all students and be designed to meet the needs of those left out and left behind, including children with disabilities, minorities, marginalized groups, the poorest and out-of-school children.

## **Starting Early**

The provision of universal early childhood education is the first step in changing outcomes for children from all backgrounds, but especially those from disadvantage. The work of Thrive by Five and the current lead that Victoria and New South Wales is taking not only in providing 30 hours of free preschool for four-year-olds and 15 hours for three-year-olds by

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<sup>22</sup> Duncan A, 'Behind the Line: Poverty and disadvantage in Australia 2022', Bankwest Curtin Economics Centre Focus on the States Series, #9, March 2022.

2029, all taught by bachelor trained early childhood teachers is a positive step forward. But all states and territories need to be offering this level of education for children around the country to have the same opportunities as those living in the most populous states.

The Front Project report *A Smart Investment for a Smarter Australia: Economic analysis of universal early childhood education in the year before school in Australia*,<sup>23</sup> commissioned by PwC and published in 2019 found that children, their parents or carers, governments, and business all benefit from the provision of a quality public early childhood education:

- The benefits of early childhood education for children include increased cognitive capabilities, which can be measured in terms of improved literacy and numeracy. These can be linked to improved achievement at school, which in turn affect school completion rates and levels of educational attainment. Educational attainment is in turn a strong predictor of earnings over a lifetime.
- Some of the parents and carers of children who participate in early childhood education are able to participate in paid work, when they otherwise would not be able to, or choose to work more hours. They benefit from higher incomes, including over an extended period as a result of less career disruption.
- Early childhood education also contributes to a more capable and highly qualified workforce, which is a benefit to business in terms of higher productivity and greater levels of innovation.
- Governments are long-term beneficiaries of the provision of early childhood education. They benefit from higher taxes paid by parents and carers who are able to work more, and children who earn more over their lifetimes. Early childhood education also reduces unemployment and the resulting payments of unemployment benefits and other forms of social expenditure. State and Territory governments are beneficiaries as a result of fewer children repeating a year of school or needing special education placements, as well as lower health and criminal justice systems costs.

Overall the study found \$2 of benefits for every \$1 spent on universal early childhood education.

### **Public Schools Educate the Most Vulnerable to Poverty**

Barbara Preston's report *The Social Make-Up of Schools*<sup>24</sup> prepared for the AEU in February 2018 looked at family income, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander status, family type, religion, languages spoken, disability, home internet access, housing tenure, and geographic mobility of students in public, Catholic and independent schools and offered important data considerations as to why funding public schools must be a priority in any efforts towards equity.

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<sup>23</sup> [https://www.thefrontproject.org.au/images/downloads/ECOpercent20ANALYSISpercent20Full per cent20Report.pdf](https://www.thefrontproject.org.au/images/downloads/ECOpercent20ANALYSISpercent20Full%20per%20cent20Report.pdf)

<sup>24</sup> <https://www.aeufederal.org.au/application/files/7115/2090/2405/Preston2018.pdf>

Based on Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) Census data from 2016, students with lower family incomes disproportionately attended public schools, while students with higher family incomes disproportionately attended private schools (both Catholic and independent). Specifically, public schools enrolled 64 per cent of all students, but 80 per cent of students in the lowest family income range (less than \$400 a week). Catholic schools enrolled 21 per cent of all students, but just 12 per cent in the lowest family income range. Independent schools enrolled 15 per cent of all students but just 8 per cent in the lowest family income range and 52 per cent in the highest family income range.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students were 5 per cent of all students in 2016 according to the ABS Census. They were represented by at least twice the rate in public schools (6 per cent of all public school students) than in either Catholic or independent schools (3 per cent and 2 per cent respectively). Eighty-one per cent of all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students attended public schools, 12 per cent attended Catholic schools and 6 per cent attended independent schools.

Students in one parent families were 21 per cent of all Australian school students in 2016, but 70 per cent of students in the lowest family income group of less than \$650 a week, and only 2 per cent of students in the high family income group of \$2,500 or more a week.

Students who need assistance with core activities made up 3.3 per cent of all students in 2016. They were almost twice the percentage of all students in public schools compared with the percentage of all students in Catholic or independent schools (4.0 per cent, 2.1 per cent and 2.4 per cent respectively). They were also much more likely to come from low income families.

The ABS Census definition of disability is particularly narrow. Adjusting the Census data by the definition and data from the ABS Survey of Disability, Ageing and Carers, estimates of the percentages in some specific categories who have a disability would be as follows: 11.5 per cent of all public school students, 6.0 per cent of all Catholic school students and 6.9 per cent of all independent school students.

While a large majority of students (96 per cent) could access the internet from home, a substantial number could not. Around 115,000 public school students had no internet access at home, the majority of these (around 74,000) were in primary schools, and over 60,000 from low-income families. Most affected were public primary school students with very low family incomes, 15 per cent of whom (around 28,000 students) could not access the internet at home. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students at all family income levels were around four times as likely as other students not to have access to the internet at home.

The report showed public schools had greater concentrations of students whose schools require extra resources to provide them with equal educational opportunities, yet this is not reflected in government schools funding.

The report also found federal government policy has been the main contributor to a decline in enrollments in public education since 1976 as funding was funneled to private schools over public education.

## **Public schools must be resourced to deal with the impacts of poverty on students**

Student wellbeing, mental health and the impact of trauma stemming from poverty is a significant and growing issue for schools and has been exacerbated by the difficulties of students and school staff in dealing with both the short- and long-term challenges presented by COVID-19. The impact is evident in the results of the AEU's 2021 *State of Our Schools* survey of public school principals. Although principals considered themselves able to deal with most wellbeing and mental health challenges in a positive manner overall, six of the seven areas where principals responses reveal the most difficulty are those that relate directly to vulnerable students – being able to provide ongoing learning support for students with additional needs, providing ongoing learning support for students with disability, pastoral care for vulnerable students, maintaining student engagement and supporting student's mental health.

65 per cent of principals said they have noticed a decline in student wellbeing in the last 18 months (17 per cent noted a significant decline and 48 per cent noted some decline) and this rises to 71 per cent in school described as under resourced by the principal.

66 per cent said they have noticed a decline in student engagement in the last 18 months (18 per cent significant decline and 48 per cent some decline) Additionally, under resourced schools have had three times the level of significant decline in engagement that adequately resourced schools have had (26 per cent vs 8 per cent).

A University of Newcastle empirical study in New South Wales primary schools also supports this, finding that the “back to basics” focus on literacy and numeracy to the exclusion of sports, excursions, and other extracurricular activities in disadvantaged schools since the pandemic had detrimental effects on student and teacher wellbeing.<sup>25</sup>

The AEU welcomes the Federal Government's decision to amend the school chaplaincy program to allow schools to employ pastoral care workers and counsellors who are not religiously affiliated and recommends that an ideal approach to student wellbeing would be a ‘wraparound’ model of service provision that is already operating in some limited cases, particularly in the ACT.

The most significant factor affecting student learning outcomes is their socioeconomic status. Despite the transformative power of public education, the evidence is clear that education alone is insufficient to address structural economic inequality. It must be supported through proper provision of social welfare and public services. As stated in the ACT Government Education Directorate's own ten-year strategy, *The Future of Education*:

*A holistic view of students as people recognises that basic welfare and wellbeing needs, things like nutritious food and physical and mental health support, provide the basis on which learning can occur. Meeting these needs allows the full opportunity of education to be made available.*

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<sup>25</sup> <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s13384-021-00436-w#Sec2>

School staff are often required through necessity to take on huge additional pastoral care burdens including:

- Finding housing for students and their families;
- Navigating legal concerns;
- Advising on the availability of welfare payments and assisting students and their families to apply;
- Providing mental health crisis support;
- Providing financial support to parents; and
- Feeding and clothing students.

The impact on teaching and learning from these circumstances is significant. Staff in all roles in schools are often required to devote significant additional time and resources to meet the needs of their students and their families. Schools are currently called on to devote additional time and resources to attempting to find ways to provide support to students' families that are well outside of any educational role. With limited time and resources, schools are forced to choose between ensuring wellbeing and the work required to implement teaching and learning programs.

These demands cause considerable health mental impacts for educators who find themselves undertaking mental health crisis work and de facto social work with no training or support. These educators often sustain serious psychological injury as a result of this unsafe work, compounding the issues of staffing shortages.

There are and should be limits to what teachers are required to do to support students. The AEU suggests that the Committee recommends that State and Territory governments develop whole of government plans to lift all school age children out of poverty and housing insecurity, two of the main drivers of poor wellbeing among public school students.

The AEU also recommends that the next National School Reform Agreement (NRSA) recognises that a substantial increase in resources for student wellbeing and pastoral care is required, and that in addition to allowing non-religious pastoral care workers to access funding previously ring-fenced under the National School Chaplaincy Program the Commonwealth, State and Territory governments should work collaboratively to increase funding for pastoral care workers and fully qualified school counsellors.

### **If We Don't Act Now**

Save Our Schools economist Trevor Cobbold in Dec 2022 assessed the fallout of not funding public education for low SES students and found "very high proportions of low SES, Indigenous and remote area students do not achieve national literacy and numeracy standards compared to very small proportions of high SES students. By Year 9, low SES, Indigenous and remote area students are several years of learning behind their high SES peers. There has been very little progress in reducing the learning gaps between rich and poor over the last

decade or so. There has been no learning improvement amongst low SES students since 2008 and declines in many cases.”<sup>26</sup>

Funding failures by successive Commonwealth and state governments are a major factor contributing to these education inequities, where over 80 per cent of low SES, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and remote area students attend public schools. Despite this, government funding increases since 2009 have heavily favoured private schools.

Combined government funding per student, adjusted for inflation, increased by \$830 per student in public schools compared to \$2,839 per student in Independent and \$2,490 per student in Catholic schools. In percentage terms, the increase in funding for Independent school (45 per cent) was nearly six times that of public schools (7.8 per cent) and the increase for Catholic schools (32.2 per cent) was over three times that of public schools.

Public schools across Australia are vastly under-funded to meet the challenges they face. They are currently funded on average at 87.1 per cent of their Schooling Resource Standard (SRS). Public schools in all states except the Australian Capital Territory (ACT) are funded at well under their SRS. They will remain under-funded until at least 2029 under current funding arrangements.

By contrast, private schools, who serve only a small minority of students from disadvantaged backgrounds, are significantly over-funded. On average, they are currently funded at 104.3 per cent of their SRS and will remain over-funded for the rest of the decade. Private schools in all states except the Northern Territory are funded at over 100 per cent of their SRS.

The recent decision by the Education Ministers Meeting in December 2022 to extend the current National Schools Reform Agreement to 2024 means public schools will be shortchanged by an additional \$6.7 billion in funding for another year. First, the funding agreement only provides for public schools to be funded at 95 per cent of their SRS by 2029 while private schools are funded at over 100 per cent of their SES until at least 2029. Second, the agreement allows state and territory governments to claim certain non-school expenditures (4 per cent depreciation tax) as part of their share of the SRS of public schools but not for private schools. The effect is that public schools will actually be funded at less than 91 per cent of their SRS until at least 2029 while private schools are funded at over 100 per cent of their SRS for the rest of the decade.

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<sup>26</sup> <https://saveourschools.com.au/funding/shocking-inequalities-in-school-results/#more-5303>

## **Recommendations**

In conclusion, public education has the power for change, to close poverty gaps and provide lifelong benefits for all, and especially for low-SES students. Therefore, every delay in properly funding public education widens poverty gaps and sets back essential, life-saving change.

The AEU thus recommends:

1. That all public schools are funded at a minimum of 100 per cent of the SRS with appropriate loadings for priority equity student cohorts;
2. That families do not need to make up funding shortfalls by contributing through public school fees;
3. That free universal public early childhood education is provided for all three- and four year-olds;
4. That public TAFEs are rebuilt to the world-class standard they once were with proper guaranteed funding and that contestability for funding is immediately revoked; and
5. That in addition to receiving 100 per cent of the SRS, public schools are provided with additional resources to help them address the many issues stemming from poverty that school staff deal with every day including counsellors, welfare and housing officers and school psychologists.