

2015 marks 40 years of publication of *Independence*, the biannual journal of the Association of Heads of Independent Schools of Australia. To celebrate, AHISA presents for its members and friends a special series of interviews with people of influence in education and educational leadership, and material from the *Independence* archives. This month we publish an essay by the journal's Editor.



APRIL 2015: FROM THE EDITOR



LYNDAL WILSON has worked in policy and communications in the independent schools sector for over 20 years. She has a BA and GradDipEd (Secondary). She has been Editor of AHISA's journal, *Independence*, since Issue 2 of 2007.

In this essay, Ms Wilson examines the rhetoric of those who campaign against non-government schools and the truth of claims made about the performance of independent schools. She argues that the 'war' against non-governments schools has only served to protect state and territory governments from full public scrutiny of the quality of their own education provision, and condemned many young Australians to academic under-achievement.

The opinions expressed in her essay are not necessarily those of AHISA.

INDEPENDENCE was birthed in 1975 as the journal of the Headmasters' Conference of Independent Schools of Australia (known as HMC). When HMC and the Association of Heads of Independent Girls' Schools of Australia (AHIGSA) amalgamated to form AHISA in 1985, publication of the journal continued under the umbrella of the new association.

In the early years there was a missing issue or two, and a volume renumbering, but production had stabilised by the time publication of the journal passed to AHISA. Conceived as a journal by Heads for Heads, its editorship was traditionally an honorary role performed by current or newly retired members of AHISA. The increasing demands of Principalship were the prompt for AHISA to seek outside its membership for an Editor, supported by an editorial sub-committee comprised of AHISA members. Mr Garth Wynne, Headmaster of Christ Church Grammar School in Perth, Western Australia, is Chair of the 2013-15 sub-committee.

AHISA members who have served as Editors of *Independence* are:

- 1975-85 **JUDGE PETER GEBHART**, then Head of The Geelong College, VIC
- 1986-93 **MR PAUL MCKEOWN AM**, on retirement as Headmaster of Canberra Grammar School, ACT
- 1993-97 **MR TONY RAE AM**, on retirement as Headmaster of Newington College, NSW
- 1997-2000 **MR JEREMY MADIN**, then Headmaster of Christ Church Grammar School, WA
- 2001-07 **THE REV. CHRISTOPHER WELSH**, then Headmaster of Oxley College, NSW

Protection racket

THE UNACCEPTABLE COST OF DECEPTION IN THE WAR AGAINST NON-GOVERNMENT SCHOOLS

LYNDAL WILSON

THERE ARE those with such a deep-seated antagonism to the very existence of non-government schools that the likelihood of reasoned public debate on education provision in Australia seems ever remote. Unfortunately, apart from a few notable exceptions, neither reason nor truth plays a strong part in the ongoing war against non-government schools. Instead, the weapon of choice is disinformation.

In the last 15 years some quite sophisticated and no doubt costly disinformation campaigns have been waged against non-government schools. Up until about seven years ago, most of these campaigns were linked to federal election campaigns; their aim appeared to be to persuade parliamentarians and those who vote for them that support for the education of students attending non-government schools was a crime against the nation.

With a war chest largely financed by the Australian Education Union, such campaigns were waged on multiple false fronts, for example: 'private schools create social and religious "enclaves" that undermine social cohesion'; 'private schools undermine Australia's democracy'; 'public schools are in danger of "residualisation"'; and that old chestnut, still to be found in letters to the editors of major metropolitan dailies, 'private schools are funded at the expense of public schools'.

Private schools were demonised as the root cause of inequitable outcomes in school education. Not only were they accused of draining the public purse, it was claimed that they used public money to seduce the best teachers out of public schools, and stole the best and brightest students away from public schools with lucrative scholarships.

Public vs private

As I have argued elsewhere¹, the choice of language for these campaigns is deliberate. The classification of schools as either 'public' or 'private' reflects far more than common usage: it is a means to obscure

dis·in·for·ma·tion

ˌdɪsɪnfəˈmeɪʃ(ə)n

Definition: False information that is given to people in order to make them believe something or to hide the truth.

Merriam-Webster Dictionary, <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/disinformation>

the distinction between the public purposes of schooling and the public institutions of schooling. Governments do not need to own schools to ensure all children have access to them, any more than local councils need to own garbage trucks to provide householders with rubbish removal services.

The terms 'public' and 'private' are not used to denote ownership, they are used to create and sustain division between 'us' (public and 'inclusive') and 'them' (private and 'exclusive').

Consider for a moment the effect of replacing the term 'public' with the descriptor 'schools owned by governments' and replacing 'private' with 'schools owned by community groups'. That's hardly likely to pit neighbour against neighbour, is it? A school owned by a community group sounds a little too much like something 'us' might want to be part of or, worse, deem to be a demonstration of the entrepreneurial effort that so often serves to invigorate democracies and economies.

So successful is the term 'public versus private', first in dividing the community and then in uniting the 'us' parties through the common purpose of being against 'them', that it is still used to define the ground of debate. It is a gift to media searching for headlines and grabs that will polarise opinion.

One of the quite clever tactics of campaigns in the 00s was to engage high profile or otherwise reputable 'advocates' or 'champions' for the underdog of public education in its fight for survival against the creeping cancer that was private

education. Top education bureaucrats, professors of education, high profile media personalities and even an eminent scientist who had been Australian of the Year weighed in with opinions or concerns, none of which were backed by evidence.

It is a true mark of the success of these campaigns that they could propose and sustain the status of underdog for schools whose owners had access to multi-billion dollar budgets and were able to draw on communities of millions of people.

In the early 00s, the preoccupation with non-government schools as undermining social inclusion led to proposals that schools funding models should be linked to enrolment policies. The following is a good example of the tenor of the language used:

Such approaches to funding might be adapted from the concept of resources taxes to limit toxic greenhouse gas emissions. The right to practise particular forms of exclusion could be purchased from the government, much as the right to certain levels of carbon gas emission . . .²

The introduction of the SES model to distribute federal general recurrent grants to ‘toxic’ non-government schools, which had the effect of delivering increased funding to the sector, drove self-styled public education advocates to even further extremes. Ideological bias among some education academics became more pronounced, with critical rigour discarded like a cumbersome garment in an undignified and muddy scramble to what was thought of as higher moral ground. Let me give you one example.

A Victorian research institute of otherwise high reputation published a paper on the SES model by a professor of education, also of otherwise high reputation. The professor was critical of the model and the funding it delivered to non-government schools because of the crudity of using postcodes as a measure to determine SES. A letter was duly sent protesting this fatal flaw in the professor’s argument. As anyone who had bothered to properly research the SES model should have known, student addresses were linked to Census Collection Districts, not postcodes. A Collection District contains only about 220 households. (The postcode area in which I live embraces over 14,000 people!) A letter came back in due course to say the institute would stand

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by the research as describing the SES model as based on postcodes rather than the far smaller and more homogenous Collection Districts was ‘a matter of interpretation’.

This slippery hold on indisputable fact evident in the work of some academics meant that ‘interpretations’ about the nature and role of non-government schools spread like bindi weed in a suburban lawn; one academic paper referenced another academic paper and within five citations a sloppy opinion had become evidence. We can see this at play in advice to the Gillard Government’s Review of Funding for Schooling (Gonski Review). Referencing published academic papers, some of the Panel’s commissioned research reports maintained that non-government schools and/or the exercise of school choice explained the under-achievement of some students in government schools.

While these campaigns can boast some successful skirmishes, there was no ultimate victory. For all the effort expended and academic reputations tarnished, for all the no doubt several millions of dollars of teacher union funds that were spent, this war never produced anything of worth, certainly not in any classroom that I’ve ever heard of.

Unfortunately, this wasteful war continues and, in spite of fresh tactics, its most recent campaign continues to demonstrate its futility.

Hip pocket warfare

The current campaign is akin to a social marketing campaign. The old arguments about non-government schools undermining Australian democracy never really worked. It seems a lot of Australians thought

that by choosing to educate their children in a non-government school they were actually exercising their democratic rights, and enrolments in independent schools continued to climb.

The new campaign is a sophisticated attempt to put a collar and leash on the highly subjective issue of value for money. Aimed straight at parents' hip pockets, so far it has managed to get a good run in the park. Of course, having the inside running helps enormously, as I shall explain.

Once parents choose to educate their child in a non-government school they lose eligibility for the same level of government support for their child's education that would be available if their child attended a government-owned school. While governments contribute some money on a per student basis, with the amount depending on the relative advantage of the school community, families have to bridge the gap by paying fees. The less governments contribute, the more parents have to pay.³

As we read in the press every time the Australian Scholarships Group issues its annual prompt to parents to invest in education savings plans, the cost of educating one or more children in non-government schools can account for a large chunk of a family's after-tax income. In stark contrast is the very low cost to families of educating their children in government-owned schools.

This cost differential is what gives legs to this particular dog of an argument, especially in the aftermath of the Global Financial Crisis. The body of the argument is the proposition that the 'products' are the same, usually expressed in terms of student academic achievement. I'll come to that shortly, but first let's deal with the hip pocket.

Pick-a-mug

It is essential for the success of the current campaign (I will call it 'Fido', for short) to have people think of government schools as 'free'. But of course, they are not free. Far from it. In 2012-13, collective recurrent expenditure on government schools by Australian, state and territory governments was worth \$36.9 billion, with another \$1.9 billion on top for capital expenditure. Nationally, the average per student

'The old arguments about non-government schools undermining Australian democracy never really worked.'

recurrent expenditure by governments for government-owned schools was \$15,703.⁴ Government schools are not 'free', but as the cost of educating students in them is largely borne by the entire community, there is no noticeable impact on individual pay packets.

Fido certainly finds it easy to neglect the taxpayer who foots the bill for public education. Instead, the campaign invites parents to imagine about other ways they might be spending those private school fees. Just in case their imaginations are exhausted from all that hard work to cover the cost of their children's education, Fido offers ready-made dreams.

One memorable example was given in an article published by *The Sydney Morning Herald*.⁵ A former advertising executive, now public education advocate and media commentator, revealed that she and her husband, who lived on Sydney's lower North Shore, sent their two children to Mosman High School, saving an estimated \$300,000 on private school fees:

The girls got a fantastic education and we were free to use that money in other ways. We took them overseas – twice – we bought good computer technology, we got them great coaching when they needed it and we are now paying their HECS fees.

The savings also allowed the family to buy an 87-hectare country retreat.

Paying private school fees? You're a mug, growls Fido. (Given stories like the above, you could be forgiven for assuming it is the taxpayer who is the mug. And please don't accept the implication of this kind of spin, that when it comes to schools, government schools are perceived simply as the best option to increase personal financial capital at the expense of the taxpayer. Many parents buy real estate or rent in the catchment zones of their preferred government school to ensure their child's

enrolment, and attending the local school is a major factor for some families, especially in the primary years.)

Mentions of individual public schools in the Fido campaign are relatively rare. For the campaign to be successful, it must encourage parents to think about public schools in general, not in the particular, because schools are all very different and, in spite of the fact that government schools within each state and territory have the same owner, there is tremendous diversity among them.

Just to put the above example of school choice in the context of that diversity, according to My School, Mosman High School has an ICSEA score of 1149 (that is, it is a high-advantage school); 65 per cent of its 1030 students are in the top quartile of the ICSEA spread and only one per cent in the lowest quartile. Per student net recurrent expenditure in 2013 was only \$11,898 (considerably lower than the NSW in-school per student average for secondary schools of \$16,346) but, significantly, this figure reflects \$1.16 million that was raised that year from fees, charges and parent contributions.

In contrast, the public high school where the family has their country property has an ICSEA score of 965 and only nine per cent of 660 students are in the top quartile of the ICSEA spread; 45 per cent are in the lowest quartile. The gap in school mean scores for Year 9 achievement averaged across the five NAPLAN domains was 61 points, in favour of Mosman High School.

Per student expenditure at the country school was \$13,959, with an impressive \$395,873 raised from fees, charges and parent contributions. Very generous considering the high proportion of students from low-SES families, but then of course these parents don't have the same demands on their pockets as do jetsetting city dwellers purchasing a country retreat; they already live in the country.

Performance propaganda

The main message of the Fido campaign is that given the choice between two similar products, one 'free' and one that involves personal expenditure, you'd have to be pretty silly to fork out your money. Brushing aside incidental differences such as co-

curriculum, pastoral care and facilities, not to mention school climate – but lingering a moment to play with the 'old school tie' or 'networks' – the campaign fearlessly delivers its favourite tagline: 'There is no difference in performance between public and private schools'. Look at Fido's tail wag! Hear Fido bark! 'The evidence proves it!' Woof!

After more than a decade watching the antics of the public education lobby, use of the term 'evidence' by its warriors puts me on guard. Evidence? Or just more 'interpretation'? Whatever it is, I would recommend circling it at a distance and sniffing carefully before approaching.

What the excited Fido is pointing to – one front leg raised, neck stretched and tail extended – is comprised mostly of analysis of NAPLAN data. Some of this analysis has been undertaken by academics, some by former government school principals and some by the media. All of them recognise a large gap in the raw mean scores of independent schools and government schools across the five NAPLAN domains (reading, writing, spelling, grammar and punctuation and numeracy). All attempt to explain the gap away by either the socioeconomic background (SES) of the students or the schools, the family characteristics of the students or the prior achievement or 'general ability' of the students. In other words, they argue that independent schools do well – that is, their students get high marks in NAPLAN – not because of anything the schools do, but because of the characteristics of the students they enrol.

I am not an academic, I have no background in statistics, and I have no way of checking the data, but I would be prepared to accept the findings in at least some of the research on NAPLAN data. I know there are severe limitations to the NAPLAN testing and what it tells us about how children are faring at school, but even so, students are sitting the same tests; the narrowness of NAPLAN data is not a good reason to dismiss all the stories the data tell.

The problem, it seems to me, is not always with the findings (although the factors analysed are often limited), but with the way they are described and the use to which they are put. There are some notable exceptions, but bear with me while I work through a few examples to illustrate the point.

‘Analysis of NAPLAN data from Years 7 to 9 compared to Years 3 and 5 suggests the effect of schools on student learning may be cumulative.’

Bias and misrepresentation

Recent analysis of Year 3 and 5 NAPLAN results married to the Longitudinal Study of Australian Children (LSAC) data found no evidence that independent schools affect student achievement after accounting for a range of student and family characteristics.⁶

On release of the analysis, the media launched into blanket conclusions about the value of the education on offer in non-government schools. For example, Brisbane’s *The Courier Mail* proclaimed in its headline, ‘No benefit in private schooling: Queensland study’. On its website, ABC’s AM radio program ran a headline to their coverage which read, ‘Study suggests mums working to pay kids’ private school fees should stay at home and use public schools instead’. The ABC’s PM program was more restrained: ‘No academic advantage gained in private schools: research’. *The Australian’s* headline ran, “Private schools “perform no better””. They’re big claims to promote about analysis that reaches only to Year 5; most people think of schooling as a developmental experience of possibly 12 years’ duration.

Which points to one of the most dissatisfying aspects of the way much of the NAPLAN research is interpreted – when it comes to determining differences in school ‘value adding’, are two-year or four- year timeframes sufficient to determine school effects on student learning, especially in the primary years? Analysis of NAPLAN data from Years 7 to 9 compared to Years 3 and 5 suggests the effect of schools on student learning may be cumulative. At the very least, it suggests schools can help to overcome any disadvantages inherited from families and their circumstances.

Late in 2014 *The Australian* published its own analysis of NAPLAN data. While no information was given that allows for a judgment to be made about the breadth of the data or the accuracy of its analysis, I offer it here for consideration because it does allow a comparison between a measure of school performance from Year 3 to Year 5 against Year 7 to 9. At the same time it is also a good example of how media reporting can bury otherwise important information under ‘interpretation’.

The Australian’s analysis classified schools into four categories based on student gain between Years 3 and 5 and between Years 7 and 9, as measured against the average progress of all students:

- schools with low-scoring students making little progress were designated as ‘low-performing schools’
- schools with low-scoring students who were advancing more quickly than expected were designated as ‘improving schools’
- schools with high-scoring students who showed little improvement above expected levels were designated as ‘coasting schools’
- schools with high-scoring students who were also improving above the average gain of all students were designated as ‘successful schools’.

I have taken *The Australian’s* findings and illustrated them in Charts 1 and 2. Note that students in schools deemed as ‘coasting’ or ‘successful’ are still achieving high scores. (The charts are published at size on the following page, so they are easier to compare.)

The Australian published its NAPLAN research on 9 December 2014, under the heading, ‘High scores hide schools’ failure to improve’. That certainly stopped readers focusing on the fact that in Year 5 60 per cent and upwards of non-government schools had high-scoring students, irrespective of whether the students were progressing at above average rates. In Year 9, 70 per cent and upwards of non-government schools had high scoring students.

Even according to *The Australian’s* own analysis, the proportion of ‘successful’ non-government schools – that is, schools with high-scoring students who were

Charts on page 7; text continues page 8.

NAPLAN 2013 School performance as expressed by student gain Years 3-5 Percentage of schools in four categories by sector

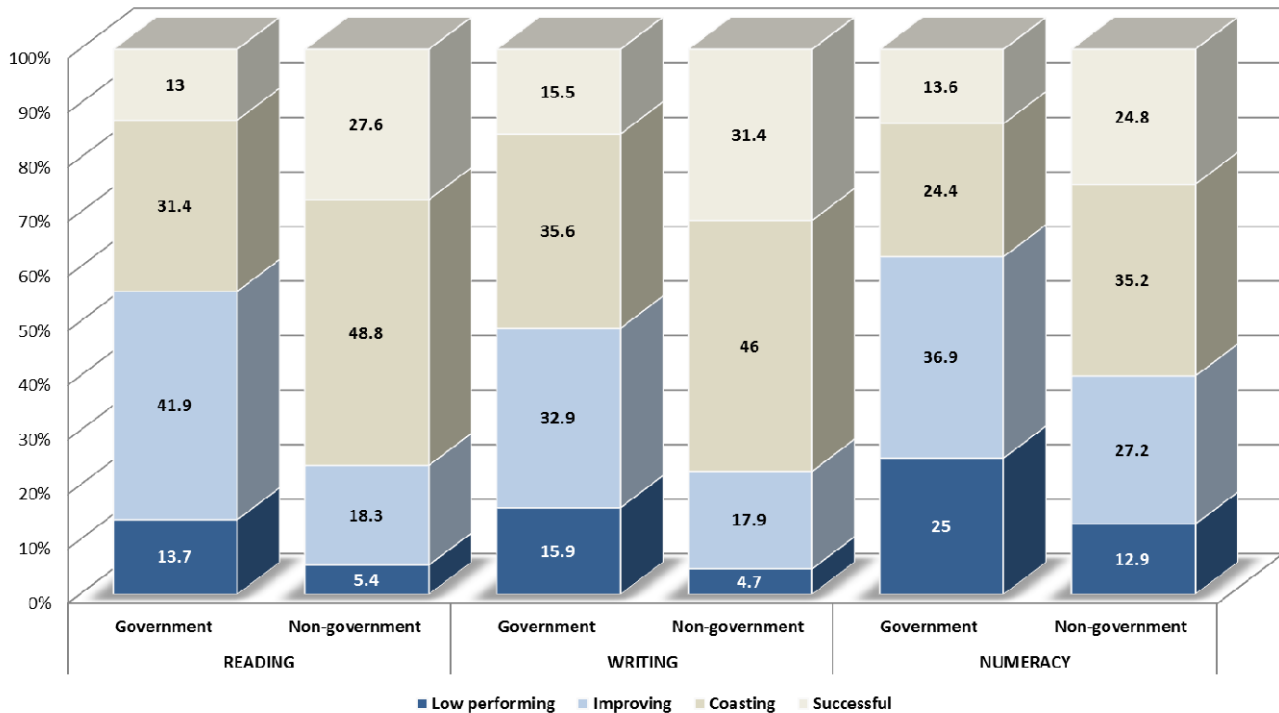


CHART 1. NAPLAN 2013: Years 3-5: Data as published by *The Australian*, 9 December 2014; chart presentation by Lyndal Wilson.

NAPLAN 2013 School performance as expressed by student gain Years 7-9 Percentage of schools in four categories by sector

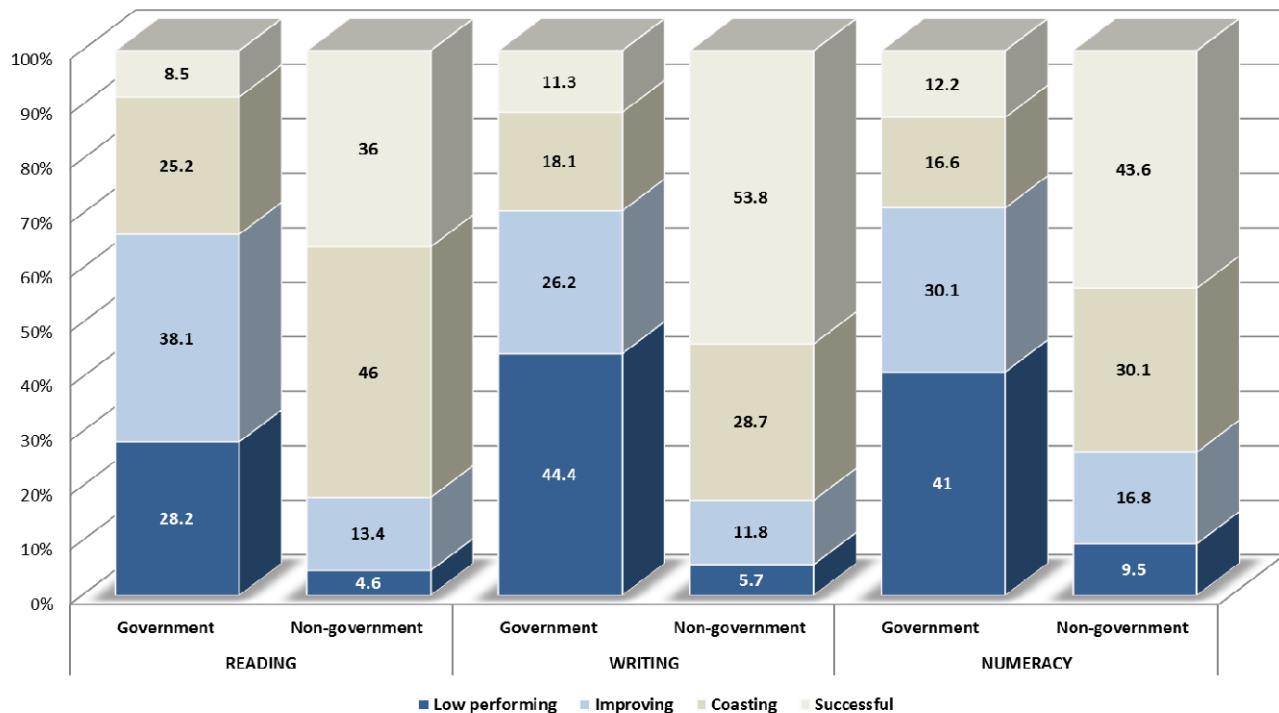


CHART 2. NAPLAN 2013: Years 7-9: Data as published by *The Australian*, 9 December 2014; chart presentation by Lyndal Wilson.

Note the increase in the proportion of high-scoring students in non-government schools by Year 9 and the significant increase in the proportion of non-governments schools classified as 'successful'.

also demonstrating above average gain – is remarkable. Yet these are the opening paragraphs of the paper’s page one article:

The focus on high test scores is masking the failure of schools to improve their students’ learning, with a substantial proportion of fee-charging private schools ‘coasting’ on their high-achieving students, who make little progress.

Analysis of national literacy and numeracy test results shows about 40 per cent of private primary schools and 35 per cent of private secondary schools are coasting, looking good with high test results but failing to record significant improvement in student scores.

It is not until many paragraphs later, in the continuation of the story on page two, that the high performance of non-government schools rates a (small) mention.

Startling as this evidence of media bias is, let’s not ignore the interesting aspects of the data. Notice the significant jump in the proportion of non-government schools deemed ‘successful’ according to Years 7-9 data compared to Years 3-5 data. This is important. It may be possible to dismiss the high scores of non-government schools as merely a reflection of student SES or prior student achievement, but gains beyond those predicted by prior achievement cannot be explained away in this manner.

Note also that the proportion of ‘successful’ government schools shrinks. I can hear Fido howling that this is simply the effect of private schools stealing away all the high performing students from public schools with lucrative scholarships. The relatively small proportion of students on scholarships could not possibly explain either the increase in ‘successful’ non-government schools or the decrease in ‘successful’ government schools.

Of course, many children change schools at Year 7 and so this analysis does not necessarily support the notion of a cumulative school effect, but clearly something is going on, and it might just be ‘value adding’. Surely the fact that non-government schools are clearly able to get enough students improving

‘Surely the fact that non-government schools are clearly able to get enough students improving above expectations and thereby shift their rating from ‘coasting’ to ‘successful’ makes whatever they are doing worthy of investigation.’

above expectations and thereby shift their rating from ‘coasting’ to ‘successful’ makes whatever they are doing worthy of investigation.

There is some overseas research that I believe sheds some much needed light into why non-government schools obtain these results, but let me press the ‘pause’ button for a quick word on the official country analysis of Australia’s PISA results, as undertaken by the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER).

Statistics and damned lies

Results of the OECD’s Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) and the associated ranking of participating countries and economies carry such weight that some nations are prepared to build their education policies around them. Australia’s country report is therefore a serious document.

Since 2009, the reporting of Australia’s PISA results has included some analysis by school sector – government, Catholic and independent. ACER’s PISA 2009 and 2012 country reports both noted significant gaps in the raw mean scores between schools in the different sectors, and in the proportions of students in the different achievement percentiles. Both reports work very hard to minimise these differences. For example, in ACER’s PISA 2009 report⁷, the fact that 25 per cent of students in independent schools achieving in mathematical literacy at the highest proficiency levels of 5 and 6 (against 14 per cent of students in government schools) was attributed to ‘most’ independent schools being ‘selective in terms of academic achievement’. Whether a gross error or just an

unhappy choice of phrasing, fortunately this misleading explanation was not repeated in the PISA 2012 report.

The PISA 2012 Australia country report does however sustain the spin cycle in the data wash. For example, the wider spread of scores between the 95th and 5th percentiles in mathematical literacy for government schools is explained as indicative that ‘government schools cater for students with a broader range of abilities than do Catholic or independent schools’ (page 34). Yet the 2009 results for mathematical literacy showed that South Australia had the narrowest spread of scores in Australia. The ACT had the second highest spread after the Northern Territory. This would seem to support the interpretation of narrower spread as an indicator of greater equity in educational attainment. It is certainly an explanation used in other research, but apparently not in Australia’s PISA analysis, or at least not when school sector is involved.

In both the 2009 and 2012 reports the raw achievement gaps favouring Catholic and independent schools are explained away as reflecting the SES of students and the SES of schools (as measured by a composite of various parental and home characteristics). Allowing for both student and school SES enabled the ACER to conclude that ‘the differences in performance across school sectors are not significant’.⁸

There are many studies noting a stronger correlation between school SES and student achievement than between individual student SES and achievement, and the two effects are often compared. But it is only in OECD literature that I can find mention of them being combined, and then only obliquely. In PISA the SES of the school is determined as an average of the combined SES scores of those students in the school sitting the tests – up to 35 students per school, so to merge both effects seems akin to putting one slice of bread on a plate, turning it over and then claiming that a piece of bread with two sides is therefore the equivalent of a sandwich.

Even though an imaginary sandwich is poor fare, anti-private school campaigners continue to dine out on the ACER’s conclusion that there are no sector differences in school performances.

TABLE 1. Raw Australian sectoral scores displayed against raw country rankings.

PISA 2012: COMPARISON OF RAW MEAN SCORES		
READING LITERACY: Comparison of mean scores		
COUNTRY/ECONOMY	MEAN SCORE	COUNTRY RANK
Shanghai-China	570	1
Australia - Independent sector mean	551	(2)
Hong Kong-China	545	2
Singapore	542	3
Japan	538	4
Korea	536	5
Finland	524	6
Australia - Catholic sector mean	523	(7)
Australia - Country mean	512	14
OECD average	496	
Australia - Government sector mean	495	(26)
SCIENTIFIC LITERACY: Comparison of mean scores		
COUNTRY/ECONOMY	MEAN SCORE	COUNTRY RANK
Shanghai-China	580	1
Australia - Independent sector mean	559	(2)
Hong Kong-China	555	2
Singapore	551	3
Japan	547	4
Finland	545	5
Estonia	541	6
Korea	538	7
Australia - Catholic sector mean	532	(8)
Australia - country mean	521	16
Australia - Government sector mean	506	(23)
OECD average	501	
MATHEMATICAL LITERACY: Comparison of mean scores		
COUNTRY/ECONOMY	MEAN SCORE	COUNTRY RANK
Shanghai-China	613	1
Singapore	573	2
Hong Kong-China	561	3
Chinese Taipei	560	4
Korea	554	5
Australia - Independent sector mean	541	(6)
Australia - Catholic sector mean	514	(16)
Australia - Country mean	504	19
OECD average	494	
Australia - Government sector mean	489	(30)
SOURCES: OECD (2013) PISA 2012 results: Excellence through equity - giving every student the chance to succeed (Vol 2); Australian sectoral data from http://www.acer.edu.au/ozpisa/the-australian-pisa-data-files.		

PISA Australia 2012: Effect of student and school SES on gap between raw mean scores - government and independent sectors

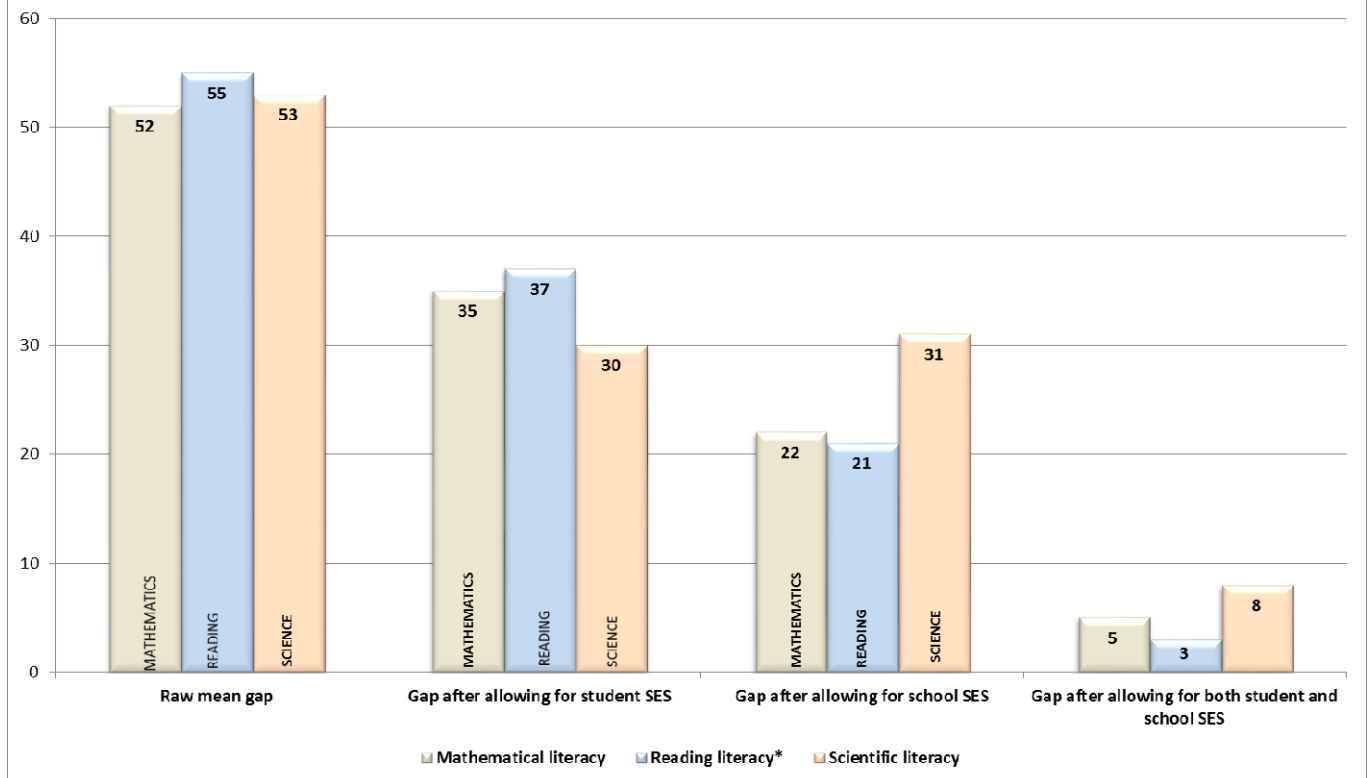


CHART 3. PISA 2012: Australia: The difference in raw mean scores between the government and independent sectors and the effect of allowing for student and/or school SES.

*In its country report ACER notes the difference as 55 although in other representations of sector raw scores the gap is 56.

Table 1 on the previous page shows the raw mean score results by sector for Australia in PISA 2012, expressed for interest's sake against the rankings for countries and economies. As you can see, and as the Australia country report notes before its SES discounting frenzy, the gaps in raw means scores by sector are significant. In Chart 3, I've shown the effects of accounting for student SES and school SES on the gap in raw scores as separate effects, which is more typical of other school achievement and equity research analysis.⁹ I've also included the ACER double dip, although it seems counter intuitive. The gap remaining after allowing for either student SES or school SES, but not both, aligns far better with what is evidenced in the Year 7-9 NAPLAN analysis above. It also helps explain what comes next: the incontrovertible, indisputable and undeniable evidence of value adding by independent schools from Year 9 to Year 12.

Yes, schools do make a difference

Some of the evidence pointing to the value adding of independent schools has already been covered in AHISA's journal.¹⁰

To summarise, analyses of PISA data and Year 9 NAPLAN data (and previous literacy and numeracy testing conducted as part of the Longitudinal Survey of Australian Youth) against Year 12 achievement and tertiary entrance scores all show conclusively that, by Year 12, students in independent schools achieve at a level beyond that expected by prior performance. The 'value add' is significant, representing between 6 and 8 percentiles in tertiary entrance rank – *after* allowing for both student SES and prior achievement. The finding is consistent across datasets and across time.

The value add is greatest for students whose prior achievement is the weakest. For some, this would be another indicator of equity in academic achievement in non-government schools. But not for Fido. The Fido campaign ignores the already substantial and growing body of research on value adding in independent schools and instead tries to distract parents with loud barking about research studies showing that students from independent schools do not perform as well at university as students from government schools. According to Fido, that

independent schools are able to achieve better outcomes for all students, not just some, has nothing to do with equity and more to do with 'nannying'.

While there is evidence that students educated in independent schools achieve (slightly) lower results than expected in their first year at university, there is no evidence but only conjecture as to why.

About a decade or so ago, when some Western Australian analysis on first-year university academic achievement according to school attended was released, I telephoned one of the researchers to ask if his study offered any explanation for the apparent under-achievement. Again, there was no evidence, but he commented that he suspected students from independent schools continued their heavy engagement in extra-curricular activities such as inter-collegiate competitive sports, debating and theatre, which were less regulated in the university environment and could be more demanding on students' time. (The word 'partying' was not mentioned.)

Certainly 'nannying' is not the answer. Analysis of data collected for the Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia (HILDA) Survey shows students who attended independent schools are 2.8 times more likely to complete a university degree than students who attended government schools after allowing for the effect of parents' education. Further, attendance at a non-government school increases the odds of graduating from a Go8 research-intensive university (x1.576) or graduating with medicine or law degree (x1.524). Students who attended a non-government school are also 1.4 times more likely to complete a post-graduate degree.¹¹ The HILDA data suggests resilience and 'stickability' can be learned just as well in non-government schools as in the alleged 'toughening-up' environments of government schools.

Academic optimism

One thing that comes through very strongly from these data is that overall, if their children have completed Year 12 in an independent school, then parents can be confident their offspring will have achieved as well as they possibly could and more than might otherwise have been expected. Further, they will have gained a significant advantage for their

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tertiary studies. For many parents, that confidence is worth the spend.

Rather than ignore these results, as Fido would have us do, surely they invite further investigation as to why independent schools perform so well and whether their success can be replicated.

As mentioned in the *Independence* articles already cited, Australian research evidence suggests that it is academic environment or 'academic press' that is the most statistically significant factor that can be determined for the effect of independent schools, not only on the tertiary entrance scores of their students, but on the higher probability of their students transitioning to university.

Various other studies mention a range of school variables that can be measured as affecting student achievement, such as student retention, stability of the school's student population, depth of academic offerings and 'school climate', which includes disciplinary climate, student engagement and teachers' expectations of students. All of these sit neatly with factors parents cite as influencing their choice of school for their children.¹²

However, none of these factors, important as they all are, seems to capture the vitality so apparent in independent schools or their tangible but difficult to measure 'ethos'.

Bryk, Lee and Holland, in seeking to explain the positive effect of Catholic schools in the United States on student achievement¹³, found that valuing and promotion of community, the conviction that all

students can learn, school autonomy, and theology as a unifying principle were the key factors explaining this effect. (Flecks of frothy spittle are appearing around Fido's mouth. Did I mention that Fido is an atheist?)

More recent research, conducted in public schools in the United States, provides further insight the effect of school ethos.¹⁴ According to this research, there are three school characteristics that are apparent in making a difference to student achievement after allowing for student SES and prior student achievement: the academic emphasis of the school, the collective efficacy of teachers (that is, 'the judgment of teachers that the faculty as a whole can organise and execute the actions required to have positive effects on students') and teachers' trust in parents and students. These characteristics are tightly interwoven and their combined effect is described by the researchers as 'academic optimism'.

In capturing the affective as well as academic and structural characteristics of schools, this research suggests why it is that parents remain happy with their choice of non-government schools despite Fido's attempts to undermine their confidence: it is almost impossible for outright lies, disinformation or marketing spin to undermine trust when the evidence of happy, engaged, challenged students, performing at their best, assures parents their trust is well placed.

The real story

The ghastly truth is that the war against non-government schools is a civil war. It pits neighbour against neighbour and undermines the collegiality of the teaching profession. Worse, the preoccupation with non-government schools has served to mask and therefore failed to address under-performance in the government sector. Fido is the government school owner's best friend.

Just why advocates of public education and the media they feed choose to put the boot into non-government schools rather than kick state and territory governments into action to improve their schools is a mystery. Why spend so much energy trying to 'disappear' the gains of independent schools when surely those gains are useful evidence

that too many students in government schools are being left to languish in under-achievement? No doubt Fido would snarl that the higher achievement of some comes at the expense of the under-achievement of others. But that is a false correlation.

The high performance of non-government schools is a weak and silly excuse to offer for the under-performance of government schools, roughly equivalent to 'Fido ate my homework'. Only the gullible would believe it. And no one who wants every young Australian to have the opportunity to do their best at school should accept it. ■

Lyndal Wilson is Editor of AHISA's journal, *Independence*. The opinions expressed in her essay are not necessarily those of AHISA.

NOTES & REFERENCES

- ¹ Wilson L (2003) Religious schools and Australian democracy. *Independence*, 28(2):25-28; Wilson, L (2004) Non-government schools are good for democracy in Australia. *Online Opinion*, 5 April 2004. Accessed at <http://www.onlineopinion.com.au/view.asp?article=2116>.
- ² 'Schools in Australia: A Hard Act to Follow' in *School resourcing: Models and practices in changing times*. Australian College of Education Year Book 2000; page 74.
- ³ An overview of how non-government schools are funded can be found in 'The school funding partnership', *Independent Update*, Issue 9, 2014, published by the Independent Schools Council of Australia at <http://isca.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/2011/07/Independent-Update-Issue-9-2014-The-School-Funding-Partnership.pdf>.
- ⁴ Productivity Commission (2015) Report on Government Services 2015. Accessed at <http://www.pc.gov.au/research/recurring/report-on-government-services/2015/childcare-education-and-training/school-education>.
- ⁵ Elliott T (2011) Private v public – an educated guess. *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 13 April 2011. Accessed at <http://www.smh.com.au/money/private-v-public-an-educated-guess-20110412-1dbok.html>.
- ⁶ Nghiem HS, Nguyen HT, Khanam R & Connelly LB (2015) Does school type affect cognitive and non-cognitive development in children? Evidence from Australian primary schools. *Labour Economics*, April 2015, 33:55-65.

⁷ Thomson S, De Bortoli L, Nicholas M, Hillman K & Buckley S (2011) *Challenges for Australian education: Results from PISA 2009*. Melbourne, Australia: ACER; page 188.

⁸ See for example the 2012 Australia country report, Thomson S, De Bortoli L & Buckley S (2013) *PISA 2012: How Australia measures up*. Melbourne, Australia: ACER; pages 34-35.

⁹ As discussed by Dr Gary Marks in his article in the May 2015 issue of *Independence* (in press), some researchers argue that school-level SES is a 'statistical artefact' and cannot be used to explain sector differences. Dr Marks argues that prior achievement is a better predictor of student achievement than student SES or school SES. PISA measures student achievement at a single point in time and therefore does not account for prior achievement. I am not qualified to argue the research methodology; my main purpose is to query some of the interpretation brought to bear on the data.

¹⁰ See Marks G (2015, in press) Students, schools and socioeconomic background. *Independence* 40(1):4-12. Plus data compiled for *Independence* 39(1):16, 'Data check: Independent schools do make a difference'. See also Wilson L (2003) op. cit., which cites Australian research indicating that students in independent schools are more

likely to undertake volunteering and have higher levels of school engagement (which has been linked to civic engagement).

¹¹ Chesters J (2014) The Australian education system: Why expansion has not alleviated inequality in opportunities and outcomes. Seminar presentation, ANZSOG Institute for Governance (ANZSIG), February 2014. Accessed at <http://www.governanceinstitute.edu.au/magma/media/upload/ckeditor/files/Chesters%20ANZSIG%20feb2014.pdf>.

¹² Recent research on parents' perceptions of independent schools and reasons for choosing independent schools, undertaken by Independent Schools Queensland, is summarised in 'Data Check: Parental perceptions of independent schools' in *Independence* 40(1):10, in press.

¹³ Bryk AS, Lee VE & Holland PB (1995) *Catholic schools and the common good*. Cambridge, USA: Harvard University Press.

¹⁴ Hoy WK, Tarter JC & Hoy AW (2006) Academic optimism of schools: A force for student achievement. *American Educational Research Journal*, 43(3):425-446.