

DATA, *not* DRAMA

ISSUES BRIEF

*A fresh look
at **equity** in
Australian
schools.*



AUGUST 2024

‘Data not drama’: A fresh look at equity in Australian schools

Issues Brief | Catholic Schools NSW | August 2024

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

PART 1

- ▶ **Australia’s High-Equity School System:** Despite prevailing negative discourse, Australia’s school system is highly equitable by global standards, consistently ranking above the OECD average in both excellence and equity.
- ▶ **Immigrant Student Success:** Immigrant students in Australia outperform non-immigrants in PISA scores, both before and after accounting for socio-economic status. Australia leads the OECD on these measures, and also has the third-highest proportion of immigrant students.
- ▶ **NAPLAN Participation Decline:** Declining participation in NAPLAN, particularly among disadvantaged groups, poses a significant challenge to tracking and improving equity in education. This trend threatens the accuracy of data used to monitor equity gaps.
- ▶ **Misleading Theories on Inequity:** Common explanations for educational inequity, such as school funding levels, non-government schools, and ‘segregation’, lack substantial evidence. Data shows no clear link between these factors and equity outcomes in Australia.
- ▶ **Actual Drivers of Inequity:** Among the many evidence-backed causes of inequity, a key driver is declining student attendance, especially among disadvantaged cohorts, which remains below pre-pandemic levels.

PART 2

- ▶ In Australia, it is the largest non-government school provider, Catholic education, that makes significant contributions to positive equity measures. Data from Catholic education shows strong results for low socioeconomic status (SES) students, Indigenous and Language Background Other than English (LBOTE) students.

CONTENTS

Executive Summary.....	2
Introduction	3
PART 1	4
High equity, high excellence	4
Immigration: Australia’s success story in equity	6
Issues in tracking equity	7
‘Red herrings’ in equity.....	8
‘Segregation’	8
Non-government schools.....	9
Funding	9
Falling Student Attendance	10
PART 2	11
NSW Catholic schools’ contribution to equity.....	11
Appendix: Classroom Discipline.....	13
Endnotes	14

INTRODUCTION

Equity is an important goal of Australia’s school system, and too important for its analysis to be reduced to a simplistic ‘doom-and-gloom’ narrative. Taking equity seriously as a goal requires taking a clear-eyed look at the data, a critical analysis of not only areas where Australia falls short in equity, but where it succeeds as well.

If there is no capacity to recognise progress in equity when it has been made, then all efforts to improve equity will be constrained at the outset, with resources deployed inefficiently or spread too thinly, school staff becoming unnecessarily discouraged and their achievements overlooked, and the risk of even effective measures falling casualty to a discourse of despair.

Passion for equity should not preclude acknowledgements of progress where it has been made.

This paper uses recent OECD and Australian datasets to take a brief and fresh look at equity in Australian schools, separating common myths from overlooked realities. It rightly finds that there is a need to improve equity, though Australia remains a high-equity school system, and several purported markers of its inequity are severely lacking in evidence, while several substantiated drivers of inequity await sufficient policy attention.

Lastly, Part 2 reports on the unique contribution of the Australian Catholic School Sector to addressing inequity and expanding educational opportunities for traditional equity groups. As the largest segment of the non-government school sector, it demonstrates the markedly positive contribution Catholic education makes to supporting Australian students.

PART 1

HIGH EQUITY, HIGH EXCELLENCE

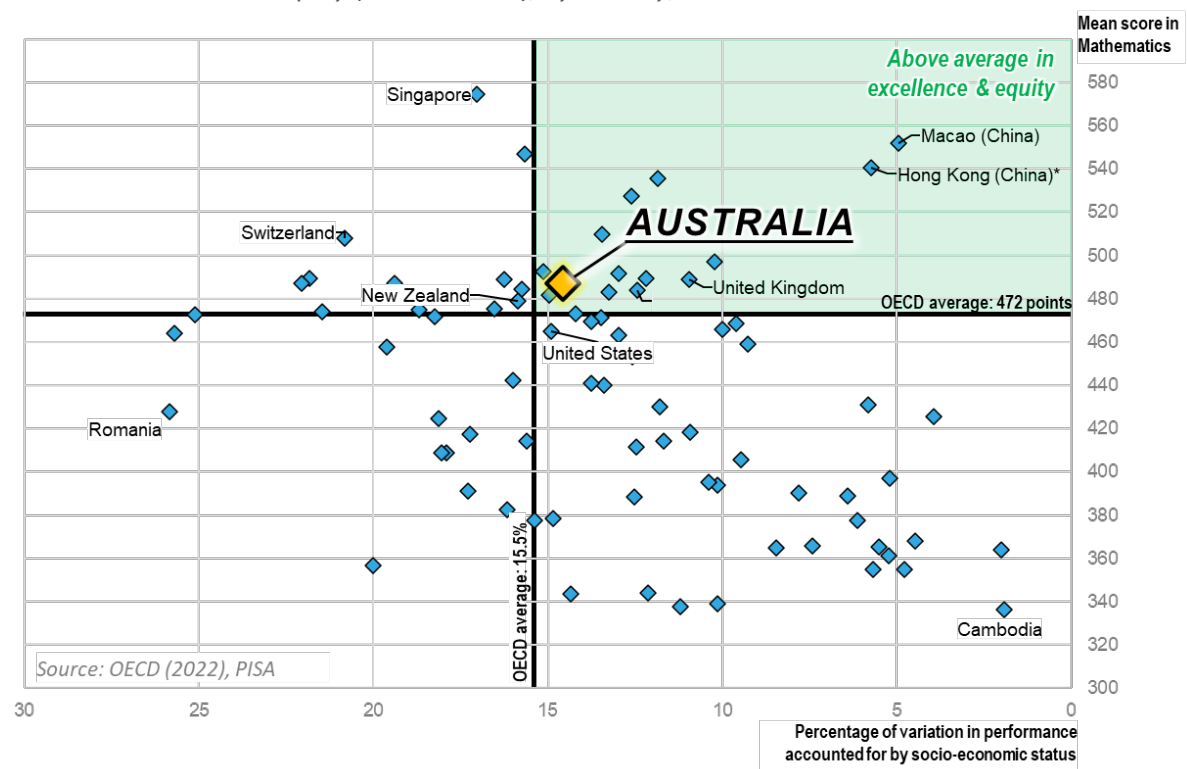
Contrary to public and even some academic discourse, Australia's school system is highly equitable by world standards.

The most common international benchmark for Australia's school system performance is the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's (OECD) Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), a two-hour assessment of 15-year-olds conducted every three years across the 37 OECD member countries and 44 'partner' countries or economies.¹

After each round of PISA assessments, the OECD published a series of charts plotting country performance against two measures: 'excellence' – as measured by *Mathematics, Reading, or Science* scores – and 'equity' – as measured by the percentage of these scores explained by students' socio-economic status (calculated via regression). On both these measures, Australia consistently scores above the OECD average; that is, Australia is among a minority of school systems categorised by the OECD as '*above average in ... performance and socio-economic fairness*',² a rare double bullseye achievement.

Australian schools are above average in equity and excellence.

Mathematics score vs Equity (Mathematics), by country, PISA 2022

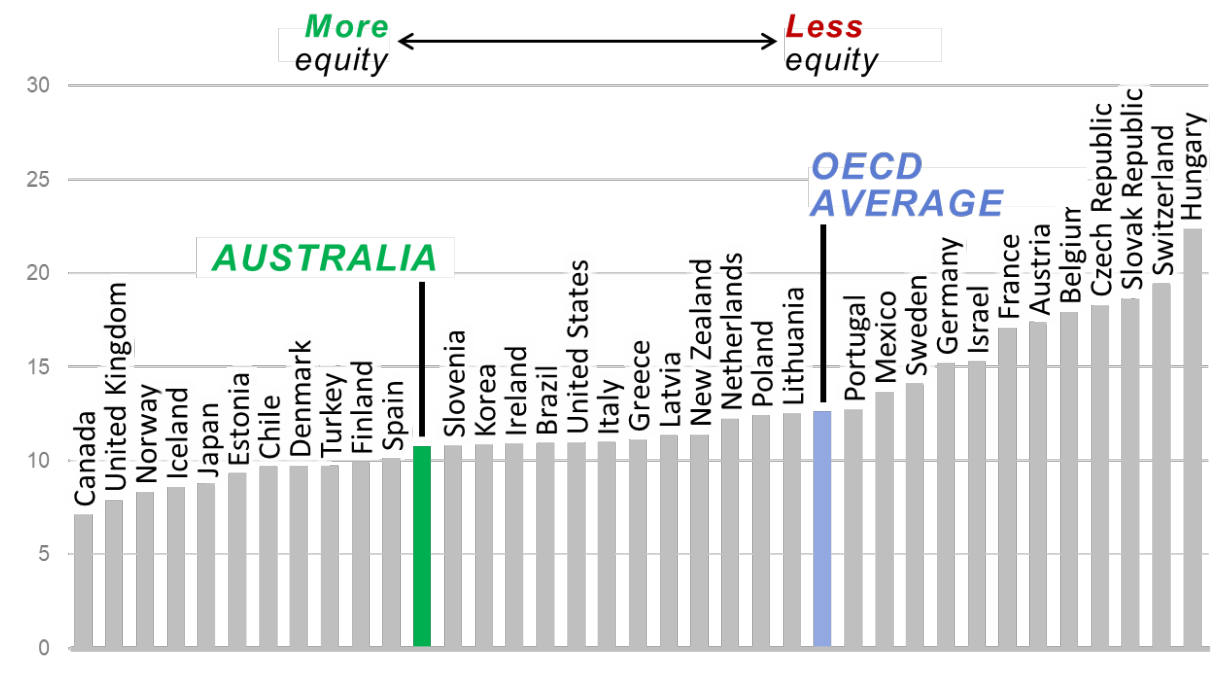


Furthermore, there has been no long-term decline in equity; the OECD notes, '*Between 2012 and 2022, the gap in mathematics performance between the top and the bottom 25% of students in terms of socio-economic status remained stable in Australia.*'³ If this fact sounds incongruous with reports of Australia's long-term decline in PISA performance,⁴ it is because that decline has occurred among *both* advantaged students *and* disadvantaged students; that is, declining grades are an across-the-

board problem, not one localised to low-SES students.⁵ Finally, it should be noted the OECD observes a short-term decline in equity, between the current (2022) and previous (2018) iterations of PISA in *Mathematics* and *Science*. This was most likely due to the pandemic-era school closures, which have been widely acknowledged as regressive in their socio-economic impact.^{6 7 8 9}

Australian schools are above the OECD average in equity.

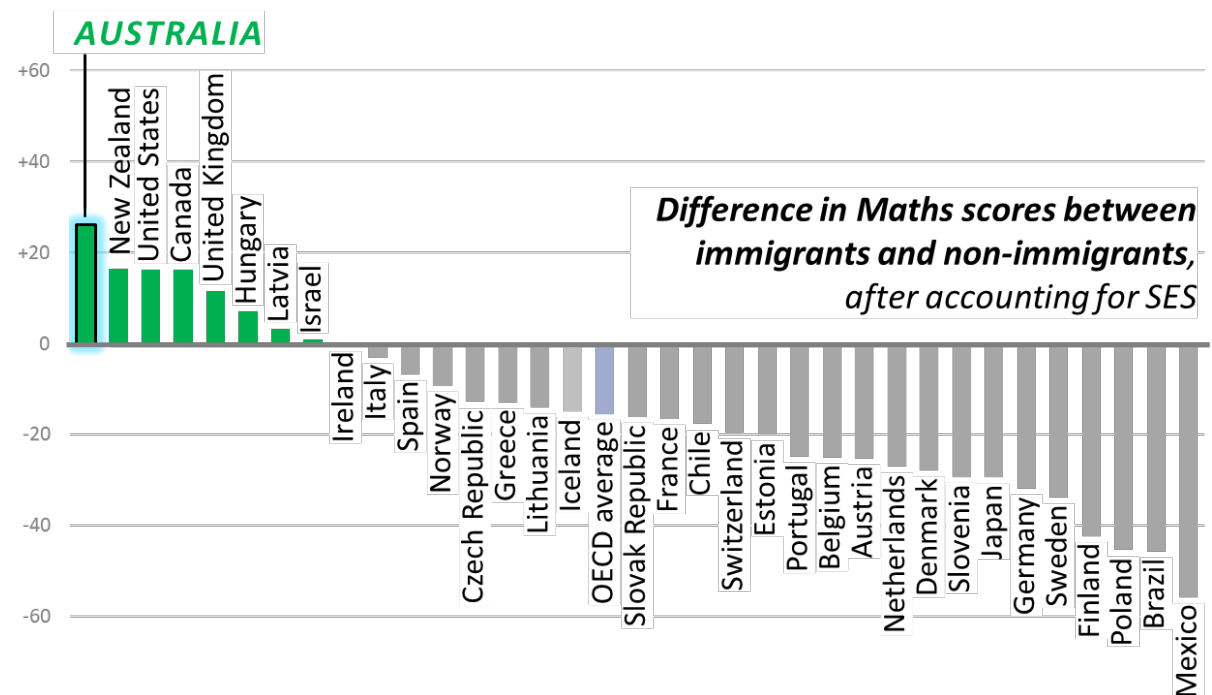
Percentage of variation in Reading scores explained by SES



IMMIGRATION: AUSTRALIA'S SUCCESS STORY IN EQUITY

From an equity perspective, Australia's strongest success story is, without a doubt, the performance of its immigrant school students. Australia's immigrant school students get higher PISA scores than non-immigrants – both before and after accounting for socio-economic status.¹⁰ Across OECD countries, Australia is the leader among only a handful of school systems where immigrants outscore non-immigrants.

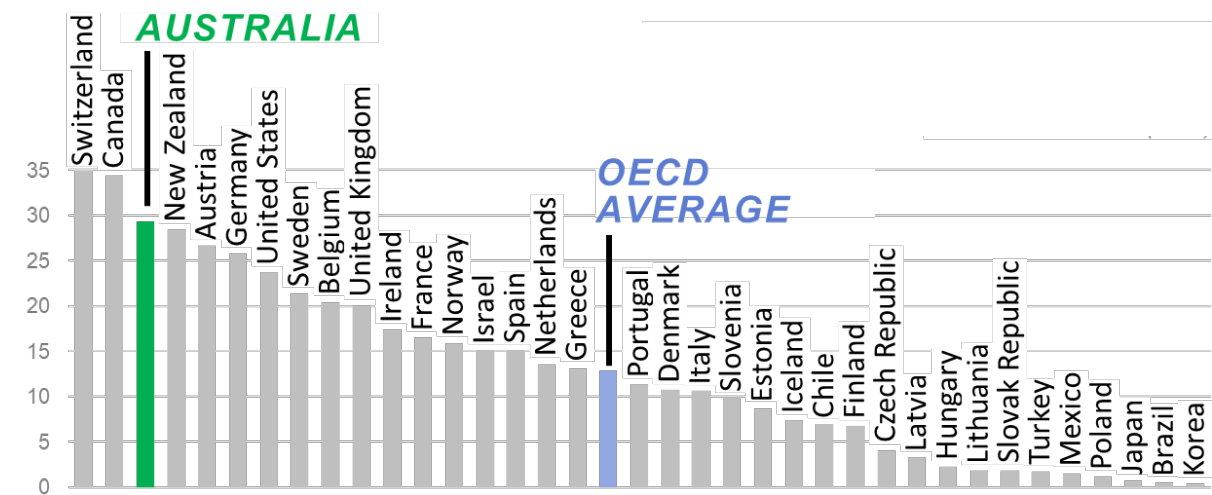
Australia has the most successful multicultural schools in the OECD.



The achievement is even more impressive when coupled with the high share of immigrants within Australian schools; among OECD countries, Australia has the 3rd highest share of immigrant school students (29%).

Australia has the 3rd-highest share of immigrant students in the OECD.

Percentage of school students that are 1st or 2nd generation immigrants



ISSUES IN TRACKING EQUITY

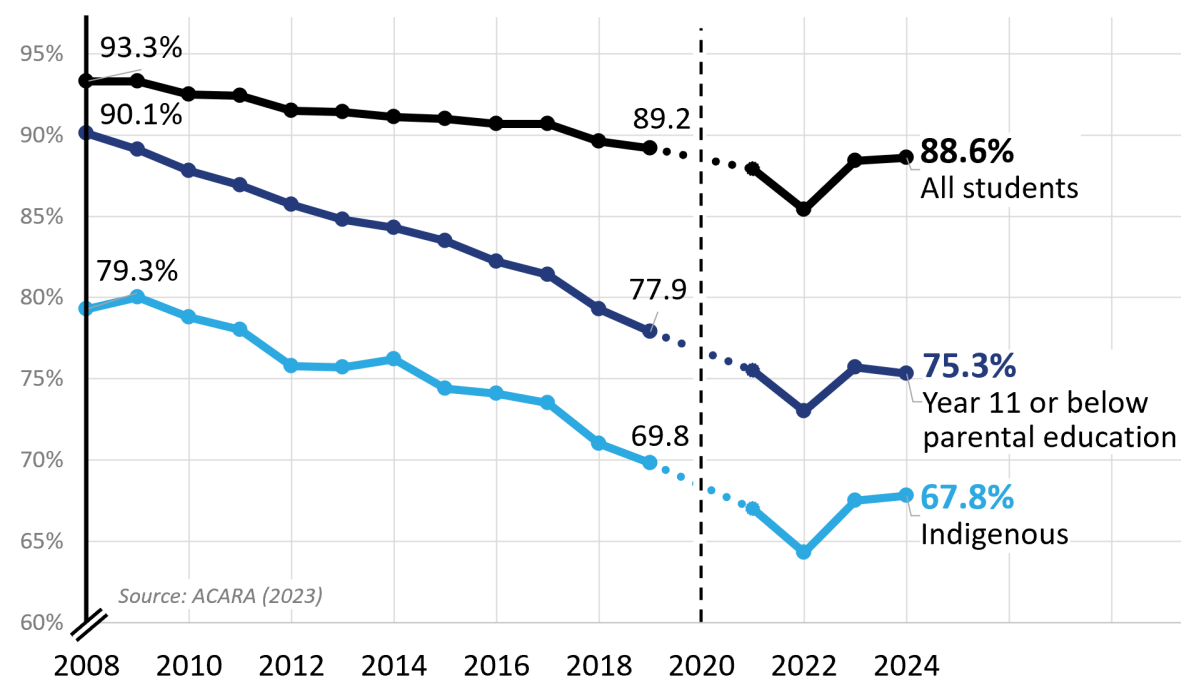
Opportunities to improve equity in Australian schools are put at risk when the chief measure of tracking equity becomes more compromised with each year.

Equity in Australian schools is tracked in a range of ways. While PISA offers a valuable triannual benchmark of the system as a whole, NAPLAN offers a more frequent (annual) and more granular (school - and student-level) gauge of learning progress, especially for students from disadvantaged backgrounds. Similar to PISA, NAPLAN results show poorer learning outcomes on average for different equity groups.¹¹

Therefore, it is highly concerning that participation in NAPLAN has been steadily declining, is below pre-pandemic levels, and is much lower than average for disadvantaged cohorts¹² – precisely those students whose progress it is most important to measure. Attacks on NAPLAN can lead to further equity risks.

NAPLAN participation is falling faster for disadvantaged cohorts.

NAPLAN Participation, Year 9 Numeracy



The Australian Education Research Organisation (AERO) ‘sounded the alarm’ on this trend in early 2023, noting:¹³

Participation rates among students from priority equity groups are much lower, and declining faster, than average. This poses a significant challenge for measuring and monitoring the equity gaps in Australian education systems.

Various causal factors have been posited for the decline, including Covid-19,¹⁴ teacher’s union boycotts,¹⁵ and even non-government schools ‘gaming the system’.¹⁶

While recent proposals for new ‘early screening’ measures (Year 1 numeracy checks) are welcome,¹⁷ a first step for policymakers should be stabilising the coverage of existing screening measures, such as NAPLAN.

‘RED HERRINGS’ IN EQUITY

In trying to identify drivers of inequity in Australian schools, public and some academic discourse frequently resorts to a series of ‘red herrings’ - theories with little to no evidence behind them - to explain learning disparities among disadvantaged students.

OECD data highlights the lack of evidence behind three ‘red herrings’ in particular: ‘segregation’, non-government schools, and funding.

‘SEGREGATION’

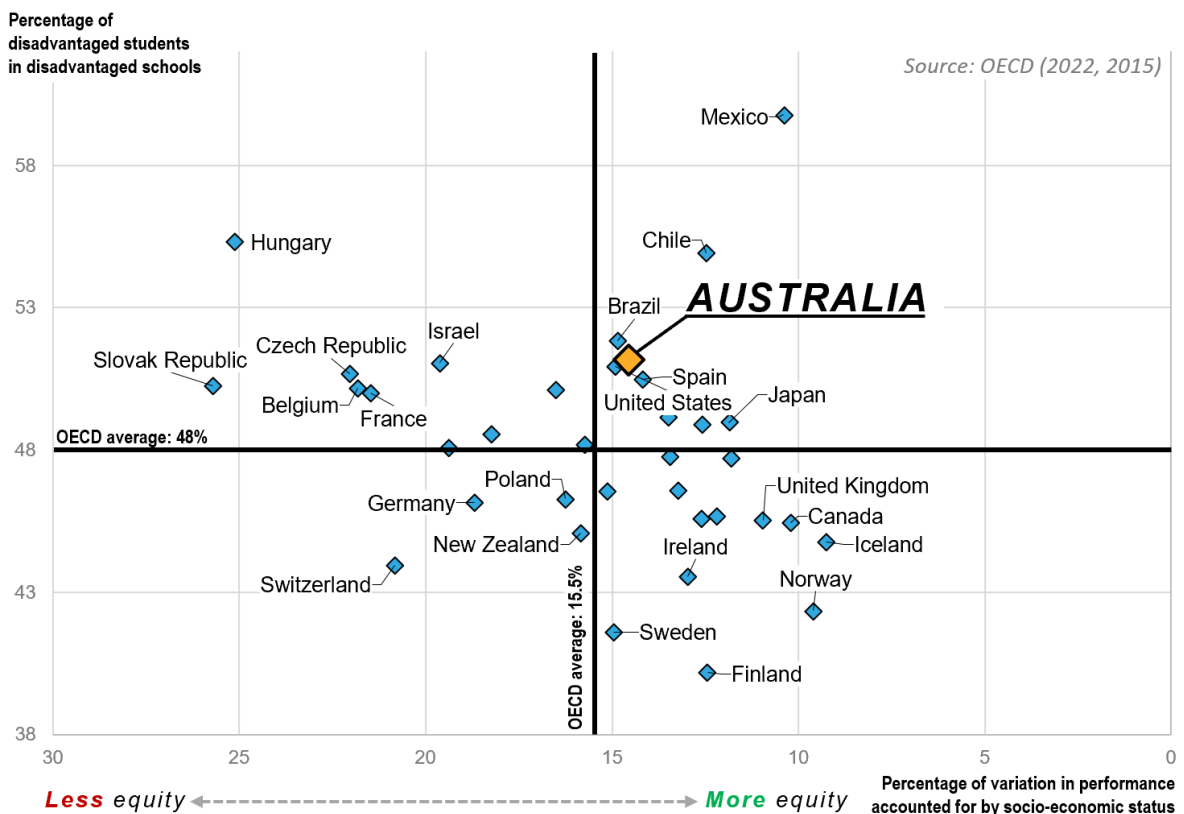
Some commentators have suggested that ‘segregation’ is a chief cause of inequity in Australian schools.^{18 19} Typically, such commentaries refer to an OECD analysis of 2015 PISA data,²⁰ that defined such ‘segregation’ as schools where a majority of students come from the lowest socio-economic quartile. This analysis showed Australia above the OECD average on such ‘segregation’.

Yet a glance at the data clearly shows there is little to no association between ‘segregation’ and equity across OECD countries, and while Australia may be above-average in ‘segregation’, it remains above-average in equity.^{21 22} Additionally, while such concentrations of disadvantaged students in Australia have increased over time,²³ there has been no concurrent decrease in equity,²⁴ further demonstrating the lack of an association between the two in Australian schools.

Finally, the ‘segregation’ measure itself is more linked to socio-economic differences between geographies than between school sectors,²⁵ making the metric less relevant to available education policy responses. Claims of segregation effects do not withstand basic interrogation.

There is little to no relation between equity and ‘segregation’.

‘Segregation’ vs Equity (Mathematics), by country, PISA 2022

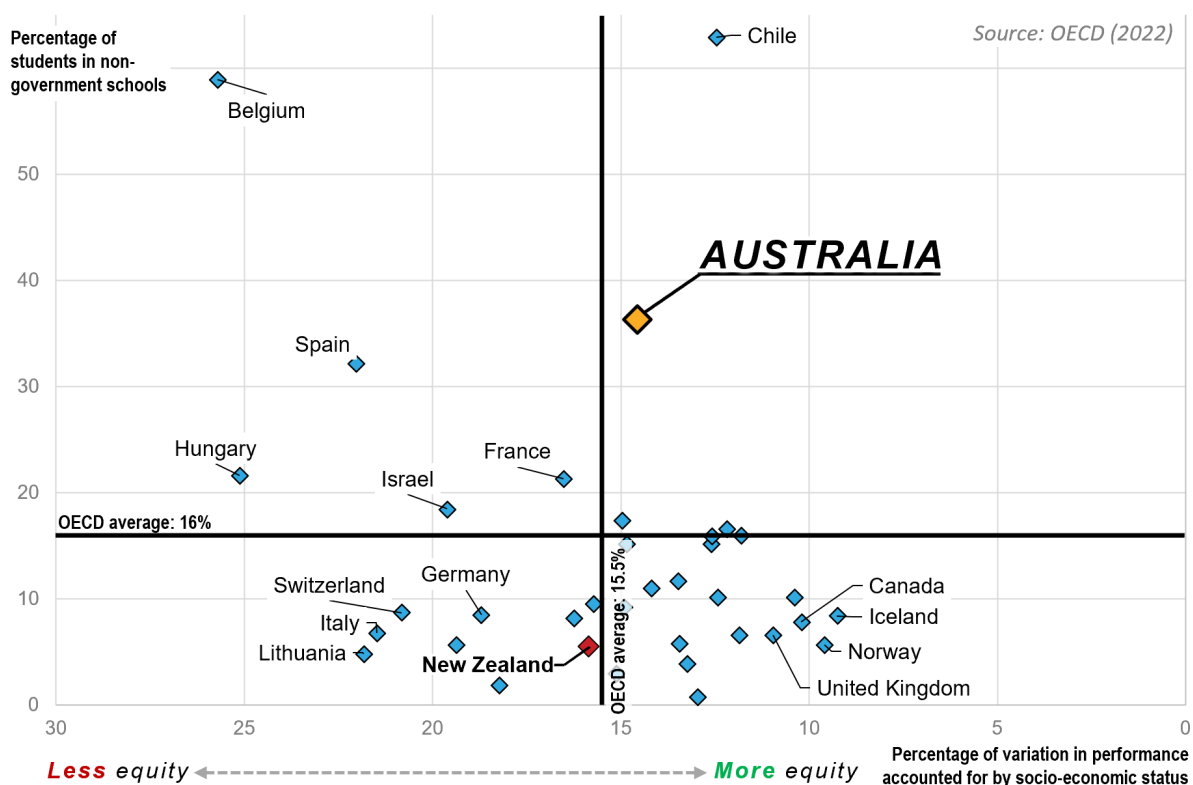


NON-GOVERNMENT SCHOOLS

There is no association between equity and the share of students attending non-government schools, as seen by plotting the two measures across OECD countries. Australia (36%) has more than double the share of non-government school students than the OECD average (16%) yet is above average in equity.^{26 27} Conversely, New Zealand has fewer than 6% of its students attending non-government schools yet is below average in equity.

There is no relation between equity and non-government schools.

Non-Government Schools Enrolments vs Equity (Mathematics), by country, PISA 2022



FUNDING

As the OECD has explained in their country note on Australia,²⁸ for rich countries already investing heavily in education, there is little evidence that additional funding improves student performance:

Expenditure on education is related to student performance **only to a certain extent**. ... **this was not the case** among countries/economies whose cumulative expenditure was greater than USD 75 000 (PPP). For this latter group of countries/economies, **the ways in which financial resources are used seems to matter more for student performance than the level of investment in education**. In Australia, the cumulative expenditure per student ... was equivalent to about USD 126,000 (PPP).

This aligns with Australian analyses that show a lack of association between funding increases and school performance,²⁹ and the numerous examples of expensive programs that failed to deliver intended results, most recently the small-group tutoring programs from the NSW Government (\$250 million)^{30 31} and the Victorian Government (\$1.2 billion).³² While all Australian schools should be funded to the level of their need, it is important for advocates to identify a sound basis for the proposition.

FALLING STUDENT ATTENDANCE

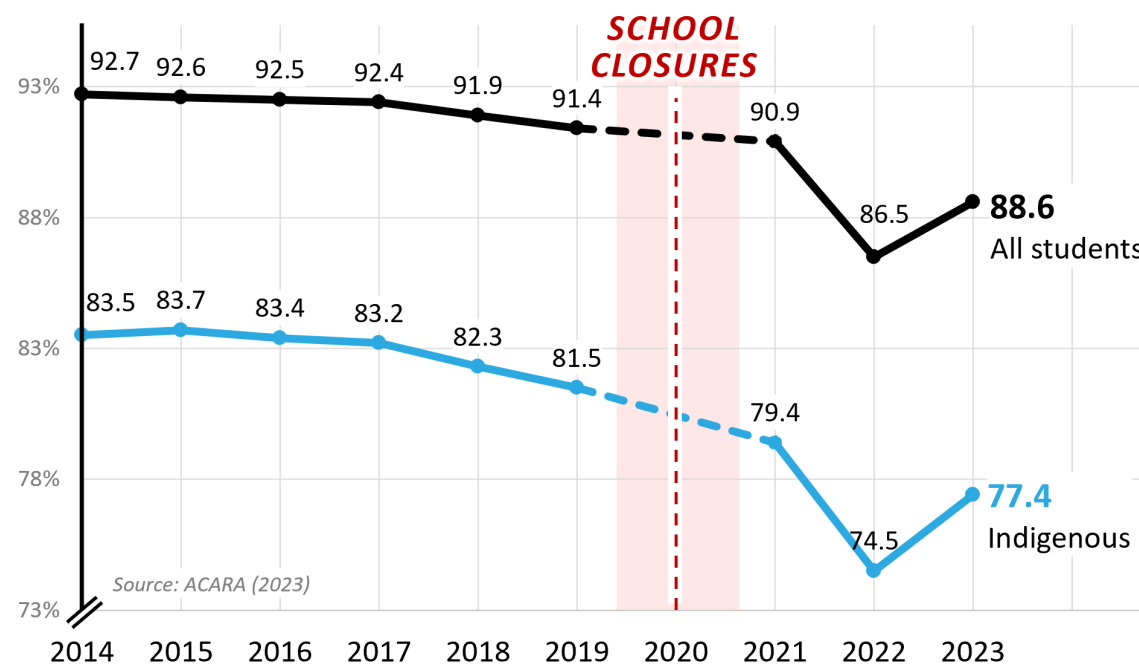
Without the distraction of such ‘red herrings’, more plausible drivers of inequity can come into focus; in particular, there is strong evidence that low student attendance contributes to inequities.

Even before the onset of the pandemic, student attendance rates were in long-term decline,³³ and despite an improvement on 2022, attendance rates have not yet returned to pre-pandemic levels. Critically, attendance remains lower for equity cohorts than for other students; for example, attendance was 88.6% for all students, but only 82.1% for low-SES students and 77.4% for Indigenous students. Such low and falling attendance threatens the effectiveness of most policy interventions targeting equity cohorts.

Nothing imperils learning outcomes like absenteeism.

Attendance has not yet recovered from pandemic school closures.

Attendance Rate, Year 1-10



PART 2

NSW CATHOLIC SCHOOLS' CONTRIBUTION TO EQUITY

Catholic Schools across Australia, and in NSW in particular, make a significant contribution to equity, both in enrolment and learning outcomes for equity cohorts.

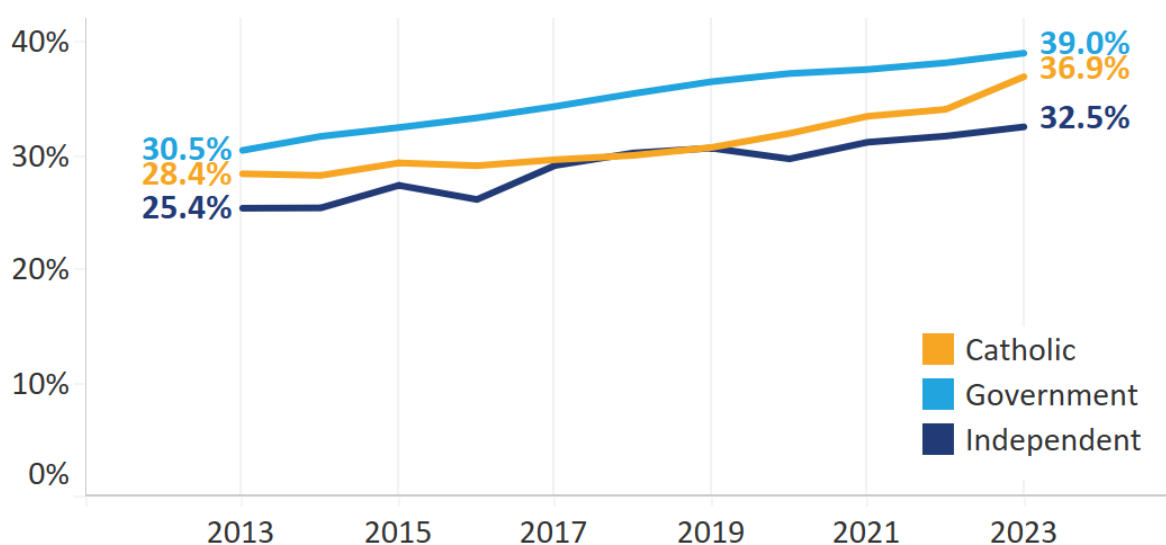
In NSW, systemic Catholic schools now enrol more low-SES* students than at any time since 2013, both in total numbers (35,636) and in share of enrolments (15.7%).³⁴

Similarly, Indigenous enrolments in the sector have steadily risen to a high of 4.3%, or 9,760 Indigenous students. Systemic Catholic schools remain the primary alternative to Government schools for Indigenous students located in remote areas.³⁵

Finally, the sector's enrolments of students from a language background other than English (LBOTE) has risen to a high of 37%, approaching that of the Government sector (39%).

NSW Catholic schools' enrolments of students with a non-English language background has risen to near that of the government sector.

Language Background Other than English (LBOTE) students as % of cohort, NSW Schools by Sector 2013-23



Importantly, the priority placed on equity extends to outcomes, especially school attendance. While students from disadvantaged backgrounds typically exhibit lower attendance rates than other students, such 'attendance gaps' are substantially smaller within NSW Catholic schools.

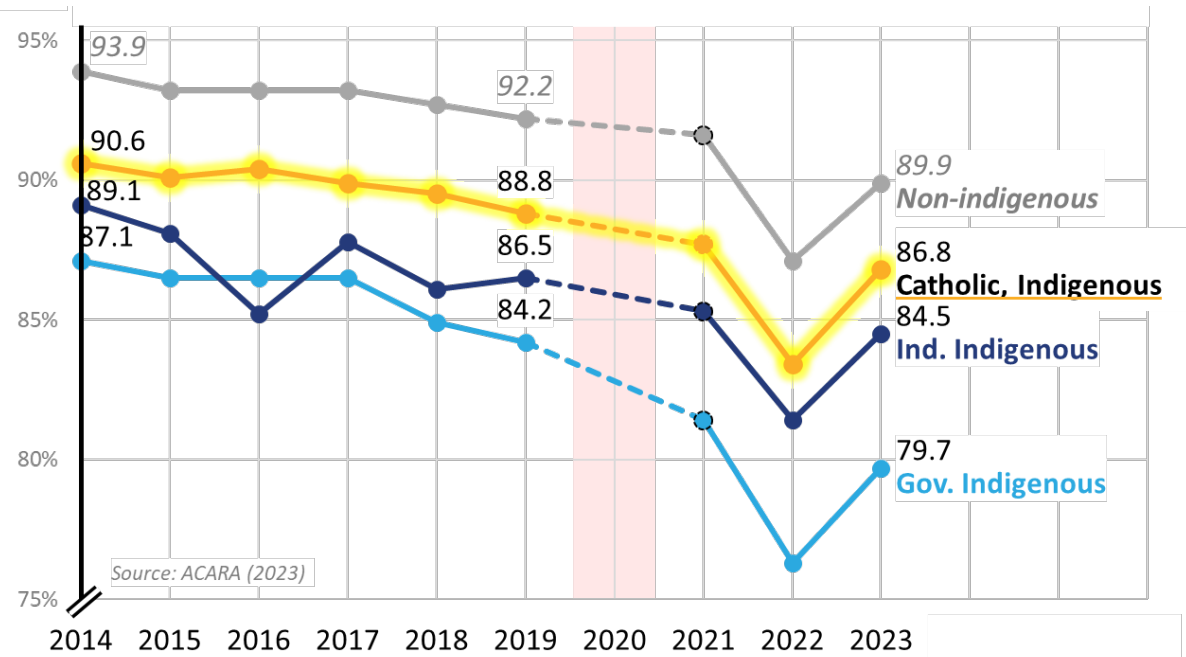
NSW systemic Catholic schools have the highest Indigenous attendance rates of the three sectors, and the lowest 'gap' in attendance between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students. Similarly, for low-SES students, NSW systemic Catholic schools have the highest attendance rates of the three sectors.

However, it remains the case that all sectors have seen their attendance rates decline in recent years, with the falls extending to students from equity cohorts.

* Note in this context, 'low-SES' refers to students from the bottom ICSEA quartile, as calculated by ACARA.

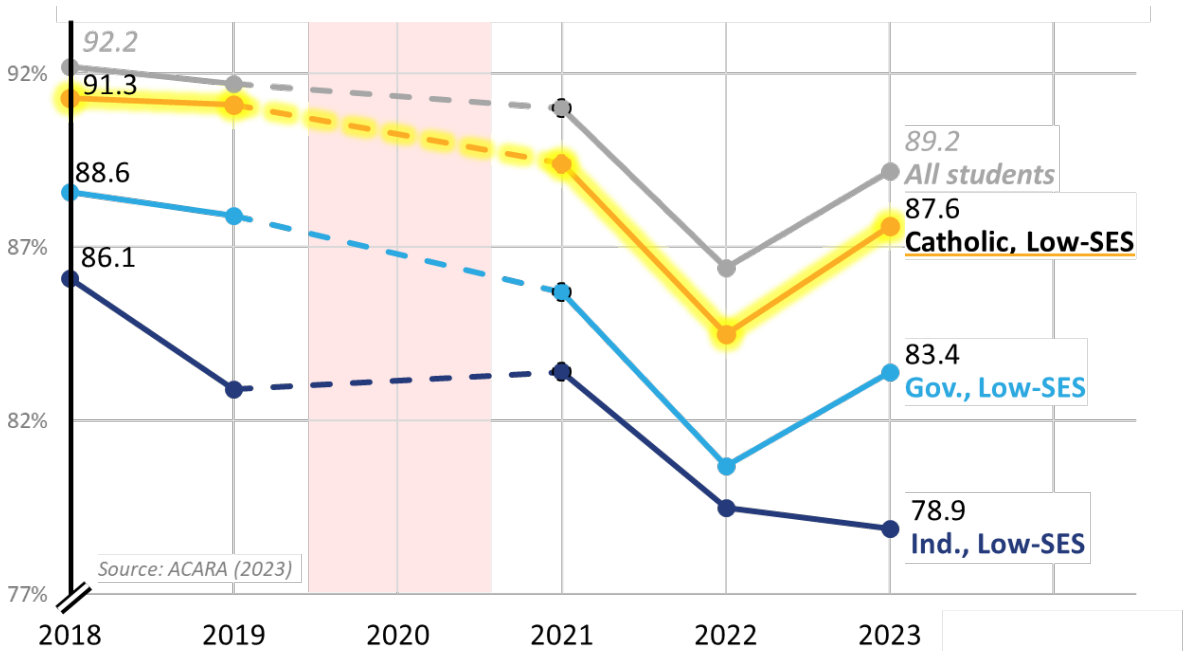
NSW Catholic Schools have the highest Indigenous attendance rate.

NSW Indigenous Attendance Rates, by Sector, Year 1-10



For low-SES students, NSW Catholic Schools have the highest attendance rates.

NSW Attendance Rate for Low-SES Students, by Sector, Year 1-10



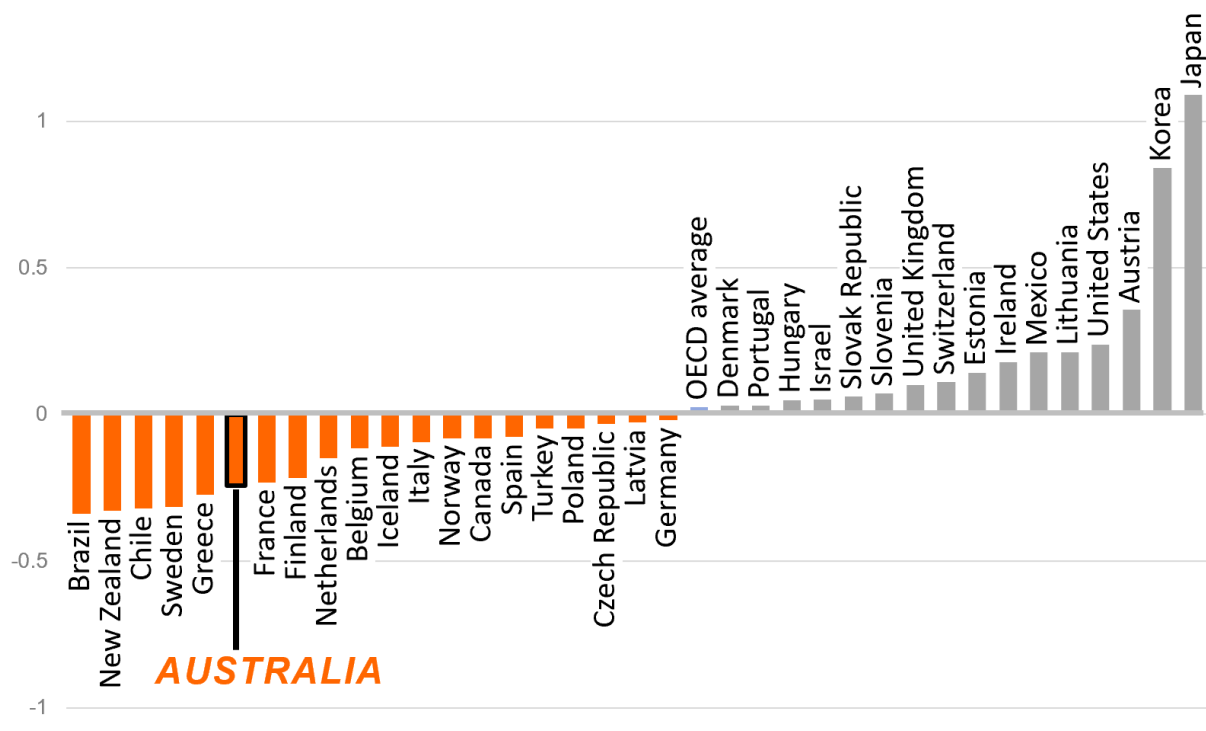
APPENDIX: CLASSROOM DISCIPLINE

An additional driver of inequity is classroom discipline. Australia is far below the OECD average when it comes to student-reported disruption in their classrooms.³⁶ As the OECD note:

...about 25% of students in Australia reported that they cannot work well in most or all lessons (OECD average: 23%); 33% of students do not listen to what the teacher says (OECD average: 30%); 40% of students get distracted using digital devices (OECD average: 30%); and 37% get distracted by other students who are using digital devices (OECD average: 25%).

Australia has highly disrupted classrooms by world standards.

Index Disciplinary Climate (OECD, 2022)



The issue has been steadily gaining policy and research attention, including a Senate Parliamentary Inquiry's report released in February 2024,³⁷ and AERO publishing a series of resources for teachers on classroom management in the same month.³⁸

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