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What do Australians really think about religious school LGBT discrimination?

Attitudes amongst the public, teachers, students, parents and school sectors

Neil Francis, Dr Jacqueline Hendriks & Professor Sharyn Burns

FIRST NATIONS ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

We acknowledge the traditional custodians of the land on which we come together to conduct our research, Whadjuk Noongar country, and recognise that these lands were never ceded. We honour and pay respect to all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander elders past and present.

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CRICOS Provider Code 00301J

TEQSA PRV12158

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Suggested citation

Francis, N, Hendriks, J and Burns, S, 2024, What do Australians really think about religious school LGBT discrimination? Attitudes amongst the public, teachers, students, parents and school sectors, Curtin University, Perth WA, 70 pp.

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A note about terminology

This report refers collectively to lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people as the “LGBT” community. This is because the primary research study of this report asked questions specifically relating to LGBT people. We nevertheless acknowledge the wider LGBTQIA+ community.

Highlights

Religious school commentators claim that stakeholder attitudes underwrite a social license to discriminate against lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) people.

“[Our own] polling supports discrimination protections.”

Christian Schools Australia¹

The poll methodology has been called into question, and the methodology not published despite requests.

Independent research shows overwhelming **support** for
LGBT **inclusivity** (not discrimination):

Australian public: 73% to 82%

Public school teachers: 86%

Private school teachers: 78%

Public school students: 81%

Catholic school students: 89%

Independent school students: 81%

Just 12% of parents say they choose a religious school specifically for its religious affiliation.

Half (50%) of parents at independent faith schools
and more than half (53%) at Catholic schools say
religion is of little to no importance in their everyday life.

Across religion, religiosity and school sector spectrums, most parents comprehensively **support LGBT inclusivity** (not discrimination):

Non-religious parents:	92%
Catholic parents:	82%
Anglican parents:	89%
Minor Christian denomination parents:	74%
Other religion parents:	82%
Not-very religious parents:	88%
Somewhat religious parents:	84%
Very religious parents:	74%
Secular-only-school parents:	88%
Catholic-school parents:	88%
Independent-faith-school parents:	79%
<i>Very</i> religious parents at <i>religious</i> schools:	64%

Even amongst *very* religious parents, only around one-quarter (26%) expressly oppose LGBT inclusivity. Religious devotion is not synonymous with anti-LGBT attitudes.

Political orientation is important in explaining discrimination attitudes.

Australian parents overwhelmingly choose religious schools for their perceived better facilities, teachers and academic standards, student care and attention to discipline.

The contention that most or even a majority of religious school stakeholders — even *very* religious parents — endorse LGBT discrimination is comprehensively rejected.

Executive Summary

Over recent years in Australia, governments and institutions have grappled with balancing the rights and freedoms of religious and lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) citizens. Although the two don't *necessarily* come into conflict, the Australian Christian Right in particular has framed the debate by positioning itself as a besieged minority now in need of more substantial protection.

Much of the debate has centred on the right of religious schools to discriminate against LGBT students and staff, although some schools have expressly stated that they don't want to discriminate against students. Conservative religious spokespeople have frequently staked the claim that religious schools must have this right in order to honour the religious beliefs and values of their schools' parents to protect their "religious sensibilities".

Robust evidence for this claim has been missing to date.

Employing findings from multiple Australian studies, this report examines Australians' religious and political orientations; public, teacher and student attitudes toward school discrimination, and intrinsic parental attitudes toward LGBT inclusivity.

Major findings from robust and reliable studies include:

- Most of the Australian **public** (73% to 82%) oppose various forms of discrimination against LGBT people.
- Almost all Australian **teachers** (94% to 98%) believe that LGBT students should be accepted and well accommodated, and oppose discrimination against LGBT staff. Most government school teachers (86%) and private school teachers (78%) believe same-sex couples should have the same rights as heterosexual ones.
- Like teachers, most Australian **students** believe same-sex couples should have the same rights, from 81% at both government and independent faith schools, to 89% at Catholic schools.
- More than half (53%) of **parents** at Catholic schools, and half (50%) of parents at independent faith schools, say that religion is of little to no personal importance to their daily life.
- Significant majorities of **parents** with a child currently enrolled in school expressly support LGBT inclusivity:
 - Across the **religious denomination** spectrum — 74% of minor Christian denominations, 82% of Catholics, 82% of Other religionists, 89% of Anglicans, and 92% of non-religious parents.
 - Across the **religiosity** spectrum — 74% of the very religious, 84% of somewhat religious, 88% of not-very religious, and 92% of not-at-all religious parents.

- Across all **school sectors** — 79% of independent faith school parents, 88% of Catholic school parents, and 88% of secular-only school parents.
- Highly religious **Catholic** parents are no more likely than less religious Catholics to send their child/ren to a Catholic school, and at least as likely to support LGBT inclusivity.
- **Very religious** parents with child/ren in religious schools are no more likely than very religious parents at secular-only schools to support or oppose some LGBT inclusivity principles, but slightly more likely to oppose others. Differences were very small, however, at just 7% or less of parents.
- **Political** orientation explains more of the variance in attitudes toward LGBT people than does religion alone. Coalition voters are slightly less likely, and Other (micro-parties and independent) voters significantly less likely, to support LGBT inclusivity. However, even amongst the most negative group, highly religious Other voters, support exceeded one-third of parents (37%). Undecided voters are more likely than Coalition or Other voters to support LGBT inclusivity.
- Australian **parents** overwhelmingly choose religious schools for their perceived better facilities, teachers, and academic standards, greater care (including smaller class sizes), and discipline.
- Just 12% of **parents** say they choose a religious school specifically because of the school's religious affiliation. "Faith" and "values" reasons (though undefined) are well down the list of priorities for religious school selection, from priority number seven to number eighteen.

At least one religious school organisation was found to claim from its own study that most of its parents desired to discriminate. We identified major concerns with the study design. The organisation declined multiple requests to publish its study methodology in full.

The contention that most or all parents at Australian religious schools seek to discriminate against LGBT people is found to be robustly false. *A social license for such discrimination does not exist.* Most religious and religious-school parents clearly support LGBT inclusivity. While a very small cohort of parents undoubtedly choose a religious school for the purpose of LGBT discrimination, most parents choose religious schools for other reasons such as perceived school facility quality, teaching quality, and attention to discipline.

Introduction



A contest of religious and LGBT rights and freedoms

In recent years the tension between religious and other — notably LGBT — rights and freedoms has been the subject of increased Australian public debate and scrutiny.

Despite greater suicidality among Australia’s LGBT population being well known,^{2,3} by late 2016, an LGBT inclusivity program operated by Safe Schools Coalition Australia had largely collapsed under conservative religious pressure.⁴

In 2017, a national postal survey asked Australians for their views on extending marriage rights to non-heterosexual couples — “marriage equality”. The majority *Yes* result led to marriage equality becoming law late that year, despite intense opposition by conservative religious groups. The survey caused great distress and elevated levels of suicidality amongst the LGBT community,^{5,6} as well distress amongst their families.⁷

The Coalition federal government of the day then commissioned a formal investigation into religious discrimination — the “Ruddock” inquiry — which delivered its findings in 2018.

This led to the federal government introducing a religious discrimination bill into the parliament in 2019. The bill’s overarching intent was to shore up religious rights to discriminate. The bill was described as “deeply unbalanced”,⁸ and likely to cause almost irreparable damage to Australian society, entrenching the fallacy that LGBT people are incompatible with religious freedom.⁹

In 2021 the government abandoned the legislation after some of its own members publicly threatened to vote against the bill.

Leading up to the 2022 federal election, major political parties put forward religious freedoms-and-rights policies. The Labor party won office with a policy to legislate against such discrimination. The new government asked the Australian Law Reform Commission (ALRC) to investigate and report on legislative options, which it did during 2022–23. The final report was handed to the government in early 2024 and the government prepared a draft bill.

Throughout this extended period, the Australian Christian Right had “reframed the discourse of religious freedom by positioning itself as a besieged minority” now in need of more muscular protection.¹⁰

In July 2024, the Labor government shelved its legislative reform, citing the failure of the Coalition opposition to offer constructive bipartisan support.

Contention regarding religious schools

Much of the public debate has focused on the right or otherwise of Australia's religious primary and secondary schools to discriminate against LGBT staff and students.

Many religious schools insist that they don't wish to discriminate against *students*.^(e.g. 11) It's unclear, though, that if discrimination is bad for children, at what age it becomes acceptable for adults.

In relation to LGBT *staff*, religious schools frame their argument in terms of rights to "religious freedom" and to accord respect for "religious sensibilities".

Nevertheless, it is well established that many religious schools do in practice discriminate against both LGBT students and staff, often with devastating effects.^{12,13} Around 12% of high-school-age Australians identify as sexual-orientation diverse, and 3% as gender diverse.¹⁴

Doubts about religious school survey

Religious schools sometimes claim that polling of their own parents "supports discrimination protections",¹ arguing that "traditional" values against LGBT people are important to their school's parents, for example:

When asked what practices should be most important at a Christian school, 74% of parents indicated teaching of traditional Christian values and beliefs are of significant importance to them. — Christian Schools Australia¹⁵

However, these surveys can be unreliable because "traditional Christian values and beliefs" are not defined in the survey question. It is unknown whether parents interpret "tradition" to mean teaching that Jesus died on the cross, attending church on Sundays, kindness and generosity towards others, or disapproval of non-heterosexual and non-marital sexuality.

They can also be unreliable because the very religious, rather than a balanced sample of parents, may self-select to participate in the survey and to answer all its questions.

We twice asked Christian Schools Australia to publish the full methodology of their study. The requests were declined.

Christian Schools Australia¹⁶ continues to publicise that their member schools' code of conduct:

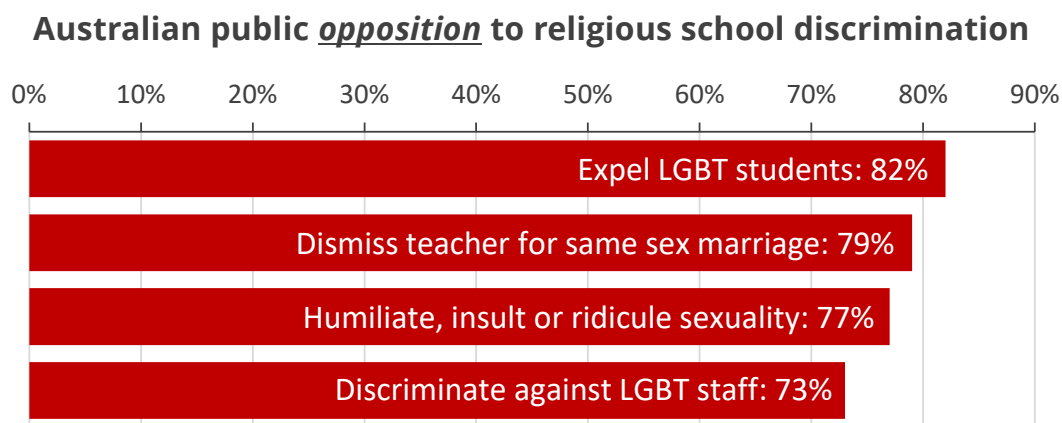
"...reflect[s] their faith beliefs and often include Christian teachings around sexuality and marriage, which are a core part of their faith. Those core beliefs cannot be separated from our Christian faith and parents are choosing our schools for these values."

Public attitudes toward religious school discrimination

National polls make clear the public’s views about religious school discrimination.

Most (82%) of the Australian public are opposed to religious schools having the right to expel LGBT students, and 79% oppose dismissing teachers for marrying a person of the same sex.¹⁷

In addition, most (77%) oppose ‘belief statements’ that humiliate, insult or ridicule in relation to protected attributes, including sexuality,¹⁸ and 73% oppose religious school discrimination against LGBT staff.¹⁹



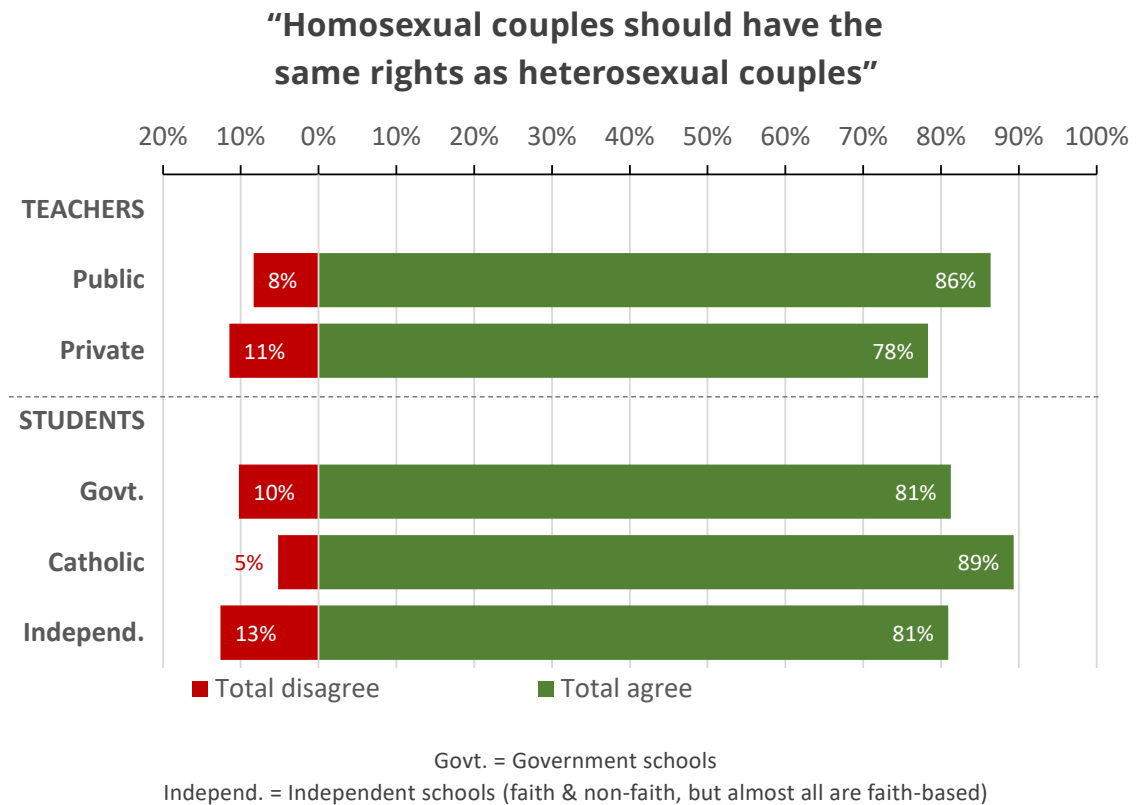
Sources appear in the main text.

Summary: Most of the Australian public (73% to 82%) opposes religious school discrimination against LGBT staff and students.

School teacher and student attitudes

Amongst Australian school teachers there is near universal support for the admission of same sex attracted and transgender students (both 98%), treating them the same as other students (i.e. addressing by preferred name, allowing the use of toilets/changing rooms that match who they feel they are—99%, 94%), and opposing discrimination against same sex attracted and transgender staff (98%, 97%).²⁰

Across school sectors, a great majority of both teachers and students say that homosexual couples should have the same rights as heterosexual couples do.*²¹



Summary: Most teachers and students at both religious and government schools hold supportive attitudes toward LGBT people.

* Summary published in author’s article; more detailed breakdown supplied privately.

Purported social license for religious school discrimination

Many conservative religious spokespeople who shape, communicate and defend policies for religious school rights to discriminate against LGBT people, make similar statements.

For example, in a submission to the ALRC's inquiry, Parkinson²² said that:

"A lot of parents from cultures with conservative views on sex and family life worry enormously about state schools because the school's values conflict with their own. Actually, a lot of parents, religious or not, worry about what is being taught and practiced in state schools. That is why they choose faith-based schools."

Catholic School Parents Australia²³ submitted to the ALRC that:

"Parents are first and foremost, the primary educators of their children and, as such, parents' rights to have their children and young people taught in a school according to their values and beliefs is fundamental."

Similarly, Iselin¹⁵ for Christian Schools Australia (CSA), says that:

"The primary reason why families are choosing Christian schools was related to the explicit Christian values that were being taught and promoted within the school community with 54% of parents selecting 'values that align with my own' as the primary factor in choosing a Christian school."

And the Executive Director of National Catholic Education, Collins²⁴ states:

"Governments, federal and state, should respect and protect the religious freedom of families who choose to send their children to a school where they will be taught in accordance with their beliefs and values."

That is, religious spokespeople base their case on purported parental religious beliefs as underwriting the demand and social license for policies that might restrict LGBT freedoms.

Summary: Religious school arguments for the social license to discriminate against LGBT people are based on a purported school parent demand for it.

[†] Note that almost half of the CSA parents (46%) did *not* choose self-aligned 'values' as primary to school choice. Nor was the specific nature of 'values' specified.

Parental attitudes toward LGBT inclusiveness

This policy report adds significant new knowledge to inform the debate about religious school discrimination against LGBT students and staff. It directly assesses the attitudes of Australian schoolchild *parents* toward LGBT discrimination.

Critically, it tests the fundamental claim that most parents at religious schools hold an underlying desire to discriminate.

Major national survey of parents

The findings are based on a survey of Australian parents of school-age children, conducted through Curtin University in 2021, amid the national religious discrimination debate.

Total final sample size was $N = 2,418$ parents.

Parents were asked for their religious affiliation (aggregated into None, Catholic, Anglican, Other Christian, and Other (Non-Christian)), the personal importance of religion (not at all, not very, somewhat, very), and which school sector/s their children were enrolled in.

Schools were classified into three sectors: Secular (government and private non-faith), Catholic, and Independent faith based schools.

To test underlying attitudes toward LGBT people, parents answered four statements of principle about teaching sexuality education in schools: inclusivity regardless of gender identity, inclusivity regardless of sexual orientation, reducing homophobia, and inclusivity regarding gender diversity and in reducing transphobia. Parents who supported teaching the principles would intrinsically wish *not* to discriminate.

More details about the study appear in the Appendix.

What's new: A major new analysis of attitudes amongst Australia's schoolchild *parents* reveals whether or not they have an intrinsic desire to discriminate against LGBT people.

Religion of parents by school sector

Non-exclusive religious schools readily acknowledge that many of their students' families do not share the school's religion, for example:

"Nearly 40% of all parents who have enrolled their children at Christian schools do not attend any church or religious services ... Christian schools have both persons of faith and no apparent faith commitment."

— Iselin¹⁵ for Christian Schools Australia

"Catholic schools aren't just about teaching the faith. We also exist to serve the common good by delivering quality education to people of faith and to people of none."

— Collins²⁴ for the National Catholic Education Commission

At government schools, over half of parents (52%) have no religious affiliation, with the remainder spread amongst Catholic (14%), Anglican (10%), other Christian (14%) and other non-Christian (10%).

Nearly half of parents at Catholic schools (46%) are not Catholic, and more than one-fifth (22%) have no religion.

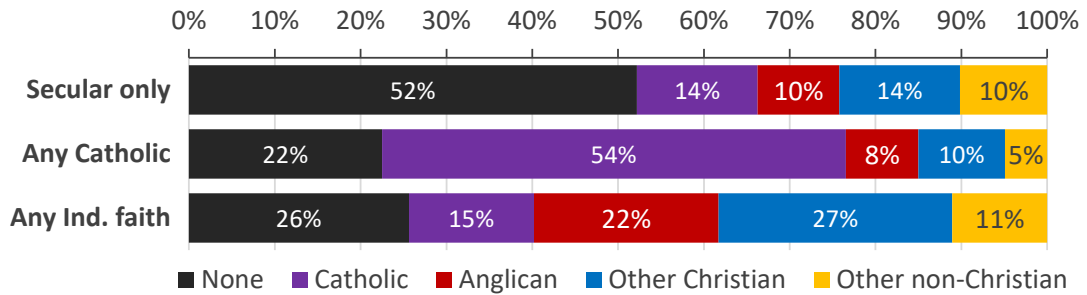
Amongst independent faith schools, a quarter of parents (26%) have no religion, slightly more (27%) are of minor Christian denominations, and smaller proportions are Anglican (22%), Catholic (15%) or other non-Christian (11%).

Parents with no religion, as well as non-Christian religionists, are far more likely to send their children to secular schools (79% and 72% respectively) than are Catholic (39%), Anglican (56%) or other Christian (60%) parents.

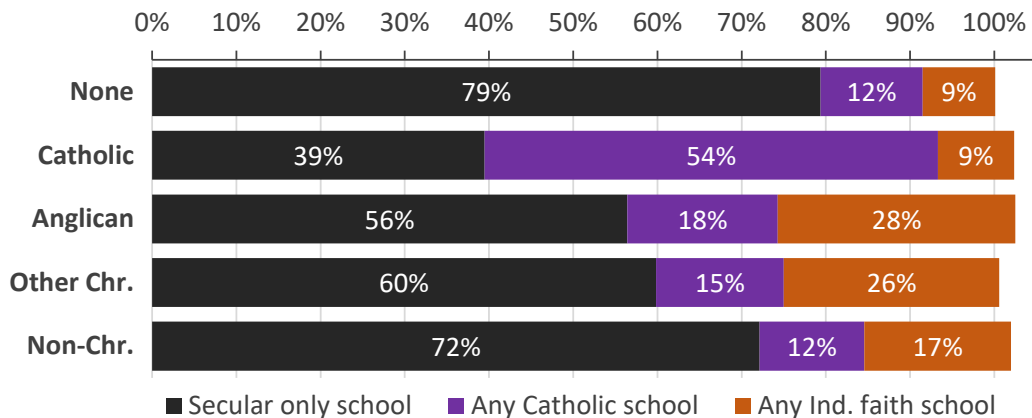
Slightly more than half of Catholic parents (54%) send any of their children to a Catholic school, while other Christian parents are more likely to send their children only to secular schools (Anglican 56%, other Christian 60%).

Summary: Parents across all three school sectors comprise a wide range of religions and none. Nearly half of parents at Catholic schools (46%) are not Catholic. Significant minorities of parents at Catholic and independent faith schools have no religion (22% and 26% respectively). Non-Christian parents (religion and no religion) are most likely to send their children to secular schools (72% and 79% respectively).

Religion of parents by child school sector



Child school sector by religion of parents



Totals may exceed 100% because a small proportion of families have children enrolled in more than one school sector.

Note: Charts are read as “Of those who are [row label on the left], X% of them are [legend label by colour].”

Note: Percentage figures in some charts may not add exactly to 100 due to rounding.

Religiosity of parents by school sector

Two-thirds (66%) of secular-school parents attribute little or no importance to religion, as do a majority (53%) of Catholic-school parents, and half (50%) of independent-faith-school parents.

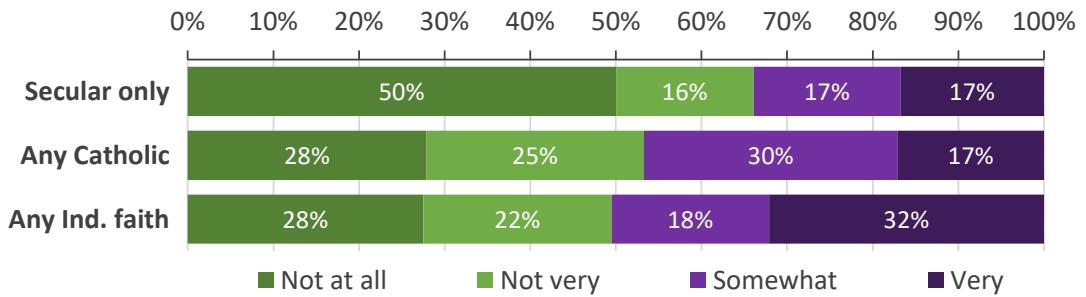
Small minorities of secular-school and Catholic-school parents say religion is very important (17% each), with around one-third (32%) of independent-faith-school parents saying likewise.

Across the religiosity spectrum (from not at all to very), majorities of parents send their children only to secular schools, from 76% for not at all religious parents, to 55% of not very religious parents.

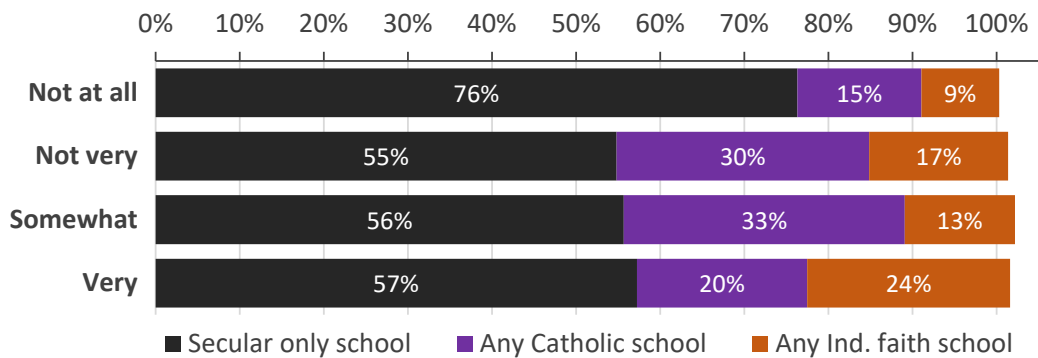
Amongst very religious parents, one-fifth (20%) send a child to a Catholic school and nearly a quarter (24%) send a child to an independent faith school.

Summary: Religion is of *little to no importance* amongst half (50%) of parents at independent faith schools, more than half of parents (53%) at Catholic schools, and two-thirds of parents (66%) at secular-only schools. Almost one-third (32%) of parents at independent faith schools, and a small minority at Catholic schools (17%), say religion is very important.

Religiosity of parents by child school sector



Child school sector by religiosity of parents



Totals may exceed 100% because a small proportion of families have children enrolled in more than one school sector.

Parent LGBT attitudes by school sector



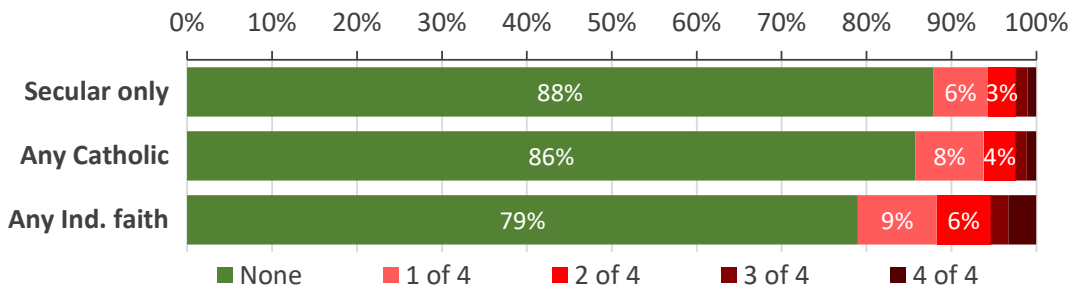
Parent LGBT attitudes by school sector

Most parents across all three school sectors opposed *none* of the four LGBT inclusivity principles (inclusive to sexual orientation, inclusive to gender identity, reducing homophobia and reducing transphobia): 88% of secular-only school parents, 86% of Catholic school parents, and 79% of independent faith school parents.

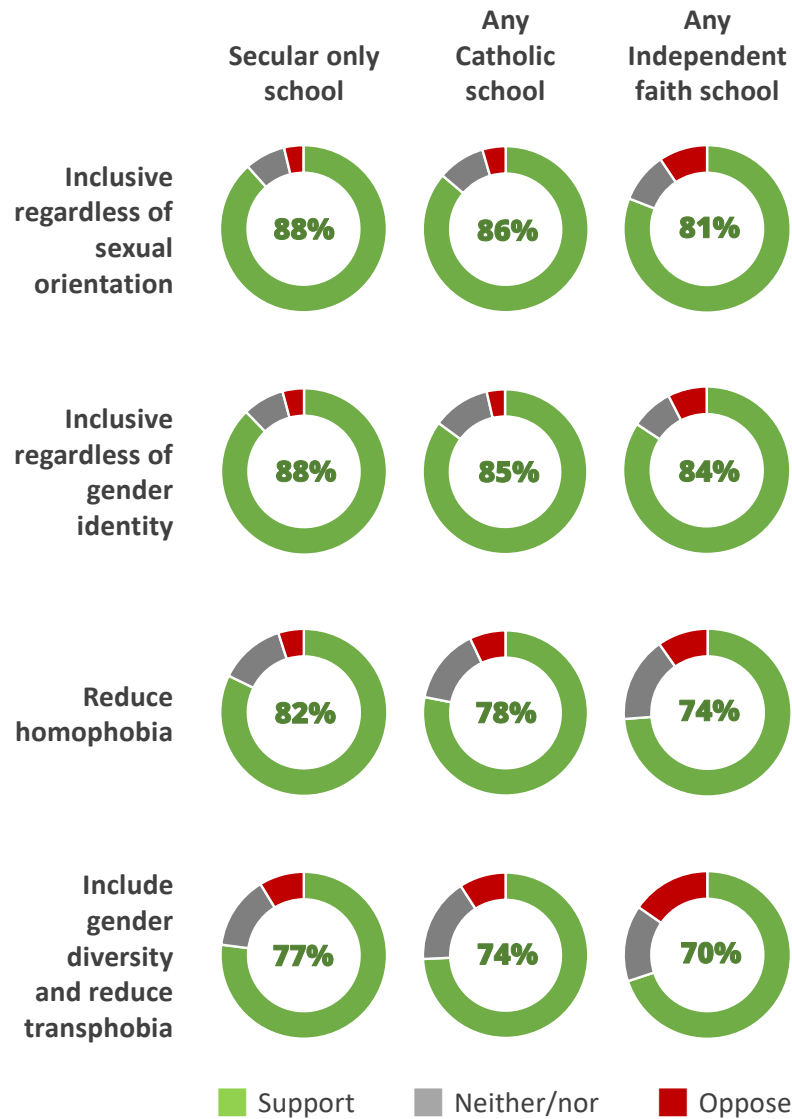
Most parents across all three school sectors expressly *supported* schools teaching each of the four principles: from 77% to 88% of secular-only parents, 74% to 86% of Catholic school parents, and 70% to 81% of independent faith school parents.

Across all three school sectors, only small minorities of parents, from 2% to 15%, opposed any of the four principles.

School sector by count of 4 inclusivity principles opposed

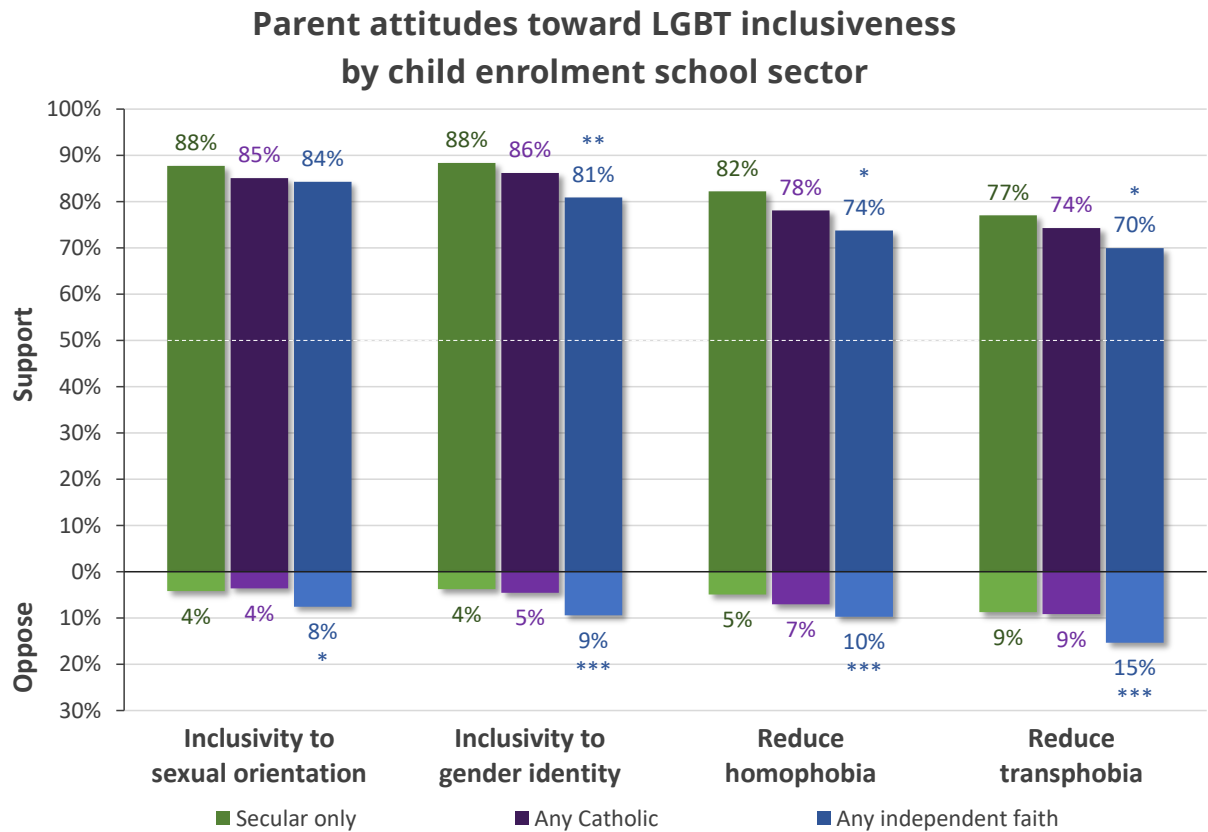


Parent attitudes toward LGBT inclusiveness by school sector



Although parents at independent faith schools (but not Catholic schools) were statistically less likely than others to support and more likely to oppose the four principles, the size of the differences was very small, from just 4% to 7% of independent faith school parents versus secular-only school parents.

Summary: Across all three school sectors, only small minorities of parents expressly opposed *any* of the four principles: 12% of secular-only school parents, 14% of Catholic school parents, and 21% of independent faith school parents: a difference of just 9% between secular-only and independent faith school parents. Most parents supported each of the four inclusivity principles, from 70% of independent faith school parents towards reducing transphobia, to 88% of secular-only school parents towards inclusive sexual orientation and gender identity. On each of the four principles separately, Catholic school parents did not significantly differ from secular-only school parents, while differences for independent faith school parents differed by just 4% to 7% less supportive.



Statistically different from the Secular-only school sector parents, p * < 0.05, ** < 0.01, *** < 0.001.



***Parent LGBT attitudes
by parent religion***

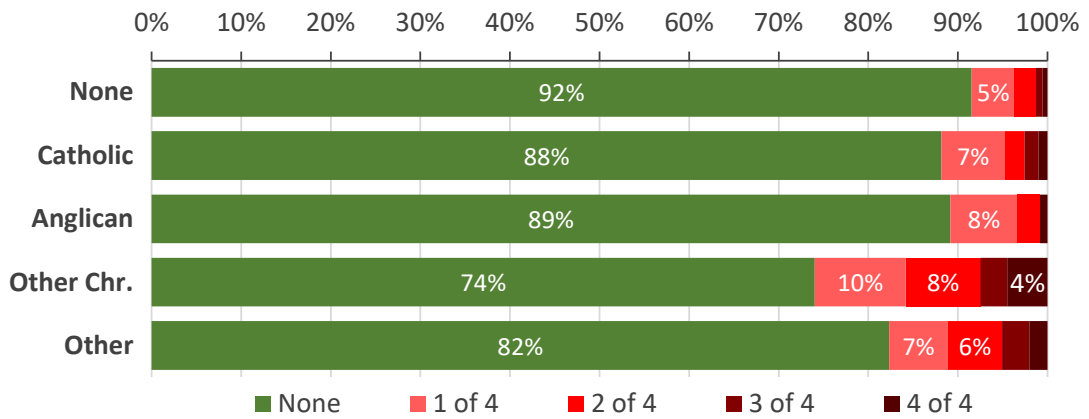
Parent LGBT attitudes by parent religion

Most parents across all religious denominations opposed *none* of the four inclusivity principles (inclusive to sexual orientation, inclusive to gender identity, reducing homophobia and reducing transphobia): 92% of the religiously unaffiliated, 88% of Catholic parents, 89% of Anglican parents, 74% of minor Christian denomination parents, and 82% of other-faith parents.

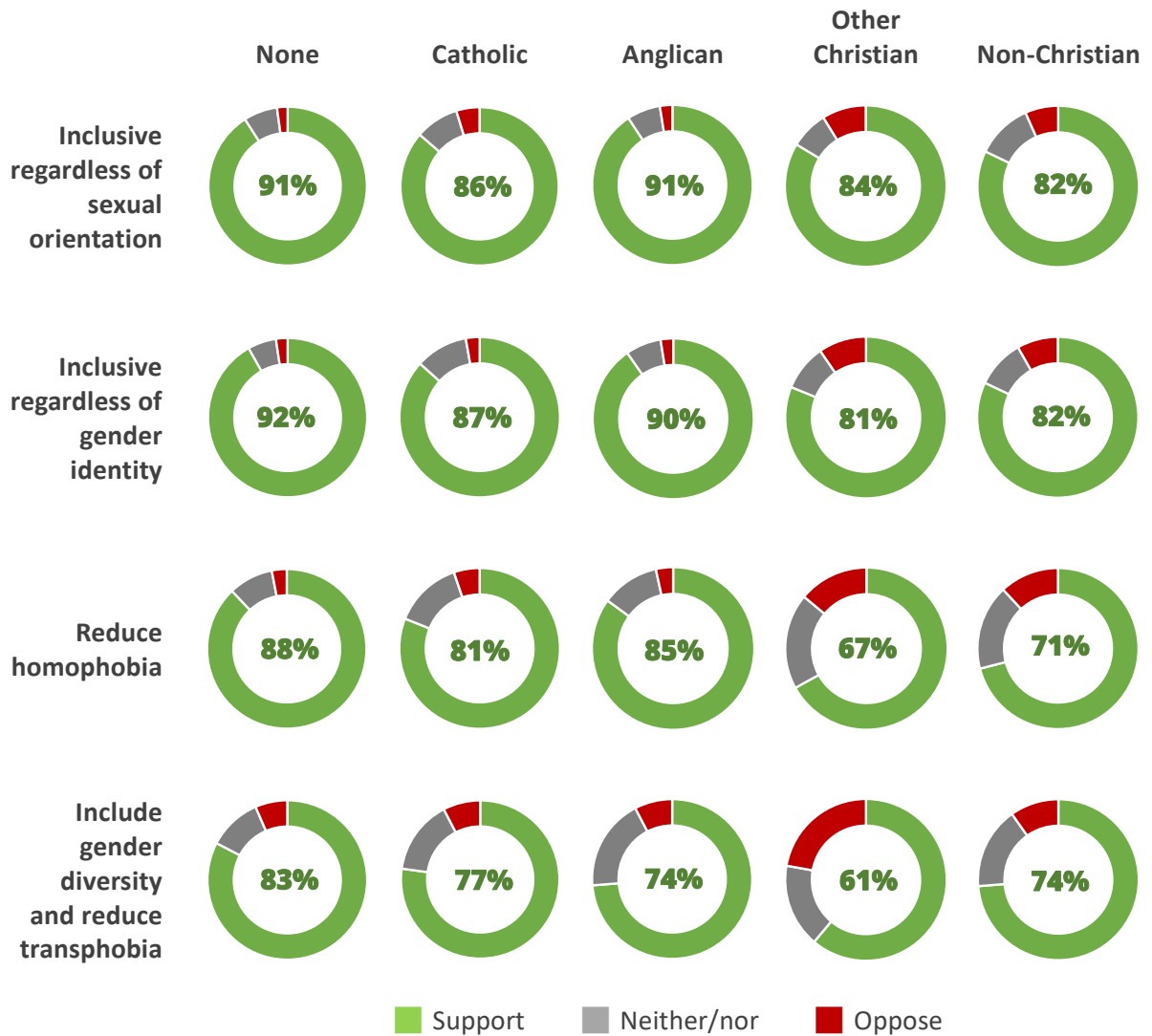
Most parents across all religions expressly *supported* schools teaching each of the four principles: from 83% to 92% of unaffiliated parents, 77% to 87% of Catholic parents, 74% to 91% of Anglican parents, 61% to 84% of minor Christian denomination parents, and 71% to 82% of other-faith parents.

Amongst parental religions, only small minorities of parents, from 2% to 22%, opposed any of the four principles.

Parent religion by count of 4 inclusivity principles opposed



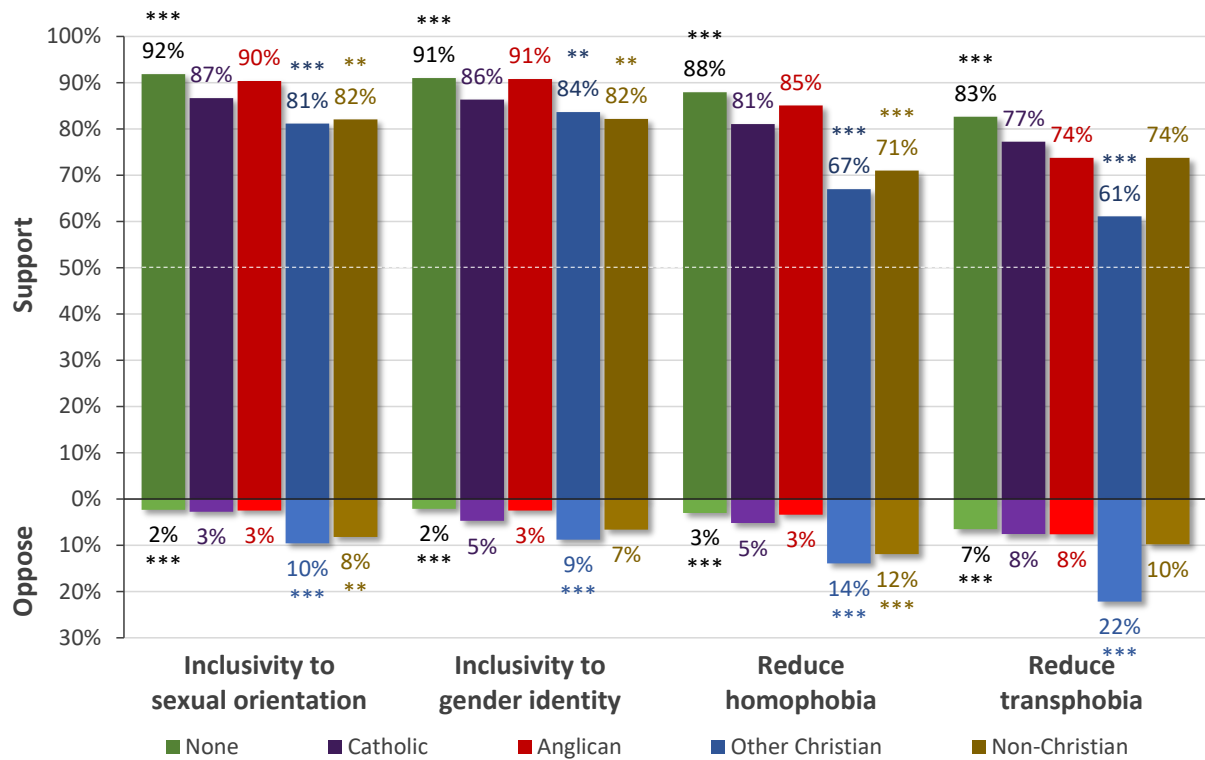
Parent attitudes toward LGBT inclusiveness by parent religion



Although Other Christian (Christian denominations other than Catholic and Anglican) parents were statistically less likely than others to support and more likely to oppose all four principles, the sizes of the differences were small, from just 7% to 22% of parents versus religiously unaffiliated school parents.

Summary: Across the religions, only small minorities of parents expressly opposed *any* of the four principles: 8% of secular-only parents, 12% of Catholic parents, 11% of Anglican parents, 26% of minor Christian denomination parents, and 18% of other-religion parents: a difference of just 18% between unaffiliated and minor Christian denomination parents. Most parents supported each of the four inclusivity principles, from 61% of minor Christian denomination parents towards reducing transphobia, to 92% of unaffiliated parents towards inclusive gender identity.

Parent attitudes toward LGBT inclusiveness by parental religion



Statistically different from all other religion cohorts combined, $p^* < 0.05$, $** < 0.01$, $*** < 0.001$.

***Parent LGBT attitudes
by parent religiosity***



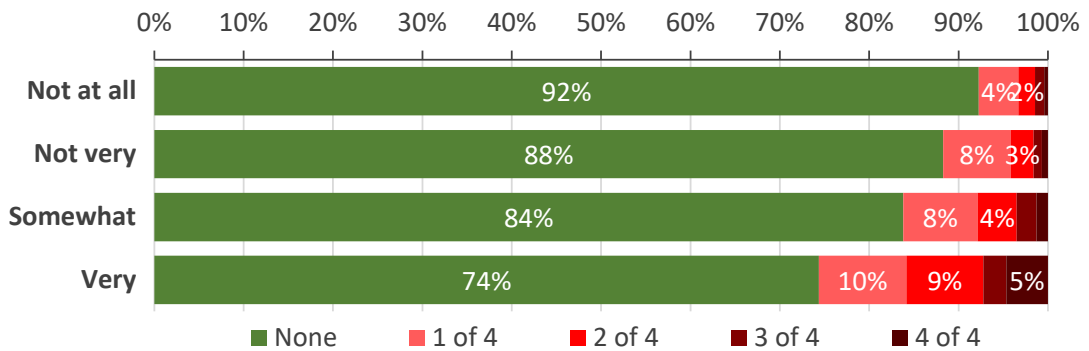
Parent LGBT attitudes by parent religiosity

Most parents across all four levels of religiosity opposed *none* of the four inclusivity principles (inclusive to sexual orientation, inclusive to gender identity, reducing homophobia and reducing transphobia): 92% of the not-at-all religious, 88% of not-very religious parents, 84% of somewhat religious parents, and 74% of very religious parents.

Most parents across all four religiosity levels expressly *supported* schools teaching each of the four principles: from 84% to 93% of not-at-all religious parents, 74% to 88% of not-very religious parents, 72% to 84% of somewhat religious parents, and 64% to 78% of very religious parents.

Across the four levels of parental religiosity, only small minorities of parents, from 2% to 20%, opposed any of the four principles.

Parent religiosity by count of 4 inclusivity principles opposed



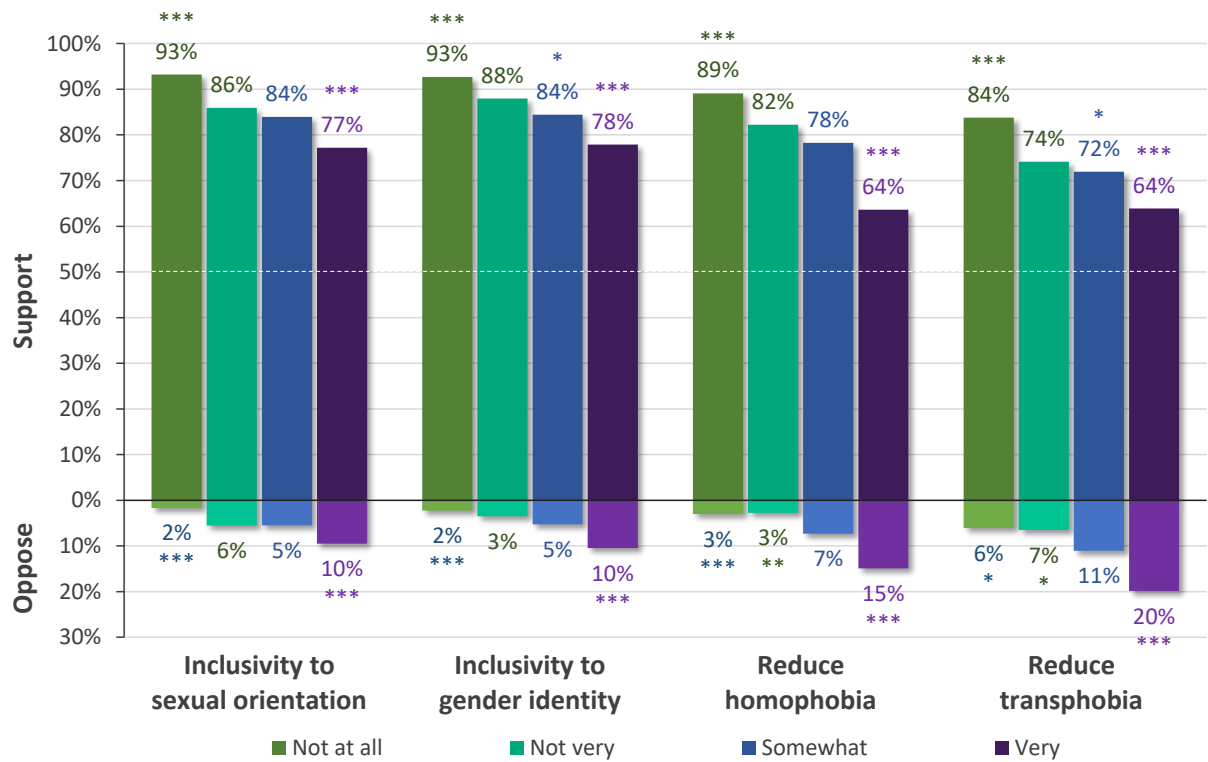
Parent attitudes toward LGBT inclusiveness by parent religiosity



Although *very* religious parents were statistically less likely than others to support and more likely to oppose all four principles, the sizes of the differences were small, from just 8% to 25% of parents versus not-at-all religious parents.

Summary: Across the four levels of parent religiosity, only small minorities of parents expressly opposed any of the four principles: 8% of non-religious parents, 12% of not-very religious parents, 16% of somewhat religious parents, and 26% of very religious parents: a difference of just 18% between very and non-religious parents. Most parents supported each of the four inclusivity principles, from 64% of very religious parents towards reducing transphobia, to 93% of non-religious parents towards inclusive sexual orientation and gender identity. The contention that most religious parents — even most *very* religious parents — are hostile to LGBT inclusivity is contradicted.

Parent attitudes toward LGBT inclusiveness by parent religiosity



Statistically different from all other religiosity cohorts combined, p * < 0.05, ** < 0.01, *** < 0.001.

***School sector choice
amongst religious parents***

School sector choice amongst religious parents

Among religious parents, are those who send their children to religious schools versus those who send their children only to secular schools more likely to hold LGBT-hostile attitudes? We tested for differences amongst Catholic parents sending a child to a Catholic school versus secular-only schools, and very religious parents sending a child to any religious school versus secular-only schools.

Choice amongst Catholic parents

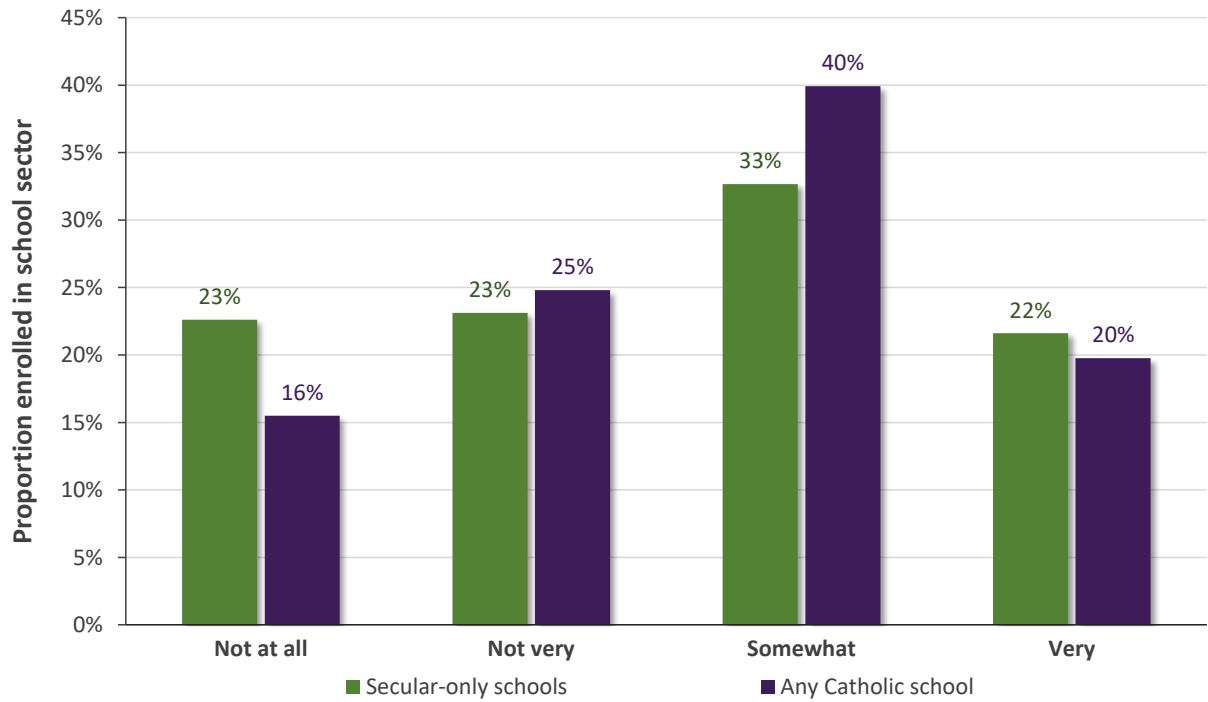
The Australian Catholic Bishops' pastoral letter, released this year, recognises the challenges of a changing and ever-increasingly secularist society in maintaining a Catholic identity and mission. — Collins²⁴ for National Catholic Education

Amongst Catholic parents, there was no consistent association between parental religiosity and choosing a Catholic over a secular school. While somewhat-religious Catholic parents appear a little more likely to send a child to a Catholic school than secular-only schools, none of the differences were statistically significant.

Catholic parents at Catholic schools appeared more (not less) likely to support, and less (not more) likely to oppose, the four LGBT inclusiveness principles. However, none of the differences were statistically significant.

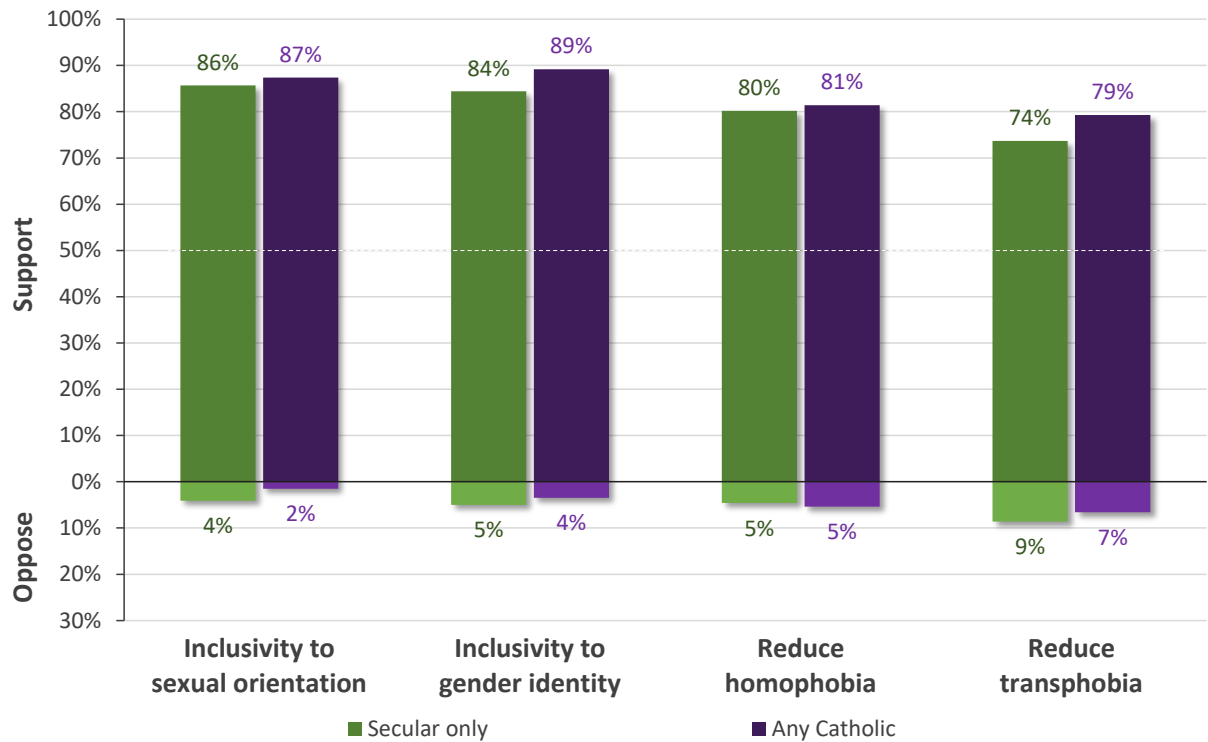
Summary: Greater religiosity amongst Catholic parents is not consistently or statistically associated with a greater likelihood of sending a child to a Catholic school. Catholic parents who send a child to a Catholic school appear more, not less, likely to support LGBT inclusive principles, though differences are not statistically significant. The evidence contradicts the contention that most Catholic parents send children to Catholic schools in support of church doctrine on LGBT matters. Indeed, most appear to do so *despite* church doctrine.

Catholic-parent religiosity and choice of school sector



None of the paired differences are statistically significant.

Catholic-parent attitudes toward LGBT inclusiveness by School sector



None of the paired differences are statistically significant.

Choice amongst very religious parents

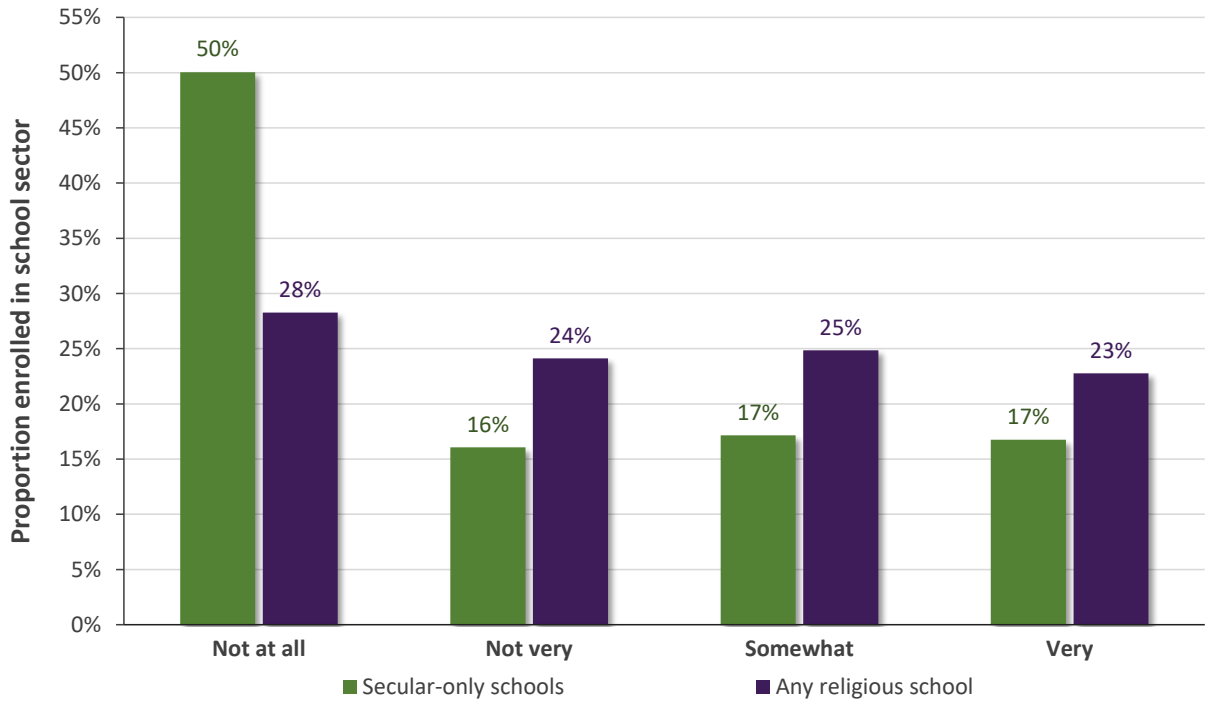
Non-religious parents were significantly more likely to send their children to secular-only schools. However, amongst the three levels of any religiosity (not very, somewhat, very), there was no difference in the likelihood of parents choosing a religious school. This suggests that while many non-religious parents reject religious schools, religious parents are simply more accepting, regardless of religiosity.

Amongst *very* religious parents (who are the most likely to oppose LGBT inclusive principles), there were no statistical differences between secular-only parents and religious school parents in attitudes toward reducing homophobia and transphobia.

There were statistical differences in *very* religious parents' lower likelihood of supporting, and higher likelihood of opposing, LGBT inclusivity for sexual orientation and gender identity, compared with *very* religious parents at secular-only schools. However, the differences were small, just 4% and 7% of parents respectively.

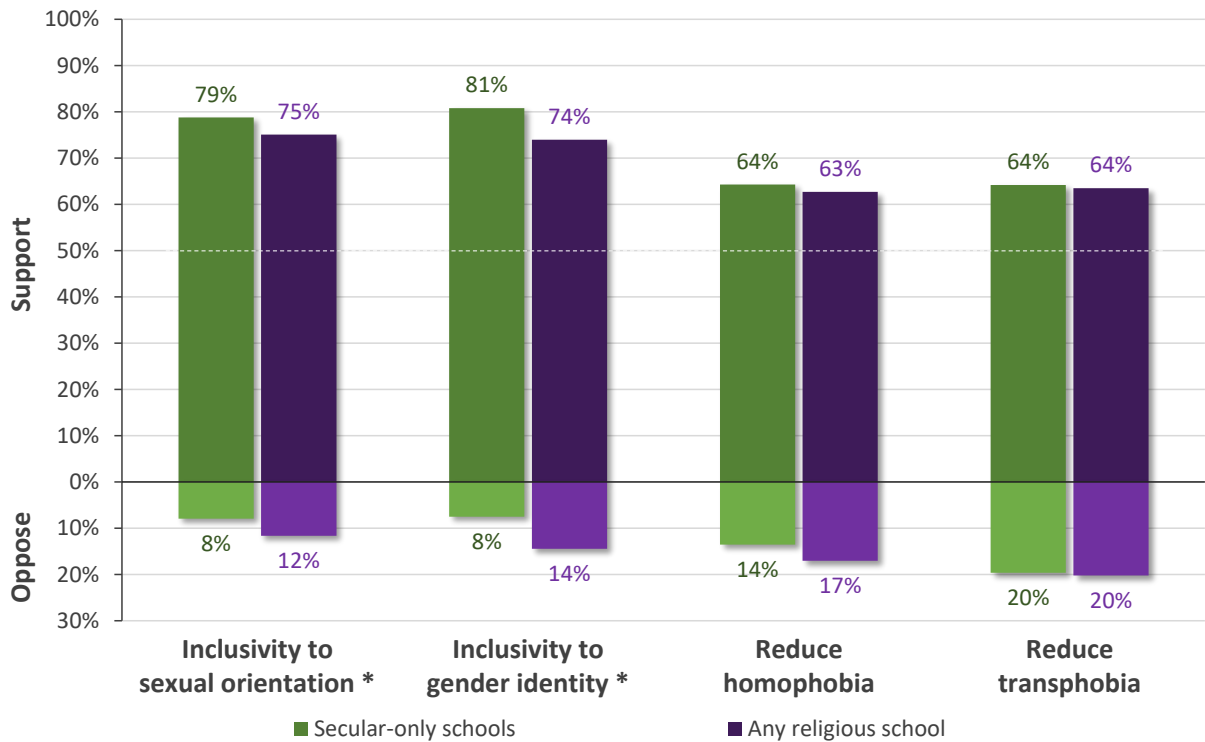
Summary: Non-religious parents were more likely to reject religious schools, but parents with any religiosity (not very, somewhat or very) were equally likely to select religious schools. That is, greater religiosity beyond “none” was not associated with greater likelihood of selecting a religious school, suggesting only a simple “rejection” motivation amongst non-religious parents. *Very* religious parents at religious schools were no more or less likely than *very* religious parents at secular-only schools to support two of the four LGBT inclusivity principles. For the two principles they were less likely to support and more likely to oppose, the differences were small (4% and 7% of parents). This suggests that only a very small proportion of parents might choose a religious school expressly for its opposition to LGBT inclusivity.

Parent religiosity and choice of school sector



All pair differences statistically different $p < 0.001$.

Very religious parent attitudes by School sector



* Statistically significant pair difference $p < 0.05$.

***Parent LGBT attitudes by
parent political preference***



Parent LGBT attitudes by parent political preference

Political preference was measured by the parent's stated first party preference if an election were held tomorrow.

Higher religiosity (somewhat, very religious) comprised slightly more than one-quarter (27%) of Greens parents, slightly more than one-third (36%) of Labor parents, one-third (33%) of undecided parents, nearly half (47%) of Coalition parents, and 45% of Other (micro-party and independents) parents. (Lower religiosity comprised not-at-all and not very religious parents.)

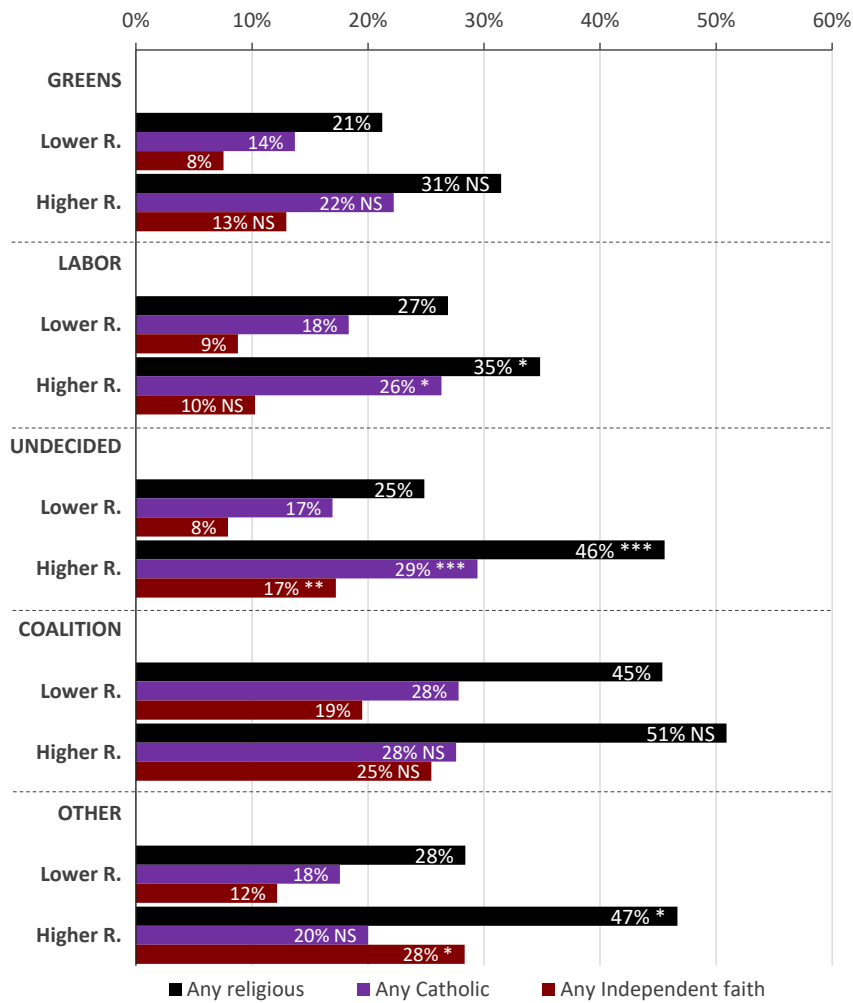
For some political orientations but not others, higher religiosity was associated with differences in the likelihood of enrolling children in a religious school. Amongst Greens (lower rates of religious school enrolment) and Coalition (higher rates of religious school enrolment) parents, there were no statistical differences.

Higher religiosity Labor parents were more likely than their lower religiosity counterparts to enrol children in Catholic, but not independent faith, schools. Higher religiosity Other parents were more likely than their lower-religiosity counterparts to enrol their children in independent faith, but not Catholic, schools.

Higher religiosity Undecided parents (33% of Undecideds), were very significantly more likely than their lower religiosity counterparts to enrol their children in both Catholic and independent faith schools. This represents a challenge to both major parties in attempting to attract undecided voters: Labor in not alienating the one third who are higher religiosity, and the Coalition in not alienating the two thirds who are lower religiosity, regarding policies affecting private versus public schools.

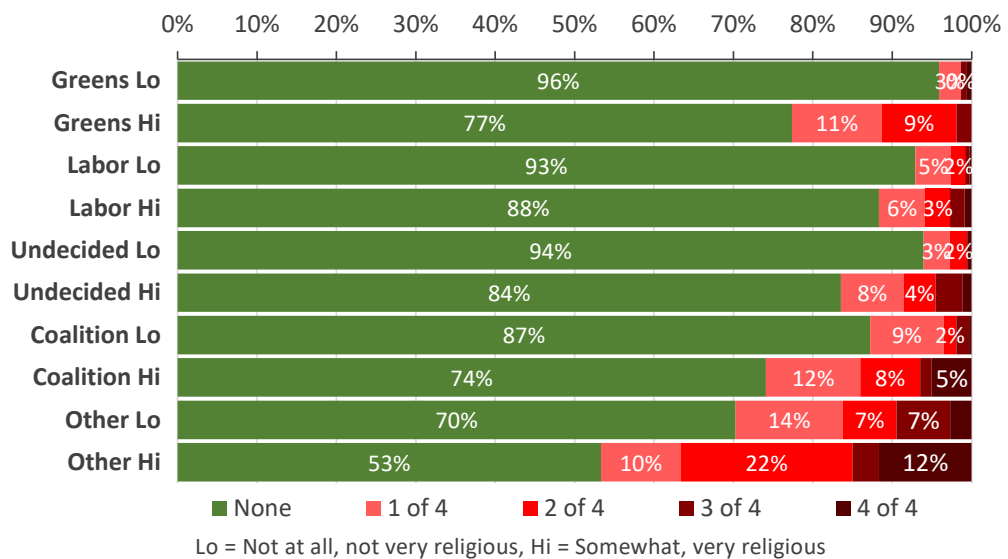
Summary: Higher religiosity amongst Greens and Coalition parents is not associated with likelihood of enrolling children in religious schools. There are small differences (Catholic schools) for Labor parents, and (independent faith schools) for Other parents. Higher religiosity amongst Undecided parents is associated with the greatest increased likelihood of enrolling children in both Catholic and independent faith schools, posing challenges for the major parties regarding policies affecting private versus public schools.

School sector choice by parent religio-political preference



Lower R. = "Not at all/Not very", Higher R. = "Somewhat/Very" personal importance of religion. Higher R. statistics are differences from paired Lower R. p: NS = not significant, * < 0.05, ** < 0.01, *** < 0.001.

Parent religio-political preference by count of 4 principles opposed



Australian school-parent LGBT attitudes

Amongst parents who preferred the major parties (Labor, Coalition [Liberal, Nationals], or Greens), or were politically undecided, great majorities supported all four LGBT-inclusivity principles, from 60% of high-religiosity Coalition voters for reducing transphobia, to 95% of lower-religiosity Greens voters for sexual orientation inclusiveness.

Opposition to the four principles amongst these parents was small, from 1% of low-religiosity undecided voters to sexual orientation inclusiveness, to 20% of high-religiosity Coalition voters for reducing transphobia.

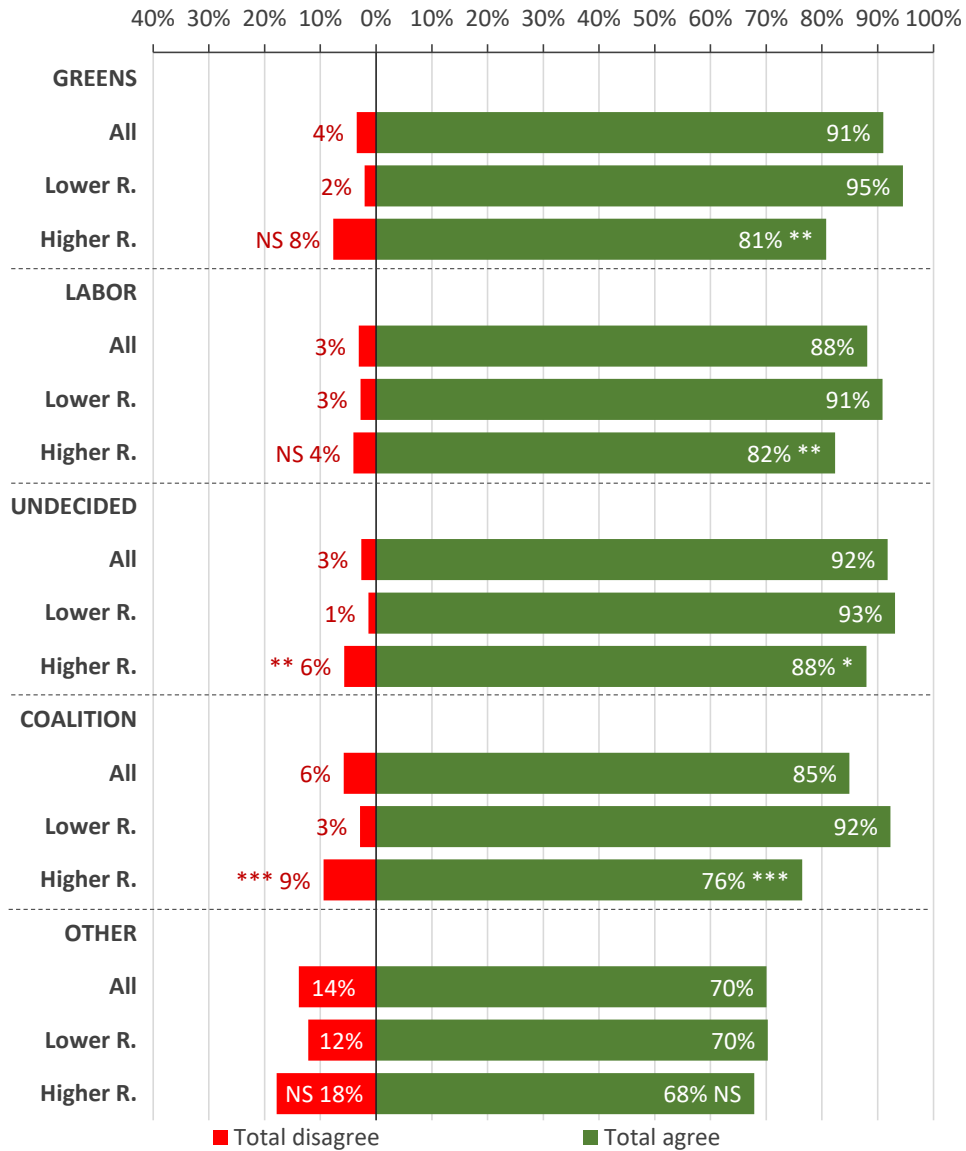
Politically undecided parents were more likely to support and less likely to oppose all four LGBT-inclusivity principles than were those preferring the Coalition. Undecideds' attitudes were more consistent with those preferring Labor and the Greens. This represents a significant political risk for the Coalition.

Parents preferencing micro-parties and independents ("Other") were less likely than other parents to support and more likely to oppose the four principles, though in only one case, higher religiosity parents in respect of reducing transphobia, did opposers (40%) exceed supporters (37%).

The risk of losing parent first-preference votes amongst opposers of the four principles, for a political party adopting LGBT-supportive policies, is significantly greater for the Coalition than for Labor or the Greens. Adopting such policies is likely to be favourable in nett election preference movement amongst Undecideds, for Labor and the Greens.

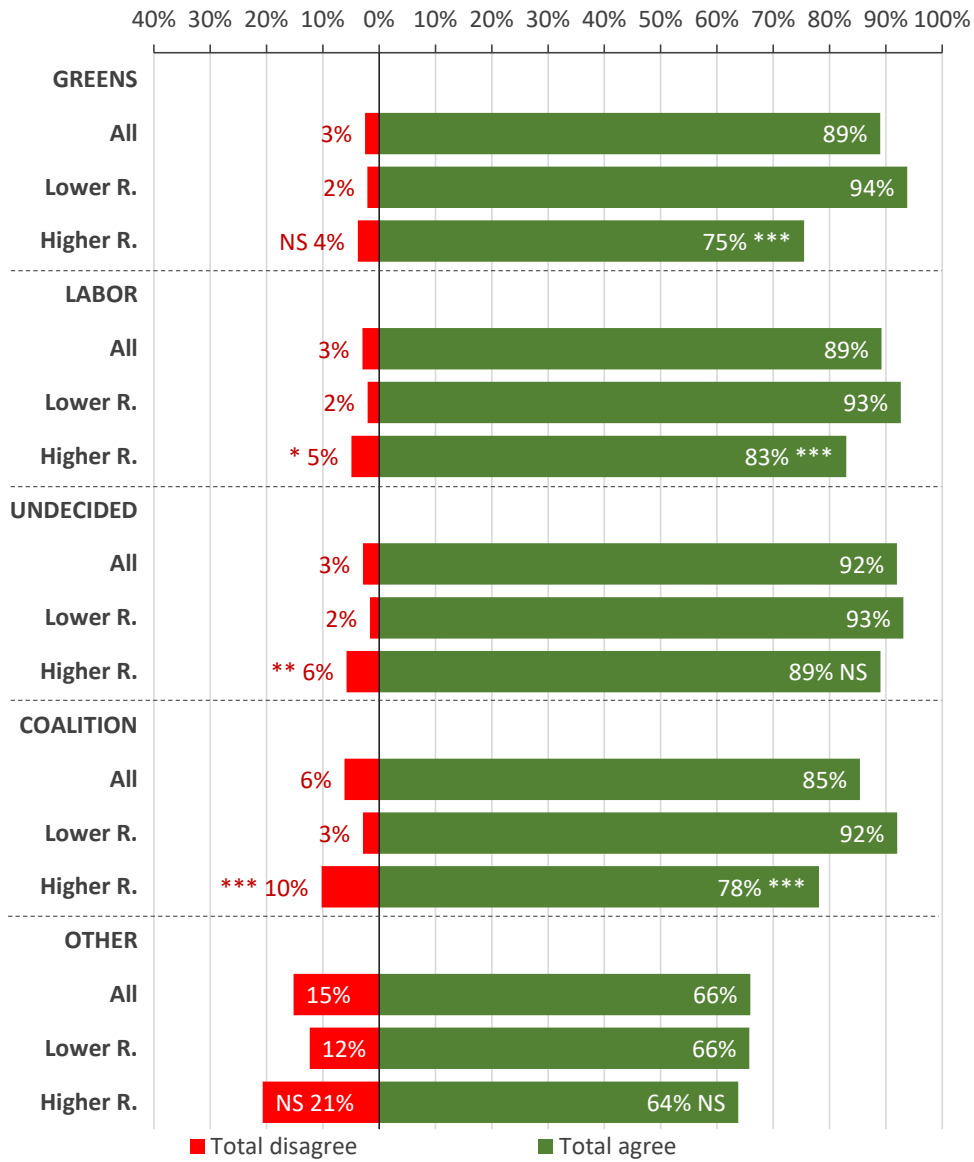
Summary: Across the established political spectrum of Greens, Labor and Coalition, great majorities of parents supported the four LGBT-inclusivity principles, and only small minorities opposed them. Prevalence of attitudes amongst undecided voters were more like parents preferring the Greens and Labor, and more progressive than amongst parents preferring the Coalition. Parents, especially high-religious ones, preferring micro-parties and independents were very significantly less likely to support, and very significantly more likely to oppose, the four principles. But in only one case amongst these particular voters did opposition outweigh support. The Coalition is at greater risk of bleeding votes to both the left (supportive parents) and the right (opposed parents).

Parent attitudes toward sexual orientation inclusiveness by parent religio-political preference



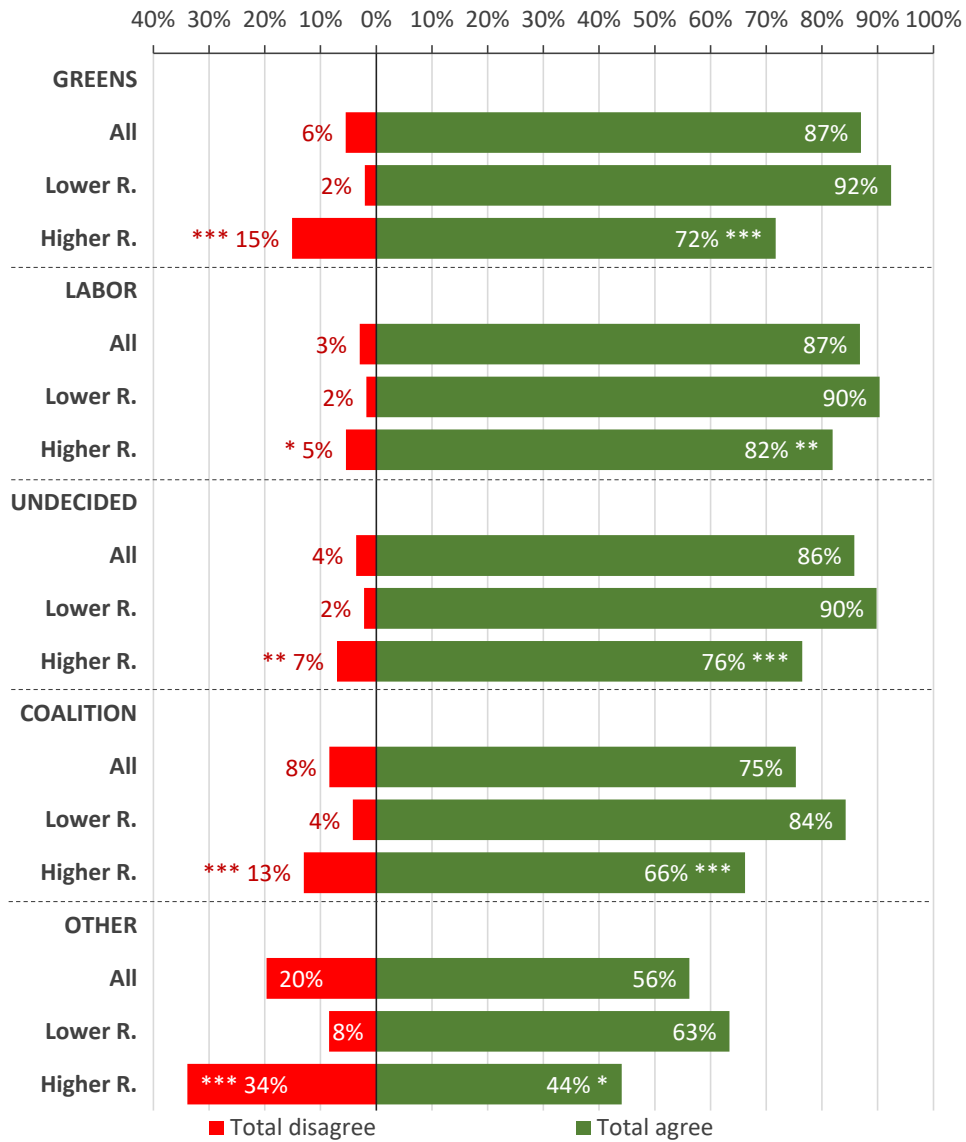
Lower R. = "Not at all/Not very", Higher R. = "Somewhat/Very" personal importance of religion.
Higher R. statistics are differences from paired Lower R. p: NS = not significant, * < 0.05, ** < 0.01, *** < 0.001.

Parent attitudes toward gender identity inclusiveness by parent religio-political preference



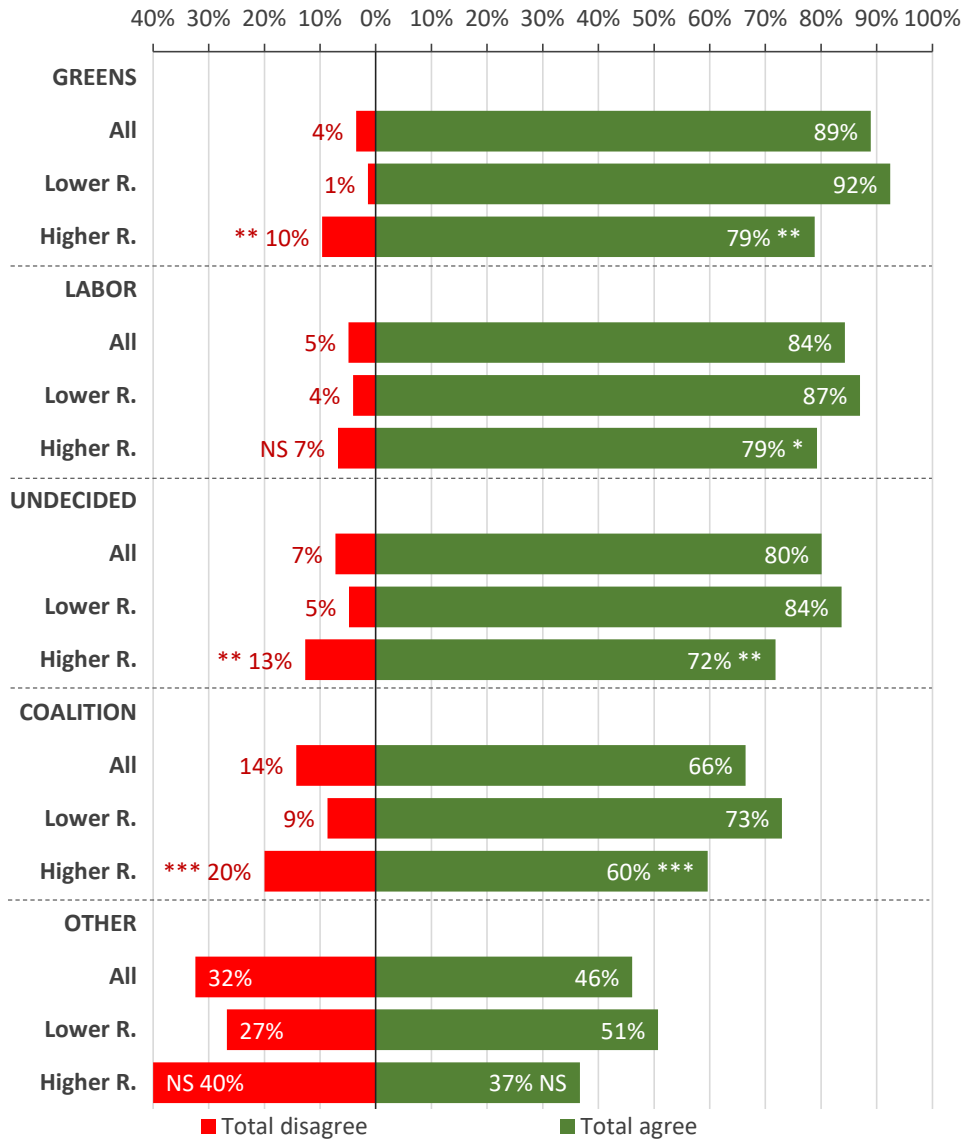
Lower R. = "Not at all/Not very", Higher R. = "Somewhat/Very" personal importance of religion.
 Higher R. statistics are differences from paired Lower R. p: NS = not significant, * < 0.05, ** < 0.01, *** < 0.001.

Parent attitudes toward reducing homophobia by parent religio-political preference



Lower R. = "Not at all/Not very", Higher R. = "Somewhat/Very" personal importance of religion.
Higher R. statistics are differences from paired Lower R. p: NS = not significant, * < 0.05, ** < 0.01, *** < 0.001.

Parent attitudes toward reducing transphobia by parent religio-political preference

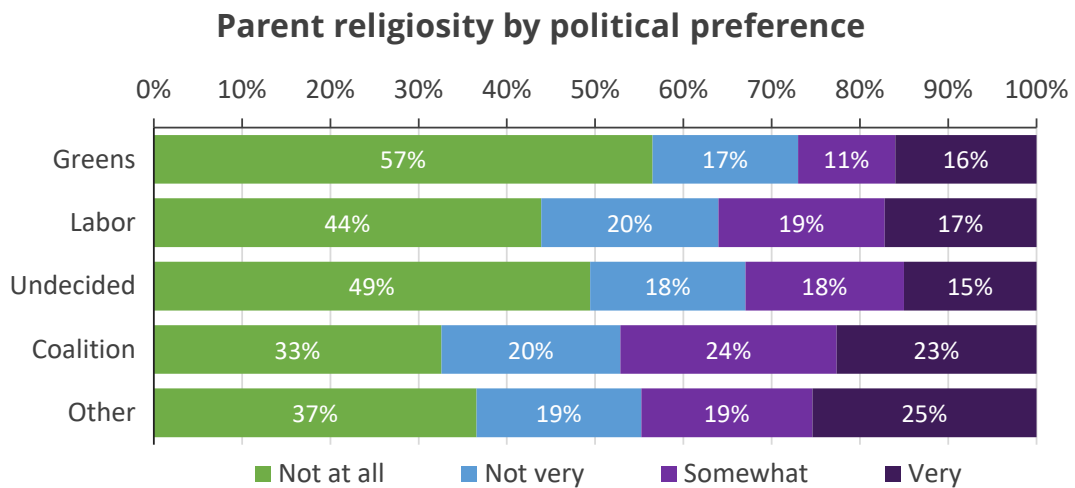


Lower R. = "Not at all/Not very", Higher R. = "Somewhat/Very" personal importance of religion.
Higher R. statistics are differences from paired Lower R. p: NS = not significant, * < 0.05, ** < 0.01, *** < 0.001.

Parent religiosity by political preference

Religion is of little or no personal importance amongst around three-quarters (74%) of Greens-oriented parents, nearly two-thirds of (64%) of Labor parents, and more than half of Coalition (53%) and Other (56%) parents.

Religion is *very* important to nearly a quarter (23%) of Coalition parents, and one-quarter (25%) of Other parents.



The pattern of parental religiosity of politically Undecided parents falls in between those of the Greens and Labor parents. This points to a significant ballot-box risk for parties with religio-conservative policies.

Summary: Religio-conservative policies are likely to alienate many more Undecided parents than attract them, a significant ballot-box risk for parties advancing such policies.

Why most parents really choose a private school



Why most parents really choose a private school

The strongest predictors of private school enrolment in Australia are household income (that is, the affordability of private school fees) and whether either parent, or especially both parents, had attended a private school.²⁵

According to Maddox²⁶ faith scores close to the bottom of parents' reasons for choosing religious schools (p 189). Rather, parents choose them for their perceived discipline, values and standards (p 113).

Reasons for choosing Christian schools

This accords with the findings of Beamish and Morey²⁷ that the top three reasons parents choose private Christian schools are high perceived teaching quality, high student support and care (including lower student-to-teacher ratios), and strong discipline.

The most prevalent faith reason, “effectively presented Christian worldview” comes in at number 10, and “Christian school” comes in at number 17.

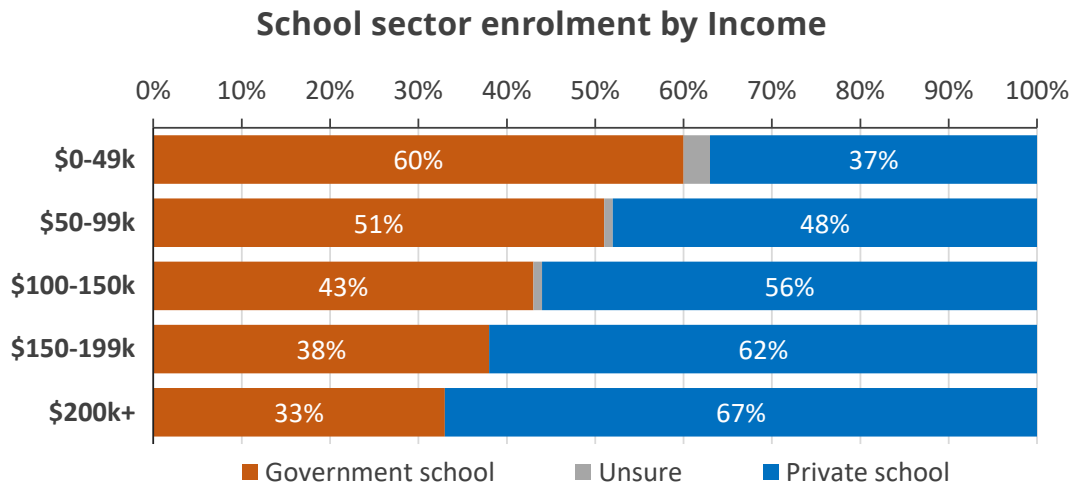
Whether the child's siblings or friends also attend the school was a selection reason for significantly more parents than whether a parent had attended the school.

Reasons confirmed more widely

A more recent study confirms the most important reasons, including perceptions of better quality of school facilities and teachers, closeness of school to home, level of discipline and a safe environment, academic results, and smaller class sizes.²⁸ The school's “religious or values systems” comes in at number 7, though what these value systems were was not established in the study. A school's “religious affiliation” came in only at number 18, nominated by 12% of parents.

Additional reasons

Other reasons for choosing private schools include factors that are not often asked in surveys. These include a desire to ensure childhood networking opportunities with upcoming leaders and influencers amongst student peers, to pursue a more internationally recognised qualification (International Baccalaureate), and to improve the likelihood of being selected by a higher-reputation university.



Source: Pearson and De lure²⁸

Summary: Key ‘mechanics’ influence school choice: parental income in relation to school fee affordability, and proximity of the school to home. A small minority of parents (12%) choose a private school expressly for its religious affiliation, but most choose them due to positive perceptions — relative to government schools — of high-quality facilities and teachers, good teacher/student ratios, better academic performance, and better discipline.

Conclusions



Conclusions

In the examination of extensive Australian evidence, no specific and reliable association was found to support the contention of conservative religious commentators that most parents who choose a religious school do so for the desire to discriminate against LGBT students or staff.

Indeed, comprehensive evidence contradicts the claim.

The public

Very significant majorities (73% to 82%) of the public oppose religious school discrimination against LGBT staff and students, including humiliating, insulting or ridiculing LGBT sexuality, dismissing a teacher for same-sex marriage, and expelling LGBT students.

School staff and students

Most Australian teachers believe that same-sex couples should have the same rights as heterosexual ones, at government (86%) and religious schools (78%) alike. Almost all teachers (94%+) oppose discrimination against LGBT staff and believe that LGBT students should be well accommodated.

Similarly, most Australian students believe that homosexual couples should have the same rights as heterosexual ones: 81% at government schools, to 89% at Catholic schools and 81% at independent faith schools.

Opponents of LGBT-inclusive stances are in a very small minority, from 11% or less of teachers, to 13% or less of students.

School parents

Just 12% of parents say they choose a religious school expressly because of its religious affiliation. “Faith” and “values” alignment reasons — whose tenets remain undefined — range across studies from seventh to eighteenth in parental priority.

Nearly half (46%) of parents whose children attend Catholic schools are not Catholic, and more than one-fifth (22%) have no religious affiliation. At independent faith schools, more than one-quarter of parent (26%) have no religious affiliation.

Of course, self-declared religious affiliation guarantees neither that religion is personally important, nor that the individual supports all the doctrines of the religion’s leaders, including doctrines hostile to LGBT people.

At Catholic schools, a majority of parents (53%) say that religion is of little or no personal importance to them. At independent faith schools, half of parents (50%) say likewise.

At secular schools, most parents (88%) support *all four* prosocial LGBT principles: inclusivity to sexual orientation, inclusivity to gender identity, reducing homophobia, and reducing transphobia. So do 88% of Catholic school parents, and 79% of independent faith school parents.

By parent religious affiliation, 92% of unaffiliated parents support all four principles, as do 82% of Catholic parents, 89% of Anglican parents and 82% of Other religion parents. Even amongst the least supportive religious group, minor Christian denominations, 74% of parents support all four principles.

Likewise, great majorities of parents across the religiosity spectrum support all four principles: 92% of non-religious parents, 88% of not very religious parents, 84% of somewhat religious parents, and 74% of very religious parents.

Even high parental religiosity is no guarantee of LGBT-hostile attitudes. Amongst Australia's most ("very") religious parents, close to three quarters (74%) expressly support LGBT inclusivity.

Little differences amongst Catholic parents

There is no significant association of higher religiosity amongst Catholic parents and likelihood of choosing a Catholic school. Catholic parents at Catholic schools appear more, not less, likely to support LGBT-inclusive principles than Catholic parents at secular-only schools, but differences are not statistically different. That is, most Catholic parents appear to choose a Catholic school *despite*, rather than in support of, Catholic doctrine regarding LGBT students and staff.

Little difference amongst very religious parents

Non-religious parents are significantly less likely than all others to select secular-only schools. But amongst those with any religiosity (not very, somewhat, very), there are no differences in choice for a religious school, suggesting a simple "acceptance" hurdle.

Even amongst *very* religious parents with children at *religious* schools, most (from 64% to 75%) support all four LGBT-inclusive principles. Only small minorities from 12% to 20% are opposed to individual principles.

Even amongst *very* religious parents with children at religious schools, most (from 64% to 75%) support all four LGBT-inclusive principles. Opposition is in a small minority from 12% to 20% against the individual principles.

Religion and politics

Greens voting parents are least likely, and Coalition voting parents most likely, to send their children to religious schools. Higher religiosity Labor voters are somewhat more likely than their lower religiosity counterparts to choose a Catholic school. High religiosity Undecided and Other (micro-parties and independents) parents are more likely to choose independent faith schools than their low religiosity counterparts.

Undecided voters, of both higher and lower religiosity, showed great majorities of support (72% to 93%) for, and little opposition (1% to 13%) to, each of the LGBT-inclusive principles.

At the same time, Other voters (most micro-parties in Australia are socially conservative) were the least likely to support (37% to 70%) and the most likely to oppose (12% to 40%) the four principles. Only in *one* case amongst Other voters (higher religiosity parents in respect of reducing transphobia), did opposition to outweigh support for any principle.

The Coalition is at greatest risk of losing progressive voting parents by adopting more hostile LGBT policies, or conservative voting parents by adopting more supportive LGBT policies.

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Appendix — Study methodology

An online survey was completed by Australian parents and carers in 2021. Final cleaned sample size was $N = 2,418$.

School-sector enrolments amongst respondent families were compared with the 2021 school enrolment census figures and found to be comparable, with a slight over-sampling of parents at non-religious independent schools²⁹. Few respondent families (8.9%) had children enrolled across more than one school sector.

Religion and religiosity

Religion was measured by respondent religious affiliation, classified into None, Catholic, Anglican, Other Christian, or Other (non-Christian).

Religiosity was measured by respondent rating of the importance of religion in their everyday life: *not at all* (or non-religious), *not very*, *somewhat*, or *very*.

Political preference

Parents were asked, if an election were held tomorrow, which political party would receive their first preference.

School sector

School sectors were classified using Australian conventions:

- ‘Secular’ means none of the respondent’s children attended a religious school: that is, all the respondent’s children attended either a government school or a non-faith-based independent school.
- ‘Any Catholic’ means at least one of the respondent’s children attended a Catholic school.
- ‘Any independent faith’ means at least one of the respondent’s children attended a faith-based independent (not Catholic) school.

Avoiding inherent bias

We didn’t ask parents directly about religious school rights to discriminate, because that can raise problems of bias.

Acquiescence bias can occur when people say “yes” because they think most parents *want* to discriminate, so it ought to be allowed.

And confirmation bias can occur when people believe religious schools already can and do lawfully discriminate, so it must be OK.

Rather, we sought to directly examine parents' underlying attitudes, beliefs and values towards LGBT people, rather than potentially misguided perceptions of anyone's right to discriminate.

Attitudes, beliefs and values

Parental underlying attitudes, beliefs and values were measured by their response to four statements of principle as follows:

“Relationships and sexuality education should...”

- “Be inclusive to all students, regardless of sexual orientation.”
- “Be inclusive to all students, regardless of gender identity.”
- “Reduce homophobia (i.e. prejudice and discrimination against lesbian, gay, and bisexual people.”
- “Seek to include gender diversity and reduce transphobia (i.e. prejudice and discrimination against transgender or gender diverse people).”

The response frame for each question was pre-coded using a 5-point Likert scale, *strongly agree*, *agree* (together = total agree), *neither agree nor disagree*, *disagree* and *strongly disagree* (together = total disagree). A very small minority of respondents who selected *don't know/prefer not to say* were excluded from analysis of the question data.

Statistics

The statistical significance of differences in the prevalence of attitudes amongst cohorts was calculated using Pearson's Chi square test of independence.

Limitations

The study did not include questions about household income or wealth, so any effects of private school affordability could not be determined. Also, the study did not differentiate between exclusive versus inclusive religious schools. Opposition to LGBT+ inclusivity principles may possibly be higher amongst parents at some religion-exclusive schools.

More information

More details of the survey methodology can be found in Hendriks, Marson, Walsh, Lawton, Saltis and Burns ³⁰.



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