

all.

Australian
Learning
Lecture


LESSONS FROM CANADA

An equal school system
is possible

CONCISE SUMMARY

KOSHLAND
INNOVATION
FUND





“We have one of the most segregated education systems in the world, not by the colour of your parents' skin but by the size of their pay packet. That is just a fact.”

The Hon Jason Clare MP

Minister for Education

Interview - ABC Sydney, 14 March 2024

“We are so richly blessed with a system in which the non-religious and Catholic dimensions of our whole education system work together in co-operation to make education a treasure for which all Ontarians may truly be thankful.”

Cardinal Thomas Collins

Archbishop of Toronto between 2007 and 2023

'Education: The Issue from a Catholic Perspective', 2022

IS THERE A BETTER WAY TO DESIGN OUR SCHOOL SYSTEM?

Australia has one of the most segregated school systems in the developed world and the problem is getting worse. This has a negative effect on national academic achievement, equity of outcomes, and the experience of school.

Multiple years of learning separate the children of the rich and the poor, the white and black, city and country dwellers. Increasingly students are selected or excluded by schools through entry tests, fees and other criteria. This contributes to a concentration of disadvantaged students in low socio-economic status schools.

An international body of evidence overwhelmingly links the concentration of social disadvantage to low achievement in schools.

The *2023 Independent Review to Inform a Better and Fairer Education System* reported that, in PISA science testing, disadvantaged students who attend disadvantaged schools are on average three years of learning behind their peers who attend advantaged schools. And low-SES students in low-SES schools are half as likely to achieve at NAPLAN National Minimum Standards than low-SES students in high-SES schools.

Experts have been advising Australian governments for decades that intense levels of social segregation undermine all our schools try to achieve.

If we continue to leave the fundamental drivers of this problem unaddressed, our children and our society will suffer.

This long-term policy failure in Australia is resulting in wasted human potential, less fulfilling lives, and a less productive society. How can this be in our national interest?

SEARCHING FOR SOLUTIONS

In searching for solutions, it makes sense to explore how comparable countries design their school systems.

In October 2024 a delegation of Australian educators and researchers visited Canada under the auspices of Leading Educators Around the Planet (LEAP) and the Australian Learning Lecture (ALL) to find out what Australia can learn about creating a school system that enhances equity, opportunity and achievement.

CANADA AND AUSTRALIA: SIMILAR SOCIETIES, DIFFERENT EDUCATIONAL OUTCOMES

As Australia searches for solutions to the problem of segregation, inequity and underachievement, Canada is a natural place to turn for inspiration.

Canada outperformed Australia in all subject areas in the 2022 Programme for International Student Assessment tests run by the OECD, just as it has in every round of PISA since the test's inception at the start of this century. The differences in Canada and Australia's scores equate to approximately half a year of learning in each subject area.

School systems in all the Canadian provinces exhibit markedly less social segregation than in Australia: young Canadians are much more likely to meet and mix across class and cultural divides at school than their Australian peers.

The significant differences in educational outcomes between Canada and Australia exist even though Canadian society looks much like our own, and spending on education is similar. This means that it is much more likely that education policies are responsible, rather than factors outside the school gate which policymakers do not directly control.

While there are several high-profile countries that shine in international standardised tests, many are markedly different to Australia historically and socially.

More meaningful comparisons between countries are made on a 'like-with-like' basis, and Canada and Australia are remarkably similar societies. Each has a diverse population thinly spread across huge land masses; each educates a large proportion of students from immigrant backgrounds as well as an Indigenous student population affected by the legacies of European conquest and colonisation.

When the OECD reports PISA data it ranks countries in terms of the Index of Economic, Social and Cultural Status (ESCS). Out of 79 participating countries and economies, Canada and Australia are next to each other, ranking equal third, with the same mean score (3.8).

Many high achieving countries and economies, like Macao (China), Singapore, Sweden and Norway, spend substantially more per student than we do; but spending on education in Australia and Canada is similar. In fact, the cumulative per student expenditure on education is ever so slightly higher in Australia than in Canada. Australia spends around \$520 more per student each year. Spending on all primary and secondary education amounted to 3.8 percent of GDP in Canada in 2020/21; in Australia the proportion is 3.9 percent.

When our nation consistently fails to provide many children with the educational opportunities that should be their birthright, and when repeated attempts at systemic reform remain unrealised, we must be open to what international experience can teach us.

What can Australia learn from Canada about creating a school system that expands access to opportunity and achievement?

Each province in Canada has a distinct education system as the national government has no responsibility for education. This provides many lessons to learn from Canada's range of school systems. Provinces like Ontario enable Australia to see new possibilities. Other provinces, like British Columbia and Quebec, reflect our own problems back at us, even if in less acute form.

FINDINGS

1. Ontario, Canada's largest province, has a needs-based funding system and no publicly funded schools charge fees.

The first lesson Ontario offers Australia is that funding all schools according to the educational needs of the students they enrol is possible and reform is achievable.

Ontario's needs-based funding system was established in the late 1990s when it was recognised that existing arrangements had failed to provide all young people with an opportunity to realise their full potential.

Today Ontario has a genuinely sector-blind and needs-based funding system in which secular and faith-based schools are resourced to meet the needs of the students they serve.

Across all sectors and systems, one common needs-based funding formula applies equally. The formula includes a baseline per-capita amount and funding loadings which factor in the additional needs of Indigenous students, students with disabilities, and students with low household income; low parental education; lone parent status, or low engagement.

Additionally, the funding formula addresses the greater costs faced by small and rural schools and schools with declining enrolments.

2. In Ontario secular and faith-based schools belong to one common framework.

Secular and faith-based schools are fully publicly funded, prohibited from charging fees, and operate on a level playing field of rules, regulations and policies.



92 percent of young Ontarians attend schools that are part of the common legislative and financial framework.

At the same time, there is a commitment to diversity within the framework of fully publicly financed schools. Faith-based public schools are free to foster and promote their schools' distinctive religious character, ethos and curriculum as they see fit.

The remaining small sector of fee-charging private schools receives no public funding.

3. Ontario's schools have low levels of social segregation and support high achievement.

The level of social segregation in Ontario's school system is much lower than in Australia. Ontario's schools are resourced at very similar levels to Australia's, but Ontario's 15-year-olds achieve at significantly higher levels in PISA.

This pattern is repeated in Alberta which also has faith-based public schools, low segregation and high student achievement.

Ontario's common framework and needs-based funding system have eliminated the sectoral basis for social segregation that is a distinctive feature of Australia's schooling. The consequence of removing fee barriers, as well as other enrolment discriminators, is that Ontario's faith-based schools serve a much higher proportion of children from low-income households than their counterparts in Australia.

4.

Needs-based funding across secular and faith-based school systems is affordable.

The Australian debate surrounding school funding is often misguided by the false belief that governments cannot afford to fully fund compulsory education.

This is untrue, as evidenced by Ontario, a society similar to Australia in terms of education spending, which successfully provides full needs-based funding across both secular and faith-based school systems.

The alleged taxpayer savings in Australia are exaggerated, and the potential social and economic costs of a school system reliant on parental co-payments are not adequately considered. These costs include increased student segregation without any improvement in overall outcomes, which may outweigh any supposed fiscal benefits.

5.

A common framework of secular and faith-based schools enjoys political support across a widespread cross-section of society.

A striking feature of Ontario's school funding is that it is championed by both faith schools and public education advocates. This strong arrangement, based on a broad social consensus, has proven successful over time.

This contrasts sharply with Australia, where conflict between school sectors has consistently hindered and stalled progress.

6.

British Columbia regulates fees in some non government schools, but others still enjoy significant resource advantages and can actively or passively exclude disadvantaged students.

The challenge for Australians is that education arrangements in Ontario are so different to what we have and challenge many of our basic assumptions.

British Columbia is helpful because it represents a midway point between arrangements in Ontario and Australia.

One category of non-government school is publicly funded at 50 percent of neighbouring public schools; and total operating costs cannot exceed the level of public counterparts. A second category of non-government school receives a lower level of public funding (35 percent) but fees at these schools are not capped or otherwise regulated.

Compared to Australia, British Columbia illustrates that some regulation of fees and enrolment practices is better than nothing.

Compared to Ontario this approach contains multiple disadvantages and downsides. British Columbia has a larger non-government school sector than Ontario, yet performed less well in PISA 2022, despite having the most advantaged student population in Canada.

7.

Quebec has similar policy settings to Australia and the same problems.



Like Australia, Quebec heavily subsidises private schools, with public funding as high as **75 percent** of the level received by public schools. The province does little to regulate fees or enrolment practices. It has a large private sector in Canadian terms, and in response a subset of public schools has staked out a competitive position by adopting forms of student selection and exclusion.

Like Australia, there is a high level of social segregation across Quebec's schools. The children of high-income families are mostly concentrated in private schools, and selective public schools. The level of social segregation is not as bad as in Australia, but at the same time, segregation in Quebec is much worse than any other Canadian province.

8.

In Quebec, a group of concerned parents and citizens are campaigning for a fairer, more inclusive and more effective school system.

École Ensemble (School Together) has developed a plan for a 'common network' of publicly funded schools to address the high degree of social segregation produced by Quebec's three-tier system of private schools, selective public schools and comprehensive public schools. The proposed common network would include public schools and 'contracted' private schools. The latter would be fully publicly financed and free while retaining management autonomy (as is the case in Ontario).

All schools in the common network would be assigned enrolment areas optimised to maximise socio-economic diversity and reduce travel times. To minimise disruption private schools would transition to the common network in a graduated way over a six-year period.

Economic modelling commissioned by École Ensemble reveals that the common network would save the Government of Quebec almost CAD \$100 million each year once the transition is completed.

ONTARIO AT A GLANCE

- Ontario introduced and fully implemented a **needs-based funding system** over 25 years ago.
- **Faith-based schools are fully publicly funded** and are not permitted to charge fees or exclude students on the basis of prior achievement or engagement.
- **Schools that charge fees receive no public funding** and enrol 7 percent of students.
- Ontario has **lower socio-economic segregation** and **higher equity and achievement** than Australia.
- Ontario's total public expenditure on school education is very similar to Australia's.



TOTAL POPULATION

16.1 million



STUDENT POPULATION

2.1 million



SPENDING PER STUDENT

AUD \$20,215



PUBLIC SCHOOL ENROLMENT SHARE

92%



FEES IN PUBLICLY FUNDED SCHOOLS

No



FUNDING OF PRIVATE (FEE-CHARGING) SCHOOLS

No



OECD INDEX OF ECONOMIC, SOCIAL AND CULTURAL STATUS (ESCS)

4.1 (Australia = 3.9)



Faith based public schools educate almost a third of the province's 2.1 million school children.

BRITISH COLUMBIA AT A GLANCE

- Most non-government schools in British Columbia are entitled to **50 percent of the public funding** of neighbouring public schools. In return the school's total operating costs cannot exceed those of public schools in their area.
- Another category of non-government school is officially **subsidised at 35 percent** of public school funding and faces **no cap on total operating costs**.
- In practice a range of loopholes mean taxpayer funding of private schools is higher than the stated policy.
- British Columbia has **one of the largest private school sectors in Canada** - 40 percent of independent schools are registered as charities.
- British Columbia has the **most advantaged student population** in Canada but student achievement does not reflect this.



TOTAL POPULATION

5.7 million

STUDENT POPULATION

577,024

total students in public schools

86,201

total students in independent schools



SPENDING PER STUDENT

\$18,853



PUBLIC SCHOOL ENROLMENT SHARE

87%



FEES IN PUBLICLY FUNDED SCHOOLS

Category 1: Total operating costs cannot exceed the level of neighbouring public schools
Category 2: Unregulated



FUNDING OF PRIVATE (FEE-CHARGING) SCHOOLS

Group 1: 50% of operating costs of neighbouring public schools
Group 2: 35%



OECD INDEX OF ECONOMIC, SOCIAL AND CULTURAL STATUS (ESCS)

4.3 (Australia = 3.9)

QUEBEC AT A GLANCE

- The Government of Quebec provides large subsidies to non-government schools, as much as **75 percent of the funding delivered to public schools**.
- Quebec's publicly subsidised private schools are permitted to charge high admission fees and enrol on a selective basis.
- Quebec has a **large number of selective public schools**.
- Quebec's schools have the **highest level of social segregation** in Canada.
- École Ensemble (School together) is a movement of concerned parents and citizens campaigning for a common network of public schools and 'contracted' private schools.



TOTAL POPULATION

9.1 million



STUDENT POPULATION

1 million (Public schools)



SPENDING PER STUDENT

\$23,606



PUBLIC SCHOOL ENROLMENT SHARE

87%



FEES IN PUBLICLY FUNDED SCHOOLS

Yes, up to \$5,500



FUNDING OF PRIVATE (FEE-CHARGING) SCHOOLS

Up to 75% of equivalent public schools



OECD INDEX OF ECONOMIC, SOCIAL AND CULTURAL STATUS (ESCS)

3.6 (Australia = 3.9)

SOLUTIONS ARE POSSIBLE

Canada shows how Australia can get the politics right as well as the policy.

Canada demonstrates that it is possible to create a shared framework in which all schools are accessible to all students, no matter their parents' bank balance.

Canada also shows that full public funding of both secular and faith-based schools is affordable.

And Canada shows that a common, consistent approach to resourcing and regulation in no way hinders the capacity of schools or school sectors to determine their own character and ethos.



ONTARIO

Ontario offers a real-world example of a common framework of publicly funded schools that are resourced according to need and regulated on a consistent basis but are diverse in their character, curriculum, ethos and governance.

BRITISH COLUMBIA

While British Columbia performs well on international standardised tests, its record is less impressive in a Canadian context. It begins with the most advantaged student population amongst the provinces in terms of socio-economic background, but it is not in the top-ranking provinces in terms of achievement. In this respect, the lesson from British Columbia could be: 'don't go there, educationally speaking'.

QUEBEC

When we look at Quebec we see our own situation reflected. In both Australia and Quebec a stratified three-tier system predominates, students are heavily segregated based on their background, and this has an especially deleterious effect on the most disadvantaged. And in both jurisdictions, calls for fundamental structural change are growing louder.

TOWARDS A MORE EQUAL SCHOOL SYSTEM

Australia can apply the lessons from Canada to create a more socio-economically inclusive and diverse system of schools which supports social cohesion, enriches academic opportunity and achievement and expands Australia's human potential.

In 2023 the Australian Learning Lecture published its proposal for a common framework for all Australian schools. It argued that to turn Australia's educational performance around and close the unacceptable gaps between students from different backgrounds, Australia needs to:

1. fund all schools based on educational need.
2. ensure children from disadvantaged backgrounds have the opportunity to thrive in more socioeconomically mixed schools; and
3. create a system where schools compete, not on their ability to attract additional resources and the right students, but on their capacity to help each child achieve a full year of learning, every year, and to realise their full potential.

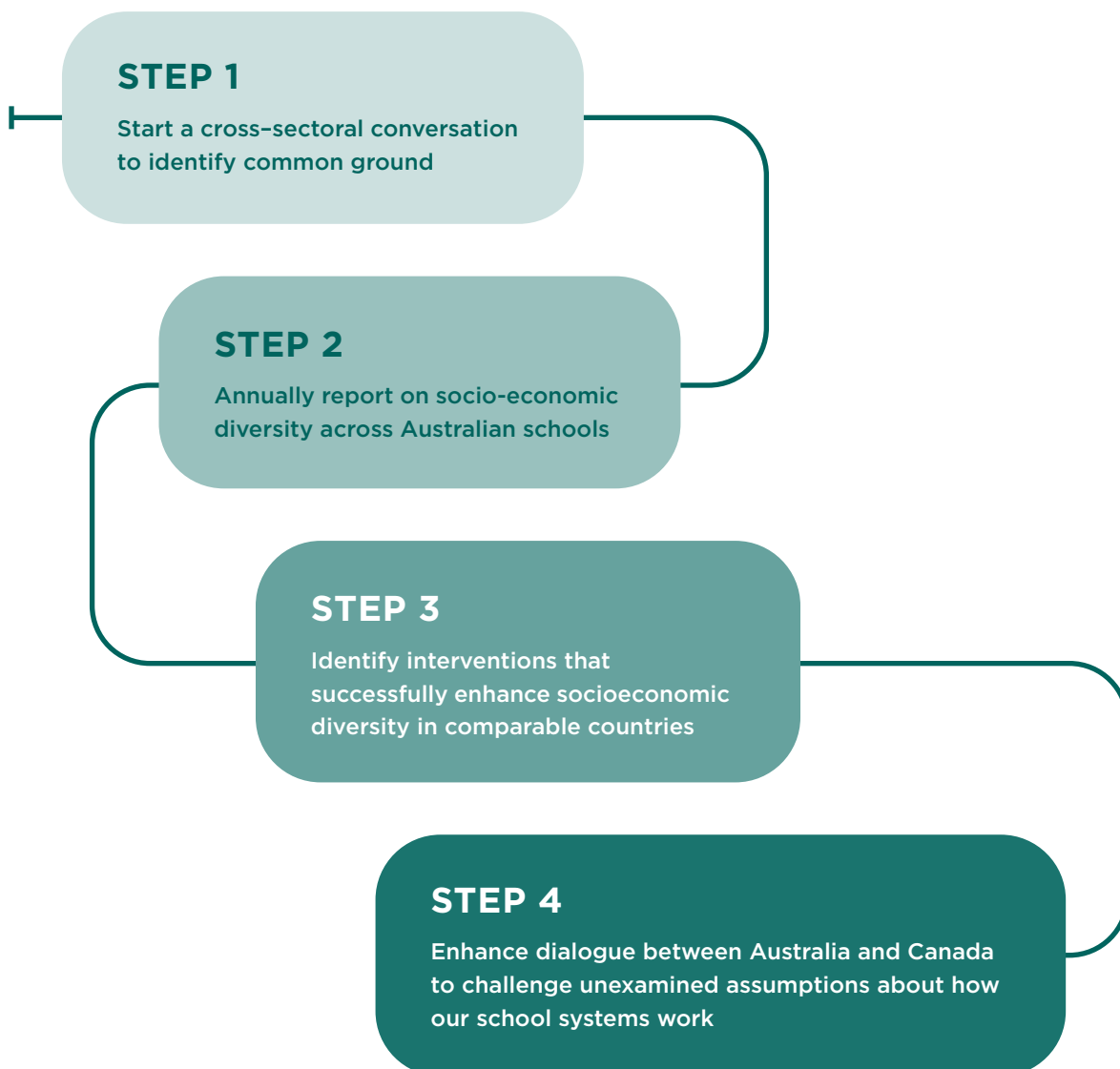
WHAT IS A COMMON FRAMEWORK?

A common framework of responsibilities and obligations should apply equally to all publicly funded schools guaranteeing that:

- All schools that receive public funding, whether they're in the government or non-government sector, are free to the user and prohibited from charging fees.
- All schools that receive public funding are open to children of all abilities and prohibited from excluding children based on entrance tests and other similar discriminators; non-government schools could continue to apply enrolment and other policies necessary to promote their specific religious or educational ethos.
- Independent and faith-based schools that accept these conditions are fully publicly funded to meet recurrent and capital costs on the same needs-basis as government schools; and
- Independent and faith-based schools that continue to charge fees or reject inclusive enrolment obligations would no longer receive any public funding.

NEXT STEPS

The example of Canada demonstrates that a common framework is achievable and desirable. Australia can start building an equal school system for all young people by taking the following actions immediately.



Policy debates in Australia can only be enhanced by continuous active engagement with comparable countries like Canada. Too often public conversation in Australia is limited by unexamined assumptions about how things must be.



ANDY MISON - A COMMON FRAMEWORK CAN ADVANCE THE 'FAIR GO'

Andy Mison is the President of the Australian Secondary Principals' Association, a director on the board of the Australian Institute of Teaching and School Leadership and has served as a teacher and principal in three jurisdictions. Visiting Canada convinced him of the urgency of establishing a common and fair regulatory and funding framework for all Australian schools.

"While the Ontario system is not perfect, the key difference in my mind is that the funding and regulatory conditions imposed by the provincial government and the education system are more efficient at mitigating choice and equity problems than ours. For Australians, Ontario challenges long-held assumptions and opens our eyes to different ways of structuring and funding schools.

The emphasis on equity, the commitment to the common good, and the shared belief in fully funded public education for every student are lessons that remind us of the 'Fair Go' and to put our kids first when designing education policy. We carry this reminder back to Australia."



MICHAEL SCIFFER - FOCUSING ON WHAT REALLY MATTERS

Michael Sciffer is a school counsellor and PhD candidate researching the drivers and outcomes of the segregation of low SES and Indigenous students. Sciffer noticed that the policy settings in Ontario mean school leaders and teachers approach their roles in a different way to their Australian colleagues.

"Australian public, independent, and Catholic schools compete like businesses for high status customers to raise institutional reputation and enrolment share. Advertising HSC results, scholarships for high achieving students, curricula and extra-curricula offerings, and an infrastructure arms race are all marketing tools Australian schools use to purchase the cultural capital of elite and middle-class families. Yet at the same time, the performance of high achieving students has been declining in international assessments.

Schools in Ontario operate very differently. Each public sector has the same financial resources and seems confident in their enrolment shares. This allows principals and schools to focus on what really matters, the learning and wellbeing of all students within their schools. I think this is a big part of why the academic performance of Ontario's schooling system is well ahead of Australia's on both excellence and equity."



CAROLINE DAVID - A FAITH PERSPECTIVE

Caroline David is the Principal of Woonona High School, and Vice President of the NSW South Coast Secondary Principals' Council. She is a PhD candidate at the University of Sydney investigating how Australian education policy architecture is entrenching inequality. David reflects on the position of Catholic schools in Ontario compared to Australia.

"As a person of faith, I often feel confronted by the insular, exclusive nature of faith-based schools in Australia. Their tendency to serve students whose families can part with sums of money large and small seems at odds with their faith's mission statement to be inclusive of all. Nor does enough thought appear to go into the implications for the schooling of those students who are not accepted - or subsequently excluded - from their schools.

"It would be wonderful if there was a time in Australia when faith based schools were committed to sharing the education of all young Australians, particularly those that are disadvantaged so that we could reflect the Ontario experience and have our faith leaders also report "We are so richly blessed" to have co-operation between the sectors - and a shared commitment to equity in words and deeds."

LET'S START THE CONVERSATION

The Australian Learning Lecture wants to start a new conversation about improving Australia's education system to truly achieve equity and excellence for all our children.

We invite parents, educators, researchers and policy makers to read the full report which comprehensively documents what we discovered in Canada:

Read the full report: <https://all-learning.org.au/lessons-from-canada-publication/>

We welcome your thoughts about Lessons from Canada and our proposal for A Common Framework for all Australian children.

Questions, objections, support are all crucial to the conversation we need to have.

Follow the discussion on:

Facebook - [@AusLearning](#)

X [ALL_learnAU](#) | [#lessonsfromcanada](#)

Together, we can work for reform for an equal school system in Australia that will serve the needs and aspirations of all our young people.

Read the full report: <https://all-learning.org.au/lessons-from-canada-publication/>

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info@all-learning.org.au

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