

**AUSTRALIAN COUNCIL FOR THE DEFENCE OF
GOVERNMENT SCHOOLS
PRESS RELEASE 866**

**Closing Australia's education divide will take a
generation:**

**This is the advice of Sergio Macklin, the deputy lead of
education policy at Victoria University's Mitchell Institute:**

On 12 December 1972, the Interim Committee for the Australian Schools Commission was appointed by the Hon. E.G. Whitlam, Prime Minister of Australia.

The Committee was asked to *'make recommendations as to the immediate financial needs of schools, priorities within those needs, and appropriate measures to assist in meeting those needs.'*¹

The 'Needs' policy was articulated and the principle of 'Equality' defined by the Committee as follows:

The Committee values the principle that the standard of schooling a child receives should not depend on what his parents are able or willing to contribute directly to it, or whether he is enrolled in a government or non-government institution. It believes that if incomes are to continue to be as unequal as they now are, there are good reasons for attempting to compensate...through schooling for unequal out-of-school situations in order **to ensure that the child's overall condition of upbringing is as free of restriction due to the circumstances of his family as public action through the schools can make it.**²

Forty years later David Gonski articulated the 'equality' or 'Needs' principles even more strikingly. Referring to his 2011 'Gonski Review of School Funding' Report in 2014 he said:

We delivered the Gonski report in December 2011. In it we set out our recommended funding arrangements whose aim was to produce improved educational outcomes for all Australian students, and also to seek **to ensure that educational outcomes in Australia were not the result of differences in wealth, income, power or possessions.**

¹ *Schools in Australia, Report of the Interim Committee for the Australian Schools Commission* , May 1973, p. 3

² *ibid* p. 11

This last point became our definition of ‘equity’, and was central to our thinking. All of us on the review panel were very moved by what we saw in the many site visits we made and what we heard from the experts we spoke to. Everything supported existing research, which showed a large gap between Australia’s highest and lowest performing students and also a clear link between low achievement and educational disadvantage, especially among students with low socioeconomic and Indigenous backgrounds.

3

If Karmel and Gonski sincerely believed that they could make a difference, they were proved mistaken. The history of ‘equality’ in Australian education is, amongst other things, the history of the failure of a social democratic Post World War II enterprise to tackle the ever growing gap between the education of the wealthy, privileged classes, the upper 10% or even 1% and the ‘disadvantaged’ in the lowest quartile.

In 1973 the Whitlam government did not control the Senate. Two compromises were made in order to establish the Schools Commission. Commonwealth funding of resource-rich (wealthy) schools was continued and the Catholic Church was given block grants to administer. A consequence was that system expansion rather than the funding of the poorest schools often occurred. According to Malcolm Turnbull, expressing outrage at the Both of these compromises diminished the potential of the Schools Commission to support its social justice objectives.⁴

By 2020, fiscal integrity alongside inequities affecting disadvantaged children in the Australian community have been exposed, by a series of International OECD and UNICEF Reports on inequalities and segregation in Australian

³ Jean Blackburn Lecture 21 May 2014 at <https://www.theguardian.com/world/interactive/2014/may/22/david-gonski-jean-blackburn-oration-speech-in-full> accessed 09.10.2020.

⁴ In 1982, after his chairmanship had not been renewed, Dr. McKinnon, said:

It, (the ‘needs’ policy’ is not illegal, just slippery....It expected everybody to play the game by the declared rules...It’s like income tax – everybody maneuvers themselves to benefit in the best possible way. *National Times* 29 August-4 September 1982.

McKinnon also said it was impossible to penetrate what was happening in the NSW Catholic system. O’Brien, Report of an interview with Dr. McKinnon, 1994 in *Blazing a Trail: Catholic Education in Victoria, 1963-1980*, 1999, p.141

Jean Blackburn resigned in 1980 and when Dr. Ken McKinnon was not reappointed by the Coalition Government, she said:

It is the end of an era...in which we thought education could contribute something very significant to the enlightening of society. Richard Scherer, ‘Head of Schools Body Not Being Reappointed,’ *Canberra Times*, 4 December 1980, p. 8.

education;⁵ Auditor General Reports; ⁶the National School Resourcing Board Review of Needs-Based Funding;⁷ research by various policy and research groups ;⁸reporters in the Fairfax Press ⁹and the ABC¹⁰; - and the pandemic.

The latest exposure of the quite shocking levels of inequality in our education system was published in this last week by the ABC on their website by Conor Duffy, their national education and parenting reporter. We reproduce it below:

<https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-10-28/education-opportunity-landmark-report-reveals-gap-widening/12817724>

Closing Australia's education divide will take a generation, landmark study finds

By national education and parenting reporter [Conor Duffy](#)

Posted 10hours ago, updated 3hours ago

One of the most comprehensive studies of Australia's education system has found postcodes and family backgrounds impact the opportunities available to students from pre-school to adulthood, with one in three disadvantaged students falling through the cracks.

Key points:

- The study tracked 300,000 kids from school entry to adulthood
- Students from disadvantaged backgrounds were less likely to progress into work or further study

⁵ *OECD Report on Worldwide education indicators:PISA results 2018 : Effective Policies, Successful Schools (Vol V)*. According to this Report Australia is ninth-worst of 77 countries for the equitable allocation of resources between disadvantaged and advantaged schools. Only Colombia, Panama, Peru, Cyprus, Philippines, Mexico, Brazil and Thailand rank lower. Australia is also 15th in the OECD is spending per student, behind countries including Norway, US, Iceland, Sweden, Belgium, Morea, Finland, UK and Singapore. Australia scores almost five times worse than the OECD average in terms of the unequitable allocation of resources to disadvantaged schools. The Report also shows IT access for students from disadvantaged backgrounds has gone backwards since 2015. and UNICEF Reports....

⁶ Auditor General Reports:

⁷ National School Resourcing Board Review of Needs-Based Funding, December 2019 accessed 14.09.2020 at <https://docs.education.gov.au/node/5342>

⁸ Grattan Institute; The Gonski Institute; Save Our Schools. Lyndsay Connors articles in John Menadue's Pearls and Irritations at https://johnmenadue.com/part-1-education-policies-over-the-decades-have-intensified-socio-economic-segregation/?mc_cid=f8408db7df&mc_eid=1b851cb851 and <https://johnmenadue.com/part-2-society-bears-costs-of-education-policy-crimes/>

⁹ Age Reports:

¹⁰ ABC <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-09-02/how-the-catholic-school-system-takes-from-the-poor/12588920?nw=0>

- The Smith Family's Anne Hampshire believes the problem can be fixed within one generation

Sergio Macklin, the deputy lead of education policy at Victoria University's Michell Institute, released the report *Educational Opportunity in Australia*, which calls for immediate extra resources to help disadvantaged, Indigenous and remote students.

"Educational success is strongly linked to the wealth of a young person's family and where they grow up," Mr Macklin said.

"I think Australia's really letting down students from low-income families, Aboriginal students and those in remote areas."

The report critiques progress on last December's Alice Springs Education Council meeting where, in the wake of Australia's poor performance against its international counterparts, education ministers pledged to deliver a system that produced excellence and equity.

Last year's poor results on equality of education have now been exacerbated by remote learning, with some students without internet or stability at home falling weeks behind their peers.

"The children and young people that were being worst served by the education system are probably the ones that are being most affected by it," Mr Macklin said.

"So you'll see employment stress in families dramatically increased student vulnerability."

The report followed the progress of more than 300,000 students from school entry through primary school, into high school and onto early adulthood.

Mr Macklin believes the problem will take a generation to fix.

The report found disadvantaged students were more than twice as likely as their peers to not be in study or work by the age of 24.

The national average of students missing out on either work or study is 15 per cent, but this rises to 32 per cent of students from the lowest SES backgrounds, 38 per cent from very remote areas and 45 per cent among Indigenous young people.

"I think what this report highlights is that we're losing young people's opportunities in adulthood — and that's a real problem for young people," Mr Macklin said.

"But it's also a real problem for Australia. It puts a handbrake on our recovery efforts from the COVID recession."

About half an hour outside of Canberra, in regional New South Wales, 14-year-old Caitlyn, 16-year-old Iliana, 13-year-old William and their mother Mem are bucking the trend, with the help of the Smith Family.

They are members of a proud Indigenous family originally from Djangadi country, in far north-eastern NSW.

Remote learning has been a battle for everyone, but getting it done in a two-bedroom apartment which houses three teenagers and their single mum has come with its own challenges.

Even getting a desk was a major hurdle.

"I worried were they going to bicker," Mem said.

"How do all of us get enough space? Because there's nowhere to get away to and you weren't really allowed outside.

William sleeps in the lounge room and his bedroom became a school headquarters of sorts.

"I'm in the lounge room and it's the most public area of the house. Iliana and Caitlyn both have their own bedrooms," William said.

Caitlyn found it a tough change from school.

"After a few weeks, I realised it sucked, because I struggle sometimes with just online learning," the year 9 student said.

"I find it easier to do face to face, so instead of in a big group, they can explain it to me in a way that I would understand."

But for the oldest of the three siblings, 16-year-old Iliana, it became comfortable.

"I think we had a little trouble at first adjusting because we didn't know exactly who was going to be where and who was intruding on who, but eventually we found our rhythm on how to do things," she said.

Mem is proud of her three children's dedication.

All are on track to be future Indigenous leaders, and with the extra support they were lucky enough to arrange, they have gone back to school on par with their peers.

Positive solutions

The Smith Family's head of research, Anne Hampshire, says it was proof it could be done.

She said educational equity could be achieved much quicker than in a generation if philanthropists, educators, welfare agencies and all levels of government came together.

"What that concretely looks like, the type of support that makes a difference, is high-quality pre-school programs before children start school and then providing financial, emotional and education support — things like high-quality reading programs, after-school learning clubs," Ms Hampshire said.

She said the investment would quickly be repaid through lower rates of welfare and health problems for those who kept slipping through the gaps.

"We need to have a commitment to investing in an Australian education base so we're actually investing in what works and evaluating new initiatives as we go," she said.

"The international evidence is that [with that], a lot more people can do well educationally."

LISTEN TO THE DOGS PROGRAM
855 ON THE AM DIAL: 12.00 NOON SATURDAYS
<http://www.3cr.org.au/dogs>