



Don't polarise, stress education quality instead



Equity is one of the main polarising issues between public and private school supporters. Opponents of public funding for non-government schools, such as the Australian Education Union, argue that the increasing growth of the non-government sector – one in three children across Australia now attend either Catholic systemic or independent schools – has led to poorer overall education results and greater inequality. The ACT has the country's highest proportion of primary and secondary students attending non-government schools, at 42.9 per cent.

Many of these opponents' arguments are based on misuse of funding data and selective examples that portray the non-government sector as the preserve of privilege and the social elite. Nothing could be further from the truth, nor more out of step with the evidence. Indeed, the latest evidence convincingly shows that non-government schools provide a significant return on the public's investment in this sector, in terms of quality education, equity and contributions to national wellbeing.

It is the particular characteristics of the non-government sector – its focus on quality and achievement, the flexibility to respond to the educational needs of each individual student, its strong systems of accountability to parents and government, and a capacity to recruit high-quality staff – that lead to quality education outcomes that, in turn, contribute to greater equity.

Here is the evidence. Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development studies have found that, after controlling for socio-economic intake, these attributes of accountability, autonomy and choice contribute to greater equity and higher achievement and reduce the dependence of student achievement on socio-economic status. Overcoming social disadvantage through education is

more effective when government provides per capita funding to schools and allows them autonomy and flexibility. By providing public funding, governments ensure schools operate in the national interest.

The problem in discussions about equity in education is a confusion about what equity means in practice and where it fits with a nation's need for quality education.

Some see equity in terms of not just of equal access, but in terms of the same outcomes for all. A more useful approach to equity would focus on education quality, removing barriers to access and addressing disadvantage and then working with individual students to achieve their full potential. The best means of improving equity in our society is to improve the quality of education. In other words, better quality of education overcomes social disadvantage. This is also what the evidence says.

More spending on education is not the answer for government. Governments of all political colours have been taking that approach for years, yet Australia still has a significant equity problem with lengthy underachievement associated with being indigenous, living in rural and remote regions and from a socially disadvantaged background.

The evidence shows that resources aimed at improving the overall quality of education is the real answer to improving equity, to really tackling the education disadvantage. Improve an individual's education performance and you improve the person's life chances. This is real equity reform aimed at disadvantage.

In practice, achieving improved education quality requires not more funding, but spending where it makes a difference. This means focusing on early intervention and quality education in the early years. We know that works. It means improving teacher quality and performance in the classroom. It means schools having a better

learning environment, good leadership and a focus on achievement. It means having a school system with more parental involvement, more flexible teaching practices and more accountability. It means having education strategies addressing educational disadvantage that is based on evidence about what works for particular students in particular contexts.

It means doing a lot of what the non-government sector is doing now. Education outcomes in the non-government sector are higher than in the government sector. The easy explanation for this difference, of course, is that the non-government school population comes from more advantaged backgrounds. This view ignores the social diversity of non-government schools. It also ignores the considerable evidence now available from overseas and Australia to show that non-government school achievement is higher regardless of social background. Funding policies supporting school choice, autonomy and accountability – in other words, having a vibrant non-government sector – are important contributors to achieving greater equity.

Australian education is facing a challenge. Internationally Australian school students are mostly high achievers, performing well above the OECD average. But the latest Program for International Student Assessment results show that, relative to other countries, Australia's education outcomes are declining. Australia was the only high-performing OECD country to show a significant decline. It is time we focused on equity in a way that we know works. It is education quality that counts. It is hoped the current Gonski review into school funding understands this.

■ Professor Scott Prasser is executive director of the Public Policy Institute at the Australian Catholic University and recently issued the report *Equity and Education*.