

How NSW and Australia failed its schools

Institute of Retired Senior Educational Administrators (IRSEA).

Note: The graphics shown are simplified versions of the originals. The latter are in or referred to in *Waiting for Gonski*.

Chris Bonnor

Can I acknowledge that we are on the lands of the Gadigal people and add my respects to elders past, present, and emerging.

Can I also add a related finding: across Australia Indigenous students are increasingly finding themselves in schools with the least capacity and resources to help them! More along those lines later.

First of all, thank you for inviting me. I'm a bit over-awed, your combined contribution to NSW public schools is enormous. We all go back many years and many previous lives – and like me, you clearly can't let go. Let's face it, it is what we were ... and still are.

We've all been influenced by our experiences. After separation (whatever that means), I did a few things, worked with one of the universities for a short while and co-authored a couple of books.

I'm still interested in schools, at two levels: how innovative they can be and how they fit together as systems. The first interest, innovation, took me to look at schools in a few places. I was encouraged by Viv White and had a close look at the Big Picture schools in the USA. I certainly remember walking from a Bronx subway station to visit a nearby school. Someone pointed the way and the graffiti along the streets pointed to much else.

I was impressed, there and also here, at how a personalised learning design could be so successful, including in the things we don't sufficiently do and measure: re-engaging kids, love of learning, rigorous learning, future focus, family participation, post-school destinations and much more.

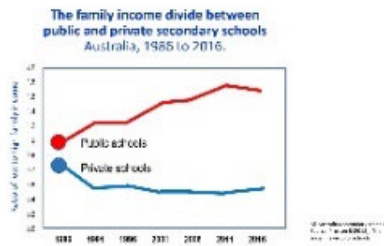
I don't think there is a NAPLAN test for all that ... and in fact, innovative schools seem to exist almost in deliberate defiance of orthodoxy in what schools are and do.

Then over the last decade I've worked with a variety of people, Bernie Shepherd, Christina Ho at UTS, the Centre for Policy Development and the Gonski Institute... and now many others through my writing with Tom Greenwell. More of that later.

Over this time I've been energised by both Gonski Reviews because they promised to shift the dial, firstly on equity (that's the first review) and secondly on the way we do school itself (the second review). Alas, it was not to be, or at least was not to be enough.

And all this time I was grieving at what was happening to public education, something that was, in hindsight, quite easy to see. We have all lived our careers through this time.

And this graph summarises what happened. It shows the separation of school enrolments as indicated by the ratio of low to high income families.



In effect we were becoming what John Howard referred to as a safety net for the poor.

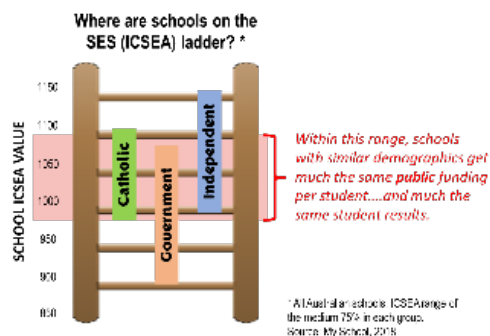
Then fourteen years ago two interesting things happened. The first was the Gonski Review, but the second came when Julia Gillard launched the My School website. Its value had, and still has, little to do with why it was established....I think it was a product of some neoliberal fantasy.

But for the first time it was possible to attach numbers around things which for years we could see happening, but couldn't prove.

So for six years Bernie Shepherd scraped all the My School data from the website, initially using a team of a dozen uni students in a Rooty Hill HS classroom. Bernie taught me about spreadsheets, beat me up if I made mistakes, and together we published quite a bit. He died in 2017. If he was around today he would lament that our work was delivering in an era when a good story or fake news could trump evidence almost every time.

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OK, time now for some specifics. My School data has long shown that we have a well-established hierarchy of schools, a hierarchy in terms of both socio-educational advantage and student achievement. The strong association between SES and achievement is now well known – I think Kevin Donnelly is the last living Australian in denial.



In brief, this infographic shows where the school sectors lie on the ladder. I use 'SES' as a better-known descriptor. In the context of schools, it is actually SEA – socioeducational advantage....but there is consistency between the two measures.

We get the pattern shown on the graph in almost every community, and there is enough overlap, in the shaded area, to make interesting comparisons of money going into schools and results coming out. The differences between the sectors in that shaded area are quite small.

Of course, on *average* the sectors are different in so many ways, but averages are rather silly because some schools enrol mainstream low-cost kids, while others, mainly public schools, enrol the highest cost kids from the highest cost families, communities and locations.

That area of overlap enables apples with apples comparisons between the sectors, something that has huge implications. The public funding and the results are similar, but there is nothing similar in our obligations and the rules we have to follow.

On the money side, the private or fee-charging sector gets more *total* dollars per student...but even this has huge implications. Why aren't these 'similar' yet wealthier schools doing better? When politicians complain about schools getting so much money for no better results, they are ignoring the top end of that ladder.

Those schools are highly resourced, including with the apparently scarce resources of teachers. There isn't an overall teacher shortage at the moment - just like all other resources going into schools they are inequitably distributed.

Surplus teachers are especially locked up in the independent sector. And there is another resource locked up with them in most high SES schools in all sectors – and I refer to the resource of advantaged and aspirant kids.

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It is that *student* resource which has shifted from low to high SES schools, and in the process has especially created our growing enrolment segregation and associated inequity and underachievement. It is worsening in very measurable ways, year by year.

How do we know? Since 2011 we have been able to track student movement, using the data lurking behind My School. And what an opportunity, we had a major review of schools, emerging in 2011 at the same time as a mountain of data which would soon, and quickly, tell whether the review and its implementation was making a sufficient difference. It wasn't, and it probably won't.

Around that time I thought that the universities would turn this data into digestible publications. But substantial research takes years to see the light of day, that is, if you can get the funding. Even the book I've written with Tom Greenwell took two years.

Other things can be much quicker. Within a month of the Perrottet government announcing a new selective school for Westmead I wrote a 5000 word paper. If someone gave me this month's My School data in spreadsheet form I could produce a detailed analysis in two weeks, and a published paper in four.

(As an aside I can't though at the moment, because I haven't had annual My School data since 2019. If you know a statistician out there who is as mad as I am please let me know. I mean it, I'm desperate for a statistical partner!)

So what did Bernie and I do with what were very alarming findings? Many years ago I would sit with others in the minister's office and really wonder whether it was time well spent. Up there in Mordor we would throw around various issues and I quickly concluded that unless the minister could hear the same message in the roar of the crowd down below in Farrer Place, or in the media equivalent, not enough would change.

So for the last decade and more I've taken the short cut to the media. You all know the risks in dealing with the media, but there are still some good education journalists out there.

Mind you, even they make mistakes. Did you see the gushing piece about Riverbank Public School in the *SMH* this week? It seems that their success is *all their own work*. But does that mean that the apparent shortcomings of Riverstone Public, just two suburbs away is *all their own fault*? One school

has an ICSEA of 1130 and serves a postcode with a relatively high (\$3285/week) household income. The other has an ICSEA of 960 in a suburb with a much lower (\$2138) household income. Go figure!

But it is a dilemma. If that is revealed will it put more bums on seats at Riverstone Public School? But even then, the message I got from colleagues, even years ago, was 'tell it like it is - we don't have much more to lose!'

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The data has helped clarify what issues matter, and what don't. And it has highlighted the disconnect between within-school reform and the need for wider system restructuring. Within-school reform matters, and always has. I was heavily involved, not only in my own schools but with Big Picture.

But if within-school reform is all we do - and ignore the wider structures - it won't be enough. Yes, we can deluge disadvantaged schools with reform and even parachute the very best teachers into those schools. But that won't be enough if the most aspirant and able students are, at the same time, encouraged to head out the back door.

The end result is that we are concentrating the strugglers together, mainly in public schools. No one else has to take them. And this increasing concentration, is closely associated with our overall decline in student achievement – through what we know as the peer or compositional effect in schools and classrooms.

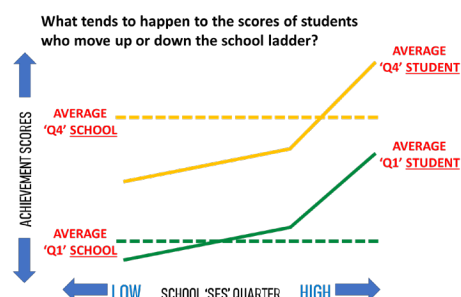
Let me give some background and then let's look at some alarming data.

The school where I was longest as principal, Asquith Boys HS was at the bottom of the local school SES hierarchy. It was also quite small and the learning culture of each cohort was often at risk.

Aside from useful reforms, I did something else. I put half the senior school in blazers and ties. Why? So that our elite would look like others, and our school would look like a good place for aspirant families.

It's appalling, but it helped get the right kind of enrolments. It tells so much, as does research, about the true nature of school competition.

Secondly, from the early 2000s, research, including by Stephen Lamb and Richard Teese in Victoria, was increasingly pointing to peer impact on student learning. Then in 2011 our Department produced a discussion paper *Australian School Funding Arrangements*, which was fed into the Gonski Review. There's far more detail on all this, as well as specific references, in my book *Waiting for Gonski*.



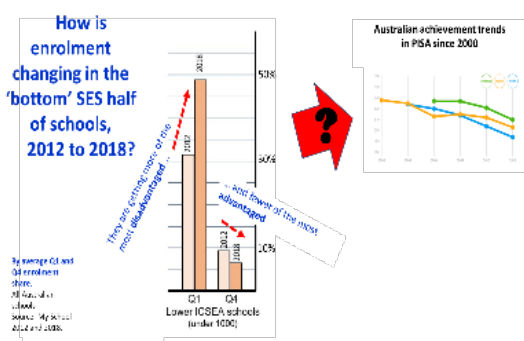
The NSW discussion paper showed the impact of school SES, created by its enrolment, on student achievement. This very simplified graph shows the changed performance of Q1 and Q4 students who attend schools further up, or down for that matter, the ICSEA ladder.

These findings certainly haven't slowed the rollout of more selective schools. And the paper itself seems to have disappeared.

I haven't let it drop. The data points to the impact of enrolment separation. An increasing number of kids are almost literally in a class of their own.

Of course there are many explanations for declining student outcomes, but peer effects almost certainly underpin the decline and help explain why other reforms don't deliver as we constantly hope.

If we are going to ignore or dismiss the peer impact on learning we need to be 100% certain that it doesn't matter. Why? Because it is getting worse. Here are the trends in graphical form



Lower ICSEA schools are *increasing* their proportion of lowest quarter (Q1) kids, and losing their Q4 kids. The graph on the right is our PISA performance. There is a close association between the two graphs. Association isn't the same as cause and effect, but

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So, let's look at the relationship between increasing disadvantage and *our own* measures of student achievement.

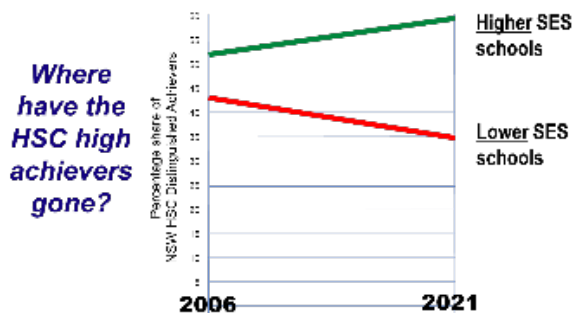
This is where My School shines. It enables far more nuanced research into who goes where to school, and what comes out in results. You can cross-reference My School data against other data from the ABS and other authorities, including NESA. And of course, you can plot changes over time.

The cross referencing is important. We fret about the NAPLAN gaps that increase between Years 5 and 9....and everyone has a theory. But by Year 9, the more disadvantaged kids form a much larger proportion of public school enrolments especially. Yet I haven't seen any commentary which points to this as a possible factor.

Let's go to a measure everyone knows. The number of HSC distinguished achievers (DAs) is trumpeted by the media in what passes these days for league tables. And schools with more and more DAs are celebrated, while those with fewer ... well, don't go there, literally, as is the implication!

But the *schools*, as such, may not be doing better or worse. In the main, the potential DAs have changed schools! And many schools, and systems, are active agents in making that happen.

So what does this look like? Using DAs as a measure, the changing location of high scoring students can be tracked against school SES, sector and location. I'll focus on school SES. This graph includes all sectors.



And that is just over 15 years!

The shifting location of high achieving students tells us as much, if not more, than does comparing NAPLAN over time. It suggests that it's not only what schools do that matters, it's likely to be more about *which* students are going *where* to school.

In NSW, potential DAs have abandoned low or even middle ICSEA schools and have taken their high scores elsewhere....and this enrolment shift also shows up in changes in school size and enrolment composition.

Even leaving the private sector aside, our public high schools in NSW tell the story. In 2006 DAs in our schools were spread 55% in high, and 45% in low ICSEA schools. The spread is now 72:28. The split between Sydney and the bush used to be 83:17, it is now 94:6

Our low SES schools have been residualised to the hilt, almost everywhere. When they announced a new mega-selective school for Westmead, the question that sprang to my mind was: where the hell do they think the enrolments will come from, because there are few high achievers left in the comprehensive schools in west and southwest Sydney.

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I need to wrap up. We are all educators in this room. And if we don't believe we can make a difference for kids regardless of the circumstances, then we've been in the wrong job. But what's happened in the last two decades is that the circumstances have changed.

And changed in ways that policy makers, school authorities and even high-profile school and system leaders may not understand, or even want to know. And if they do, they are reluctant to advocate for the bigger system and structural change. That shows up even in high-level reviews going back to Gonski, even to Karmel in the 1970s and most recently to the Productivity Commission.

Near the end of *Waiting for Gonski* Tom Greenwell and I propose, what in Australia, would be a radical change - but in many other countries is quite ho-hum, because they are doing it. That is a long story in itself. And in that last chapter we pose the question 'what if we don't'. If we don't, we'll get more of what we have. And by any standard, continuing what we have is unconscionable.