



THE MCKELL INSTITUTE

# Bridging the Gap

A PATHWAY TO EXCELLENCE AND EQUITY IN  
AUSTRALIAN SCHOOLS THROUGH **NEEDS-  
BASED FUNDING AND EQUITABLE POLICY**

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# ABOUT THE MCKELL INSTITUTE

The McKell Institute is an independent, not-for-profit research organisation dedicated to advancing practical policy solutions to contemporary issues.

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF COUNTRY

This report was written on the lands of the Jagera and Turrbal peoples. The McKell Institute acknowledges Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as the Traditional Owners of Country throughout Australia and their continuing connection to both their land and seas.

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## FOREWORD

Reports on Australia's education system often contribute to an overly simplistic narrative of system-in-decline. While rightly identifying a cause for concern, this narrative fundamentally fails to represent the complex work that is undertaken inside the school gate by Australia's teaching profession.

For the past decade, governments have reacted to media headlines about failing schools and kids lacking the basics. The result is a suite of reviews, reports and policy initiatives like the *Review of the Australian Curriculum* (2014), *Action Now: Classroom Ready Teachers* (2015), *National Teacher Workforce Action Plan* (2022), and two iterations of National School Reform Agreement.

Despite this raft of reviews, results continue to suggest more is needed to be done to improve educational outcomes in our schools. In 2011, the Commonwealth Government released the *Review of Funding for Schooling - Final Report* (Gonski Review), which called for a needs-based approach to school funding, but more than a decade later public schools continue to be shortchanged.

The new *Better and Fairer Schools Agreement (2025-2034)* must deliver better and fairer school funding, and the agreement should adopt a bold plan that empowers Australia's teaching profession to tell their school's story in a meaningful way. This will require governments to trust those working inside the school gate to consult with their community as they strive to achieve equity and excellence for the students within their school gates.

This report draws on publicly available data, content published on school websites and government reports and highlights some important case studies showing the work that occurs inside the school gate. Ensuring that a world class education is within reach of all students in this state should be the driving force of every Queensland Government.



**Sarah Mawhinney**  
Executive Director, McKell Institute Queensland

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Education policy can either worsen or offset social disadvantages. It can bridge or widen gaps, and it can drive or impede social mobility.

A body of research is clear that growing disadvantage and declining student outcomes are the consequences of how we resource and invest in our schools. As we completed this report, the OECD's *Education at a Glance 2024* survey was released, reconfirming what studies consistently show: there is a widening gap between advantaged and disadvantaged students, harming learning outcomes and leading to increased concentration of social disadvantage.<sup>1</sup>

The research shows us that Australia's education crisis has manifested because Australian governments continue to spend less on public education than other developed countries, and that within our uniquely segregated school system, needs-based funding is urgent. The research also remains clear about the human cost of policy failures. Decades of underfunding have generated a vast number of excluded students—a morally indefensible situation in a country as wealthy as Australia.

More, the research shows that to the greatest extent possible, education should be equitable and fair not only for the livelihood of all existing public school students, but for the long term economic and health benefits for all Australians.

Education is in crisis, but this is repairable. This report shows that through needs-based funding, Queensland's access to education can become more equitable and its outcomes can rise to meet community expectations and world standards. Queensland now has an opportunity to reverse educational decline in ways that are affordable, politically achievable and popularly-supported.<sup>2</sup>



Alongside our presentation of the current educational policy context, we include in this report brief case studies from some of the many Queensland schools and teachers who are making a tangible difference for their students and their families. The place-based strategies schools employ to overcome disadvantage is visible in student achievement data, and also evident in their positive outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people; their remarkable relationships with local and diverse communities; their commitment to opening life-changing opportunities for young people; their well-being strategies (for both students and education staff) and their commitment to evidence-based and innovative pedagogical practices.

### WE CONCLUDE WITH FOUR POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS TO GOVERNMENT:

1. **Increase** the Commonwealth share of school resource standard payments to at least 25 per cent;
2. **Embed** school autonomy and local consultation in expenditure of schooling resource standard payments;
3. **Develop** a reporting mechanism that is both qualitative and recognises school difference; and which mitigates workload of school leaders and
4. **Invest** in professional collaborative time.

Definitive, evidence-based pathways are set out in this document, along with policy strategies that are within practical reach.



## KEY FINDINGS

- ▶ Case studies confirm that needs-based education funding works, transforming the prospects of students from socially-disadvantaged communities.
- ▶ Social disadvantage can be addressed through targeted investment in schools and teaching.
- ▶ Queensland can maintain both high quality results and equal access and support for students through affordable policy measures.
- ▶ Equity and excellence in Australia's lagging education system is achievable with policy measures that support students and teachers.

## PART 1: AUSTRALIA'S PURSUIT OF EXCELLENCE AND EQUITY IN EDUCATION

Education holds the promise of unlocking potential and creating pathways to success for all students. In Australia, the opportunity to harness this power lies in needs-based education funding. Research consistently shows that a strong, inclusive education system can deliver both equity and excellence, ensuring that students from all backgrounds thrive. While challenges exist, especially for students from socially-disadvantaged communities, there are clear examples of how targeted support can lead to transformative outcomes. Case studies from Queensland's government schools demonstrate how investing in at-risk students not only elevates their prospects but also contributes to broader social mobility and stronger communities.<sup>3</sup>

Our Australian education system is facing unprecedented challenges. Full and secure funding for state schools is especially urgent in the current crisis of extreme teaching shortages. Unless there are some urgent changes, we risk losing our best teachers from the schools that need them most.<sup>4</sup> Teachers have reported they feel underpaid, undervalued, overworked and under extreme duress.<sup>5</sup> Meanwhile, young people, especially those who are already disadvantaged, are experiencing record levels of mental health issues, declining academic achievement, and increasing disengagement from schools. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students are among the most vulnerable students with government falling short on its Closing the Gap Commitments.<sup>6</sup>

In Queensland, with its unique rural and remoteness, providing schools, teachers and students with adequate support to thrive is crucial.

The evidence is clear: needs-based education funding can transform the prospects of students and communities from socially-disadvantaged communities.<sup>7</sup> A range of research finds a strong and healthy education system can help achieve equity and excellence regardless of the student's background.<sup>8</sup>

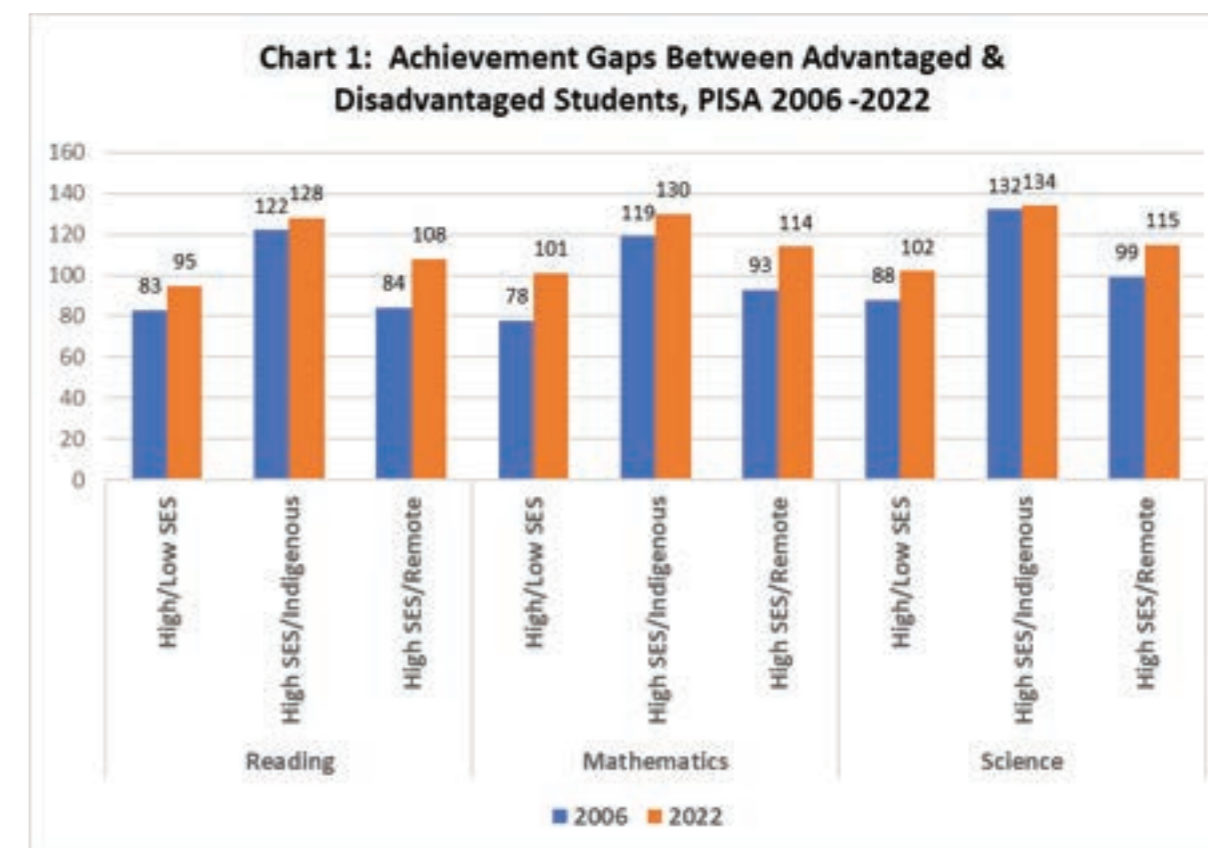
Since the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) commenced the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) in 2000, Australia's education system has raised concerns, ranking among the most inequitable of any OECD country.<sup>9,10</sup> Yet case-study testimonies from government schools in Queensland paint a clear picture of educational transformations.<sup>11</sup> Some of these case-studies are extracted here. They show that funding our at-risk and disadvantaged students builds their capacities for success and also places social mobility, resilient communities, and broader social justice outcomes within reach.

By some analyses, Australia's at-risk students rank at levels five years behind students from more affluent postcodes.<sup>12</sup> These analyses are supported by reports from the National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) tests in 2024, which show “long-standing educational disadvantage remained entrenched across Australia” with identifiable cohorts of student demographics.<sup>13</sup>

These students include those who identify as First Nations, students with disabilities, students from low socio-economic backgrounds, students with low English language proficiency, those living in regional, rural, and remote communities, and those enrolled in small or very small schools. These student demographics were identified as contributing to educational disadvantage in the Commonwealth Government's *Review of Funding for Schooling – Final Report (Gonski Review)*<sup>14</sup> and subsequently informed the policy response of the Commonwealth Government which is enshrined in the *Australian Education Act 2013*.<sup>15</sup> This report also acknowledges educational disadvantage brought to bear by refugee or asylum-seeking backgrounds<sup>16</sup> and children in out-of-home care situations.<sup>17</sup> Some of these students face multiple intersections of disadvantage.<sup>18</sup>

### Addressing disadvantage through targeted investment has local impact

Needs-based school funding for these students continues to be the most important investment governments can make in their community's future.<sup>19</sup> Many schools report school-wide and community-wide transformations from such funding that cannot be adequately captured by global assessment programs like PISA, nor by national assessment programs like NAPLAN.<sup>20</sup> Localised information on how students are faring can be found in school-based reports of better long-term academic achievement, as well as data showing greater school attendance and class engagement; decreased entry into the juvenile justice system; greater parental involvement in learning; increased community engagement, and greater ability of schools to enact long-term strategic planning.<sup>21</sup>



Source: De Bortoli, L., Underwood, C., & Thomson, S. (2023). *PISA in Brief 2022: Student performance and equity in education*. Australian Council for Educational Research.

Among other significant policies (detailed below), the Gonski Review warned us that state school leaders and teachers, who continue to do the heavy lifting to support excellence and equity, cannot continue this without both Commonwealth and State government support. A primary recommendation of the Gonski Review was that, while funding increases are required across all school sectors, “the largest part of this increase” must flow “to the government sector due to the significant numbers and greater concentration of disadvantaged students attending government schools”.<sup>22</sup> Government schools enrol the vast majority of students who fall into categories of disadvantaged groups. The OECD reports that forty-one percent of government schools can be described as doing the heavy lifting to overcome factors of educational disadvantage.<sup>23</sup>

Queensland has the opportunity to help its most at-risk students reach their full potential to become autonomous, confident and creative lifelong learners, and active and informed community members,<sup>24</sup> if state and Commonwealth governments commit to increase funding and deliver 100 percent of the Schooling Resource Standard (SRS) to all Queensland government schools. The opportunity can be seized by both levels of government in a new bilateral agreement, arising from the *Better and Fairer Schools Agreement (2025-2034)*<sup>25</sup> and which replaces the *National School Reform Agreement (2019-2024)*.<sup>26</sup> The *Better and Fairer Schools Agreement* increases Commonwealth funding contribution from 20 percent to 22.5 percent.<sup>27</sup> Some education stakeholders contend the increased Commonwealth contribution is insufficient and have called for an increase to a minimum of 25 percent.<sup>28</sup> The position is supported by some state Ministers for Education, including Queensland’s Minister.<sup>29</sup>

### Case study: Benowa State School

In a rapidly developing, economically diverse neighbourhood, and with more than half (54 per cent) of its students from non-English speaking backgrounds, Benowa State School has a “diverse and rich tapestry of multicultural backgrounds,” says Principal Michael Josey. Benowa State School is a government school on the Gold Coast and its “diversity is mapped across the globe, from Cook Islanders, Italian, Portuguese, Middle Eastern, Asian and Scandinavian. In our last count over 40 different languages other than English were spoken at home as the family’s first language.” The school community includes families who have been in the area for many generations, as well as many newcomers from across the globe.

Yet despite being from language backgrounds other than English, Benowa students far outperformed most Australian schools in successive NAPLAN scores of reading, writing, spelling, and grammar—demonstrating that with support, these groups are far less ‘at risk’.

Benowa’s school leadership has invested its SRS funding in supporting curriculum and pedagogy differentiation and allocations of time for professional collaboration and inquiry when teachers come together to discuss student data with leaders

at individual and cohort levels. In Benowa’s School Opinion Survey, more than 96 per cent of parents agree ‘Teachers at this school motivate my child to learn’, ‘Teachers at this school treat students fairly’, and ‘I can talk to my child’s teachers about my concerns’. Moreover, more than 90 percent of students agree ‘I feel safe at my school,’ ‘my teachers motivate me to learn,’ and ‘my teachers provide me with useful feedback about my school work.’

This is only possible in a school with great leadership, a great teaching team and adequate resourcing.

The school also demonstrates the recursive benefits to communities, remaining, as the Principal notes, “deeply rooted in the many ongoing generations that proudly return to this school for a continuing partnership in quality education that they so fondly remember”.<sup>30</sup>

### Excellence and equity are not out of reach

Internationally, the strength of education systems is often measured on the basis of excellence (the quality of educational outcomes) and equity (that every student can achieve their educational potential regardless of their personal or social circumstances). The highest performing education systems are those that can provide evidence of both.<sup>31</sup> In other words, there is a strong relationship between equity and excellence.

Notably, equity and excellence underpin Queensland’s Department of Education *Strategic Plan (2024-28)*.<sup>32</sup>

We know from decades of research that there remain persistent inconsistencies in student excellence and equity based in large part on the socioeconomic status signalled in their postal code. In 2022 for example, The Productivity Commission released a review of school standards in Australia, finding we “persistently fall short” when it comes to providing a high quality and equitable education for all students.<sup>33</sup> It found “governments are yet to demonstrate results in improving equity”, particularly for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, and those in rural and remote areas, as well as students with disabilities. The report calls for high equity (and high quality) education for students from priority equity cohorts. It calls for new strategies—developed with students, parents, and communities—to support students from disadvantaged backgrounds.<sup>34</sup>

The evidence is clear that excellence is only possible if Australia maintains both high quality results as well as equal access and support for all students. While there are questions around the benefits of using PISA data for international comparisons, its 2022 findings, published in *The State of Learning and Equity in Education*, confirm other analyses suggesting Australian students are falling behind.<sup>35</sup> Although recent PISA results have been contested by some who suggest a cultural bias and an over-reliance on standardised tests,<sup>36</sup> successive PISA findings

reveal that in countries and economies where more resources are allocated to disadvantaged schools, overall student performance in subjects such as science are significantly higher.<sup>37</sup>

Equity can be defined as children from different social groups having the same opportunities to achieve a similar level and range of learning outcomes, and that every child succeeds above minimum standards of education.<sup>38</sup> A focus on equity has become more urgent at a time when Australia is experiencing unprecedented teaching shortages. With less-experienced teachers more likely than ever to be teaching in schools where students need them most,<sup>39</sup> teachers teaching out-of-field,<sup>40</sup> and with some schools unable to fill their teaching vacancies at all,<sup>41</sup> we need to remain vigilant so that equity issues don't drop off the map.<sup>42</sup> Reflecting on the first of the reports on *Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage* in 2003, the steering committee chair found that: "It is distressingly apparent that many years of policy effort have not delivered desired outcomes: indeed in some important respects the circumstances of Indigenous people appear to have deteriorated or regressed".<sup>43</sup>

In a recent survey commissioned by the UNSW Gonski Institute for Education, a resounding nine out of 10 Australians endorse educational equity across the nation's school system. They rate our current system a troubling "OK" and say a student's background should not be an obstacle to academic prospects.<sup>44</sup>

### **Queensland has the opportunity to reverse unequal outcomes**

An important way to reverse unequal outcomes and meet the government's own targets is the Schooling Resource Standard (SRS), which provides a base amount for every primary and secondary student, along with six loadings that provide extra funding for disadvantaged students and schools.

#### **Case study: Whitfield State School**

Without state support and the formidable efforts of its staff and community, the deck would seem stacked against Whitfield State School, in a suburb of Cairns in Far North Queensland. It has an ICSEA value of 973—well below the national average of 1000—with almost two thirds (63 per cent) of its families in the bottom quartiles on the distribution of socio-educational advantage. More than half its students live in public housing, with almost a quarter (23 per cent) Indigenous and more than a quarter (28 per cent) from a language background other than English. Although these and other factors place many students in the school at risk of significant disadvantage, Whitfield has seen the cultural diversity of its community as a strength rather than a deficit. The school has deployed its SRS payments, referred to in Queensland government schools as Investing for Success, by funding specialist staff to work with families and students, as well as tailored teaching programs. These investments have reaped many benefits within and beyond the classroom. In Year 3 spelling and grammar, students in 2023 were performing above the average

of all Australian students, and well above other students from a similar background in the areas of reading, writing, spelling, and grammar. More, since 2012, students have moved up the band scale—from band 5 to band 6. They are making above-average progress in writing. The numbers of students achieving As, Bs, and Cs continues to improve. With an emphasis on well-being for both students and staff, additional funds have meant Whitfield can offer programs in the arts, sport, and many other community activities, showing students and their families that they matter and that the world is open to them.<sup>45</sup>

### **Needs-based funding works**

Governments have long acknowledged that learning should not be disadvantaged by whether a child comes from a wealthy home or not; whether the child is raised by a single parent, or whether the child lives within a culturally and linguistically diverse community and multi-generation home; whether the student has a language background other than English; or whether they have access to ICT devices and reliable internet connection or not, or can access a quiet room for studying or not.

Needs-based funding aims to ensure that differences in educational outcomes are not the result of non-school factors such as a student's socioeconomic background or commensurate postcode.

The results of studies (including PISA 2000) implicated government education policies for failing to provide funding where it is most desperately needed—for basics such as infrastructure and materials, good quality teachers, or enough teachers.<sup>46</sup> A substantial and mounting body of studies published in recent years demonstrate that increased expenditure on schools improves student outcomes, particularly for disadvantaged schools and students.<sup>47</sup> Improving Australia's PISA score is not an outcome in itself, but a reflection of an improvement in the health of the educational system overall. Achieving equity in education means ensuring that students' socio-economic status has little to do with learning outcomes.

Australia must not create winners and losers among our children and families because of how its schools are funded. Researchers have found many similar countries, such as Canada, New Zealand, Scotland, Belgium and the Netherlands "have ensured a more equitable education for every student, while allowing a diversity of schools to best meet student needs. The experience of these countries, and their success in international education rankings, suggests alternatives for Australia."<sup>48</sup>

Globally, successful education systems are founded on these alternatives. Their governments have found ways to allocate resources to level the playing field for children who lack the material and human resources that students in advantaged families enjoy. The research is clear that when more students learn, the whole system benefits. The research tells us that how Australia commits to educating its children now will determine the country's future.

Queensland has an opportunity to fix systemic asymmetries in how our schools are funded, and in turn to promote excellence. School funding based on the needs of its students, no matter who they are or where they live, provides an opportunity to distribute educational resources fairly and lift all schools to the resource standard they need for excellence.

### Case study: Pallara State School

Pallara State School is a fast-growing P-6 school in outer Brisbane and is set to experience substantial enrolment increases by 2027. In a suburb of such rapid growth, Pallara SS is a culturally diverse school, with 1175 students, more than two thirds (67 per cent) of whom come from a language background other than English, and 3 per cent of whom identify as First Nations students. Because of this diversity, Investing for Success funding was used to build teacher capacity to improve literacy and numeracy, having a huge impact on student results in 2023, with Year 3s and Year 5s soaring above the national average in writing, spelling and grammar.

The decision making and professional actions of teachers are endorsed by Pallara's School Opinion Survey in which more than 94 per cent of parents agree 'my child feels safe at this school,' 'my child's learning needs are being met at this school,' 'my child is making good progress at this school,' and 'teachers at this school provide my child with useful feedback about his or her school work.' Moreover, more than 90 per cent of students agree 'I feel safe at my school,' 'my teachers motivate me to learn,' and 'my teachers provide me with useful feedback about my school work.'<sup>49</sup>

### How Commonwealth and State policies advance equity and excellence in education

All Australian governments have agreed-upon common goals for schooling in Australia, through forums resulting in declarations that set out a national vision for education and the commitment of Australian Governments to improving educational outcomes, including excellence and equity in education. One of these was the *Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians* (2008) in which education ministers agreed to revised directions and goals for Australian schooling.<sup>50</sup> The *Melbourne Declaration* elevated equity and excellence to the primary goal: "Australian schooling promotes equity and excellence".

With widespread dissatisfaction among educational stakeholders in the equity of the funding system, 2011 saw the first review led by David Gonski. The primary aim of this review was to "develop a funding system for Australian schooling which is transparent, fair, financially sustainable and effective in promoting excellent outcomes for all Australian students".<sup>51</sup>

The *Melbourne Declaration* was followed in 2019 by the *Mparntwe Education Declaration*, which set out a vision for education in Australia and a commitment to improving educational

outcomes for young Australians, building on past declarations signed in Hobart, Adelaide, and Melbourne.<sup>52</sup>

In 2019, The Council of Australian Government (COAG) National School Reform Agreement reiterated Australia's goal to be ranked as a high quality and high equity schooling system by international standards by 2025. It found that "the education community must improve outcomes for educationally disadvantaged young Australians."<sup>53</sup>

Through the *National School Reform Agreement (2019-24)*, the Commonwealth, States, and Territories share responsibility to lift student outcomes across all Australian schools. The Commonwealth Government's Department of Education allocates federal funding to schools through specific student characteristics (for example, students with a disability or low English language proficiency) and school characteristics (for example, remote locations). Queensland's *Investing for Success* funding program (formerly *Great Results Guarantee*) also provides a needs-based funding model for Queensland state schools. The Queensland Government's Department of Education encourages principals to make decisions about how to spend this funding based on the needs and input of their local school communities.<sup>54</sup>

It is well-understood that "a more equitable education system not only benefits the most disadvantaged children and their families; it makes entire societies".<sup>55</sup> The Oakley State High School case study is one of many that attests to this.

### Case Study: Oakley State High School

Oakey State High School in south-west Queensland, is an exemplar of community-wide benefits flowing from investment into at-risk students. More than half of its families are in the bottom quartiles on the distribution of socio-educational advantage, and more than half are also from backgrounds where languages other than English are spoken. Nonetheless, with Investing for Success funding, the school has managed to punch above its weight, rising above the national average in NAPLAN student progress scores, and its students from some years achieved above the scores of students with similar backgrounds in numeracy and writing. This year, the school celebrated its sixtieth year, during which Principal Danny Keenan acknowledged "the passion and connection to and for Oakey High runs strong in the community." Alongside excellence, he said, "our focus is to encourage students to become active participants in the broader community." With funds to build a new multi-purpose hall, the wider community celebrated—some "had been at school in 1964 and had sent all their children to OSH and they were thrilled with the new facility and the festivities." Keenan says "cultural vitality" is one outcome of academic achievement, with the broader community continuing to benefit from "a wonderful sense of community directed at getting the best outcomes for the young people of Oakey and its surrounding districts. We have produced opera singers, Rhodes scholars and corporate CEOs."<sup>56</sup>



The *Mparntwe Education Declaration* acknowledges education's vital role in promoting the intellectual, physical, social, emotional, moral, spiritual, and aesthetic wellbeing of young Australians. It also understands the role of equity to ensure Australia's ongoing economic prosperity and social cohesion.

The Commonwealth's *Review to Inform a Better and Fairer Education System* recommended reform priorities to be included in a new national school reform agreement.<sup>57</sup> The evidence is clear that our education system needs support for all students to become confident and creative individuals, successful lifelong learners and active, informed citizens.



**ALL AUSTRALIAN GOVERNMENTS HAVE AGREED-UPON COMMON GOALS FOR SCHOOLING IN AUSTRALIA, THROUGH FORUMS RESULTING IN DECLARATIONS THAT SET OUT A NATIONAL VISION FOR EDUCATION AND THE COMMITMENT OF AUSTRALIAN GOVERNMENTS TO IMPROVING EDUCATIONAL OUTCOMES, INCLUDING EXCELLENCE AND EQUITY IN EDUCATION.**

## PART 2: POLICY IMPACT ON QUEENSLAND'S SCHOOL COMMUNITIES

Queensland's student population is diverse, with students from a wide range of cultural, linguistic, and socio-economic backgrounds. This diversity spans urban areas to remote communities, creating varied learning environments across the state. The mix of backgrounds offers both opportunities and challenges for educators and policymakers, making it crucial to address the needs of all students to ensure an inclusive and equitable education system in Queensland.

Covering 1,727,000 square kilometres, Queensland is the second largest state in Australia and the third most populous. It's the most decentralised of all the mainland states, with just less than half (49 per cent) of the population living in the capital city, compared with more than two thirds (68 per cent) in other states.<sup>58</sup>

### The following is a snapshot of Queensland's student diversity:

- ▶ Over 38 per cent of Queenslanders live in rural or remote areas<sup>59</sup>
  - ▶ 7 out of 10 of Australia's most disadvantaged local government areas (LGAs) are in Queensland.
  - ▶ Most of Queensland's refugees and asylum seekers live near the cities.<sup>60</sup>
  - ▶ Most disadvantage is located in regional Queensland, particularly in the west and far north of the state—30 of the 40 most disadvantaged areas are outside Brisbane, and eight of the 10 areas experiencing the most extreme disadvantage were located outside the capital.<sup>61</sup>
- ▶ 66 per cent of Queensland's First Nations people live in remote areas<sup>62</sup>
  - ▶ At the time of the 2021 census, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples made up 4.6 per cent of Queensland's total population, above the national level of 3.2 per cent. Queensland's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples were more decentralised than the overall population—with only around one in three (32.6 per cent) Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander residents lived in Greater Brisbane.
  - ▶ A total of 67,210 First Nations students were enrolled in Queensland state schools in February 2024, making up 11.7 per cent of all Queensland's state school students.
  - ▶ From 2020 to 2024, First Nations enrolments grew by 5,847 (9.5 per cent), compared to a 1 per cent decrease for all students.
  - ▶ In 2024, the largest proportion of First Nations students were in Far North Queensland Region (18.2 per cent), North Queensland Region (13.9 per cent), and Metropolitan South Region (13.4 per cent).
- ▶ Students in Queensland were born in more than 220 different countries, speak more than 230 different languages and dialects, and identify with a diverse range of cultures and religions.<sup>63</sup>



The school prepares students for further education in mainstream schools or the TAFE sector. It teaches English as an Additional Language or Dialect (EAL/D) through language, literacy and literature, humanities topics, mathematics, science, and health and physical education. Students also enjoy art and develop coding skills. Milpera provides specialised support programs delivered by teachers, teacher aides and more than 140 volunteers who help around 300 students.

Many of the students in the school experience economic disadvantage and all experience cultural and linguistic dislocation. To support students, the school is staffed by experienced Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL), bilingual teacher aides, a large number of volunteers, and an extensive student services team including the Guidance Officer, Art and Music Therapists (HEAL), Head of Student Services, Youth Support Worker, on-site GP (General Practitioner), School Health Nurse, Community Liaison Officer, and representatives of many community support organisations. Milpera works collaboratively with community organisations, using an inter-agency model of service delivery for pastoral care, acculturation and settlement services.

The positive impact of Milpera's teachers, school leaders, and wrap-around support services is indicated in its English as an Additional Language (EAL) Bandscale Data for 2022.<sup>70</sup>

## Schooling Resource Standards alone are insufficient for significant change

The Queensland government's inclusive education policy recognises that its students come from diverse social, cultural, geographic and family backgrounds, and are of many identities and abilities. Some Queenslanders are far more likely than others to experience poverty and social exclusion and many experience persistent, multiple or multilayered disadvantages (such as being from a non-English speaking background and the compounding effects of generational poverty).

The research shows students experience inclusive education when they can access and fully participate in learning, alongside their similar-aged peers, supported by reasonable adjustments and teaching strategies tailored to meet their individual needs. Many students experience multiple disadvantage factors.<sup>71</sup>

Yet currently, government schools receive less than 95 per cent of the Schooling Resource Standard (SRS) loading while non-government schools on average receive at least 100 per cent of the SRS as well as funding from their non-SRS funding streams, such as enrolment fees.

However, the Schooling Resource Standard (SRS) loadings alone cannot make a difference. In

Queensland, government schools need additional public funding to deliver crucial education services. As an approved system authority, the Queensland Government uses its own needs-based funding arrangements informed by its knowledge of local contexts to provide a holistic funding model for government schools that addresses student needs. All schools receive core resources which may be supplemented by targeted resources that address specific needs, including the needs of regional, rural, remote and small schools.

### Case study: Spinifex State College

With Indigenous children making up more than a third (37 per cent) of its student population, Spinifex State College in remote Mount Isa has around 870 students, more than half (54 per cent) of whom are in the lowest SEA quarterly. The school—the largest secondary school in Queensland's north west—has complex needs, with almost a fifth (17 per cent) of students from non-English-speaking backgrounds and around one in ten (11 per cent) with identified disabilities. The college has a residential campus and close links with TAFE and local industry. Spinifex has a Skills for Tertiary Education Preparatory Studies (STEPS) program for students who are not achieving success in the mainstream program, and also a junior campus Special Education Program and senior campus Special Education Class. Principal Chris Pockock describes his school as “one of the best”, and his vision is for programs that develop “clever, skilled and creative Spinifex graduates”.<sup>72</sup>

From 2023 to 2025, the Queensland Government has committed to investing around \$290 million annually in Queensland state schools through the *Investing for Success* initiative. State schools are expected to use funding to support students in achieving improved outcomes at all levels of schooling.<sup>73</sup>

The *Investing for Success* improvement initiative includes a per student location loading for Outer Regional, Remote and Very Remote government schools.

In Queensland, a methodology is used to grade or band schools according to their complexity. While many factors, including isolation and school resources, influence how a school is classified, it is also important to include the presence, significance and size of diverse student and community groups (those from non-English-speaking backgrounds or with learning difficulties, anti-social or non-conforming behaviours, or those from economically and socially-disadvantaged backgrounds). While school banding is used to determine employment classifications, it is also indicative of a school's needs. The more complex the school, the more challenges faced by a school.<sup>74</sup>

## PART 3: PRAXIS INFORMED POLICY IMPROVEMENTS

There is no question that schools are dependent on both Commonwealth and State funding to deliver a world-class education to all children. The quality and equity of our education system should not be dependent on varied funding models or changing policies. Young people and their families should be able to take it for granted that in a privileged nation like Australia, everyone receives an education that offers them options, opportunities, and employment pathways as well as well-being. All students should feel valued, safe, respected, and supported.

In the current context, where teaching shortages impact schools' capacities to put a quality teacher in front of every class,<sup>75</sup> global insecurities including everything from climate change to housing and employment precarity cause anxiety for students, teachers, and families.<sup>76</sup> Increasing poverty and disadvantage also puts many families at risk.<sup>77</sup> It is more important than ever that government safeguards the policies that provide funding security and support schools need to deliver a world-class education to all children.

### **Case Study: Berserker Street School**

Rockhampton's Berserker Street State School in Central Queensland is exceptionally disadvantaged, with an ICSEA rating that ranks it as one of the lowest 3 per cent of schools in Australia. Almost all (95 per cent) of students are from families in the lowest two SES quartiles; with more than three quarters (79 per cent) in the lowest. Indigenous children make up almost half (44 per cent) of the student population, and almost all (94 per cent) of students are from a language other than English. These include Pacific Islander children and refugee children with no formal education or English skills who require intensive support. The school also has a high number of students with identified disabilities who undergo a range of unique programs including AUSLAN sign language classes in every grade. Berserker Street enrolls a significant number of children in care—including those in residential facilities—who have complex needs. The school is part of an international network of schools focussed on excellence in outcomes for all. According to principal Ryan Gilmour, the school fosters a whole-of-community approach to learning, with "strong and productive partnerships between staff members, students, parents and the community" to "strongly encourage our parents to become partners in their child's education. We host several major community events each year to celebrate the wonderful achievements of our students and wider school community."<sup>78</sup>

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## Interventions that make a difference

Education research is extensive in identifying the things that ‘make a difference’. Some of these successful initiatives are not easily quantifiable and cannot be reduced to ‘what works’ nor to reductive data embedded in simplistic international comparisons. NAPLAN data, or changes in literacy bands can only tell a partial story of how young people are coping, or on how much they are learning or gaining from their school community.<sup>79</sup> Our case studies illustrate how, with the weight of good policy behind them and with crucial targeted funding, schools are often community hubs.

### Broadly, some of the interventions most agreed to make a difference to both quality and equity include the following:

**Place-based initiatives.** Local, contextualised initiatives are crucial in all aspects of school improvement. While national consistency in teacher preparation, curriculum offerings, and pedagogical practices are important, all the evidence points towards place-based solutions and contextualised practices. One size doesn’t necessarily fit all, especially in a Queensland context which includes urban, regional, rural, and remote settings.

**Culturally appropriate, safe, and nourishing practices.** An increasingly culturally diverse population requires policies that recognise cultural diversity and the principles of social inclusion. This means schools must be resourced, staffed, and prepared to offer the best education from students of all backgrounds and home languages. Schools should be commended for initiatives that take a strength-based approach with high expectations for all students.

**Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander priorities.** Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders are Australia’s First People, and Indigenous ways of being, learning, and knowing should be prioritised in all schools to redress existing disparities in educational outcomes, health, and employment outcomes.

**Community engagement and codesign.** The best educational outcomes are possible when schools become community hubs. Communities, families, and carers feel most involved when their voices are heard and when they are invited into the decision-making processes. When community engagement is authentic, vital relationships can be built, behaviour improves, and students are less at risk of falling behind or dropping out.

**Support for all education staff.** In a time when teachers are known to be struggling and overburdened, support for teachers at all stages of their career becomes increasingly important. This means providing everything from exceptional mentoring for new teachers, professional development, and support for those moving into leadership positions. It also means employing more non-teaching staff, such as administrative staff, Education support staff, Indigenous Education Workers, Integration Aides, special education staff, counsellors, health workers, and tutors to reduce teachers’ workloads to let teachers concentrate on the core business of teaching.

**High-quality instructional programs and professional development.** Evidence-based pedagogies lead to greater outcomes for students, especially those historically at risk. Teachers should be offered the most up-to-date professional development and not just encouraged but be given time in their workloads to stay current with the newest pedagogical practices, such as in literacy or numeracy.

**Opportunities beyond the school walls.** While they are integrally important, academic outcomes assessed through school data are not the only indicators of a healthy school. All students, no matter their geographic or socio-economic circumstances, should have access to opportunities beyond the school curriculum. These include opportunities to participate in sport, the Arts, and STEM amongst other things. For regional, rural, remote or low SES urban schools, these opportunities should be offered through the school. Access is often only available to more privileged children and families. When schools offer access beyond the formal curriculum, they de-limit the way some children can imagine their futures and the kinds of leaders they will become.

**A focus on wellbeing.** With growing concerns about the wellbeing not just of students and their families, but of educators (teachers as well as school leaders), wellbeing is not an add-on but a priority.

Effective policy solutions strive to meet the educational goals for young Australians agreed to in the *Mparntwe Education Declaration*, and deliver policy aims aligned to those goals.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

### **Recommendation 1: Increase the Commonwealth share of school resource standard payments to at least 25 percent.**

To enhance the quality and equity of education in Queensland, it is crucial to increase the Commonwealth's share of the Schooling Resource Standard (SRS) to a minimum of 25 per cent for government schools and secure a bilateral agreement between the Commonwealth and Queensland governments to deliver 100 percent of the SRS to all government schools. Raising the Commonwealth's contribution would alleviate the financial burden on the state, helping to close funding gaps and ensure that every student has access to the necessary resources for a high-quality education. A bilateral agreement guaranteeing full SRS funding would address disparities in educational outcomes, ensuring that all government schools are adequately resourced to support their students, regardless of socio-economic status or geographic location.

### **Recommendation 2: Embed school autonomy and local consultation in expenditure of schooling resource standard payments.**

By allowing schools greater control over how they allocate their funding, this approach empowers school leaders to make decisions that best meet the unique needs of their students and communities. Local consultation, and at its best co-design, ensures that these decisions are informed by those frontline workers inside the school gate, who understand the specific challenges and opportunities within the school environment, including teachers, parents, and community members. This tailored approach to resource allocation can lead to more effective use of funds, fostering innovative solutions and targeted support that directly benefits students, while also promoting transparency and accountability in how education resources are utilised.

### **Recommendation 3: Develop a reporting mechanism that is both (i) qualitative and recognises school difference, and (ii) mitigates workload of school leaders.**

Implementing such a mechanism involves creating a system that captures and acknowledges the diverse contexts and needs of individual schools, ensuring that reports reflect the unique challenges and successes of each school. The mechanism should adopt a purposeful, collaborative, solution-focused, ethical and inclusive approach to underpin local choice about what data to capture and then how that decision represents current practice and informs school improvement. Data collection methods should be unobtrusive and there must be local agreement about when data is collected, who enters and tracks the data, who can access the data, and how data will be represented and reported. At the same time, it is crucial to design this reporting process in a way that minimises the administrative burden on school leaders, perhaps through streamlined data collection tools and automated reporting features. This dual focus ensures that schools can provide meaningful feedback and demonstrate their progress without being overwhelmed by excessive paperwork, ultimately leading to more

accurate assessments and a clearer understanding of how resources and support impact student outcomes.

### **Recommendation 4: Invest in professional collaborative time**

This millennium has seen exponential increases in the complexity of work inside the school gate, particularly increases in workload and work intensification of teachers and school leaders. For schools to make a difference, especially in the most socially-disadvantaged metropolitan, rural and remote communities, teachers must be provided with time for professional learning, planning and collaboration. Teachers need collaborative time, either face-to-face or with online networks, to identify local issues and generate collective solutions. Collaborative time should be a forum for dialogue between teams, rather than monologues delivered by managers. Dialogue empowers teams whereas monologues erode trust and devalue educators' knowledge and skills. Investing in professional collaboration time shows teachers' and school leaders' professional knowledges and skills are valued. Allowing teachers to do crucial elements of their work within working hours will re-instate the work teachers find rewarding and reduce the heavy burden of reporting they say contributes most to their workplace dissatisfaction.

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