

The public school advantage



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Another study can now be added to the almost 30 other academic works published over the past 15 years that show that in terms of educational outcomes there is no advantage in sending a child to a private school. Essentially, it is a waste of parents' money.

One of the most recent studies was conducted by Professor Luke Connelly and Dr Hong Son Nghiem from the Faculty of Health and Behavioural Sciences at the University of Queensland. The comprehensive research conducted by the team confirms similar studies in the United States and the United Kingdom.

"Our results show that sending children to Catholic or other independent schools has no significant effect," Professor Connelly said. "Any differences we see in test results are not due to the school type. Rather, they reflect differences between households and students that already exist in society.

"The work adds to a growing literature from three differ-

ent continents that the returns from attending independent primary schools are no different from those attending public school."

Two academics at the National Institute for Labour Studies at Flinders University, Professor Kostas Mavromaras and Dr Stephane Mahuteau, recently conducted a study that confirmed, among other findings, that the main determinant of test scores is socio-economic status, not the school type. The study was published by the Institute for the Study of Labor (IZA) in Bonn, Germany, and is based on a statistical analysis of the 2009 PISA test results for reading, mathematics and science.

This is an important study, writes Trevor Cobbold in *The Age*. "This is a simple but powerful result which suggests that when we compare the quality distributions between government and non-government schools we cannot find any statistical significant difference," he says.

The article cites two other research studies. One was published in the *Economics of Education Review* in December 2014. According to *The Age*,

the study showed that "Catholic schools' performance has declined since 1980 relative to government schools... [and] that the advantage Catholic schools once held over government schools has virtually disappeared." This is despite the enormous increase in funding these schools have received compared to the public sector.

In a recently published paper (2015), "The Comparative Advantage of Public School Graduates", Canberra-based researcher Barbara Preston argues, "The general finding is that graduates of non-elite and co-educational schools do better at university than graduates of socially and academically elite and single-sex schools who achieved the same tertiary entrance score."

In her paper she cites four Australian and three English studies, concluding, "State school graduates do better at university than private school graduates with the same end-of-school tertiary entrance score. That's the clear finding in a number of Australian studies since the 1980s and in England since the 1990s."

John Graham, a researcher with the Victorian AEU, cites a

2013 study by Cardack and Vecchi. He writes that their study "examined the academic advantages of students attending Catholic schools compared to attending government schools, concluding that they were marginal in terms of secondary school completion, and university commencement and completion.

"In fact, [Cardack and Vecchi] put forward the possibility that attending a Catholic school may have a comparatively negative effect on these student outcomes."

A general conclusion by Associate Professor Chris Ryan, in a paper that examined Australia's performance in reading and maths in the PISA testing program, is that declines in school performance were most marked in private schools.

"At the school level, the declines in performance of schools have not been associated with many of their observed characteristics, other than that the declines appear to have been concentrated among private schools," Dr Ryan states.

"Where private schools once generated better outcomes than public schools, given the com-

positions of their student bodies, this was not the case after 2003." Chris Ryan's paper, published in the *Economics of Education Review* (37), is entitled, "What is behind the decline in student achievement in Australia?"

Trevor Cobbold, a former economist with the Australian Productivity Commission for more than 30 years, says the Flinders study also concluded that private schools do not use

the resources at their disposal more effectively than public schools. The study could not find any evidence of financial efficiency in the non-government sector, he argues in his article in *The Age*.

All the more reason why the Gonski model needs to be implemented in full so that the funding is targeted to those schools with the highest need. This is more efficient and fairer.

The Gonski Review found that public schools were seriously under-resourced for the job expected of them and that a needs-based funding model is long overdue. It is to their credit that public schools, as confirmed by study after study, continue to produce equal or better academic results compared to the non-government sector.

What is happening in Aus-

tralian education is that private schools are effectively schools of social mobility that are marketed on myths and protected by vested interests with the funding advantage they enjoy leading to a more unequal Australia.

The funding crisis has led to a growing gap between the advantaged and disadvantaged.

As a nation we must do better. Our children deserve no less..