



A CREEPING INDIGENOUS SEPARATION

DISCUSSION PAPER

In a Class of Their Own



CENTRE
FOR POLICY
DEVELOPMENT

CREATE. CONNECT. CONVINCED.

<http://www.cpd.org.au>

FEBRUARY 2018

Chris Bonnor
in association with
Christina Ho & Garry Richards

Cover Image – ‘Light bulb and broken bulbs’ by Kevron 2002 © via depositphotos. To view the original image click [here](#).

Image 1 - ‘Wooden chair against a school desk’ by KrisCole © via depositphotos. To view the original image click [here](#).

Image 2 – ‘School Corridor’, by Ignat Gorazd. To view the original image, click [here](#).

Image 3 – ‘Remote Education, Arnhem Land, Australia’ by Rusty Stewart. To view the original image click [here](#).

Image 4 – ‘Pencils’ by Alessandro. To view the original image click [here](#).

Image 5 – ‘Bathurst Former National School’, by Adaptive Architects. To view the original image click [here](#).

Image 6 – ‘Cross Roads. The former rural school of Cross Roads near Mannum. It operated from 1901 to 1950’ by denisbin. To view the original image click [here](#).

Image 7 – ‘And so exam season begins’, by Charl Cater. To view the original image click [here](#).

AUTHORS

Chris Bonnor AM is a retired principal, education writer and Fellow of the Centre for Policy Development. Chris was co-author of *Uneven Playing Field: The state of Australia’s schools*, released by CPD in 2016. He is a previous president of the NSW Secondary Principals’ Council and author of several books including *The Stupid Country* and *What Makes a Good School*, both written with Jane Caro.

Christina Ho is a Senior Lecturer & Discipline Coordinator, Social and Political Sciences, at the University of Technology Sydney.

Garry Richards is a retired head teacher and statistical data analyst.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This report is part of CPD’s Effective Government program. The principal focus of this program is to examine the role of an active government in addressing 21st-century public policy challenges. We are interested in several issues that flow from this, including the role of education in a democratic society.

This report has been subject to internal and external review. The authors extend their appreciation to all those who assisted with this process, particularly CPD Research Committee Member Geoff Shuetrim and the staff at CPD.

The ongoing work in Effective Government is possible because of contributions from CPD’s program and organisational donors, including the Community and Public Sector Union (CPSU), the Susan McKinnon Foundation, Qantas, Brian and Diana Snape, the Garry White Foundation, and a number of individual Ideas Sustainers.

You can read more about CPD and the Effective Government Program here: <http://cpd.org.au>

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	4
A CREEPING INDIGENOUS SEPARATION	6
Headlining a problem	6
Crunching the data.....	6
The overall picture.....	7
Where do Indigenous students go to school?.....	8
But which Indigenous students?.....	10
...and where?	12
Taking a closer look.....	14
Summary of findings	16
CONCLUSION	18

GRAPHS & TABLES

Table A: Indigenous enrolments, all schools by ICSEA brand	8
Table B: Lowest ICSEA government schools – key indicators by location	13
Graph 1: Indigenous enrolments all Australia schools.....	9
Graph 2: Indigenous enrolments and school Q1/Q4 enrolment spread.....	11
Graph 3: Indigenous enrolments – major cities and regional areas.....	13

INTRODUCTION

Over the past two years, CPD has highlighted inequity in the funding of Australia's schools and a growing concentration of disadvantaged students in poorer schools. *Uneven Playing Field* (2016) and *Losing the Game* (2017) used *My School* data to reveal how our shared schooling experience in Australia was slipping away. Funding wasn't following need in the way envisaged by the original Gonski review. A growing divide between advantaged and disadvantaged students, and richer and poorer schools suggested a less equal and more fragmented schooling system within Australia.

Time will tell whether the new funding arrangements address the first of these concerns. In the meantime, *My School* data that shows clusters of disadvantaged students in Australia's schools merit further investigation. *In a Class of Their Own* is a new series that extends this analysis, firstly in relation to Indigenous students. It does so as we observe the 10th Anniversary of the Apology to Australia's Indigenous Peoples and consider how well our country is closing the gap of Indigenous disadvantage.

Some inroads have been made in recent years in achieving better educational outcomes for Indigenous students. This paper does not devalue these achievements or the political and policy vision that underpins them. Notwithstanding, *My School* and other data point to gradual but significant trends that will shape the education of Indigenous students over the long term.

1. While most schools have increased their enrolment of Indigenous students in both absolute and percentage terms, the proportion of Indigenous students is far greater in disadvantaged (lower Socio-educational Advantage - SEA) schools.
2. These trends are magnified in regional areas where the majority of Indigenous students attend school. Higher SEA schools are not enrolling an increasing share of the Indigenous student population. In fact, they also have a lower proportion of the most disadvantaged students.
3. Where schools and school sectors are in competition, the more advantaged (higher SEA) schools have reduced their share of Indigenous students, while two-thirds of less advantaged (lower SEA) schools have increased their share.
4. Closer analysis shows that the number of Indigenous students at many schools does not reflect the size of the local Indigenous population. Lower SEA schools have disproportionately more Indigenous enrolments, higher SEA schools in all sectors have (with some exceptions) disproportionately fewer.

In short, the dynamics of our school system – rather than promoting inclusion and equity – are increasingly putting Indigenous students in a 'class of their own'.

Why might this matter? CPD's research on renewing Australia's democracy, conducted throughout 2017, found that one in three Australians believe the main purpose of democracy is about "ensuring that all people are treated fairly and equally, including the most vulnerable in the community". In his 2012 book, *What Money Can't Buy: The Moral Limits of Markets*, American political philosopher Michael Sandel put it a slightly different way:

"Democracy does not require perfect equality, but it does require that citizens share a common life. What matters is that people of different backgrounds and social positions encounter one another, and bump up against one another, in the course of ordinary life."

Schools are critical to this and play a pivotal role in fostering a more equal and inclusive society. For schools to be effective in promoting cohesion through shared experience, understanding and opportunity, the networks they support and cultivate must reach across social and racial divides. In this way, schools mitigate social and cultural dynamics that might otherwise create and reinforce structural difference and discrimination between groups and individuals.

The evidence presented in this discussion paper suggests that the capacity of our school system to act as catalyst for inclusion, equity and opportunity for Indigenous students is weakening. Rather than being places which bring people and communities together, evidence suggests that schools are yet another place where children grow further apart.



In addition to the negative impacts on individual achievement and opportunity, the increasing separation of Indigenous students from other Australian school students has broader societal implications.

In many communities, **it highlights a racial aspect atop longstanding, if loose, layers of social class.** Measures of school and community socio-educational advantage already show that [less than a third of our schools have an enrolment](#) which resembles the cross-section of people in their local community. Class and even religion have to some extent always defined who we are. But we don't need race to become an increasingly significant ingredient.

These trends, if they continue, will mean schools are less able to address the most intractable problems faced by many Indigenous families. These problems include poverty in all its manifestations, as well as dislocation and inter-generational trauma. Any breakthrough solutions for students in the worst affected families and communities are limited if we separate them from the more successful, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous.

Last and most important, unless these dynamics are recognised and addressed we won't improve equity for all – and particularly for Indigenous young people. The benefits of improved equity are substantial and widespread. But the chances of achieving the much-needed improvement in student achievement is diminished when we aggregate the most disadvantaged students – whatever their background – in schools which are already struggling.

We do not offer specific policy prescriptions but aim to provide a conceptual first step and pointers for future policy action that might address what is a significant and concerning challenge to an equitable and inclusive Australia.

A CREEPING INDIGENOUS SEPARATION

Headlining a problem

There was a time “when the black and white kids used to mix” and were represented in balanced numbers
[Boggabilla \(NSW\) resident](#)

In 2008 a Fairfax journalist wrote a Walkley winning story '[White flight leaves system segregated by race](#)', about student enrolment shifts in towns near the NSW/Queensland border. A school principal said a "de facto apartheid" had developed in some towns, including Mungindi, near Moree, where Indigenous students attend the public school and others attend the Catholic school. The article reported on busloads of non-Indigenous students from Boggabilla crossing the border every day to attend school in Queensland.

Other media articles that week focused on the [local schools](#), the dilemmas faced by parents, [the political response and wider implications](#). After a week – as is often the case with stories about Indigenous Australians – it was old news. Education ministers poured cold water over any concerns by variously denying the problem or reaffirming their commitment to parental choice of schools.

Apparently, this degree of school separation wasn't always the case. A former principal at Mungindi Central School said that about 60 per cent of his students in the 1990s were Indigenous and the remaining 40 per cent were from white families. The reporter noted that by 2008 between 70 and 90 per cent of the students were Indigenous. Almost all the students at nearby St Joseph's Catholic primary school were white.

Is that local trend representative? To what extent are Indigenous students in Australia 'in a class of their own'? Despite some improvement, the educational gaps between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians [remain very wide](#). Will we really 'close the gap' if the school experience for most Indigenous students compounds the disadvantage they already face?

This report shows how entrenched disadvantage, location and the operation of school choice combine to worsen the odds for most Indigenous students. At one level the Indigenous school experience resembles that of other disadvantaged school students in Australia. But the plight of Indigenous students is more visible; it challenges our oft-claimed commitment to equity and it demands something better.

Crunching the data

To address these questions, this report relies on *My School* data, together with Australian Bureau of Statistics data for equivalent years. It also includes reflections from many familiar with Australian schools.

My School is especially useful. It shows, for individual schools, for school sectors and geolocations:¹

- The number and percentage of Indigenous students
- The [Index of School Community Socio-educational Advantage](#) (ICSEA)
- The distribution of enrolment by Socio-educational Advantage (SEA) quarter.
- How patterns in where Indigenous students attend school might be changing

¹ This study both the metropolitan-provincial-remote-very remote categories – as well as the more recent major cities-inner regional-outer regional-remote-very remote categories.

Two anonymous online surveys were conducted to gather opinions on this topic. Recently retired NSW government secondary school principals were invited to respond to some of the draft findings, as were current principals of rural non-government schools with relatively high Indigenous enrolments. The response rate was around 20%. Whilst we do not claim that the survey responses are representative, they provide invaluable perspective on the analysis from educators who know local areas, conditions and challenges.

The overall picture

1. Indigenous students

My School shows that Australia had a total of 3 439 088 school students in 2016. Almost 70% attended school in the major cities, just under 30% in regional areas and less than 2% in remote and very remote areas. The distribution of the 200 885 *Indigenous* students is markedly different, with 36% in the major cities, just under half in the regions and around 15% in remote/very remote areas.

Approximately 85% of Indigenous students attended government schools in 2016, 10% attended Catholic and 5% attended Independent schools. Schools with a high socio-educational advantaged (SEA) enrolment have a low proportion of Indigenous students – regardless of school sector. *My School* data shows that most localities and school groups have an increasing Indigenous enrolment, especially in lower SEA schools including in regional Australia.

While the achievement gap remains, recent *Closing the Gap* reports point to a considerable [increase in numbers of Indigenous students completing senior high school](#). NAPLAN results are also showing some statistically [significant improvements](#) for Indigenous students.

2. Indigenous Australia

The 2016 census reports a rapidly growing Indigenous population, up 17% from 2011 – with a slightly higher family size than in Australia as a whole. Greatest increases were along the East Coast, in Brisbane and along the South-East Queensland coast, the NSW coast and Sydney/Wollongong – with a decline in some remote areas. The census also showed an increase in school participation and completion rates. For example, [almost 60% of Indigenous people aged 15-18 were attending school](#), up from 51.2% in 2011.

Studies regularly caution against generalisations about the relative disadvantage of Indigenous Australians.

On average, Indigenous people have an income that is only two-thirds that of the non-Indigenous population, but the recent growth in incomes for Indigenous people has outpaced that of the rest of the population – albeit off a lower base. Also, more Indigenous Australian families are able to exercise choice in where they attend school.

On the other hand, The ABS Socio-Economic Indexes for Areas (SEIFA) typically imply an [over-representation of Indigenous people in the most disadvantaged deciles](#). This varies considerably across Australia, with a clear gradient of disadvantage by remoteness, while capital cities rank relatively well.

Where do Indigenous students go to school?

Notwithstanding the diversity in Indigenous Australia, there is a clear and strong association between the level of socio-educational advantage of schools and their proportion of Indigenous enrolments. This is illustrated in Table A, which groups schools according to their level of advantage as indicated by their *My School* average Index of School Community Socio-educational Advantage (ICSEA).



Table A

Indigenous enrolments, all schools by ICSEA band

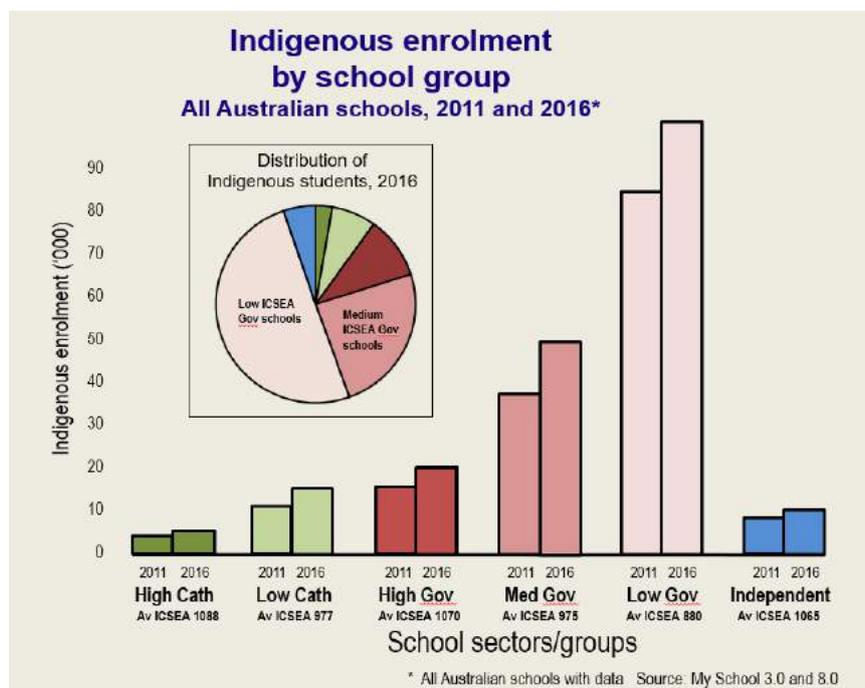
Source: *My School* – 2011-2016. All schools with data

ICSEA group and range		2011 data			2016 data		
		Total enrolment	Indigenous enrolment	% of group	Total enrolment	Indigenous enrolment	% of group
Above the mean ICSEA	1100 and over	563 967	3 721	0.66	628 104	4 730	0.75
	1050-1099	550 288	7 674	1.39	604 218	9 714	1.61
	1000-1049	766 772	20 129	2.63	823 869	27 165	3.30
Below the mean ICSEA	950-999	684 646	33 520	4.90	702 863	43 722	6.22
	900-949	430 684	39 490	9.17	429 596	49 127	11.43
	Under 900	158 274	49 633	31.36	154 099	57 647	37.41

Table A shows that all groups of schools have increased their enrolment of Indigenous students in both absolute and percentage terms. However, the proportion of Indigenous students is greater in lower Socio-educational Advantage (SEA) schools. In numerical terms, the biggest increases are also found in these schools. Unless they have the resources to choose otherwise, Indigenous families enrol their children in schools which are locally available and accessible. In most cases, this means government schools, the ones which must be available to all families, regardless of location and circumstance. Schools which are not required to provide such access, particularly non-government schools, don't usually have high Indigenous enrolments; instead, the charging of school fees of any amount usually restricts who gains access.

In broad terms, the numbers of enrolled Indigenous students go down as fees rise. But, as Graph 1 illustrates, there are interesting sub-sets of schools where factors other than fees might impact on Indigenous enrolments. In Graph 1 the two biggest sectors shown, government and systemic Catholic,² are divided into three groups (government schools) or two groups (Catholic schools) according to their ICSEA. This enables a more nuanced view of these larger sectors.

Graph 1 - Indigenous enrolments, all Australian schools



Although Indigenous enrolments have grown in every school group, in numerical terms the growth is much more marked in medium and low ICSEA government schools. In contrast, there is a lower Indigenous enrolment in high ICSEA government schools; these schools are located in relatively higher income areas with low numbers of local Indigenous families.

In a similar way (but on a different scale) lower ICSEA non-government schools have higher Indigenous enrolments. Non-government schools and systems largely make their own decisions about where they will establish, who they should serve and how much might be charged for admission. They range from 'elite' urban schools to a small number of fully government-funded schools in remote Indigenous communities. Enrolment data suggest that practices regarding enrolment of Indigenous students vary considerably. Anglican schools in regional NSW have a small Indigenous enrolment while non-systemic Christian schools, often in the same town, have a higher Indigenous enrolment.³

Increases in Indigenous enrolments are often shown in percentage terms, especially by [Catholic](#) and [Independent school](#) peak groups. While they look impressive, high percentage increases often reflect that the increases come off a low base. For example, systemic Lutheran schools show great percentage increases between 2011 and 2016 but the increases represent just a few hundred students. This contrasts with 4569 (a 30% increase) in systemic Catholic schools and 32 327 (a 23% increase) in the government system.

² Systemic schools are administered by the Catholic Dioceses and their fees are usually lower than 'independent' (non-systemic) Catholic schools

³ In NSW these are supported by The Anglican Schools Corporation group.

Average figures for groups of schools can also obscure other differences. Just over one in ten Independent schools increased their enrolment of Indigenous students by more than one percentage point between 2011 and 2016. The equivalent figures were almost one in five Catholic schools and over one in three government schools. The pie chart inset in graph 1 clearly shows where most Indigenous students attend school.

But which Indigenous students?

Schools and school systems sometimes display their data on Indigenous enrolments as evidence of their commitment to equity. When viewed in a wider context the data tells a more complex story. Which Indigenous students are being enrolled, and where?

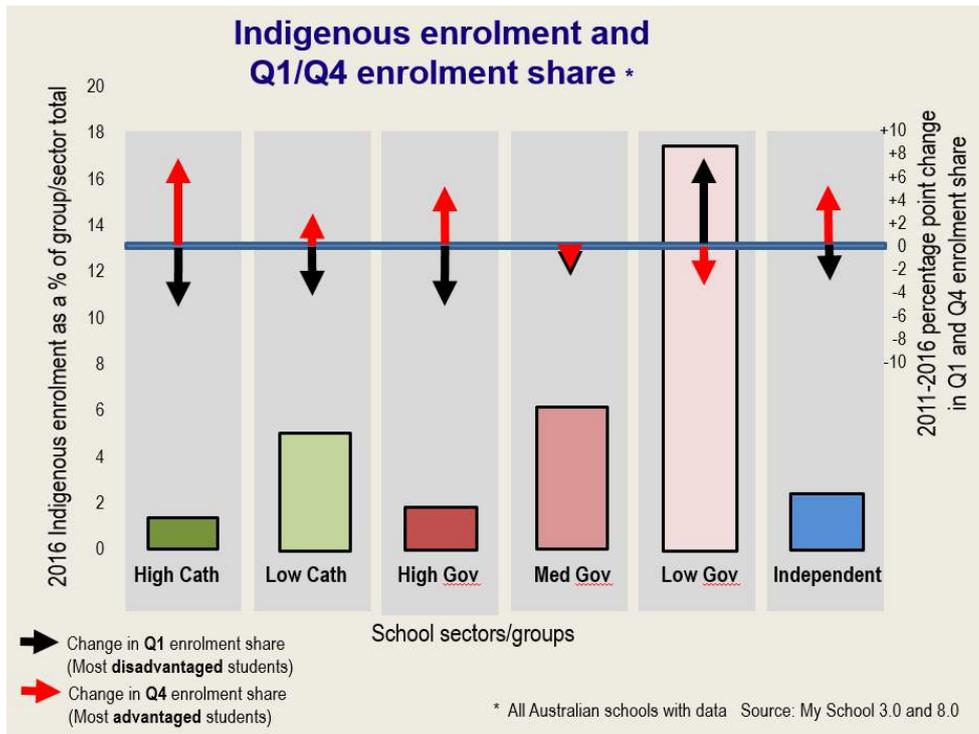
We can compare the data on enrolment of Indigenous students with data showing the changing spread of enrolments within schools, according to their level of student socio-educational advantage. The *My School* website shows the distribution of students, by level of SEA, within each school – across four SEA quarters. Q1 is the percentage from families in the lowest quarter of socio-educational advantage. Q4 is the percentage from the highest quarter. The average spread is 25% in each of the four quarters. Low ICSEA schools will have a very high Q1 portion – often well above 50%. High ICSEA schools will have a very high portion of Q4 students.

Given the significant number of disadvantaged Indigenous students, one could expect that an increasing Indigenous enrolment might be reflected in a higher Q1 portion in schools and systems. Is this happening in all schools?



Graph 2 shows the same groups of schools as Graph 1. The columns show the percentage of Indigenous students in each school group in 2016. The arrows show the *change* in each group’s enrolment of the most disadvantaged (black arrows) and the most advantaged (red arrows) students. The graph shows that the large enrolment of Indigenous students in the lowest ICSEA government schools is accompanied by an increased portion of the most disadvantaged students. This is consistent with these schools enrolling the Indigenous students who are the least advantaged.

Graph 2 - Indigenous enrolments and school Q1/Q4 enrolment spread



This phenomenon is not occurring in the other school groups. We know from Graph 1 that Indigenous enrolment in the other school groups is increasing, but in most cases, their Q1 student portion is falling – and their Q4 proportion is rising. The Indigenous students they are enrolling are relatively advantaged and/or these schools are increasingly enrolling more advantaged students in general.



In the case of high ICSEA government schools, this suggests that more advantaged local Indigenous families, particularly in urban areas, are moving into the school catchments. In the case of non-government schools, the more advantaged Indigenous families are able to pay the required school fees.

Responses to the surveys conducted for this paper suggest a range of additional explaining factors. Some referred to improving employment and incomes for many Indigenous families, accompanied by increased schooling aspirations. Others described how fee exemptions or fee support is made selectively available. Some schools, including boarding schools, make efforts to increase their Indigenous intakes, including by targeting students with various abilities. Government school principals seemed very aware that parents wanted to avoid schools with significant numbers of disadvantaged students, regardless of their background.

It's also important to see such trends in a wider context. We know from findings in the CPD publication *Losing the Game* that high ICSEA schools in general are growing in size and increasing their proportion of advantaged students. The enrolment of more advantaged Indigenous students is likely to be part of this trend. We also know that low ICSEA government schools tend to be shrinking and increasing their concentration of disadvantaged enrolments. Over half of Australia's Indigenous students attend these lowest ICSEA government schools. These schools, in contrast to others, face the biggest challenges in lifting student achievement. Their increasing concentration of the less advantaged provides a key explanation for poor and declining average overall student achievement, also explained in *Losing the Game*.

ENTRENCHED SCHOOL DISADVANTAGE: WHAT LIES BENEATH?

For some time we have known - including from research by the NSW Department of Education and Training and by Professor Richard Teese¹ - that cohort effects lead to more positive outcomes for students who are learning in more advantaged schools.

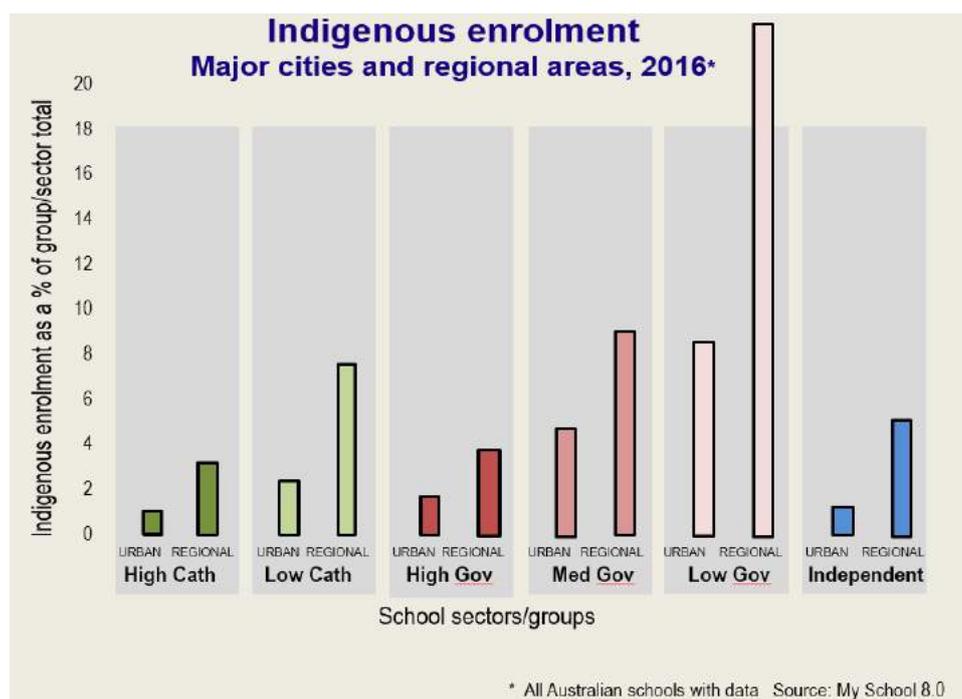
How does this play out at the school level? Schools with students who are *advantaged* accumulate the social, cultural and even financial capital of their supportive and resourceful parents. Schools which enrol an increasing proportion of *disadvantaged* students experience a different dynamic in their learning environment. Over time they are hampered from improving their performance and school culture. They have fewer higher-performing students to bring that stimulus to their classrooms. Their parent organisation might lose some of its more articulate and energetic advocates. Teacher experiences and expectations, as well as curriculum offerings and access, can change. Teachers might shift subtly from continually exploring new ground to having to consolidate skills and knowledge already traversed. The range and availability of resources might reduce.

Initiatives such as those developed by the Stronger Smarter Institute¹ show that increasing expectations can make a difference, but the residualisation of the strugglers goes on. Australia has far more of its disadvantaged students in equally disadvantaged schools than is the case in equivalent countries. A majority of our Indigenous students are in these schools. A very recent OECD report¹ tells of the low and declining resilience of our disadvantaged students.

....and where?

Total school enrolments between 2011 and 2016 have risen by 8% in major cities and 2.5% in regional Australia - but Indigenous student enrolment has increased by 30% in major cities and almost 25% in regional areas. The larger increases in Indigenous enrolments might be explained by combinations of natural increase, the [younger average age of Indigenous Australians](#), increasing identification as Indigenous status and by migration into urban areas. Greater analysis of these factors is beyond the scope of this paper.

Graph 3 - Indigenous enrolments - major cities and regional areas



Both urban and regional schools are growing their Indigenous enrolments but, as Graph 3 shows, Indigenous students make up a much greater percentage of total school enrolments in regional schools. It is the lowest ICSEA regional schools in particular which have the most noticeable concentration of Indigenous and disadvantaged students. The reality for these schools is that there is no one below them on the school ICSEA ladder. They don't win the more advantaged students in the competition stakes and instead they contribute their remaining share to schools further up the ladder. These schools are the front line in the battle to lift the achievement of disadvantaged and especially Indigenous students. The question is can they succeed when we keep increasing their share of the strugglers?

We can also look more closely at trends for groups of schools in different locations and configurations. Some of these are illustrated, for the lowest ICSEA government schools, in Table B.

Table B

Lowest ICSEA government schools - key indicators by location

	All Australia	Urban Australia	Regional Australia	Secondary/ Combined schools (all locations)	Competitive markets in regional Australia
% Indigenous 2011	14.8%	6.6%	18.0%	16.9%	19.0%
% Indigenous 2016	17.6%	8.2%	22.2%	20.4%	23.4%
Q1 change 2011-16	+7.3	+5.1	+9.1	+8.2	+9.8
Q4 change 2011-16	-2.9	-2.3	-3.7	-2.8	-3.7

Table B shows the much greater proportion of Indigenous enrolments in regional Australia in both 2011 and 2016 – and the way this is accompanied by a substantial rise in their Q1 enrolment share and a fall in the Q4 share.

The last two columns show other school location scenarios:

- One shows trends in *secondary and combined schools*. It is in the secondary years where families are more likely to exercise choice of schools. The table suggests the effect of this choice is to leave a higher than average Indigenous enrolment in the lowest ICSEA government secondary/combined schools.
- The final column shows schools in the larger regional centres where there is a choice of schools – either within or between sectors. These are competitive school markets. Again, the lowest ICSEA government schools have very high Indigenous enrolments and, in comparison with other locations shown in the table, the most significant gain in Q1 and loss of Q4 enrolments. Clearly, those students who can, choose to enrol elsewhere.

Taking a closer look

It is regional and rural areas where Indigenous and non-Indigenous families live in relatively close proximity and most students usually go to one of a number of schools in a well-defined area. This enables a closer look at the composition of school enrolments, particularly in comparison with the demographics of the local area. In this way, it is possible to compare school Indigenous enrolments with the Indigenous composition of the ABS State Suburb in which the school is located. Some schools have an Indigenous enrolment, in percentage terms, which is noticeably larger or smaller than local demographics might suggest? Which schools and why?

a. Regional NSW

The first closer look includes 202 schools in four large statistical areas (ABS SA3) in NSW: Coffs Harbour, Orange, Tamworth-Gunnedah and Wagga Wagga. These centres are similar in both population size and the size (between 5 and 10%) of the local Indigenous population. There is a substantial choice of schools in each place, including 150 government schools across the four areas, which for analysis, are again broken into high, medium and low ICSEA groups. There are 36 Catholic schools, again divided into high and low ICSEA groups - and 16 Independent schools.

Most schools in these four centres are enrolling more Indigenous students than are similar schools elsewhere in Australia. Again, this is especially noticeable for lower ICSEA schools, including low ICSEA Catholic schools. Indigenous students in the lowest ICSEA government schools form over 30% of their enrolments and 80% of these schools increased their enrolment of Indigenous students between 2011 and 2016. In contrast, 50% of high ICSEA government and Catholic schools, and 25% of Independent schools increased their enrolment of Indigenous students.



More becomes apparent when Indigenous enrolments are compared with the local Indigenous demography. School catchments don't always align with ABS statistical areas - and some schools have low enrolments - but broad trends are still evident. Of the 202 schools in the four centres around one-quarter, 54 schools, had an indigenous enrolment share that was much lower than the Indigenous proportion of the local population. Most of these (37) were Independent or Catholic schools, just seventeen were government schools, almost all of these were higher ICSEA schools.

In contrast, the remaining 148 schools had an Indigenous enrolment in excess of the Indigenous proportion of the local population:

- The highest suburban proportion of Indigenous people around Coff's Harbour is about 8% - but eight schools in the local ABS Statistical area have an Indigenous enrolment double that figure.
- Indigenous Australians constitute anything between 8% and 20% of the population of Tamworth's suburbs; but half a dozen local schools have Indigenous enrolments well above this figure - including one at over 70%.
- The Indigenous population of Wagga is as high as 18% in the suburb of Ashmont, but four schools in the same vicinity have an Indigenous enrolment well above this level.
- Indigenous people make up 6.5% of the population of the Orange ABS State Suburb, but all the government schools exceed this figure and all the non-government schools fall well short.

This points to students moving around considerably to attend school. *My School* data doesn't say exactly who and why. Many factors, including enrolment churn and local demographic changes, may be part of the explanation, but the pattern clearly suggests that those families with choice seem to be avoiding the schools with the highest Indigenous enrolments. Conversely, kinship and friendship links might explain aggregation of Indigenous families in some schools. Regardless, the outcome includes stark local variations: the highest school ICSEA in Tamworth is 1082, the lowest is a school just across the Peel River with an ICSEA of 701.

It is likely that school enrolment policy and practice makes some contribution to these trends. While government schools have catchments and are all bound by the same rules, these may not always be consistently implemented. While fees in non-government schools act as an enrolment discriminator, some have higher than anticipated indigenous enrolments - indicating policies or practices to support higher Indigenous enrolments. The Carinya Christian Colleges in both Tamworth and Gunnedah, for example, have Indigenous enrolments which at least reflect local demographics.

b. Rural NSW



By examining NSW towns with both public and Catholic primary schools we get greater insight. In the 109 towns in this category, the two sectors were competing, actively or otherwise, for enrolments in the same identifiable market. In most towns, the percentage of Indigenous students was higher in the government school. In 22 towns the Indigenous percentage was similar, while in 15 the Catholic school had an equal or larger Indigenous enrolment portion. While half of these 15 are very small schools, the data about others provides clues:

- In **Laurieton**, the government primary school and St Joseph's Primary are broadly similar in size and serve a relatively poor community. The Catholic school has a more advantaged enrolment but it also has an increasing Indigenous portion, now at 11%, against 7% in the government school. The Catholic school is publicly-funded (\$12 076 per student combined government funding) at higher levels than is the government school, with fee income on top of this amount.
- The competing schools in **Moruya** are again similar in size, both with a 16% Indigenous enrolment. The Catholic school has a more advantaged enrolment and a much lower Q1 portion. Combined with the relatively high school fees, this suggests that the Indigenous enrolment in that school is relatively advantaged.
- The Catholic school in **Milton** is much smaller than the government school, something which helps to explain its much higher public funding per student – funding which is possibly used to support its 6% Indigenous enrolment. The situation may be similar in places such as **Culcairn, Adelong, Bowraville, Holbrook, Manildra** and **Uralla**.

In our anonymous survey Principals commented that some Catholic schools work harder than others to increase Indigenous enrolments. While they mainly enrol the more advantaged (including the sporty) other factors such as families' historical links to local Catholic schools, and the attraction of particular educational programs may play some part.

The scenarios playing out in both regional and rural NSW raise many questions. To what extent is passive and/or active enrolment selection at work? Who benefits when school fees are varied or waived for some students ahead of others? Who decides - and are there any known criteria? Given the high public investment in all local schools, including non-government, should enrolment practice be subject to oversight to ensure transparency and fairness? Finally, if some schools can do it why can't others?

Summary of findings

Based on the general information and the analysis outlined above, there are several firm findings:

- The distribution of Indigenous students reflects their location and the availability and accessibility (including costs) of schools. It reflects the level of socio-educational advantage of both families and schools, as well as school enrolment policies and practices, including priorities and commitment to equity. The distribution also illustrates the uneven obligations of the school sectors, despite often similar public funding, in respect of who they are required to serve.
- While most schools have increased their enrolment of Indigenous students, the proportion of Indigenous students is far greater in disadvantaged (lower Socio-educational Advantage -SEA) schools. Increased enrolment of Indigenous students in some schools is often less significant than claimed. Increases in advantaged (higher SEA) schools are more likely to come from more advantaged Indigenous families, hence schools and sectors should be cautious in claiming that increased Indigenous enrolments reflect a greater overall commitment to equity.

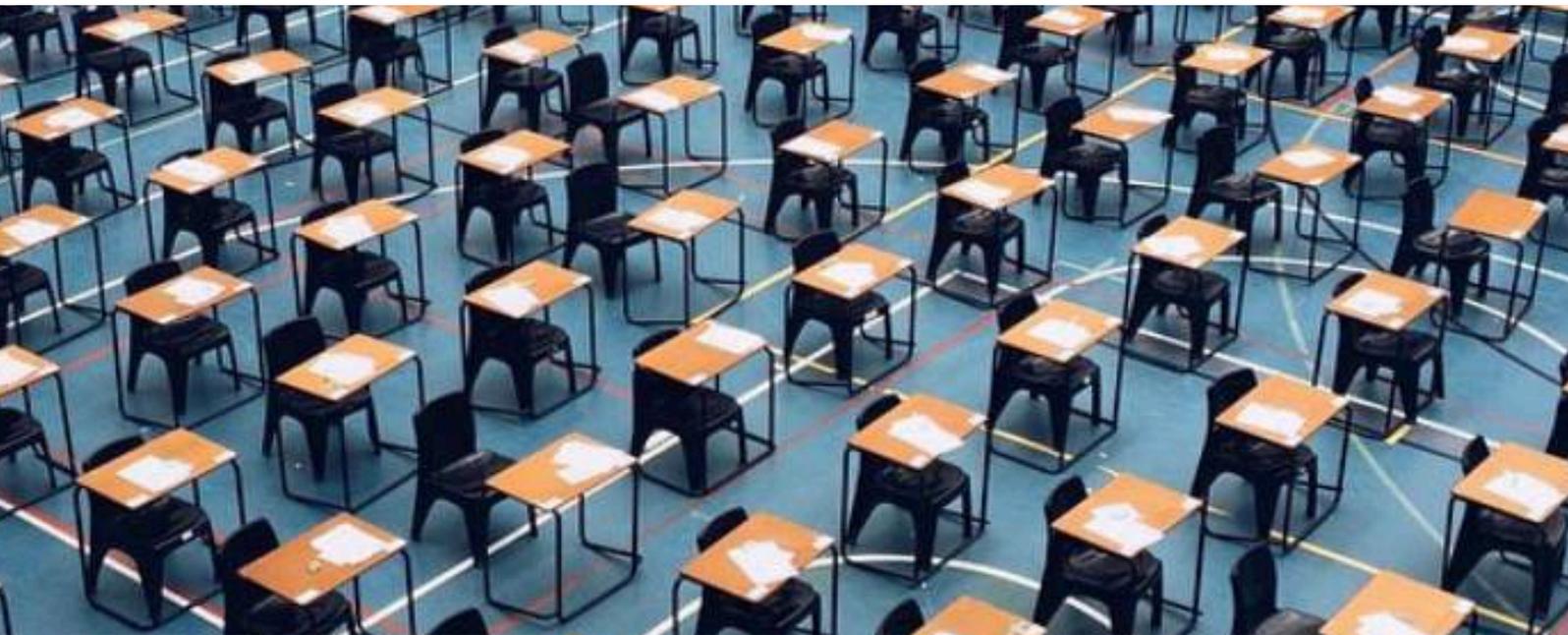
- Trends tend to be magnified in regional areas where the majority of Indigenous students attend school. Higher SEA schools are not enrolling an increasing share of the Indigenous student population. They also have a lower proportion of the most disadvantaged students. In contrast, lower SEA schools, especially in the regions, continue to have high Indigenous enrolments AND a big increase in their share of disadvantaged students generally.
- Where school sectors are in competition, the more advantaged (higher SEA) schools have reduced their share of the total number of Indigenous students, while two-thirds of less advantaged (lower SEA) schools increased their share. Indigenous and Q1 enrolment in regional Australia is especially high and increasing in less advantaged, mainly government schools. High SEA schools, while enrolling more Indigenous students, are consistently reducing their Q1 and increasing their Q4 enrolment portions.
- Closer studies show that the number of Indigenous students at many schools does not reflect the size of the local Indigenous population. Lower SEA schools have disproportionately more Indigenous enrolments, higher SEA schools in all sectors have (with some exceptions) disproportionately fewer. Data from two-school (government-Catholic) rural communities shows that around 14% of Catholic schools enrol a similar or larger percentage of Indigenous students than the nearby government school. Reasons will vary but most of the Catholic school exceptions receive very high levels of public funding per student.

CONCLUSION

Some pointers for future action

There was never a golden era when most Indigenous and non-Indigenous students in Australia attended the same school, but *My School* data reveals a slow and consistent trend towards greater separation.

This is more noticeable in regional Australia and in places where choice of schools exists. It both reflects and creates another layer of increasing separation of students by socio-educational advantage. This is in part created by geography, especially for government schools which serve a variety of communities. However, it is also created by enrolment discrimination, created by the capacity of non-government schools to charge fees.



As a result of these dynamics, this paper highlights that clear and concerning trends are crystalising. It shows that our schools have, or assume, significantly different obligations to Indigenous Australians. This is sometimes through accident of geography, at other times by choices that schools make about who and where they serve. While an experience of schooling is shared by all, the paper highlights that Indigenous and non-Indigenous children increasingly don't share the same school. Closing this gap needs to be part of the obligation of every school and our collective efforts to create a better and more inclusive future for all Australians.

Previous publications: *Uneven Playing Field* and *Losing the Game* revealed a growing divide between advantaged and disadvantaged students and schools. This paper elevates the urgency for all schools which are funded by governments to operate in ways which reduce, rather than increase, such discrimination.

On the positive side, there are significant shards of light among initiatives to support Indigenous students. The success of the [Stronger Smarter Institute](#) is deservedly well-known. Other examples exist at the [school level](#) and also in school designs which [challenge the orthodoxy](#) of what schools should look like and do. There is also some encouraging data emerging from recent Closing the Gap reports, including on Indigenous student retention rates.

There are also a number of high-profile efforts to lift some Indigenous students out of their community and into well-resourced schools and systems. Some students emerge from these programmes as winners, but arguably with a negligible and even negative impact on those left behind. Such strategies don't solve any of the bigger problems of concentrated disadvantage – they just risk adding to it.

We will always need to scale up the best strategies inside each school, support proven programs to lift the achievement of Indigenous students, with funding built into school budgets for the long term. An impetus to do this might emerge from forthcoming findings and recommendations of the second Gonski Review. But, can we really close the gap in a sustainable way while increasingly consigning Indigenous students to the schools with the least capacity to address their pre-existing disadvantage? How much will school improvement, by itself, be enough?

Without change, those who can, may choose; those who can't will struggle – increasingly in a class of strugglers, a class of their own. This dynamic will continue to undermine the disadvantaged and it is developing an unhappy racial dimension.