

EDUCATIONAL INEQUALITY IN AUSTRALIA: DOES EVERY STUDENT HAVE THE SAME OPPORTUNITIES?



How does access to different types of schooling influence students' long-term opportunities, and what does this reveal about equality of opportunity?

WHAT IS EDUCATIONAL INEQUALITY?

Educational inequality refers to differences in students' access to quality education, resources, support and opportunities.

WHY DOES IT MATTER?

Education plays an important role in shaping students' future opportunities, including access to higher education, employment and social mobility. However, having access to school does not always mean having equal opportunities to succeed. Differences in school type, resources and socioeconomic background can influence students' experiences and outcomes. Understanding these inequalities helps us examine how fair Australia's education system is.

THE 3 MAIN SCHOOL SECTORS IN AUSTRALIA

- Government schools** : publicly funded and managed by state and territory governments.
- Catholic schools** : part of the non-government sector and generally include Catholic religious education.
- Independent schools** : privately managed and usually charge school fees.

2025: 98.7% of school-aged children were enrolled in school

Number of schools by school sector and school type, Australia 2025

School type	Government	Catholic	Independent	All
Primary	4,806	1,231	196	6,233
Secondary	1,080	312	68	1,460
Combined	508	167	766	1,441
Special	343	48	148	539
All	6,737	1,758	1,178	9,673

HOWEVER, THEY OFFER UNEQUAL ACCESS

- Resources and facilities**: differences in technology, laboratories, libraries and learning materials.
- Subject and programme choices**: some schools offer more specialised or advanced subjects.
- Academic support**: differences in class sizes, tutoring and individual support.
- Extracurricular opportunities**: unequal access to sports, clubs, competitions and leadership programmes.
- University and career support**: differences in guidance, preparation and access to networks.

Schools (%)	GOVERNMENT	CATHOLIC	INDEPENDENT
Mathematical			
High performers	11	10	19
Low performers	32	22	16
NPS*	45	52	65
Scientific			
High performers	11	11	19
Low performers	24	16	12
NPS*	53	60	70
Reading			
High performers	11	11	17
Low performers	26	17	14
NPS*	52	60	68

* National proficient standard

SOURCE: OECD

Australia's performance on PISA 2000-22

different school sectors can provide students with unequal access to resources, academic support, extracurricular activities and networks. These differences can influence students' educational achievement and their future access to university and employment opportunities.

The differences between school sectors can be seen in PISA results. Students in independent schools, for example, achieved higher average scores than those in government and Catholic schools.

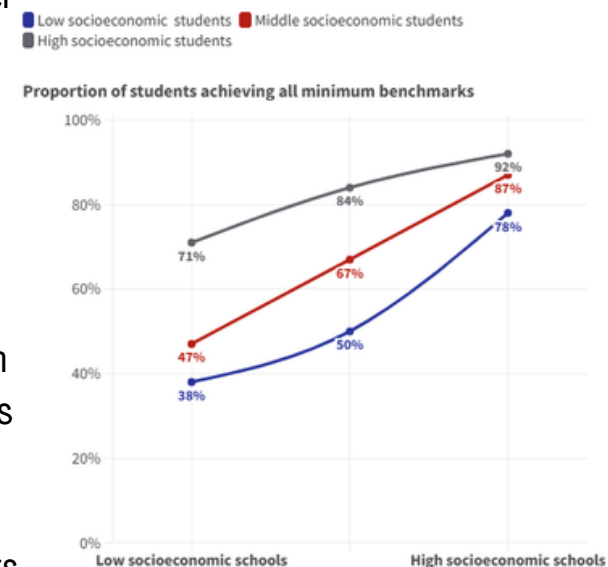
PISA results show differences in average performance between school sectors. However, these differences cannot be attributed to school type alone, as socioeconomic background and other factors also influence outcomes.

SCHOOL TYPE IS NOT THE ONLY FACTOR:

Socioeconomic background:

Students from wealthier families may have greater access to tutoring, computers, books, extracurricular activities and other educational resources. Financial difficulties can limit these opportunities and make it harder for some students to achieve the same results.

NAPLAN results: 2017



Geographic location:

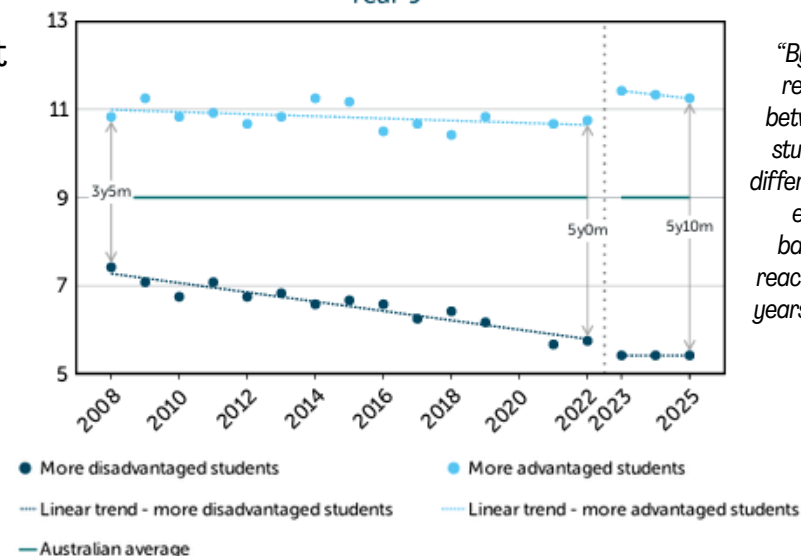
Students in non-metropolitan and rural areas often have fewer subjects to choose from and less access to advanced or specialised courses than students in metropolitan schools. This is partly due to smaller student numbers and difficulties in attracting teachers. As a result, where a student lives can influence the subjects and pathways available to them.

Family circumstances

Family circumstances can influence how much time, support and resources a student has for learning. For example, parents' availability, educational background or family responsibilities can affect homework support, study time and access to educational opportunities.

Year 9 reading gap by parental education, 2008-2025

Equivalent years of learning



"By 2025, the reading gap between Year 9 students from different parental-education backgrounds reached almost 6 years of learning."

DO OTHER COUNTRIES FACE EDUCATIONAL INEQUALITY IN THE SAME WAY, AND HOW DO THEY RESPOND TO IT?



France

A centralised education system

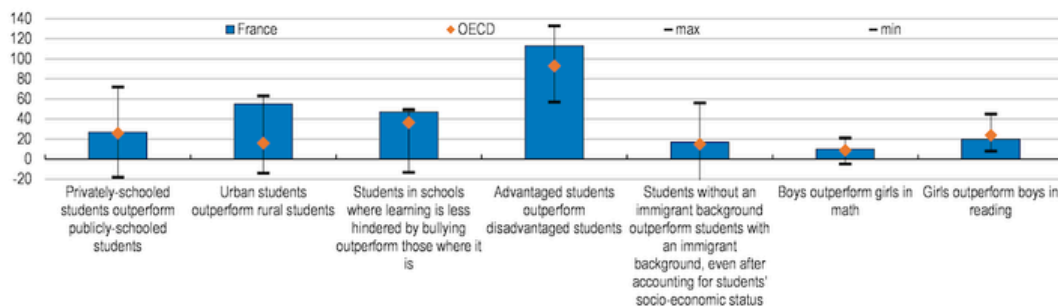
France has a largely national education system. Public schools are free, compulsory and secular, while private schools can operate under contract with the State and must follow the national curriculum. The State also awards national diplomas.

Where does inequality come from?

Educational inequality in France is particularly connected to social and territorial differences. Students from disadvantaged backgrounds can face greater difficulties, while where they live can also affect the educational environment and resources available to them. The French government explicitly identifies both social and territorial inequalities as challenges.

Figure 5.2. Students' performance is highly linked to certain characteristics
Score point differences in maths performance by student characteristics

Source: OECD Program for International Student Assessment (PISA), 2022 Reading, Mathematics and Science Assessment.



How does France respond?

France uses Priority Education (REP and REP+) to give additional support to schools in areas facing greater social difficulties. Measures include smaller classes in the early years, additional teacher support, professional development and programmes such as Devoirs faits. In 2023, more than 1.7 million students were enrolled in REP or REP+ schools.



Vanuatu

A diverse and decentralised school network

Vanuatu's education system includes government schools, government-assisted church schools and private schools, with both English- and French-medium education. The Ministry of Education and Training provides a national curriculum from preschool to Year 13. In 2024, there were 146 secondary schools, including 80 government, 51 government-assisted church, 5 non-assisted church and 10 private schools.

Where does inequality come from?

Vanuatu faces particularly strong geographical and resource-related barriers. Its islands are widely dispersed, making it harder to provide the same access to secondary schools, qualified teachers, learning materials and infrastructure everywhere. Teacher training and support are also challenges, while cyclones, earthquakes and other hazards can disrupt schooling.

How does Vanuatu respond?

Vanuatu is working to improve infrastructure, teacher development, access and climate resilience. For example, a €10 million EU–UNICEF programme launched in 2025 is upgrading school infrastructure and supporting around 900 teachers, school staff and community members, while strengthening resilience to climate-related disasters.

Australia, France and Vanuatu all aim to provide fair educational opportunities, but their different geography, resources and education systems require different solutions. Rather than copying another country's model, Vanuatu can draw on international experiences and adapt them to its own priorities, communities and strengths. This comparison therefore highlights how countries can learn from each other while developing solutions suited to their own context.

REDUCING INEQUALITY

Australia is working to reduce educational inequality by targeting the barriers that prevent some students from having the same opportunities. **School of the Air** reduces the disadvantage of living in remote areas by providing distance education, allowing students to access lessons and teachers without needing to attend a nearby school. **Closing the Gap** addresses inequalities experienced by Indigenous students by supporting literacy and numeracy, helping reduce differences in educational outcomes. **The Better and Fairer Schools Agreement** aims to make school funding more equitable by providing additional resources to schools with greater needs. This can help disadvantaged schools improve teaching, student support and learning resources, reducing the impact of socioeconomic background on educational opportunities.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR AUSTRALIA AND VANUATU

Australia

- Increase needs-based funding for disadvantaged and remote schools.
- Create partnerships between public and private schools to share facilities, resources and expertise.
- Improve access to specialist subjects and learning support in disadvantaged areas.

Vanuatu

- Prioritise remote schools for infrastructure, technology and learning materials.
- Strengthen teacher training, especially in rural areas.
- Develop urban-remote school partnerships to share resources and learning opportunities.
- Improve digital access for students in remote islands.

France

- Increase funding for disadvantaged schools and rural areas.
- Improve access to digital equipment and educational resources.
- Strengthen academic support for students who need it most.



MY PROPOSED SOLUTION: SCHOOL PARTNERSHIPS

Create partnerships between public, Catholic and independent schools to share resources, expertise and opportunities.

The programme could involve:

- **Sharing resources:** facilities, technology, equipment and learning materials.
- **Sharing expertise:** teacher training, teaching methods and successful practices.
- **Joint opportunities:** workshops, extracurricular activities, mentoring and academic programmes.
- **Targeted support:** prioritising disadvantaged and remote public schools.
- **Schools, teachers and students involved could also receive certificates, awards or professional/academic recognition to encourage participation.**



Goal: reduce differences in access to educational resources and opportunities while encouraging cooperation between different types of schools.



This proposal was informed by my research and discussions with Dr Peter Nolan on the impact of resources, infrastructure, location and socioeconomic background on educational inequality.



DR PETER NOLAN