

Session IV: Education

Question and Discussion

Julia Horne: I'm Julia Horne from the University of Sydney. I actually wanted to go back to the first panel session and Alison Frame's point about entrenched disadvantage and also Richard Holden's point about education actually being key to creating human capital. This is for the whole panel, but in particular Pasi and Kim. I'm not sure if you've read the most recent Productivity Commission review, which is on education.¹ It actually focuses not only on higher education, but also primary and secondary education and the link to tertiary education. It has very disturbing figures about funding and where that funding is going. It points out that the majority of funding goes to the Catholic Schools sector, and even more goes to the Independent sector, with a national average being 20%.

The Catholic and Independent sectors are about 36 and 40%, I think, yet government schools are only 18% and it doesn't then break down, the sort of inequities, Kim, which you were talking about between segregated schools. But anyway, just to wind that up, their point is that all this extra funding's gone in. It's been distributed inequitably, and it actually hasn't produced better results in terms of however you measure educational outcomes: people actually getting trained into being productive citizens. I just wonder, can we expand that notion of entrenched disadvantage and is there a way where in fact we should be concentrating on,

in essence, putting money into that part. It might be only a small part of the population, but if you get that right, is there then the beginning of addressing that question of equity in education because it seems to have been a long-time sort of being successful?

Julianne Schultz: Thanks, Julia. Can I just add something to Julia's question, which is just a little bit more data, which is that we have 54% of kids now in high schools in fee-paying schools. A rising percentage of primary school children in fee-paying schools. The segregation is not just brainy kids and the rest, in New South Wales it's single-sex schools, it's religious schools, it's socioeconomic. There's a whole range of different forms of segregation in the education system, which adds into the picture. I'm just interested, given that you're both interested and so expert in the question of equity, can that be fixed without the system being fundamentally reshaped? It's not a leading question. They might say yes.

Kim Beswick: The short answer is no, it can't without a major shift in the system. Australia really does need to seriously look at the funding of education and we know how to do that as well. We've had reports. It's not just the political will, as I was trying to say, it's the community demand for it because the current situation is partly so well entrenched because the graduates, the alumni, of those very most well-off and advantaged schools end up in very power-

¹ Australian Productivity Commission, *National School Reform Agreement* (2022) <https://www.pc.gov.au/inquiries/completed/school-agreement/report/school-agreement-overview.pdf>

ful positions with very vested interests and much interest in maintaining the status quo. It's going to take a major shake-up to change that. I don't think we can wait for that to happen, though.

Even when we fix that funding and we get a level playing field in terms of funding, there are still barriers to choice about schools that you go to because of geography. We need to fix those things as well. Some of that goes to changing the way that all of us — teachers included because teachers are simply part of the community — think about the capacities of students. And move away from a deficit view of because you're Indigenous, because you're in a rural school, because of whatever, that you are not as capable as a child from a wealthy suburb in Sydney.

I've done research that shows that teachers do teach differently and have different expectations of kids depending on their family background. We must shift that. Some of the in-school segregation just reinforces that kind of thing. It's not really the teacher's fault because if you are sent to one of those disadvantaged rural schools, and that's the only place you've ever taught, you don't know what a really well-resourced, well-backed 15-year-old can do. You never get to see it. The kids in the class never get to see that either. We've got to attack this problem at every level.

Peter Shergold: Just very quickly, I don't want us to get too down here. I am agreed, to make systemic change takes a lot, especially the sort of change I'm talking about. But, yes, you can do things instantly. Angelica said something from the 2021 census: that people in Western Sydney now have a higher proportion of people with degrees

than the rest of Sydney. Just think about that. If I had told you, even 10 years ago, that would be, you wouldn't believe. Some things can be possible, but it's no use waiting for government. This is happened in part because you've had waves of migrants coming through, their children coming into the Catholic schools, the public schools, the Independent schools, most of low-income Christian and Islamic schools. Coming in with big ambitions for their children. And those ambitions have then raised the ambitions of all the children in there. You've had a university that has run a very significant program starting at year nine, now starting at primary schools with over 92 schools in that area. That too raises expectations. You provide large numbers of scholarships and grants and support for people to come into university. So Western Sydney University — this is extraordinary — now has 907 students who came to this country on humanitarian visas or are still here on bridging visas. You can do it, but sometimes you have to do it at the university and the community level, not wait for the big reforms to come out of government.

Pasi Sahlberg: I don't have too much to add, other than people probably need to know that there's no other country in the world that funds schools like we do. That the money's coming from all over the place and everybody pays. If you ask me after four years here, I can tell you that we don't have public schools, we don't have private schools either, because everybody pays. On average, parents whose children go to public schools, pay about \$800 a year. That could be a major violation in most other countries, against the constitution or wherever the right to education is deployed. But here, it's a kind

of a normal thing. If your kids go to Sydney Boys High, you pay more than \$3,000, maybe \$4,000, which is a kind of a private school fee.

We need to think not only rethink this whole thing, and ask these hard questions: that is this the way to go? Basically, we should be able to redesign the whole thing so that at least all the public schools — gov-

ernment schools — should be funded up to the school-resourcing standard, which is a minimum thing. But I also want to say that funding alone will not fix these inequalities. That's a misbelief if you say that just give us enough money and we'll fix these things. It doesn't happen. We need to go beyond that, but that's a minimum starting point.

