



Gonski Institute
for Education

NSW Adults' Beliefs and Attitudes about Educational Equity

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The views and opinions expressed in this report are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the views of the Gonski Institute for Education. The funding of this study was provided by the Gonski Institute for Education.

Executive summary

- **Meaning of Educational Equity.** Two thirds of NSW adults who participated in this study indicated that educational equity is more than mere access to education for all. They indicated that educational equity is achieved when all students have (a) equal access to education (17%), (b) equal access to *quality* education (26%), or (c) equal opportunity to succeed (21%).
- **Endorsement for Educational Equity.** There was a high-level of endorsement for educational equity; respondents overall gave a rating of 9 out of 10 regarding the importance of achieving educational equity in Australian society. When two-dimensions of equity (i.e., fairness and inclusion) were asked separately, 78.1% and 86.4% of the respondents supported fairness and inclusion in education, respectively.
- **Main Reasons for Educational Equity.** Participants endorsed various reasons to achieve educational equity, such as a human rights imperative, the achievement of human potential, and social and economic benefits.
- **Rating of Educational Equity in the School System.** The Australian public gave only a 6.3 on a 10-point scale in rating the performance of school system with respect to educational equity. Respondents' scores differed by respondents' gender, parenting status, and political views.
- **Equity versus Excellence.** Nearly two-thirds of the respondents reported that both equity and excellence can be achieved and should be priorities for the Australian school system. Most respondents (92%) endorsed equity as either a single priority or a dual priority together with excellence; 8% chose excellence only. Moreover, 70% believed that educational excellence can be achieved by improving performance of underachieving students.
- **Responsibility for Educational Equity.** Nearly 75% of the respondents believed that it is society's responsibility to close the achievement gaps among students. Furthermore, the majority believed that the government (42%) or educational authorities (20.9%) hold(s) the primary responsibility to ensure educational equity.
- **School Funding.** While 47% of the respondents indicated that the allocation of government's school funding should be based on schools' needs, only 8% supported the performance-based funding allocation.
- **Targeted Assistance.** As many as 78% of the respondents supported the provision of extra assistance for students in need and 78.6% supported extra funding assistance for schools in need.
- **Strategies to Achieving Educational Equity.** Respondents supported various strategies that could be adopted by government, schools, teachers, parents, or other stakeholders to achieve educational equity. In general, respondents favoured the strategies directly related to improving quality of education or reducing inequity and the strategies that can benefit all students regardless of their backgrounds.

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Introduction

Attending to social justice through the provision of education to all citizens is one of the longstanding principles of the Australian society. Aligned with the principle of social justice, “equity” has become a key concept at the forefront of educational policy debates in recent decades (Lingard, Sellar, & Savage, 2014). In democratic societies, public opinion has been shown to influence voting patterns and, subsequently, policy directions (Burstein, 2003; Page & Shapiro, 1983; Wlezien, 2004). While academic literature broadly promotes the idea of equity in the school system, there is little knowledge about the general public’s views on educational equity. Hence, this project investigates how the public understands educational equity, what challenges the public identifies in achieving educational equity, and what specific measures the public supports in promoting educational equity in Australia. Although there are many other dimensions of educational equity to be addressed (such as gender, disability), this project mainly delves into educational disadvantages that students may experience due to their family socioeconomic status. We also limit our investigation to education in the school system (Kindergarten to Year 12). The data was collected from Australian adults living in New South Wales (NSW), the most populous state in Australia. The main body of this document presents the findings gathered through our online survey about educational equity.

Definition of Equity in Education

A broad range of existing literature expresses various views in defining educational equity. Below we briefly introduce the definitions of educational equity provided in OECD, UNESCO, and Gonski reports (e.g., Gonski et al., 2011; OECD, 2012; UIS, 2018). This is followed by our working definition of the term to be used within the context of this project.

OECD documents. OECD (2012), citing the work by Field, Kuczera, and Pont (2007), highlights two dimensions of equity: fairness and inclusion. Equity as fairness means “that personal or socio-economic circumstances such as gender, ethnic origin or family background, are not obstacles to achieving educational potential” (p. 9). Equity as inclusion means “that all students reach at least a basic minimum level of skills” (p. 9). OECD (2018c), however, takes equity in education to mean providing “equal learning opportunities to all students” (p. 22).

UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS) (2018). UIS (2018) presents equity as fair, impartial, and just distributions, while acknowledging the diversity of views on equity principles. It offers five key concepts of equity: minimum standards (“binary educational variable...is positive for everyone”), equality of condition (“educational variable is the same for everyone”), impartiality (“education does not depend on background characteristics”), meritocracy (“education is positively related to ability but not related to other characteristics”), and redistribution (“education is positively related to disadvantage”) (p. 23).

Gonski et al. (2011). While taking a similar approach to Field et al. (2007) and OECD (2012), it defines “equity in schooling as ensuring that differences in educational outcomes are not the result of differences in wealth, income, power or possessions” (p. 105). It also states that “all students must have access to an acceptable international standard of education, regardless of where they live or the school they attend” (p. 105).

Reviewing the definitions abovementioned, we have come to our own working definition of educational equity as a condition where (a) students’ educational outcomes are not the results

of their personal or family backgrounds (referred to as “fairness” in OECD documents and “impartiality” in UIS (2018)); and (b) all students attain the minimum standards of education (referred to as “inclusion” in OECD documents and “minimum standards” in UIS (2018)). Therefore, the project focused on these two core components of educational equity.

The notion of equity is linked to normative frameworks of fairness and justice (OECD, 2018a; UIS, 2018). There are diverse views on the meaning of fairness and justice, as well as varied perspectives on how to achieve them (Savage, Sellar, & Gorur, 2013). Accordingly, even when people accept educational equity as a principle, they may disagree on what educational equity should look like and what approaches and strategies should be taken to achieve educational equity. Therefore, it is imperative to investigate people’s views on not only educational equity but also approaches and strategies to achieve it. Our project aims to shed light on the Australian public’s opinions on those matters.

The Current State of Educational Equity

There is no country that can declare the total elimination of educational inequity despite the substantial progresses made in many parts of the world (OECD, 2018c). There is considerable evidence that students from low socioeconomic backgrounds experience educational disadvantages. A large and persistent gap in performance of students from advantaged and disadvantaged backgrounds has been reported in the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) in 2018. On average across OECD countries, the gap in reading scores was 141 score points between the 10% most socioeconomically advantaged students and the 10% most disadvantaged students, which was equivalent to over three years of schooling (OECD, 2019). This gap has remained unchanged in the past decade (Schleicher, 2019). Moreover, students from disadvantaged backgrounds were less likely to achieve the minimum level of reading proficiency in PISA, 2018 (Schleicher, 2019). The substantial influence of family backgrounds on students’ performance also demonstrates a large extent of educational inequity. In a UNICEF report based on data from 41 member countries of OECD and/or EU, for example, close to 33% of the reading score variation of primary school students was explained by parental occupation (UNICEF Office of Research, 2018).

Nonetheless, not all students from disadvantaged backgrounds are destined to struggle academically (OECD, 2019). On average, 1 in 10 disadvantaged students achieved scores in the top quarter of reading performance, and disadvantaged students in some countries (e.g., Australia, Canada, Ireland) were more likely to be academically resilient than disadvantaged students in other countries, according to PISA 2018 data (OECD, 2019). The strength of the relationships between educational outcomes of students and their family backgrounds undoubtedly varied across countries (OECD, 2019). This variation suggests that educational equity is achievable, depending on how the school system develops and manages its educational infrastructure, resources, and provisions.

PISA data has also shown that achieving educational equity does not mean sacrificing excellence in education (Schleicher, 2019). Countries like Finland and Korea are examples of achieving higher performance on both reading and educational equity than that of the OECD averages (OECD, 2019).

One major factor that contributes to socioeconomic inequality in students’ academic performance is inequality among schools. The UNICEF Office of Research (2018) highlighted

that one fifth of the variation in children's reading scores was explained by differences between schools. Socioeconomically disadvantaged students tend to attend schools with less than ideal conditions such as having a large proportion of underperformers, lacking educational material and physical infrastructure, or lacking experienced teaching staff (OECD, 2019). Well-resourced and high-performing schools tend to be located in wealthier neighbourhoods, making it difficult for students from low income families to attend those schools (Schleicher, 2019). A similar observation was made by the UNICEF Office of Research (2018) that "segregation of students along social and economic lines contributes to the persistence of inequalities due to family background" (p. 38).

In Australia, educational inequity – as impacted by students' socioeconomic background – is still prominent. At first glance, Australia's standing in the world appears to be contradicting in the UNICEF and OECD reports on educational equity. According to UNICEF Office of Research (2018), Australia is one of the most unequal countries at the primary and secondary levels of education (i.e., ranked 5th in terms of the performance gap between top and bottom 10% performers in primary school among 29 countries examined in 2016 (UNICEF Office of Research, 2018). Conversely, Australia is one of the most successful countries in reducing educational inequity, showing a weaker relationship between socio-economic status and reading performance than the OECD average in PISA 2018 (OECD, 2019, p. 15). Aside from ranking, however, there still exists substantial performance gaps between advantaged and disadvantaged students in Australia. Only 6% of disadvantaged students were top performers in reading while about 24% of advantaged students were in PISA 2018 (Echazarra & Schwabe, 2019). Also, a reading score gap between socioeconomically advantaged and disadvantaged students was 89 points, which is about same as the average performance gap across OECD countries in PISA 2018 (Echazarra & Schwabe, 2019).

The Importance of Equity in Education

Equity in education is essential because education is fundamental for the wellbeing and development of individuals and society. Education is a significant predictor of a range of individual outcomes such as employment, financial security, health, wellbeing, and civic participation (Hout, 2012; Lee, 2014; OECD, 2017; Oreopoulos & Salvanes, 2011). Education is also crucial to the nation's economic, social, and political development (e.g., Hanushek & Woessmann, 2008; Hout, 2012; Rindermann, 2008; Sianesi & Reenen, 2003). Most importantly, education is a human right (UN General Assembly, 1948) as it is essential for people to fully develop and participate in society (Field et al., 2007; OECD, 2012). Hence, it is not surprising that persistent educational inequity that denies some students equal opportunities to learn and achieve and undermines societal development, has been a significant concern for the public and the government.

The benefits of educational equity for individuals and society have been well documented. Specific narratives of the benefits include: preventing wastage of human potential (Field et al., 2007); offering children and young people from disadvantaged backgrounds the opportunity to succeed in life (OECD, 2018c); laying a foundation for a democratic society (OECD, 2019) so that everyone can become an informed citizen able to fully and effectively participate in decision making processes; and promoting social cohesion and trust in society (Field et al., 2007).

Accordingly, international organisations have adopted equity as a key principle for the improvement of education systems around the world. OECD (2018), for instance, claimed that

“equity is a fundamental value and guiding principle of education policy” (p. 22). Equity in education is also one of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) set by the United Nations in 2015. SDG 4 calls on all member states to “ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all” (United Nations, n.d.).

Similarly, equity has been a tenet in Australian educational policies in recent decades (Lingard et al., 2014). Educational reform between 2007 and 2013, for example, was driven by the government’s commitment to equity, which received bipartisan support (Lingard et al., 2014). Similarly, the Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians (Ministerial Council on Education, 2008) declared that the promotion of equity and excellence is the number-one goal for Australian education (p. 7), while recognising “the central role of education in building a democratic, equitable and just society” (p. 4). The Review of Funding for Schooling Final Report (Gonski et al., 2011), known as the ‘Gonski Report’, was an effort to address inequity in the Australian school system in that the reasons for the review included “an unacceptable link between low levels of achievement and educational disadvantage” and “[a] concerning proportion of Australia’s lowest performing students... not meeting minimum standards of achievement” (Gonski et al., 2011, p. xiii). These policy initiatives clearly indicate that educational equity is “firmly on the policy agenda” in Australia (Savage et al., 2013, p. 164).

Public Opinion and Educational Policy

Countries have taken different approaches to address educational inequity. The development and implementation of educational policy in each country are influenced by its unique social, cultural, economic, and political contexts (OECD, 2018b). In the policy making processes, public opinion has a substantial impact on policies in that politicians tend to reflect public preferences in their policy decisions (Burstein, 2003; Page & Shapiro, 1983; Wlezien, 2004). Although policy making is influenced by many complex factors, politicians’ willingness to pursue education policy reforms is likely to be influenced by public support shown towards these reforms (Busemeyer, Lergetporer, & Woessmann, 2018).

In spite of the vast literature on public opinion regarding various public institutions or public policies, this topic has not been extensively researched in the field of education (Busemeyer et al., 2018; Fladmoe, 2012). There is a paucity of scholarly literature that examines the public’s views about educational equity. Studies about public opinion in education are found with respect to government spending on education (e.g., Busemeyer et al., 2018), education systems (e.g., Fladmoe, 2012), or specific educational policies (e.g., Hess, 2006). However, these studies are not directly relevant to educational equity. For example, Busemeyer et al. (2018) investigated the public’s support for government spending on education and their willingness to pay additional tax to fund education; Fladmoe (2012) explored the public’s confidence and evaluation of education systems in 3 Nordic countries; and Hess (2006) examined the U.S. public’s opinion on *the No Child Left Behind Act*. In other relevant fields of research, studies have explored the public’s views on fairness or social justice (e.g., Marshall, Swift, Routh, & Burgoyne, 1999; Rasinski, 1987), affirmative actions (e.g., Kravitz & Platania, 1993), government role (e.g., Biddle, Gray, & Sheppard, 2019), or government expenditure (e.g., McAllister, 2014). However, these studies did not explore the issues directly related to educational equity.

Our project presents a unique approach to the topic of educational equity through a comprehensive analysis of the meaning, purpose, challenges, and strategies pertinent to achieving educational equity in the Australian school system.

Methodology

This study utilised an online self-completion questionnaire to collect data on people's beliefs and attitudes about educational equity and relevant policies. The survey questionnaire was developed from Australian and international literature and the findings from a preliminary qualitative survey; and it was validated by educational experts. Given the limited literature on people's beliefs and attitudes about educational equity, we first gathered the views of staff at UNSW Sydney through a preliminary qualitative survey ($n = 89$) with open-ended questions. This information was utilised in the development of this survey questionnaire.

The target population of this study was Australian adults aged 18 years or over and living in New South Wales (NSW). Quota sampling was adopted to ensure that the recruited sample would be similar to the population in terms of key demographic variables. Five demographic variables including age, gender, education, income, and region, were used as the quotas. The fieldwork for the survey was conducted by a data collection company called Qualtrics Panel, to ensure the quality of the quota sampling. The total sample size was $n = 2,017$.

The survey was administered online, and the survey link was open for about 8 weeks between 23rd October and 16th December in 2019. The survey had 30 questions about educational equity with multiple Likert-scale items, along with 30 questions about demographic information (see below the demographic information). The survey questionnaire asked about the meaning of equity in education, reasons why equity is important, views on equity in the current Australia school system, normative beliefs about educational equity, preferences for educational practices and policies to achieve equity, and demographic information.

Ethics approval was obtained from the Human Research Ethics Committee at UNSW Sydney. Participants were clearly informed of the purpose and procedure of the study prior to their consent to participation as these were presented in the recruitment email and on the first page of online survey. Participants were also informed that they were able to withdraw from the study at any time. Surveys were completed anonymously and did not collect any identifiable information on participants.

The approach that we took for data analysis was to highlight how educational equity issues are understood by the general public. Statistics that were used for the results of this report included item analysis by frequencies, pairwise t-test (to examine statistical differences on the two means provided by the same group of people), independent samples t-test (to examine statistical differences on the two means provided by two independent samples such as males and females), and one-way ANOVA (to examine statistical differences across more than two means provided by independent groups). All the statistical analyses were conducted using IBM SPSS version 25.

Demographic Information of the Participants

Demographic information of the participants was collected as part of this study. The information about their gender, region, parenting status, political party that they voted for in the last federal election, and educational level are presented in *Table 1*.

For group comparisons, some categories with very few cases were excluded or grouped together with other categories. For instance, regarding gender, group comparisons were made between males and females only because the number of respondents in the other categories was too small to meaningfully compare them with the two major gender categories. For the categories of political party, only the four groups were compared and the groups indicating “did not vote” or “prefer not to answer” were excluded. In terms of the educational levels, we further classified them into four groups: secondary school, some schooling after secondary school, Bachelor’s degree and graduate diploma or certificate, and advanced degree holders (with Master’s or Doctoral degree).

The mean age was 50 (SD = 17) with an age range of 18 to 89 years old. Given this age range, it is understandable that the majority was not a student (89%) and paid tax (73%). Also, 94% were Australian citizens and 5% were permanent residents. About 40% reported their income level as less than \$1,500 fortnightly after tax deductions, another 42% between \$1,500 and \$3,000, and 16% more than \$3,000. We also asked about subjective feelings of economic hardship by asking whether it is difficult or easy to make ends meet. About 30% answered “difficult”, 35% “neither easy nor difficult”, and 36% “fairly easy” and “very easy”.

In comparison to the NSW population in Census 2016 (ABS, 2017, 2018), survey respondents were slightly more likely to be female (52.3% vs 50.7%), live in rural and remote areas (12.4% vs 6%), have children (65.3% vs 61.7%), or be a supporter of Labor party (37% vs 34.6%); and were much more likely to have a Bachelor’s or higher degree (35.2% vs 23.4%). Census 2016 included Australians who were 15 years or over whereas participants of this study were 18 years or over. The age difference may explain the differences related to parental status or education to a certain degree.

Table 1. Demographic Information of the participants

	Frequency	Percent
Gender		
Male	954	47.3
Female	1054	52.3
Non-binary/ Other	3	0.1
Prefer not to answer	6	0.3
Region		
Metropolitan	1347	66.8
Regional	420	20.8
Rural	235	11.7
Remote	15	0.7
Parenting status		
No child	699	34.7
Younger children	150	7.4
School-age children	542	26.9
Older children	626	31.0
Political party		
Liberal/National Coalition	737	36.5
Labor	681	33.8
The Greens	166	8.2
Other	136	6.7
Did not vote	152	7.5
Prefer not to answer	145	7.2
Educational level		
Year 9 or below	81	4.0
Year 10	185	9.2
Year 11	22	1.1
Year 12	373	18.5
Trade/ apprenticeship	89	4.4
Other TAFE/ Tech. Cert.	324	16.1
Diploma	227	11.3
Bachelor’s Degree	411	20.4
Graduate Dip. or Cert.	129	6.4
Master’s Degree	147	7.3
Doctoral Degree	23	1.1
Other	6	0.3

Note. *n* = 2,017

Why Equity in Education?

The Meaning of Educational Equity

The participants were asked about the meaning of educational equity. As seen in *Figure 1*, five options were presented to them (along with “other”).

The majority of the responses were divided into four options, “access to education” (34%), “equal access to education” (17%), “equal access to good education” (26%), and “equal opportunity to succeed” (21%). Notably, two-thirds (66%) believed that educational equity is more than having mere “access to education”.

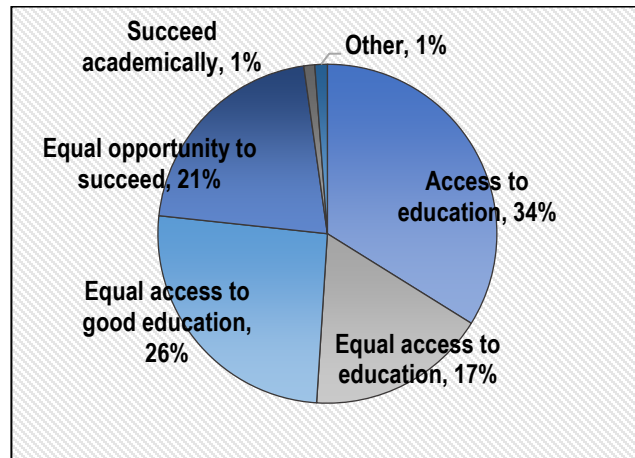


Figure 1. The Meaning of Educational Equity

Main Reasons to Ensure Equity

Respondents were asked about the reasons why achieving educational equity is important. The mean values ranged from 3.9 to 4.1 across all ten statements (see *Figure 2*; they are listed from the highest to the lowest) (on a 5-point scale). It was found that all “good” causes were appealing to respondents. Although the differences in scores are small, the top two reasons were related to individuals’ full potential (4.1) and human right (3.97), rather than to the social and economic issues and benefits to the society.



Figure 2. Main Reasons to Ensure Educational Equity

Equity and Excellence

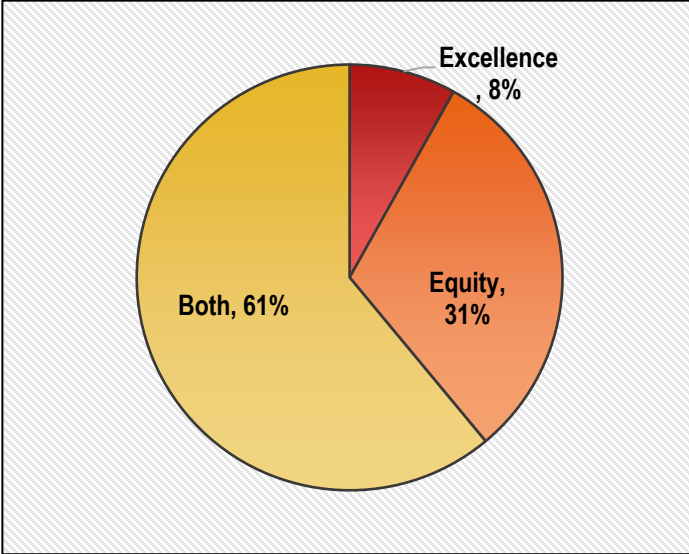


Figure 3. Equity versus Excellence as a Priority

To examine how the Australian public feels about equity issues, we asked whether equity, excellence, or both should be the priority in the Australian school system (*Figure 3*).

Not too surprisingly, the majority indicated that both should be the priority (61%).

As many as 31% indicated that achieving educational equity is the priority.

Only 8% responded that excellence is the priority.

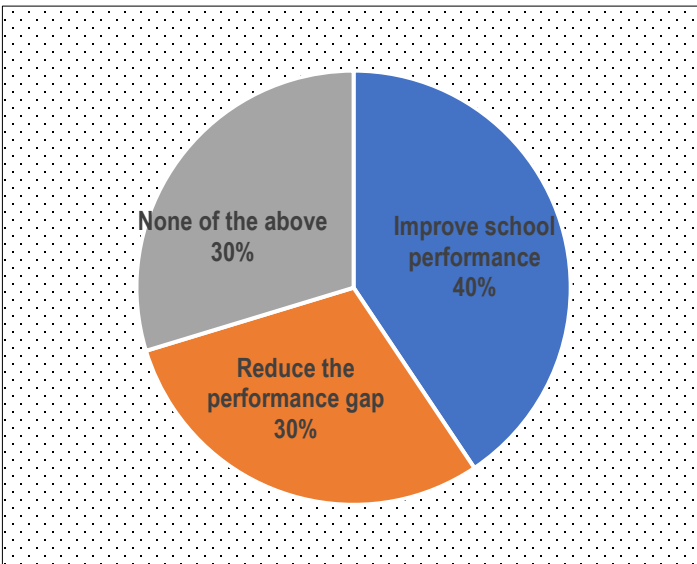


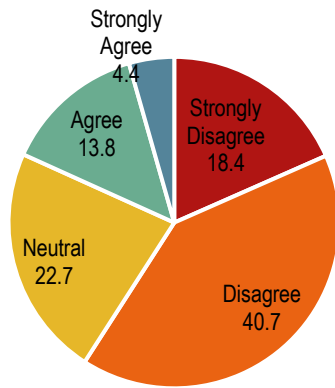
Figure 4. Equity versus Excellence Regarding Standardized Tests

On the other hand, when respondents were asked differently, the support for excellence climbed up (*Figure 4*).

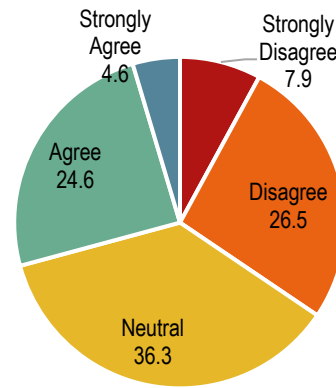
In choosing a school's approach in the preparation for standardised tests (e.g., NAPLAN), 40% believed that a school should focus on improving school performance even if the performance gap among students increases while 30% believed that a school should focus on reducing the performance gap among students even if school performance declines.

Nonetheless, 30% did not endorse any of these approaches, which may reflect their refusal to choose one or the other as a priority.

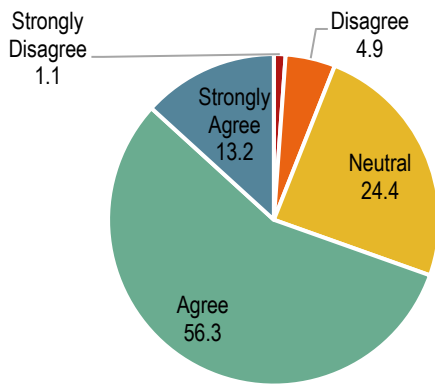
Respondents were further asked about the compatibility of these two priorities. Only 18% believed the impossibility of having both excellence and equity in education, and 70% believed that excellence can be achieved by improving performance of underachieving students (i.e., excellence through equity). See *Figure 5*.



Impossible to have both equity and excellence



Inequity is inevitable to have excellence



Excellence through equity

Figure 5. Compatibility of Equity and Excellence

Overall Challenges for the Australian School System

Twelve items related to the challenges for the Australian school system were presented, on a 5-point scale (Figure 6). The list of challenges is displayed on the right hand-side. They are ranked from items with the highest mean scores to items with the lowest mean scores (the mean scores are presented in bracket).

The top three most severe challenges were identified as the lack of resources in rural and remote schools, rising cost of education, and insufficient funding for public schools.

On the other hand, issues surrounding student wellbeing, achievement gap among students with different family backgrounds, technologies and cultural diversity in the curriculum were placed at the lower end of the list.

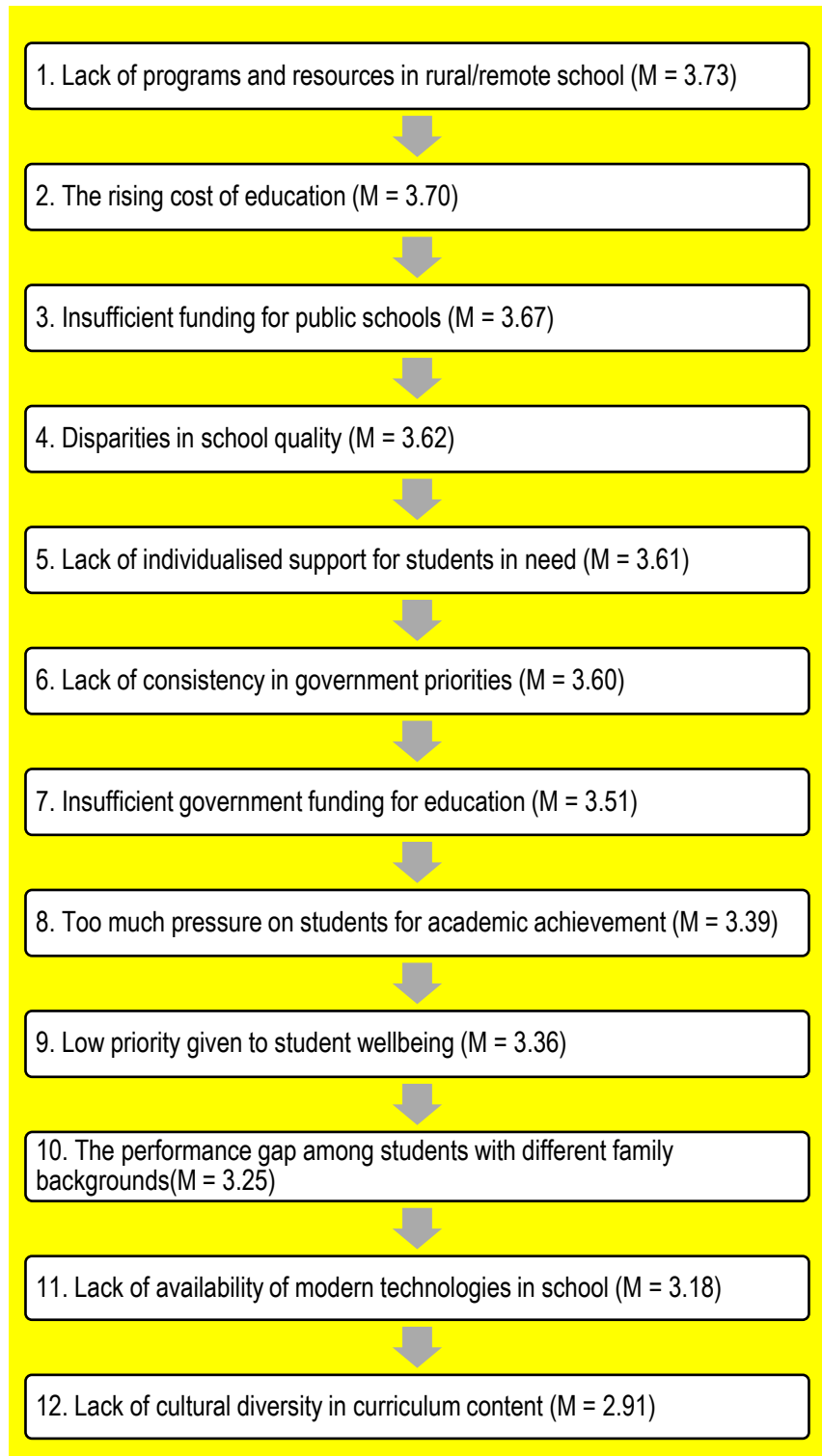


Figure 6. Challenges for the Australian School System

Three Core Questions

Respondents were asked to indicate whether they are satisfied with the Australian school system, whether they believe that equity is an important issue, and how well equity issues are addressed. They were given a response scale from 1 to 10. Here, a scale-point from 8 to 10 can be interpreted as “satisfied”, a scale-point from 5 to 7 as “marginally satisfied (i.e., neither satisfied nor dissatisfied)”, and a scale-point below 4 as “unsatisfied”.

Respondents scored similarly on two questions: the overall ratings of the school system (Mean = 6.6; SD = 1.8) and how the equity issues are addressed (Mean = 6.3; SD = 2.1). These two mean values indicate that people are marginally satisfied with how the school system is currently run in Australia.

On the other hand, most people believed that equity is an important issue (Mean = 8.3; SD = 1.8). The discrepancy between the ratings of how the equity issues are addressed and the importance of equity may indicate a desire for a further improvement of educational equity (Figure 7).

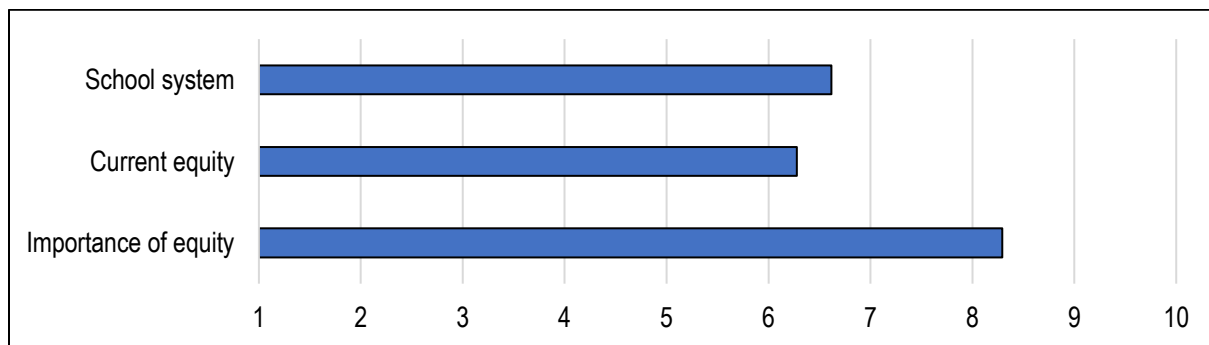


Figure 7. Ratings about Australian School System and Importance of Educational Equity

Overall Rating of the Australian School System

This section presents further analyses about the public’s perception of the Australian school system in general. It focuses on group differences by gender, region, parenting status, political party, and educational level.

Overall. As mentioned above, the mean of the overall rating of the school system was 6.6 (SD = 1.8) on a 10-point scale. The majority responded with a rating between 6 (25 percentile) and 8 (75 percentile) while the mode (a rating that was most often selected by the respondents) as well as the median (50 percentile) was 7.

By Gender. There was a small gender difference in the overall rating of the Australian school system (Figure 8). The independent sample t-test ($t = 2.00$; $df = 2006$; $p = 0.04$) showed that males had a slightly more positive attitude ($M = 6.71$; $SD = 1.8$) than females ($M = 6.55$; $SD = 1.8$).

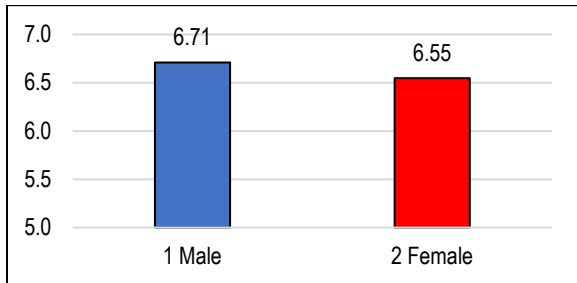
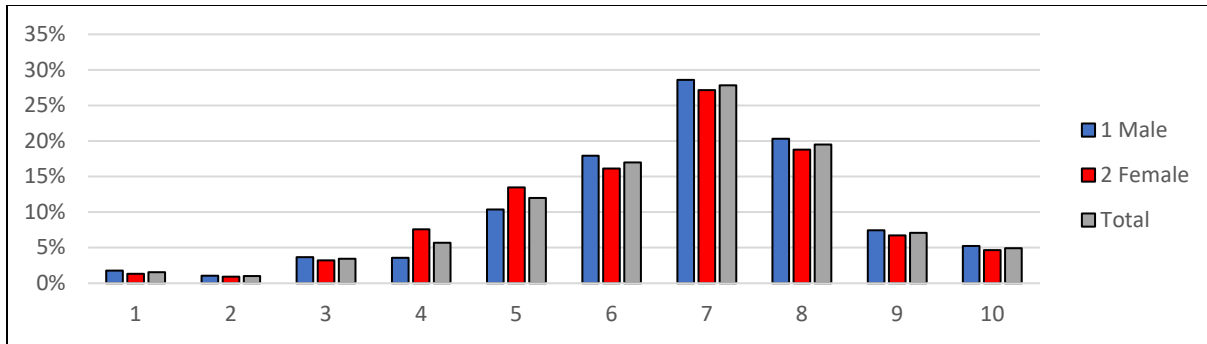


Figure 8. Overall Rating of the Australian School System by Gender

By Region. The ratings of the Australian school system were similar among people living in different parts of NSW (Metropolitan, Regional, Rural, and Remote). The post-hoc pair-wise test on the omnibus ANOVA indicated that there was no statistical difference when comparing each group against the other.

By Parenting Status. The respondents were grouped into one of the following: no child, having children younger than school-age, having school-aged children, and having children older than school-age. The overall ratings of the Australian school system were similar among these four groups, with the mean values ranging between 6.0 and 7.0.

However, the post-hoc and homogeneous subsets tests showed that the respondents with no children ($M = 6.5$; $SD = 1.70$) scored slightly lower (i.e., less satisfied) than either the group with school-age children ($M = 6.8$; $SD = 2.05$) or the group with younger children ($M = 6.9$; $SD = 1.70$). There was no statistically significant difference among the three groups with different stages of parenting. See *Figure 9*.

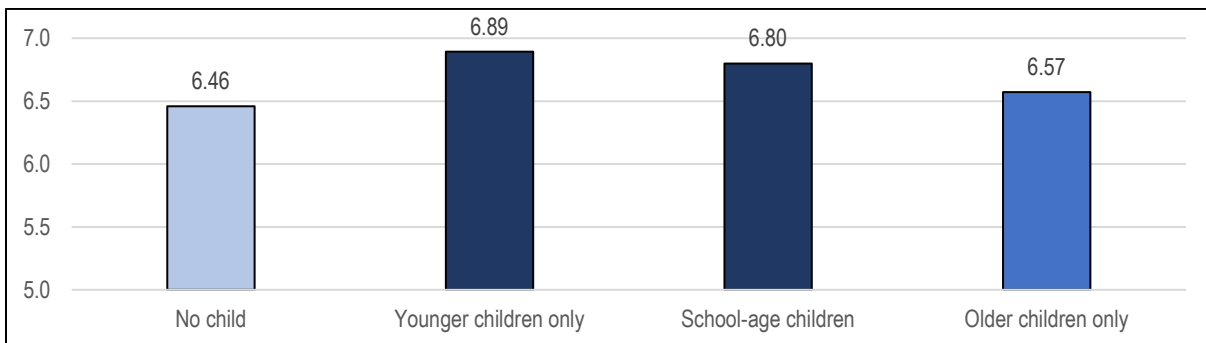


Figure 9. Overall Rating of the Australian School System by Parenting Status

Note. Statistical difference between the light blue and the darker blue.

By Political Party. The overall ratings of the school system differed ($F = 22.64, p < .001$) with respect to the political parties that the respondents voted for in the last federal election (Liberal/National Coalition, Labor, the Greens, and Other). Among these four, the participants who voted for the Liberal/National Coalition showed the most favourable view about the Australian school system, while the group “Other” (those who did not vote for the major three parties) showed the least favourable view (*Figure 10*).

The post-hoc and homogeneous subsets test indicated that the rating of the Liberal/National Coalition group differed from that of the Labor group. The rating of the Greens did not differ from those of either Liberal/ National Coalition or Labor. The group who voted “Other” rated statistically lower than each of the three groups.

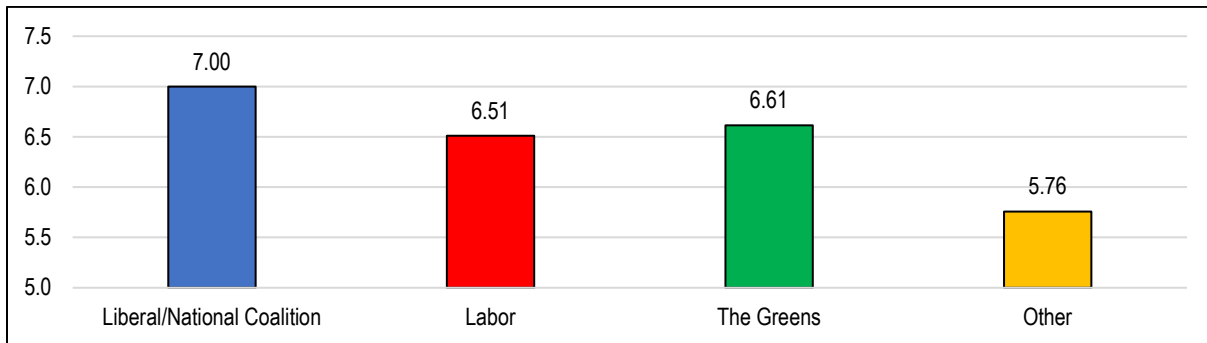


Figure 10. Overall Rating of the Australian School System by Political Party

By Educational Level. A one-way ANOVA of group differences was conducted by the four major groups of educational attainment: secondary school, some training after secondary school, Bachelor’s degree, and postgraduate degree. The mean levels of the four groups were statistically significantly different from each other ($F = 3.01, p = .03$). The only statistical difference was found between people with some training after secondary school and people with a postgraduate degree ($p = .04$). Those with the higher educational attainment reported to be more satisfied than those with some training after secondary school (*Figure 11*).

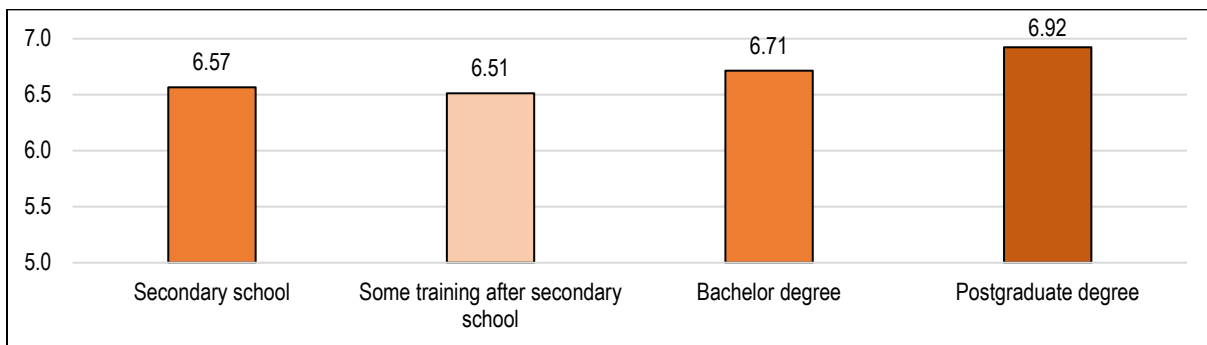


Figure 11. Overall Rating of the Australian School System by Educational Level

Note. Statistical difference between the light orange and the darker orange.

Overall Rating of Equity in the Australian School System

Overall. A mean of 6.3 (SD = 2.0) was obtained on the overall rating of how equity issues were addressed in the Australian school system. Both mode and median were 7 out of 10 points.

Most respondents indicated a score between 5 (25 percentile score) and 8 (75 percentile score). These central tendency measures can be interpreted as people showing marginal satisfaction.

By Gender. The male respondents showed a slightly more favourable view than the female counterparts about the way equity issues are addressed in the Australian school system. A statistically significant difference was found in the independent sample t-test ($t = 2.49$; $df = 2006$; $p = 0.01$), with the males having a slightly more positive attitude ($M = 6.41$; $SD = 2.0$) than the females ($M = 6.18$; $SD = 2.1$). See *Figure 12*.

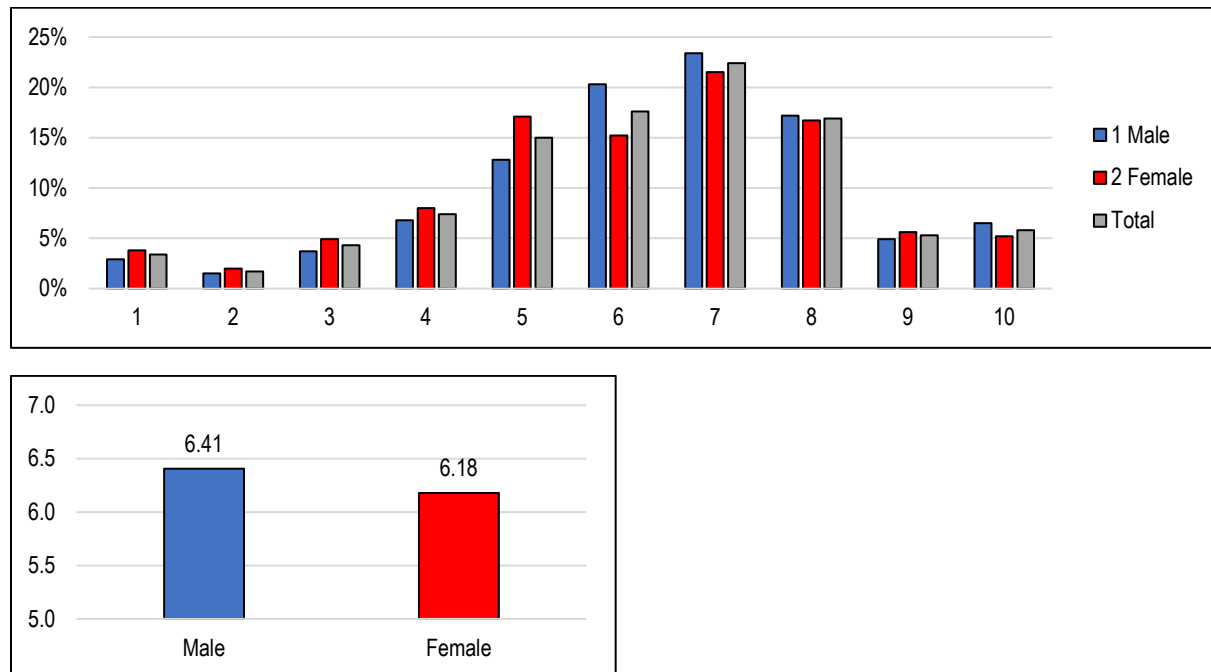


Figure 12. Overall Rating of Equity in the Australian School System

By Region. Among the four groups living in different parts of NSW (Metropolitan, Regional, Rural, or Remote), there was no statistical difference in the overall ratings in how well equity was addressed. While their overall means ranged from 6.06 (Regional area, $SD = 2.1$) to 6.67 (Remote area, $SD = 1.4$), the difference was not statistically significant.

By Parenting Status. The ratings of how equity was addressed were statistically different among the respondents by their parenting status. The omnibus ANOVA test indicated that there was a statistical group difference but it was driven by the difference between the two groups only; the group with no child ($M = 6.07$; $SD = 2.05$) and the group with school-aged children ($M = 6.54$; $SD = 2.2$). Parents with school-aged children held a more positive attitude than the people with no children. See *Figure 13*.

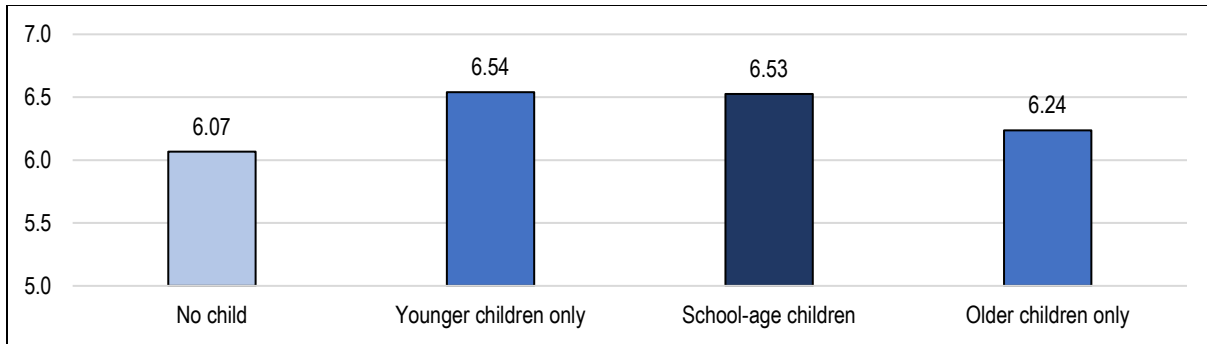


Figure 13. Overall Rating of Equity in the Australian School System by Parenting Status

Note. Statistical difference between the light blue and the darker blue.

By Political Party. The respondents' view about how equity issues were addressed differed by the political parties they voted for in the last election. The Liberal/National Coalition voters had a statistically significantly higher mean than each of the other three groups. There was no difference in the views among the Labor, Greens, and "Other" voters.

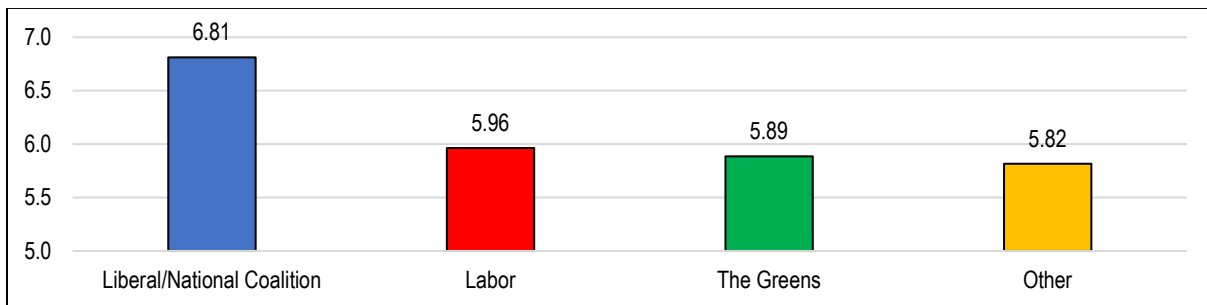


Figure 14. Overall Rating of Equity in the Australian School System by Political Party

By Educational Level. The respondents' rating of how equity was addressed did not differ by educational level. The mean differences were not statistically significant between any two pairs among the four groups.

Importance of Educational Equity

Overall. The respondents indicated that they highly value equity in the Australian school system. On a 10-point response scale, most (84%) gave a score between 7 and 10 to the question of "how important is it for you that Australian education system is equitable?". As many as 37% responded with a maximum score of 10 while fewer than 3% gave a rating between 1 and 4.

By Gender. While both males and females indicated a high level of endorsement of the importance of educational equity, gender difference existed ($t = 3.30$, $df = 2006$, $p = .001$) with females ($M = 8.42$; $SD = 1.78$) expressing a slightly stronger endorsement than their male counterparts ($M = 8.16$; $SD = 1.75$). See Figure 15.

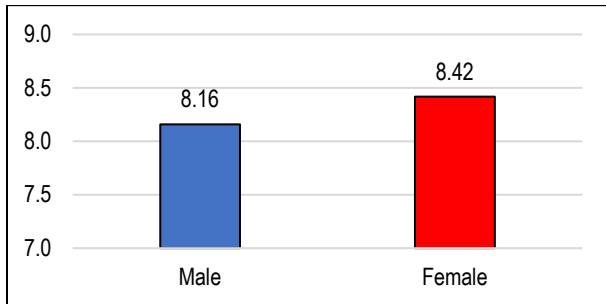
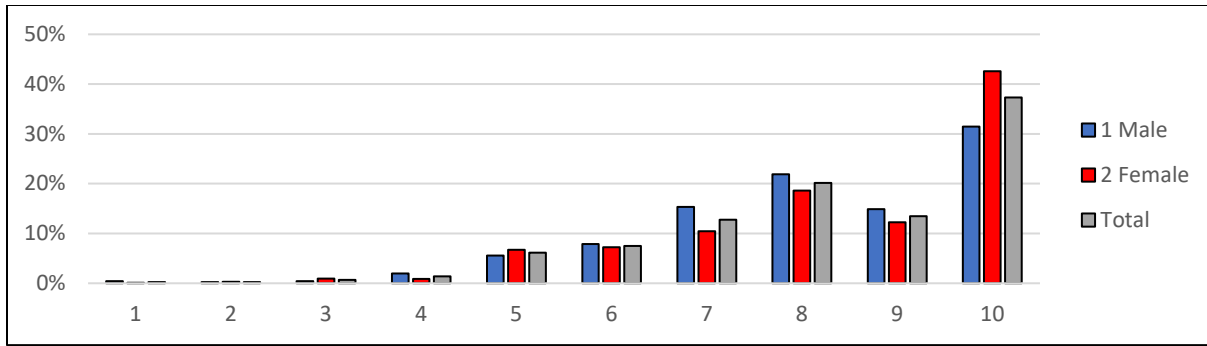


Figure 15. Importance of Educational Equity by Gender

By Region. There was no statistical difference in the mean levels on the importance of educational equity among the respondents living in different parts of NSW (Metropolitan, Regional, Rural, or Remote). The mean values are 8.31 (SD = 1.72) for Metropolitan area, 8.26 (SD = 1.93) for Regional area, 8.30 (SD = 1.78) for Rural area, and 8.00 (SD = 1.69) for Remote area. A one-way ANOVA test showed no statistically significant difference.

By Parenting Status. The ratings of the importance of educational equity showed statistically significant differences between the groups ($F = 8.46, p < .001$). The mean values ranged from 7.91 (SD = 1.91) of parents with younger children to 8.56 (SD = 1.58) of parents with older children. However, the post-hoc and homogeneous subsets tests showed that the statistically significant difference existed only between the parents of older children and each of the other three groups. There was no difference between the other three parenting groups. See Figure 16.

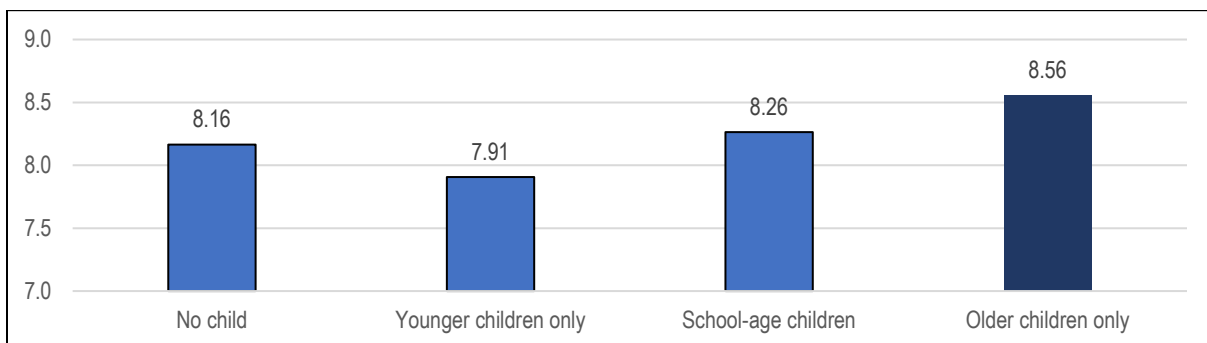


Figure 16. Importance of Educational Equity by Parenting Status

Note. Statistical difference between the lighter blue and the darker blue.

By Political Party. There was no group difference by the political party about the importance of educational equity. All respondents showed a high level of endorsement of the importance of equity issues.

By Educational Level. In general, the respondents indicated that educational equity is important in Australian society, irrespective of their educational level. The ratings ranged between 8.08 (Bachelor's degree) and 8.45 (some training after secondary schooling). However, the small difference in the mean values between these two groups turned out to be statistically significant ($p = .003$), with those with some training after secondary schooling exhibiting a higher level of endorsement. See *Figure 17*.

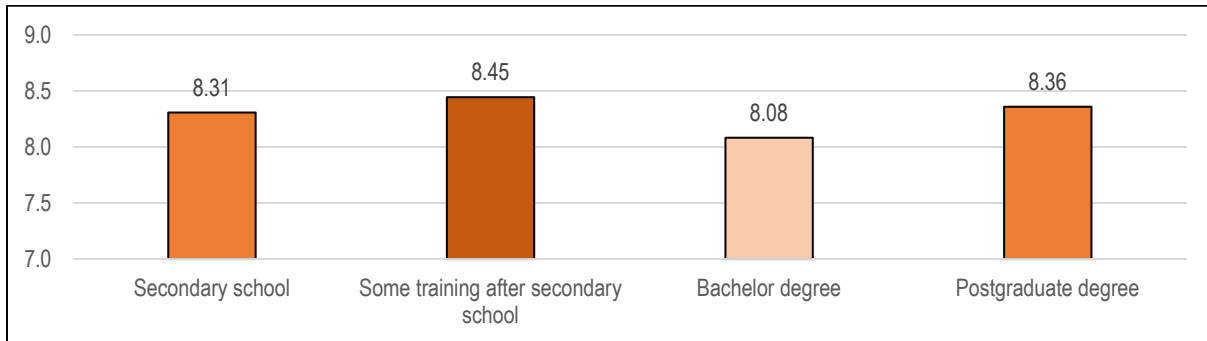


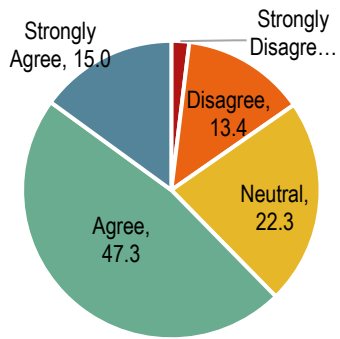
Figure 17. Importance of Educational Equity by Educational Level

Note. Statistical difference between the light orange and the darker orange.

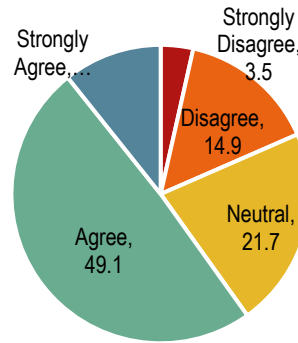
Educational Equity in the Australian School System

We also asked whether the current school system is achieving some level of educational equity. Almost two-thirds (62.4%) of respondents strongly agreed or agreed that high-ability students succeed in school regardless of their family backgrounds. Conversely, 38% strongly agreed or agreed that students' academic outcomes are mainly a result of their family backgrounds. Nearly 60% strongly agreed or agreed that most students achieve basic literacy and numeracy. Overall, around 60% of respondents seem to believe that the Australian school system is achieving equity in relation to both fairness and inclusion.

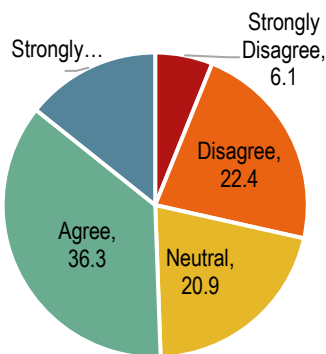
Regarding the education conditions, however, only 38.3% strongly agreed or agreed that every student receives good quality education and 37.4% strongly agreed or agreed that the government provides more funding to schools that need extra assistance. See *Figure 18*.



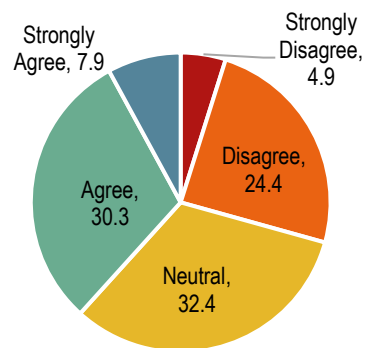
High-ability students succeed in school



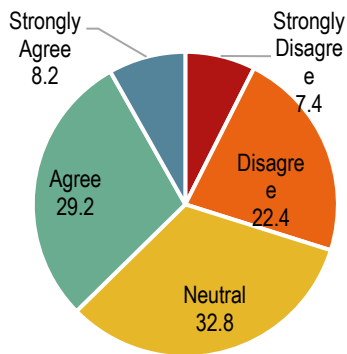
Most students achieve basic literacy and numeracy



Every student receives good quality education



Academic outcomes are mainly a result of family backgrounds



More government funding for schools in need

Figure 18. Educational Equity in the Australian School System

Normative Beliefs about Educational Equity

Educational Equity as Fairness and Inclusion

The respondents were asked about two-dimensions of equity identified by OECD: fairness (i.e., backgrounds not being obstacles to academic success) and inclusion (i.e., all students achieving the minimum standards of education). As shown in *Figure 19*, most respondents strongly agreed or agreed with both statements: 78.1% on fairness and 86.4% on inclusion.

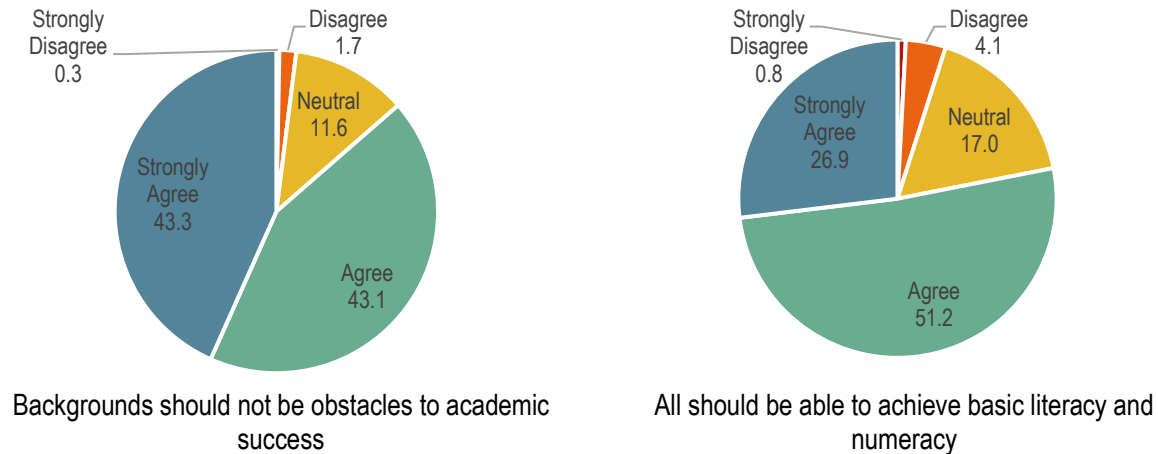
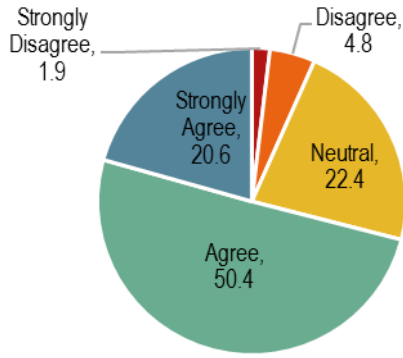


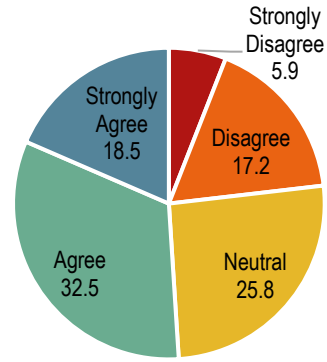
Figure 19. Educational Equity as Fairness and Inclusion

Educational Equity and Family Resources

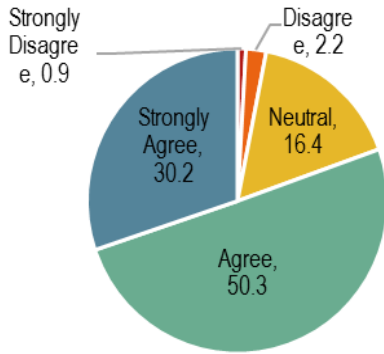
Respondents' views on educational equity derived from inequalities in family resources seem to be somewhat complex (*Figure 20*). On the one hand, as many as 71% agreed on people's entitlement to spend money on their children's education and only 38% agreed on unfairness of inequalities in resources that families can utilize to improve their children's performance. On the other hand, 78% and 80% strongly agreed or agreed with providing extra assistance and free educational resources to students in need, respectively. Thus, many respondents did not consider it was unfair that some students experience educational advantages due to their families' financial capacities to invest in their education. At the same time, many supported redistributive measures to compensate for educational disadvantages experienced by some students due to the lack of their families' financial capacities to do the same.



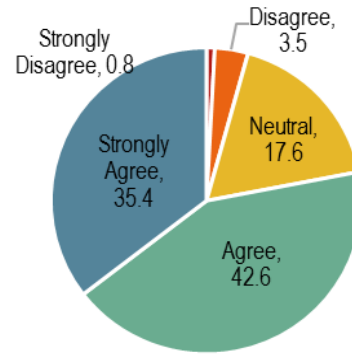
People are entitled to spend money on education



Inequality in family educational resources is unfair



Additional assistance for students with higher needs

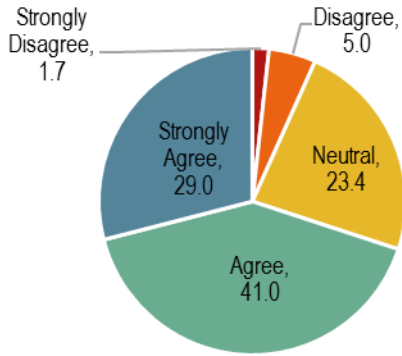


Free educational resources for those in need

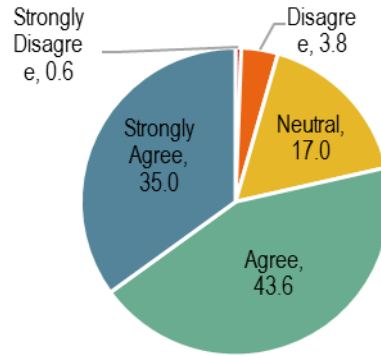
Figure 20. Educational Equity and Family Resources

Educational Equity and School Resources

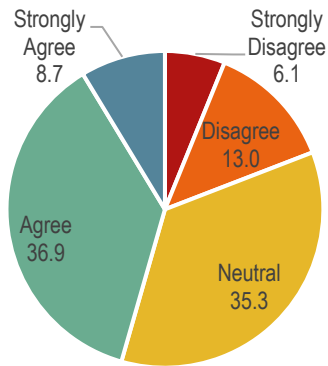
In relation to school resources, 70% strongly agreed or agreed on unfairness of large inequalities in school resources. While 45.6% strongly agreed or agreed that performance-based funding motivates schools, 78.6% strongly agreed or agreed that the government should provide more funding to schools in disadvantaged areas. Overall, respondents supported need-based school funding although some recognised the benefits of performance-based funding. See *Figure 21*.



It is unfair that some schools have far more resources than other schools do



The government should provide more funding to schools in disadvantaged areas



Performance-based funding motivates schools

Figure 21. Educational Equity and School Resources

Responsibility to Ensure Equity

In a question about closing the achievement gap among students, 74.4% strongly agreed or agreed that it is our collective responsibility as a society (Figure 22).

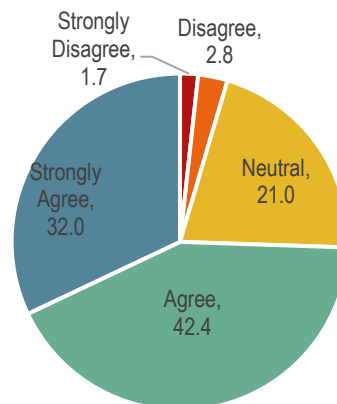


Figure 22. Beliefs about Societal Responsibility to Close the Achievement Gap

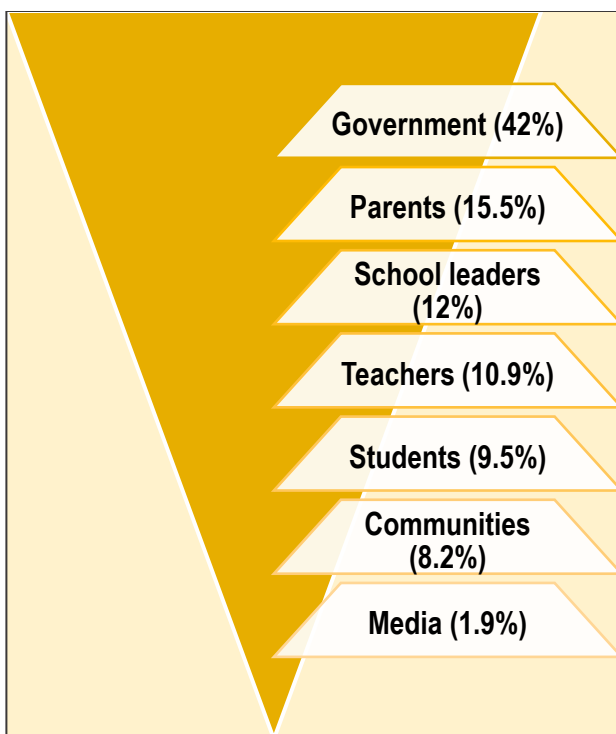


Figure 23. Primary Responsibility to Ensure Educational Equity

Furthermore, we asked respondents about who should hold the responsibility to ensure that student performance is not determined by individual backgrounds. Participants ranked the entities in the order of most responsible to least responsible (*Figure 23*).

Among the options given, the government was selected as the most responsible entity by 42% of respondents. This was followed by parents/ carers, school/ school leaders, and teachers.

Policies and Strategies to Ensure Educational Equity

Educational Policy Priorities

To gauge the public’s opinion on the “urgency” to achieve educational equity in the school system, we asked respondents to rate on a 5-point scale each of the statements listed below. The response categories were essential priority (5), high priority (4), moderate priority (3), low priority (2), and not a priority (1).

As shown in *Figure 24*, respondents indicated that the “improvement of academic performance of all students” is the highest priority. This was closely followed by the concern about “the achievement gap among students in the city and rural areas”. The next concern was about “improving access to early childhood education and care”, which was followed by “the narrowing the gap among students from different socio-economic backgrounds”.

Narrowing the achievement gap between racial/ethnic groups, between gender, and for newly arrived students were assigned a medium-level of urgency.

Students repeating a year in school or placement of students based on their abilities were ranked as the lowest concern.

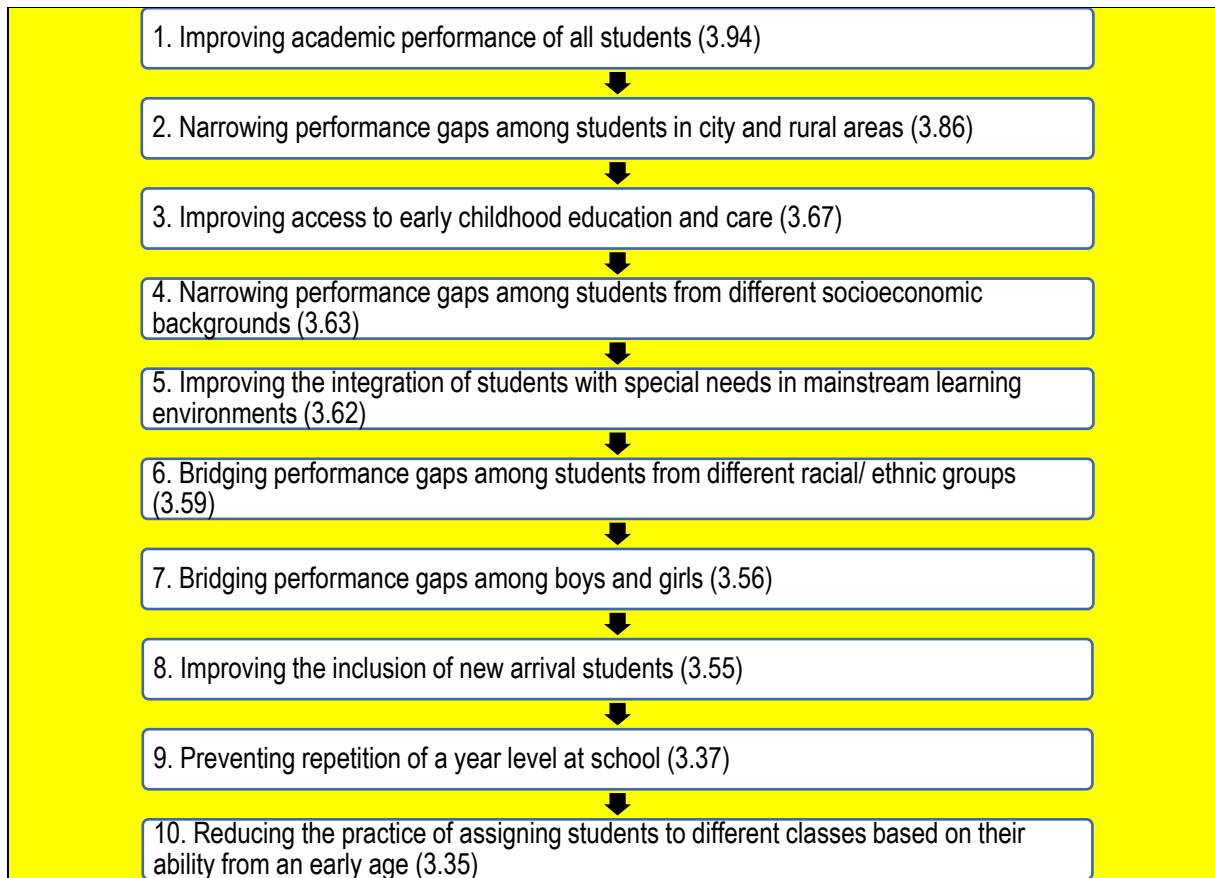


Figure 24. Educational Policy Priorities

Government Funding

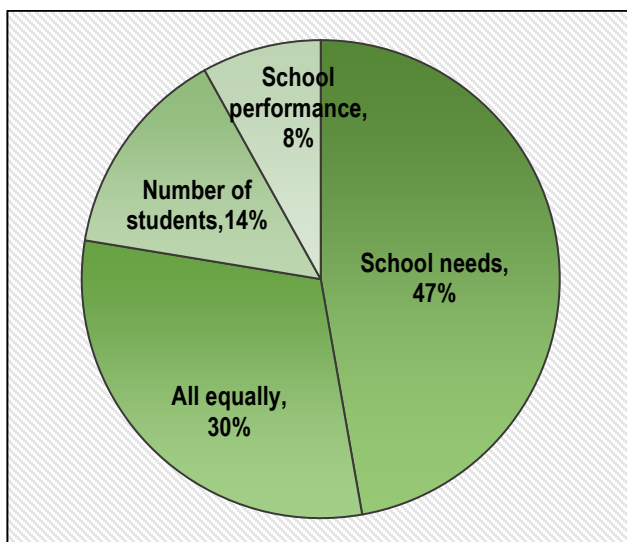


Figure 25. Rationale for the Government Funding Allocation

The participants were also asked about the way in which government funding should be allocated among schools in Australia. Four options were provided for participants to choose from (school needs, all equally, number of students, and school performance) as shown in *Figure 25*.

The most frequently endorsed response was that the government funding should be allocated according to the schools' needs (47%).

Nearly one-third of respondents (30%) indicated that funding should be allocated to all schools equally.

Only about 8% perceived that the government funding should be allocated according to school performance.

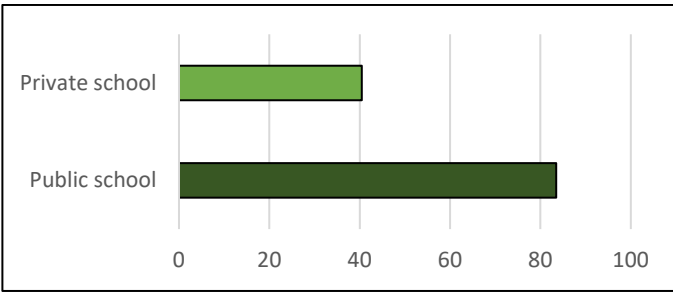


Figure 26. Allocation of the Government Funding for Private and Public Schools

The respondents were asked to indicate the percentages of the government funding for private and public schools (*Figure 26*).

As expected, the percentage for the public schools is much higher (83%) than for the private schools (40%). However, not all respondents believed that all funding for the public schools should come from the government. Further, on average, the respondents expressed the view that as much as 40% of the private schools' funding can be provided by the government.

Government Strategies to Ensure Equity

Seventeen statements related to the strategies that the government may take to ensure educational equity were presented, and the respondents rated the preferences on a 5-point scale (Figure 27).

The respondents were generally positive about each of the strategies. They are listed on the right-hand side and ranked from those with the strongest (4.3 at the top of the list) to those with the weakest endorsement (3.5 at the bottom of the list).

Overall, the strategies directly related to improving quality of education (extra resources, investment, teacher incentives) were ranked higher than the strategies that may be seen as indirectly related to educational equity (health and wellbeing, school autonomy, cost of early childhood education and higher education, school choice).

1. Ensure good quality of education at all levels
2. Ensure that all schools are appropriately resourced
3. Invest more in public education
4. Provide more incentives for teachers to work at rural or disadvantaged schools
5. Provide extra resources to disadvantaged schools
6. Improve monitoring systems on teacher quality and training
7. Increase funding for education in general
8. Develop policies and guidelines to promote educational equity
9. Reduce the cost of higher education
10. Make health and wellbeing services available in all schools
11. Improve job security and offer higher pay for teachers
12. Raise the minimum qualification required to become a teacher
13. Give schools more autonomy in allocating resources
14. Reduce the cost of early childhood education and care
15. Set ambitious goals and monitor the progress of disadvantaged students
16. Provide parents with more school choices
17. Provide free healthy meals to all students at school

Figure 27. Preferences for Government Strategies to Ensure Equity

School Strategies to Ensure Equity

Respondents were offered seven strategies that schools can implement to ensure the achievement of educational equity (Figure 28).

The respondents were favourably inclined towards all seven strategies and there was little difference in their ratings (with the mean values ranging from 3.97 to 4.15 on a 5-point scale).

The top three strategies were identified as “maintain open communication with parents to identify student needs”, “hire more specialist teachers”, and “reduce the costs of school-related expenses”.

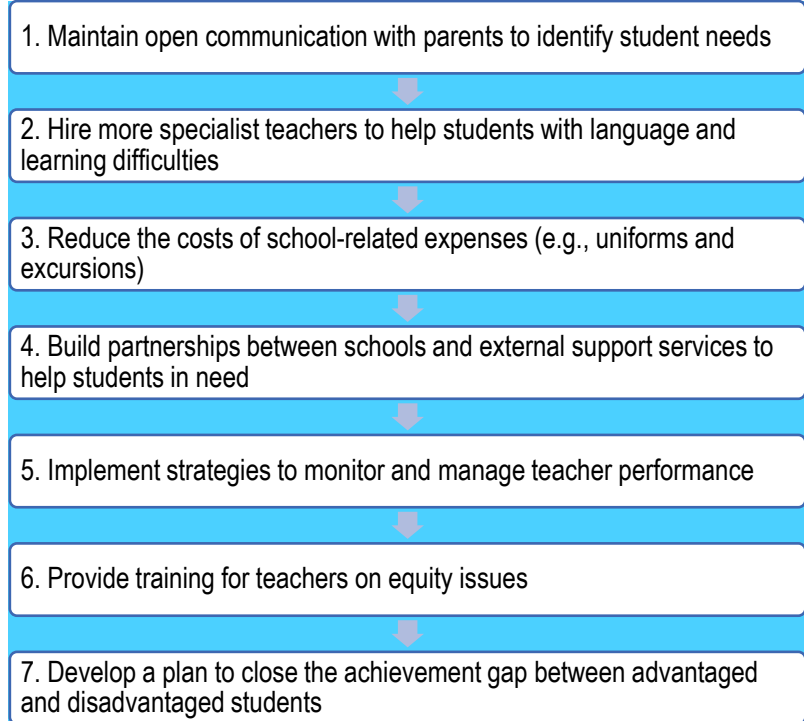


Figure 28. Preferences for Schools Strategies to Ensure Equity

Teacher Strategies to Ensure Equity

Eight strategies that teachers can use to ensure educational equity in Australian schools, were presented (*Figure 29*).

Overall, the respondents felt favourably towards all eight strategies. However, unlike the government or school strategies, there were stronger and weaker preferences (the mean levels ranged from 3.42 to 4.22 on a 5-point scale across the items).

On the right-hand side, the strategies are presented in the order with the more favourable strategies listed at the top.

The most favourable strategies were treating students equally, providing targeted help, recognising student needs, and enhancing teacher communication with parents.

The strategies directly related to only disadvantaged students received the least favourable endorsement.

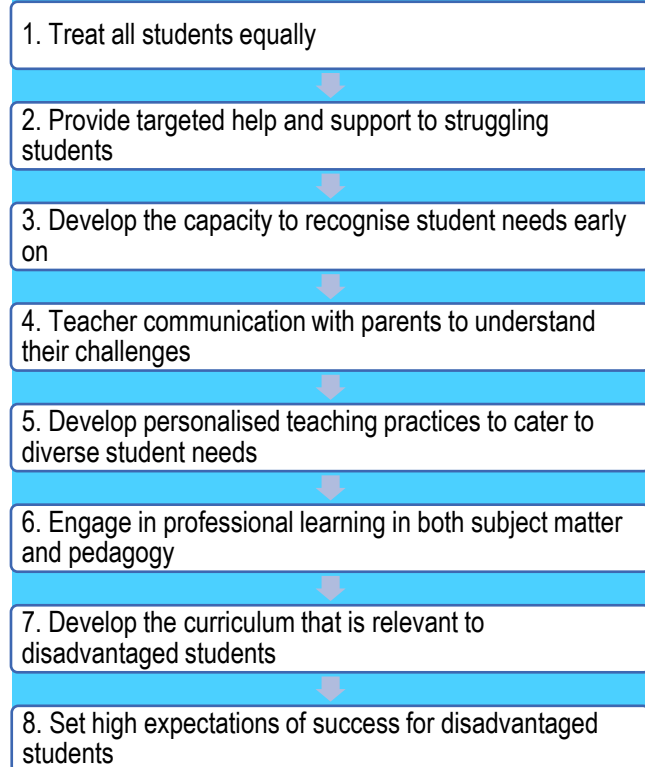


Figure 29. Preferences for Teacher Strategies to Ensure Equity

We presented four specific strategies that schools and teachers can implement to help socio-economically disadvantaged students (*Figure 30*). Overall, these items received lower endorsements than other items in the survey. The mean levels ranged from 2.59 to 3.96 on a 5-point scale. The most preferred strategy was to spend more time with disadvantaged students to assist their learning. This was followed by a strategy related to development of pedagogical approaches to cater to diverse learning needs. The next was the adjustment of assessments to accommodate the needs of disadvantaged students, which was mildly endorsed. Giving extra marks on schoolwork as a strategy to assist disadvantaged students was not a popular option.

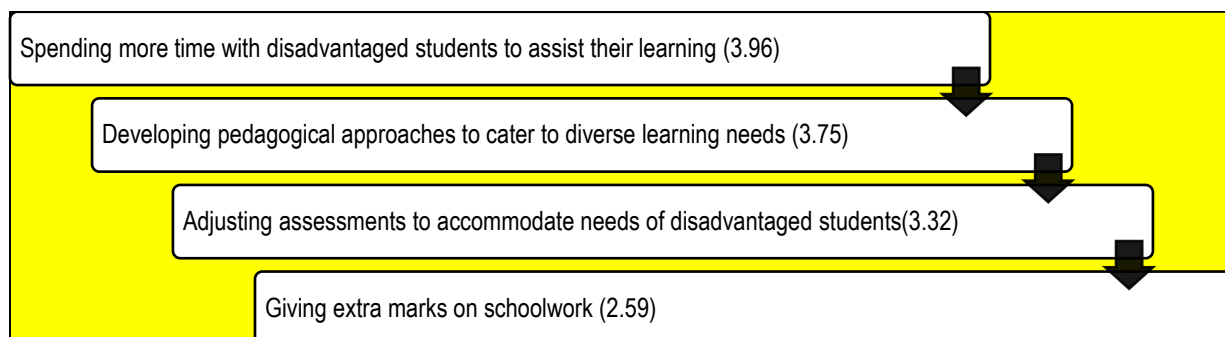


Figure 30. Preferences for Educational Strategies to Ensure Equity

Parents' Strategies to Ensure Equity

Respondents were given seven strategies that parents can adopt to promote educational equity (*Figure 31*).

While all seven strategies were viewed positively, the preferences were shown.

The most strongly endorsed strategies were about parents directly working with their children (ranked first, with the mean value of 4.33) and collaboration between parents and teachers (ranked second with the mean value of 4.28).

The least favourable strategy was "send their children to local public schools" (mean level of 3.85).

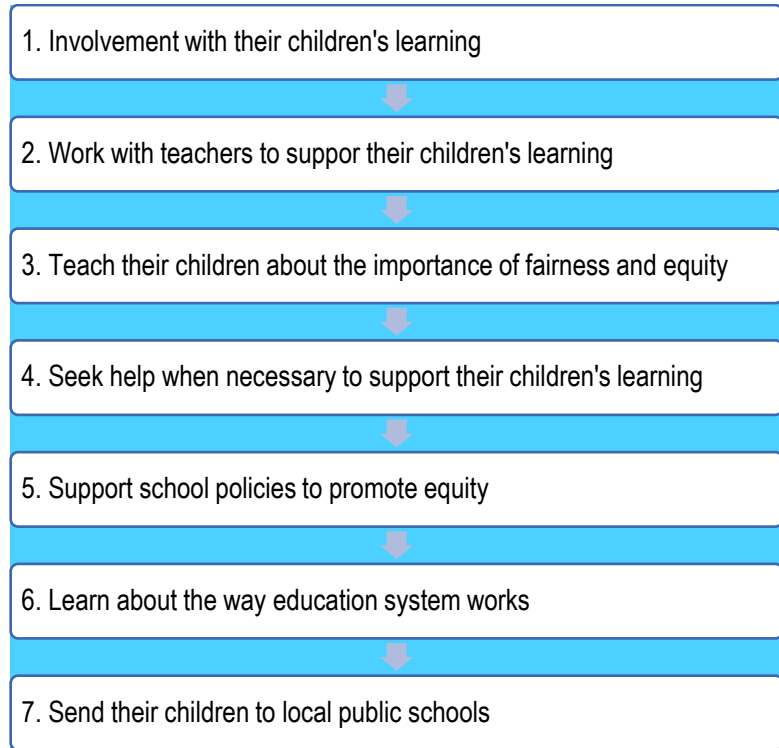


Figure 31. Preferences for Parental Strategies to Ensure Equity

Summary & Discussion

This project aimed to enhance our understanding of public beliefs and attitudes about educational equity in the context of Australian school system. A sample from adults who live in New South Wales ($n = 2,017$) was drawn, using a quota sampling technique. The sample's demographic composition approximately matched that of the NSW population in terms of age, gender, education, income, locations, and political views.

This study found that there was a high-level of endorsement from the respondents of the importance of educational equity in the Australian school system (an overall rating of 9 on a 10-point scale). The majority believed that students' backgrounds should not be obstacles to academic success (i.e., fairness) and all students should be able to achieve basic literacy and numeracy (i.e., inclusion) (78.1% and 85.4% respectively). Fairness and inclusion in this sense, are key elements of educational equity identified in OECD (2012). This result also shows that respondents clearly supported educational equity. Overall, these findings indicate that Australian society values equity as an important principle for its school system.

Although both equity and excellence were declared as the primary goals for Australian education by the government (Ministerial Council on Education, 2008), the concepts of equity and excellence can be viewed as conflicting. Some people may have concerns that the promotion of equity may mitigate students' academic excellence while others may have concerns that a pursuit of academic excellence may undermine educational equity. Thus, we asked the general public whether equity, excellence, or both should be a priority in the Australian school system. Nearly two-thirds of the respondents believed that both equity and excellence should be priorities for the Australian school system. Most respondents (92%) endorsed equity as either a single priority or a dual priority together with excellence; 8% chose excellence only. Further, about 70% of the respondents believed that supporting underachieving students is a way to achieve educational excellence in Australian society. This result indicates that the Australian public seems to perceive equity and excellence as compatible principles and as such, equally important goals for education.

While educational equity appeared to be highly valued by most Australians, their ratings of the Australian school system with regards to educational equity were lukewarm. The respondents were marginally satisfied with the Australian school system (6.3 on a 10-point scale) and its management of educational equity issues (6.6 on a 10-point scale). Given the high importance placed on education equity, it can be argued that this marginal satisfaction warrants attention from policy makers and politicians. The Australian public seems to demand more actions to achieve educational equity in the Australian school system.

Understandably, there were some notable group differences in the ratings of the school system according to gender, educational levels, and political views. The most notable of these differences were found by the political party that the respondents voted for in the last Federal election. Those who voted for the Liberal/National Coalition were more favourable towards the Australian school system and its management of educational equity while people who voted for other parties seem to believe that more things need to be done. As mentioned earlier, most of our respondents shared the same view on the importance of educational equity, regardless of their party voting tendency. Thus, taking together these findings, we conclude that the

Australian public appears to similarly value educational equity but express different views on how it is currently handled in the school system.

In this project, we also delved into how the public would view or define the concept of educational equity. More than 60% of respondents perceived that educational equity is more than merely providing children with access to education. They believed that educational equity is achieved (a) when all children are provided with equal access to education (17%), (b) equal access to quality of education (26%), and (c) equal opportunities to succeed academically (21%). Access to education can be obtained if children are able to receive education; but it does not necessarily require removing barriers to education or assisting children to learn and perform. In contrast, ensuring equal access to education, equal access to quality education, and equal educational opportunities would require more proactive measures to remove barriers to education, to provide all schools with resources and support needed to maintain the quality of education, and to ameliorate educational disadvantages experienced by some students. This result implies that, if the government and education sector are to reflect the Australian public's understanding of educational equity, they would need to address these matters.

In terms of the responsibility to ensure educational equity, the majority of respondents indicated government (42%) and educational authorities (22.9%) are most responsible. Only about 15.5% indicated that it is parents' responsibility and only 9.5% stated that it is the responsibility of students themselves. Thus, there is an acknowledgement among the public that the issues of educational equity need to be handled at the macro-level, government, and education sectors, not at the micro-level, students, and parents.

Strong support for educational equity was also expressed in the endorsement of specific strategies to promote educational equity. Nearly 80% of the respondents supported additional assistance in place for either students from disadvantaged backgrounds or schools in socioeconomically disadvantaged areas. Overall, the strategies directly related to improving quality of education or reducing inequity (e.g., ensuring that all schools are properly resourced, investing in public education) were ranked higher than the strategies seen to be less relevant (e.g., providing free healthy meals to all students). Also, the strategies that can benefit all students regardless of their backgrounds (e.g., providing targeted help for struggling students) were more favoured than those specifically benefitting only disadvantaged students (e.g., setting high expectations of success for disadvantaged students). These findings suggest that both targeted and universal strategies to promote educational equity are likely to be supported by the Australian public if they are directly relevant to the issues of educational equity.

Despite our efforts to ensure rigour in sample recruitment, analysis, and interpretations, the findings reported in this document should be viewed with caution. The respondents of this study were selected using a quota sampling, which cannot guarantee a representative sample of the NSW population. A more rigorous procedure, stratified sampling, involves a random sampling within a designated quota to achieve the representativeness of the sample. Our sampling procedure did not involve random sampling and thus, selection bias cannot be ruled out. In addition, our sample recruitment was limited to New South Wales only and thus the findings of this study cannot represent the views of the Australian population. Another limitation is the use of self-report measures. Nonetheless, self-report measures are still the most widely used method in collecting data of people's beliefs and attitudes. Lastly, we would like to make a note of a possibility of social desirability bias. Questions about educational equity might be perceived as value laden even though these questions were phrased in a value neutral way.

On a final note, we can conclude that there appears to be a sufficient level of public support for the governmental or societal actions to implement public policy measures for promoting educational equity, at least in New South Wales where this study was undertaken. Although Australia is doing relatively better than other countries in equity measures on a global scale, there is enough evidence to suggest that equity issues have not been sufficiently dealt with in its school system so far. Addressing educational equity issues is a political and social endeavour, requiring agreed-upon perspectives, concerted efforts, and close collaborations among various stakeholders including and perhaps most importantly the general public. This project, investigating the public's beliefs and attitudes about educational equity and their endorsement levels for relevant policy and strategies, indicated that the public's support was high on most strategies that we asked about. In particular, the government may take a note that both universal strategies to benefit all students and targeted strategies to assist disadvantaged students were well supported.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, we provide the following recommendations.

- That educational policy and practice focus on removing barriers to education to ensure equal access to education; providing proper educational infrastructure, staffing, resources to all schools to guarantee equal access to quality education; and assisting disadvantaged students to provide them with equal educational opportunity.
- That educational equity is positioned as a top priority in educational policy and practice; and both fairness and inclusion issues are addressed in the promotion of educational equity.
- That the government and education sector employ strong measures to improve educational equity across NSW. The discrepancy between the importance placed on educational equity and the levels of satisfaction about educational equity in the school system suggests that the public expects more to be done to address educational equity.
- That both equity and excellence are upheld as compatible and equally important goals for education. Successful educational initiatives may need to address both equity and excellence simultaneously.
- That the government takes a strong leadership in promoting educational equity while working together with other stakeholders. The public believes that educational equity is a systemic issue and government is most responsible to ensure educational equity.
- That differing needs of students and schools are considered in the allocation of government school funding. The public showed the preference for the needs-based funding, as opposed to the performance-based funding.
- That students from low socioeconomic backgrounds are provided with extra assistance to overcome their educational disadvantages. A clear majority supports extra assistance for students and schools in need.
- That the government utilises both universal and targeted strategies to promote educational equity. The public showed a high level of endorsement for both targeted and universal strategies that are directly relevant to educational equity.

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