

Australia's new education report fails to target the roots of structural inequality

In the shadow of two decades of declining results and worsening inequalities, expectations were high for a blueprint to reimagine our schools to ensure all young Australians have a better and fairer education. Unfortunately, the report falls short – especially when it comes to addressing inequalities in student outcomes. Rather than a bold vision for educational transformation, it treads the well-worn path of the status quo, offering few tangible targets to address the structural inequalities that are baked into our system.

As the report notes, Australian schools have some of the highest levels of concentrated socioeconomic advantage and disadvantage across OECD nations and this trend is worsening. These trends map on to our schooling sectors, with concentrated advantage in private schools and concentrated disadvantage in public schools. Australia also has shocking learning gaps in literacy and numeracy between young people from advantaged and disadvantaged backgrounds. By the time students reach year 3, the achievement gap between young people from high and low socioeconomic backgrounds is already equivalent to 2.3 years of learning in reading and this balloons to a staggering 5.1 years of learning by year 9.

These inequalities are mirrored in last week's release of the programme for international student assessment results, showing alarming achievement gaps between Australian students from low and high socioeconomic backgrounds and between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students in reading, science, and maths. Far from being the great equaliser, these trends show our education systems exacerbate inequalities – an embarrassing state of affairs for a country that prides itself on the "fair go".

While the report consistently outlines equity challenges and rightly argues all schools need to be fully funded in line with the Gonski funding model, there is not a single target specifically designed to close widening achievement gaps. The closest we get is to tackling achievement gaps are weaker targets to increase the proportion of students in "priority equity cohorts" who meet proficiency standards for reading and numeracy in Naplan. In practice, these targets aspire to little more than getting more kids achieving minimum benchmarks in standardised tests.

D'après Caitlin Cassidy , The Guardian, Sun 26 Nov 2023