How to be equal? Let me count the ways...

The issues

The issues are:

- What does ‘equity’ in education mean?
- Do non-government schools contribute to equity outcomes or make them worse?
- How do you best improve equity outcomes in education?

Background – Australia’s comparative education performance

In the international testing stakes, Australian school students are mostly high achievers. They achieve well above the OECD average and are outperformed by students from eight countries – Shanghai-China, Finland, Korea, Hong Kong-China, Singapore, Canada, New Zealand and Japan.

The latest PISA results however leave no room for complacency. They shine a light on the two most significant areas of schools policy – quality of education, and equity. Relative to other countries, Australia’s education outcomes are declining, and most of this decline has occurred through a sharp drop in the proportion of students attaining the highest level of proficiency, without a compensating rise at the lowest levels. Australia was the only high performing OECD country to show a significant decline.

And the results show that Australia has a significant equity problem, a “long tail of underachievement,” which is associated with being Indigenous, living in a rural or remote area or coming from a socially disadvantaged background.

For modern societies that depend so heavily on quality outcomes from schooling for economic growth and national productivity, these results are cause for concern.

Improving education outcomes

A strong body of research evidence over time shows how differences in education levels explain the majority of the differences in economic growth rates across OECD countries. In Australia, the Productivity Commission has underlined the importance of keeping a focus on
our education achievement. The Commission sees improvement in basic literacy and numeracy skills as the key to raising productivity and participation in Australia and estimates that, together with improvements in early childhood education and higher educational attainment, increases in literacy and numeracy could raise Australia’s aggregate labour productivity by up to 1.2 per cent in 2030 (Treasury, 2010).

The answer to raising achievement however does not lie simply in providing more resources to schools:

> Simply providing more resources gives, according to the available evidence, little assurance that student performance will improve significantly. (Hanushek & Woessmann 2010)

The resources need to be targeted at education approaches and initiatives that have been shown to work. These are:

- **Early intervention** - investment in quality early years education and care should be a priority
- **Teacher quality**, the most significant in-school factor influencing student performance
- **School-related factors** such as the learning environment, leadership and a focus on achievement
- **System-related factors** such as accountability, autonomy and choice, which provide the incentive to meet parental expectations, in terms of performance and the broader outcomes of schooling
- **Educational strategies addressing education disadvantage**, based on evidence about what works for particular students in particular contexts.

Investments such as these are relevant to both government and non-government schools in Australia. Typically, outcomes in the non-government sector are higher than in the government sector. While the easy explanation for this difference is that the non-government school population comes from more advantaged backgrounds, this response ignores the social diversity of the non-government sector, and the considerable evidence now available from overseas and Australia to show that non-government school achievement is higher regardless of social background. Funding policies supporting school choice, autonomy and accountability have underpinned this result.

**Improving equity**

Equity in schooling means different things to different people. It can simply mean fairness, implying that specific instances of disadvantage will be addressed and overcome, or it can mean equal outcomes for all, in terms of all students achieving basic minimum standards, or all students achieving outcomes at the end of schooling that cannot be attributed to differences in wealth, income, power or possessions. A more merit-based approach to equity would have people getting ahead through their own ability, hard work and character, once barriers are overcome.
Equity is the main polarising issue between government and non-government school supporters. Opponents of non-government school funding argue that privatisation of education has led to poorer overall results and greater inequality. Nothing could be more out of step with the research evidence which shows convincingly that non-government schools provide a significant return on the government’s investment by contributing to national growth and productivity as well as equity.

Characteristics of the non-government sector – a clear focus on quality and achievement, the flexibility to respond to the educational needs of each individual student, strong systems of accountability to parents and government and the capacity to recruit high quality staff – are associated with quality outcomes and these in turn contribute to greater equity.

OECD studies have found that, after controlling for socioeconomic intake, these attributes of accountability, autonomy and choice contribute to greater equity, higher achievement and higher outcomes in terms of non-cognitive skills, and reduce the dependence of student achievement on SES. Overcoming social disadvantage through education is more effective when schools have the flexibility to respond to the educational needs of each individual student, a clear focus on quality and achievement, strong systems of accountability to parents and government, and the capacity to recruit high quality staff.

The community expects all schools to contribute to a more equitable society. It is clear that non-government schools deliver on this expectation. If resources are targeted at quality outcomes and directed at approaches and programs that have proven their effectiveness, the result will be higher achievement for all.


Further reading:

Banks, G., 2010, Advancing Australia’s ‘Human Capital Agenda, Ian Little Lecture, Melbourne, April


