The changing face of Australian schooling

An ISCA Analysis of the ABS 2016 Census of Population & Housing

2018
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ISCA is the national peak body representing the Independent schooling sector. It comprises the eight state and territory Associations of Independent Schools (AISs). Through these Associations, ISCA represents a sector with 1,123 schools and almost 604,000 students, accounting for approximately 15 per cent of Australian school enrolments. ISCA’s role is to bring the unique needs of Independent schools to the attention of the Australian Government and to represent the sector on national issues.

Independent schools are a diverse group of non-government schools serving a range of different communities. Many Independent schools provide a religious or values-based education. Others promote a particular educational philosophy or interpretation of mainstream education.

Many Independent schools have been established by community groups seeking to meet particular needs. Examples include Independent community schools for Indigenous students in remote areas, special schools for students with disability and boarding schools to educate children from rural and remote areas. There are also schools that seek to reflect the religious values of a particular community or that seek to practise an internationally recognised educational philosophy such as Steiner or Montessori schools. Independent Catholic schools are a significant part of the sector, accounting for eight per cent of the Independent sector’s enrolments.

Most Independent schools are set up and governed independently on an individual school basis. However, some Independent schools with common aims and educational philosophies are governed and administered as systems, for example Lutheran systems. Systemic schools account for 18 per cent of schools in the Independent sector.
Key Findings

- The 2016 ABS Census results confirm the ongoing trend over recent years of Independent and Catholic schools becoming demographically more similar in the type of communities they serve.

- Enrolments in the Independent, Catholic and government sectors have all grown since 2011, with the Independent sector having grown by 9 per cent.

- Despite strong growth in the government sector in recent years, since 2011 the Independent sector enrolment share has remained unchanged at 15.2 per cent.

- Census results show that the average number of dependent children in an Australian family has remained relatively stable at 2.42 from 2011 to 2016.

- When it comes to religious affiliation of students probably the most notable trend is the continued growth of the No Religion category across all three sectors.
This document summarises ISCA’s analysis of the available ABS 2016 Population & Housing Census statistics, exploring the key demographics of the Australian school age population, focussing on the three school sectors, namely: the Independent sector and the Catholic sector, which are collectively referred to as non-government schools; and the government sector.

The classifications of the school sectors used in this report stem from the following ABS Census questions, asked of all people who spend the night at the given dwelling on Census night:

a) Is the person attending a school or any other educational institution?

b) What type of educational institution is the person attending? (Include secondary colleges and senior high schools under the ‘Secondary school’ category)

- Pre-school
- Infants/Primary school
  - Government
  - Catholic
  - Other non-government
- Secondary school
  - Government
  - Catholic
  - Other non-government
- Tertiary institution
  - Technical or further educational institution (including TAFE Colleges)
  - University or other higher educational institution
  - Other educational institution

It should be noted that, as the Census is a self-administered questionnaire, respondents answer questions in the way they see best matches their circumstances. In answering the educational institution question, it is assumed that most Catholic independent students will class themselves as attending a Catholic school, rather than an ‘other non-government’ (hereafter known as ‘Independent’) school. This will impact some findings.

Also of note, while the estimated 21,000 international students studying in Australia in 2016 are counted in the Census among the usual Australian student population, there is no way of identifying and excluding these students. As they represent only 0.6 percent of the total student population, they should not have a meaningful impact on any of the demographics considered here.
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Analysis

The release of the results of the 2016 Census of Population and Housing brings significant new data to help understand ongoing demographic trends and changes in the ever-evolving makeup of Australia’s three education sectors.

ISCA’s analysis of the Census data looks at trends across school sectors in areas including enrolment share and growth, family income, dependent children, students recently arrived in Australia and religious affiliation.

Enrolments in the Independent, Catholic and government sectors have all grown since 2011. The Independent sector has grown by 9 per cent, the Catholic sector by 8 per cent and government schools by 10 per cent.

Despite media reports of a significant shift to government schools in recent years, the 2016 Census shows that since 2011 the Independent sector enrolment share has remained unchanged at 15.2 per cent.
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Enrolment share and growth (continued)

Over the same period Catholic schools have experienced a slight decline from 21.6 per cent to 21.3 per cent, while government schools have increased from 63.2 per cent to 63.5 per cent.

Examining the enrolment share by state, the highest proportion of Independent sector students can be found in South Australia with 18 per cent attending Independent schools, the highest proportion of Catholic enrolments is in the ACT with 25 per cent, and the Northern Territory has the highest proportion of government sector students at 70 per cent.

Census 2016 student share by sector, state

Note: Percentages may not add up to 100 due to rounding.
Family income

The perception that all Independent schools are high-SES schools serving only high SES families is a fundamental misunderstanding of the Independent sector. For the last thirty years most of the growth in the Independent sector has been in low to middle-fee schools. Catholic systemic and Independent schools and school communities have more similarities than differences and over time have moved to serve substantially similar populations.

The 2016 Census results show an increasing similarity in income between the Independent and Catholic sectors.

There has been a continuation in the trend of strong Independent sector growth for medium-income families ($52,000 to $155,999). In the previous Census high income earners were the greatest share of Independent enrolments, but in 2016 medium-income families have now become most common at 45 per cent.

A similar trend is evident for Catholic schools, with 56 per cent coming from middle-income families.

Over time the proportion of low-income families (below $52,000) in the Independent and Catholic sectors has remained fairly constant, and in the 2016 census they are identical at 13 per cent. Government schools show a distinctly different pattern, with 26 per cent of their students from low-income families.
For high-income families ($156,000 and above), almost half send their children to Government schools, 28 per cent choose Catholic schools and 25 per cent choose Independent schools.

High income earners (>$156,000) proportion by sector, 2016

- Government: 47%
- Catholic: 28%
- Independent: 25%
Census results show that the average number of dependent children in an Australian family has remained relatively stable at 2.42 from 2011 to 2016.

**The number of dependent children per family, for families sending children to Independent schools has remained consistent from 2011 to 2016 at 2.40.**

Government schools have the largest families, and have remained consistent with an average of 2.43 children. Catholic schools have had a slight decline in family size, dropping from 2.42 to 2.39 children.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Independent</th>
<th>Catholic</th>
<th>Government</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2011</td>
<td>2.40</td>
<td>2.42</td>
<td>2.43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2016</td>
<td>2.40</td>
<td>2.40</td>
<td>2.43</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In all three sectors Islamic families have shown a significant increase in dependent children numbers (from 3.07 to 3.11), but numbers have largely remained consistent across the non-religious and main Christian religions.
Students that have arrived in Australia within the previous three years of the Census date are most likely to go to a government school, with 77 per cent of those students attending government schools in 2016.

Enrolments from newly arrived students in Independent schools was 14 per cent in 2016, which is in-line with the Independent sector’s overall student share of 15 per cent.

Between 2011 and 2016 enrolments from newly arrived students in Catholic schools dropped from 12 per cent to 9 per cent, which is significantly below the Catholic sector’s overall student share of 21%.

Proportion of students recently arrived to Australia, within 3 years of Census date

When it comes to the religious affiliation of students across the three sectors, probably the most notable trend is the continued growth of the No Religion category.

Across all sectors, since the 2006 Census, students in the No Religion category have increased from 29 per cent to 37 per cent. Catholic religious affiliation has declined from 30 per cent to 27 per cent, Anglican religious affiliation has changed from 16 per cent to 11 per cent, while other religions have remained around 25 per cent.
It would be fair to say that all three school sectors are, on average, becoming increasingly non-religious. In Independent schools the No Religion category grew from 23 per cent in 2006 to 31 per cent in 2016. In Catholic schools students with No Religion went from 8 per cent to 14 per cent, and in the Government sector it grew from 37 percent to 45 per cent.

Note: Percentages may not add up to 100 due to rounding.
The perception that all Independent schools are high-SES schools serving only high SES families is a fundamental misunderstanding of the Independent sector.

The 2016 ABS Census result confirms the ongoing trend of recent years that sees the non-government sector’s Independent and Catholic schools becoming demographically more similar in the type of communities they serve.

This is due to the continuation of the trend of strong Independent sector growth for medium-income families ($52,000 to $155,999). The 2016 results show that both sectors are now predominantly made up of middle income families.

The proportion of low-income families (below $52,000) in both the Independent and Catholic sectors is identical at 13 per cent, while government schools show a distinctly different pattern, with 26 per cent of their students from low-income families.

Enrolments in the Independent, Catholic and government sectors have all grown since 2011. The Independent sector has grown by 9 per cent, the Catholic sector by 8 per cent and government schools by 10 per cent.

Despite strong growth from the government sector in recent years, the 2016 Census shows that since 2011 the Independent sector enrolment share has remained unchanged at 15.2 per cent.

Catholic schools have experienced a slight decline from 21.6 per cent to 21.3 per cent, while government schools have increased from 63.2 per cent to 63.5 per cent.

Census results show that the average number of dependent children in an Australian family has remained relatively stable at 2.42 from 2011 to 2016. Independent schools remain unchanged at an average of 2.40 children, while Catholic schools have had a slight decline in family size, dropping from 2.42 to 2.39 children. Government schools have the largest families with an average of 2.43 children.

When it comes to the religious affiliation of students probably the most notable trend is the continued growth of the No Religion category across all three sectors. Since the 2006 Census, students in the No Religion category have increased from 29 per cent to 37 per cent.