Factors Influencing School Choice

ISCA Research Report 2017
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About Independent Schools

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 1,104 schools and almost 600,000 students, accounting for approximately 16 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 Rudolf 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.

Factors Influencing School Choice
Key Findings

- Parents have long-term goals for their children’s education – most importantly that the school will provide the foundation to grow into a mature, well-rounded person.

- The most common reasons parents choose an Independent school include; good teachers, overall educational excellence, good facilities, and the supportive and caring environment.

- Personal interaction with the school and its community is the most persuasive influence for parents when choosing a school.

- Overwhelmingly parents agree that they would recommend the school at which their children are currently enrolled to family and friends.

- 35 per cent of parents said that ‘Education policy’ influenced their vote at the 2016 Federal election.

- Parents also nominated ‘Education’ as being the most important issue in Australia’s political landscape over the next 10 years.
Over the last four decades student enrolments at Independent schools have grown significantly. From less than 5 per cent of all enrolments in 1980 to almost 16 per cent in 2016, Australia’s 1,104 Independent schools now educate nearly 600,000 students.

In 2007 the Independent Schools Council of Australia commissioned research to explore the factors that affect school choice amongst parents of children attending Independent schools. The 2007 research examined:

- The educational outcomes parents desire from Independent schools
- The advantageous and disadvantageous aspects of Independent schools
- Whether parents would recommend Independent schools to friends and family
- The factors in choosing an Independent school
- What children want from an Independent school.

The 2007 research indicated that parents view their decision to enrol their children in an Independent school as an investment in the future. While there was a change in emphasis according to each stage of their children’s schooling, parents wanted their children to receive a well-rounded education from Independent schools, with a strong emphasis on learning life skills. Parents focused on a school’s curriculum and co-curricular opportunities and how the wider school community supported their children’s education.
The reputation of Independent schools for employing good teachers and good teaching methods significantly influenced parents’ decision making. This is not surprising considering that there is a broad research consensus that teacher quality is the most important in-school factor influencing student achievement.

Ten years later, in late 2016, ISCA commissioned similar research in order to update the information available to the Independent sector about the factors that influence parents when choosing an Independent school for their children, and identify any significant changes and trends over time.

The 2016 research examined:

- What parents want from the education of their child
- The reasons why families chose an Independent and/or non-Independent school
- What families identified as the positive attributes of Independent schools, and whether parents would recommend their children’s current Independent school to others
- The role of grandparents in choosing and funding children’s education
- The importance of education as a political issue at the 2016 Federal election, and over the coming decade.

The 2016 research employed a quantitative research methodology. A 15 minute online questionnaire was developed and distributed through a leading Australian social research company. 1,322 parents of students enrolled at Independent, government and Catholic schools responded to the questionnaire.

The results of the survey were weighted to ensure that they are representative of the Australian population. Population statistics were obtained from the Australian Bureau of Statistics and are based on the results from the 2016 Estimated Resident Population publications.
The research that ISCA undertook in 2007 and again in 2016 sought to explore what factors influence families in their decision to choose to enrol children in an Independent school.

The research was particularly focused on identifying what families consider to be important when choosing a school for their children, the main reasons why families chose to enrol at an Independent school, what families want from the Independent school their children are currently enrolled in, whether parents would recommend Independent schools, and the importance of education as a national political issue.

Independent sector parents chose an Independent school for their children for a wide variety of reasons. However, the most commonly nominated reasons indicated that parents made a choice based on the desire to support a well-rounded school experience for their children.

The five most important reasons that parents chose an Independent school were:

- Educational excellence
- Supportive and caring environment
- Good teachers
- Student receives individual attention
- Good facilities.

These reasons are the same as the five most important reasons identified in the 2006 research. Each of these reasons indicate the importance to parents of the school being a positive environment and a community in which students can develop academically and personally.
A significant number of parents also had religious reasons for choosing an Independent school. Almost one in five parents said that they chose an Independent school for the school’s faith-based environment. Fourteen percent of Independent school parents nominated the faith-based environment as being one of the three most important reasons they chose the school.

It is clear that parents want their school community to focus beyond simply academic results such as NAPLAN, ATAR or university entrance, but also to play a complementary role in their children’s personal development, and provide skills that are important throughout life.

The top three reasons parents chose an Independent school

- Educational excellence: 32% (2016), 33% (2017)
- Supportive and caring environment: 17% (2016), 24% (2017)
- Good teachers: 16% (2016), 22% (2017)
- Child receives individual attention: 11% (2016), 16% (2017)
- Good facilities: 19% (2016), 16% (2017)
- Faith-based environment: 14% (2016), 19% (2017)
Parents use a range of sources when looking for background and contextual information when choosing a school. While some parents consulted My School or looked at NAPLAN results, few parents said that these were the most important sources of information. The research showed that personal interaction remains the key consideration for parents.

When deciding which school to send their children, parents use word of mouth from friends or other parents as the most influential information source. This was the case for just over 50 per cent of parents of students enrolled at Independent schools.

Interactions with the school in a face-to-face context also proved to be popular sources of influence for parents. This includes school open days, interaction with school staff, and other personal experiences with the school.

### How do parents choose an Independent school?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source</th>
<th>2007</th>
<th>2016</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Word of mouth from friends or other parents</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>53%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interaction with school staff</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>35%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School open day</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>34%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal experience</td>
<td>34%</td>
<td>34%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School website</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School rankings*</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>22%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School’s social media*</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advertising/marketing from Independent schools</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My School website*</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NAPLAN results*</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Question was not asked in 2007
The influence of the child in the choice of their primary school has grown significantly over the last decade. In 2006, 18 per cent of Independent school parents said their child had at least some influence. By 2016 that figure had risen to 43 per cent. It is a similar case with a child’s degree of influence in the choice of secondary school, which was 36 per cent in 2006 and has risen to 55 per cent in 2016.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>2007</th>
<th>2016</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No influence</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Little influence</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some influence</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neutral</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>44%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total influence</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don’t know</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Percentages may not add up to 100 due to rounding

The research also examined the influence of grandparents in choosing a school. Sixty one per cent of parents said that grandparents had little or no influence on the choice of primary school, while 24 per cent indicated that grandparents had some influence.

While there is a growing public perception that grandparents are also playing an increasing role in financially supporting their grandchildren’s education, the results were less significant than might have been expected.

For primary schools 54 per cent of Independent school parents said that they did not receive financial contributions from grandparents. For secondary schools 70 per cent of Independent school parents said that grandparents had not contributed to school fees.

Reflecting the increase in the influence of technology for communication, the importance of the school website has increased since 2006. In 2006 only 9 per cent of Independent school parents consulted the website when choosing a school. By 2016, 34 per cent of Independent school parents used the school website as a source of information.

The fact that individual and personal factors remain the most important influencers for parents who decide to enrol their children at an Independent school reinforces the emphasis that parents want their school community to focus beyond simply academic results. Parents are seeking deeper sources of information about the nature of the school community. Parents want to understand the personal relationships at the school and be assured that their children will thrive in the community.
Parents’ educational focus and priorities depend on the age of their children, and change as their children progress through the stages of schooling. The research showed that parents choose Independent schools in order to give their children a well-rounded education, with a strong emphasis on developing broader life skills.

The research indicated that parents have a wide range of priorities for their children’s schooling. In general, parents are very ‘future-focused’, wanting their children to develop skills and capabilities that will equip them for future educational, employment, and life opportunities and challenges.

When their children are in primary school, Independent school parents place importance on their children attaining foundational developmental capabilities such as essential reading, writing, and numeracy skills.

By the time their children reach secondary school, parents of Independent school students are wanting schools to help their children to advance in higher order skills and attributes. At this stage of development, Independent school parents placed less importance on a specific skill and more emphasis on wide-ranging academic capabilities such as critical thinking and problem solving, and on socio-emotional outcomes, such as that their children are happy.

A significant number of parents of Independent school students (60 per cent) also want their children’s school to prepare them for employment. Forty per cent of all parents said that being prepared for employment was one of the three most important long-term outcomes that they wanted from their children’s school education.

In addition to being prepared for employment, Independent school parents nominated the ability for their children to think for themselves, and to have self-discipline as the most important long-term outcomes from their education.

These outcomes align with the parental emphasis that education needs to be about more than simply academic results. They highlight the end of secondary schooling as a transition phase where parents want schools to support personal capabilities which complement their children’s growth into a more independent person.
Independent school parents identified a range of positive perceptions of Independent schools. The most common positive qualities recorded in the research were:

- Good facilities
- Good teachers
- Educational excellence
- Stable environment.

These positive qualities matched the four most common responses that parents of Independent school students gave for the reasons why they enrolled their children in an Independent school.

Only 4 per cent of parents said that they would not be likely to recommend the Independent school at which their children are enrolled to family or friends.

More than half of all Independent school parents (57 per cent) stated that they would recommend Independent schools because of their educational excellence. The qualities nominated as reasons for recommendations give an indication of the aspects parents see as contributing to the foundation of Independent schools’ positive outcomes. Parents said they would recommend Independent schools due to:

- Educational excellence
- Good teachers
- Good facilities
- Stable environment
- Teach/reinforce values
- Supportive and caring environment
- Safe environment.

It is apparent therefore that parents see these attributes as being critical success factors for Independent schools.
Parents were asked to indicate how much influence education policy had on their decision who to vote for at the 2016 Federal election. Thirty five per cent of parents who have children enrolled at an Independent school indicated that education policy had some or total influence on their voting decision.

Parents were also given an open-ended text question asking them to identify which three issues they considered to be the most important in Australia’s future political landscape over the next 10 years.

Overall, 30 per cent of all parents nominated education as the most important issue of public policy for the next decade, followed by health (24 per cent), jobs/employment (23 per cent), and the economy (22 per cent).

### Key Learnings

Overall, the research indicated that parents of students at Independent schools make choices and decisions with an appreciation that investing in school education is beneficial to the future of their children, including their personal and social development.

Families continue to choose to enrol their children in Independent schools with the sector experiencing a significant and growing share of the number of Australian students. While the research indicated that paying Independent school fees and other associated educational costs were an issue for many parents, it also indicated that this was an investment in their children that parents are prepared to make.

Regardless of whether parents choose a high, medium, or low fee school, the significant recommendation rate for Independent schools shows that parents have a high level of satisfaction with the educational and personal opportunities provided at Independent schools. The overwhelming conclusion of the research is that even in a changing economic and social environment, parents are positive about their decision to choose an Independent school.