Independent Schools Overview

1,148
Independent schools in Australia

631,762
Students attending Independent schools in Australia

$5,430
The median fee of an Australian Independent school

Independent schools are a significant, large and growing component of the Australian schooling system. They have a reputation as providers of quality education and are recognised for their leadership and innovation in school education. Including independent Catholic schools, **1,148 of the 9,503 schools in Australia are in the Independent sector.** In 2019, they enrolled over 631,700 students, 16 per cent of the Australian student population.

Like both Catholic systemic and government schools, Independent schools are diverse, in terms of the communities they serve, their student population, their size and nature. **This diversity has long been considered a major strength of the Australian schooling system, serving well the needs of a geographically dispersed, socially mixed, multicultural and multi-faith population.**

Independent schools are located in all states and territories. The majority – 65 per cent – are in major cities, although there are also many Independent schools, including Aboriginal community schools, located in rural and remote areas. Independent schools in the city also attract many students from rural and isolated areas. Independent schools include small and large day schools and boarding schools, co-educational and single-sex schools.

Many Independent schools are affiliated with a particular religion or promote a particular educational philosophy. Some schools with common aims, affiliations or educational philosophies are governed and administered as systems. Within the sector, systems – which account for almost 20 per cent of Independent school students – vary in size from as many as 34 schools to as few as 3 schools.

All recognised government and non-government schools in Australia operate within the bounds of state and territory and Australian Government legislation which together impose requirements in relation to financial operation, accountability, the curriculum, assessment and reporting. What distinguishes Independent schools from other non-government and government schools is their independence of operation within these boundaries. Apart from systemic schools, where the system authority has a management role, **Independent schools are set up and governed on an individual school basis, connected directly to their community and answerable to their own governing board or management committee.**
Size of the sector

The Independent sector’s enrolment share is more significant in the later years of schooling, as the table below shows. While 11.7 per cent of primary students attend Independent schools, this proportion rises to 18.5 per cent at the junior secondary level and to 20.1 per cent at senior secondary.

Full-time enrolments by sector and level, 2019*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sector</th>
<th>Primary</th>
<th>Junior secondary</th>
<th>Senior secondary</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Government</td>
<td>70.4%</td>
<td>59.9%</td>
<td>58.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Catholic</td>
<td>17.9%</td>
<td>21.6%</td>
<td>21.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Independent</td>
<td>11.7%</td>
<td>18.5%</td>
<td>20.1%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics

*The ABS classifies independent Catholic schools as Catholic, rather than Independent.

Since 1970 the Independent school sector’s share of Australian full-time school enrolments has grown from 4.1 per cent to 14.8 per cent in 2018, although the rate of growth has slowed in recent years.

Growth in both the number and diversity of Independent schools over time has resulted in greatly increased access to Independent schooling for a wider section of the population. In the last decade, the average annual increase in full-time enrolments in the Independent sector, at 1.7 per cent, has consistently exceeded the average growth at Catholic systemic (0.8 per cent) and government (1.3 per cent) schools. Much of the growth has been in low fee schools serving disadvantaged communities.

Types of Independent school

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. Independent schools include:

- Schools affiliated with Christian denominations, for example Anglican, Catholic, Greek Orthodox, Lutheran, Uniting Church, Seventh Day Adventist and Presbyterian
- Non-denominational Christian schools
- Islamic schools
- Jewish schools
- Montessori schools
- Steiner schools
- Schools constituted under specific Acts of Parliament, such as grammar schools in some states
- Indigenous community schools
- Schools that specialise in meeting the needs of students with disabilities
- Schools that cater for students at severe educational risk due to a range of social/emotional/behavioural and other risk factors

School systems in the Independent sector

School systems bring together schools with common aims, affiliations or educational philosophies and account for some 20 per cent of the Independent sector’s students. Independent sector systems are predominately state or territory based. Some systems represent a loose collection of schools, while others possess stronger systemic arrangements with greater central influence and provision of services.

The largest systems within the Independent school sector are the Lutheran, Anglican and Seventh Day Adventist school systems. There are also numerous other groupings of Independent schools throughout Australia that are not formal systems but which provide member schools with support.

Students

The 631,762 students attending Independent schools come from all socio-economic backgrounds. As a sector, Independent schools provide for students of all abilities, including students with special needs, and serve a wide range of communities from remote and disadvantaged indigenous communities to socially, culturally and ethnically diverse communities in capital cities.

The majority of schools in the sector are co-educational although single-sex schools remain a feature of the sector, with 19 per cent of boys enrolled in boys-only schools and 21 per cent of girls attending girls-only schools. In 2018, 80 per cent of Independent school students attended co-educational schools.

The Independent sector differs from Catholic systemic and government schools in the proportion of enrolments in primary and secondary education.

For more about Independent schools visit www.isca.edu.au
In the Independent sector, primary schooling accounts for just under half the total student population, 45 per cent, whereas in Catholic systemic and government schools, primary students account for 53 per cent and 62 per cent respectively.

Conversely, secondary students make up 55 per cent of Independent school students, compared with 47 per cent of Catholic systemic school students and 38 per cent of government school students. This appears to be largely due to a cohort of students that switch to an Independent school for secondary or senior secondary education, although this pattern differs across jurisdictions.

The Independent sector also differs from Catholic system and government schools in the prevalence of combined schools which offer both primary and secondary schooling in the one school. Sixty-six per cent of all Independent schools are combined schools. A number of Independent schools also offer middle school programs, designed to meet the specific developmental needs of early adolescence.

Some 14,340 Indigenous students were enrolled in Independent schools in 2019. Many of these students attend one of the 40 Majority Indigenous Student Schools in the sector, which are mostly located in remote areas. Indigenous enrolments in Independent schools over the past decade have been increasing at an average annual rate of 5 per cent, same as the increase in Indigenous enrolments in Catholic systemic schools and compared with a 3 per cent increase in government schools. In 2019, they represented 2 per cent of the Independent school student population, compared with 3 per cent of Catholic systemic school students and 7 per cent of government school students. More information on Indigenous students is available on ISCA's website.

There were 120,533 students with a disability enrolled in Independent schools in 2019, representing 19 per cent of the Independent school student population. Most of these students attend regular Independent schools although more than 8,900 attend one of the 119 special schools in the sector.

As of 2018, the Australian Government provides funding support for students based on the Nationally Consistent Collection of Data on School Students with Disability (NCCD) for the top three levels of adjustment (Supplementary, Substantial, Extensive) at a funding amount relative to their adjustment level. The fourth level, Support Provided Within Quality Differentiated Teaching Practice, is unfunded.

The Independent school sector has considerable involvement in providing education opportunities for overseas students, mainly at the secondary level. More than 7,620 overseas students attended Independent schools in Australia in 2019. This represents the decrease in enrolments from 2018.

**Staff**

In 2019, Independent schools employed 19,350 primary and 30,620 secondary teachers. This represents 17 per cent of the Australian teaching workforce. Independent primary and secondary schools also employed 28,054 non-teaching staff.

Student-teacher ratios in the Independent sector have reduced over time, from the 1973 levels of 17.1 for primary and 14.2 for secondary to 13.7 and 10.4 respectively in 2019. As can be seen from the table below, student-teacher ratios in the Independent sector have been consistently lower than the Catholic systemic and government sectors.

**Student-teacher ratios 1973 – 2019**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>YEAR</th>
<th>GOVERNMENT</th>
<th>NON-GOVERNMENT</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Primary</td>
<td>Secondary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1973</td>
<td>25.1</td>
<td>16.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1980</td>
<td>20.2</td>
<td>12.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1990</td>
<td>17.9</td>
<td>12.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>17.1</td>
<td>12.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>15.4</td>
<td>12.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2019</td>
<td>15.3</td>
<td>12.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics

*The ABS classifies independent Catholic schools as Catholic, rather than Independent.

**School Size**

The Independent school sector contains some of Australia’s largest schools and a significant number of smaller schools. Twenty three Independent schools (2 per cent) have more than 2,000 students, while at the other extreme, 128 schools (11 per cent) have fewer than 50 students. Thirty six per cent of Independent schools have fewer than 200 students, and 44 per cent have enrolments between 200 and 1,000. The average size of an Independent school is 537 students. This compares with the average size for a Catholic systemic school of 438 and for government schools of 389.
Why do parents choose Independent schools?

Survey research shows that the main driver of school choice is the desire of parents to match the school with the individual needs of the child and the values of the family. Other reasons parents choose an Independent school for their children include religious affiliation, academic outcomes, particularly at Year 12, quality teaching, a supportive caring environment, the physical environment and facilities, the content of the curriculum, quality leadership and extra-curricular opportunities.

Funding

Independent schools are funded by a combination of parental contribution and Australian Government and state and territory government funding. The majority of funding for the sector – 54 per cent of recurrent income and 89 per cent of capital income – comes from parents and other private sources.

The willingness and commitment of Independent school parents to pay school fees is estimated to save governments approximately $4.8 billion a year in schooling costs, based on a calculation of the additional funding that would be required if all Independent school students attended government schools where they would be fully publicly funded.

In the shared responsibilities for education between the Australian Government and the states and territories in Australia’s federal system, the Australian Government is the major source of government funding for non-government schools, while state and territory governments are the main source of funding for government schools. For the Independent sector as a whole, the Australian Government provides 76 per cent of government recurrent funding and the states and territory governments provide the remaining 24 per cent.

A new approach to funding non-government schools commenced in 2014, under the Australian Education Act 2013 which resulted from the ‘Gonski’ Review of School Funding commissioned in 2010. The legislated funding model, based on a Schooling Resource Standard (SRS) with additional loadings to address disadvantage, is still being phased in and applies to each of the approximately 950 non-systemic Independent schools. For the 8,500 systemic schools, including systemic Independent schools, system authorities can decide how to distribute Australian Government funding to individual schools as long as it is according to an approved needs-based methodology.

In 2017 the Australian Government announced changes to the ‘Gonski’ funding model and further changes were announced in 2018. The current funding model aims to transition all schools to a set share of Commonwealth funding. For government schools, the Commonwealth share is 20% of their SRS entitlement and for non-government schools the Commonwealth share is 80% of their SRS entitlement. Schools transitioning up to 80% will complete their transition in 2023. Schools transitioning down to 80% will complete their transition in 2029. New schools go straight on to their calculated SRS funding entitlement.

One feature of the funding model which only affects non-government schools is ‘capacity to contribute’ (CTC), which means that the amount of base funding they receive is dependent on their schools’ community’s estimated capacity to pay fees. Currently, CTC is determined by the school’s Socio-Economic Status (SES) score utilising area-based data from the ABS Census of Population and Housing. Schools with a higher SES score receive less per capita base funding.

The SES methodology was reviewed in 2018 by the National School Resourcing Board. The Board recommended that the area-based methodology be replaced with a direct measure of CTC based on parental income tax data. Work on this new measure is currently underway. It is intended that the new measure of CTC will be phased in from 2020 to 2022.