

Community attitudes towards independent schools:

a nationwide survey

February 2010

Association of Independent Schools of New South Wales | Independent Schools Queensland | Association of Independent Schools of South Australia



ABOUT INDEPENDENT SCHOOLS

Australia's 1,100 independent schools enrol some 511,000 students, accounting for nearly 15 per cent of total Australian school enrolments.

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, while 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 schools
- Non-denominational Christian schools
- Islamic Schools
- Jewish schools
- Montessori schools
- Rudolf Steiner schools
- Schools constituted under specific Acts of Parliament, such as Grammar schools in some states
- Community schools
- 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 high risk factors.

Independent schools are not-for-profit institutions founded by religious or other groups in the community and are registered with the relevant state or territory education authority.

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Detailed survey findings can be accessed at:

www.aisnsw.edu.au
www.ais.sa.edu.au
www.aisq.qld.edu.au

ABOUT THE RESEARCH

“Students deserve equal support from the government, no matter what school they attend.”

1. Background

The Associations of Independent Schools of New South Wales and South Australia and Independent Schools Queensland commissioned a nationwide survey, conducted by UMR Research Pty Ltd, to explore community attitudes towards independent schooling. The survey was undertaken in November and December 2009 and examined:

- Perceptions of schooling in Australia, including perceptions of government, Catholic and independent schools
- Attitudes towards different types of schools
- Knowledge and understanding of state and federal school funding arrangements
- Attitudes towards the school funding arrangements.

2. Research methodology

The researchers relied on both qualitative and quantitative research methodologies.

The researchers initially employed qualitative research methods (focus groups) to determine in-depth perceptions of schooling in Australia. The primary purpose of the qualitative phase of the research was to inform the development of the quantitative questionnaire and to provide context and depth to the quantitative findings.

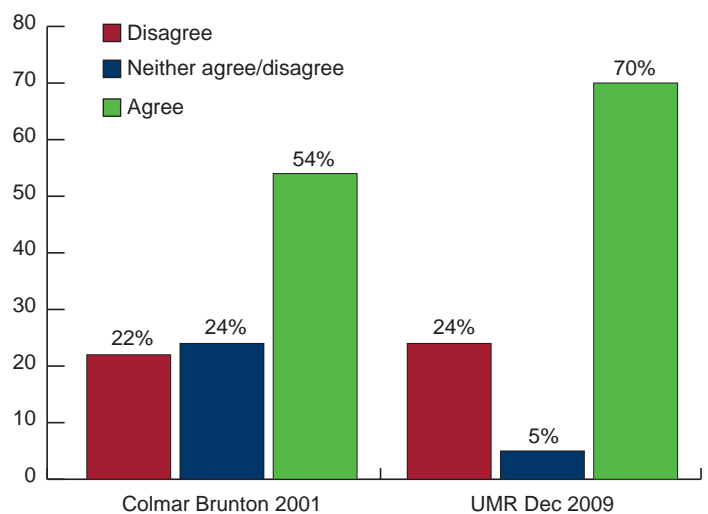
A telephone survey was conducted amongst 1,000 respondents nationwide. The data was weighted and matched with Australian Bureau of Statistics census data to ensure a nationally representative sample.

3. About the researcher

UMR Research Pty Ltd is a full service opinion research company based in Australia and New Zealand, working across the Asia Pacific region. UMR specialises in corporate and stakeholder research, campaign polling, political campaigns, community consultation, social research, issues and crisis management and financial products and services research.

UMR has conducted many significant and influential projects for corporations, industry bodies, government departments and government agencies.

Responses to the statement: “In general I support independent schools”



KEY FINDINGS

Four out of ten parents with children at a government school would prefer to send their child to an independent school if fees were not an issue.

1. Public support for independent schooling

- The research found an increase in general support for independent schools from 54% in 2001 (Colmar Brunton study) to 70% in 2009.
- 75% of respondents to the survey stated that they have a positive opinion of independent schools.
- Four out of ten parents with children at a government school would move their child to an independent school if fees were not an issue.
- 69% rejected the notion that independent school students should not receive government financial support for their schooling – up from 51% in 2001.

2. Funding for independent schooling

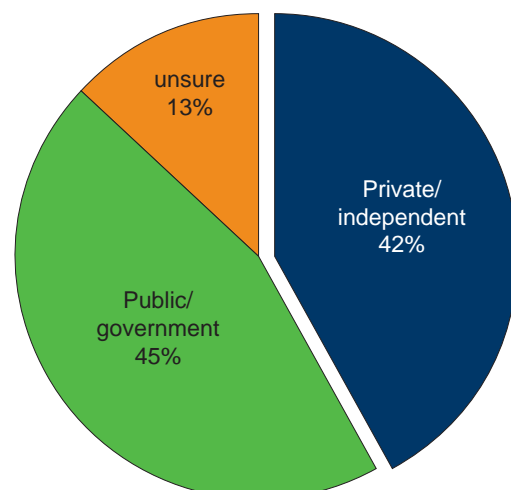
- Misconceptions persist around schools funding, with most people (58%) incorrectly believing that independent school students receive the same or more government funding for their education than students in a government school – compared to 63% in 2001.
- 58% of respondents believe that independent school students should receive the same amount of government funding support as government school students.
- 52% believe it is unfair that independent school students receive less funding support than government school students.
- There is confusion about the funding responsibilities of state and federal governments in relation to schools funding.

- A slight majority (51%) were aware that the Federal Government provides more funding per independent school student than state governments.
- Most believe that current levels of federal government spending on independent school students should remain the same (45%) or be increased (21%).
- 75% of respondents agreed that students with a disability should be funded at the level same regardless of the type of school they attend.

3. Nature of the education sector

- 55% of respondents were aware that independent schools are not for profit, with 42% not aware of this fact.
- 88% agreed that the Australian education system should have a mix of schools provided by the government and the not for profit sector.

Parents with a child in a government school were asked: “If fees were not an issue, would you prefer to send your child to a government school or an independent school?”



RESEARCH FINDINGS AND COMMENT

“Parents have a right to choose where their children go to school and have them educated according to their beliefs and values.”

The survey explored public perceptions of independent schooling and sought to ascertain the levels of support in the broader community for independent schools, government funding arrangements and parental aspirations in relation to school choice. The survey also probed the levels of knowledge and understanding of respondents in relation to schooling issues, particularly in relation to funding, and whether they believed the existing government school funding arrangements were adequate or fair.

1. Public support for independent schooling

The research found that support for independent schools was high at 70%, exceeding the 54% reported in a similar survey conducted in 2001 (Colmar Brunton study for the Independent Schools Council of Australia). This increase in support is reflective of changing community attitudes to independent schooling and is also reflected in the continuing increase in enrolments in independent schools nationally over the last twenty years or more.

Independent schools were found to be well regarded by the general public, with 75% expressing positive views, increasing to 94% for those whose children attend an independent school.

Interestingly, more than four out of ten (42%) of parents with children in government schools indicated they would prefer to send their child to an independent school if fees were not an issue. This is supported by enrolment trend data showing that from 1970 to 2009 independent school enrolments have increased from 4% to 15% of all students in Australia. Over the same period, the enrolment share in government schools decreased from 78% to 66%.

This increased share and level of support is also reflected in the increasing diversity of the independent schooling sector in terms of type, size and focus of school, an emphasis on educating students with special needs, and overseas students. It is also a reflection of parents being prepared to exercise their choice in schooling as they seek a wider range of educational options that reflect their own values, religious and cultural priorities and needs.

2. Funding for independent schooling

The research showed that myths about education funding still prevail. 58% of respondents believed, incorrectly, that each student in an independent school received the same or more government funding than a student in a government school. In 2001, 63% shared this belief. This misconception can be attributed to the complexity of funding arrangements for schooling in Australia as well as misleading information frequently published by opponents of independent schooling. Media activity in relation to schools funding is often incomplete or inaccurate with little regard given to deeper analysis and explanation of funding arrangements.

Once the current funding levels were explained, more survey respondents were prepared to support funding to independent schools by the Federal Government (increase from 66% to 73%).

Currently, combined average yearly funding per student from federal and state governments is:

- \$12,639* for each student in a government school
- \$6,076* for each student in an independent school.

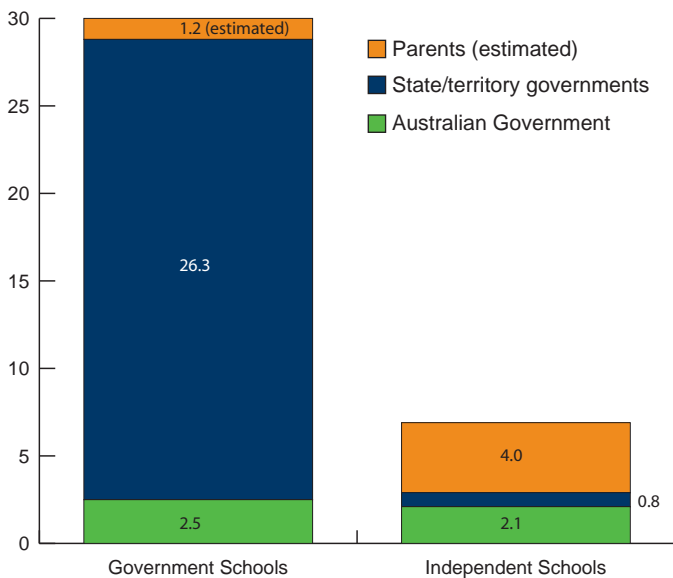
*Based on average funding figures from the *Productivity Commission Report on Government Services 2010* and *MCEECDYA Australian National Report on Schooling*.

Students with disabilities should receive the same amount of government funding assistance regardless of whether they attend a government or a private school.

There remains confusion about the nature of school funding arrangements with the majority of respondents unclear about the split between federal and state government funding responsibilities. The existing funding arrangements see state governments primarily responsible for the funding of government schools, providing 90% of these funds. The Federal Government is the main source of government funding for independent schools, with combined funding from state and federal governments providing approximately 40% of the annual funds to independent schools. To make valid comparisons of levels of public funding for schooling it is important to take account of funding from both government sources.

Total government recurrent funding for government schools in Australia in 2007-08 was \$28.8 billion, compared to just \$2.9 billion for independent schools. The majority of independent school income, around \$4 billion, was derived from parent after-tax contributions in the form of school fees.

Schools Recurrent Funding 2007 - 08 (\$billions)



Despite this lack of understanding among respondents about the nature of school funding there was still strong community support for independent schooling. Almost 70% of people rejected the notion that independent schools should not receive financial support from governments. This was an increase from 51% in a similar survey conducted by Colmar Brunton in 2001. Further, there was majority support for equality in government funding for education. The question “*In your opinion should a student in an independent school receive more, the same or less government funding than a student in a government school?*” saw 58% responding that these students should receive the same amount of funding.

In relation to funding for students with a disability, 75% agreed with the notion that funding support should be the same regardless of the type of school the child attends. Currently, a student in an independent school attracts significantly less in government funding support than a student in a government school. This funding disparity can run into tens of thousands of dollars in some cases where a student has high support needs, and it is up to the school community to fund the difference.

In recent years the enrolment of students with a disability in independent schools has been increasing at a higher rate than overall enrolment increases across the sector. This supports the notion that funding for these students should be based on an adequate level of funding that allows each student to achieve their educational goals.

Source: Productivity Commission Report on Government Services 2010 and MCEEDYA Australia National report on Schooling.

“Private schools relieve the burden on government schools.”

3. Nature of the education sector

An extremely high level of respondents to the survey (88%) agreed that the Australian education system should be a mix of government schools and schools operated by the not-for-profit sector.

This belief was supported by agreement that the current system *“not only provides parents with choice but benefits the wider community by encouraging healthy competition between the sectors to produce better educational outcomes for all”*.

The research also showed that 55% of respondents were aware that independent schools are not-for-profit. Importantly, when pointed out to survey respondents who were not aware of this fact, there was increased support for independent schooling and for funding of independent school students. Respondents also overwhelmingly agreed (94%) that parents have a right to choose where their children go to school and have them educated according to their beliefs and values.

Understanding of the diversity and socio-economic profile of independent schools was also quite high, with 64% rejecting the statement that most parents of children in independent schools are wealthy. This also supports data showing that the independent schooling sector caters for families from all sections of society, both in socio-economic terms as well as geographic and cultural terms. Encouragingly, this challenges long-held stereotypical notions of the nature of the independent schooling community.

CONCLUSION

Overall, the UMR research found that independent schooling has a very positive image within the Australian community. This positive perception is reflected in the continuing steady increases in independent school enrolments over the past 30 years or more. This has led to considerable diversity within the sector and to recognition within the community that independent schooling is an integral and desirable part of the Australian educational landscape.

This research confirms that the provision of non-government schooling is seen as a strength by providing choice for parents and it also reflects the great diversity that is a feature of the Australian community.

Successive Australian and state/territory governments have recognised the importance of independent schools to achieving quality educational outcomes and to continued national economic prosperity. This is shared by the Australian community that now clearly expects all governments to continue supporting independent schools financially and in policy terms. Not only do Australians accept and welcome independent schools, they believe that a mix of not-for-profit non-government schools and government schools makes the best education system.

We are now in an era where the focus should be on the needs of individual students rather than what school they attend.

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