

Hugh Stretton Oration: Are Public Policy Failures Risking Our Democracy?

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Hugh Stretton gave so much to so many in such a range of fields, that it is easy to think of him primarily as a champion of social change, or a shaper of cities, or an early environmentalist or a wise leader of housing policy. He was all of those and more. But he was first an historian who understood that we must examine the consequences of past decisions if we are to know where to go next. He was desperately interested in testing whether how things are is how they must or should be.

At every point Stretton articulated his moral position that democracy and justice should be our guiding lights. I will apply these tools and this philosophy to tonight's task.

For we are in a time when both democracy and justice are being tested to their limits. When understanding the consequences of past decisions is essential. As the aphorism suggests "history doesn't repeat, but it often rhymes", and many of us hear in the timbre and metre of today's rise of the popular right, the disruption and authoritarianism that came in the wake of the First World War and the Great Depression.

It is tempting to lay blame at the feet of the president of the United States, or to question the motives of tech bro billionaires and their social media platforms. But I cannot submit to the idea that individuals shape history regardless of circumstance. The historical perspective we must take is that while we can be distracted by the impression made by so-called Great Men or People, it is the tide of the population that makes the difference.

This is what Carlyle referred to when he wrote of the French Revolution:

Hunger and nakedness and righteous oppression lying heavy on 25 million hearts: this, not the wounded vanities or contradicted philosophies of philosophical advocates, rich shopkeepers, rural noblesse, was the prime mover in the French revolution...ⁱ

We need to look less at Pauline Hanson and more at why, in South Australia's upper house, a quarter of the population voted for a party of protest. We need to treat Elon Musk or Mark Zuckerberg, less as important, still less as interesting individuals and look more closely at the system that made their extraordinary wealth and power possible.

As Lenin said, 'politics begin where the masses are, not where there are thousands, but where there are millions, that is where serious politics begin.'ⁱⁱ Given South Australia's relative population size we might shrink the scale. Here, a few hundred people voting for

a protest party may mean little, a few thousand should be taken seriously. Over two hundred and sixty thousand people voted for One Nation in March and that should focus our minds.

The subject of this oration is the effect of public policy choices on how people feel about our system of government. I will assert that the neo-liberal view we have allowed to take root here has laid the ground for the anger we experience now. I will presume to suggest that Hugh Stretton might have said “I warned you”.

Tonight I will use education policy as our guide to what has gone wrong and what should be done to remedy it. This will be a deep dive, be warned, and some will find it confronting. I intend it not to be critical of individual choices but to call attention to the true state of the overall education system to which we are blinded by our lack of awareness of what an outlier we are internationally and to the cumulative effect of hundreds of thousands of individual choices within this highly unusual system.

I could have selected any major public policy – the stagnation of productivity and living standards, how we struggle to manage big economic and labour market changes that throw people out of work, what we have not done to prepare for the tsunami of ageing Australians the tax payers of tomorrow will be supporting, the virtual impossibility for young people to contemplate buying houses, or the global failure to stave off catastrophic climate change.

What makes examining education policy so revealing is not simply that it illustrates unfairness in the effect of public policy, but that it is formative – and in two ways. First, of course, the very idea of education is that it brings out the potential of every young person to equip them for their future; failure here is formative for a lifetime. Further, it is formative as the first experience of public policy through which Australians learn whether the state is fair, whether effort is rewarded, and whether they belong. Long before people encounter the labour market or housing policy, they encounter the school system and it leaves an indelible imprint on their understanding of ‘how things work around here’.

Through examining the education system, we can perhaps understand part of why the masses are telling us something is wrong that requires serious effort to repair.

Allow me to build towards my argument slowly. We have some time together.

First, I must substantiate the proposition that our democracy is currently at risk. Some will take this as a given, with the rise of One Nation being proof enough. I don’t think we can read the result so simply. Nor should we be fixated by One Nation’s fortunes. Their travails as a party may well see them lose support over time but that does not negate the reasons for their success this year. It expresses something that should be heard.

One Nation is a party of uncritical nationalism, of nostalgia for an Australia that never really existed, one that was uncomplicatedly white, where men were the breadwinners in stable families, would-be migrants formed an orderly queue and Aboriginal people were kept at bay in their requests for recognition as the First People of the land. It is also a party that offers largely uncritical support for the actions of the President of the United States and benefits from the largess of enormously wealthy Australians. In these respects, it resembles populist right parties and movements, such as the Front National in France, Reform in the UK, and MAGA within the US Republican Party, all of which have disturbing links to international autocrats and appear to regard the institutions of democracy as dispensable.

I don't accuse One Nation of having the depth of anti-democratic temperament of those other movements.

But if I shy at calling a vote for One Nation a deliberate blow against democracy itself, I see it clearly as a vote against the way in which our system works now, which risks leading to disengagement from our democracy or even to active attempts to dismantle it.

The two-party system that has governed Australia for so long is losing the confidence of a growing number of people. What does that mean – what is it about the shared values of the two parties that see them being turned away from by record numbers of people in favour of the Greens, Teals, One Nation and other minor parties and independents? Since 2007 the federal election vote for minor parties has more than doubled from 15 to 33 per cent. In 1983 it was just over 6 per cent.ⁱⁱⁱ This is a trend that is accelerating and requires attention.

But the vote for One Nation is different from those for the other parties: in emotion, in attitude. It is not a case of reforming the system, policy by policy.

Voting for One Nation is about giving up on how things work now, a view that even if the policies of One Nation fall far short of a coherent way of running the country, a vote for that party ought to be heard by the major parties as a rebuke and as a warning that people have had enough.

It is that threat that I want to address. Not that One Nation itself is here to stay, nor that I accuse it of wanting to tear down democracy in Australia, but that the anger, despair and contempt felt by those voting for One Nation are begging us all to look at the root causes of their rage before that becomes the next logical step. It is impossible to look at the rise of fascist-flavoured politics in countries we have long felt affinity with and not contemplate their rise here.

To look for a moment at the March election result. I was arrested by the collapse of the Liberal vote in my former seat in Port Adelaide. Just on seven per cent of people voted Liberal; over 20 per cent voted One Nation.

While many of those voters were Labor once, most were former Liberal supporters in a traditionally Labor seat. Kos Samaras, in correspondence in the recent Quarterly Essay argues that working-class conservatives once voted Liberal “on the promise of aspiration [...] where economic growth would create opportunity for those willing to work”. He sees their shift to One Nation as being “not because [it] has a credible economic program, but because grievance politics at least acknowledges that something has gone wrong”.^{iv}

Before I turn to these root causes, to what I think has gone wrong, I want to define two approaches to understanding the rise of the populist right across much of the Western world.

Former British MP Liam Byrne describes in his book *Why Populists are Winning*^v the supply and demand sides fuelling the rise of Reform. Both are equally important and worthy of analysis.

The supply side includes the inflammatory power of social media with deliberately designed algorithms increasing the temperature of debate and driving polarisation, the sinister role played by the wealthiest people in the world in encouraging the rage of those with the least resources in Western nations, and the state-actors interfering in political debates in other nations. All these are fascinating and explain much of what is happening around the world. They repay careful study. The extent to which these factors are influencing Australia’s democracy demands investigation. It is not a lapse into paranoid conspiracy to see that those who are making the most out of the current febrile state of the world have an interest in protecting the system that benefits them through substituting rage and cynicism for real change that might require the very wealthy to share their bounty. A classic ‘look over there’ tactic is clearly and cynically being employed to mask the truth that their success is at the cost of others’ misery.

But it is the demand side – the legitimacy of people’s grievance – that I want to explore tonight.

The Melbourne Institute has plunged into this issue. Researchers found in 2025 that voters who felt bleak about their financial future were more likely not to vote for major parties and people struggling with energy bills were nearly one and a half times more likely to vote for right-wing populists.^{vi}

There is a clear connection between feeling society has failed and voting against the status quo.

Grievance does not necessarily curdle into hostility towards democracy. But it will if people conclude that the rules are unfair and see that the political system does not acknowledge that plainly. At that point, anger seeks not sensible reform but rejection of stability. Showing that democracy is capable of understanding the source of grievance rather than reacting dismissively to its expression, is the path to stabilising our nation.

Let us not hide from the truth: times are tough for a lot of people and unfairness has grown unforgivably.

Economic growth and productivity increases in Australia have struggled for the last fifteen years, and few can look at our economic outlook, the increasingly fraught international environment and the looming impact of AI across the labour market, without being concerned.

The redistributive role of work is failing, as capital is increasingly concentrated in fewer hands, and those hands are located internationally, neutralising governments' efforts to use taxation and regulation to direct profit for the benefit of society.

As Martin Wolf, London Financial Times commentator, wrote in his well-titled *Crisis of Democratic Capitalism*:

...a good part of what has gone wrong is what Adam Smith warned us against – the tendency of the powerful to rig the economic **and political** systems against the rest of society.^{vii} (my emphasis)

The lack of strong and consistent growth that is shared with everyone has become a feature of the Australian economy, with growth in better paid jobs outpacing low paid^{viii}, and wealth disparity growing.^{ix}

In the outer suburbs and regional areas, where One Nation is surging, real household disposable income has been on a sharp decline since 2021.^x

Is it any wonder that our politics are polarising geographically and demographically?

Three-quarters of a million children in Australia are living below the poverty line of 50% of the median income. The wealthiest ten per cent of households hold nearly half of all the wealth, while the poorest twenty percent hold just one percent.^{xi}

The splendid Glyn Davis, in his inaugural Stretton oration, quoted a 2020 Melbourne Institute study that children born into extreme disadvantage are likely to remain so for life. “For more than one in ten Australians, a lifetime of economic struggle beckons.”^{xii}

We have now arrived at the heart of this lecture. What we in this country have allowed to happen to our education system. Because of all the levers we have to break this cycle of

intergenerational disadvantage, education should be the most powerful. And yet we have somehow designed a school system that hardwires disadvantage in family background translating into disadvantage in educational outcomes. And we have done so with no benefit to our overall results.

If ever there were a public policy example of why people might be aggrieved, it is this one. I am not claiming that reforming education alone is the antidote to political fury, but I am suggesting that without repairing this foundational institution, this essential piece of public policy, no amount of rhetorical reassurance will restore trust.

Before I go further, let me state clearly that using any part of this lecture to criticise individual governments would be inaccurate and unfair. It is up to us as the voting public to give governments and oppositions the license for major reform. The last thing education needs is to fall foul of culture war accusations of class envy, nor to become a party-political football.

So let us set aside the cheap weaponisation of a serious argument.

I will now present to you the four features that make our education system stand out internationally. I want to walk through these carefully, not because every detail matters equally, but because together they tell a story about what our democracy guarantees and to whom.

1. The money. I can't not start with the money. Nothing signals national priorities like government funding.

Australia publicly funds private schools but does not regulate the fees they can charge. We are almost unique in this approach.

Most countries go one of two paths. The first is to restrict privately-run schools to the public funding provided to them which is at the same level as for public schools, and the school cannot charge a fee. The other is for governments to provide no subsidy at all to private schools, meaning only the very wealthy can pay.

Our system of subsidising private schools with no restriction in fees means that one of Australia's most prestigious schools can spend \$48,000 on each student, \$8,000 of which has come from the public purse. Compare this to a similar socio-economically advantaged public school here in SA, spending a total of \$18,000 on each of its students.^{xiii}

In South Australia every year over \$400m more is spent on mainstream private school students than on mainstream public school students, by governments and parents

combined.^{xiv} This raises a question of efficiency as much as of fairness. What does it take to fund a decent school education and in what circumstances should some students have more spent on them than others?

Capital spend also disproportionately favours private schools. In the last three years in South Australia public schools on average spent less than a quarter per student on capital upgrades compared to private schools.^{xv}

Capital spend has a triple effect: providing more modern facilities for high-tech subjects; being attractive to parents choosing schools; and, heartbreakingly, sending the signal to students whether or not they deserve a decent school.

I recall a group of students from a disadvantaged school on a parliament tour a few years ago asking me shyly why they had to attend a “povo” school. My heart shattered.

2. This funding model has seen a flight from public schools that marks us out as unique amongst our peer nations. Australia has nearly the highest proportion of children in fee-paying schools in the world at 40 per cent and climbing.^{xvi xvii}

Compare this with the United States, which has under 10 per cent of students in fee-paying private schools. The United Kingdom, Canada and Ireland each have about 7 per cent. New Zealand has 5 per cent. France has less than 1 per cent.^{xviii}

I imagine few people realise just the extent to which our system is an outlier.

3. Unsurprisingly given the above, Australia has created a segregated school system. Australian children from disadvantaged homes are more likely to be in schools with other disadvantaged children than in all other OECD countries but Chile, Hungary and Mexico.^{xix} That is known as segregation – placing socio-economically similar students in schools with each other – and we do it more than nearly every other country.

This is the direct result, of course, of creating an incentive for all families who can afford it, to move to the private system.

This is not a curious anomaly of the system; it **is** the system.

It is inevitable that widespread access to fee-paying schools will create a divide within a community. Suburb by suburb you see the socio-economic divide between private and public^{xx}. Scholarships that privilege more aspirational or talented children are doubtless welcome to their families but also remove those children from local public

schools and incidentally drive up the public dollars provided to the private school as well as their results.

This is in no way to blame individual families. We can identify a trend that has an unwanted and harmful cumulative effect without disparaging the individuals making choices within a system that is larger than they are.

What is the harmful effect of segregation? Socio-economic segregation is bad for disadvantaged children and not particularly beneficial for the advantaged. Segregation has a negative effect on disadvantaged students that compounds the existing challenge of being from a disadvantaged family.

If you are a child of a disadvantaged family in a school with some children of well-resourced and well-educated parents, you are likely to benefit from greater parental advocacy, greater parental fundraising, and more educationally useful parental volunteering. If you sit next to a child from an educationally advantaged home, you are likely to hear them use a wider vocabulary, will watch them apply their likely larger general knowledge and by observing their parents you will be more aware of the kinds of future careers that are possible.

Having more schools of concentrated disadvantage rather than socio-economically average schools counts heavily against disadvantaged students: a disadvantaged student gains a year of schooling simply by being in an average school rather than one of concentrated disadvantage, and two years in a highly advantaged school.^{xxi}

That is with no change in the student's background, just who they sit next to. Two years of schooling.

Lessons from desegregation in the US in the 1960s tell us students from educationally advantaged backgrounds are not held back by being in an integrated school, but those from an educationally disadvantaged background benefit enormously.

If you will forgive the gendered language, this from the 1966 Coleman study following 40,000 students after desegregation:

If a [...] pupil from a home that is strongly and effectively supportive of education is put in a school where most pupils do not come from such homes, his achievement will be little different than if he were in a school composed of others like himself. But if a [...] pupil from a home without much educational strength is put with schoolmates with strong educational backgrounds, his achievement is likely to increase.^{xxii}

A contemporary test of whether having more socio-economically integrated schools is good for the education system is that all the culturally similar nations that regularly outperform Australia in the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) run by the OECD, have a higher proportion of those schools than we do.^{xxiii}

We must stop being afraid of our children being with a diverse range of classmates.

We must also avoid equating public schools, which by the design of this system has more students of high disadvantage, with low quality teaching. Public school students perform at least as well as private school students in NAPLAN and in PISA, when the socio-economic status of their school is taken into account.^{xxiv xxv}

4. We have a problem with our national results, particularly, but not only, with the results of disadvantaged students. Australia's results are falling, both absolutely and relatively, in PISA.

In PISA, Australian 15-year-olds in 2022 scored at a level expected of Australian 14-year-olds 20 years earlier.^{xxvi} We've lost a full year and in that time we have watched other nations improve their results.^{xxvii}

Since the first year we were tested, starting in 2000, Australia by 2018 had gone from 4th in reading to 16th, from 10th in maths to 29th and from 8th in science to 17th.^{xxviii}

As segregation in Australia's schools has increased we have seen a decline in disadvantaged students' performance over time. For example, in 2000 a fifth of disadvantaged students were low performers in reading. By 2018 nearly a third were.^{xxix}

In sum, we stand out internationally: we have a uniquely generous funding regime for private schools; we have the lowest rate of public school enrolment by a long shot amongst similar nations; we have almost the highest concentration of disadvantage in schools in the OECD; and we are seeing our national results drop.

While a country might survive low education results, a democracy struggles to survive a generation taught early and often that fairness is not for them. These are not just educational outcomes they are civic lessons.

They teach some that the system will invest in them, and others that it will tolerate their exclusion.

That is why failure in this public policy is a threat to our democracy.

In this last part of my lecture I ask how this state of affairs came to be, and then what we might do about it. So first, why? What might Hugh Stretton have looked for to explain what we have collectively done?

The dominance of a neo-liberal approach to governing for the past few decades is the cause and therefore challenging it must be part of the solution.

I use the term 'neo-liberal' advisedly and not as a political slogan. I do not mean the mere existence of non-government schools, or the reasonableness of parental choice, or the importance of competition, enterprise and innovation.

I mean something both narrower and more consequential: the steady substitution of individual choice for collective improvement; the preference for competition over system capability; and the comfort in too many areas of public life with public services being almost good enough for those with no alternative.

This trajectory did not begin with a single government or party. It emerged gradually from bipartisan decisions that treated competition on an uneven playing field as an engine of quality.

The neo-liberal view holds that government is to be used as a last resort (other than as a subsidiser of private choices), that our first loyalty is to our immediate family, and our first priority is the creation and maintenance of private wealth.

It is a world of competition between winners and losers, not one of equity and mutual benefit.

The neo-liberal view of schooling is that there are limited chances of prosperity in our society, so your child can only succeed by getting them away from those who face more challenges.

This has meant the deliberate construction of choice by individuals as a substitute for working towards system-wide competence.

Anxiety that you may fall through the cracks is a feature of a neo-liberal society. This is true for many parents paying school fees they can only just afford but that they believe are necessary for their children's future.

Another hallmark of neo-liberalism is grievance experienced by those missing out on the bounty available to those with resources. This is true for those parents who see their children's public schools in a parlous state while they drive past the wellness centres, performance halls and technological facilities springing up in private schools.

And as we have seen, this system does not produce better results for our country.

We need to *act* if we do not want this.

While right-wing populists are expert at harnessing frustration and fanning its flames to drive disengagement from the system, the rest of us have to make public policy choices, that have consequences and costs, if we are to offer hope not fuel powerless fury.

And the actions that need to be taken are difficult, because they require us to acknowledge that we have built an unfair and underperforming system on the philosophy of “get what you can for yourself”, not the universal principles of social democracy.

We have to acknowledge these truths, then we have to desegregate our school system.

Desegregation need not mean a single overnight scheme, and it must not mean punishing families for acting rationally within an irrational system. It means setting a clear direction of policy travel – incremental tightening of public subsidies to public purposes, strengthening local public schools so they are genuinely chosen, and designing enrolment settings that bring integration to life.

I know that for many in this room the moment this argument becomes real is when it brushes up against your family choices and your children. It is one thing to agree in principle that the system is unfair; it is another to accept any change that feels as though it might ask your family to bear risk or relinquish advantage.

That quiet calculation sits at the heart of our current stalemate.

Unless there is the community as well as the political will to rethink how we fund and measure our school system, it will remain discriminatory against children who happen to be born into struggling families and it will hold our nation back.

It will take the community demanding change as much as politicians being prepared to affect it, for this scale of reform requires both sides of politics to commit, to hold their nerve and to resist playing politics.

Could it fairly be said that Australians deliberately wanted an expensive, dysfunctional and internationally unique (in all the wrong ways) education system? Could it be said that it is doing any good for our country and our democracy even though it has been delivered by elected representatives of the people? I think not.

This is the conundrum of democracy that deserves its own Stretton oration.

Public policy makers and those in society who have the power to change things for the disempowered must look beyond the trite “you get the government you deserve” and ask ourselves how we forge a democracy that has meaning for all?

If neo-liberalism has harmed our education system, it has not restricted its impact to that area of public policy.

If we accept that our democracy is currently at risk from those who have been left behind, and that wise public policy is one way to secure it, are we prepared to rethink major areas of policy and recognise they are in the process of failing? Can we the policy shapers discern a serious demand through the democratic process, even though the language used is of dissent and discontent?

Where does the responsibility of politicians lie in disentangling the real consequences of public policy?

Where lies the responsibility of you good folk here tonight? Are you prepared to give governments the instructions and the *permission* to make drastic and possibly expensive changes?

Permission does not mean abstract approval. It means tolerating redistribution that does not benefit your own household directly; it means resisting the instinct to seek individual escape when collective repair is required; and it means voting not only for fairness in theory but for the budgets, compromises and discomfort that fairness demands. Permission also means being honest about transition, measuring success not by ideology, but by whether we lift outcomes and restore trust.

Can the vote for One Nation be read narrowly as anger at the education system? No, of course not. But I think it must be read in part as exhaustion with the failed promise of the neo-liberal approach to residualising public services to be not *quite* adequate for those who can't afford private, whether that be education, health, aged care or retirement income.

Would fixing the education system lead to a resurgence of votes for the major parties? Goodness only knows.

But it would make it fairer and more capable, and that is the job of a democracy. Isn't it?

As stewards of public policy, do we have the courage to recognise when a radical reset is required before something more radical and darker is forced on us?

A last word of guidance from the Great Man himself, he who did not believe in Great Man history.

It is one of Hugh Stretton's most oft-repeated lines in the perfectly titled *Australia Fair*:

We should be doing whatever we can, by old and new means that fit our changing historical conditions, to leave Australia fairer than we found it.¹

ⁱ Thomas Carlyle, *The French Revolution: A History*, Book Three, 1837.

ⁱⁱ Said to have been at the First All-Russia Congress on Adult Education on May 19, 1919.

ⁱⁱⁱ [The steady decline of voters choosing the major parties is reshaping Australian politics - The Australia Institute](#)

^{iv} Kos Samaras, *Correspondence*, Quarterly Essay QE101 - March 2026

^v Liam Byrne, *Why Populists Are Winning And How to Beat Them*, published by Apollo, 2026

^{vi} The Australian Economic Review: *Disaffection in Australia and Rational Disaffection? The Economic Origins of Minor-Party Voting in Australia*, Melbourne Institute, May 2025

^{vii} Martin Wolf, *The Crisis of Democratic Capitalism*, Penguin, 2024

^{viii} To be referenced formally when Melbourne Institute work published

^{ix} Australian Council of Social Services <https://povertyandinequality.acoss.org.au/inequality/>

^x RedBridge analysis of ABS Household Income & Wealth, ANU Regional Living Cost Index, Productivity Commission (2024). [Source](#)

^{xi} Australian Council of Social Services <https://povertyandinequality.acoss.org.au/inequality/>

^{xii} Professor A. Abigail Payne & Dr Rajeev Samarage with assistance from Dr Maxim Ananyev, *Spatial and Community Dimensions of Income Poverty*, Melbourne Institute, 2020

^{xiii} See <https://myschool.edu.au> Recurrent per capita spend 2024. Glenunga High School total \$17,652 of which \$15,558 is from state and federal governments. Geelong Grammar total \$47,888 of which \$7,806 is from state and federal governments. Note: boarding charges and costs are excluded.

^{xiv} Author's analysis from my school data. Average recurrent expense per capita of students in each sector, the differential in favour of private school students multiplied by the number of private school enrolments.

^{xv} Author's analysis from my school data. In 2024 the average capital spend per capita over the previous three years as \$13333 for private school students and \$3626 for public school students.

^{xvi} <https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/people/education/schools/2025#data-downloads>

^{xvii} <https://www.acara.edu.au/reporting/national-report-on-schooling-in-australia/student-numbers> 57 per cent of Australian secondary students went to a public school in 2024

^{xviii} <https://www.wooclap.com/en/blog/public-vs-private-school-statistics/>
<https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c2lk2p7wpr4o>
<https://insidestory.org.au/why-do-canadas-schools-outperform-australias/>
<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/03323315.2023.2174571#abstract>
<https://www.newzealandshores.com/resources/live-in-new-zealand/education-and-schooling-in-new-zealand/>
<https://eurydice.eacea.ec.europa.eu/eurydice/france/organisation-private-education>

^{xix} OECD, *Equity in Education: Breaking Down Barriers to Social Mobility*, PISA, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://doi.org/3.10.1787/97089264073234-en>, 2018 p.122

^{xx} An instructive lesson is to compare the Distribution of Socio-Educational Advantage of the three schools that sit on the same site in Golden Grove on <https://myschool.edu.au>

^{xxi} Thomson S, DeBortoli L, Underwood C, *PISA 2015: Reporting Australia's Results*, Australian Council for Educational Research, 2017 p.218

^{xxii} Coleman, J, *Equality of Educational Opportunity*, US Government Printing Office, 1966, p.22

^{xxiii} Author research comparing PISA results with Canada, New Zealand, Finland and Estonia, the four culturally similar nations that have consistently outperformed Australia up to 2022 (note COVID makes international comparisons difficult for 2022).

^{xxiv} <https://www.acer.org/au/news/article/pisa-2018-australian-students-performance>

^{cxxv} Public schools cater for more lower socio-economic students – South Australian public schools teach nearly 90 per cent of the students in schools of below average advantage. Analysis by author from <https://myschool.edu.au>

^{xxvi} https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/pisa-2022-results-volume-i-and-ii-country-notes_ed6fbcc5-en/australia_e9346d47-en.html

¹ H Stretton *Australia Fair*, University of New South Wales, 2005

^{xxvii} *PISA 2018 In Brief I: Student performance* by Sue Thomson, Lisa De Bortoli, Catherine Underwood and Marina Schmid, ACER (2019)

^{xxviii} PISA was undertaken in 2022, but the variable influence of COVID on education outcomes in some nations makes international comparison less reliable. Australia's results were stagnant at 2018 levels, while many other nations suddenly declined. Given the uncertainty I use the pre-COVID assessment in 2018. <https://research.acer.edu.au/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1057&context=ozpisa>
<https://www.nature.com/articles/s41539-025-00297-3>

^{xxix} Thomson S, DeBortoli L, Underwood C, Schmid M, *PISA 2018: Reporting Australia's Results*, Australian Council for Educational Research
<https://research.acer.edu.au/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1035&context=ozpisa> , 2019, p83