
SELECTIVE COMPARISONS UNHELPFUL IN PURSUIT OF LEARNING EXCELLENCE

The education debate in Australia should focus on improving learning opportunities in all schools. Test results are best used by teachers and parents to improve student learning, not by commentators to pit sector against sector.

That's the message from National Catholic Education Commission executive director Ross Fox, who says that trying to label one education sector – Catholic, independent or public – as superior to the others distracts people from the priorities of school education.

"New analysis released today by the 'Save Our Schools Coalition' attempts to fuel competition between sectors by extrapolating information from one domain of NAPLAN testing for one year level in metropolitan areas only," he said.

According to data from the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority, 44 per cent of Australian schools are outside metropolitan areas. Today's report excludes those 4,200 schools and almost 1 million students from the analysis.

"The real need in school education is more rigorous, peer-reviewed research that informs quality teaching and learning," Mr Fox said.

"We should be striving to have every student achieving at a high standard, irrespective of their background and the school sector they have chosen."

Mr Fox said it is unhelpful, and potentially damaging, to use limited information to draw conclusions about school sectors and try to make a cheap political point.

Non-government schools provide school choice, with more than 750,000 students enrolled in Catholic schools in each state and territory, Mr Fox said. That equates to one in five school students across Australia.

There are large numbers of students from low socioeconomic status backgrounds in Catholic schools, and there have been significant increases in the number of students with disability – 50 per cent in the past six years – and the number of Indigenous students, which has doubled in the past decade.

"Students in Catholic schools only receive 77 per cent of the government funding that students in government schools receive," he explained.

"And even after parents' contributions, about 10 per cent less money is spent on each Catholic student compared with a student in a government school, when government funding and private income are combined.

"Catholic schools are focused on educating the whole child," Mr Fox said.

"NAPLAN tests are a useful education tool in context, but should not be seen as the be-all and end-all of student achievement or school excellence – and certainly not used to divide school sectors."

Mr Fox said he hopes when the 2015 school year starts next week, the thousands of great teachers across Australia continue to improve the learning of students, rather than being distracted by unhelpful and selective analysis.