

**Election 2025**

# Education Policy Brief: Schools

**The Mitchell Institute, Victoria University**



## Acknowledgement of Country



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## Suggested Citation

Brisbane, R., & Hildebrandt, M. (2025). *Election 2025 Education Policy Brief: Schools*. Mitchell Institute, Victoria University.

**ISBN:** 978-1-86272-882-0

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## Overview

As Australia heads into the 2025 federal election, it's fair to say that childcare and tertiary education are a greater focus for the major parties than schooling. However, since the last election, debates over school funding and facilities, curriculum content, teacher shortages and student wellbeing have stepped up, shaping a national conversation on how best to support the primary and secondary education sectors.

Government schools continue to grapple with funding shortfalls, despite federal government commitments to close the gap, while funding and accountability for independent schools remains contentious.

Meanwhile, policy shifts such as nationwide mobile phone bans and curriculum updates reflect community concerns about student engagement, digital literacy, and civic awareness.

## What are the likely battlegrounds?

With polling day just over the horizon, battlelines are being firmly drawn on school education policy, with the conversation centring on funding, equity, and student outcomes. The major parties appear to be facing off on issues of fairness and socio-economic responsibility from traditional vantage points.

### 'Fair' funding

The Labor Party is staking its claim as the party of public education, prioritising increased funding to government schools and equity-driven reforms, while the Coalition's more market-driven approach focuses on competition and accountability to improve outcomes.

The Albanese Government has committed to ensuring government schools receive 100% of their Schooling Resource Standard (SRS) by 2026, arguing that more investment is needed to support disadvantaged students. The SRS is the recurrent funding model for schools

recommended through the Gonski Review in 2011. [1]

The Coalition may push for a more balanced funding model, emphasising efficiency and parental choice. Catholic and independent school funding will also be debated, with Labor under pressure to reduce funding to elite private schools, with the Coalition maintaining a funding model that supports school choice.

Government schools in growing suburbs and regional areas face overcrowding and outdated facilities. Labor is likely to campaign on building new schools and upgrading classrooms, while the Coalition may argue for more public-private partnerships to fund infrastructure.

## Teacher shortages

With teacher shortages worsening, Labor is likely to campaign on increasing teacher salaries, reducing workloads, and offering incentives for new teachers. The Coalition has highlighted the impact of the crisis in regional areas, calling for urgent changes to the administrative burdens on teachers and the challenges principals face in staffing schools. This issue will be critical in regional and outer suburban electorates, where shortages are most severe.

## What is taught in schools

The national curriculum has been politically contentious, with Labor supporting updates that centre Indigenous history, climate change, and digital literacy. The Coalition has criticised these changes, arguing for a greater focus on core fundamentals including traditional Australian history, literacy, and numeracy and a curriculum that cultivates critical thinking, responsible citizenship and common sense.

The Opposition's 'Students First' policy plan also includes a call for explicit instruction, phonics-based literacy teaching, and accountability measures to lift student performance. This could become a polarising issue, with Labor supporting teacher professional judgment and a more flexible curriculum rather than a strict reliance on one methodology.

## Student wellbeing and technology

The Albanese Government, and most state and territory governments, support mobile phone bans in schools to improve focus and mental health. The Coalition supports these bans but may push for stronger school discipline policies as part of a broader debate on student behaviour and wellbeing.

# What does the school system look like in Australia?

The school system in Australia provides formal learning to children and young people, typically ages 5 to 18. It is divided into primary education (Foundation to Year 6 or 7) and secondary education (Years 7–12), with variations between states and territories. Schooling is compulsory until at least Year 10, with students required to be in education, training, or employment until they turn 17.

The Australian Curriculum, overseen by the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA), sets national learning standards while allowing states and territories to tailor content to local needs.

School funding in Australia is complex, but designed to ensure all students receive a quality education while accounting for factors like school type, student needs, and location. Australia's school system includes government (public) schools, which are majority funded by the state/territory and federal governments, and non-government (private) schools, which include Catholic and independent schools that charge fees, but also receive government funding.

Government schools in Australia are primarily funded by state and territory governments, which cover the bulk of operational costs, teacher salaries, and infrastructure expenses. On average, state and territory governments contribute 75-80% of total funding for government schools. This funding supports essential services such as classroom resources, special education programs, and school maintenance.

The Federal Government supplements public school funding, and as of November 2024, contributes a minimum of 20 per cent of the Schooling Resource Standard (SRS) funding amount [2]. The SRS is a model designed to ensure schools receive adequate resources based on student needs. Federal funding is often targeted towards disadvantaged students, including those from low-income backgrounds, Indigenous communities, rural and remote areas, and students with disabilities. Whilst government schools do not charge mandatory tuition fees, they may request voluntary contributions from parents and raise additional funds through sponsorships, fundraising events, and grants.



# What has happened in school education policy since the last election?

Since the 2022 federal election the Albanese Government has focused on increasing funding to government schools, addressing teacher shortages, and reforming aspects of the national curriculum. Meanwhile, broader societal concerns about student wellbeing and digital distractions have led to policy shifts, including widespread bans on mobile phones in schools.

## Review of the National School Reform Agreement

Federal Education Minister Jason Clare commissioned the Productivity Commission to review the National School Reform Agreement (NSRA) (final report released Jan 2023) to identify how well national policy initiatives by the various federal, state and territory governments have achieved the NSRA's objective to lift student outcomes across Australian schools [3].

Following this, Minister Clare appointed an Expert Panel to review and inform the development of the next round of the National School Reform Agreement and Bilateral Agreements. The Panel's review focused on equity, wellbeing and workforce [3]. The objective being to get every school to 100 per cent of its fair funding level and work to achieve the equity objectives of the Gonski review of school funding, completed some ten years earlier. [4].

Importantly, the Expert Panel recommended investing to strengthen the links between schools and community and health services, particularly in the most disadvantaged communities [5] in what is often referred to as expanding the 'full-service schools' model [6]. It also recommends 10 year funding agreements for schools, with a review at the five year point [5], as opposed to the five year agreements in place under the NSRA [7].

All state and territory governments have now signed up to the National School Reform Agreement. This is a significant milestone achievement, some 14 years after the Gonski Report made its recommendations in 2011. On 1 January 2025, the NSRA are now known as the Better and Fairer Schools Agreements and these are 10-year agreements [8]. It is likely that the remaining states, SA and QLD, will sign up before the election.

Existing Commonwealth legislation (the *Education Act 2013*) was amended late last year to allow federal funding for public schools to be increased beyond 20 per cent [2]. This, and the BFsAs, are a crucial piece of policy architecture that now allows the federal government to deliver on the promised funding increases for government schools, bringing them up to 100 per cent of their schooling resource standard (SRS) levels. Bringing schools up to 100 per cent of their funding level is important to help public schools achieve smaller class sizes and increased support in classrooms [9].

The debate over the allocation of taxpayer money to Catholic and independent schools has

intensified, particularly following reports of financial mismanagement in some private institutions. This has fuelled calls for greater transparency in how non-government schools use public funds. At the same time, 'voluntary' fees in government schools have surged, highlighting ongoing funding gaps despite government commitments.

## Teacher workforce supply

The ongoing teacher shortage has remained a pressing challenge, leading to policy responses such as scholarships for teaching students, improved working conditions, and fast-tracked pathways into the profession.

The government has sought to address teacher burnout by proposing workload reductions, though many educators argue that further systemic changes are needed to make the profession more sustainable.

Most parents and schools are acutely aware of the issue of teacher shortages. Despite funding available to students completing placements [9, 10], and sign on bonuses for teachers who accept positions in priority schools [11, 12], teachers are leaving the profession faster than they can be replaced. Burnout from administrative and compliance workload [9], classroom sexual harassment [13] and classroom behaviour problems are commonly cited as reasons [9].

Attraction and retention of new teachers is a key priority for governments. The National Teacher Workforce Action Plan (November 2022) aims to address the projected teacher shortage [14] of up to 4,100 by 2025 [15]. The Plan includes visa processing priorities for qualified teachers [16], \$337.3 million in federal funding for additional university places, scholarships and a national campaign to elevate the profession [10].

In addition, funding to support placements, 'Commonwealth practicum payments' of \$319.50 per week are available to teaching students whilst they are undertaking unpaid placements [9]. The Australian Education Union notes fewer enrolments in teaching degrees along with around half of all enrolments dropping out before completing [9].

## Student wellbeing and technology

In response to concerns over student distractions and cyberbullying, state and territory governments - backed by federal support - have banned mobile phones in public schools during school hours. Most jurisdictions had implemented these restrictions by 2023, aiming to improve classroom focus and student mental health. While broadly supported, some education experts have questioned the effectiveness of outright bans versus regulated phone use for learning purposes.

Labor is also working with states and territories on a national standard to address bullying in Australian schools. On February 16, the party announced an Anti-Bullying Rapid Review which will inform this work in 2025 [17].



## Curriculum changes

The Albanese Government has also overseen updates to the national curriculum, particularly in civics education, where there has been a stronger emphasis on digital literacy, misinformation awareness, and Indigenous perspectives.

# What are the major issues for this election?

## Public vs. private funding

One of the most significant and enduring issues in Australian schools policy is how to ensure equitable funding for government and non-government schools. The debate centres on whether funding should prioritise public schools to close the resource gap or be distributed more evenly across all sectors.

Labor's funding agreements focus on government schools, aiming to close resource gaps. The Albanese Government has committed to fully funding public schools based on the Schooling Resource Standard (SRS), with agreements like the \$4.8 billion deal for New South Wales setting a precedent.

The Coalition, while supportive of government school funding, continues to support funding for non-government schools and maintaining school choice for families.

## Curriculum and educational priorities

The election will also highlight differences in how the major parties approach curriculum content. Labor supports a curriculum that emphasises Indigenous perspectives, climate change education, and diversity, aligning with progressive educational goals. The Coalition has traditionally favoured a more "back to basics" approach, with a strong focus on literacy, numeracy, and Australian history. These differing philosophies reflect broader ideological debates about the role of education in shaping national identity and social values.

## Teacher shortages and workforce retention

A critical concern is the national teacher shortage, which has been exacerbated by declining enrolments in teaching courses and high attrition rates. Labor has introduced the National Teacher Workforce Action Plan, investing \$337 million to improve teacher supply, training, and retention. The Coalition has called for urgent action, particularly in regional areas, where shortages are most severe. Both parties recognise the need to reduce teacher workloads and improve working conditions, but the effectiveness of their proposed strategies will be a key point of contention.

## Student behaviour, mental health and digital distractions

The impact of COVID-19 on student engagement and wellbeing remains a priority. Increased anxiety, absenteeism, and disruptive behaviour in classrooms [18] have led to calls for greater investment in school-based mental health programs for students as well as protections for Principals and teaching staff experiencing abuse, violence and threatening behaviour in the workplace [13, 19-21]. Labor has expanded funding for school counsellors and psychologists, while the Coalition has focused on classroom discipline and behaviour management policies. How parties balance mental health support with stricter school behaviour policies will be a key issue.

With the rise of digital learning tools and artificial intelligence, both parties are grappling with how to regulate and integrate technology in schools. Labor has emphasised digital literacy programs and responsible AI use in education, while the Coalition has supported stricter mobile phone bans and policies to reduce screen distractions in classrooms.

## School facilities and overcrowding

School facilities and overcrowding have become pressing issues in Australia's education landscape. The surge in student enrolments, especially in urban areas, has strained existing infrastructure, leading to overcrowded classrooms and inadequate facilities.

In Melbourne, more than 40 state schools are reported to be at or beyond capacity, with over a quarter situated in regions slated for significant development in the coming years. A notable example is University High School, which, due to overcrowding, plans to relocate 400 Year 9 students to a rented office building in Lonsdale Street starting from the first term of 2025. Similarly, Perth's inner-city schools, such as Highgate Primary School, are experiencing severe enrolment pressures, leading to concerns among parents and educators.

In response to these challenges, both federal and state governments have initiated funding programs aimed at upgrading and expanding school facilities. The Australian Government's Schools Upgrade Fund (SUF) is a \$284.3 million initiative designed to enhance school infrastructure nationwide.

Despite these efforts, disparities in capital investment between public and private schools persist. Analysis by the Australian Education Union indicates that five private schools collectively spent as much on new facilities in one year as 3,000 Australian public schools combined [22].

Additionally, enrolments in non-government schools have increased significantly in recent years, with more than 1.5 million students now attending private institutions. This trend has implications for resource allocation and exacerbates the challenges faced by government schools.

## Declining student performance

Australia's declining student performance in international assessments like the Program for International Student Achievement (PISA) has put pressure on policymakers to improve academic outcomes. There is a lot of debate about whether student performance is declining or not, as well as where Australia is ranking, with different opinions about the tests used and comparisons drawn [23].

While both parties agree on the need for stronger literacy and numeracy standards, their approaches differ. Labor has backed targeted intervention programs and teacher training improvements, while the Coalition has pushed for greater curriculum rigor and performance accountability.

The most recent NAPLAN (National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy) results [24] illustrate a consistent result, without significant decline or improvement. However, the important detail is the one in three or approximately 30 per cent of students who are not meeting expectations [24, 25] and who find it progressively harder and harder to catch up [26].

One of the global indicators of a well performing education system is the percentage of students achieving upper secondary completion.

Compared to the other 41 OECD countries, Australians complete 20.4 years of education (compared to the OECD average of 18) and 84 per cent of Australian adults (aged 25-64) have completed upper secondary school education [27]. This again is higher than the OECD average of 79 per cent [27]. However, a more meaningful focus is the 16 per cent of young Australians who do not complete upper secondary education and how this impacts their quality of life. Australia's overall ranking is only 21 out of 41 countries [27].

## Increase in non-government school enrolments

In the past five years there has been a significant increase, of almost 20 per cent, in enrolments in the independent school sector [28], particularly with schools that charge fees around \$5,000 per year [29]. Enrolments in government schools have been in slow decline.

Indeed, Australia has a high proportion of students attending non-government schools by international standards. Sitting at just over 40 per cent of students enrolled in non-government schools, this is around double the OECD average which sits between 15 per cent at lower secondary and 20 per cent by upper secondary [31].

Figure 1: Secondary school enrolments by sector since 1996 [29]

### Secondary school enrolments by sector since 1996

Government secondary school enrolment share has dropped from 66% to 58%, while Catholic and independent enrolments have both increased.

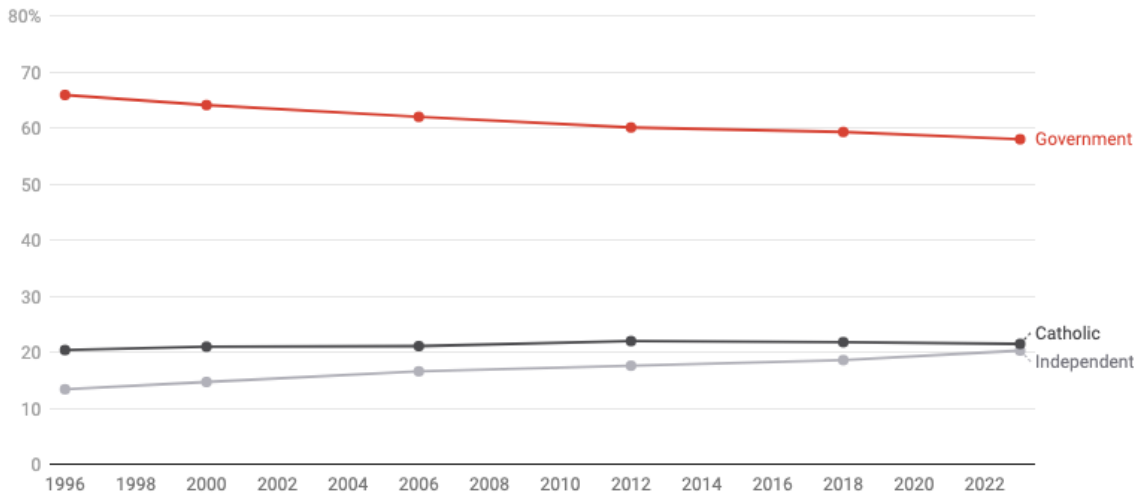
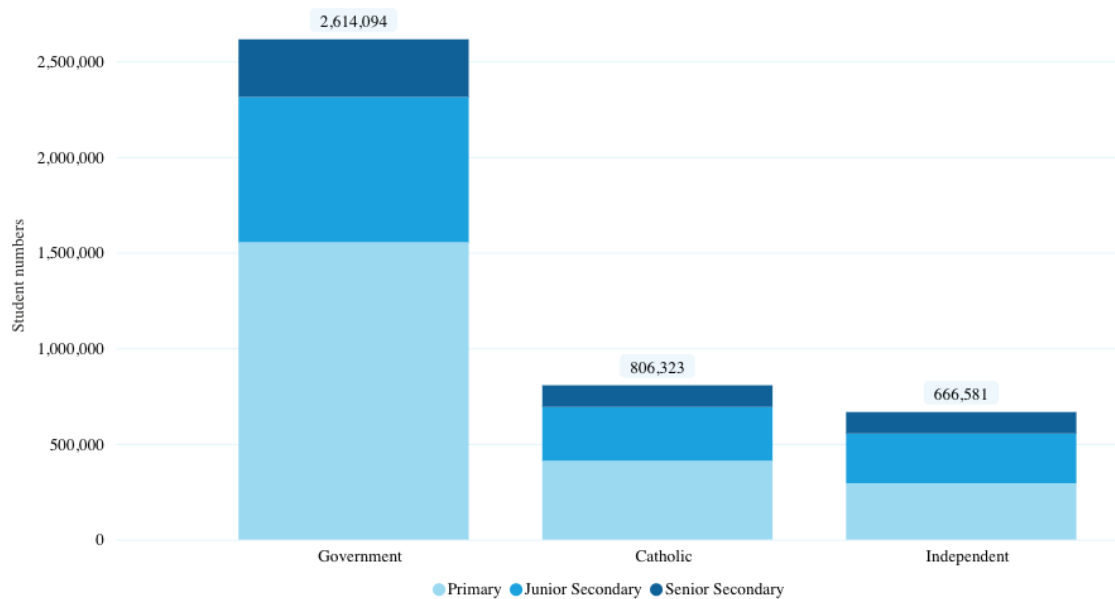


Chart: The Conversation • Source: 1996 data from Springer; 2006, 2012, 2018, 2023 from ACARA; 2000 from Allen & Unwin • Get the data • Embed • Download image • Created with Datawrapper

Figure 2: All students by school sector and school type, Australia 2023 [30]

School level	Government	Catholic	Independent	All
Primary	1,553,683	411,876	294,823	2,260,382
Junior Secondary	759,168	281,227	259,355	1,299,750
Senior Secondary	301,243	113,220	112,403	526,866
All Secondary	1,060,411	394,447	371,758	1,826,616
All	2,614,094	806,323	666,581	4,086,998



## What are the parties offering?

The question for voters on schools will be whether they support Labor's approach of increased funding for government schools, progressive curriculum updates, and mental health support, or the Coalition's focus on school choice, traditional curriculum values, and stricter discipline policies.

Meanwhile, the Greens continue to support all schools (government and non-government) receiving the full 100 per cent of their educational funding needs [29]. They have also pledged to end public school fees and provide an \$800 back-to-school payment per child to help with the cost of uniforms, school supplies and technology [22].

All major parties acknowledge the issue of teacher shortages, with Labor responding with incentives such as scholarships and improved conditions. Whereas the Coalition is focusing on alternative pathways into teaching, including fast-tracked teacher training programs. The Greens are advocating for higher teacher salaries and reduced workloads to combat burnout.

The Government has been vocal about reducing the negative impacts of technology on young people, supporting state-wide mobile phone bans in public schools. These bans are already in place in most states and territories, with the aim of reducing distractions, cyberbullying, and mental health issues. The Coalition is likely to continue supporting phone restrictions, but may advocate for more flexibility, such as giving teachers more discretion.

The curriculum battlelines are well-worn, with the Labor Government supporting the current Australian Curriculum: Civics and Citizenship, which includes democracy, voting, Indigenous perspectives and global engagement. The Coalition, however, is pushing for a greater emphasis on Western democratic values, national identity and Australian history, arguing that the current curriculum is too focused on 'activism' (e.g. climate change and indigenous issues) [20]. Finally, the Greens advocate for stronger focus on Indigenous history and rights, environmental justice, and political activism in civics education.

As stated at the outset, when it comes to education this election – it is tertiary education (particularly universities) and early childhood education and care that are front of mind for the Government and the Opposition, given the more direct links to issues like cost of living and workforce participation.

However, the major parties' platforms on schools continue to reflect their broader economic and social values, offering voters differing takes on funding and shaping a school system in contemporary Australia.

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