

A persistent link between socio-economic status and educational opportunity

Educational Opportunity in Australia 2020 is one of the most comprehensive data studies of Australia's education system. It examines young people's progress at four key educational milestones, from school entry through to early adulthood. It looks not only at academic achievement, but the extent to which our education system is supporting young Australians to be confident and creative, and actively engaged in their communities and the world.

Despite Australia's commitment to equity and opportunity for all students, *Educational Opportunity 2020* finds that family background still plays an unacceptably large role in determining students' experiences and achievements. At all stages, there remains a strong and persistent link between a young person's socio-economic status and educational outcomes.

While the report finds large gaps in academic outcomes, educational participation and attainment from early childhood through to adulthood, it has uncovered smaller and less persistent gaps in other areas of learning. In relation to creativity and confidence, and active and engaged citizenship, disadvantaged students are doing better than in relation to academic outcomes, although there are still gaps between students from low and high socioeconomic backgrounds.

Key findings

- Australia's education system is letting down the most disadvantaged children and young people. Socio-economic disadvantage is consistently and strongly associated with substantially lower academic outcomes, lower confidence and creativity and lower levels of active and informed citizenship from childhood through to adulthood.
- Gaps in educational opportunity and outcomes are apparent from school entry and often persist through to adulthood. Socio-economically disadvantaged students are less likely to attend preschool, less likely to be developmentally ready for school, less likely to finish school, and less likely to gain a post-school qualification.
- Gaps between the most socioeconomically disadvantaged students and national averages are largest in relation to academic performance but while they are smaller in other areas such as confidence and creativity they are still evident.
- The effects of socio-economic disadvantage persist well beyond school. Compared to the national average, the most socioeconomically disadvantaged 24 year-olds are:
 - less than half as likely to have or be working towards a university degree (17.9% of lowest socioeconomic status (SES) 24 year olds compared to 41.5% nationally)
 - substantially less likely to be fully engaged in employment, education or training (50.8% compared to 70.3%)
 - around twice as likely to not be engaged in any employment or education (32.3% compared to 15%); unemployed (9.4% compared to 5.0%); or not in the labour force (22.9% compared to 10.0%).

Proportion of children and young people from high and low SES backgrounds succeeding on key educational opportunity indicators, by stage of learning (%)

	Successful lifelong learners		Creative and confident individuals		Active and informed citizens	
Entry to school	On track on all key domains	On track in literacy and numeracy	On track in social competence	On track in emotional maturity	On track in responsibility and respect & prosocial and helping behaviour	
High SES	85.3%	90.9%	81.3%	81.8%	88.6%	
Low SES	67.7%	74.3%	67.5%	70.6%	80.1%	
Middle school years	Above NMS in Reading and Numeracy	At or above international benchmark in science	Exhibits behaviours indicative of creativity	Possesses strong self-efficacy or belief in self	Informed about current events and global issues	Believes in importance of civic activities to citizenship
High SES	91.3%	85%	80.7%	72.2%	68.4%	66.6%
Low SES	50.6%	43%	63.6%	62.5%	59.6%	61.5%
Senior school years	Attains Year 12 or equivalent certificate	At or above benchmark in maths, science & reading	Exhibits strong creative problem solving skills	Possesses strong self-efficacy or belief in self	Informed about current events and global issues	Believes in importance of civic activities to citizenship
High SES	91.8%	86.2%	79%	81.3%	85.0%	71.4%
Low SES	66.8%	48.6%	50%	67.7%	61.0%	60.2%
Early adulthood	Fully engaged in work, education or training	Gained or studying post-school qualification	Adaptable to change and open to new ideas	Confident in self and the future	Keeps informed about the world	Active in the community
High SES	82.0%	86.3%	72.3%	76.6%	76.0%	73.0%
Low SES	50.8%	52.9%	63.2%	67.7%	56.0%	49.8%

Source: Lamb et al, Educational Opportunity in Australia 2020

Note: readers should take caution when comparing results of different indicators as the measure used for socioeconomic status varies (refer to original report for more detailed analysis).

What does this mean?

The research shows a clear and persistent relationship between socio-economic status and educational outcomes in Australia across all areas, at all stages. Up to one half of children and young people from disadvantaged backgrounds are not gaining the skills and knowledge needed to be successful lifelong learners, creative, confident, active and informed citizens. These learners are far more likely compared with their advantaged peers to be missing out in all areas of learning, at all stages.

Australia's education system is not doing enough to address inequality between the most and least advantaged young people. With the right kinds of supports in place, students who start behind can catch up to their peers. When this doesn't happen, the effects of disadvantage can continue and worsen through childhood and into adulthood, impacting on work and career prospects and driving intergenerational inequality.

Providing funding and support to schools with higher levels of socio-educational disadvantage to drive excellence in teaching and learning within education systems is important in addressing inequality. Additionally, use of data and high quality assessment to tailor teaching to the individual needs of students can help reduce gaps in achievement.

Universal access to early learning is also key, with research showing that the most disadvantaged children are most likely to miss out, but have the most to gain from engaging in high quality early education and care. More work needs to be done in tailoring support to disadvantaged students as they transition from school into work, training, and further education.

Excellence and equity in our education systems will go a long way towards achieving Australia's educational goals, but solutions also need to address drivers of inequality in other areas. Strategies to reduce poverty and other forms of disadvantage are key to improving children and young people's educational opportunities in the future, as well as improving their health and wellbeing, and the financial security of disadvantaged families.

What we measured

Milestone 1 – Early years looked at which children were developmentally ready at the point of entry to school, across all five domains of the Australian Early Development Census as well as their skills in the basic literacy and numeracy subdomain. To understand early creativity and confidence the report uses the AEDC to assess development in social competence and emotional maturity. AEDC data on responsibility and respect as well as prosocial and helping behaviour is used to explore early indications of skills needed to be active and informed citizens.

Milestone 2 – Middle years used a range of data sources to look at Year 7 students' reading and numeracy, Year 8 students' achievement in science; and Year 6 students' proficiency in Information Communication Technology (NAPLAN, Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study, NAP-ICT). It examined the proportion of 10 to 11 year old students reporting high levels of confidence and displaying various creative behaviours using data from the Longitudinal Study of Australian Children (LSAC). It also looked at civic knowledge, attitudes and skills in Year 6, using data from the National Assessment Program – Civics and Citizenship (NAP-CC).

Milestone 3 – Senior school years used the Census to examine what proportion of young people had attained a Year 12 or an equivalent qualification by the age of 19 and Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) data to look at achievement in reading, maths and science. It also examined proficiency in creative problem-solving, and confidence using data from PISA. Keeping informed about current events and belief in the importance of civic activities was explored using data from NAP-CC.

Milestone 4 – Early adulthood used the Census to look at engagement in full time work, training or study at age 24 and 29 as well as who had gained a post-school qualification. It also examined levels of self-reported creativity and confidence using the Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Youth (LSAY). The LSAY was also used to explore the extent to which young adults report being socially and politically active in their community and remaining informed about the world around them.

More information

Educational opportunities in Australia 2020 was prepared by the Centre for International Research on Education Systems (CIRES) for the Mitchell Institute for Education and Health Policy – both at Victoria University.

Report citation: Lamb, S., Huo, S., Walstab, A., Wade, A., Maire, Q., Doecke, E., Jackson, J. & Endekov, Z (2020), *Educational opportunity in Australia 2020: who succeeds and who misses out*, Centre for International Research on Education Systems, Victoria University, for the Mitchell Institute, Melbourne: Mitchell Institute.