

What is the potential for philanthropy to address inequality within disadvantaged schools? Policy implications of an evaluation of the Fair Education program in New South Wales

[Esther Doecke](#) and [Graeme Newman](#)

Summary

The Centre for Research International Research on Educational Systems (CIRES) conducted a longitudinal evaluation of the Fair Education program in New South Wales from 2016 to 2020. The Fair Education program is a philanthropic initiative designed to address the complex challenge of educational inequality and to strengthen parent and community engagement within disadvantaged schools. It does so by providing ongoing funding, coaching and project development support over a three-year period. The evaluation aimed to assess school leaders' experiences of the program, to identify the challenges schools encountered, to find out how the external coaching component was received, and to determine how successful the locally-driven projects were. This policy brief outlines key policy implications of the evaluation.

Philanthropy and school funding inequality

Philanthropy is a growing influence on educational thinking and policymaking worldwide (Ball 2012). Echoing practices evident in other education systems worldwide, the most recent national review of school funding in Australia (known as the 'Gonski review') effectively encouraged all schools, including the most disadvantaged, to start to 'connect with philanthropic partners to deliver time, money and expertise to schools' (Gonski et al. 2011).

Not all schools are equal when it comes to access to private funding. Public schools have access to the lowest amount of total (public and private) recurrent income per student (Connors & Morrow, 2015). Among these, disadvantaged schools within the public sector have the lowest level of private contributions to their overall school budget and are less likely to receive philanthropic donations (Thompson, Hogan & Rahimi 2019).

Fair Education

Fair Education is a philanthropic initiative targeted for disadvantage schools. It seeks to help them achieve better outcomes and improve family and community involvement in student learning. In New South Wales, the program is funded by the Vincent Fairfax Family Foundation (VFFF), delivered by Australian Schools Plus and involves:

- coaching and mentoring for school leaders
- funding of a 3-year school-driven project.

Evaluating Fair Education

The evaluation of Fair Education was commissioned and funded by the Vincent Fairfax Family Foundation (VFFF). The CIRES research team adopted a mixed-methods approach for the program evaluation, using:

- online surveys and interviews of teachers, parents and school leaders
- documentation provided by Australian Schools Plus on Fair Education schools and projects
- administrative school data (e.g. attendance rates and school NAPLAN results).

A key aspect of the evaluation was annual in-depth interviews with school leaders across the more than 90 participating schools. The final evaluation report compiled findings from the four years of evaluation (2016-19) to provide an overall assessment of Fair Education. School leader interviews form the basis of the findings reported in the CIRES Working Paper on Fair Education and the policy recommendations below.

Policy lessons from Fair Education

- In a context of constrained government funding for disadvantaged schools and marked funding inequalities between schools, including in accessing private funding, Fair Education shows that there is **a role for philanthropy in Australia to support school communities that are dealing with** the persistent and deep challenges associated with socioeconomic inequality and educational disadvantage
- Philanthropic funding such as Fair Education empowers schools to **develop school-driven projects** that they could not have otherwise been able to afford
- Submission-based **competitive selection of schools to access philanthropic resources** is an effective way to **identify schools positioned to develop school-based projects and drive school improvement**
- However, it also important to **support disadvantaged schools that may have lesser capacity to engage in a formal submission process** but have greater need for additional support

- Various **challenges** facing disadvantaged schools, including **staffing and leadership continuity**, make it difficult to derive long-term benefits from coaching and project support
- Having the opportunity to **try, adjust, modify and transform projects along the way** was decisive to respond to changing school contexts
- **School autonomy in building school-driven projects** is critical to commit to school improvement in disadvantaged contexts
- **Government policy** for disadvantaged schools **can be experienced as constraining** if externally imposed and accountability-driven
- **Disadvantaged school leaders are eager to collaborate** with one another when empowered to act as professionals
- Findings from Fair Education are **important not only for philanthropic initiatives but equally for governments** developing interventions and programs for disadvantaged schools
- **Adequate and ongoing funding and support from governments** may reduce disadvantage schools' need to have to source revenue from philanthropic sources, especially if structural issues are tackled
- **Philanthropic funding** could better support achieving educational opportunities for all Australians if it was more effectively **targeted to disadvantaged schools**

References

- Ball, S. J. (2012). *Global Education Inc.: New Policy Networks and the Neo-Liberal Imaginary*. Oxon and New York: Routledge.
- Connors, L., & McMorrow, J. (2015). *Imperatives in Schools Funding: Equity, Sustainability and Achievement*. Camberwell: Australian Council for Educational Research.
- Gonski, D., Boston, K., Greiner, K., Lawrence, C., Scales, B., & Tannock, P. (2011). *Review of Funding for Schooling: Final Report*. Canberra: Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, Australian Government.
- Thompson, G., Hogan, A., & Rahimi, M. (2019). Private funding in Australian public schools: a problem of equity. *The Australian Educational Researcher*, 46(5), 893-910. doi:10.1007/s13384-019-00319-1

About the authors

Dr Esther Doecke has been a Research Fellow at the Centre for International Research on Education Systems (CIRES) since 2014. She has a particular interest in how education system structures, social context and public policy impact schools, students and educational experience. Esther has been one of the lead researchers on the Fair Education evaluation throughout the project. In 2019, she completed her PhD on family strategies of educational advantage in Germany and Australia.

Graeme Newman has worked in schools in the Western Suburbs of Melbourne for over 40 years. He has experience in teaching, school and program leadership and curriculum development. Graeme has been a Research Fellow at CIRES since 2016 and has worked on the evaluation of the Fair Education program since its inception. Graeme visited many of the over 90 schools involved in Fair Education and especially enjoyed speaking with school leaders. Graeme presented to the Australian Association for Research in Education conference in late 2019 on aspects of Fair Education.

Access the full Working Paper [here](#).

Suggested citation

Doecke, E., & Newman, G. (2021). What is the potential for philanthropy to address inequality within disadvantaged schools? Policy implications of an evaluation of the Fair Education program in New South Wales. *CIRES Working Paper 01/2021: Policy Brief*. Melbourne: Centre for International Research on Education Systems, Victoria University.