



Why parents choose Private or Public schools

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August 17 2004

This report was prepared by the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER) for *The Sydney Morning Herald* (SMH) and *The Age* newspapers. The author wishes to acknowledge the work done for the project by ACNielsen, and the assistance given by Gerard Noonan of the SMH.

The author also wishes to acknowledge the contribution of Dr. Gerald Elsworth, Director of CIRCLE (*Collaborative Institute for Research, Consulting and Learning in Evaluation*) at RMIT University, who provided advice in the use of the Categorical Regression procedure reported on in Chapter 6.

Finally, the accurate and helpful work of Jarrod Bates, who copy-edited the final draft of the report, must be acknowledged.

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Executive Summary

This study was designed to investigate why parents choose to send their children to Private or Public schools.

The data and its collection

ACNielsen collected the data using Computer Assisted Telephone Interviews during the period 10 to 23 June, 2004.

It took, on average, 15 minutes to complete each telephone interview.

A total of 609 interviews were conducted with a parent who had a child currently enrolled at a secondary school. Of these parents, 204 had a student at a Government school, 204 had a student at a Catholic school and 201 had a child at a non-government, non-Catholic (i.e. Independent) school.

After weighting, analysis of a range of variables indicated that these data were likely to be representative of the Australian population of parents with children at a secondary school.

Research questions

The study was designed to address three major questions:

1. What are the family background factors that influence selection of a Private or Public school?

2. What are the economic factors that influence selection of a Private or Public school?
3. What are the parents' perceptions of schools that may shape their selection of Private or Public schools?

Other questions were also investigated in the study where it was felt that the findings might be of general interest to the SMH or *The Age*.

Findings

The series of bivariate analyses indicated that a number of family background factors appear to influence the selection of a Private or Public school. These include:

1. Political persuasion - Liberal/National Party voters are more likely to send their children to an Independent school, compared with Labor voters who are more likely to send their children to a Government school.
2. Occupational status - families with high occupational status are more likely to send their children to an Independent school, compared with those with lower occupational status who are more likely to send their children to a Government school.
3. Family educational levels - families with the highest levels of education are more likely to send their children to an Independent school, compared with other families who are more likely to send their children to a Government school.
4. Family income - families with high income are more likely to send their children to a Private school.
5. Family socio-economic status - families with high socio-economic status are more likely to send their child to an Independent school (but not a Catholic school) compared with Government school parents.

Would government school parents choose a Private school if there was no additional cost?

Asked about a hypothetical situation in which parents were able to enrol students in a Private school with no additional cost, 53% of Government school parents said that they would not change to a Private school. The most common reasons for not changing were:

- The parent or their children had attended Government school with positive results.
- The quality of education was seen to be the same, or both types of school were seen to offer the same things.
- There is more variety in students' backgrounds, or there are broader social experiences available in a Government school.

Around 34% of Government school parents said they would change sectors under this scenario. The most common reasons given for changing from a Government school to a Private school were there to be no additional costs included:

- The view that there is better discipline in Private schools.
- The view that there is better education or better teachers (paid more or properly screened) in Private schools.
- The view that there are smaller classes or more individual attention given to students in Private schools.

The largest differences between those parents who would not send their child to a Private school and those who would (were there no additional cost in doing so) was the frequency with which they referred to the following reasons:

- Better education or better teachers (paid more or properly screened) in Private schools (commonly given as a reason for changing to a Private school, was rarely given as a reason for not changing).
- The parent or their children had attended Government school with positive results (commonly given as a reason for not changing and never given as a reason for changing to a Private school).
- Religious beliefs/values or morals (commonly given as a reason for changing to a Private school, but rarely given as a reason for not changing). This last finding suggests that if Private education was more affordable, the drift away from Government schools would continue.

Aspects of schools that were important to parents in the selection of a Public or Private school

These aspects of schools were seen to be important in shaping selection of school by parents:

- Discipline (for selection of a Catholic school).
- The range of subject available (for selection of a Government school compared with an Independent school).
- The religious or moral values of the school (for selection of a Catholic or Independent school compared with a Government school).
- The location of the school (for selection of a Government school compared with the other sectors).
- School traditions (for selection of a Catholic school compared with a Government school).
- Having a school uniform (for selection of a Catholic school compared with a Government school).
- Being a school of the same type as the one attended by a parent (for selection of a Government school compared with a Catholic school).
- Having a cluster of traditional values (very high for selection of a Catholic school, high for selection of an Independent school, and relatively low for selection of a Government school).
- Having a cluster of concerns about the social and cultural familiarity or security of the school (for selection of a Government school compared with an Independent school).

Using multiple regression it was found that the strongest effect on the selection of a Private school was the importance of traditional values. This effect was strong.

The following findings were made about a range of factors not directly associated with the research questions:

- All parents, irrespective of the sector to which they sent their child, had high levels of involvement in choosing the school.
- All parents had high levels of satisfaction with the school, however, those with children at Catholic and Independent schools reported higher levels than those parents with children at Government schools.
- Extent of choice perceived to be available by parents varied between sectors with parents of children at Catholic and Independent schools perceiving they had more choice than parents at Government schools.
- Most parents plan for their child to leave school at the end of Year 12. This did not vary between sectors.

Overall conclusions

In so far as this research was able to pin down the reasons for the selection of a Private or Public school, one factor stood out: the extent to which the school embraced traditional values to do with discipline, religious or moral values, the traditions of the school itself, and the requirement that a uniform be worn.

There was some evidence that family socio-economic status also influenced the selection of a school, with higher socio-economic families more often selecting Independent schools.

Perceptions of the academic excellence of a school had some effects, as did concern for the security and culture of the school environment.

1 Introduction

The study examines why parents choose to send their children to Public or Private schools. This has recently become an issue with the growth in the proportion of students attending Private schools compared with Government schools. Between 1993 and 2003, Government school enrolments increased by 1.2%, compared with non-Government schools where enrolments increased by 22.3%.

Research questions

This study addresses the following questions:

1. What family background factors influence selection of Private or Public schools?
2. What are the economic factors that might influence selection of a Private or Public school? Related to this is the question of whether respondents would change to a Private school if money were no barrier for them.
3. What are the parents' perceptions of schools that may shape their selection of Private or Public schools?

Structure of the report

The report is divided into eight sections and is supported by four Appendices. The sections are:

1. An introduction.
2. An overview of the data.
3. An investigation of family background factors that may influence the selection of a Private or Public school.
4. An investigation of the economic factors that might influence selection of a Private or Public school.

5. An investigation of the perceptions of schools that may shape parental selection of a Private or Public school.
6. An assessment of the relative importance of factors that may shape parental selection of a Private or Public school.
7. A description of other findings not directly related to the research questions.
8. A conclusion.

Technical details are usually located in the Appendices.

A comment on the statistical significance of associations in cross tabulations

Where an association is stated to exist in a cross tabulation of data, this claim is based on the fact that this association is statistically significant. The test of significance used was *Pearson's Chi-square* measure. Significance levels are cited as a note below each table depicting a cross tabulation. The criterion probability value used is 0.05. In other words if there is an association in the data, such a result should occur by chance no more than one in 20 times. This is a standard criterion used in the social sciences.

Terminology

In this report the terms 'non-Government' and 'Private' schools are used interchangeably. Private schools include both Catholic and non-Catholic non-Government schools. Non-Catholic, non-Government schools are named 'Independent' schools.

2 Overview of the data

The data were collected by telephone interview. ACNielsen was responsible for the data collection and used Computer Assisted Telephone Interviewing (CATI) technology. The body of the ACNielsen methodology report is attached as Appendix A. This appendix should be consulted for information about:

1. The target population
2. The sample frame and design
3. Time taken to complete the questionnaire
4. The period of the data collection
5. Coding of verbatim responses.

A copy of the interview schedule is attached as Appendix B.

Number of respondents

A total of 609 telephone interviews were completed. These were distributed across families in the following way:

- 204 parents of Government secondary school students
- 204 parents of Catholic secondary school students
- 201 parents of Independent (non-Government, non-Catholic) school students.

In order to provide estimates of the Australian population of parents with children attending secondary school, weights were applied to these data to reflect the true distribution of parents across these school sectors. Table 1 shows the distribution of responses after this weighting was applied, reflecting the fact that 62.5% of parents in Australia send their children to Government schools, 21.4% send

their children to Catholic schools and 16.1% send them to Independent schools.

Table 1 Distribution of responses after weighting to reflect population proportions

	Frequency	Percent
Government	381	62.5
Catholic	130	21.4
Independent	98	16.1
Total	609	100.0

Data weighted

Table 2 shows the distribution of responses across all Australian States Territories. All sectors are represented in the data for each State and the Northern Territory. There were no data collected from parents with a child in a Private school in the ACT.

Table 2 Distribution of responses by state

	Frequency	Percent	Percent of the Australian population*
ACT	12	1.9	1.6
NSW	210	34.4	33.6
NT	5	.8	1.0
QLD	109	17.9	19.2
SA	41	6.7	7.7
TAS	16	2.7	2.4
VIC	160	26.3	24.7
WA	57	9.3	9.8
Total	609**	100.0	100.0

Interview data weighted, Australian population data unweighted.

Shading in tables is used to assist reading the information.

** Australian Demographic Statistics, December quarter, 2003 (cat. no. 3101.0, Australian Bureau of Statistics)*

*** Note that the total of 609 is correct. Summing the figures in the 'frequency' column gives a total of 610. The difference arises from rounding errors on values generated by the weighting of the data.*

Preliminary descriptive statistics

This section of the report provides a description of the distribution of a range of background characteristics of the respondents, the students to whom the respondents refer and the school which they attend. These statistics are designed to:

- Help assess if the sample has characteristics consistent with expectations.
- Indicate if there are any differences associated with sectors.

Number of children at secondary school

Table 3 shows the number of children at secondary school in families who participated in the study. Nearly 60% of participating families had only one child at secondary school and almost 95% had one or two children at secondary school.

Table 3 Number of children at secondary school in participating families

	Frequency	Percent
One	348	57.2
Two	221	36.2
Three	38	6.2
Four	0	0.1
Five or more	2	0.3
Total	609	100.0

Data weighted.

This is consistent with information about family size in Australia (where the average number of children per family is less than 2). Table 4 shows that there are very similar proportions in the number of children in each family across each of the sectors.

Table 4 Number of children at secondary school in participating families by sector

	Sector			Total
	Government	Catholic	Independent	
One	57.2%	54.6%	60.8%	57.2%

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Two	36.0%	40.0%	33.0%	36.3%
Three	6.8%	4.6%	6.2%	6.3%
Four			.0%	.0%
Five or more		.8%	.0%	.2%
Total	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Data weighted. Pearson Chi-Square 5.6, 6df, P=0.69 (Not significant)

Relationship of respondent to student

Table 5 shows the distribution of parents and guardians who participated in the study. Almost 99% of participants were parents of the student. Just over two-thirds of participants were mothers.

Table 5 Relationship of study participant to student

	Frequency	Percent
Mother	413	67.9
Father	187	30.8
Female Guardian	5	0.8
Male Guardian	3	0.6
Total	609	100.0

Data weighted.

This distribution did not vary greatly between the sectors. Table 6 shows this similarity with, for example, 67.5% of participants with children in Government school being mothers of the student, compared with 69.5% in the Catholic and 66.3% in the Independent sectors.

Table 6 Parent type by sector

	Sector			Total
	Government	Catholic	Independent	
Mother	67.5%	69.5%	66.3%	67.8%
Father	30.9%	29.8%	31.6%	30.8%
Female Guardian	1.0%		1.0%	.8%

Male Guardian	.5%	.8%	1.0%	.7%
Total	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Data weighted. Pearson Chi-Square 1.8, 6df, P=0.93 (Not significant)

Year level of selected child

Table 7 shows the year level of the child selected for the study.

Table 7 Year level of child selected for the study

	Frequency	Percent
Year 7	70	11.5
Year 8	115	18.8
Year 9	104	17.1
Year 10	123	20.1
Year 11	111	18.2
Year 12	86	14.1
Total	609	100.0

Data weighted.

Table 7 reveals there were more students in Year 10, and fewer in Years 7 and 12. In part the small number in Year 7 is due to Year 7 being the final year of primary schooling in Queensland, South Australia, Western Australia and the Northern Territory.

Table 8 shows the distribution of year levels across sectors. The proportions are broadly the same for each sector.

Table 8 Year level by sector (column percentage)

	Sector			Total
	Government	Catholic	Independent	
Year 7	11.8%	11.5%	10.1%	11.5%
Year 8	18.6%	20.0%	18.2%	18.9%
Year 9	15.2%	19.2%	22.2%	17.2%
Year 10	20.5%	19.2%	20.2%	20.2%

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Year 11	18.6%	18.5%	16.2%	18.2%
Year 12	15.2%	11.5%	13.1%	14.1%
Total	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Data weighted. Pearson Chi-Square 4.3, 10df, P=0.93 (Not significant)

Gender of students

Just over 51% of the students, whom the parents were reporting on for the study, were male and just fewer than 49% were female. As Table 9 shows, there was very little variation in the proportions of male and female students between sectors.

Table 9 Gender by sector

	Sector			Total
	Government	Catholic	Independent	
Male	52.4%	50.4%	49.0%	51.4%
Female	47.6%	49.6%	51.0%	48.6%
Total	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Data weighted. Pearson Chi-Square 0.43, 2df, P=0.81 (Not significant)

Co-educational or single-sex schools

Table 10 shows that nearly 85% of the students in the study attended co-educational schools.

Table 11 shows that there is considerable difference in the proportion of students attending Government schools that are single-sex (2.9%) compared with students in Independent schools (29.4%) and Catholic schools (44.1%). This suggests that this variable – whether the school is single-sex or not – is confounded with schools being Private. That is, it may not be clear if parents are selecting these schools because they are single-sex or because they have other attributes. As is shown below, it seems likely that other attributes are important because parents report that they do not, on average, attach great importance to whether the school is single-sex or not.

Table 10 Single-sex, co-educational and other school types attended by students

	Frequency	Percent
Single-sex	98	16.0
Co-educational	508	83.5
Some years are single-sex, some co-educational	3	.4
Don't know	0	.1

Total	609	100.0
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Data weighted.

Table 11 Single-sex, co-educational and other school types attended by students by sector

	Sector			Total
	Government	Catholic	Independent	
Single-sex	2.9%	44.1%	29.4%	25.5%
Co-educational	97.1%	54.9%	68.7%	73.6%
Some years are single-sex, some co-educational		1.0%	1.5%	.8%
Don't know			.5%	.2%
Total	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Data weighted. Pearson Chi-Square 142.2, 6df, $P=0.001$ (Significant). As 50% of the cells had less than 5 cases another analysis was conducted contrasting single-sex only schools with others. The results confirmed the association between sector and whether the school was or was not single-sex - Pearson Chi-Square 137.4, 2df, $P=0.001$ (Significant.)

Summary

The characteristics of the respondents (and the students to whom they refer in this study) are distributed in the following ways:

- The respondents were distributed across the states and territories in about the same proportions as the Australian population.
- The number of children in the family attending secondary school is consistent with the known average family size.
- Nearly all participants were the mother or father of the student, with few being guardians.
- Around two-thirds of the respondents were the mothers of the child. This was the case for each school sector.
- The students were distributed fairly evenly across year levels at school.
- The students were evenly divided into males and females.

On these variables there were similar distributions across the educational sectors. This information is reassuring in that it points to the sample not being biased along any of these dimensions. These data look plausible.

It was found that students attending Private schools were more likely to be in single-sex schools compared with students from the government sector.

3 Family background factors in the choice of a Private or Public school

The family background factors available to be investigated in this study included:

1. The political party supported by the parent interviewed
2. Family occupational status

3. Family educational levels
4. Parent's country of origin.

Data on family wealth were also available but these are considered in the next chapter of the report which investigates the effect of economic factors.

A note of caution is needed about how to use the results of the analyses in this and the next chapter. The analyses only use two variables at a time and so it is impossible to rank the importance (strength of the effect) of these variables. Chapter 6 addresses this issue. Nevertheless the results from this and the next chapter do provide insights into the factors which shape parental choice of Private or Public schools.

Political party supported by the parent

Table 12 shows the distribution of political party orientation amongst those parents who were interviewed. It reveals that about 10% of the data are missing either because of refusals or because of not knowing. On such a potentially contentious topic, this is a low level of missing data. Of the valid cases, 40% indicated they are Labor voters and 30% indicated they are Liberal voters.

Table 12 Political party preference of the parent

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent
Valid	Labor Party voter	220	36.1	40.0
	Liberal Party voter	162	26.5	29.4
	National Party voter	22	3.6	4.0
	Australian Democrats voter	9	1.4	1.6
	The Greens voter	28	4.6	5.0
	An independent candidate voter	8	1.3	1.4
	One Nation Party voter	1	.2	.2
	Some other party voter	4	.7	.8
	Swinging voter	96	15.7	17.4
	Total	549	90.2	100.0
Missing	Refused	24	3.9	
	Don't know	36	5.9	
	Total	60	9.8	
Total		609	100.0	

Data weighted.

The large number of categories seen in Table 12 makes it difficult to analyse the data so a reduced set was constructed: *Labor*, *Liberal/National* and *Other*. The distribution of these categories can be seen in Table 13.

Table 13 Political party preference of the parent – Labor, Liberal/National and Other

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent
Valid	Labor	220	36.1	40.0
	Lib/Nat	184	30.2	33.5
	Other	146	23.9	26.5
	Total	549	90.2	100.0
Missing		60	9.8	
Total		609	100.0	

Data weighted.

Table 14 shows the distribution of the political party preference of the parent across educational sectors. The *Other* category is distributed fairly evenly across the sectors, but there are marked differences between the distribution of Labor and Liberal/National party voters, especially between the Government and Independent sectors.

Table 14 Political party preference of the parent – Labor, Liberal/National and Other by sector

	Sector			Total
	Government	Catholic	Independent	
Labor	46.2%	35.3%	22.8%	40.0%
Liberal/National	28.1%	38.8%	46.7%	33.5%
Other	25.7%	25.9%	30.4%	26.5%
Total	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Data weighted. Pearson Chi-Square 20.1, 4df, P=0.001 (Significant).

These differences can be seen more clearly in Figure 1.

Figure 1 Political party preference of the parent – Labor versus Liberal/National by sector

Data weighted.

These data suggest that political preference may be associated with school selection. Labor voters are more likely to select Government schools and Liberal/National party voters are more likely to select Independent schools.

Family occupational status

Table 15 shows the occupational categories used for this study and the distribution of responses across these categories. Categories 1 to 7 can be viewed as providing a rough measure of occupational skill level and so they can be treated as a rank order from 1 (lowest) to 7 (highest). These levels are treated as an indicator of occupational status.

Table 15 Occupational status of parent respondent

	Frequency	Percent
1.Lower blue collar (cleaner, fruit picker, window washer)	29	4.8
2.Lower blue collar (removalist, truck driver, road worker)	41	6.7
3.Upper blue collar (carpenter, butcher, cook)	43	7.0
4.Upper blue collar (policeman, nurse, technical officer)	97	15.9
5.Lower white collar (sales, business owner, clerical)	140	22.9
6.Upper white collar (engineer, chemist, senior manager)	76	12.4
7.Upper white collar (solicitor, company director, doctor)	29	4.8
8.Student, Housewife, Home Duties	114	18.7

9.Retired, Pensioner, Unemployed	27	4.4
Refused	4	.6
Other	6	1.0
Don't know	5	.8
Total	609	100.0

Data weighted.

The study also collected data about the occupation of the respondent's spouse (using the same categories as seen in Table 15). It was from these two sources of information that an indicator of family occupational status measure was constructed. It is this measure which was used in the analyses described here. This measure was constructed in the following way:

- If there was an occupation category (in the range 1 to 7 seen in Table 15) for the respondent and an occupation for their spouse (also in the range 1 to 7), then the family occupational status was classified using the higher of the two values.
- If there was only one occupation category (in the range 1 to 7) – either the respondent or the spouse – this was used as the measure of family occupational status.
- If neither parent had an occupation category (in the range 1 to 7), they were classified as missing data. In other words, a household in which no-one was a blue or white collar worker was removed from the analyses which used the family occupational status variable.

Table 16 shows the distribution of families across each of the occupational status categories. It demonstrates there are quite low proportions in the lowest two categories. This occurs in part because the classification procedure used tends to truncate the distribution at the lower end by selecting the higher status occupation to represent the family's status. An alternative approach of using an average measure tends to truncate the distribution at both ends. This approach therefore does nothing to solve the problem of a truncated distribution. A third approach is to use both variables in analyses, however the high proportion of cases who are students, have house duties, are retired or who are pensioners (and so on), increases the levels of missing data to unacceptable levels.

Table 16 Family occupational status

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent
Valid			
This story was found at: http://www.smh.com.au/articles/2004/08/17/1092508439581.html			