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ACER, "ACER eNews 08 August 2004" (2004).
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Public or Private: Where's the evidence?

When choosing a secondary school for their children, parents attach greatest importance to the quality of teachers in the school. They also look for schools that are safe, secure and that provide quality student care. These are top priorities for parents regardless of the type of school they are considering. Other features that parents look for include the range of subjects available, the strictness of discipline, the quality of facilities (sporting, library, laboratories, etc), the reputation of the school for academic achievement, and the likely implications for their children's career opportunities.

Parents who choose a private secondary school (either catholic or independent) give as the main reasons for their choice the teaching of religious/moral values, discipline, school traditions and school uniforms.

Among government secondary school parents, 34 per cent say they would send their children to a private school if there were no additional cost. Their reasons include the belief that private schools have better teachers and deliver a better education, and that private schools have smaller classes and provide more individual attention to students.

Underlying parents' school choices are perceptions about the kinds of teaching and learning provided in government, catholic and independent schools. These perceptions no doubt originate in their own schooling experiences, in widely held stereotypes of government and private school education, and in schools' own marketing materials. But to what extent do parental perceptions of public and private schools mirror reality?

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First, consider the question of values. Is it true that private schools are more successful in developing young people with tolerance? compassion for others? a greater sense of justice? a heightened sense of morality? a more developed conscience? Does a school's connection to church make it more likely that students will develop personal ethical standards and moral codes of behaviour? Or does the fact that government schools are more representative of local communities mean that students in those schools are more likely to value inclusiveness and to be supportive of others, including minorities and disadvantaged groups? Are bullying, student cliques and intolerance equally prevalent in all sectors?

We do not have answers to these questions. We lack the evidence to evaluate how effectively individual schools are teaching and modelling values: whether some schools are more successful than others in developing a sense of fairness, a concern for others or a commitment to honesty. We know very little about the value systems of young Australians or whether and how these change during adolescence. In the absence of evidence to compare schools' success in modelling, teaching and developing values, parents' choices inevitably are driven by their perceptions and stereotypical beliefs.

Second, consider the perception that private schools provide a 'better education' than government schools. While it is true that some private schools achieve outstanding Year 12 results and are highly successful in terms of university entrance, some of these schools, like some public schools, have selective student intakes. In these schools, students enter with above-average records of school achievement. They often come from higher socio-economic groups within the community and have above-average levels of support at home and outside school.

For these reasons, the quality of education provided by a school is best judged not by its final results but by the difference it makes, taking into account students' starting points. A school making a large difference to students' levels of achievement and life chances may deliver 'better education', despite its lower Year 12 results.

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A further difficulty in deciding whether a school or sector provides 'better education' than another is the need to consider the contexts in which schools work. Some schools place a particular emphasis on achieving excellent Year 12 results and high levels of university entrance. Other schools face the challenge of providing the best possible pathways into higher education, training and work for the full range of students. Should schools be judged and compared on the success of their highest achievers? Should they be judged on their average results? Or is 'better education' provided by schools-both public and private-that make drastic and lasting changes to the life chances of the lowest achieving students in a community?

If parents are to make informed choices, they require more sophisticated evidence than academic results unadjusted for differences in students' starting points and backgrounds. They require information about the differences schools make (the 'value' they add), including information about their effectiveness in raising achievement levels for traditionally underperforming and disadvantaged groups of students.

Third, consider the prevailing perception that class sizes are smaller in private schools than in government schools. In fact, there appears to be no good up-to-date evidence on average class sizes in public and private schools.

We know the number of teaching staff and number of students in each sector, so it is possible to calculate the ratio of students to teachers. In Australian government secondary schools there are approximately 12 students per teacher. In private schools there also are approximately 12 students per teacher (13 in catholic schools; 11 in independent schools). But these are not average class sizes because the numbers include principals, deputy principals and other senior teachers with administrative duties. Once again, in choosing between schools, parents would benefit from better evidence about actual class sizes and about how class size impacts on student achievement.

Published August 2004

An interesting finding of the *Herald*'s recent survey is that parents in all sectors now seek a high level of involvement in choosing a secondary school for their children. If parents are to make informed choices between sectors and schools, they require better evidence than is currently available to them.

Professor Geoff N Masters
Chief Executive Officer
Australian Council for Educational Research

This article was originally published in [The Sydney Morning Herald's opinion section](#) on 11 August 2004 and is reproduced here with permission of the *Herald*.

Published August 2004

ACER to launch assessment program in India

ACER will launch its newest assessment initiative, *globalAchieve*, in India this October.

The *globalAchieve* program consists of pencil and paper tests for students in classes 3-10 in English and Mathematics. The tests are based on ACER's international research work and designed to measure a student's performance in the generic skills that underpin the teaching of English and Mathematics across the globe.

"ACER is committed to ensuring that all assessment is linked integrally to ongoing student learning," said Research Director, Systems and School Testing Professor Jim Tognolini. "*Global Achieve* includes all of the components necessary to incorporate assessment into classroom learning."

The components of the *globalAchieve* system include high quality feedback of results; professional development for teachers in assessment and using the program to improve learning; and access to ACER's database of research materials and information on the *globalAchieve* website.

"The *globalAchieve* system is unique as it provides assessments followed by continual support for students, teachers, parents and schools to improve the quality of learning and enhance students' achievement," Professor Tognolini said.

All questions in the system assess generic skills identified by universities as necessary for success in tertiary studies. The questions have also been designed to be engaging for all students and challenging for the most able students.

Thirteen schools from New Delhi participated in a research project with ACER in April 2004 to validate the *globalAchieve* tests for use in Indian schools. Participating schools were provided with detailed feedback regarding the performance of their students and the suitability of the tests for use in Indian schools.

Published August 2004

A detailed description of the *globalAchieve* system and additional information is available through the *globalAchieve* website.

The test will be administered in India on 27 October 2004. ACER staff will conduct professional development workshops soon after the results are returned to schools in January 2005.

Published August 2004

Teacher magazine launched

Teacher, a new national magazine for the education sector, was launched by ACER on 6 August following ACER's acquisition of Educare in May.

Teacher, although Australia's newest professional magazine for teachers and school leaders, has been in the sector for seventeen years, starting life as *Educare News*.

Speaking at the launch, ACER chief executive Professor Geoff Masters said backing by ACER means all state, Catholic and independent schools now have access to a broad-ranging national magazine that addresses their professional needs.

"Under the editorship of Steve Holden *Educare News* was an award-winning magazine, so when we bought it we made sure he came with it. We've since put substantial resources into *Teacher* to build on the strengths we identified."

While ACER has a strong presence in educational publishing, the foray into magazines is something of a new direction. "It's timely that educators have a revitalised and broad media outlet like *Teacher* that is representative of the variety of interests in the sector and that speaks for everyone," Professor Masters said.

"We identified the strength of *Educare News* in doing that and we saw that made a good fit with ACER's goals, which are to inform teachers about what's happening in their profession, especially in terms of policy and educational research. It's about time we had a major voice in education that really does speak without fear or favour, for all educators."

See [Teacher](#) for more information.

Published August 2004

ACER UPDATE

Rowe appointed to Carrick Institute board

ACER Research Director, Learning Processes, Dr Ken Rowe has been appointed as a Director and Board member of the Carrick Institute for Learning and Teaching in Higher Education. Ken was an invited attendee at the official launch of the Carrick Institute at Parliament House, Canberra, on Wednesday 11 August 2004. Further information about the Carrick Institute and Board members can be found in Minister Nelson's recent media announcements on DEST website.

More information at Carrick Institute website.

Evaluation of *Deadly Vibe*

ACER has been asked to evaluate the magazine *Deadly Vibe* ('deadly' is an Aboriginal English word that means 'cool', 'very good'). The magazine is produced by Vibe Australia, an Aboriginal media, communications and events agency that specialises in the implementation, production and dissemination of targeted, culturally sensitive communication products and services for Indigenous communities. More information can be found at [Vibe Australia](#) website .

Research Developments now available

The latest edition of ACER's research newsletter, [Research Developments](#) is now available online and in print form. Articles in this edition include an examination of higher order thinking schools, a review of Indigenous education research in Australia over the past decade and updates on other ACER projects.

Published August 2004

ACER Press title takes out award

[*Crisis Management and the School Community*](#), edited by Mardie Whitla and published by ACER Press has taken out The Australian Awards for Excellence in Educational Publishing prize in the teacher reference section. The award was announced at a presentation on 6 August. The award citation stated that "*Crisis Management and the School Community* provides a high quality and easy access resource for teachers dealing with crises in their school. The clear writing and examples make this title a very worthwhile resource for the school community. Purchase information for the book is available [here](#)."

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