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In this issue:

- [Why parents choose public or private schools](#)
- [National civics and citizenship assessment](#)
- [School non-attendance](#)
- [ACER UPDATE](#)

Why parents choose public or private schools

Assumptions are often made about what parents are looking for in the school they select for their children but there is little real evidence to show why parents choose a public or private school.

In July this year the *Sydney Morning Herald* and the *Age* newspapers commissioned ACER Principal Research Fellow Dr Adrian Beavis to investigate why parents choose to send their children to private or public schools using data collected in an ACNielsen phone poll.

Data was collected from 609 households using computer assisted telephone interviews. Information was collected on family background and parents' perceptions of the school sectors and what factors most influence their decision in choosing a school.

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 perceptions of schools that parents have that may shape their selection of private or public schools?

The study found a clear link between what parents perceive to be important and the selection of a school sector. For those parents selecting a private school, it is the traditional values and not political persuasion, nor probably socio-economic status that appears to shape this decision. The wearing of a school uniform and the traditions of the school are also important.

For parents with students in a catholic school discipline, the religious values of the school, the traditions of the school and the requirement of wearing a school uniform were considered important criteria when selecting a school.

Selection of a Government school was influenced most by parents' perceptions of the importance of academic and social and cultural security or familiarity of the school. The range of subjects available and the location of the school were also important. School uniform, tradition of the school and religious or moral values of the school were considered less important.

Parents of government school students were also asked if they would move their child to a private school if money were no object. Just over half of parents (54 per cent) answered that would not move their children to a private school even if there were no additional cost. The reasons given by the parents who would not change from a Government school relate to their experience of the quality of education offered by these schools, or a belief in the quality of education that they provide. Other reasons included support of the Government school concept, a dislike of religious aspects of private schools and a view of private schools as elitist.

Conversely, approximately a third of public school parents (34 per cent) said they would change to a private school if the fees were no more than for government schools, suggesting that if private education were more affordable the drift away from government schools would continue. Most of the reasons given by the parents who would change from a Government school relate to the perception that there is better discipline in private schools, better quality of education and superior facilities. There was also some evidence of religious views influencing these opinions with 8.5 per cent of parents mentioning the religious or value systems of the private schools.

ACER eNews
Research results and news from ACER

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

In other findings:

• Occupational status is associated with the selection of a private or public school, with those having high occupational status more likely to choose a private school compared with those with lower levels of occupational status.

• 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.

• Political preference may be associated with school selection. Labour voters are more likely to select Government schools and Liberal/National party voters are more likely to select independent schools.

The findings from this research were featured in the 'Great Schools Debate' series in the *Sydney Morning Herald* from 9-13 August. The full report is available on the *Sydney Morning Herald* website, along with a number of the stories from this series.

National civics and citizenship assessment

ACER has been contracted by the Performance Measurement and Reporting Taskforce of MCEETYA to conduct the assessments and prepare a report showing the national results in the second phase of the National Year 6 and Year 10 Civics and Citizenship Sample Assessment.

ACER also worked on the developmental first phase of the assessment project. In Phase 1, undertaken during 2003 and completed in March 2004, ACER was responsible for the development of the Civics and Citizenship Assessment Domain and the writing and trialling of test items in consultation with jurisdictional and expert stakeholders.

The assessment will take place in October 2004 involving a randomly selected sample of Year 6 primary students and Year 10 secondary students from approximately 600 schools across Australia. Students will be asked to complete a written assessment that examines civic knowledge and understanding and the skills and values needed for active citizenship.
ACER will administer the test, analyse the data and prepare the national report, which will provide analysis of nationally comparative state and territory data and overall trends.

The main purpose of the national Year 6 and Year 10 civics and citizenship assessment is to monitor and report on the overall progress that is being made towards achieving the national goals related to civics and citizenship.

This assessment of civics and citizenship is part of a national plan that is progressively being put in place to monitor and report on student achievement against the *National Goals for Schooling in the Twenty-first Century* . All state, territory and federal education ministers agreed to the national goals and the importance of monitoring student achievements in relation to the goals in 1999. The monitoring and reporting program is being implemented by the Performance Measurement and Reporting Taskforce, a nationally representative taskforce established by the nation's education ministers.

Aspects of civics and citizenship have been identified from the national goals of schooling in Australia. The goals state that when students leave school they should 'be active and informed citizens with an understanding and appreciation of Australia's system of government and civic life'. Moreover, students should 'have the capacity to exercise judgement and responsibility in matters of morality, ethics and social justice, and the capacity to make sense of their world, to think about how things got the way they are, to make rational and informed decisions about their lives and to accept responsibility for their own actions'.

Schools involved in the study will receive student reports in December this year while ACER will prepare a full report to MCEETYA by May 2005.

Additional contextual information regarding the administration of the assessment, the Assessment Domain and examples of trialled assessment items, along with examples of the marking keys that will be used to score students' responses, can be found on the [MCEETYA website](#).

ACER eNews
Research results and news from ACER

School non-attendance

Non-attendance at school is a key issue. Failure to be in school long enough (early leaving) or often enough (truancy) to gain basic skills and knowledge has personal and social costs. Unemployment, poverty, homelessness and criminal activity can often be linked to this basic failure.

Data about school non-attendance, truancy and suspensions is patchy, but the data available indicate that days absent per student, and rates of unexplained absence continue to rise very slightly in most years of schooling. From one calendar year to another there may be no large increase, but over several years the rises seem quite significant. However, in most states there are clear indications that non-attendance is being taken more seriously than in the past.

Policy responses to school non-attendance can be considered to be either punitive or curricular. A punitive policy may require schools to make greater efforts at surveillance of the whereabouts of their students, effect faster contact with parents of truants (for example, through SMS or emails), and with threats of legal action offered to combat persistent non-attendance. A curricular policy response may aim to change the curricular offerings and ethos of schools so that they become more attractive places to students. The two kinds of response are not mutually exclusive.

A paper prepared by ACER Senior Research Fellow Graeme Withers for the Dusseldorp Skills Forum, *Disenchantment, Disengagement, Disappearance: Some recent statistics and a commentary on non-attendance in school*, makes several recommendations:

- Measures to track students should be accompanied by school initiatives aimed at improving the quality of school life and learning conditions for those individuals or groups most at risk of disengagement and truancy.
- Responsibility for collection, interpretation and reporting of a wide range of school attendance data should be added to the Terms of Reference of the Performance Measurement and Reporting Taskforce.

- Presentation and publication of data should distinguish between authorised and unauthorised non-attendance; distinguish between long and short suspensions, exclusions and cancellations; itemise reasons for suspensions and exclusions; indicate rises and falls in proportions from one calendar year to the next, and from one year of schooling to another; and distinguish the existence or otherwise of appeal mechanisms in cases of expulsions.

- Data collected about absenteeism should include all schools (including Independent and Catholic) which are in receipt of public funds.

- Consideration should be given to at least matching the range of attendance data and their public availability as collected and published by the New Zealand Ministry of Education.

ACER eNews
Research results and news from ACER

ACER UPDATE

WA Literacy and Numeracy Assessment

ACER has been awarded the contract for item development, trialling and analysis of trial data for whole cohort testing of Year 9 students in WA government schools in English, Mathematics and Science. ACER is also the contractor for the WA Literacy and Numeracy Assessment (WALNA - Year 3, 5 & 7) program 2005.

AEI distributed in Taiwan

The Australian Education Index database developed by ACER is now being distributed in Taiwan by Transmission Books and MicroInfo Co on subscription (Consortia) to universities and colleges. It will be released in the coming new semester. The search screens, field names and subject terms have been translated into Chinese to assist searching.

Australian Education Index (AEI) at TBMC
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Bachelor of Learning Management evaluation

ACER's Teaching and Leadership research program has been awarded a contract with the Australian Government Department of Education, Science and Technology (DEST) to conduct an evaluation of the Central Queensland University's Bachelor of Learning Management.

ACER eNews
Research results and news from ACER

Research Conference 2004

ACER's Research Conference 2004 *Supporting Student Wellbeing: what does the research tell us about social and emotional development of young people?* will take place at the Raddison Playford Hotel Adelaide from October 24-26. Further information about the conference is available at Research Conferences section.

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