

All that glisters may not be gold at private schools

By David Zyngier

So we are apparently witnessing a different form of "white flight". This time, it's not just parents exiting the public school system to the elite private schools, but now "tree changers" are beating a retreat to regional centres (Rush on goldfields' private schools, *The Age*, 27 October), where private schools are offering bargain basement prices for "parents on a budget seeking a high-quality education for their children".

But these goldfields elite private schools get very generous taxpayer-funded handouts each year. Ballarat Grammar in 2012, for example, received almost \$10 million from state and federal governments in addition to \$4 million in capital grants 2009-2012 and \$3 million in private donations.

Based on data from the My School website, Ballarat Grammar is typical of the other private schools mentioned which have similar profiles.

Girton Grammar's principal suggests tree changers add diversity to his school population. However, only 3 per cent of his students come from the poorest quartile of the population, with 58 per cent in the top quartile. These schools do not enrol many indigenous students or refugee and migrant children compared with local public school counterparts. As the Gonski review found, more than 80 per cent of disadvantaged students attend public schools.

Of course, these students will achieve good results in VCE; they come from well-educated and well-resourced middle-class families.

However, a thorough analysis of these schools' NAPLAN results, especially the student gain over a two-year period, shows that while their students start at above the Australian average, their gain over time is no more than would be expected and, for some of the schools mentioned, it is less than schools with similar students.

These schools have added little value to their already advantaged high-achieving students. The only exception is Ballarat Clarendon College, which achieved some significant student gain between years 7 and 9 in numeracy only. St Patrick's College is well below the average achievement for those schools with statistically similar students in all areas (literacy and numeracy) of NAPLAN, while Loreto College's students actually demonstrated a decline in their NAPLAN student gain in numeracy, and remain below the average level for all of Australia and well below those schools with statistically similar schools and similar students.

This reflects the findings by the Grattan Institute's Ben Jensen study, *Measuring what matters: student progress*, which considered the value-added measures of school performance as a more accurate measure, and, therefore, reflection of the overall performance of a school.

Jensen concludes that "school performance measures published on the My School website are prone to mismeasurement and may be biased against schools serving lower socio-economic communities".

Value-added scores are recommended by the OECD as they measure school performance more accurately because they are better able to isolate the performance of schools from other factors that affect student performance. This creates a fairer system that is not biased against schools serving more disadvantaged communities.

Analysis of Ballarat's public primary schools shows that their student gain is higher than the national average and statistically similar schools in all areas of NAPLAN. Mount Pleasant Primary School with 49 per cent of their students in the lowest quarter of socio-economic disadvantage not only outperforms like students from statistically similar schools but is well above the national average in all NAPLAN areas tested by almost 1.5 bands of achievement.

The Centre on Education Policy in the United States reported that "contrary to popular belief, we can find no evidence that private schools actually increase student performance . . . instead, it appears that private schools simply have higher percentages of students who would perform well in any environment based on their previous performance and background".

As the Gonski review stated, "a high socio-economic background lifts all pupils, while a lower one drags everybody closer to the lowest common denominator".

Based on value-adding, Jensen argues many public schools could be said to offer the better education.

Research from Monash University found public school students who left year 12 with lower marks than students from independent schools overtook them once they were at university.

The head of the Australian Council for Educational Research states that: "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 [value adding] to students' levels of achievement and life chances may deliver 'better education', despite its lower year 12 results."

Given that these schools will cost a family more than \$100,000 for 12 years' education compared with less than \$6000 for the same education in Ballarat's public system, they are still for society's elites. The Ballarat and Bendigo working-class cannot afford even these supposed "discounted" fees, which are kept artificially low by the generous taxpayer subsidies provided to these tree changers.

Dr David Zyngier is a lecturer in the Faculty of Education, Monash University.