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PUBLIC OPINIONS ON AUSTRALIAN SCHOOLS & SCHOOLING

DEANA LEAHY & NEIL SELWYN

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BACKGROUND

Public debate on schools and schooling is a prominent part of Australian politics. Recent years have seen a series of controversies about what is taught in Australian schools, alongside criticisms of the quality of teaching and resulting learning outcomes. Recent headlines have pointed to a perceived declining quality of teachers and teacher education, alongside increasing concerns over poor student discipline and behaviour. The relatively low standing of Australian schools, in terms of the OECD Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) rankings, has led to continued headlines of "Students' falling test scores costing the nation $120b in lost GDP" (ABC News, 3 April 2018) and "Australia faces a slide into national illiteracy" (The Age, 21 March 2018).

Elsewhere, controversy over initiatives such as the Safe Schools program continues to prompt conservative criticisms along the lines of "Progressive fads promote cultural illiteracy in schools" (The Australian, 18 Jan 2019) and "Focus on soft skills will lead us astray" (The Australian, 26 Nov 2018). Conversely, progressive critics bemoan schools as being out-of-touch and out-of-date. As an example: "Australian schools 'not preparing students for real life'" (9News, 29 July 2018) and "Antiquated school day is failing everyone" (Sydney Morning Herald, 16 June 2018). All told, the public can be forgiven for presuming Australian schools to be in need of considerable improvement.

So what does the Australian public make of the nation's schools? Amidst ongoing media and political discussions of failing schools, crises in teacher quality and classroom behaviour, it is surprisingly rare to canvas public opinion on schools in detail. We believe that this sort of information should be an important element of the national education debate. For example, one of the few regular surveys of public opinion on education is the US-based 'Phi Delta Kappa' *'PDK Poll of the Public's Attitudes Toward the Public Schools'*. Starting in 1969, the PDK poll has provided annual insights into public opinion about relevant issues in K-12 education. The 2018 PDK poll canvased over 1000 US adults on their views about teacher pay, teacher strikes, school spending, college tuition, and expectations for all children. Data of this sort provides a rich picture of how opinions on US schools are patterned, and has become a key part of informing the national debate on US education.

Against this background, there is definite value in canvassing public opinion on education in Australia. As such, this report presents an initial snapshot account of public opinion in Australia regarding schools and schooling. Based on a nationally-representative survey of 2052 adults, the report addresses the following questions:

- How do people rate the current performance of Australian public schools in terms of learning outcomes?
- How do people think Australian public schools will be performing in 10 years' time?
- What characteristics and qualities do people think are most important in relation to children's education?
- Which areas of the current school curriculum should be given more emphasis and time within Australian public schools over the next few years?
- What new learning areas do people think should be taught in public schools?

Our key aim in asking these questions is to explore where notable differences exist in public opinion on the state of Australian schools. This includes looking for differences between voters of the main political parties, between parents and non-parents, people living in different areas, and those with different educational backgrounds. We are particularly interested in identifying the key demographic patterning of public opinion. This might include differences between different socio economic groups, ages, gender, levels of household income and cultural & linguistic diversity.

As this report details, perhaps the most surprising initial findings from our survey is that we did *not* find particularly high levels of dissatisfaction about the current and future state of school performance. Nevertheless, some notable differences are apparent between age cohorts, income groups, and other demographic characteristics. These findings have significant implications for the development of education policymaking, education practice and perhaps rebalancing the ways in which education is publically discussed and debated over the next ten years or so.

METHODOLOGY

This report presents an analysis of data generated by a nationally-representative survey of 2052 Australian adults. A 45-item questionnaire was developed to gauge public opinions on Australian schools. Two sections of the survey concentrated on the current use of digital technology in schools, as well as the future of schools in an increasingly digital age (these technology-related issues are reported separately — see Selwyn [January 2019] 'Digital Lessons' report). This present report provides an overview of the survey sections relating to public opinions on Australian school performance, curriculum subjects, and future priorities.

The research was conducted by Whereto Research using participants from the Online Research Unit (ORU) online panel cohort. The survey was administered to members of the ORU panel, and responses collected between 11 and 30 November 2018. This resulted in a sample of 2052 adult residents eligible to vote Australia.

The final sample (see Table 1) was broadly representative of Australian population figures in terms of gender, age, region and socio economic status (see Appendix for further details).

Table 1: Survey sample (n=2052) by main demographic characteristics

	n	Percentage
Gender		
Male	1008	49.3
Female	1038	50.7
Age range (years)		
18-29	435	21.2
30-39	375	18.3
40-49	387	18.9
50-59	355	17.3
60+	500	24.4
Socio-economic status (postcode data)		
Low	534	26.0
Medium	847	41.3
High	671	32.7
Urbanity (postcode data)		
Metro	1158	75.9
Regional	494	24.1
Household composition		
Household with child(ren) who are currently attending school	469	22.9
Household with no children currently attending school	1583	77.1
Family background		
Have/have had children attending school	909	44.3
Have not had children attending school	1143	55.7
State*		
New South Wales (NSW)	659	32.1
Victoria (VIC)	519	25.3
Queensland (QLD)	413	20.1
Western Australia (WA)	217	10.6
South Australia (SA)	143	7.0
Tasmania (TAS)	46	2.2
Australian Capital Territory (ACT)	41	2.0
Northern Territory (NT)	14	0.7
Speak a language other than English at home?		
Yes	348	17.2
No	1679	82.8
Annual household income before tax		
Up to $39,999	428	24.5
$40,000 to $79,999	542	31.1
$80,000 to $119,999	424	24.3
$120,000 to $199,999	285	16.3
$200,000 or more	65	3.7
Highest education level completed		
Year 12 or below	538	26.7
TAFE/Technical	228	11.3
Certificate or Diploma	449	22.3
University degree or higher	802	39.8
Voter preference at last Federal election		
Liberal/National Alliance	673	47.4
Labor	583	41.2
The Greens	163	11.5
Sector where children attend(ed) school		
Government school	600	67.1
Catholic school	186	20.8
Independent/ private school	108	12.1

* Subsequent reporting of data by State will only include the five most populous States for which relatively large sub-samples were collected.

Attribution: Deana Leahy & Neil Selwyn (2019). Public opinions on Australian schools and schooling. Melbourne, Monash University

RESULTS

1. PUBLIC OPINIONS ON SCHOOLS' PERFORMANCE

The first issue that the survey explored was how well respondents feel Australian schools are performing. Respondents were asked questions regarding their opinions on how well they felt Australian schools were *currently* performing, as well as how well they thought schools would be performing in *ten years' time*.

Any discussion of school performance is inevitably subjective. For these opening questions, the definition of 'performance' is specified as relating to learning outcomes. Respondents' views on the specific areas of learning that they think schools should be concentrating on are explored in subsequent sections of the survey.

1.1 How well Australian schools are currently performing

In these broad terms, we find a substantial proportion of respondents to be relatively satisfied with the current performance of Australian public schools. In response to the item, *"In terms of learning outcomes, how would you rate the performance of Australian public schools now?",* the most popular judgement is 'OK' (56.1 percent of respondents), with a further 21.3 percent giving ratings of 'very good' or 'excellent'. In contrast, just over one-fifth of the sample (22.5 percent) give ratings of 'poor' or 'very poor'.

Differences in responses to this question by respondent characteristics are presented in Table 2. This shows the overall pattern of responses to be fairly stable across most key demographic characteristics with broadly similar patterns between residents of regional and metropolitan areas, different levels of educational background, political preference and so on.

The most notable difference is in terms of age group. Here we find adults in older age groups to be more negative. For example, 32.4 percent of respondents aged 60+ years deem schools to be 'poor' or 'very poor', compared to those aged 18-29 years (16.6%) and 30-39 years (14.9%).

A few other minor differences are also worth noting:

- Respondents with children currently attending school are more likely to rate schools as 'very good' or 'excellent' (27.9%) as compared to those without children at school (19.5%).
- Higher levels of satisfaction are evident amongst respondents in households where a language other than English is spoken at home (28.5% rating schools as 'very good' or 'excellent' as compared to 21.1% of respondents in English-only households).
- Dis-satisfaction with current school performance is more pronounced amongst those respondents with lower levels of household income. Here we find 29.2 percent of respondents in the lowest income group (Up to $39,999) to rate the current performance of Australian schools as 'poor' or 'very poor'. In contrast, these ratings are only given by 12.3% of respondents in the "$200,000 or more" income band (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Respondents rating the current performance of Australian schools as 'poor' or 'very poor'.
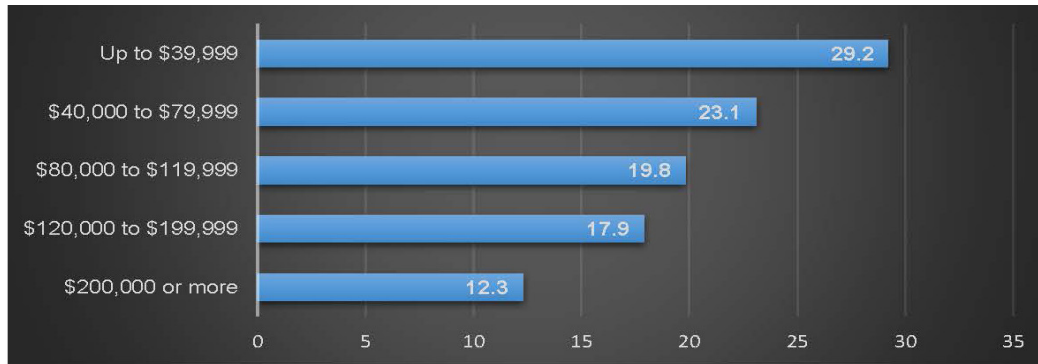
NB. Survey item asked: *"In terms of learning outcomes, how would you rate the performance of Australian public schools now?".* Data represents the percentage of respondents in each income group giving a rating of 'poor' or 'very poor'.

- Respondents sending their children to government schools are most likely to rate public schools as performing at 'very good' or 'excellent' levels (27.1%). In contrast, these ratings are given by 19.4% of respondents who have had children attending independent/private schools, and 14.6% of those who have had children attending Catholic schools.

Table 2: Survey item: "In terms of learning outcomes, how would you rate the performance of Australian public schools now?".

	Very poor	Poor	OK	Very good	Excellent
Gender					
Male	3.5	18.4	57.0	18.6	2.6
Female	4.2	19.1	55.0	19.9	1.7
Age range (years)					
18-29	2.8	13.8	56.6	23.7	3.2
30-39	2.1	12.8	59.2	22.7	3.2
40-49	3.9	15.0	60.2	18.1	2.8
50-59	6.8	21.1	55.2	15.8	1.1
60+	4.0	28.4	50.8	16.2	0.6
SES (postcode data)					
Low SES	5.1	18.9	54.1	19.7	2.2
Medium SES	3.7	19.2	56.3	19.1	1.7
High SES	3.1	17.7	57.4	19.1	2.7
Urbanity (postcode data)					
Metro	3.8	17.9	56.5	19.3	2.4
Regional	4.0	21.1	54.7	19.0	1.2
Household composition					
Household with child(ren) who are currently attending school	3.4	14.3	54.4	25.6	2.3
Household with no children currently attending school	4.0	20.0	56.6	17.4	2.1
Family background					
Have/ have had children attending school	3.6	18.0	54.8	21.9	1.7
Have not had children attending school	4.0	19.2	57.1	17.1	2.5
State					
New South Wales	4.4	20.2	52.5	20.0	2.9
Victoria	3.9	17.9	55.1	20.8	2.3
Queensland	5.1	17.7	57.4	18.2	1.7
Western Australia	2.3	16.6	62.2	17.1	1.8
South Australia	0.7	20.3	60.1	17.5	1.4
Speak a language other than English at home?					
Yes	4.0	15.5	52.0	23.3	5.2
No	3.6	19.5	56.8	18.6	1.5
Annual household income **before tax**					
Up to $39,999	4.2	25.0	52.8	14.7	3.3
$40,000 to $79,999	4.1	19.0	54.8	20.3	1.8
$80,000 to $119,999	3.8	16.0	55.9	22.2	2.1
$120,000 to $199,999	3.5	14.4	57.9	23.2	1.1
$200,000 or more	-	12.3	60.0	20.0	7.7
Highest education level completed					
Year 12 or below	4.6	21.4	55.2	17.8	0.9
TAFE/Technical	2.6	15.8	58.3	21.1	2.2
Certificate or Diploma	4.0	19.2	56.1	17.8	2.9
University degree or higher	3.5	18.0	55.4	21.1	2.1
Voter preference at last Federal election					
Liberal/National Alliance	4.0	21.7	50.8	21.1	2.4
Labor	2.7	14.5	57.8	21.7	3.2
The Greens	2.5	17.2	58.3	21.5	0.6
Sector where children attend(ed) school					
Government school	3.7	18.0	51.2	25.3	1.8
Catholic school	4.8	16.7	64.0	12.4	2.2
Independent/private school	-	20.4	60.2	19.4	-

1.2 How well Australian schools will perform in the future

Alongside these views on the current performance of schools, the survey also explored people's future expectations. This took the form of a question: *"In terms of learning outcomes, how do you think Australian public schools will be performing in 10 years' time?".*

Here we find respondents to be mostly hopeful with 31.3 percent expecting schools to be 'Better than they are now' or 'Much better than they are now', and further 52.0 percent reckoning schools will stay 'roughly the same'.

As Table 3 shows, the general pattern of responses is fairly stable across most key demographic characteristics. However, we do find notable age-related differences in these views of schools' future performance. In particular, we find younger respondents to be more optimistic about the future. 43.9% of respondents in the '18-29 years' age group expect schools to be 'Much/Better than they are now', as compared to only 23.6% of those aged '50-59 years' and 24.3% of those aged '40-49 years'.

The other notable difference is in terms of respondents in households where a language other than English is spoken at home (42.2% expecting schools to be 'Better' or 'Much better' as compared to 29.2% of respondents in English-only households).

Table 3: Survey item: "In terms of learning outcomes, how do you think Australian public schools will be performing in 10 years' time?".

	Much worse than they are now	Worse than they are now	Roughly the same	Better than they are now	Much better than they are now
Gender					
Male	2.9	11.0	53.7	28.9	3.6
Female	3.9	15.6	50.5	27.6	2.5
Age range (years)					
18-29	3.2	7.4	45.5	40.5	3.4
30-39	2.7	10.9	53.9	27.2	5.3
40-49	2.6	13.4	59.7	21.7	2.6
50-59	4.5	18.3	53.5	20.8	2.8
60+	3.8	16.6	49.4	28.6	1.6
SES (postcode data)					
Low SES	4.3	14.4	51.3	26.6	3.4
Medium SES	3.1	13.3	52.7	28.5	2.5
High SES	3.0	12.4	51.9	29.2	3.6
Urbanity (postcode data)					
Metro	3.4	12.3	51.7	29.1	3.5
Regional	3.2	16.6	53.2	25.3	1.6
Household composition					
Household with child(ren) who are currently attending School	3.2	12.2	51.2	28.6	4.9
Household with no children currently attending school	3.4	13.6	52.3	28.1	2.5
Family background					
Have/have had children attending school	2.4	14.0	51.7	28.5	3.4
Have not had children attending school	4.1	12.8	52.3	28.0	2.8
State					
New South Wales	3.5	14.3	49.3	29.0	3.9
Victoria	3.1	11.0	53.0	29.5	3.5
Queensland	4.8	13.8	51.6	27.8	1.9
Western Australia	3.2	15.2	52.5	27.2	1.8
South Australia	-	11.9	55.2	28.7	4.2
Speak a language other than English at home?					
Yes	3.2	9.5	45.1	35.3	6.9
No	3.3	14.0	53.5	26.9	2.3
Annual household income before tax					
Up to $39,999	4.0	15.7	52.3	23.8	4.2
$40,000 to $79,999	4.4	12.5	50.0	30.3	2.8
$80,000 to $119,999	3.1	13.2	49.3	30.7	3.8
$120,000 to $199,999	1.8	9.8	57.2	30.2	1.1
$200,000 or more	-	13.8	53.8	24.6	7.7
Highest education level completed					
Year 12 or below	4.3	14.5	51.9	27.3	2.0
TAFE/Technical	2.2	11.0	56.6	27.2	3.1
Certificate or Diploma	3.6	13.8	49.4	28.7	4.5
University degree or higher	2.7	13.1	51.9	29.6	2.7
Voter preference at last Federal election					
Liberal/National Alliance	2.2	14.3	51.1	29.1	3.3
Labor	2.9	11.1	49.7	32.0	4.3
The Greens	1.8	11.0	60.7	24.5	1.8
Sector where children attend(ed) school					
Government school	2.5	13.8	49.5	30.3	3.8
Catholic school	2.7	14.0	55.9	24.7	2.7
Independent/private school	1.9	13.0	56.5	26.9	1.9

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3. PUBLIC OPINIONS ON THE MOST IMPORTANT ASPECTS OF SCHOOL

The second issue that the survey explores is public opinions on which issues people feel are **most important** in relation to children's education.

Table 4: Survey item: "Which of the following do you think are **most important** in relation to children's education?" Data are percentage of respondents choosing each issue.

		Percentage choosing
1.	Basic literacy and numeracy	69.8
2.	Students being respectful to teachers and peers	54.6
3.	Teachers being of high quality	54.5
4.	Students learning social skills	52.8
5.	Students learning practical, hands on skills	50.9
6.	Students being safe and supported at school	50.5
7.	Schools teaching students how to think critically	42.5
8.	Schools teaching students to be good citizens	40.9
9.	Students being physically active at school	40.8
10.	Schools being able to solve social problems students may face (e.g. violence, sexual harassment, racism etc.)	33.5
11.	Students being given the opportunity to be creative at school	31.4
12.	Students learning about the things that interest them	23.9
13.	Students having fun at school	21.2

As can be seen in Table 4, the issue most likely to be deemed important is basic literacy and numeracy. Conversely, issues relating to students having fun, learning things of interest and being creative attract the least support.

Again, we find these views and opinions to differ along a couple of demographic lines. As with the previous questions, the main notable difference is in terms of respondents' age group. In particular, there is a notable generational difference in rating the three top-rated issues, all of which could be said to relate to traditional values of basic skills, quality and respect:

- Levels of concern for "students being respectful to teachers and peers" is almost double amongst respondents in the oldest '60+ years' age group (72.4 percent) in comparison to those aged 18-29 years (38.9 percent).
- Similarly, respondents aged 60+ years are the most likely age group to choose the importance of 'basic literacy and numeracy' (85.4 percent) in comparison to those aged 18-29 years (60.0 percent).
- Respondents in the oldest age group are also most concerned with 'teachers being of high quality' (71.4% of the 60+years age group compared to 41.3% of those aged 30-39 years).

Other notable differences are found in terms of respondents' political preference. This includes the following differences:

- LNP voters are most concerned with 'students being respectful to teachers and peers' (62.4%) in comparison to supporters of the other two parties (Labor: 49.4%; Greens 42.3%)
- Green voters are most concerned with 'schools teaching students how to think critically' (60.1%) in comparison to supporters of the other two parties (LNP: 41.3%; Labor: 43.1%)
- Green voters are most concerned with 'students being given the opportunity to be creative at school' (43.6%) in comparison to supporters of the other two parties (Labor: 33.7%; LNP 29.0%)

Otherwise, we find a few other individual differences are with regards to specific issues. These include:

- Respondents with a university degree or higher are most concerned with 'schools teaching students how to think critically' (56.2%) in comparison to 29.8% of those with a TAFE/ technical college background.
- Support for 'basic literacy and numeracy' is notably higher amongst respondents who live in households where only English is spoken (74.0 percent) in comparison to 52.0 percent of respondents living in households where a language other than English is spoken.
- Respondents who had sent their children to government schools are most concerned with 'students having fun at school' (25.5%) in comparison to parents of Catholic school students (14.5%) and independent/private school students (18.5%).

3. PUBLIC OPINIONS ON WHAT SHOULD BE TAUGHT IN SCHOOLS

A third section of the survey posed the question: *"Which learning areas should be **prioritised** within Australian public schools over the next few years? By 'prioritised' we mean they should be given more emphasis and time within the school curriculum."*

The survey presented respondents with a list of eight areas from the current Australian curriculum. Levels of support for each curriculum area were as follows:

- Mathematics **75.5%**
- English **74.8%**
- Science **46.2%**
- Technologies **33.3%**
- Health and Physical Education **19.2%**
- Humanities and Social Sciences **15.5%**
- Languages **7.2%**
- The Arts **4.2%**

As such, these figures suggest two distinct pairs of relatively high-ranking subjects:

- The traditional '3 Rs' areas of Mathematics and English are by far the most popular choices, prioritised by around three-quarters of respondents.
- While not attracting majority levels of support, Science and Technologies are also prioritised by relatively large proportions of respondents.

The levels of support for each different curriculum areas are largely consistent across the sample. However, one subject area that is found to divide opinion is the prioritisation of Science. As shown in Table 5, support for the prioritisation of Science differs between a number of different groups. In particular, support for the increased prioritisation of Science is strongest amongst:

- Higher income groups (for example, 60.0% of respondents in the '$200,000+' group, as compared to 39.5% in the 'up to $39,999' group).
- Respondents with a university degree or higher (58.1%), as compared to 38.1% of those who left school at Year 12 or before.
- Respondents whose children attended independent/private school (55.6), as compared to parents of children attending government schools (41.7%).
- Respondents living in metropolitan areas (48.5%) as compared to those living in regional areas (39.3%).

In addition, a few specific differences are evident between younger and older respondents:

• Respondents in the oldest age group of 60+ years are the most likely to support prioritisation of English (84.4% as compared to 66.7% of those aged 30-39 years).
• Respondents aged 60+ years are also the least supportive age group of the prioritisation of Health & Physical Education.
• While overall support for the prioritisation of Arts teaching is small, this is found predominantly amongst the younger age groups (i.e. respondents aged 18-29 years and 30-39 years).

Table 5: Survey item: "Which learning areas should be **prioritised** within Australian public schools over the next few years?".

	Eng	Mat	Sci	Hums	Art	Tech	HPE	Lang
Gender								
Male	70.7	75.1	49.7	12.4	4.7	35.9	16.8	7.3
Female	78.6	76.0	42.8	18.6	3.9	30.8	21.6	7.0
Age range (years)								
18-29	68.3	68.7	50.8	17.2	6.9	33.3	22.8	7.8
30-39	66.7	72.5	47.5	16.8	8.0	39.2	26.1	8.8
40-49	76.0	80.1	44.7	13.4	2.6	33.1	18.3	5.7
50-59	76.3	75.8	46.2	17.5	3.1	30.4	16.3	6.5
60+	84.4	80.0	42.6	13.4	1.2	31.2	13.8	7.0
SES (postcode data)								
Low SES	78.1	76.8	42.1	16.1	3.6	32.6	20.6	6.2
Medium SES	73.4	76.2	46.6	15.2	4.3	33.2	21.1	6.6
High SES	73.8	73.8	49.0	15.5	4.8	34.1	15.8	8.6
Urbanity (postcode data)								
Metro	73.7	74.7	48.5	16.0	4.6	33.7	18.2	18.2
Regional	77.9	78.1	39.3	14.0	3.0	32.2	22.5	22.5
Household composition								
Household with child(ren) who are currently attending school	73.8	78.3	45.2	15.6	4.7	35.2	22.4	4.9
Household with no children currently attending school	75.0	74.7	46.6	15.5	4.1	32.8	18.3	7.8
Family background								
Have/ have had children attending school	78.5	78.9	44.3	16.1	3.4	33.6	19.1	5.1
Have not had children attending school	71.7	72.9	47.8	15.1	4.9	33.2	19.3	8.8
State								
New South Wales	73.7	26.9	46.7	17.1	5.8	31.9	16.4	9.4
Victoria	74.2	24.5	46.4	17.1	5.6	32.0	23.7	6.4
Queensland	78.5	21.3	40.0	13.8	1.9	34.4	20.1	5.8
Western Australia	72.8	22.1	53.5	14.3	3.2	36.4	16.6	4.1
South Australia	74.8	21.7	53.1	12.6	2.1	38.5	16.1	7.0
Speak a language other than English at home?								
Yes	64.7	75.9	59.5	14.9	5.2	34.5	14.4	11.8
No	77.0	75.6	43.5	15.7	4.1	33.3	20.2	6.1
Annual household income before tax								
Up to $39,999	77.8	75.7	39.5	14.3	3.3	30.6	22.2	6.1
$40,000 to $79,999	75.3	75.5	47.2	15.3	6.1	35.1	20.5	7.2
$80,000 to $119,999	71.7	75.2	48.6	15.3	6.4	36.6	16.5	8.7
$120,000 to $199,999	73.7	74.7	51.6	18.9	1.8	30.2	19.6	4.9
$200,000 or more	72.3	84.6	60.0	10.8	4.6	40.0	7.7	6.2
Highest education level completed								
Year 12 or below	78.1	76.0	38.1	16.0	2.4	33.8	22.3	5.2
TAFE/Technical	77.6	81.1	40.4	12.7	4.4	35.5	16.7	4.4
Certificate or Diploma	80.6	76.6	37.9	15.4	3.8	33.2	23.4	8.5
University degree or higher	68.3	73.6	58.1	16.7	5.6	32.7	15.6	8.6
Voter preference at last Federal election								
Liberal/National Alliance	81.3	82.0	48.0	14.0	3.0	33.6	16.3	7.1
Labor	73.7	75.6	47.2	16.4	4.8	33.0	15.7	5.6
The Greens	62.6	62.6	54.0	18.4	9.2	33.7	21.5	11.0
Sector where children attend(ed) school								
Government school	76.7	78.2	41.7	15.3	3.5	36.7	19.5	5.0
Catholic school	82.3	80.6	45.7	18.3	3.2	27.4	18.3	5.4
Independent/private school	83.3	81.5	55.6	18.5	2.8	29.6	17.6	5.6

A final open-ended survey item asked respondents *"Are there any new learning areas that you think should be taught in public schools?"*. Just over one-fifth of the sample answered 'Yes' to this statement and offered a response (20.9 percent, n=428). These related to four broad areas that people want to see included in what schools teach. Over half of these responses relate to what could be broadly termed 'life skills' (n=248, 12.1 percent of the overall sample). This typically includes responses such as:

> "Use of money and money management. Also general life skills as unfortunately not enough kids will have parents to actually be bothered to educate them or simply parents don't know themselves." [Male, 30-39 years, QLD]

> "How to actually function throughout life, e.g. basic cooking, doing laundry, doing taxes, dealing with bank statements and loans, how to buy a house, what services we require from lawyers etc." [Female, 18-29 years, VIC]

> "How to 'adult'. Taxes, budgets etc." [Female, 18-29 years, NSW]

> "General living. e.g. growing vegetables, how to understand your home loan, car loan etc., how to fill in forms. Just those things that children don't seem to learn from their parents these days but would make a world of difference to not only their lives post school but society as a whole." [Female, 40-49 years, QLD]

> "Contemporary life skills — a compulsory 1-hour a week class on skills needed that parents seem continually unable to teach their children i.e. Preparation for jobs (bank account, TFN, smart casual dressing, resume writing, superannuation, personal presentation), career and study pathways information, cooking guidance, filing tax, conflict de-escalation, first aid training, critical literacy (i.e. Assessing risk, scams, health claims etc.) Virtually a more comprehensive course on life, health and wellbeing than the current health course." [Female, 18-29 years, WA]

Three other clusters also emerge from these responses, albeit in much smaller numbers. One set of responses relate to what might be termed 'traditional knowledge and values' (n=59, 2.9 percent of the overall sample). This typically includes responses such as:

> "Religious instruction and Australia's Judeo-Christian Heritage." [Female, 18-29 years, WA]

> "History of Western civilisation, the enlightenment and why the west separated religion from the law of the land." [Male, 60+ years, QLD]

> "They should be taught how to respect the wisdom of elders which seems to have gone out the window these days." [Female, 50-59 years, VIC]

> 'Values. In Japan, students are first taught good manners and how to respect other people." [Female, 30-39 years, QLD]

Another set of responses relate to what might be termed 'progressive knowledge and values' (n=53, 2.6 percent of the overall sample). This typically includes responses such as:

> "Tolerance and discrimination. Emphasise that it is our differences that what make us unique and special - all of us." [Male, 40-49 years, WA]

> "More of a focus on understanding differences between people, diversity, and more of a focus on Australian history." [Female, 18-29 years, VIC]

"How to think critically and make informed decisions. How to take responsibility for your own actions. Respect for others in society in all walks of life." [Female, 40-49 years, WA]

"Australia's indigenous history and prehistory. Sustainable living lessons." [Male, 18-29 years, SA]

A final set of responses related to specific 'technology-related knowledge and skills; (n=55, 2.7 percent of the overall sample). This typically includes responses such as:

"Technology, coding, artificial intelligence." [Female, 40-49 years, NSW]

"Robotics, Engineering, Coding/programming. Logical thinking, problem solving." [Male, 40-49 years, TAS]

"Machine learning." [Male, 50-59 years, SA]

"Coding, anything to do with new technology." [Female, 30-39 years, QLD]

"Artificial intelligence, virtual reality." [Male, 18-29 years, NSW]

As might be expected, these calls for new areas of teaching differ between various demographic characteristics. Most significantly, we find suggestions for the inclusion of various 'life skills' teaching in schools to be strongest amongst the following groups:

- Younger age groups: 66.7% of respondents aged 18-29 years offering a suggestion of a new area of teaching focused on life skills. In comparison, 'life skills' featured in 51.4% of suggestions from respondents aged 60+ years.
- Women: 68.8% of women offering a suggestion of a new area of teaching focused on life skills. In comparison, 'life skills' featured in 44.7% of suggestions from men.
- School sector: 63.4% of government school parents offering a suggestion of a new teaching area focused on life skills. In comparison, 'life skills' featured in 47.4% of suggestions from independent/private school parents.

While involving much smaller numbers, it is also interesting to note heightened support for the teaching of 'traditional knowledge and values' amongst respondents in the 60+ years age group and/or people who voted for the LNP. Elsewhere, support for the teaching of 'progressive knowledge and values' is strongest in the 60+ age group and/or those respondents who have sent children to independent/private schools. These trends are worth exploring in further research, but only relate to relatively small numbers compared to the rest of the survey.

DISCUSSION POINTS

1.   PUBLIC OPINIONS ON SCHOOLS ARE RELATIVELY POSITIVE

Most of the Australian public do <u>not</u> see their schools as being in 'crisis' or 'failing'.

Our survey finds a majority verdict that Australian schools are currently performing 'OK' (or better). We also find a majority expectation that this level of performance is likely to stay 'roughly the same' (or better) in years to come. While these might not seem like ringing endorsements, they do represent a more positive outlook on the state of schooling than is often reported. While debates around public education are understandably contentious, our findings suggest that **politicians, news media and other commentators can afford to be more positive in framing these debates.**

2.   TRADITIONAL ASPECTS OF EDUCATION CONTINUE TO MATTER

The majority of people are concerned with maintaining 'traditional' aspects of what is taught in schools.

Our survey finds people most interested in maintaining English and Mathematics teaching, and ensuring that students have basic levels of numeracy and literacy. We also find high levels of concern with students 'being respectful' and 'teachers being of high quality'. In contrast with these fundamentals, people show less support for what might be seen as progressive and/or liberal aspects of schooling. For example, there is minority concern with students learning things of interest, or being 'given the opportunity to be creative'. Echoing long-standing arguments over the persistence of divides between the 'two cultures', we find much more support for prioritising Science and Technology in schools than that for prioritising Languages and The Arts.

In our opinion, these splits point to an opportunity to **broaden the collective 'educational imagination' of Australia.** The argument can be made that Australian schools will be strongest if they excel in all these areas. Australian schools are already involved in many successful applications of interest-driven learning, Arts-based creative education and citizenship education. In this sense, there is a clear opportunity for schools to better engage parents and local communities in the ways in which such approaches are being integrated into teaching and learning processes, while continuing to also prioritise what people currently perceive to be 'the basics.'

3.   RECOGNISING GENERATIONAL DIVERSITY IN HOW EDUCATION IS SEEN

The main demographic divide in people's views of school that our survey shows is between age groups.

Our survey finds far fewer differences than expected in terms of people's political preferences, socio economic status and parents/non-parents. However, respondents in the oldest age group (60+ years) are notably less optimistic, and more concerned with issues of student respect and teacher quality. This finding raises two possible explanations. It could be argued that older people are basing their ideas on out-dated recollections and experiences of their own schooling and/or their children's schooling. On the other hand, these differences might reflect greater life-experience and the capacity to take a long-view on current developments.

In our opinion, there is certainly a need to better reflect the views of younger age groups in discussions of education practice and policy (especially those with recent direct experience of schools). Yet this need not be at the expense of also listening more to the views of older generations. Indeed, it is salutatory that older survey respondents are most likely to suggest the teaching of traditional values and the teaching of progressive values. This finding reminds us that there is not one unified 'older generation' voice, but a range of views, ideas and standpoints that is worth drawing on when discussing education.

4.   ADDRESSING UNEVEN SUPPORT FOR SCIENCE IN SCHOOL

Unlike other subject areas, public support for the prioritisation of Science teaching is divided in terms of specific demographic groups — notably prevalent amongst people in higher income groups, university educated, living in metropolitan areas and/or with children who attended independent/private school.

Nearly half our respondents support the prioritisation of Science teaching in school. Indeed, there has been a sustained push of so-called 'STEM' teaching in Australian schools during the 2010s. However, this message appears to be resonating with specific segments of the population. The need for increased Science education is certainly not accepted across all of the Australian population. There is a need to better promote Science teaching to those segments of the population who perhaps currently feel less included in these debates.

In our opinion, these findings highlight **the danger of creating a STEM education 'filter bubble'**. Instead, there is a clear need for Science education professionals to work harder to get their findings and recommendations across all sections of the population. Conversely, there is also a need to reflect on why these professional science education assumptions are not resonating fully with the wider public.

5.   PUBLIC OPINION ON SCHOOLS IS SURPRISINGLY BI-PARTISAN

Public views on schools and schooling appear to be relatively bi-partisan. Politicians, policymakers and governments should work together to develop policies with cross-party support.

While debates around education are often contentious, our survey found far fewer divides and schisms in public opinions around schools and schooling than might be expected. In particular, we find few differences in opinions between voters of the main political parties. This suggests that policy work in the area of public schools can afford to be a more consensual issue. Australian politicians, policymakers and governments should feel comfortable to **work together in developing school-related policies with cross-party support.**

APPENDIX

Table A.1: Survey sample (n=2052) by full set of demographic characteristics

	n	Percentage
Age range (years)		
18-24	236	11.5
25-29	199	9.7
30-34	195	9.5
35-39	180	8.8
40-44	197	9.6
45-49	190	9.3
50-54	191	9.3
55-59	164	8.0
60-64	165	8.0
65+	335	16.3
Gender		
Male	1008	49.1
Female	1038	99.7
Other	3	0.1
Household composition		
Single, living alone	390	19.0
Single, living in a share house	213	10.4
Couple, no children	291	14.2
Couple, no children living at home	319	15.5
Family, with school aged children living at home	469	22.9
Family, with adult children (over 18) living at home	219	10.7
Family, with pre-school aged children living at home	105	5.1
Single, living with parents	34	1.7
Other	12	0.6
State		
New South Wales (NSW)	659	32.1
Victoria (VIC)	519	25.3
Australian Capital Territory (ACT)	413	20.1
Queensland (QLD)	217	10.6
Northern Territory (NT)	143	7.0
Western Australia (WA)	46	2.2
South Australia (SA)	41	2.0
Tasmania (TAS)	14	0.7
Speak a language other than English at home?		
Yes	348	17.1
No	1679	82.8
Highest education level completed		
Year 12 or below	538	26.7
TAFE/Technical	228	11.3
Certificate or Diploma	449	22.2
University degree or higher	802	39.8
Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander		
Yes	38	1.9
No	1985	98.1

	n	Percentage
Current employment status		
Working full-time (30+ hours/week)	785	38.7
Working on a part time or casual basis (< 30 hours/week)	405	20.0
Home duties	192	9.5
Retired	389	19.2
Unemployed / not currently working	136	6.7
Studying AND working full-time	12	0.6
Studying AND working part-time/casual	53	2.6
Studying (not currently working)	58	2.9
Employment sector		
Agriculture, Forestry and Fishing	27	2.2
Mining	15	1.2
Manufacturing	64	5.1
Electricity, Gas, Water and Waste Services	10	0.8
Construction	60	4.8
Wholesale Trade	40	3.2
Retail Trade	164	13.1
Accommodation and Food Services	48	3.8
Transport, Postal and Warehousing	65	5.2
Information Media and Telecommunication	46	3.7
Financial and Insurance Services	61	4.9
Rental, Hiring and Real Estate Services	26	2.1
Professional, Scientific and Technical Services	139	11.1
Administrative and Support Services	77	6.1
Public Administration and Safety	61	4.9
Education and Training	128	10.2
Health Care and Social Assistance	135	10.8
Arts and Recreation Services	33	2.6
Other (please specify)	55	4.5
Annual household income before tax		
Up to $20,000	113	6.5
$20,000 to $39,999	315	18.1
$40,000 to $59,999	287	16.5
$60,000 to $79,999	255	14.6
$80,000 to $99,999	243	13.9
$100,000 to $119,999	181	10.4
$120,000 to $149,999	171	9.8
$150,000 to $199,999	114	6.5
$200,000 or more	65	3.7
Voter preference at last Federal election		
Liberal/National Alliance	673	47.4
Labor	583	41.2
The Greens	163	11.5
Other		
Education sector for children		
Government school	600	65.9
Catholic school	186	20.4
Independent/ private school	108	11.9
Mixture	15	1.6
Home-schooled	2	0.2

Table A.2: Representativeness of survey sample in terms of adult population of Australia.

	Population	Survey sample	Difference
Age range (years)			
18-24	12%	12%	0.5%
25-29	10%	10%	0.3%
30-34	10%	10%	0.5%
35-39	9%	9%	0.2%
40-44	8%	10%	1.6%
45-49	9%	9%	0.3%
50-54	8%	9%	1.3%
55-59	8%	8%	0.0%
60-64	7%	8%	1.0%
65+	20%	16%	3.7%
Gender			
Male	49%	49%	0.0%
Female	51%	51%	0.0%
State			
New South Wales (NSW)	32%	32%	0.1%
Victoria (VIC)	2%	2%	0.3%
Australian Capital Territory (ACT)	26%	25%	0.4%
Queensland (QLD)	20%	20%	0.1%
Northern Territory (NT)	7%	7%	0.0%
Western Australia (WA)	10%	11%	0.1%
South Australia (SA)	2%	2%	0.1%
Tasmania (TAS)	1%	1%	0.3%
Socio-economic status (derived from postcode)			
Low	32%	26%	5.5%
Medium	41%	41%	0.3%
High	28%	33%	5.2%

MONASH
University

Education Futures
Faculty of Education
Monash University
19 Ancora Imparo Way
Clayton VIC 3800
Australia

www.monash.edu/edfutures
Education-Futures-Enquiries@monash.edu

Twitter: @EDUC_FUTURES

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