

## INTRODUCTION

Over the past two years, CPD has highlighted inequity in the funding of Australia's schools and a growing concentration of disadvantaged students in poorer schools. *Uneven Playing Field* (2016) and *Losing the Game* (2017) used *My School* data to reveal how our shared schooling experience in Australia was slipping away. Funding wasn't following need in the way envisaged by the original Gonski review. A growing divide between advantaged and disadvantaged students, and richer and poorer schools suggested a less equal and more fragmented schooling system within Australia.

Time will tell whether the new funding arrangements address the first of these concerns. In the meantime, *My School* data that shows clusters of disadvantaged students in Australia's schools merit further investigation. *In a Class of Their Own* is a new series that extends this analysis, firstly in relation to Indigenous students. It does so as we observe the 10<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Apology to Australia's Indigenous Peoples and consider how well our country is closing the gap of Indigenous disadvantage.

Some inroads have been made in recent years in achieving better educational outcomes for Indigenous students. This paper does not devalue these achievements or the political and policy vision that underpins them. Notwithstanding, *My School* and other data point to gradual but significant trends that will shape the education of Indigenous students over the long term.

1. While most schools have increased their enrolment of Indigenous students in both absolute and percentage terms, the proportion of Indigenous students is far greater in disadvantaged (lower Socio-educational Advantage - SEA) schools.
2. These trends are magnified in regional areas where the majority of Indigenous students attend school. Higher SEA schools are not enrolling an increasing share of the Indigenous student population. In fact, they also have a lower proportion of the most disadvantaged students.
3. Where schools and school sectors are in competition, the more advantaged (higher SEA) schools have reduced their share of Indigenous students, while two-thirds of less advantaged (lower SEA) schools have increased their share.
4. Closer analysis shows that the number of Indigenous students at many schools does not reflect the size of the local Indigenous population. Lower SEA schools have disproportionately more Indigenous enrolments, higher SEA schools in all sectors have (with some exceptions) disproportionately fewer.

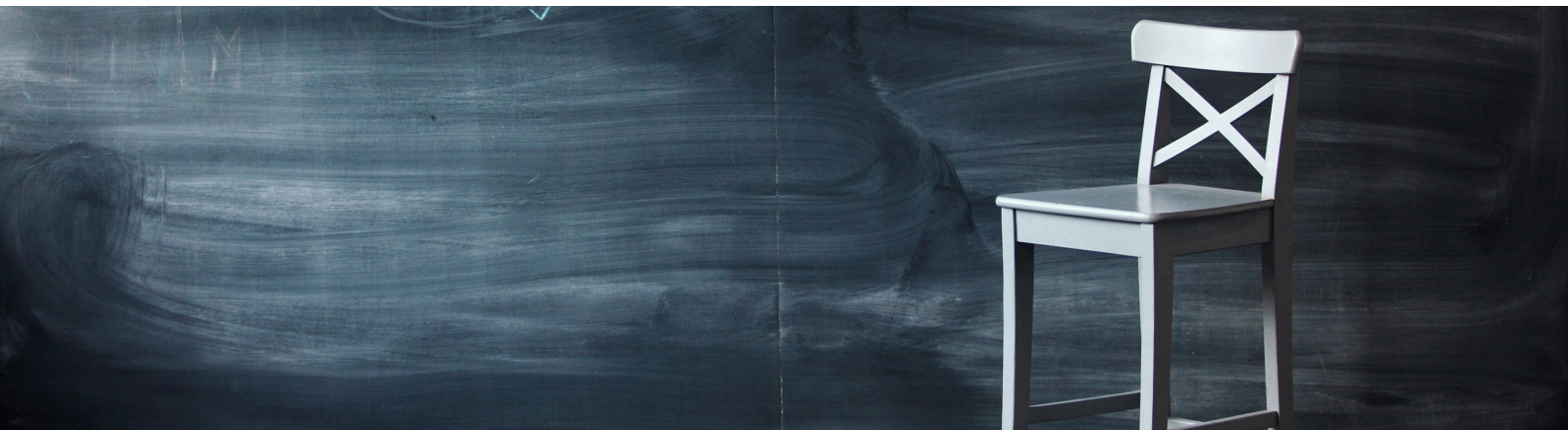
In short, the dynamics of our school system – rather than promoting inclusion and equity – are increasingly putting Indigenous students in a 'class of their own'.

Why might this matter? CPD's research on renewing Australia's democracy, conducted throughout 2017, found that one in three Australians believe the main purpose of democracy is about "ensuring that all people are treated fairly and equally, including the most vulnerable in the community". In his 2012 book, *What Money Can't Buy: The Moral Limits of Markets*, American political philosopher Michael Sandel put it a slightly different way:

*"Democracy does not require perfect equality, but it does require that citizens share a common life. What matters is that people of different backgrounds and social positions encounter one another, and bump up against one another, in the course of ordinary life."*

Schools are critical to this and play a pivotal role in fostering a more equal and inclusive society. For schools to be effective in promoting cohesion through shared experience, understanding and opportunity, the networks they support and cultivate must reach across social and racial divides. In this way, schools mitigate social and cultural dynamics that might otherwise create and reinforce structural difference and discrimination between groups and individuals.

The evidence presented in this discussion paper suggests that the capacity of our school system to act as catalyst for inclusion, equity and opportunity for Indigenous students is weakening. Rather than being places which bring people and communities together, evidence suggests that schools are yet another place where children grow further apart.



In addition to the negative impacts on individual achievement and opportunity, the increasing separation of Indigenous students from other Australian school students has broader societal implications.

In many communities, **it highlights a racial aspect atop longstanding, if loose, layers of social class.** Measures of school and community socio-educational advantage already show that [less than a third of our schools have an enrolment](#) which resembles the cross-section of people in their local community. Class and even religion have to some extent always defined who we are. But we don't need race to become an increasingly significant ingredient.

**These trends, if they continue, will mean schools are less able to address the most intractable problems faced by many Indigenous families.** These problems include poverty in all its manifestations, as well as dislocation and inter-generational trauma. Any breakthrough solutions for students in the worst affected families and communities are limited if we separate them from the more successful, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous.

**Last and most important, unless these dynamics are recognised and addressed we won't improve equity for all – and particularly for Indigenous young people.** The benefits of improved equity are substantial and widespread. But the chances of achieving the much-needed improvement in student achievement is diminished when we aggregate the most disadvantaged students – whatever their background – in schools which are already struggling.

We do not offer specific policy prescriptions but aim to provide a conceptual first step and pointers for future policy action that might address what is a significant and concerning challenge to an equitable and inclusive Australia.