



**ISCY**  
International Study  
of City Youth

## **WORKING PAPER**

# **Creating winners and battlers: examining inequality between Melbourne schools**

Jen Jackson  
Stephen Lamb

Centre for International Research on Education Systems,  
Victoria University



**VICTORIA  
UNIVERSITY**

MELBOURNE AUSTRALIA

**Centre for International Research on Education Systems**



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## **Creating winners and battlers: examining inequality between Melbourne schools**

*Jen Jackson and Stephen Lamb,*

*Centre for International Research on Education Systems, Victoria University*

This paper examines educational inequality in the city of Melbourne, Australia, as part of the International Study of City Youth (ISCY). The paper takes two schools participating in ISCY, which contrast in ways that illustrate important aspects of inequality in the Melbourne education system. It begins by outlining the policy context of school choice and competition currently dominant in Australia, and examines how performance and accountability measures position these two schools as a 'winner' and a 'battler' in the education marketplace. It then uses baseline data from the ISCY project to explore the differences between the schools more deeply, and reveal how the 'enterprise culture' interacts with the characteristics of schools and students to exacerbate educational inequality.

In every education system, some learners are more likely to succeed than others, and the rewards of educational success will be inequitably distributed. The question is therefore not whether inequality is acceptable, but which kinds of inequality are acceptable and which may be legitimate subjects for criticism and reform. To tell the difference requires ongoing examination of the causes of inequality, and the processes by which they translate into differential educational success.

This paper explores inequality in the education system of Melbourne, Australia. It forms part of the International Study of City Youth (ISCY), a longitudinal international study of 15-year-old students currently being conducted in 12 cities around the world. While it is too early in the ISCY study to compare data between the participating cities, it is possible to examine the baseline survey data for individual cities, to situate it within the local policy and practice context. This contextualisation will provide a strong foundation for future comparative analysis between ISCY cities.

Inequality in the Melbourne education system, as in many systems, is most strongly defined by student characteristics. The Program for International Student Achievement (PISA) has found that variation within Australian schools between students of different backgrounds is greater than variation at the school level (Thomson, De Bortoli and Buckley 2012). As elsewhere in Australia, Melbourne students are most at risk of educational disadvantage if they come from a low-income family; and even more so if they are among the 0.7% of the state of Victoria's population who are indigenous (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2012).



Despite the impact of student-level factors, this paper focuses on inequality at the school level. There are three main reasons for this. Firstly, although within-school variation is higher, between-school variation still accounts for 31 per cent of overall variance in Australian PISA results. It therefore ‘still matters which school a child attends’ (Thomson et al 2012, p. xxi). In Melbourne, the impact of school difference on secondary student achievement has shown a marked increase in recent decades (Lamb 2007, p. 26).

Secondly, groups of students from similar backgrounds tend to congregate in similar schools. This is partly an effect of residential segregation, and also an effect of other social processes at work within the Melbourne system, which will be discussed later in the paper. Analysis at the school level can therefore serve as a proxy for analysis of particular social groups, as well as the educational practices that these students encounter, which may contribute to inequality. Prior research on Melbourne schools has demonstrated the potential of school-level analysis to ‘throw light on some of the key mechanisms through which learning opportunities and educational outcomes become socially stratified’ (Lamb 1991, p. 5).

Thirdly, analysis at the school level is well suited to a policy and social environment in which ‘school choice’ and ‘school performance’ are dominant themes. A newcomer to Melbourne (as the first author was a decade ago) will quickly learn that the government and general population spend considerable resources trying to identify ‘high-performing’ and ‘under-performing’ schools: the former to hold them accountable for improvement, and the latter to avoid them as far as their means will permit. This culture of educational ‘winners’ and ‘losers’ informs the main contention of this paper, that educational inequality in Melbourne is fuelled by a competitive, market-driven policy and social environment.

### **The policy context—an ‘enterprise culture’**

This preoccupation with school choice and performance is sustained by a market-driven, neoliberal policy agenda, established in the state of Victoria in the early 1990s and continuing to the present day. This agenda positions competitiveness, individualism and entrepreneurialism as the primary vehicles for educational success, contributing to the rise of an ‘enterprise culture’ (Smyth 1998). This culture is not unique to the education system, and has also permeated other public and community services, which have been called on to imitate the private sector in terms of competition and efficiency (Hooper 1998).

An enterprise culture supposes that ‘the natural traits of people to be self-reliant, autonomous individuals’ should not be suppressed by the ‘heavy hand’ of the state (Hooper 1998, p.14). While

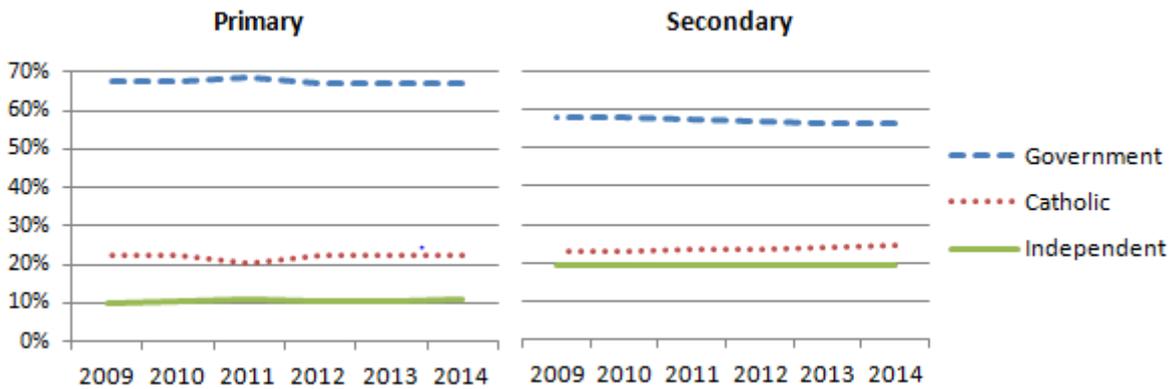
Victorian schools already have relatively high levels of autonomy, the Victorian Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (DEECD) attributes lower-than-expected performance in some schools to ‘central direction and control that has inhibited local decision-making’ (DEECD 2012, p. 3), citing OECD research that greater autonomy leads to school improvement (ibid., p.7). The current state reform agenda therefore introduces further freedoms for government schools to act autonomously and entrepreneurially, through adjustments to governance arrangements and greater flexibility in staff recruitment and remuneration (ibid.).

As well as freeing up administrative options, the current reform agenda offers government schools an expanded array of curriculum choices with which to entice prospective enrolments. Current reforms provide additional support for government school ‘specialisations’, as well as ‘an ever-expanding range of personal learning experiences’ at the individual student level (DEECD 2012, pp. 13–15). This includes a wider range of secondary certificates, comprising vocational options, and selective academic options akin to those already popular in Melbourne’s private school sector. These initiatives build on prior reforms which encouraged Victorian government schools to compete for enrolments from outside their local area.

With greater autonomy to compete comes greater accountability to perform. The Victorian reform agenda also includes measures to identify underperforming schools, which may then be subject to various forms of government intervention. Since 2010, all Australian schools have also been subject to public accountability through the MySchool website, hosted by the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA). MySchool presents schools’ results over time on national standardised tests, ‘so that parents and the community have access to information about their child’s school and other schools in Australia’ (ACARA 2013, p.1). A recent review of MySchool upheld its importance as a key mechanism for school accountability, despite criticism from many within the school sector (Knott 2014).

While the school choice and accountability agenda is familiar across many OECD countries, it perhaps finds especially fertile soil in Melbourne due to a strong presence of private (independent and Catholic) schools. These schools receive government funding and are required by law to operate on a not-for-profit basis, but enjoy greater levels of autonomy than government schools over intake, fees, curriculum, governance and staffing. Private schools are over-represented among Melbourne’s top-performing schools, and recent years have seen a sustained drift of students from the government to private school sector (Figure 1).

**Figure 1—Share of Victorian school enrolments 2009–2014, by school sector**



Source: DEECD, *School Statistics*

The success of these schools has been attributed to their capacity and motivation to continually ‘renovate’ in a competitive market, underscored by the accountability demanded of them by discriminating school communities (Connell et al 1982). In this way, such schools may be seen to exemplify the assumption that autonomy, competitiveness and accountability constitute a reliable formula for school performance.

While the focus of this paper is on schools, the enterprise culture is also apparent at other levels of the Melbourne education system. Early childhood education and care (ECEC) services have been the target of substantial recent national reforms in Australia, following international research demonstrating the developmental and productivity gains of quality ECEC provision (OECD 2006). Current reforms have sought to leverage market forces to raise quality in the sector, which already operates as a market, with a wide diversity of government, not-for-profit and for-profit providers. As with MySchool, ECEC services now have their performance against a stringent new national quality standard published on a national register.

Similar accountability reforms are underway in tertiary education and training, notably in Vocational Education and Training (VET), another mixed market in which variable quality is an enduring concern. University education in Australia is well-established as a competitive marketplace, with competition intensifying as the current federal government reduces funding to the sector. While all levels of education in Melbourne continue to enjoy some level of government support to ensure they meet minimum public expectations for access and quality, the over-riding policy narrative in recent decades has been for them to exhibit as many market-like, entrepreneurial, competitive behaviours as possible.



## **‘Southeast School’ and ‘Northwest College’—public profiles**

This paper focuses on two schools from the ISCY sample, positioned at opposite ends of the Melbourne educational marketplace. ‘Southeast School’ is a high-achieving private school situated in a desirable suburb. ‘Northwest College’ is a struggling government school situated in a low-income working-class area. These schools are not intended to present the extreme ends of a continuum, nor to necessarily represent ‘typical’ schools of their class. Nevertheless, as will be shown, they contrast in ways that illustrate important aspects of inequality within the Melbourne system.

The remainder of this paper will compare various aspects of these schools, to piece together a picture of the nature and extent of inequality within the Melbourne education system. It will begin with the public image of each school’s ‘performance’ as portrayed on the MySchool website, then dig more deeply into the less visible differences between the schools, as captured in the ISCY baseline surveys. In doing so, the paper aims to expose some of the ways in which the enterprise culture of the Melbourne education system serves to intensify inequality, and its consequent inadequacy as a means of addressing it.

### *1. Academic performance*

The performance of Australian schools is measured at a system level using the National Assessment Program—Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN). This national standardised testing regime, comprising four domains of literacy and numeracy, is administered annually to students in the third, fifth, seventh and ninth year of schooling. NAPLAN data is reported through MySchool, including whether individual school results are ‘above’ or ‘below’ results for all Australian schools, and for schools serving ‘like’ populations.

MySchool portrays Southeast School as a paragon of educational success. The school has almost always performed ‘above’—often ‘substantially above’—the average of all Australian schools, across the NAPLAN domains and year levels. Southeast School is also a strong performer relative to its peers. Since 2008, Southeast School has performed at the same level as, or ‘above’, schools serving students of similar backgrounds, except for one ‘below’ result in Year 9 Reading in 2010.

In contrast, Northwest College’s MySchool webpage is liberally adorned with the red pixels used to signify educational failure. Since 2008, Northwest College has only achieved NAPLAN results close to the national average on a single domain, with all other domains consistently ‘below’ or ‘substantially below’ the national average. From 2011 to 2013, all domains for Years 7 and 9 were ‘substantially below’ the national average. Northwest College has shown some recent improvement



relative to schools serving similar populations, but is nonetheless clearly portrayed on MySchool as an underperforming school.

## *2. School completion*

Although Victorian students must remain in compulsory schooling from age six to age 17, no national standardised tests exist beyond the ninth year of schooling. Instead, MySchool reports the number of students who remained in school for their final year, and those who attained a school-leaving certificate. MySchool also reports the number of students who pursued Vocational Education and Training (VET) in Schools, a curriculum option which enables students to work towards an accredited vocational certificate during their final years of schooling.

Completing school in Melbourne is a complicated business. The state of Victoria offers students a choice of school-leaving certificates: the academically-oriented Victorian Certificate of Education (VCE), or the vocationally-oriented Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning (VCAL). Enrolments in VCAL have increased steadily since its introduction in 2002, although it still serves a small proportion of Victoria's student population (Victorian Auditor-General's Office 2012). Students may enter university with either VCE or VCAL, although VCE offers a far more direct pathway, with VCAL students more likely to enter tertiary VET or the workforce. Students may undertake VET in Schools as part of either a VCE or VCAL program.

Like many schools with low academic achievement, Northwest College makes extensive use of vocational options. From 2011, when VET enrolments were first reported on MySchool, the school has had between three and four times as many VET enrolments as Southeast School. However, this has not necessarily resulted in students attaining a school-leaving certificate. In 2009–2013, between 12 and 16 per cent of Northwest College school completers left without a certificate, compared to between zero and three per cent for Southeast School (ACARA 2014). Critics of the diversified Victorian secondary curriculum argue that, rather than increasing engagement and retention, it simply 'corners young people into educational slots that are not necessarily of their choosing' (Broadbent & Papadopoulos 2013, p. 214).

Academic curriculum options, such as classical languages or advanced mathematics, are most likely to be available to Australian students attending private schools, or government schools in affluent areas (Teese 2007; Perry & Southwell 2013). This is not only because of the inherent prestige or appeal of these subjects for aspirational social groups. Enrolment in such subjects is an important strategy in 'playing to win' in the competitive Australian system.



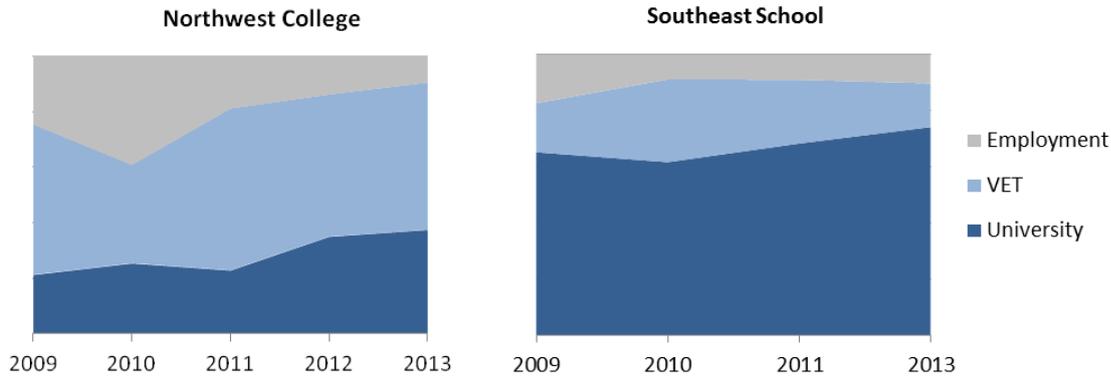
In systems such as Australia where university places are limited, university selection is managed by deriving a university entrance score from senior subjects (Lamb 2011). In Australia, this is derived by ranking students against one another through the Australian Tertiary Admission Rank (ATAR). Students receive a weighted scaled score for each of their subjects, with more academic (and competitive) subjects likely to be weighted more heavily. The choice of subjects in the final years of schooling is therefore a finely-balanced game to maximise one's position in the national academic hierarchy.

The competitive nature of the ATAR is well-aligned to the 'intensely competitive environment' of elite private schools (Lamb 1991, p. 54). While ATAR scores are not shown on MySchool due to their relative nature, Southeast School proudly announces its highest individual ATAR scores in its annual school report and website. The ATAR, with its trickle-down effects on curriculum choice and competitive behaviour, is a poignant example of how university entrance requirements can shape the prevailing culture of an entire education system (Lamb 2011). To gain access to the highest levels of educational attainment, Australian students must not only be the best they can be, but better than the rest of the pack.

### *3. Post-school destinations*

MySchool shows that Southeast School's university orientation is resoundingly successful in shaping its students' post-school outcomes (Figure 2). Northwest College is less successful at producing university entrants directly from school, although the majority of its students do transition to some form of tertiary education or training. This achievement is not to be under-rated, as VET offers a worthwhile pathway to further learning and employment for many Australians. At the same time, VET remains somewhat stigmatised as a 'poor cousin' in the Australian educational race (Hamer 2014, n.p.), and the differences in university transitions between the two schools therefore constitute an important element of inequality.

**Figure 2—Student post-school destinations for Northwest College and Southeast School, 2009–2013 (%)\***



Source: ACARA, MySchool website (2012 data missing for Southeast School)

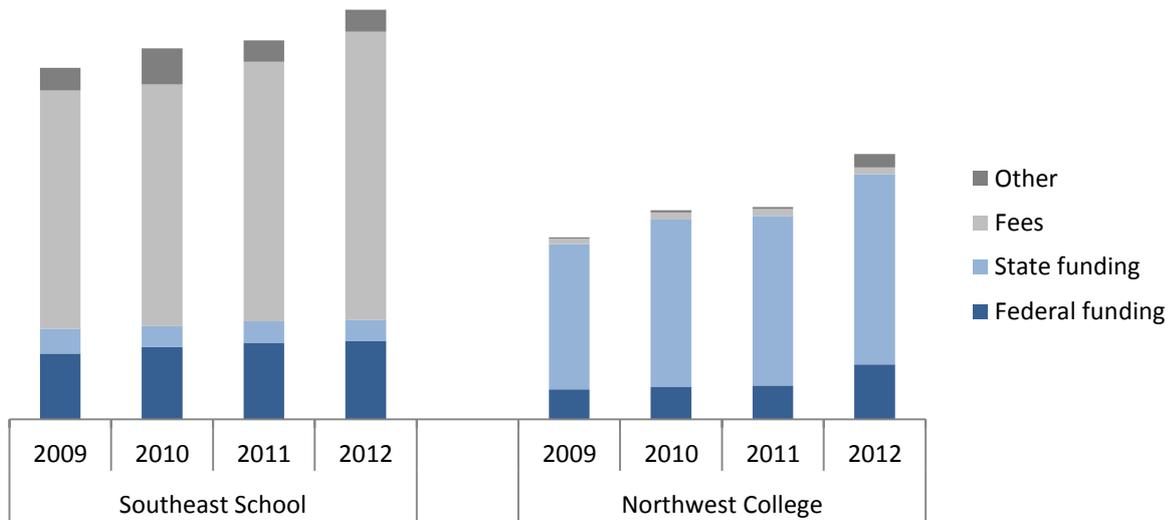
\* To protect the anonymity of the schools, exact figures are not shown. Both graphs use the same scale (%).

#### 4. School resources

So far, MySchool has shown significant inequalities between the two schools, in terms of the outcomes they achieve for their students. Controversy continues as to whether such comparison of outcomes is fair, given the differences in schools' intakes, resources and contexts (Knott 2014). To respond to these concerns, MySchool also presents data about each school's socio-economic profile and resource base. This information provides some insight into the origins of the inequality between the two schools.

A striking difference exists between the schools' resources. Figure 3 shows per-student income from different sources for Southeast School and Northwest College over four years. Northwest College received a little over half the income per student for Southeast School until 2012, when an increase in government funding raised this to almost two-thirds.

**Figure 3—Per-student income for Southeast School and Northwest College 2009 – 2012, by source (\$)\***



Source: Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA), MySchool website

\* To protect the anonymity of the schools, exact figures are not shown. Both graphs use the same scale (\$).

In Australia, government schools are prohibited from setting compulsory fees, and receive most of their funding from the state governments. Private schools, on the other hand, may set whatever compulsory fees they choose, and also receive recurrent government funding, primarily from the federal government. The level of government funding provided to government and non-government schools remains a subject of intense policy debate across Australia, at state and federal government level.

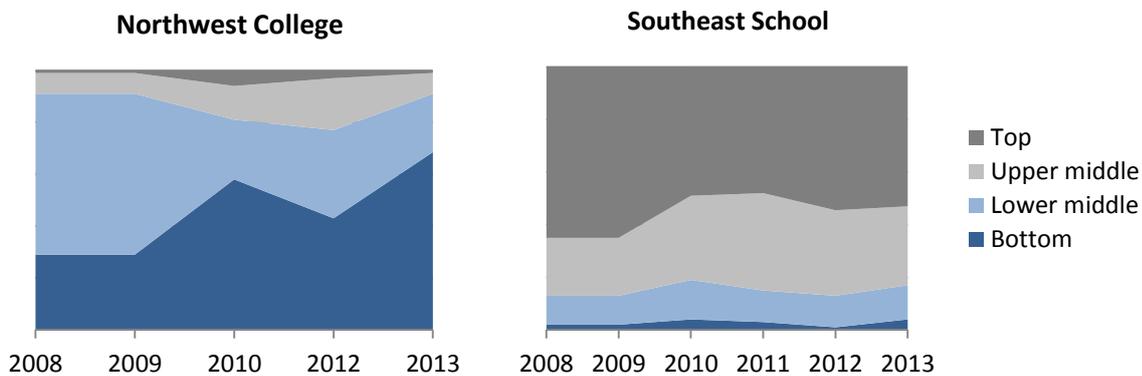
### 5. Student profile

The differences in per-student income are compounded by the fact that government schools serve a higher number of students who are more expensive to educate. Students from low-income households, students with lower levels of parental occupation, indigenous students and students with disabilities are over-represented in the government school sector, and all face educational challenges that require additional resources to address (Lamb 2007). While a shift to needs-based funding models in many Australian states has improved the alignment of resources and need, vast differences in intake across school sectors remain.

Student socio-economic status (SES) accounts for a large proportion of variance between schools in Australia’s PISA results (Thomson et al 2012, p. xxi). This manifests as school-level difference because students from different socio-economic backgrounds tend to choose (or end up in) different schools. Figure 4 shows the SES composition of the two ISCY schools in the last five

years. While Northwest College has attracted an increasingly disadvantaged population, Southeast School has consistently drawn its students from high-SES families, with a gradual increase in upper-middle-SES enrolments.

**Figure 4—Socio-economic profile for Northwest College and Southeast School, 2008–2013 (%)\***



Source: ACARA, MySchool website (2011 data missing for Northwest College)

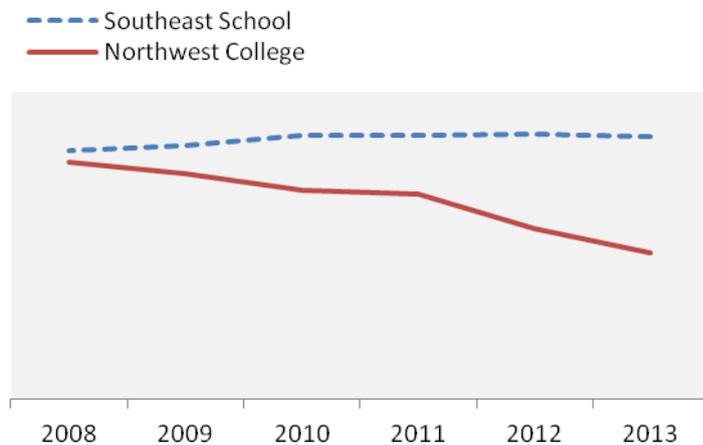
\* To protect the anonymity of the schools, exact figures are not shown. Both graphs use the same scale (\$).

## 6. Enrolments

The decline in the proportion of Northwest College students from the upper-SES range is matched by a decline in the number of enrolments at the school overall (Figure 4). Starting from a similar number of enrolments in 2008, Northwest College has experienced a collapse in enrolments over five years, whereas Southeast School has experienced modest but steady growth.

Figure 4—Total enrolments in Southeast School and Northwest College, 2008 –2013

**Figure 4—Total enrolments in Southeast School and Northwest College, 2008 –2013**



Source: Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA), MySchool website

\* To protect the anonymity of the schools, exact figures are not shown. Both graphs use the same scale (\$).



The combination of decreasing enrolments and intensifying disadvantage at Northwest College exemplifies the process of ‘residualisation’ occurring in Australian schools (Lamb 2007). Decades of policy focused on school choice and marketisation has encouraged economically and educationally advantaged students to congregate in higher-performing schools, leaving the remaining schools to contend with increasing concentrations of disadvantage. As enrolments decrease, these schools face the additional challenges associated with smaller school size, such as limitations on curriculum breadth and student support services (ibid.).

Southeast School is positioned at the winning end of the residualisation process. Less than one kilometre away from Southeast School is a government secondary school, whose enrolments, NAPLAN results and SES profile have all experienced a steady decline over the past five years, mainly losing students from the highest SES range (ACARA 2014). In contrast, the decline in enrolments at Northwest College has been matched by a gradual increase in enrolments in another government secondary school serving the local area. Enrolments in the local Catholic secondary school have remained stable during this time, showing that residualisation can be as much a product of movement *within* school sectors as *between* them.

### Examining inequality using ISCY data

MySchool has painted a stark picture of our two schools as a ‘winner’ and a ‘battler’ in the school performance contest. ‘Battler’ is a term used in Australian popular culture to refer affectionately (and somewhat patronisingly) to a humble working-class individual, who struggles against apparently insurmountable odds for modest gain. MySchool’s portrayal of Northwest College as struggling to achieve against the crippling burden of a disadvantaged school community offers little hope for the social mobility of its students, let alone any kind of system-wide redistribution of educational opportunity.

To understand possibilities for system transformation, it is necessary to form a deeper understanding of what is occurring in these schools to produce the marked differences in educational outcomes. This section draws on data from the ISCY project, from the baseline surveys for each school, to examine characteristics of the schools that are not visible in the MySchool data. In doing so, it reveals more about the causes and effects of social inequality within the schools, and how these translate into educational inequality.

## *Method*

The baseline ISCY data collection involved four instruments: the Student Survey, Skills Test (also for students), Teacher Survey and School Survey. The survey and test were administered to Year 10 (mostly 15-year-old) students in 49 Melbourne schools in 2013–2014. Teacher Surveys were completed by Year 10 teachers in the same schools, and one School Survey per school was completed by the principal or delegate. All instruments were administered using an online survey and test platform. At Southeast School, 132 students and seven teachers participated in Term 4 of 2013. At Northwest College, 102 students and 23 teachers participated in Term 2 of 2014.

The ISCY data for each school was analysed deductively, drawing on prior research to identify items that could be expected to demonstrate differences between the two schools. In most cases, survey items were analysed as they were presented in the survey, with the exception of the measures of ‘21st century skills’ discussed below. For the purposes of this paper, these measures were derived from the single survey item found to best represent the relevant construct, using principal component analysis to identify which item out of all possible items was most representative. For example, ‘creativity’ was measured using student agreement with the item ‘I am good at coming up with new ideas’; and ‘perseverance’ was measured using agreement with ‘In class, I keep working even when the material is difficult’. Further development of these measures will be undertaken when all ISCY cities finish their baseline data collection at the end of 2014, and the measures can be calibrated across the entire cohort. The Skills Test data was excluded from analysis, as this is still undergoing calibration across participating ISCY cities.

## **Results—causes and effects of social inequality**

### *1. Playing catch-up*

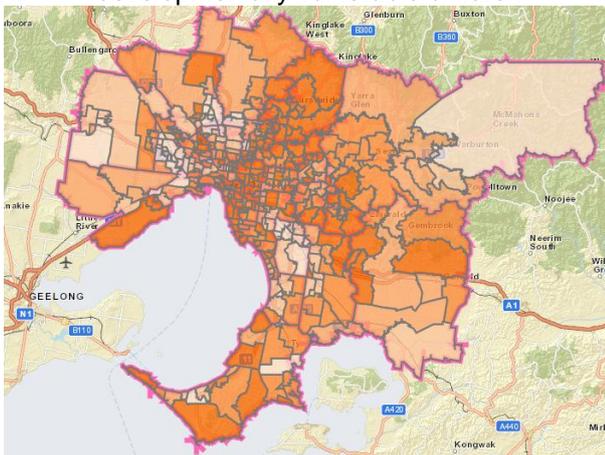
ISCY encountered students when they had already completed many years of learning. Comments from the ISCY Teacher Survey suggest that these experiences had prepared them unevenly for their senior years. All Year 10 teachers at Northwest College rated ‘students being poorly prepared in earlier years’ as a factor affecting their teaching—over half ‘to a large extent’—whereas none of the small sample of Southeast School teachers identified this as a challenge. This section briefly digresses from the ISCY data to administrative data for other levels of learning, to examine how the earlier years of the system may have contributed to this ‘catch up game’ (Northwest College teacher, ISCY Teacher Survey).

National quality standard ratings for ECEC services in each school’s local area suggest that there is little difference in the quality of ECEC services available to families (Australian Children’s Education and Care Quality Authority [ACECQA] 2014). Nevertheless, Australian Early Development Census (AEDC) data suggest that children’s early learning in the two areas is far from equal, with state-wide results showing a strong association between socioeconomic disadvantage and vulnerability (Figure 8). The ‘catch up game’ may have begun for Northwest College students even before their first day of school, and the market-driven mechanisms of ‘informed choice’ seem to offer little assistance to change this.

**Figure 8—Maps of Melbourne showing developmental vulnerability and SES**

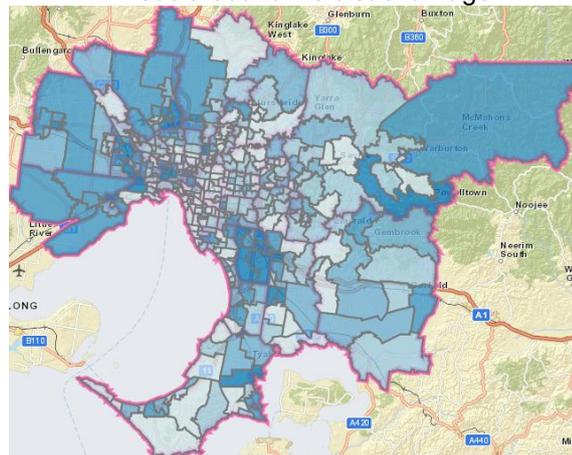
**AEDC 2012 results for Melbourne local areas**

Lighter shading shows higher concentrations of developmentally vulnerable children



**SEIFA 2011 index for Melbourne local areas**

Darker shading shows higher concentrations of socio-economic disadvantage



Source: AECD website

The pathways through primary school for Northwest College students suggest that the school bears a disproportionate share of the ‘catch-up game’. Using NAPLAN data from government schools, it was possible to identify the main feeder primary schools for Northwest College, and the relative academic abilities of students who transition there. This analysis showed that students transitioning from feeder schools to Northwest College were disproportionately drawn from the lower range of the achievement spectrum, with higher-achieving students more likely to transition to different schools, or out of the government school sector (Centre for International Research on Education Systems 2014).

Primary school transition data was not available for Southeast School. However, the school offers all years of schooling, from a three-year-old kindergarten program through to Year 12, so many of its senior students are likely to have spent much of their schooling in the same environment. The



school is therefore much less likely to be encumbered with the burden of addressing educational disadvantage commenced elsewhere, and may in fact benefit from the efforts of other educational providers, in attracting the highest-performing students from an unrestricted catchment of potential feeder schools.

## *2. School environment*

Another way in which elite schools maintain their advantage is through highly disciplined school environments. This is a function of their practices, in keeping students to a tightly-disciplined regime, as well as the selective nature of their student intake (Lamb 1991). Current policy for Victorian government schools appears to grapple with how best to emulate this feature of successful private schools, guaranteeing principals ‘the right to require behaviour standards from students and parents as a condition of enrolment’ (DEECD 2013a, p. 16), while also calling on schools to offer ‘inclusive, safe and orderly environments’ (ibid., p. 5, emphasis added). Government schools face a tension between maintaining discipline, and serving the needs of students with behavioural issues, to whom they often provide the best hope of educational support.

In the ISCY Student Survey, Northwest College students were more than twice as likely as Southeast School students to give a negative rating to the disciplinary climate at their school (32% compared to 14%). Northwest College students were also more likely to have engaged in absenteeism, or to have been disciplined for their behaviour. Students’ perceptions of school discipline were borne out by the ISCY Teacher and School Surveys. Disruption of classes by students was ‘not a problem’ in the Southeast School Survey, but a ‘moderate problem’ at Northwest College. Teacher comments at Northwest College frequently focused on behaviour issues as a barrier to learning, whereas these issues were never mentioned in the small number of Teacher Surveys received from Southeast School.

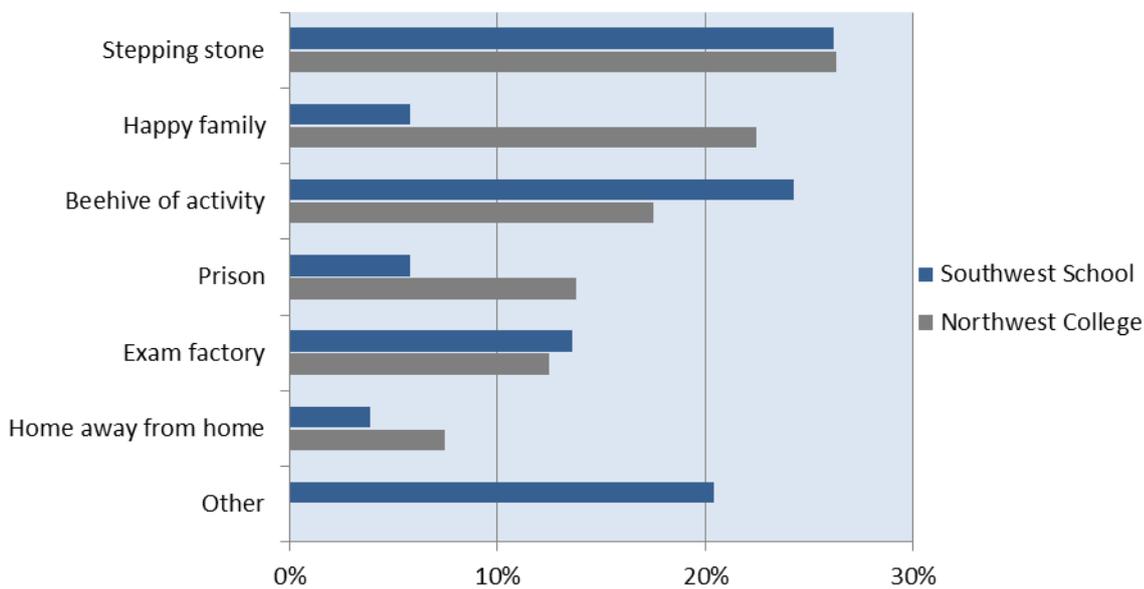
Yet the school environment at Northwest College is far from negative. Despite their lower opinions of school discipline, Northwest College students rated both peer relationships and teacher empathy higher than their Southeast School counterparts, and were more likely to strongly agree with the statement ‘I like being at school’. This matches publicly-reported student engagement levels for the school (which Victorian government schools must report annually, using the standardised Student Attitudes to School Survey). Northwest College’s Annual Report noted a marked improvement in student survey results in 2013.

The ISCY Teacher Survey supports this positive impression. All 23 Northwest College teachers reported that teachers and students at the school generally get on well, and their comments often

mentioned positive relationships between teachers, students and school leaders. Teacher retention was high, with teachers having been at Northwest College for an average of 11.34 years. One teacher (who emphasised positive relationships elsewhere in her comments) described the school as ‘truly a fabulous place to work!’

This theme continued when students were asked in the ISCY Student Survey to select which image best describes their school (Figure 6). ‘Happy family’ was the second-most frequently selected option at Northwest College, but much less frequently selected at Southeast School.

**Figure 6—Student choices of which image best describes their school, by school**



Source: ISCY Student Survey

Southeast School students were more likely to choose the industrious ‘beehive of activity’ image for their school, or to devise their own images. Most of these indicated resistance (for example, ‘death’) or cynicism (‘A pay check for teachers’ and ‘An image-conscious facility constantly looking for self-gratification’). While Northwest College may not be as ‘orderly’ as Southeast School, it appears to be having greater success in offering an ‘inclusive’ and positive school environment.

### 3. Aspirations

The differences in student post-school destinations shown in MySchool suggest there may be corresponding differences in student aspirations between the schools. However, at the time of the ISCY baseline survey, these differences had not yet crystallised. Rather than aspiring to the vocational pathways that MySchool suggests they will eventually pursue, Northwest College students exhibited a relatively high level of indecision about their future pathways. This included

which senior certificate they would do, how long they would remain in school, and what they would do afterwards. In contrast, Southeast School students were mostly very clear about their university-oriented futures, and the years of schooling and certificate they would need to get there (Table 1).

**Table 1—Student school-leaving and certificate intentions, by school and university orientation**

University-oriented pathway	Northwest College	Southeast School
Plan to stay at school until the end of Year 12	65.7%	84.6%
Plan to do VCE the following year	44.4%	83.7%
Plan to go to university after leaving school	48%	74%

Uncertain pathway	Northwest College	Southeast School
Unsure which year they will leave school	29.3%	9.6%
Unsure which certificate they will do the following year	38.4%	12.5%
Unsure what they will do after leaving school	12%	10%

Admittedly, Northwest College students completed the baseline survey earlier in the year, so had less time to make decisions about their future. Nevertheless, the university orientation of Southeast School students is unlikely to have been a recent decision, and may have been mapped out for them even before they were born (Connell et al 1982). Elite schools such as Southeast School are remarkably successful in cultivating such aspirations, and creating ‘a community of students in which all members come to view higher education and the professions as their natural destination’ (Lamb 1991, p. 66).

While students at Southeast School have clear expectations for what they want out of schooling, this is less so for students at Northwest College. It seems that the problem of ‘what to do about education for the working class’, which has dogged policy-makers for many decades (Connell et al 1982, p. 23), may also be a dilemma for the students themselves. While ISCY found that Northwest College students were in fact more likely than Southeast School students to place a high value on school (88% compared to 72%), they appeared to still be making up their minds about what this value might be.

#### 4. 21st century skills

It is increasingly recognised that students must develop a suite of ‘21st century skills’, such as resilience and creativity, in order to succeed in education and the labour market (Trilling and Fadel 2009). Academic self-concept, or confidence in oneself as a learner, is particularly strongly



associated with success at school (Shechtman et al 2013). Several Northwest College teachers suggested that students' low or indeterminate aspirations may reflect a lack of belief in their abilities, typified by the comment below:

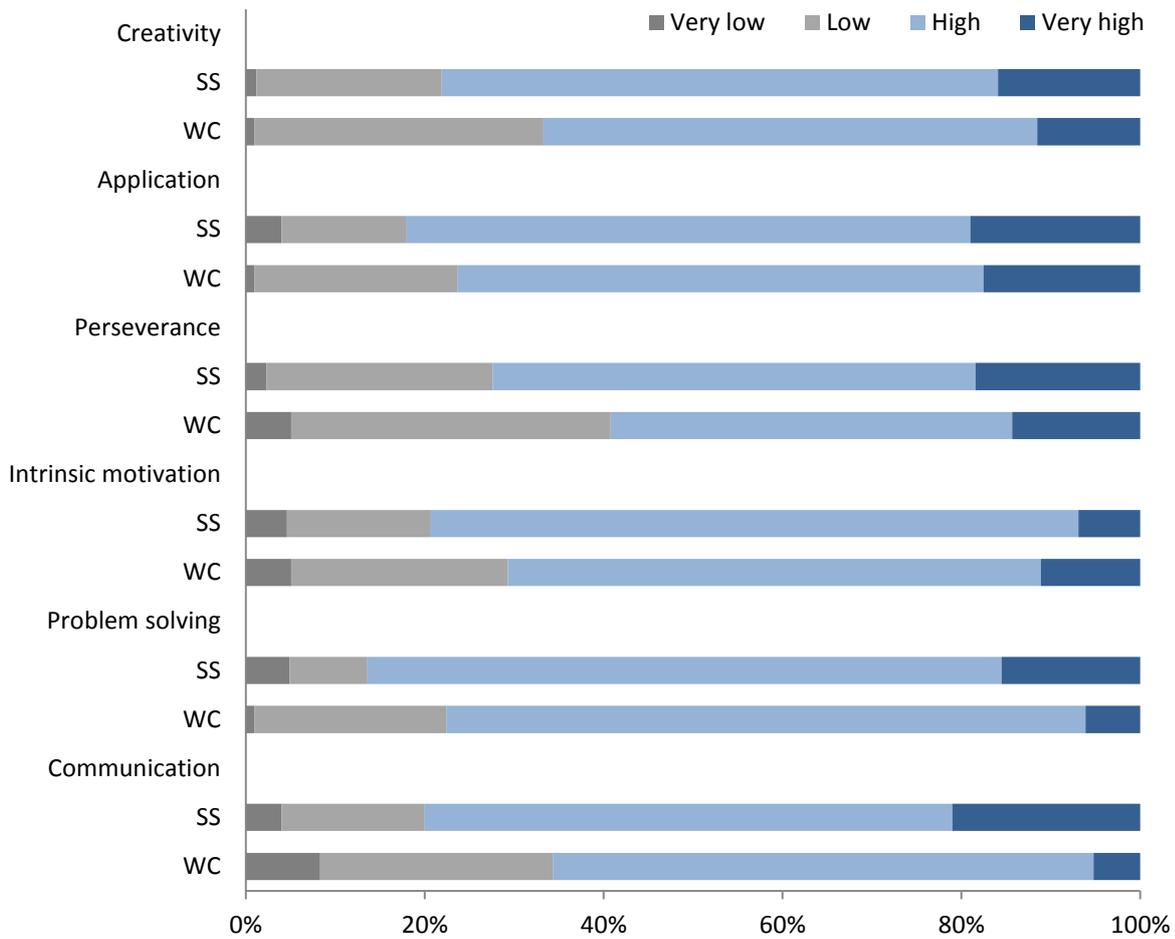
Our students do not believe in themselves and as a result accept mediocrity or low standards and don't try. When they put in the effort they can do well.

[Teacher, Northwest College, factors affecting teaching quality]

Yet Northwest College students did not express doubts about their ability in the ISCY Student Survey; at least, not compared to their peers at Southeast School. At both schools, most students expressed confidence in themselves as learners; in fact, a slightly higher proportion did so at Northwest College (90% compared to 87%). Northwest College students were also more confident of 'doing well in school', 'finding a good job when they finish their studies', and more likely to report that they 'always try to do their best'.

This pattern was reversed for 21st century skills associated with academic behaviours. Southeast School students were more likely to score highly than Northwest College students on creativity, application to school work, perseverance, intrinsic motivation, problem-solving and communication (Figure 7). Perhaps it is therefore not a lack of belief that limits academic achievement for Northwest College students, but a lesser likelihood of exhibiting the behaviours that will turn this belief into academic success.

**Figure 7—Student outcomes on selected 21<sup>st</sup> century skills, by school**



Source: ISCY Student Survey

The process of residualisation may work to compound these differences in students’ academic behaviours. According to two Northwest College teachers, students ‘have little understanding of what it takes to work hard’, and do not understand what a high level of achievement looks like, ‘as they have nothing to compare it to’. Isolated from their socioeconomically and academically advantaged peers, Northwest College students are less likely to observe peers modelling behaviours required for academic success, confirming the effects of student body composition on student achievement (Rutter et al 1979; Willms 1998 in Lamb 1991, p. 3). Instead, Northwest College students may be more likely to approach the demanding senior curriculum with a belief that academic success results from intrinsic ability, rather than recognising that it can be attained through individual endeavour (Connell et al 1982).

**Discussion—the enterprising individual**

A simplistic response might conclude that inequality between the schools could therefore be addressed by instructing Northwest College students in the skills in which they are lagging. Indeed,



Northwest College has recently adopted a university preparation program, which it offers as an elective to assist students to cultivate university aspirations and develop the skills required to attain them. The ISCY Teacher Survey indicated that most Northwest College teachers regarded the program as a positive means of raising student aspirations and achievement, and generally improving academic work habits and motivation.

It remains to be seen whether this strategy will mitigate or intensify the effects of residualisation. Outside the survey, a Northwest College leader commented to an ISCY researcher that the program was attracting strong students from outside its usual feeder schools, who were admitted to the college on the basis of an interview to assess their suitability. Tellingly, the other nearby government school had also recently introduced selective, academically-oriented curriculum options, in a bid to attract a higher calibre of student. Lamb (2007) suggests that such solutions are most likely to be a 'short-term fix with little long-term value, creating the likelihood of further intensifying social inequalities' (Lamb 2007, p. 33), by exacerbating the competition between schools that caused the inequalities in the first place.

This solution also overlooks the complex social factors that may drive these results. The majority of skills in which Northwest College students are more likely to struggle are associated with the 21st century quality of entrepreneurialism (Alberta Education 2011). While definitions of entrepreneurialism vary widely in educational research, the concept has often been associated with qualities of competitiveness, achievement-orientation and individualism (see Trainor 2011). The enterprise culture in Melbourne's education system is underpinned by an implicit valorisation of competitive entrepreneurial behaviour on the part of individuals. Students and their families are expected to make educational choices which maximise individual educational achievement, and to hold education providers accountable for doing the same. These behaviours are well-established among higher-SES communities, who are likely to adopt a demanding and discriminating stance towards their schools (Connell et al 1982). However, families without the resources, inclination or language to define and pursue their educational preferences are placed at a considerable disadvantage (Hartley 2012).

Prior research has found that Australian working-class families are less likely to hold a competitive, individualistic worldview (Lamb 1991; Connell et al 1983), and more likely to relate to the world through 'cooperative coping' (Connell et al 1982, p. 122). Competitive individualism also sits uncomfortably against the kinship and collective values of Australia's indigenous cultures (Eickelcamp 2011). Cooperative worldviews, while lending strength to these communities, are at odds with the school system's emphasis on competitive entrepreneurialism and individual



achievement. These groups therefore face the choice of either adopting the values and behaviours of the 'ruling class' (Connell et al 1982), or remaining 'battlers' in the educational marketplace.

Yet a different kind of 'battler' can also be found at Southeast School. The competitive culture places considerable pressure on schools, students and families to maintain the relatively narrow model of academic success that sustains their position at the front of the race. Elite schools must execute their well-rehearsed teaching strategies with 'military precision' (Lamb 1991, p. 115), or risk rejection by the aspirational social cohort they seek to attract. 'Teaching to the test' to sustain exemplary NAPLAN results (Knott 2014, n.p.), focusing on literacy and numeracy from the earliest years of learning (OECD 2006), and gaming the secondary curriculum to produce leading ATARs (Teese 2007), are other examples of the constraints that may be produced in a 'free' educational market (Hartley 2012).

Pressure on schools and students to conform is coupled with pressure on families to spend on their children's education. The proportional investment of private households in schooling in Australia is among the highest in the OECD (OECD 2011, p. 237), with a significant amount of this expenditure occurring in private schools, especially at secondary level (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2014). At early childhood and tertiary level, the share of private investment is even higher (OECD 2011). In addition to school fees, families may take on higher mortgages to live close to desirable schools (Cogdon 2014), and the ISCY Student Survey shows that Southeast School families are much more likely than those at Northwest College to invest in private tutoring. Parents in Southeast School's local area even have the option of paying private consultants to identify the optimal private school for their child (Regent Consulting 2014).

Perhaps for this reason, the ISCY survey found that over one in five Southeast School students believed that their families often had difficulty 'making ends meet'; only 13 percentage points lower than Northwest College. These students may represent the emergence of a new class of 'middle class battler' in Australia (Hamilton 2002), comparable to the 'overspent American' who struggles financially not because of scarcity of income, but because of pressure to continually spend (Schor 1998). It is not the place of this paper to detail the damaging effects of escalating educational expenditure, except in noting Heath's (2014) caution that the cycle of earning and spending is increasingly dominating the rhythms of social and family life.

In summary, the inequality generated by the enterprise culture in Melbourne's education system has wide-reaching adverse effects. Such effects have been widely noted elsewhere, including 'economic and racial balkanization or segregation' (Frankenberg 2011 in Tienken 2013, p. 304)

and ‘unhealthy emphasis on the calculative rates of returns in human activity’ (Smyth 1998, p. 9). Such criticisms may arguably be levelled at any market-driven agenda of educational reform.

In Melbourne, working-class students relying on the government system to deliver a reliable standard of education are increasingly finding themselves relegated to a struggling second tier, as cooperative values and behaviours are sidelined in favour of competitive achievement. At the same time, students in the top tier face ever-increasing pressure to maintain and extend their advantages. Perhaps most concerningly, the widening gap between ‘winners’ and ‘battlers’ in the system means that both sides may become less aware of the strengths and challenges of their counterparts, and less able to imagine how the system could operate otherwise.

### **Conclusion—could it be otherwise?**

An advantage of international comparative research such as ISCY is in enabling consideration of the outcomes that might be achieved if education systems operated differently (Schleicher 1995). Numerous commentators have suggested that the world’s highest-performing education systems do not embrace competitive or market-driven values (Lubienski 2008: 40 and McKinsey and Company 2007: 40 in Hartley 2012, pp. 45–50; Komulainen, Korhonen & Rätty 2009; Partanen 2011). In Finland, for example, understandings of student ‘entrepreneurship’ are formed around principles of active and ethical citizenship, rather than competitive, individualistic drive (Komulainen et al 2009). Paradoxically, systemic values of cooperation and democracy may in fact be more effective than competition, in getting ahead in the global education race.

Studies such as ISCY play a valuable role in exploring how systemic cultures, policies and practices may distribute educational opportunities and outcomes more equitably across diverse student groups. While ISCY explores these possibilities using the large-scale quantitative data known to have greatest policy impact (Blackmore & Lauder 2004), it aims to avoid the simplistic ‘league tables’ that render comparative research as another mechanism in the competitive educational culture. Instead, ISCY recognises that large-scale data sets are constructed from myriad unique actors and relationships, which must be carefully considered in light of the complex contexts in which they are situated.

This paper has attempted this contextualisation for the city of Melbourne, by taking a small slice of the large ISCY study and examining it closely. In doing so, it takes a first step towards the primary goal of the ISCY project, to examine the interaction between system, school and student characteristics in determining how well each education system is performing, and for whom. By describing the ‘enterprise culture’ prevalent in the Melbourne policy context, and tracing its effects



on two contrasting schools through increasingly detailed layers of data, the paper has sought to expose this culture as a contributor to the entrenched inequalities in Melbourne education . As long as competitive individualism continues to be upheld as the ideal at all levels of the system, those whose perspectives are at odds with this culture will continue to struggle to find their place.

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