

Education Research Paper

School Autonomy and Social Justice in Education

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First of all, I would like to congratulate the project team on its work. It has provided one of the most comprehensive reviews of the literature on school autonomy and contributed greatly to our knowledge about the implementation of school autonomy in Australian schools and its impact on students, teachers and principals.

Rather than review the array of its findings I would like to focus on a few key issues:

- The meaning of social justice in education;
- School autonomy and student achievement;
- School autonomy and the bureaucratisation of schooling.

What is Social Justice in Education?

The Report seeks to examine the social justice implications of school autonomy. This is a critically important project. Achieving social justice in education is the most fundamental challenge facing Australia's education system.

It is important to be clear on what social justice in education means. I see social justice and equity in education as broadly equivalent concepts and I use them interchangeably. My justification is that the term equity captures the justice of a given state of affairs.

Clearly defining what is meant by social justice and equity is the first step towards achieving it. If we don't define where we are going, no path will take us there. Instead, we wander around in a policy labyrinth while many students are denied an adequate education and large achievement gaps between privileged and less privileged students are ongoing.

The failure to define social justice and equity in education has resulted in different interpretations, inadequate targets, ineffective monitoring, and the sad fact that no one is held responsible for inequities in our education systems.

It allows governments to avoid accountability for the lack of progress on equity. They can continue to mouth the rhetoric without being called to account. The lack of a clear definition also allows politicians and the media to scapegoat schools, teachers, and parents. For instance, recall the slandering of public school teachers by the former Commonwealth Acting Minister for Education, the now notorious Stuart Robert, and the abominable portrayal of low socio-economic status parents by a former NSW Minister, Pru Goward, who called them a dysfunctional and lazy underclass that neglects their children.

The failure to include a clear equity goal in the national goals of schooling has allowed governments regardless of hue to misdirect large funding increases to the more privileged private sector and deny adequate funding for the vast majority of low socio-economic status (SES), Indigenous, remote area and disability students who attend public schools.

The Report ventures a definition. Its focus is economic injustice, namely, inequalities between schools in low SES, rural/remote and more privileged areas in terms of their access to human and material resources. Finding 1 defines socially just schooling as the equitable distribution of resources to improve students' school experience and outcomes.

However, with respect, it is not clear what a socially just distribution of human and material resources looks like. One common interpretation is that it means the resources needed to provide equality of opportunity to learn. But, what happens if some students don't achieve expected outcomes? Who is at fault?

The focus on inputs makes it too easy to blame the students, their parents or their social group as do the Pru Gowards of the world and those who view student achievement as mainly genetically determined. Those who don't succeed are judged as failing to take up their opportunity to learn or as incapable of succeeding. It releases governments and education policy makers from responsibility for ensuring equity in school outcomes.

Providing the resources for equal opportunity to learn does not require any particular level of achievement for all students. It is consistent with wide inequalities in outcomes between students from different social backgrounds. Continuing inequity may be legitimised because all children have the opportunity to learn.

I think we have to flip the equation. We should focus on what is social justice or equity in outcomes and then determine what resources are necessary to achieve it. Education resources are a means to an end which must be defined.

[Pasi Sahlberg and I have](#) proposed a dual equity objective. Equity should have regard to both the minimum levels of achievement expected for all students and the relative distribution of outcomes between different social groups.

From an individual perspective, equity should mean that all children, whatever their background, are equipped with the knowledge, skills and understandings to enable them to live a decent life, choose their own path in society and participate effectively in the processes and institutions of society. We call this an adequate education. In today's society it means successfully completing Year 12 or its equivalent.

From a social perspective, equity means that students from different social groups should achieve similar average outcomes and a similar range of outcomes. We call this social equity in education.

Large disparities in education outcomes mean that the social group individuals are born into strongly affects their life opportunities. Large disparities in school outcomes according to different social backgrounds entrench inequality and discrimination in society. Students from more privileged backgrounds have greater access to higher incomes, higher status occupations and positions of wealth, influence, and power in society than students from more disadvantaged backgrounds. The social equity goal should be to close the gaps in educational attainment measures between such groups.

In what follows, I explore some system level effects of the implementation of school autonomy in NSW as a case study to complement the Report's findings. In [a revealing paper](#), the former President of the NSW Teachers' Federation, Maurie Mulheron says the decade following the introduction of the NSW Local Schools, Local Decisions school autonomy program was a "lost decade". It certainly was a lost decade in the failure to address high social inequity in school outcomes and the diversions of substantial funding to non-teaching and non-school staff.

School Autonomy and Student Achievement

The commonly stated goal of school autonomy is to improve student outcomes. In the interests of brevity, I focus on social equity outcomes for Year 9 students in NSW. I examined the NAPLAN results in reading, writing and numeracy for low SES, Indigenous and remote area students. For each group, I considered the proportion not achieving the national benchmark standards, NAPLAN scores and achievement gap with high SES students since 2010. Thus, there are nine indicators of achievement for each group, giving 27 in total.

They show shocking inequalities in school outcomes between highly advantaged and disadvantaged students in NSW with few improvements since 2010.

There were no achievement improvements by low SES Year 9 students and declines in some areas. For example, the percentage of low SES Year 9 students not achieving the reading standard increased from 19% in 2010 to 28% in 2022 and the percentage below the writing standard increased from 30% in 2011 to 35% in 2022 [Chart 1]. Reading, writing and numeracy scores all declined and achievement gaps between high and low SES students of about four years of learning remained [Charts 2 & 3].

Indigenous education is one area of significant improvement. For example, the percentage not achieving the writing benchmark fell from 44% in 2011 to 38% in 2022. Writing and numeracy scores improved but there was little change in reading. There were large reductions in the writing and numeracy gaps between Indigenous and high SES students.

There was little change in the proportion of remote area Year 9 students not achieving the reading and writing standards but the proportion below the reading standard fell. There was also little change in NAPLAN scores and achievement gaps against high SES students remained large.

In summary, none of the nine achievement indicators for low SES students showed any improvement while six show declining achievement [Table 1]. Six of the nine indicators for Indigenous students show increasing achievement while only three show improvement by remote area students.

All this supports Finding 1 of the Report that school autonomy does not necessarily improve social justice and equity in education. I suggest that funding is a critical factor. More autonomy for schools to identify and meet the special needs of their community means little in the absence of adequate funding. Increased targeted funding for Indigenous students in the context of local decision-making is likely to have contributed to improving outcomes for these students. However, funding cuts to NSW public schools in the initial years of school autonomy and the diversion of subsequent funding increases to non-teaching and non-school staff instead of teachers has restricted school efforts to increase social justice and equity in education.

School Autonomy and Increasing Bureaucratisation

As Maurier Mulheron outlined in his paper, the origins of Local Schools, Local Decisions were Cabinet-in-Confidence reports to the NSW Government by Boston Consulting and, wait for it, PWC. Cost-cutting was the original goal. The purpose of the Boston Consulting Report was to identify significant expenditure savings in the Department. It said that cost cutting through devolution could provide, “opportunities ... worth \$500-\$700 million in recurrent costs.” The strategy of the PWC Report was to empower school principals to manage school-based expenditures and drive down costs while maintaining education outcomes.

The recommendations were taken up by the NSW Commission of Audit in 2012. It supported devolution of authority and accountability to schools to increase efficiency in expenditure. The outcome was Local Schools, Local Decisions.

Funding for public schools failed to keep up with costs from 2012 to 2016, meaning there was a fall in funding adjusted for inflation. Since then, funding has increased but part of it was used for huge increases in non-teaching staff in schools and in central office.

Under Local Schools, Local Decisions, central support structures for schools were dismantled. As Mulheron points out, major job losses occurred in teaching and learning support including curriculum support, professional development, drug and alcohol education, student welfare, student behaviour, the equity unit, rural education, and special education.

Non-teaching staff in schools increased by much more than teachers from 2012 to 2022, with the biggest increases occurring from 2016. Total non-teaching staff in primary schools increased by 44% compared to an increase in teachers of 12% [Chart 4]. Non-teaching staff in secondary schools increased by 26% while teachers fell by 3%. The largest increase in non-teaching staff in schools was for administrative and clerical staff. They increased by 48% in primary schools and by 32% in secondary schools.

The increases in administrative staff also far exceeded the increase in enrolments – over five times the increase in enrolments in primary schools and 30 times the increase in secondary schools.

There was also a huge increase in central and regional office staff. They increased by 132% which was 26 times the increase in all teachers and 22 times the increase in enrolments. Since 2015, when detailed figures were first published, executive staff increased by a massive 390% [Chart 5]. Specialist support staff increased by 132% and administrative and clerical staff by 108%. Over the same period, teachers increased by only 5% and students by 6%

Overall, the growth in the number of non-teaching staff in schools and non-school staff increased by more than the number of teachers. Non-teaching staff in schools increased by 6,155 and non-school staff by 2,755 compared with 2,742 in the number of teachers. It is incredible that under a school autonomy program the increase in Department staff exceeded the increase in teachers.

Public schools in NSW and elsewhere are subject to widespread accountability measures that have driven the huge increase in administrative staff in central office and in schools.

The Department of Education is focused primarily on reporting and compliance roles rather than curriculum, teaching and learning support. Its detailed organisational chart shows that the vast majority of its branches are devoted to administration of finance, policing compliance to regulations, performance monitoring, human resource management and other corporate functions. Of some 55 branches less than 10 could be considered as directly involved in supporting teaching and learning.

Despite the huge increase in administrative staff, the workload of teachers has not diminished. Instead, the administrative load for principals and teachers has increased. School leaders and teachers are working longer hours on accountability measures. Filling out endless forms and writing reports for central office is part and parcel of the life of principals and teachers.

Apart from the increases in non-teaching staff; the NSW Department of Education increased its use of consultants which is a further drain on the direct funding of schools. Payments to consultants increased from \$1.5 million in 2014 to \$10.6 million in 2021, a seven-fold increase. In 2022, the Department let contracts with consultants worth \$17.4million, most of which were with Deloitte, Ernst & Young, KPMG and....PWC.

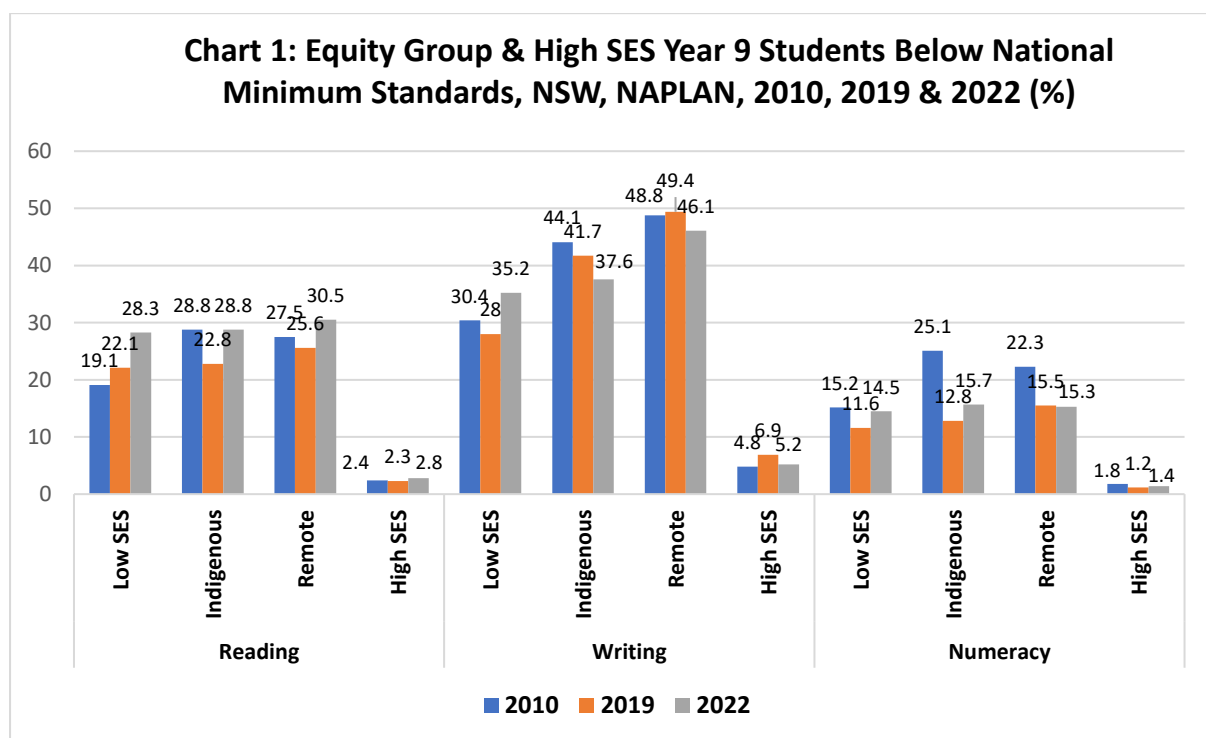
Conclusions and Further Research

The experience with school autonomy in the NSW public school system tends to confirm Finding 1 of the Report that school autonomy does not necessarily lead to more socially just schooling. I would add that broadly similar results have occurred in other states. For example, continuing inequities in school outcomes and increasing bureaucratisation are features of the Victorian education system.

It is apparent that a considerable part of the small increase in real funding for public schools has been devoted to non-teaching staff in schools and non-school staff. The large increases in non-teaching and non-school staff have far outstripped the growth in enrolments and teachers. It has undoubtedly diverted much needed funding from directly supporting learning in the classroom.

However, more sophisticated statistical analysis of the impact of school autonomy is necessary because many factors influence education outcomes – funding, student demography, school attendance, economic inequality, etc. Clearly, the failure to adequately fund public schools has been a critical factor behind the failure to improve equity in schooling. The way school autonomy has been implemented together with the funding failures of governments have been factors behind this failure.

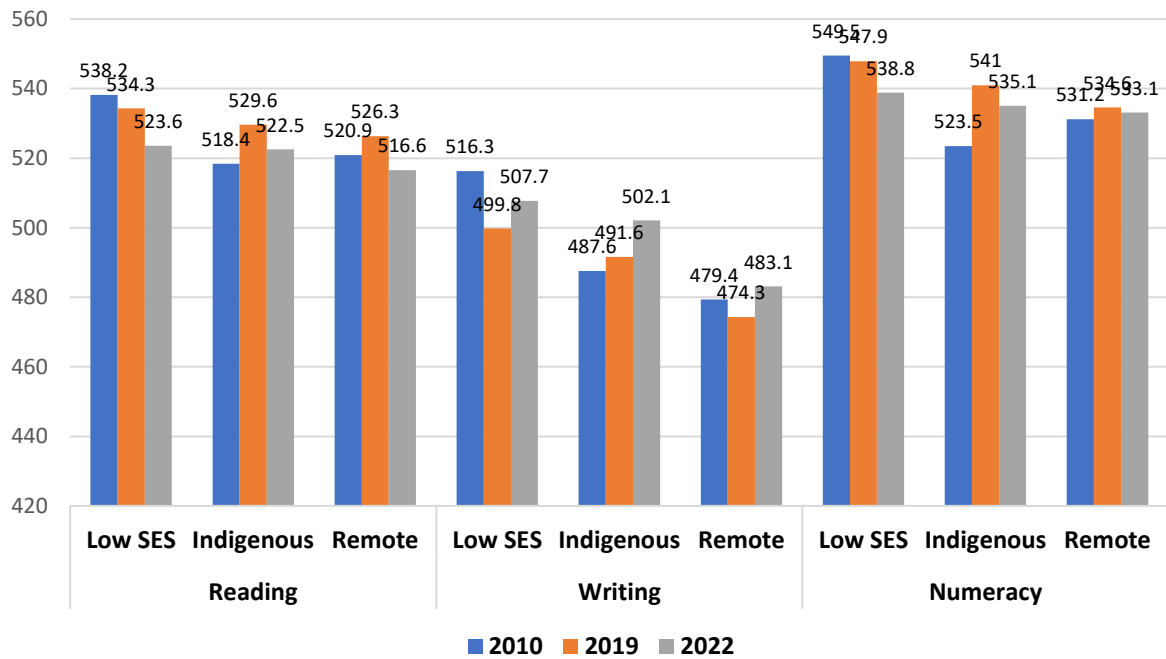
Further research on the impact of school autonomy on student achievement could examine the experience of the introduction of Independent Public Schools in Western Australia and Queensland. We know which schools have this status and when they were admitted. This makes it possible to compare before and after results taking account of changes in the background of students. It is also possible to do a comparison of student achievement and changes in the demographic profile and funding of similar schools that were not admitted to the program. This would help a better understanding of the impact of school autonomy.



Source: Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority, NAPLAN National Reports.

Note: The writing gaps are for for 2011, 2019 & 2022

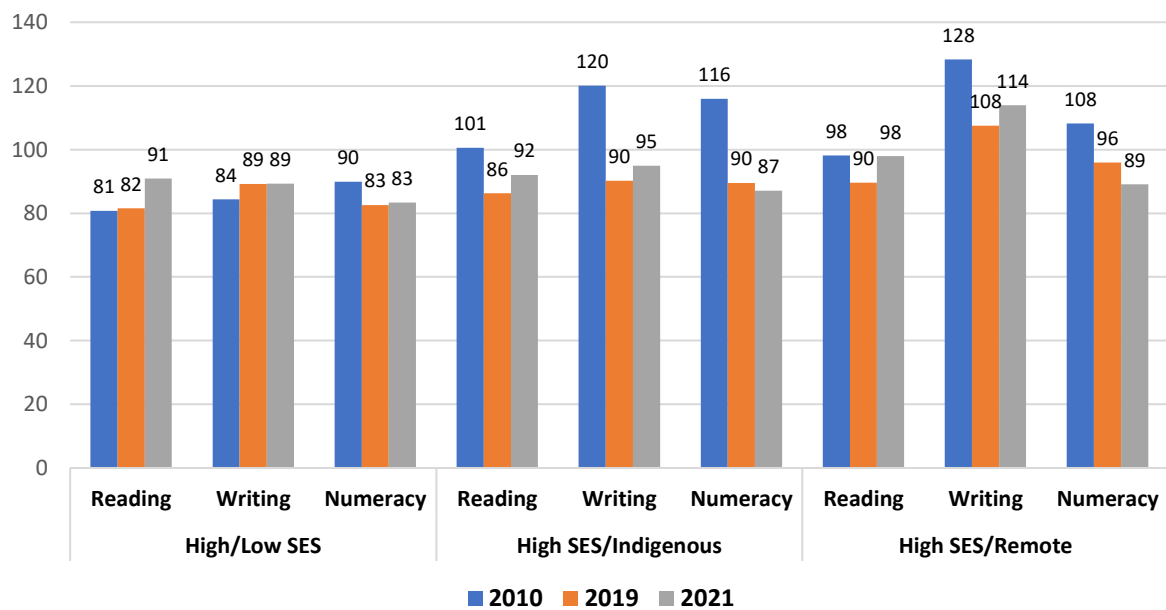
Chart 2: Year 9 NAPLAN Scores for Equity Group Students, NSW, 2010, 2019 & 2022



Source: Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority, NAPLAN National Reports.

Note: The writing gaps are for 2011, 2019 & 2022

Chart 3: Achievement Gaps Between High Education Status and Equity Group Year 9 Students, NSW, NAPLAN, 2010, 2019 & 2022

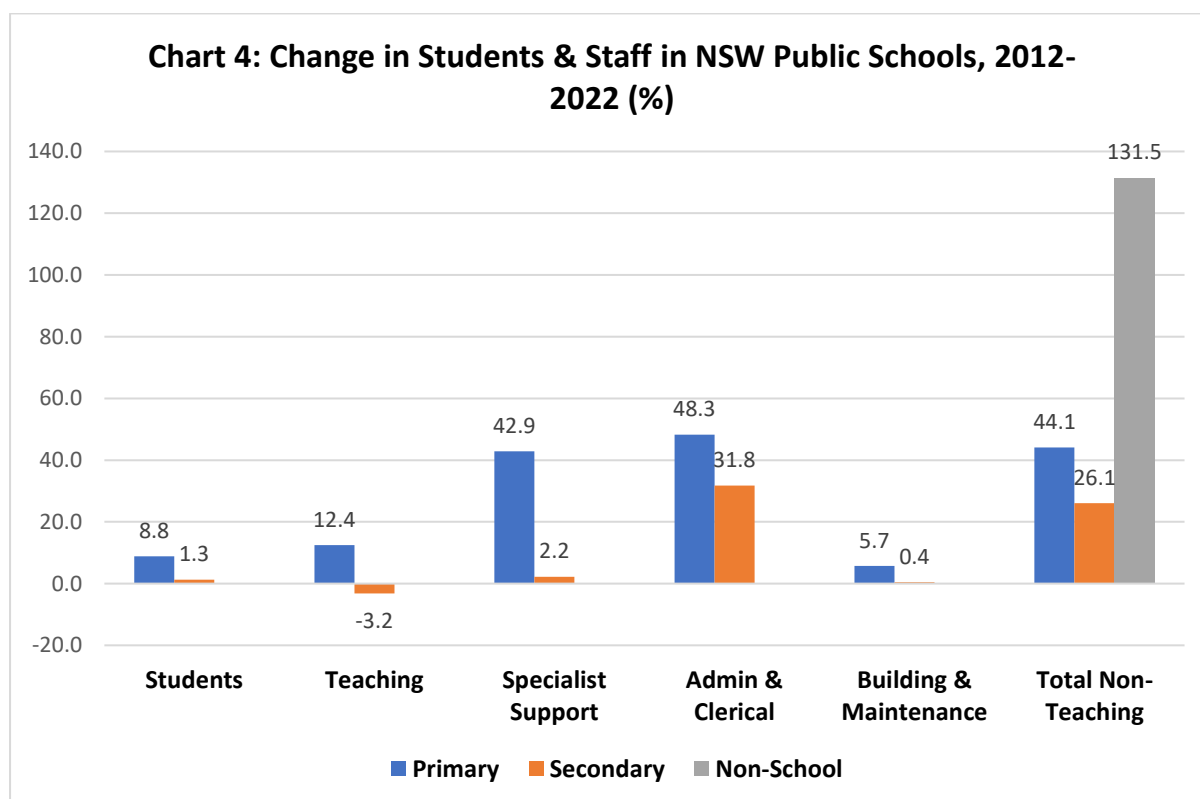


Source: Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority, NAPLAN National Reports.

Note: The writing gaps are for 2011, 2019 & 2022

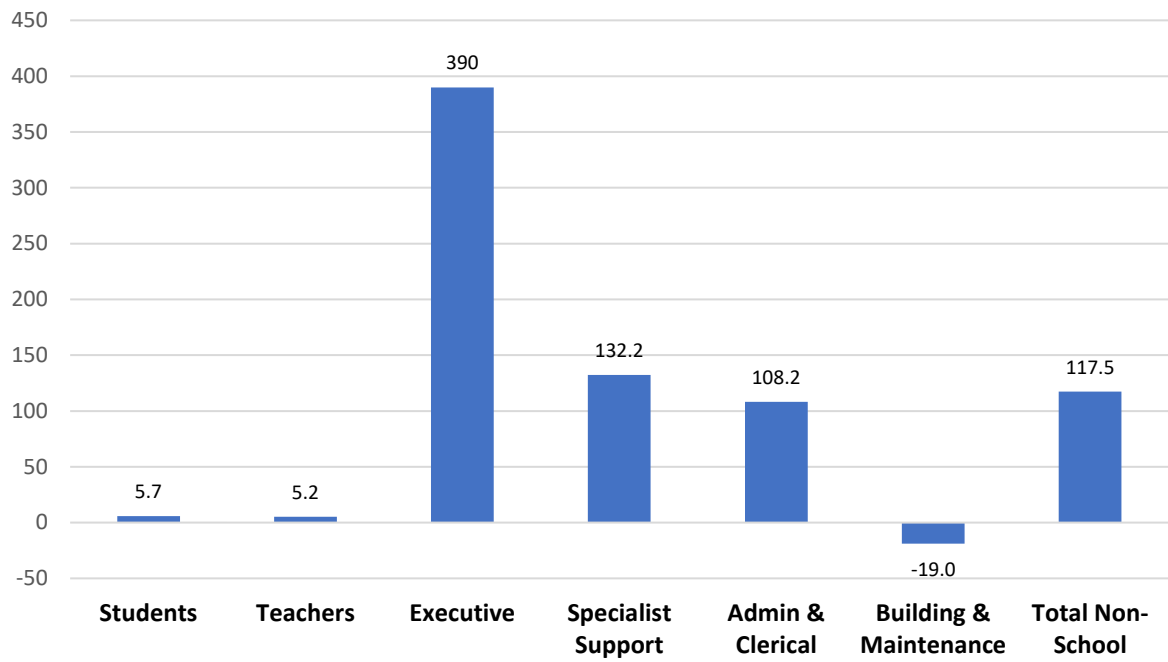
Table 1: Summary of NSW School Outcomes: 2010 to 2022

Percentage Below Standard	Year 9		
	Low SES	Indigenous	Remote
Reading	Increase	NSC	NSC
Writing	Increase	Decrease	NSC
Numeracy	NSC	Decrease	Decrease
NAPLAN Score	Year 9		
	Low SES	Indigenous	Remote
Reading	Decrease	NSC	NSC
Writing	Decrease	Increase	NSC
Numeracy	Decrease	Increase	NSC
Achievement Gap with High SES	Year 9		
	Low SES	Indigenous	Remote
Reading	Increase	Decrease	NSC
Writing	NSC	Decrease	Decrease
Numeracy	NSC	NSC	Decrease



Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics, Schools Australia

Chart 5: Change in Non-School Staff in NSW Public Schools, 2015-2022 (%)



Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics, Schools Australia.