

# FROM THE TWO CASE STUDIES ON 2020 SENIOR SCHOOL RESULTS & ATARS:

*A Synthesis of the Factors Contributing to Higher Academic  
Performance and Why this Matters to Christian Schooling*

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**ACS**

Associated Christian Schools

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## Factors identified in the Case Studies

- Academic selectivity in whole or in part
- High expectations of teachers
- High expectations of the students themselves
- Students backed by supportive teachers
- Knowledgeable, dedicated teachers
- An explicit way of teaching
- An underlying focus on literacy and numeracy from point of (secondary) entry (Year 7)
- High capability with essay writing
- Supportive social and emotional well-being programs
- An egalitarian and accepting culture
- Strong cohort-bonding
- Geographical proximity to high performing schools
- Ethnicity and family background
- Socio-educational advantage

## Factors noted in other research<sup>1</sup>

By Dr Gary Marks as noted by AHISA

- The strongest predictor of student achievement is prior student achievement, or student ability
- Socio-economic status is a weak predictor of student achievement

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<sup>1</sup> <https://independence.partica.online/independence/independence-vol-40-no-1-may-2015/flipbook/8/>

## And from PISA 2018<sup>2</sup>

- Independent schools ranked higher than Catholic schools by the equivalent of almost one year of schooling, and students from Catholic schools ranked higher than students in government schools by the equivalent of around  $\frac{3}{4}$  year of schooling
- The ACER report<sup>3</sup> suggested 'once mean scores are adjusted for individual student socio-economic background (SES) and then again by the school-level SES, there are no differences ...', a point AHISA specifically contradicted on the basis of Gary Marks' research

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<sup>2</sup> AHISA Member Briefing 4.12.2019 as reported in [ACS eBook 2](#)

<sup>3</sup> <https://research.acer.edu.au/ozpisa/35/>

## The common good must be the goal

Rupert Murdoch's challenge to work towards an egalitarian meritocracy<sup>4</sup> as reported in *ACS eBook 1* ought to be the aspiration of a Christian school. Anecdotal alumni evidence from aspirational schools like James Ruse Agricultural High School Carlingford suggest this is achievable. If achievable, then it is the interest of the common good that Christian schools strive to be that kind of school.

How this is strategised will vary from school-to-school; the following questions may help schools strategise.

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/publications/annual-lowy-lecture-2013-address-rupert-murdoch-ac>

## Is the school willing to cluster academically similar students?

Probably no Christian school is academically selective, so partial selectivity seems to be the only possibility and is the practice in many. Clustering is usually necessary for lower-performing students, so why not for average students and high-performing students? With clustering, teachers may find it helps them provide different *kinds* of support.

Interesting data from American researchers interrogating Singapore's high performance, noted high expectation of, and support for, *all learner levels*. This is critical if the goal is an egalitarian meritocracy. (PISA data suggests Singapore's success is indeed at all learner levels, but this does not automatically suggest Singapore's model achieves an *egalitarian* meritocracy: ask any Singaporean alumnus).

## Is the school willing to identify student ability?

This becomes of interest when the decision is taken to cluster students of similar ability, as it needs to be done carefully and discretely, in a way that is defensible to parents and teachers. A single test is unlikely to be satisfactory – a hybrid of prior performance (school results) and a validated form of academic testing is more likely not to miss outliers.



## **Are teachers willing to set high expectations of themselves and their students, and back that up with genuine support for all?**

This is probably the practice of memorable teachers. How it is strategised for all-of-faculty may vary, but it seems without it little school-wide improvement will occur. This is also a logical basis for the next step, for the students to develop their own high expectations of themselves. Students may need school-wide support to set their personal expectations.

## **Is the school willing to critically reflect on its curriculum?**

The assessment trend in all Australian states is towards a hybrid of within-school measures and state-wide tests. This has been a significant shift for Queensland, which pioneered school-based assessment. Since Christian colleges consist almost universally of a primary and secondary school (sometimes a primary, middle and senior school) their structure allows a much longer time-frame of preparation for senior schooling, the final two years that lead to certification and tertiary entrance. Explicit teaching with a focus on mastery of content lays the foundation for higher level thinking. The former precedes the latter, and primary curriculum especially should reflect that.

## **Is the school willing to emphasise literacy and numeracy?**

While this is the core of primary curriculum, it needs to be in junior secondary or middle school too. The evidence out of Northern Beaches Secondary College campuses is that this was particularly important for students' development of essay-writing skills, one of the critical skills especially needed for public examinations.

## **Is the school willing to reassess its social and emotional well-being programs around its academic goal?**

If academic outcomes are high-priority, other programs (social/emotional) should also reflect that. Some schools have displaced sport or diminished the arts, to provide time for students to do things other than school – e.g. employment or TAFE. For most students this is not desirable at all. As well, some schools have integrated programs once considered outside the domain of schools. Any additional programs should be critically evaluated, and justified primarily by their effect on the school's academic goals.

## **Is the school willing to allow students flexibility to select the minimum number or required subjects (typically five) for senior schooling?**

Anecdotal evidence suggests students (some if not all) benefit motivationally from becoming highly focused with their subject choices. School timetables generally allow students to attempt six subjects, so the answer to this question will require senior school organisational thought. As well, universities are pressing their early-start programs onto senior school students, and parents may believe these could give their students an advantage such as early-offers. Schools may need to guide students towards the best choice *for them*. This may not be the same for all students.

## **Is the school willing to develop an academically focused, though balanced, school-wide culture?**

Anecdotal evidence suggests students (some if not all) benefit motivationally from becoming highly focused with their subject choices. School timetables generally allow students to attempt six subjects, so the answer to this question will require senior school organisational thought. As well, universities are pressing their early-start programs onto senior school students, and parents may believe these could give their students an advantage such as early-offers. Schools may need to guide students towards the best choice for them. This may not be the same for all students.

## The final factors

The final factors may be beyond the ability of an individual school to fully control, though each school needs good self-awareness about them. These factors are those relating to *ethnicity and family background*.

## **Is the school willing to value and support diversity of ethnicity and family background, including socio-educational?**

Australian schooling is categorised by sector: Government, Catholic and Independent. As noted in the two Case Studies, these sectors are not at all uniform. Government schools may be selective in whole or in part, may be clustered with nearby schools, may be coeducational or single gender (not in all states), may have some flexibility in local control (not in all states). Catholic schools may be independent or systemic, coeducational or single gender, boarding or day. Independent schools may be coeducational or single gender, boarding or day, faith-based or not.

Schools of all sectors are differentiated by their location and composition: metropolitan, regional or remote location, urban or rural, wealthy or not wealthy, ethnic make-up, parental levels of education.

What will make a difference is the school's self-awareness, as it will prompt school leadership to take all known factors into account and judge them worthy of support.

Working towards an egalitarian meritocracy would unhesitatingly contribute to the common good. This makes it a worthy goal for Christian schools, one that finds easy validation within Holy Scripture.



