


# LEADERSHIP FOR EQUITY IN EDUCATION

*“What it is, why it matters, and what can we do?”*

ACEL Online Conference  
29<sup>th</sup> September 2021

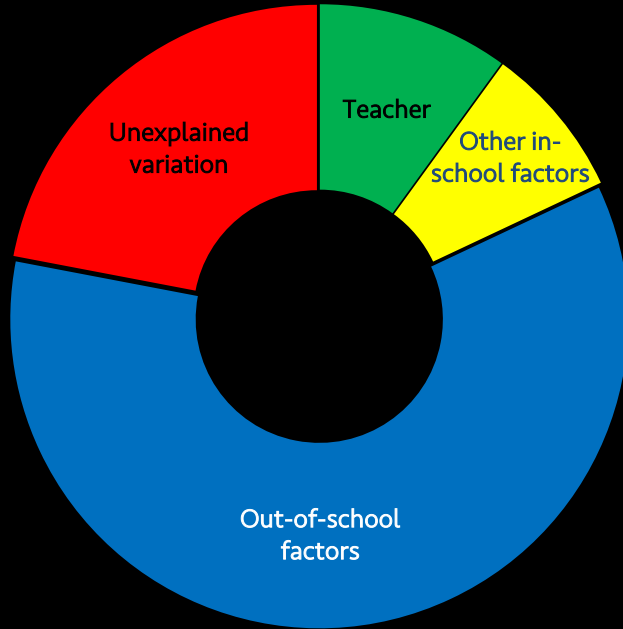
 [pasi\\_sahlberg](#)



# An inconvenient truth

**“It ain’t what you don’t know that gets you into trouble.  
It’s what you know for sure that just ain’t so.”**

# What influences student test scores?



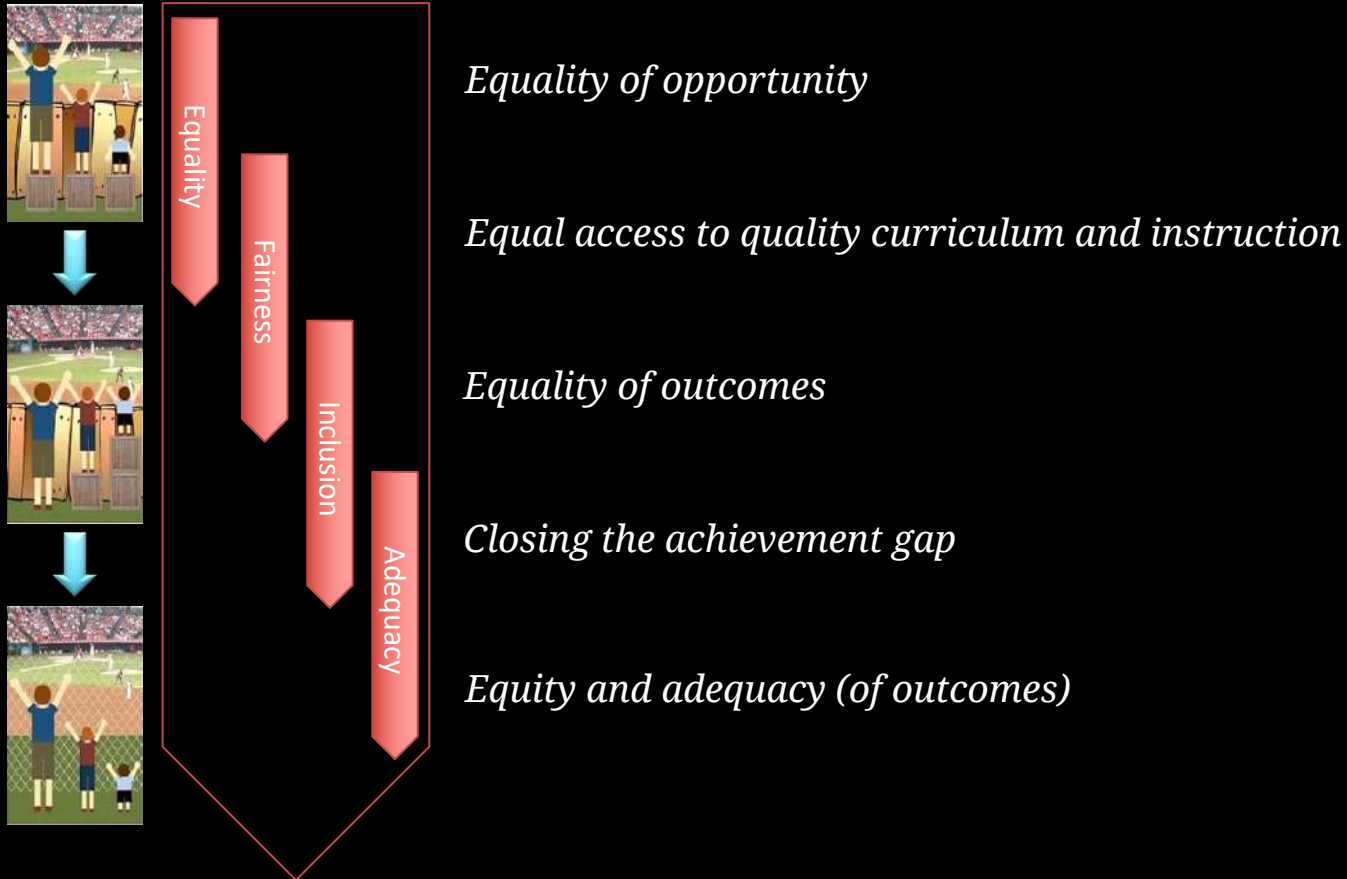
*“Teachers account for about 1% to 14% of the variability in test scores, therefore the majority of opportunities for quality improvement are found in the system-level conditions.”*

- American Statistical Association (2014)

The conclusion that family background is far more important than people think has remained a solid empirical research finding for the past half a century.

**WHAT IS EQUITY?**

# Evolution of the concept of equity in education



# EQUITY

## PERSONAL PERSPECTIVE: ADEQUATE EDUCATION

All children receive an education that enables them to realise their talents and fully participate in society in a way of their own choosing.

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## INTERPERSONAL PERSPECTIVE: SOCIAL EQUITY

Children from different groups because of their gender, class, race, ethnicity and domicile achieve similar education outcomes to ensure non-discrimination.

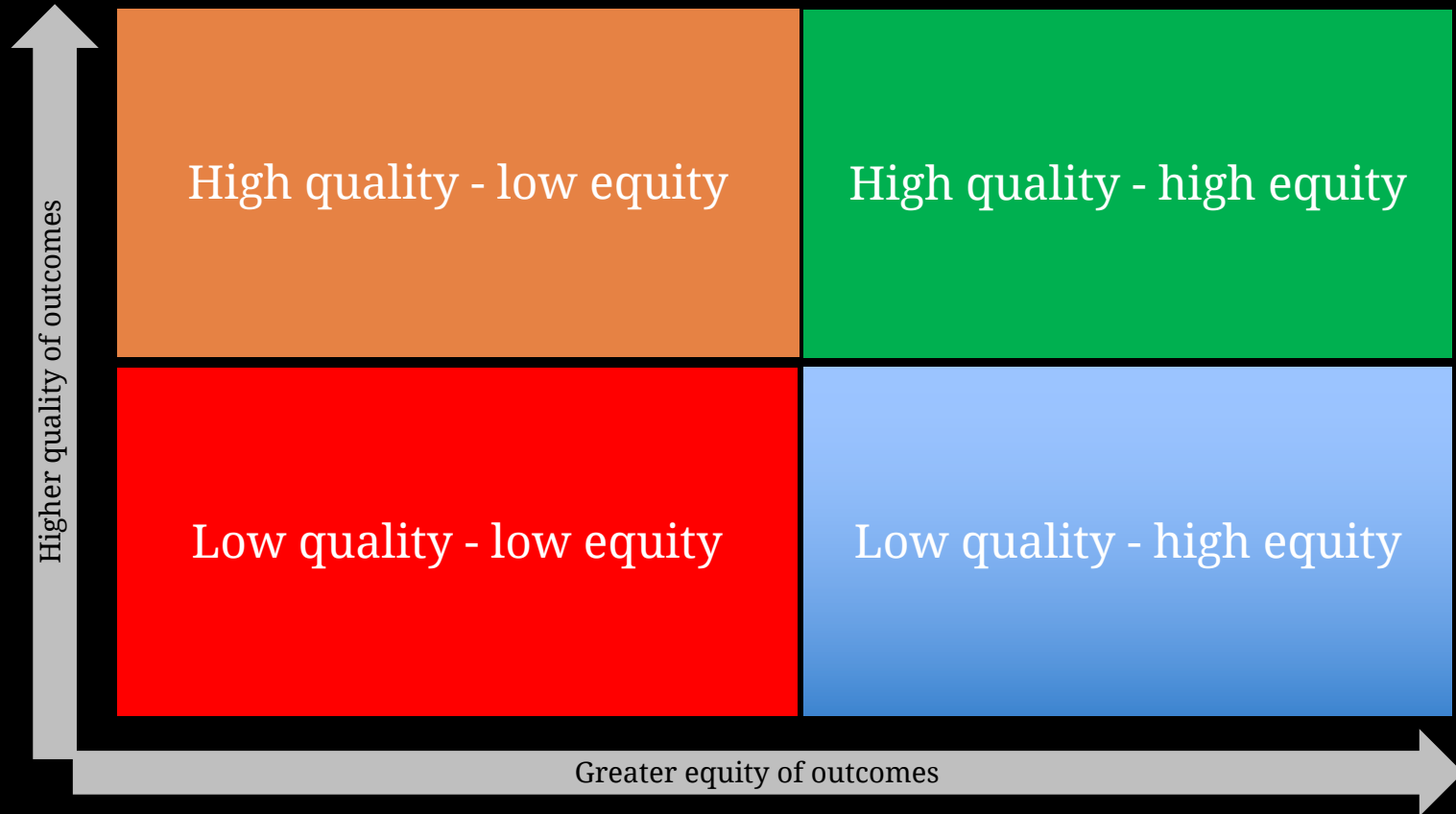
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Composite index to  
monitor equity

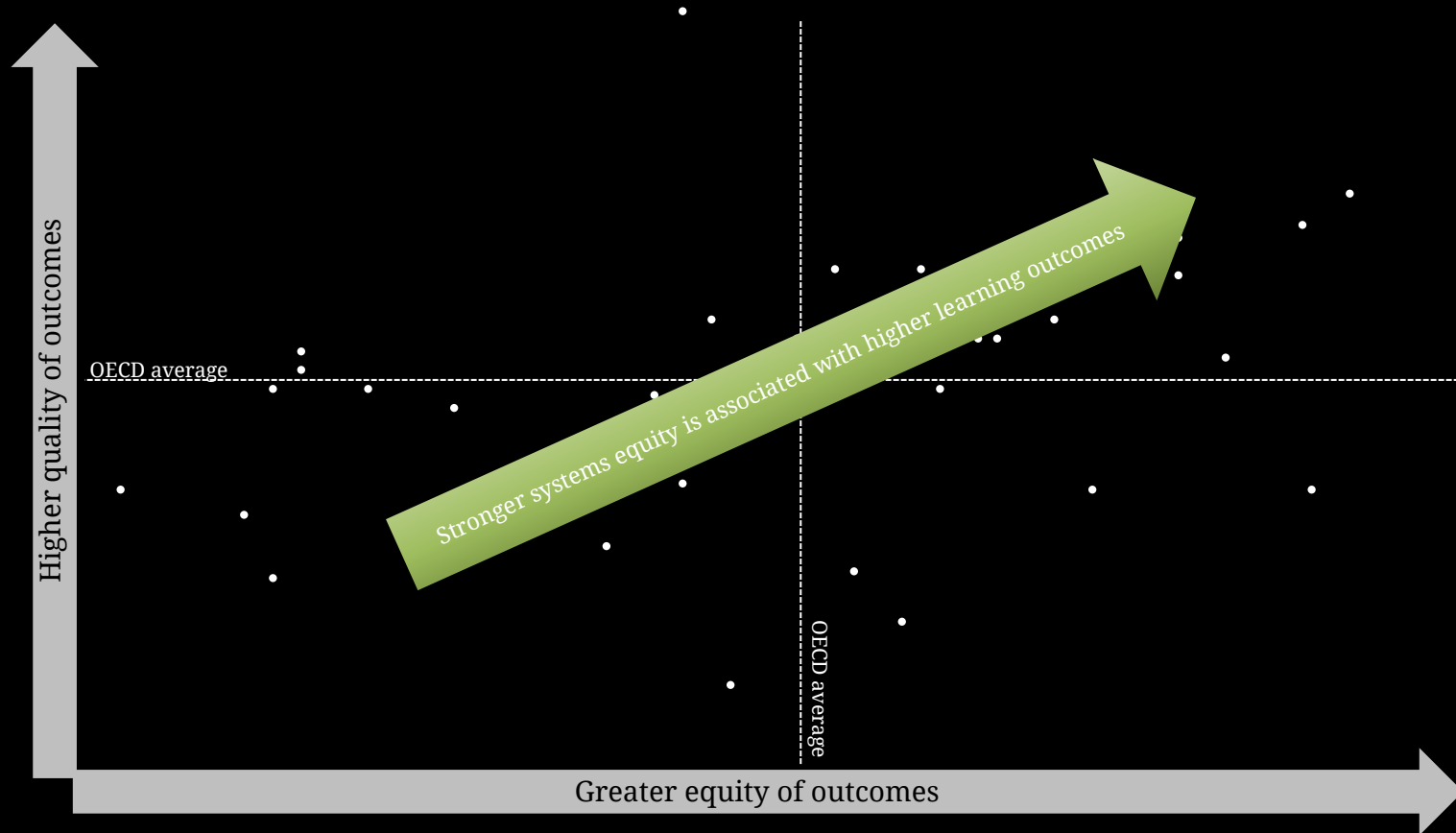
**WHY EQUITY MATTERS?**



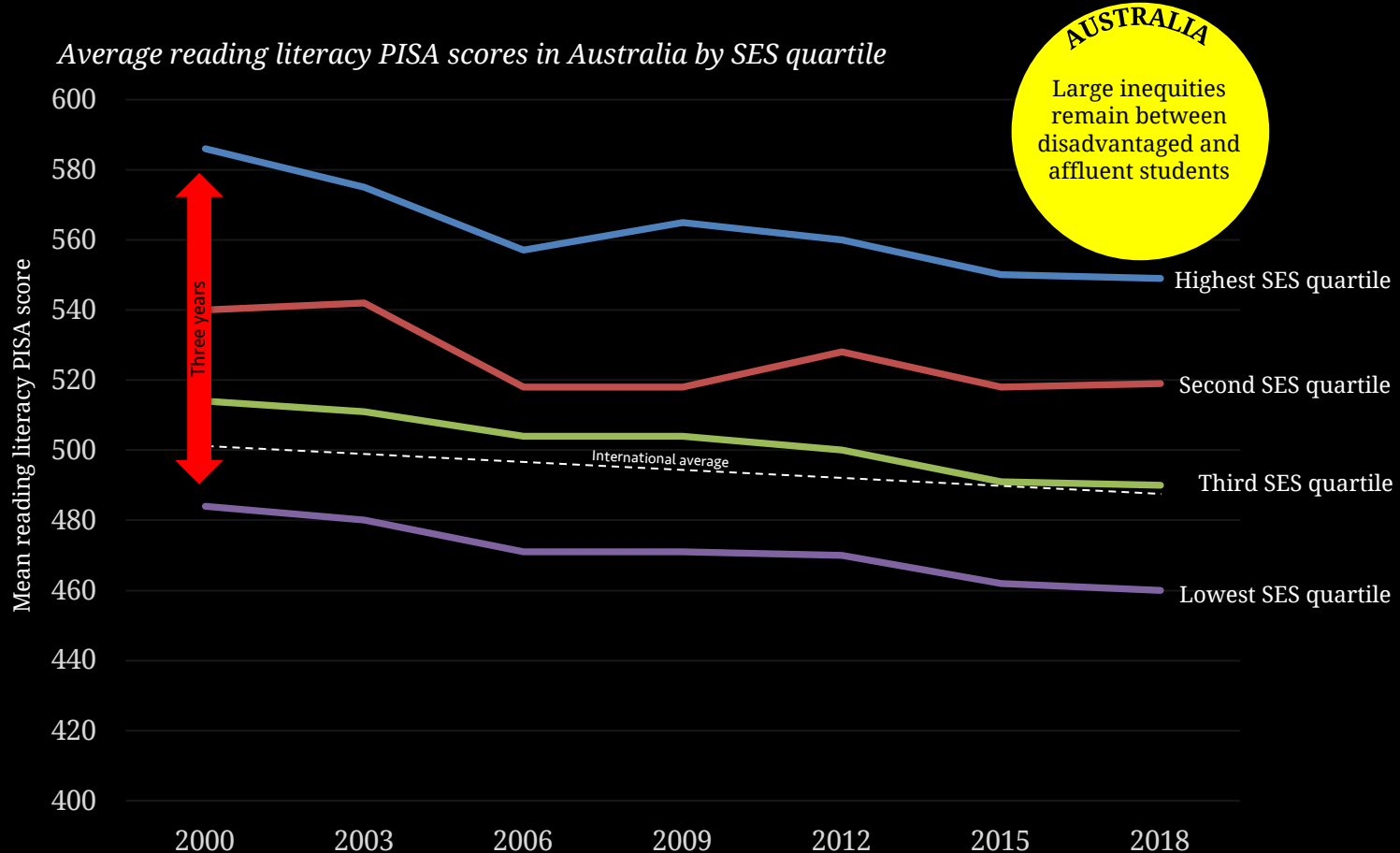
# Strength of relationship between achievement and family background



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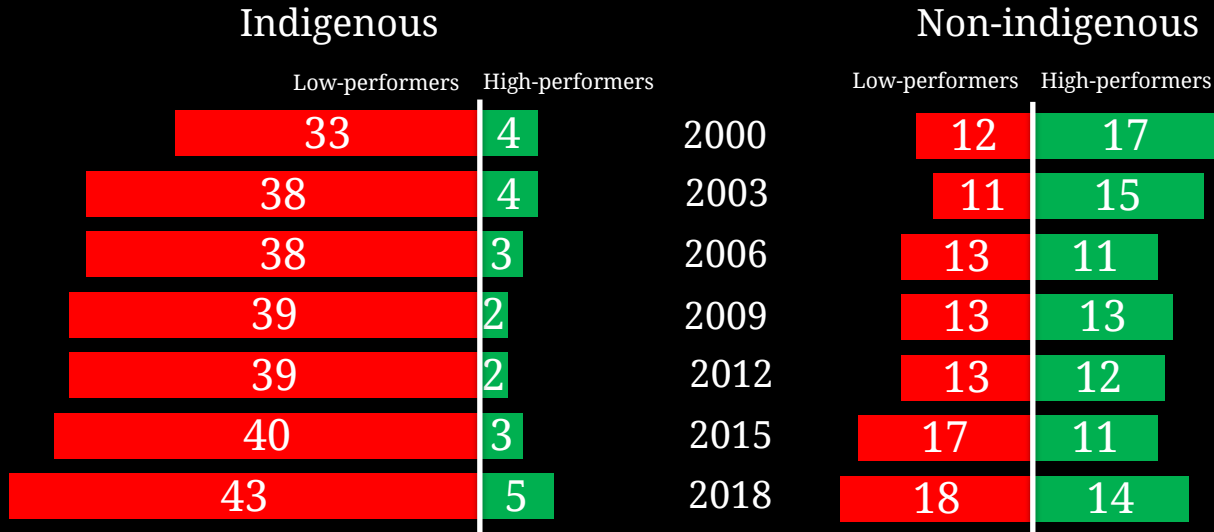
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*Proportions of low and high performers in Australia on the PISA reading literacy proficiency scale by Indigenous background*

**AUSTRALIA**  
 Number of low-performing students is increasing



**WHAT CAN WE DO?**

“A child's learning is a function more of the characteristics of his classmates than of those of the teacher.”

- Coleman (1966)

“The highest-performing education systems across the OECD are those that combine quality with equity.”

- OECD (2018)

# LEADERSHIP FOR EQUITY:

## Mission Possible: Fix Inequalities

Australia has a world class education system – but not for everyone. National data and international comparative reviews show that educational inequality is perhaps the most significant threshold that separates us from the pack of leading education nations in the world today. We deserve better as a nation, but moreover, we need to educate all our children so that they are given the tools to thrive and are capable of coping with the challenges that they may face in their lives. Some say that effecting meaningful change in an education system is too complicated and slow. We disagree and urge that as parents, caregivers, education stakeholders, policymakers, teachers and leaders, that we all can do better than we do now. But it takes all of us together to work for that better future and to implement small, but meaningful changes in our ingrained systems. Here are some examples of what we all can do.

### Mission for policymakers

#### Make equity a priority in education policy

Equity doesn't happen by chance. Effective and targeted policies can drive better practices. Policies should ensure that all schools have sufficient resources and enough trained personnel to make teaching and learning happen. Policies can also make clear what more equitable education would require schools to do. We know that quality education is easier to have with stronger equity. Consider these: high quality early childhood education for all, wellbeing as an essential outcome of schooling, and special needs education as an inclusive service to all children.

### Mission for schools

#### Make wellbeing a cornerstone of a great school

Children learn better when they are healthy and happy. In recent times, the wellbeing of young Australians has been in steady decline. Similarly, teachers and principals are increasingly stressed, tired and burned-out. Health and wellbeing are particular concerns among underprivileged children. Therefore, care for children's health and mental wellbeing should be part of the work of every school. Sufficient time for recess, physical activity, music, arts and play can positively affect students' and teachers' wellbeing in school and make it a better place for all.

### Mission for parents and caregivers

#### Host a school improvement BBQ

All parents and caregivers want to send their child to the best school. In Australia, unlike many other countries, much time and effort is spent selecting these best schools. What is best for one child may not be for others. Parents and caregivers play an essential role in supporting the school and can make significant contributions to the school community. Supporting your child's school could be as easy as organizing a fun gathering with friends to talk about how ways of improving the school to better serve different children, not just your own child/children. Challenge each other to do one concrete thing for the school community.

### Mission for businesses

#### Ask for excellence and equity

Employers know it: Well educated employees are the heart of successful business. This often leads to expectations for schools to raise levels of excellence at any cost. But inequality can be very expensive for companies and taxpayers. Advocate for high quality education in your local community. Don't stop there, insist that education system must deliver these high results in equitable ways. Establish new partnerships with high performing schools in both quality and equity of learning outcomes.

### Mission for teacher educators

#### Give all new teachers a course: "Equity in Education 101"

Teachers play a key role in schools to make all students learn beyond expectations. Initial teacher education can provide new teachers with a broader mindset and approach to student learning in school. Design a course for all students in initial teacher education that provides new teachers with the basic knowledge, values and skills to work in a school and education system that promotes greater equity.

### Mission for children

#### Look after one another

Because we all are different, so are the children in our schools. Some students find school a comfortable place to be and learn, others don't. We can do much better in every school to help each and everyone to think that school is their favourite place. Find someone who looks lonely and doesn't have many friends in school. Go and talk to a fellow student you don't know yet. Create a culture in your school that ensures helping everyone to succeed is the norm.

### Mission for journalists

#### Tell the success stories

Media plays an important role in improving education systems. Too often, however, bad news stories are reported because this content seems to garner more attention. Australia has world class education writers who not just report the news of others but often investigate their own information for their stories. Write a story about a school or a community that has done extraordinary things in helping all children succeed in school, collect real stories from children and parents and encourage inspiring school leaders and teachers to communicate what is possible in our schools.

### Mission for artists

#### Help every school to become an art school

Australian schools have a long tradition of teaching children about the rich culture of arts, music and drama. Still, success in school is determined by grades or test scores in a select few academic subjects. Arts subjects offer most children opportunities to actively engage in learning in school and that is a condition for greater equity in education. Work with students to teach them the work of an artist. Create a project with a school to use traditional storytelling and music that includes all children. Make every school in your community an art school.

### Mission for politicians

#### Listen to the experts

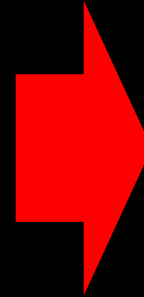
When the going gets tough, we often turn to expert advice. When politicians in Australia were coping with the global health pandemic in 2020, they systematically relied on the experience of health specialists and the top national and international scientists. Now, when you continue to develop Australian education systems to provide world class teaching and learning for all our children, make your decisions after listening to the advice of your top experts and practitioners. Communicate to schools and school leaders an overall direction and trust them to lead the way. Equitable education can't be created by force.

# LEADERSHIP FOR EQUITY:

Equity of curriculum: Policy-makers design curriculum in accordance with the needs of different students and communities.

Equity of pedagogy: Schools plan teaching and learning so that it best serves the needs of each and every learner.

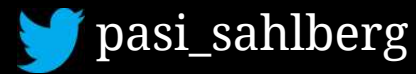
Equity of assessment: Policy-makers and schools equip teachers to use different assessment instruments and methods based on the needs of all students.



Adequate  
education



# THANK YOU!



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