

INDEPENDENT SCHOOLS AUSTRALIA

YEAR IN REVIEW 2023



INDEPENDENT
SCHOOLS
AUSTRALIA

ABOUT INDEPENDENT SCHOOLS AUSTRALIA



Independent Schools Australia (ISA) is the national peak body and the voice for the Independent school sector. Our membership and board are comprised of the state and territory Associations of Independent Schools (AISs). We work closely with our members to promote choice, diversity and partnership in education, and advocate for ongoing and sustainable levels of Australian government support through effective policy and fair funding.

FROM THE BOARD CHAIR

MICHAEL JONES

Despite increasing financial pressures on families, enrolment growth in the Independent school sector continued at a higher rate than other sectors in 2023, showing that parents trust the quality of Independent education and the ongoing efforts of school leaders and staff.

2023 was a year of expansion and development for Independent Schools Australia. After a careful and thorough recruitment process, we were delighted to appoint Graham Catt as the new Chief Executive Officer of ISA.

Graham's appointment effectively marked the commencement of an extensive consultation and planning process to support the development of ISA's Strategic Plan 2024 – 2026. This included engagement with each of our member associations, government stakeholders, national agencies, visits to schools and more.

I would like to acknowledge and thank Carolyn Grantskalns for kindly agreeing to step in as Interim CEO of ISA in early 2023, following her retirement from the Association of Independent Schools of South Australia (AISSA). Her contribution and guidance of ISA as we went through our hiring process was invaluable. I would also like to recognise outgoing Board member Michelle Green, who concluded her role after more than 20 years as Chief Executive of Independent Schools Victoria (ISV).

In 2023 our work focused on promoting Independent school education for students through increased advocacy and strong national representation. We have communicated with stakeholders through reliable relationships, supporting members in each state and territory through their own state elections, with active networks, and fruitful partnerships to support Independent schools, making sure that our voice is listened to at the highest levels of government and within the wider educational community.

During the year, ISA has led in-depth data analysis and substantial research projects, demonstrating the organisation's deep knowledge of national education policy and funding issues.

In 2023 we continued to acknowledge Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and pay our respect to Elders past and present in our ongoing journey and commitment to reconciliation through the development of our Reconciliation Action Plan. Our work in this area has broadened our values and enhanced the quality of our organisational culture.

In summary, the year 2023 has shown the resilience and flexibility of ISA, its member AISs and Independent schools. We have not only survived the challenges but have become stronger, more united, and more committed to our mission.

In developing our new Strategic Plan 2024 – 2026, the ISA Board has supported and endorsed a more leadership-oriented role within our national structure, the sector, and our interactions with governments and others. As we deliver on this challenge, I am confident that the foundation we have strengthened this year will lead us to even stronger and more effective achievements in the years ahead.

Finally, I'd like to express my appreciation to CEO Graham Catt, all the ISA Secretariat staff, and to my fellow Board Members for their expertise, relentless efforts, and dedication to ISA and the Independent school sector during 2023. It is through this support that our organisation can deliver so much for our members and for school education in Australia.

Thank you for your ongoing support and belief in the quality of an Independent school education.

Michael E Jones OAM JP
Board Chair
Independent Schools Australia





I began my tenure as ISA CEO in April and would like to acknowledge and thank both Margery Evans and Interim CEO Carolyn Grantskalns for their contributions to the organisation and for facilitating an excellent handover. I was fortunate to join a team who gave invaluable assistance to build my understanding of ISA, the Independent sector, the complexities of funding and more.

As a national peak body with a small staff team, the key to ISA's success is working effectively in collaboration with our member associations. I had the opportunity to travel and spend time with each of my AIS counterparts and visit some of the 1,216 schools they support nationally. I am grateful to the Executive Directors/Chief Executives for the warm hospitality, and for the insightful visits to over 25 diverse school communities that have helped me better appreciate their unique values, aspirations, and challenges.

The spirit of collaboration was also evident as staff from every AIS came together for the second annual AIS/ISA Symposium, an enriching event that reinforced our commitment to shared learning

and collective advancement. Thanks to the Association of Independent Schools of New South Wales (AISNSW) for hosting this important event, and I look forward to the next one.

In 2023, we agreed that a renewed focus was needed on the way we engage with governments and the community. In addition to commencing development of a new ISA Strategic Plan, we began refining ISA's advocacy strategy and messaging, including in depth research into both community and political stakeholder perceptions.

Our meetings with federal parliamentarians included Ministers Clare, Chiscolm and Aly, and Shadow Education Minister Henderson, along with members of relevant Senate and House of representative committees. These engagements focused on the diversity of Independent schools, the importance of choice to families, and the contribution Independent schools make to equity and excellence in education.

New senior appointments within the Department of Education, including Secretary Tony Cook and Deputy Secretary, Schools Group Meg Brighton, were welcomed. Both possess a sound understanding of our sector, and we have regular and constructive engagement.

Education ministers commissioned the *Review to Inform a Better and Fairer Education System*, and ISA met with the Expert Panel conducting the review and provided a comprehensive written submission. I was also invited by Minister Clare to join the Ministerial Reference Group (MRG) to inform the review.

This year we continued to build on our reputation for producing high-quality research and statistical analysis, with notable releases including *Reform Challenges in School Education*, *The Social Contribution of Independent Schools in Australia*, and *the Special Assistance Schools: Showcase*.

The Special Assistance Schools: Showcase played a valuable role in highlighting the diversity of schools and the critical role they play in educating students who may otherwise disengage from education entirely. The report gained significant media attention, and led to us bringing together Principals of special assistance schools, education experts, and politicians from around Australia to join ISA's forum *Re-Engaging Students in Education*, held in November at Parliament House.

I would like to extend my sincere appreciation to the Board of Directors, and especially to our Board Chair, Michael Jones, for their support and guidance.

Finally, I would like to thank the ISA team for their support and commitment and acknowledge the critical role that their expertise and professionalism has in ensuring our sector has a clear and influential national voice.



THE INDEPENDENT SCHOOL SECTOR IN 2023



According to the latest data, the number of students enrolled in Independent schools grew by 3.8 per cent in 2023, the sector's strongest growth in more than a decade.

The Independent sector grew not only in the number of students, but as a proportion of all Australian students. Across Australia, there were 1,216 Independent schools enrolling a total of 716,848 students. This number of students represents more than 16 per cent of all school students in Australia.

716,848

STUDENTS

Independent school student numbers increased by over 28,000



1,216

SCHOOLS

Seven new schools opened



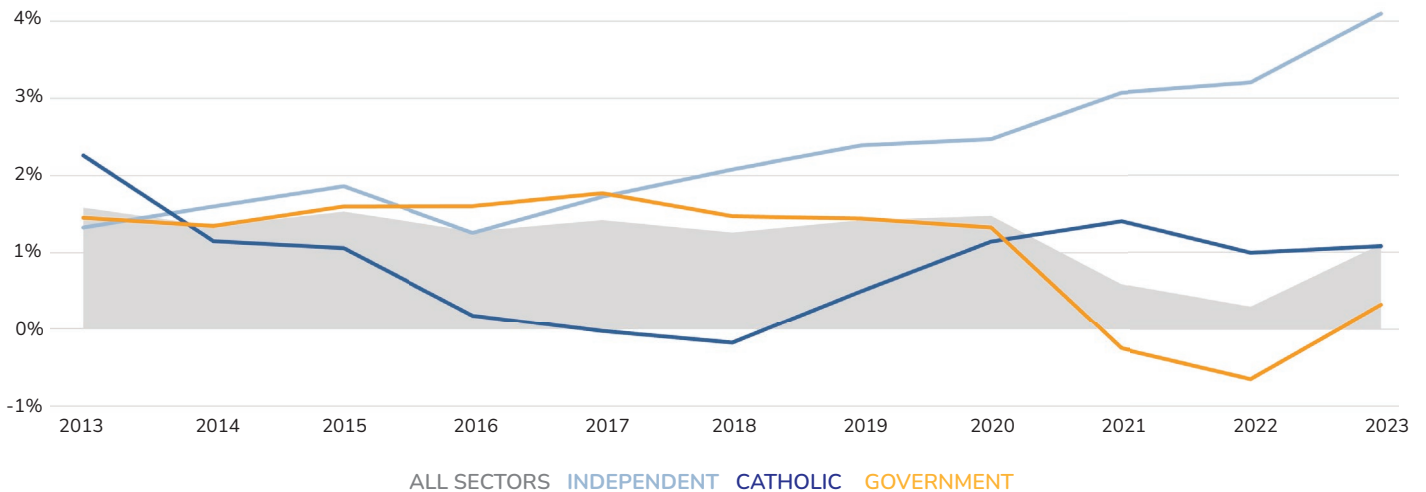
3.8%

ENROLMENT GROWTH

Enrolments in Independent schools continued to grow strongly



GROWTH IN SCHOOL ENROLMENTS ACROSS ALL SECTORS





ISA promotes Independent schooling in Australia through effective advocacy and strong national representation. With the support of the member associations, ISA continues to advocate on behalf of Independent schools on a wide range of issues impacting them.

Throughout 2023, ISA actively engaged in advocacy and relationship building, particularly with the Minister for Education, the Hon Jason Clare MP. Key issues included the National School Resourcing Agreement (NSRA), Non-Government Reform Support Fund (NGRSF), deeming for special assistance schools and exploring the implications of generative AI. Additionally, ISA advised on challenges including payroll tax in Victoria, ensuring the sector's interests were well-represented and advocating for sustainable support and fair funding for Independent schools.



ISA NATIONAL FORUM - RE-ENGAGING STUDENTS IN EDUCATION

In November, Principals of special assistance schools, education experts, and politicians came from around Australia to join ISA's forum at Parliament House, *Re-Engaging Students in Education*.

The gathering showcased inspiring stories and innovative approaches to addressing challenges faced by students who may not typically engage with education.

Participants emphasised the need for patience and acceptance in supporting young learners, recognising that these schools play a pivotal role in transforming lives.

Notably, Professor Donna Cross OAM shared startling and troubling research findings on student wellbeing and mental health.

Gavin Morris, Principal of Yipirinya School (an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander school in Alice Springs), passionately highlighted the holistic support required beyond education.

Tim McNevin, Principal at Galilee School in the ACT, underscored their commitment to individualised student responses.

Senator the Honourable Anthony Chisholm, Assistant Minister for Education, opened the event by acknowledging the sector's significant work, while Senator the Honourable Sarah Henderson, Shadow Minister for Education, addressed the forum stressing the importance of getting educational fundamentals right.



NATIONAL SCHOOL REFORM AGREEMENT

The Expert Panel chaired by Dr Lisa O'Brien conducted the Review to Inform a Better and Fairer Education System. ISA met with the Expert Reference Group to provide an overview of the sector and address the Review Terms of Reference. Graham Catt was appointed to the Ministerial Reference Group and ISA made a formal submission to the review.

ISA's submission noted that there is value in articulating a national policy agenda that drives national improvement and reform to improve the outcomes of all Australian students. At the same time, it must be recognised that reform in Australian schooling involves all sectors of education and that it is critical that all sectors are involved in the development of new national reform directions.

The submission further stated that the cost of delivering national reform is significant for Independent schools, as they operate independently and lack access to systemic supports. A commitment to the resourcing of reform in all sectors is essential and will support Independent schools in implementing educational reforms.

The ISA submission also looked at the way that Independent schools can make a valuable contribution to the development of the reform agenda, and to finding and being part of solutions. The autonomy of Independent schools means that they are ideally placed to trial and evaluate programs and initiatives, they are able to innovate, and are often early adopters of new technologies and pedagogical approaches.

Case studies were included from individual Independent schools and AISs in areas such as implementing generative AI, improving outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander boarding students, improving outcomes for disengaged students and ways to attract and retain current and future teachers.

To illustrate innovative practices in the Independent sector and the contribution that the sector can make to the national reform agenda, ISA embarked on a research report focusing on innovation in the Independent sector for completion in 2024.

Education Ministers met to refine and release their final report on 12 December, with ISA looking forward to future negotiations on the 2024 Better and Fairer Schools Agreement (BFSA).

DEDUCTIBLE GIFT RECIPIENT STATUS UNDER THREAT

In February 2023, the Productivity Commission commenced an Inquiry into Philanthropic Giving to better understand philanthropy and identify opportunities and obstacles to increasing it.

ISA's May 2023 submission emphasised the importance of Deductible Gift Recipient (DGR) Funds for Independent schools, supporting services, scholarships, and capital works, and we recommended consideration be given to ways that the DGR framework could be expanded to enable other forms of philanthropy in the school sector.

The Commission's November draft report, *Future Foundations for Giving*, proposed an unexpected and controversial recommendation to remove the DGR status for school building funds, citing concerns about potential misuse of tax-deductible donations.

This was of great concern to non-government schools as it would severely hinder the ability of parents and communities to contribute to their schools though donating to building funds.

ISA and AISs strategised a sector wide response to this threat that would shift more financial burden onto families already dealing with ever increasing cost-of-living pressures. This proactive stance aimed to safeguard the sector's ability to maintain community contributions and support.

GENERATIVE AI IN EDUCATION

In July 2023, ISA's submission to the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Employment, Education and Training's Inquiry into the use of generative artificial intelligence (AI) in the Australian education system, made seven recommendations to help to chart a safe and ethical path that maximises opportunities and minimises potential risks for schools.

With the education sector considering the potential opportunities and risks of generative AI, ISA highlighted examples of the ways six Independent schools were already exploring the rapidly evolving technology.

ISA's recommendations included integrating generative AI into teacher education to prepare future educators for its use in teaching and assessment; creating a dedicated website to provide educators with resources on generative AI in education; and establishing a federal education advisory body with representatives from all education sectors and academics to explore generative AI's benefits and risks.

VICTORIAN GOVERNMENT PAYROLL TAX

The introduction of payroll tax for non-government schools in the 2023 Victorian State Budget was a national issue for the sector. With Labor governments in power in every mainland state and territory, the introduction of the tax sets a dangerous precedent given the ideology underpinning the policy and the potential for other jurisdictions to adopt similar measures.

In support of ISV, ISA issued media releases calling for the tax to be repealed and raised the matter in meetings with federal parliamentarians as an example of misguided policy and a lack of understanding of the sector.

REPRESENTATION

Key staff from ISA, member associations and Independent schools represented the Independent school sector on a wide range of committees, taskforces and working groups during 2023.

This representation ensured the views and distinctive needs of the sector were recognised, and that Independent schools have access to services and programs developed by the Australian Government.



SUBMISSIONS

JANUARY

- Submission to the Skills Priority List Stakeholder Consultation
- 2023-24 Pre-Budget submission

FEBRUARY

- Submission in response to the Department of Employment and Workplace Relations' Jobs and Skills Australia Discussion Paper

MARCH

- Submission to House of Representatives Standing Committee on Employment, Education and Training's Inquiry into Perceptions and Status of Vocational Education and Training
- Submission to the Joint Standing Committee on Migration Inquiry into the Role of Permanent Migration in Nation Building
- Submission to the Senate Inquiry into Disruption in Australian School Classrooms

APRIL

- Submission to the Department of Education Review of the Impact of COVID-19 on School Students with Disability.
- Submission to the Teacher Education Expert Panel Discussion Paper

MAY

- Submission to the Department of Social Services Early Years Strategy
- Submission to the Productivity Commission Inquiry into Early Childhood Education and Care
- Submission to the Productivity Commission Review of Philanthropy

JULY

- Submission to the House Standing Committee on Employment, Education and Training Inquiry into the issues and opportunities presented by generative AI
- Submission to Department of Industry, Science and Resources Supporting Responsible AI: Discussion Paper

AUGUST

- Submission to the Department of Education Review to Inform a Better and Fairer Education System

OCTOBER

- Submission to the Australian Government's National Autism Strategy Discussion Paper

DECEMBER

- Commonwealth Government COVID-19 Response Inquiry



ISA maintains and develops trusted relationships and networks. These relationships broaden stake-holders' understanding about the diversity and contribution of Independent schools and contribute to ISA knowledge and expertise.

Throughout 2023, ISA continued to work effectively with member associations, key stakeholders and national and international bodies in areas ranging from the National School Reform Agreement through to the implications of generative AI.

ISA/AIS COLLABORATION

In 2023, ISA's relationship with Associations of Independent Schools (AISs) continued to deepen, enhancing ISA's knowledge of the sector's diversity and fostering robust collaborations. This partnership enables ISA to extend its endeavours beyond Canberra's political sphere, gaining deeper insights into the sector's multifaceted nature. AISs were instrumental in facilitating conference attendance, nurturing relationships with many and varied organisations, and orchestrating an extensive range of school visits.

In addition, ISA and AIS staff worked in collaboration with hundreds of individuals across numerous organisations in working groups. This collective effort expands ISA and AISs' advocacy reach and assists us to stay well informed of developments across all educational sectors.

ISA/AIS SYMPOSIUM

ISA held its second national symposium in November 2023; a significant event that brought together senior leaders from AISs to collaborate, share and imagine new possibilities for working together.

Hosted by AISNSW, the symposium saw over 40 participants from every AIS engage in dynamic group discussions, tackling key issues such as the attraction, development, and retention of school leaders; the exploration of generative AI's challenges, risks, and opportunities; and the diverse nature of the Independent school sector, including alternate pathways for senior secondary schooling and different school models.

The symposium was not only a platform for sharing ideas but also an opportunity for identifying opportunities for future projects and collaborative efforts. It underscored the Independent school sector's commitment to continued collaboration with government, government departments and all sectors to work towards national reform that benefits all.

KEY RELATIONSHIPS

There are a range of other groups with whom ISA regularly consults and collaborates, these include:

- National Catholic Education Commission (NCEC)
- National agencies: Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA)
- Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL)
- Education Services Australia (ESA)
- Australian Education Research Organisation (AERO)
- Association of Heads of Independent Schools Australia (AHISA)
- Association of School Business Administrators (ASBA)

NATIONAL CONSULTATIVE GROUP

Twice a year ISA hosts meetings of the National Consultative Group, bringing together representatives from national school groups to discuss and build a greater understanding of the diversity across the sector, organisations' priorities and issues affecting their member schools.

NATIONAL CONSULTATIVE GROUP MEMBERS

- Anglican Schools Australia
- Australian Boarding Schools Association
- Australian Council of Jewish Schools
- Australian Association of Christian Schools
- Ecumenical Schools Australia
- Lutheran Education Australia
- Steiner Education Australia
- Association of School Business Administrators
- Australian Parents Council
- Christian Education National
- Christian Schools Australia
- Islamic Schools Association of Australia
- Montessori Australia Group
- National Independent Special Schools Association
- Adventist Schools Australia
- Greek Orthodox Schools
- Association of Heads of Independent Schools of Australia
- Autism Spectrum Australia
- Uniting Church

INFORM

In 2023, ISA continued to deliver accurate and timely research and analysis to AIs, policy makers and other stakeholders. This was especially evident in the release of a number of substantial high-profile reports, further solidifying our reputation as a credible source of information.



ISA also continued production of state/territory versions of our annual Snapshot publication for AIs, producing seven state/territory editions with AISSA as a new addition in 2023.

During the year ISA also significantly increased its media presence and public commentary, proactively engaging in public outreach on a range of issues to promote the sector and highlight its diversity.

MEDIA

The National School Reform Agreement was a large focus of discussions for schools in 2023, and in line with that, ISA significantly increased its presence in media and public discussion.

Despite criticism from some quarters about Independent schools being overfunded, ISA's messaging consistently advocated for "full and fair funding," emphasised the need for collaborative reform across all educational sectors and all levels of government, and promoted how Independent schools can uniquely respond to the Government's reform pillars.

This backdrop also helped shape our highlighting of special assistance schools, and their relevance to issues around well-being, attendance rates and school refusals. The ISA launch at Parliament House generated goodwill among MPs and senators and positive coverage.

In 2023 ISA issued 25 media releases across a range of topics and was quoted more than 30 times in media across a variety of news outlets and education publications.

SOCIAL MEDIA

ISA continued its social media presence on LinkedIn, X (formerly Twitter) and Facebook. With the continued general trend of movement away from the X platform, ISA saw very strong growth in 2023 in LinkedIn followers, more than doubling its total followers to more than 2,000 by December. This took LinkedIn into the position of being ISA's strongest social media channel by a significant margin.

The most successful social post was on LinkedIn in July, regarding the Victorian payroll tax. Titled *Scrap the Tax*, it generated 28,873 impressions, 37 comments and 14 shares.

REFORM CHALLENGES IN SCHOOL EDUCATION

A contribution to the national conversation about the future of education, this research paper by the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER) was commissioned by ISA. It was designed to stimulate discussion on a vision for the future of school education in Australia and examines the challenges now confronting schools globally and how addressing these challenges will require fundamental reforms of the external frameworks within which schools work.

ISA SPECIAL ASSISTANCE SCHOOLS: SHOWCASE

This report was launched on 3 May. It showcased the unique role of special assistance schools in providing inclusive education to young people who have not experienced success in mainstream schooling. With specialised support they can re-engage in learning and determine future pathways for further study or employment. For some students, enrolling in an Independent special assistance school may be their last chance to complete their education, and to change a negative trajectory into a positive one.

The report's release received positive media coverage in major dailies. It prompted over 750 visits to the ISA website and 200 downloads of the report, with hard copies distributed to relevant Ministers and stakeholders.

THE SOCIAL CONTRIBUTION OF INDEPENDENT SCHOOLS IN AUSTRALIA

ISA collaborated with McCrindle Research to highlight the societal contributions of Independent schools. This partnership revealed the extensive impact these institutions have beyond academic boundaries, fostering a thriving society. The research examined the social benefits provided by Independent schools, showcasing their role in community service and the lasting influence on students and families. Insights gathered from parent and school surveys underscored the commitment of Independent schools to community enrichment and the positive legacy of their graduates in society. The report was officially launched at the Independent Schools Queensland (ISQ) State Forum in June.

ISA 2023 RESEARCH & DATA REPORTS

12 APRIL

– REFORM CHALLENGES IN SCHOOL EDUCATION

3 MAY

– SPECIAL ASSISTANCE SCHOOLS SHOWCASE

18 MAY

– SNAPSHOT

– AT A GLANCE

MAY - JUNE

– SNAPSHOT: STATE AND TERRITORY EDITIONS (SIX)

22 JUNE

– THE SOCIAL CONTRIBUTION OF INDEPENDENT SCHOOLS

18 SEPTEMBER

– THE INDEPENDENT SCHOOL STUDENT- A DEMOGRAPHIC PROFILE

22 SEPTEMBER

– ENROLMENT TRENDS AND PROJECTIONS





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NEW SOUTH WALES
CHAIR OF AISNSW BOARD

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(AISSA)

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(IST)

INDEPENDENT SCHOOLS VICTORIA
(ISV)

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