

Poll: Chronic underfunding is driving the exodus to private schools

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INTRODUCTION

Australia has one of the most privatised education systems in the world. Combined with skyrocketing private school fees, this means Australia is the most expensive place in the developed world for families to send a child to high school.¹

These high fees are a marker of Australia's unusual funding system; unlike in most other countries, private schools are allowed to both take government funding and charge fees of their choosing. These fees now reach as high as \$55,000 per year.²

On the other hand, Australia's public schools face annual funding shortfalls of over \$4 billion per year, underfunding that Australian governments have committed to rectifying by 2034 – or after most current students will have finished school.³ The Australian Education Union has found that 56% of private schools receive more per-student funding from Australian governments than public schools with similar sizes, locations, levels of education and student needs.⁴ This is the environment in which more and more parents are sending their children to private schools.

Australians are noticing these funding imbalances.

On behalf of The Australia Institute, YouGov surveyed a nationally representative sample of 2,230 Australians about funding for Australian primary and secondary schools.

¹ Predavec and Denniss (2026) *Australia's private high school problem*,
<https://australiainstitute.org.au/report/australias-private-high-school-problem/>

² Predavec and Denniss (2026) *Australia's private high school problem*, pp. 5-6

³ Predavec and Denniss (2026) *Australia's private high school problem*, p. 10

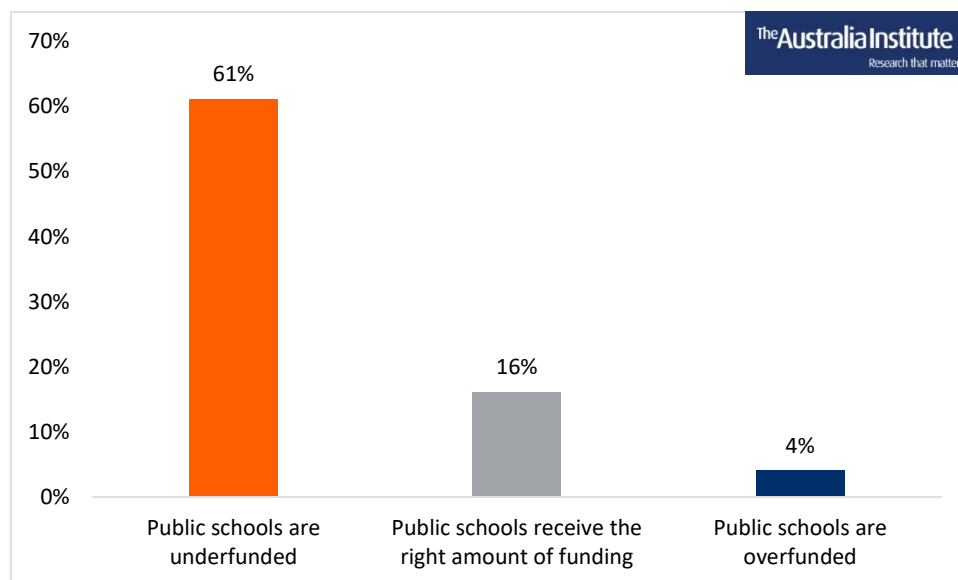
⁴ Australian Education Union (2024) A decade of inequity: How Australian governments have funded private schools above public schools since 2013,
<https://www.aeufederal.org.au/application/files/9917/2543/1780/decadeofinequity.pdf>

The results show that most Australians think public schools are underfunded and that private schools are overfunded. They also show that a better-funded public school system could attract hundreds of thousands of students who otherwise attend private schools.

POLL RESULTS

When asked what they thought best describes current public school funding, most Australians (61%) describe public schools as underfunded, and less than one in 20 (4%) describe them as overfunded.⁵ Of those surveyed, 16% said they receive the right amount of funding and 19% picked don't know / not sure.

Figure 1: Which do you think best describes current public school funding?



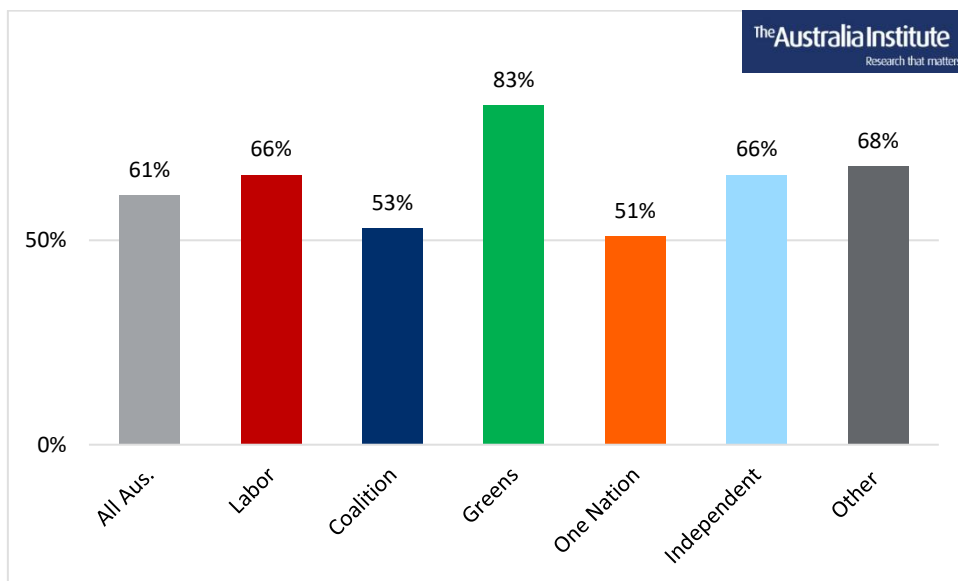
Note: 19% responded 'Don't know / Not sure'.

Half (49%) of parents with a child in private school describe public schools as underfunded, as do over two thirds (72%) of public school parents.

A majority of Australians describe public schools as underfunded regardless of who they vote for, including Labor (66%), the Liberal-National Coalition (53%), One Nation (51%), the Greens (83%), independents (66%) and minor parties (68%).

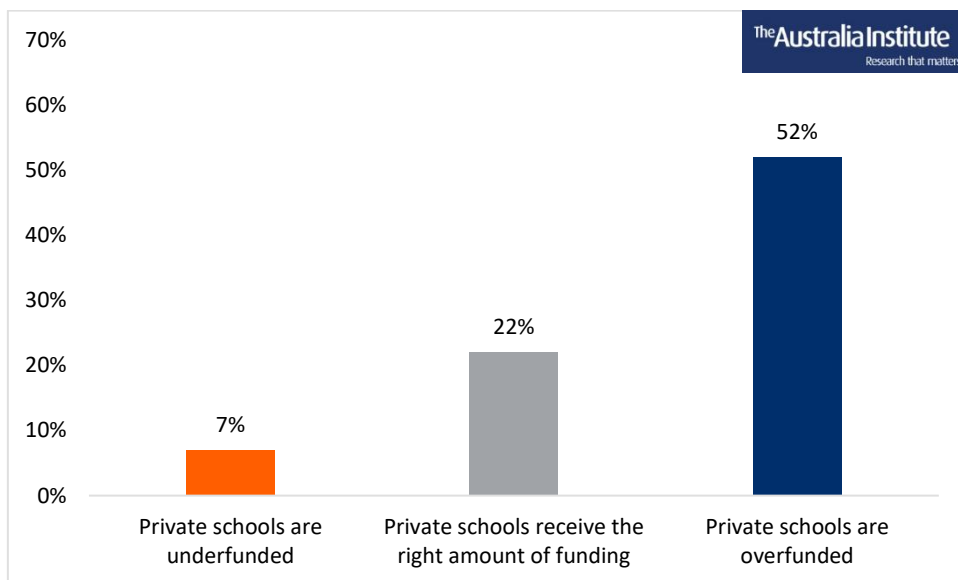
⁵ Detailed results are appended for all polling questions published in this brief.

Figure 2: Share who describe public schools as underfunded, by voting intention



When asked the same question for private schools rather than public, most Australians (52%) describe private schools as overfunded, with fewer than one in ten (7%) describing them as underfunded. Of those surveyed, 22% say they receive the right amount of funding, and 19% responded don't know / not sure.

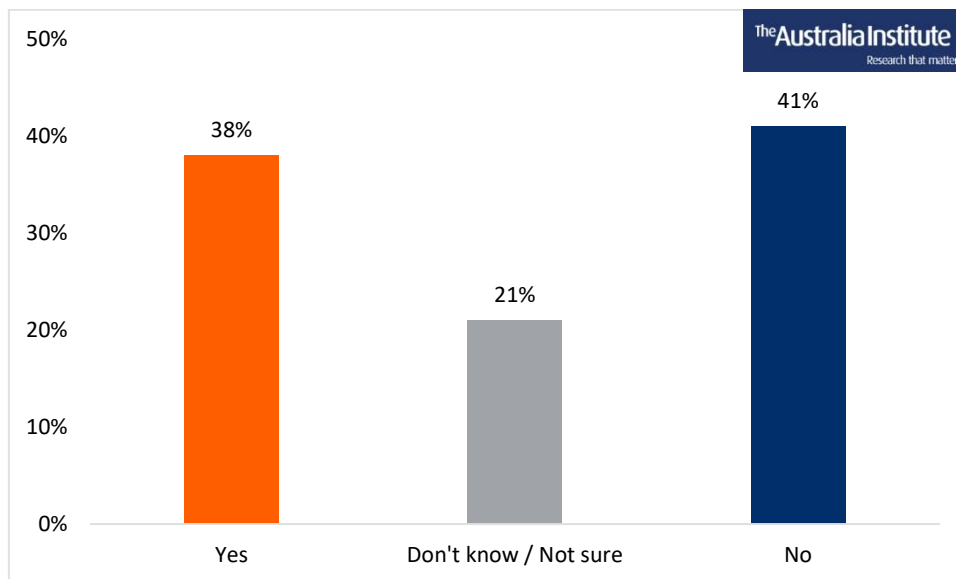
Figure 3: Which do you think best describes current private school funding?



Note: 19% responded 'Don't know / Not sure'.

Parents with children in private schools were then asked if they would have enrolled their child in the public system if their local public school were better funded.

Figure 4: Would you have enrolled your child in the public system if your local public school were better funded?



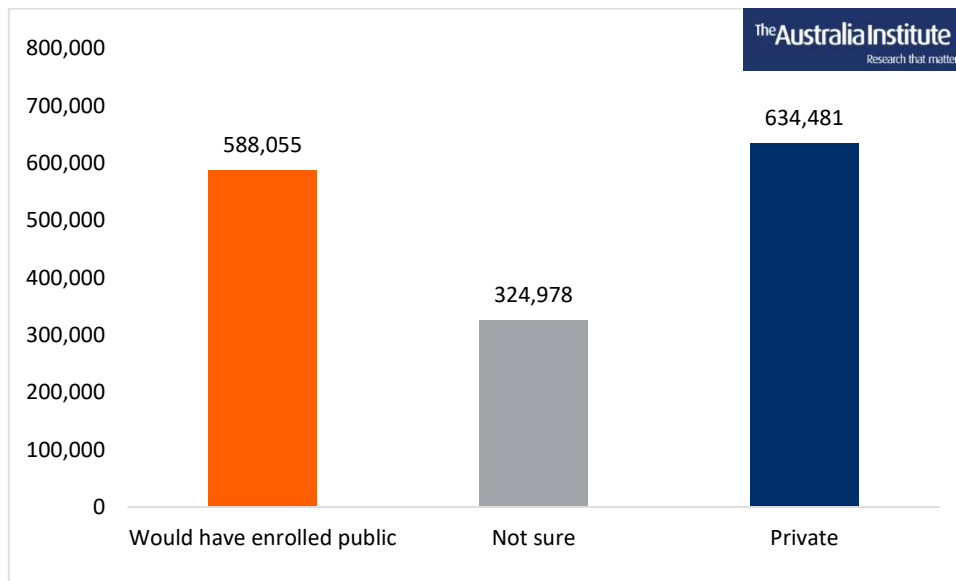
Two in five (38%) said they would have, with another two in five (41%) saying they would not and one in five (21%) unsure.

ANALYSIS

Currently, there are 1,547,514 students enrolled at private primary and secondary schools in Australia.⁶ If the public school system misses out on 38% of them, that represents over 588,000 potential students who are sent to private schools instead because of underfunding.

⁶ ABS (2026) "Schools", <https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/people/education/schools/latest-release>

Figure 5: Number of children who may have enrolled in better-funded public schools



Source: Author calculations based on poll results; ABS (2026) “Schools”

Note: assumes parents have similar average numbers of children enrolled in schools across answers.

Australia’s public schools educate 63% of primary and secondary students, or 2,613,404 nationwide.⁷ If another 588,000 students were enrolled in better-funded public schools, that would have meant 77% of students were educated in the public school system – reversing over four decades of education privatisation.

Public schools educated more than 77% of students until the 1980s and only dropped below 70% in the late 1990s.⁸

Enrolling their children in public school would also save private school parents a lot of money. On average, private school fees, charges and other parental contributions now reach \$8,973 per student per year, or over \$100,000 for a K-12 private school education.⁹ In the most expensive institutions, fees can now reach up to \$55,000 per year and are expected to reach \$100,000 annually sometime in the next decade.¹⁰ While private schools regularly blame inflation for rising fees, according to analysis

⁷ ABS (2026) “Schools”

⁸ Senate Standing Committees on Education and Employment (2004) *Schools funding*, https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/Senate/Education_Employment_and_Workplace_Relations/Completed_inquiries/2002-04/schoolfunding/report/03ch1

⁹ ACARA (2024) “School income”; Author calculations of costs over 13 years of K-12 education.

¹⁰ Harris and Kowal (2026) “We looked at fees at 32 private schools. One is charging almost \$55,000”, <https://www.smh.com.au/national/nsw/we-looked-at-fees-at-32-private-schools-one-is-charging-almost-55-000-20260113-p5ntpf.html>

from the Australian Financial Review, private school fees increased at more than double the rate of inflation in 2026.¹¹ This isn't a recent phenomenon. According to ABS data, secondary education prices almost always grown more quickly than overall prices since this data started being collected in 2000, meaning it has generally driven up inflation. Since 2000, secondary education prices have quadrupled while overall prices have only doubled.¹² In the midst of an ongoing cost-of-living crisis, this can be a significant financial stressor for parents.

CONCLUSION

Successive Australian state, territory and federal governments have allowed the public school system to be chronically underfunded, and the Australian public has noticed these funding imbalances.

Currently, Australian public schools are not expected to be fully funded up to agreed standards until at least 2034 – and there is doubt about whether all states will meet that benchmark.¹³

This polling makes clear that most Australians describe public schools as underfunded and private schools as overfunded. In this context, it is unsurprising that many parents choose to send their children to schools with greater funding and resources. However, this polling indicates that a better-funded public school system could reverse those trends, potentially bringing hundreds of thousands of students back into public schools.

Australia's state, territory and federal governments have a choice. Either they can step up their funding, providing the push necessary to reverse decades of decline in public school enrolments, or they can stay the course by keeping public schools underfunded, and push parents towards expensive private alternatives during an ongoing cost-of-living crisis.

¹¹ Bowes (2026) "Elite private school fees to hit \$100,000 a year in a decade", <https://www.afr.com/work-and-careers/education/elite-private-school-fees-to-hit-100-000-a-year-in-a-decade-20251119-p5ngra>

¹² Bowes (2026) "Elite private school fees to hit \$100,000 a year in a decade"

¹³ Towell and Precel (2026) "Righting this wrong: MPs call to pay back underfunded public schools", <https://www.smh.com.au/national/victoria/righting-this-wrong-mps-call-to-pay-back-underfunded-public-schools-20260512-p5zw1v.html>



**Australian
Polling Council
Quality Mark**

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Short Methodology Statement

Research company	YouGov Galaxy Pty Ltd
Client commissioning the research	Australia Institute
Fieldwork dates	4th June – 18th June 2026
Mode of data collection	Online recruited from research panel (100%)
Target population	Australians eligible to vote
Sample size	2,230
Australian Polling Council compliant	Yes
URL of Long Methodology statement	https://australiainstitute.org.au/australian-polling-council-long-methodology-disclosure-statements/
Is voting intention published?	No

Long Methodology Statement

Effective sample size after weighting applied	980
Margin of error associated with effective sample size	±3.13
Quotas and weighting	Age, Gender, Education, AEC region, household income, 2025 Federal Election vote and 2023 Voice Referendum vote
Weighting method used	Rim weighting
Full question text, responses categories and randomisation	Below for published questions
Source of online sample	Selected from previously recruited online panels of research participants using quotas based on weighting frame and past vote.
Positioning of voting intention questions in questionnaire?	After demographics
How were undecided voters handled?	NA
2PP calculation method	NA

DETAILED RESULTS

No prior questions are expected to influence those published in this brief.

Q1. Do you currently have a child attending a primary or secondary school? (multiple select, randomise)

1. Yes, private
2. Yes, public
3. No *[fixed]*

Column %	Total	Male	Female	18 - 24	25 - 34	35 - 49	50 - 64	65+	Private	Public	No school
Yes, private	11	11	10	3	9	27	8	2	100	11	0
Yes, public	14	15	13	3	12	35	10	1	14	100	0
No	77	75	79	96	80	42	83	97	0	0	100
Column n	2230	1091	1132	111	327	746	590	456	801	326	1199

Column %	Total	NSW	VIC	QLD	WA	SA	Other	ALP	COA	GRE	PHON	IND	Other	UND
Yes, private	11	11	10	12	15	10	7	11	15	8	11	7	12	7
Yes, public	14	15	13	15	11	11	14	16	11	12	15	9	15	13
No	77	76	79	75	75	80	79	74	75	81	76	85	74	83
Column n	2230	670	539	488	241	196	96	701	376	242	559	107	94	151

Q2. Which do you think best describes current public school funding? (single select, reverse)

1. Public schools are overfunded
2. Public schools are underfunded
3. Public schools receive the right amount of funding *[fixed]*
4. Don't know / Not sure *[fixed]*

Column %	Total	Male	Female	18-24	25-34	35-49	50-64	65+	Private	Public	No school
Public schools are overfunded	4	4	3	2	3	4	3	5	8	1	3
Public schools are underfunded	61	62	60	74	57	62	59	57	49	72	61
Public schools receive the right amount of funding	16	19	14	14	21	17	15	16	26	19	15
Don't know / Not sure	19	15	23	10	19	17	23	22	17	8	21
Column n	2230	1091	1132	111	327	746	590	456	801	326	1199

Column %	Total	NSW	VIC	QLD	WA	SA	Other	ALP	COA	GRE	PHON	IND	Other	UND
Public schools are overfunded	4	4	3	4	3	5	3	2	5	1	6	2	5	0
Public schools are underfunded	61	63	62	57	55	59	66	66	53	83	51	66	68	48
Public schools receive the right amount of funding	16	17	14	19	21	14	12	16	23	7	21	23	10	7
Don't know / Not sure	19	16	21	20	21	22	19	16	19	9	22	9	17	45
Column n	2230	670	539	488	241	196	96	701	376	242	559	107	94	151

Q3. Which do you think best describes current private school funding? (single select, reverse)

1. Private schools are overfunded
2. Private schools are underfunded
3. Private schools receive the right amount of funding *[fixed]*
4. Don't know / Not sure *[fixed]*

Column %	Total	Male	Female	18 - 24	25 - 34	35 - 49	50 - 64	65+	Private	Public	No school
Private schools are overfunded	52	55	50	61	55	46	54	51	19	59	55
Private schools are underfunded	7	7	8	4	6	10	7	7	29	4	5
Private schools receive the right amount of funding	22	23	20	25	20	25	17	22	39	19	20
Don't know / Not sure	19	15	22	10	19	19	22	20	13	18	20
Column n	2230	1091	1132	111	327	746	590	456	801	326	1199

Column %	Total	NSW	VIC	QLD	WA	SA	Other	ALP	COA	GRE	PHON	IND	Other	UND
Private schools are overfunded	52	57	53	49	42	53	55	60	39	75	45	50	55	42
Private schools are underfunded	7	8	7	8	8	7	5	5	12	3	10	5	7	6
Private schools receive the right amount of funding	22	20	21	21	28	19	21	20	27	12	26	27	16	15
Don't know / Not sure	19	15	19	22	22	21	19	15	22	10	19	18	22	37
Column n	2230	670	539	488	241	196	96	701	376	242	559	107	94	151

Q4. Would you have enrolled your child in the public system if your local public school were better funded?

1. Yes
2. No
3. Don't know / Not sure *[fixed]*

Column %	Total	Male	Female	18 - 24	25 - 34	35 - 49	50 - 64	65+	Private	Public	No school
Yes	38	42	32	91	62	37	24	1	38	52	
No	41	37	47	5	21	42	47	93	41	30	
Don't know / Not sure	21	21	21	4	17	21	29	6	21	18	
Column n	801	379	421	12	116	477	183	13	801	96	0

Column %	Total	NSW	VIC	QLD	WA	SA	Other	ALP	COA	GRE	PHON	IND	Other	UND
Yes	38	44	41	31	38	28	24	48	33	61	30	31	24	25
No	41	38	37	46	40	48	57	24	54	17	51	46	59	50
Don't know / Not sure	21	18	22	23	22	24	19	28	13	22	19	23	17	25
Column n	801	255	209	160	88	66	23	257	160	80	197	29	38	40