# PISA results show need for fully funded public schools



The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's (OECD) 2022 Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) results reveal Australia has one of the most unequal school systems in the OECD and that inequality is increasing.

There are large achievement gaps in reading, mathematics and science of five or more years of learning at age 15 and the gaps have widened since 2006. As well, a large and growing proportion of disadvantaged students do not achieve international standards.

The new results intensify the pressure on the federal and state/territory governments to fully fund public schools because they enrol over 80 per cent of disadvantaged students.

To his credit, the Federal Minister for Education, Jason Clare, said: "This again highlights the importance of fixing the funding gap and this education gap in Australian schools."

The question is whether he will deliver in the next National Schools Reform Agreement. As [journalist] Michelle Grattan stated on The Conversation website:
"Education Minister Jason Clare performs convincingly but his tests are still to come, especially as Australia grapples with how to improve school outcomes." (The PISA results reinforced how imperative this is.)

The achievement gaps between high socio-economic status (SES) and disadvantaged students have widened in reading, mathematics and science since 2006 [Chart 1].

The OECD states that 20 points on the PISA scale represents about one year of learning.

The gaps between high and low SES students increased from just over four years of learning to nearly five years in reading and over five years in mathematics and science.

The gaps between high SES and Indigenous students in reading remains at just over six years of learning and nearly seven years of learning in science.

The mathematics gap increased significantly from about six years to six and a half years. The gaps between high SES and remote area students increased by about one year of learning, with a reading gap of over five years and nearly six years in mathematics and science.

OECD data show that Australia now has the equal 12th largest mathematics achievement gap between high and low SES students out of 37 OECD countries for which data is available, the 13th largest gap in science and the 14th largest in reading.

The results also strongly suggest that the learning of disadvantaged students suffered more from the Covid pandemic than advantaged students.

Reading, mathematics and science scores fell for all disadvantaged students between 2018 and 2022 but largely increased for advantaged students [Chart 2].

Reading scores for low SES, Indigenous and remote area students fell by about six months of learning while there was an insignificant change for high SES students.

Mathematics scores for disadvantaged students fell by over six months of learning but increased for high SES students.

Science scores for high SES students increased by nearly a year of learning but declined for disadvantaged students including a decline of about six months of learning by remote area students.

Disadvantaged students had more problems in learning during the Covid shutdown. These students had less access to online learning technology and less family resources at home.

Covid and the digital divide between rich and poor has set back the learning of low SES, Indigenous and remote area students and widened the gaps between them and their SES peers.

Large proportions of disadvantaged students did not achieve the basic PISA proficiency level in 2022. One-third or more of low SES and remote area students did not achieve basic proficiency in reading and science while 43 per cent of low SES and 48 per cent of remote area students did not achieve basic mathematics proficiency [Chart 3].

Over half of all Indigenous students (55 per cent) did not achieve basic mathematics proficiency, 45 per cent did not achieve reading proficiency and 46 per cent did not achieve science proficiency.

The percentage of disadvantaged students not achieving basic proficiency standards was generally three to four times that of high SES students.

Only about 10 per cent of high SES students did not achieve these standards.

Very few disadvantaged students achieved at the highest proficiency levels compared to high SES students. Only two to four per cent of low SES, Indigenous and remote area students achieved at the highest PISA proficiency levels compared to about 25 per cent of high SES students [Chart 4].

The percentage of high SES students achieving at the highest proficiency levels was about eight times that of disadvantaged students.

The new PISA results demonstrate that Australia has a highly inequitable school system. The school system is failing disadvantaged students, the vast majority of whom are in public schools.

Over 90 per cent of disadvantaged schools are public schools. Not only does failure at school restrict the future of individual lives, but it also restricts our economic prosperity and contributes to an unequal and divided society.

The failure to fully fund public schools is a major factor contributing to inequity in education outcomes. Public schools are massively under-funded.

The under-funding is evident in a large shortfall in government funding as a percentage of the Schooling Resource Standard (SRS).

In 2023, public schools in all states except the ACT are funded at 90 per cent or less of their SRS [Chart 5].

On average, public schools are funded at only 87.5 per cent of their SRS compared to 105.5 per cent for private schools.

The funding shortfall in public schools is estimated at $6.8 billion.

By contrast, private schools are over-funded in all jurisdictions except the Northern Territory. The over-funding amounts to $1.1 billion.

The onus is on education ministers to map a path forward to improve school results for disadvantaged students and reduce the massive achievement gaps between rich and poor.

As Professor Pasi Sahlberg of the University of Melbourne and a member of the expert panel that reported on the National Schools Reform Agreement has recommended:

“We should be benchmarking students’ performance to the most affluent kids, to make sure policies try to narrow the achievement gap.”

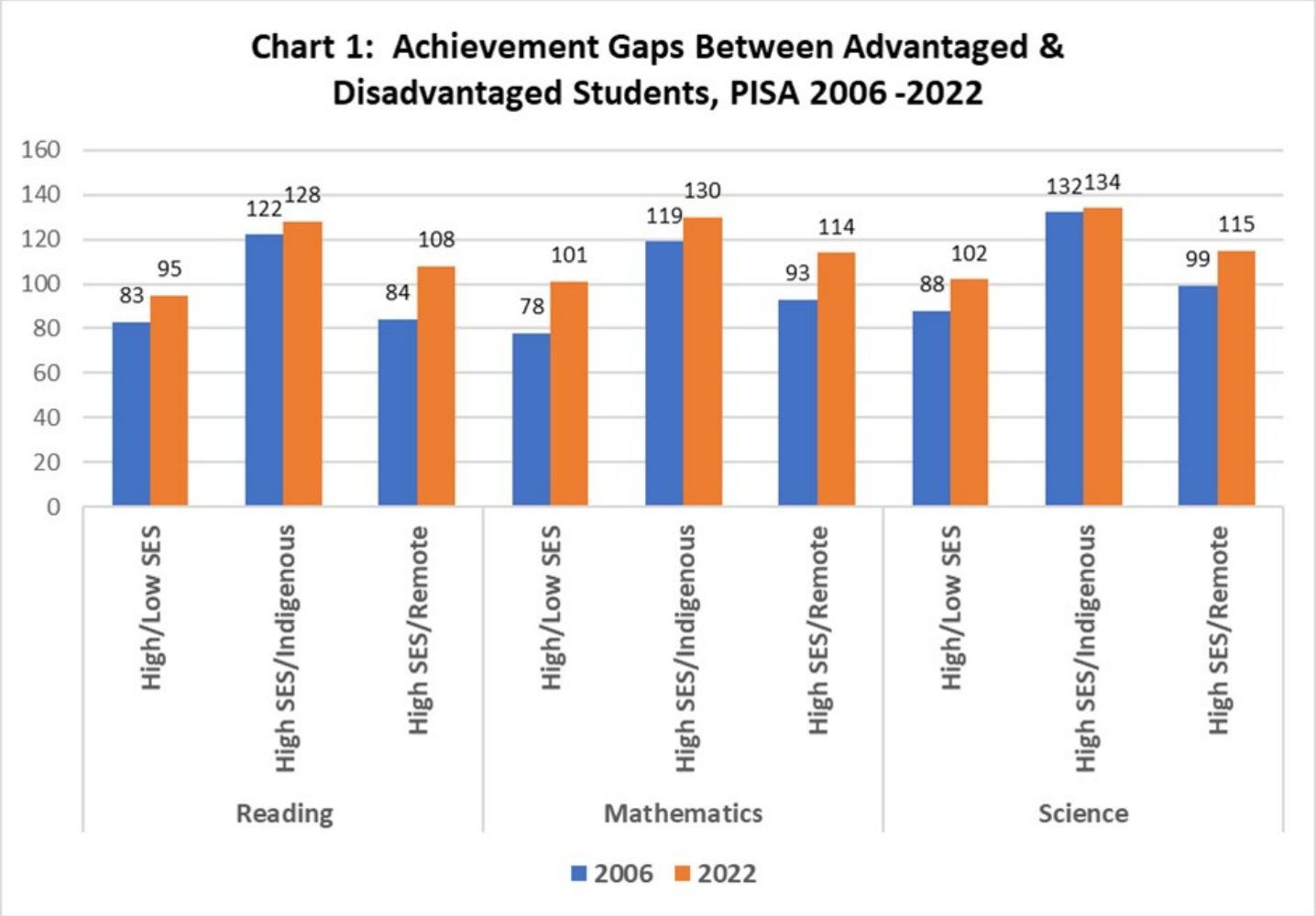
Closing the achievement gaps between rich and poor requires bridging the funding gap between private and public schools.

Education ministers must commit the funding required to meet the special challenges of public schools.

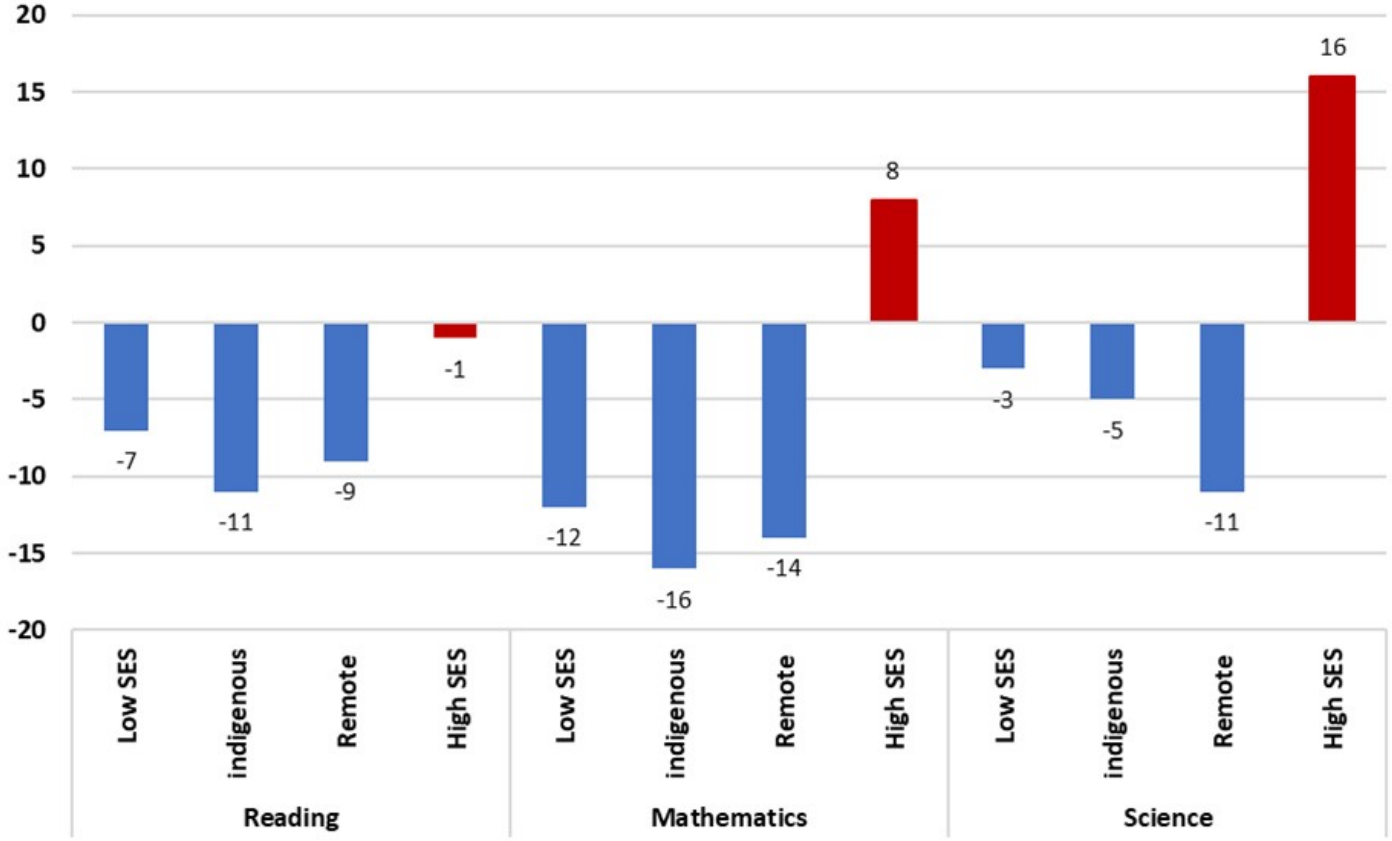
Public schools must be fully funded by 2028 and all disadvantaged schools fully funded in the first year of the next National Schools Reform Agreement.

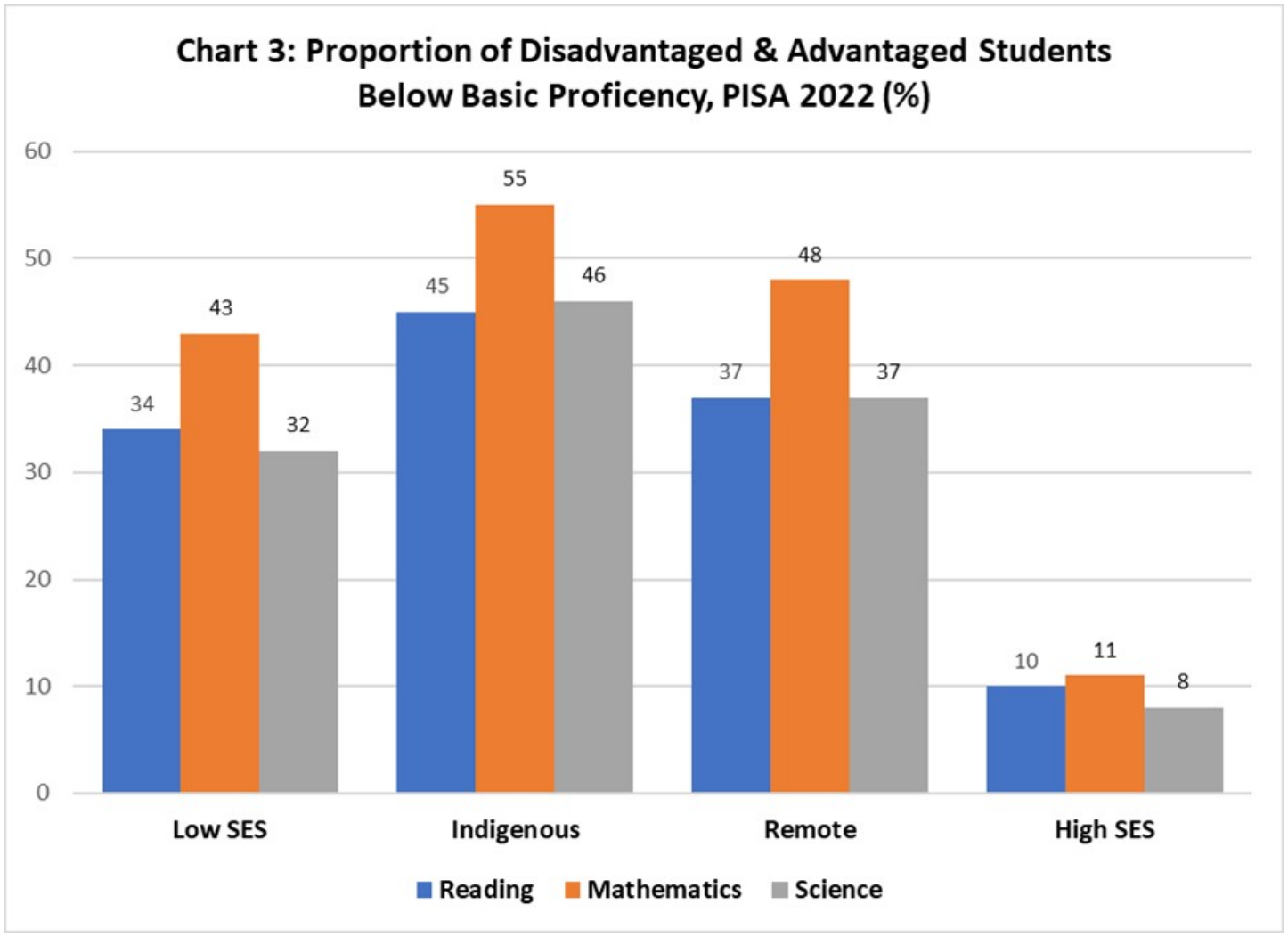
This is a test of the commitment of education ministers to improving results for disadvantaged students and to the future of public education. All public school teachers and parents will be watching. Let us hope the ministers are up to the test.

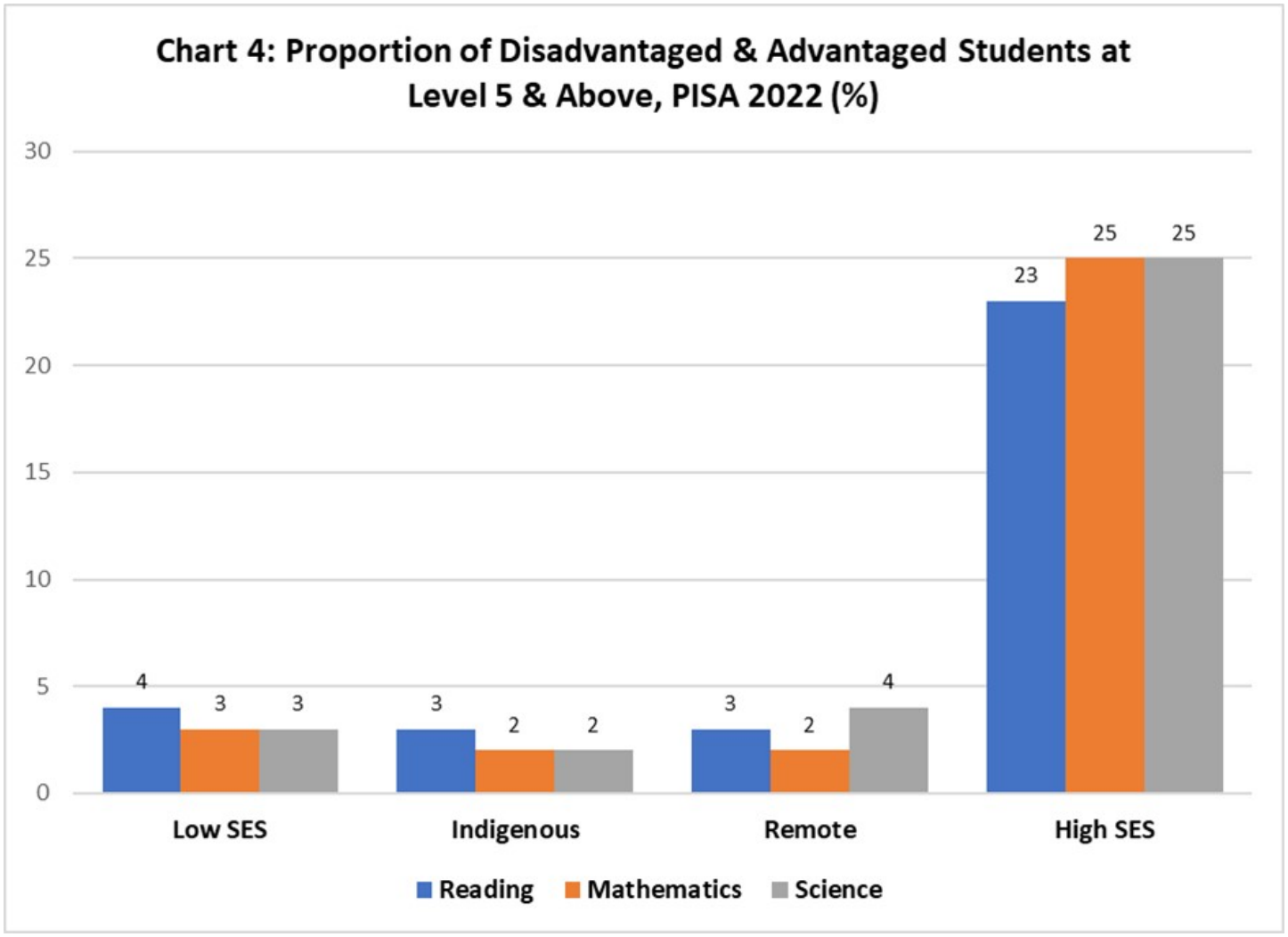
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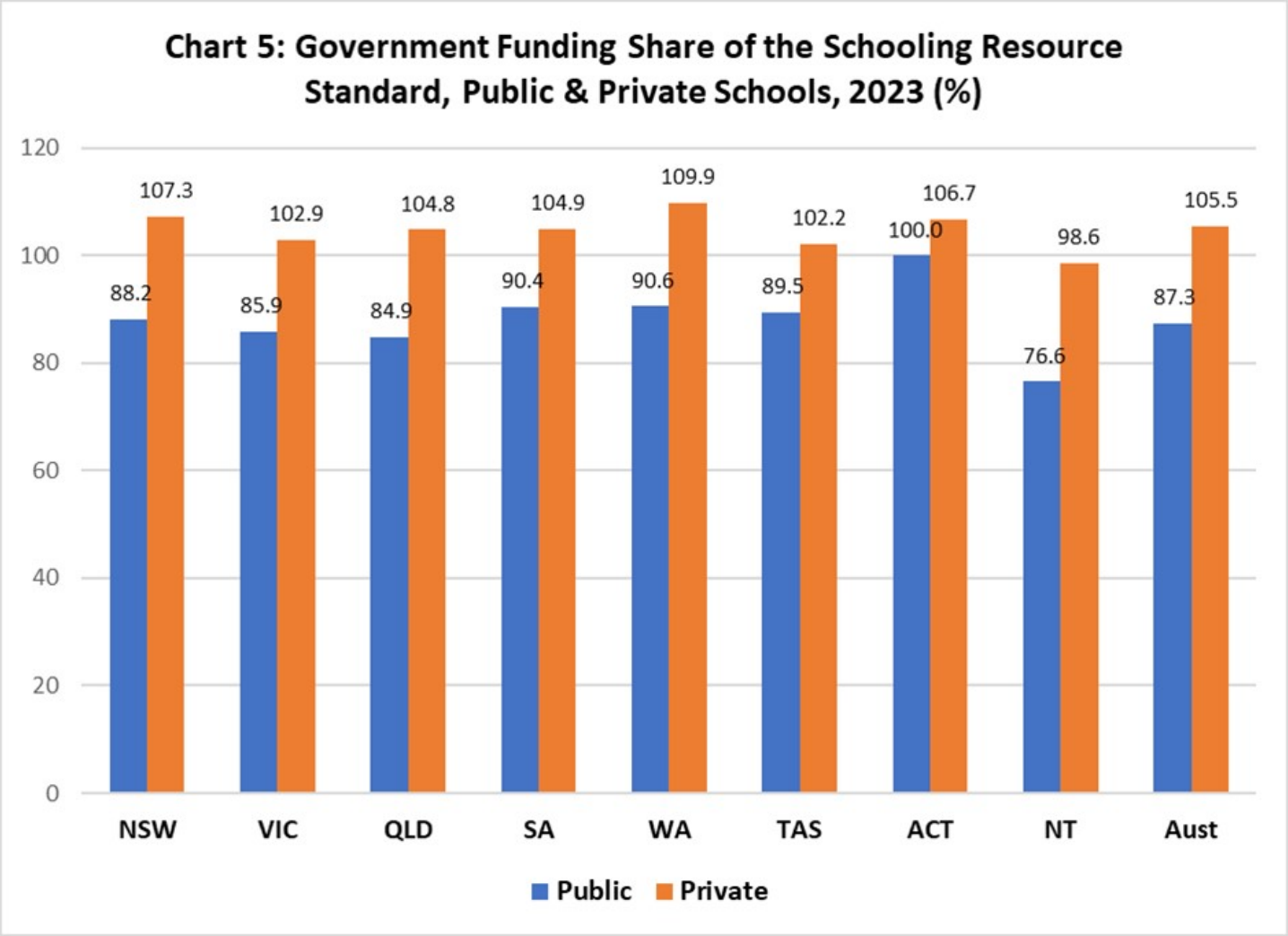


## Chart 2: Change in Scores by Advantaged & Disadvantaged Students, PISA 2018-2022




Chart 3: Proportion of Disadvantaged & Advantaged Students Below Basic Proficency, PISA 2022 (%)
60
50
40
30
20
10
0
34
43
32
45
55
46
37
48
37
10
11
8
Low SES
Indigenous
Remote
High SES
Reading
Mathematics
Science


Chart 4: Proportion of Disadvantaged & Advantaged Students at Level 5 & Above, PISA 2022 (%)
30
25
20
15
10
5
0
4
3
3
3
2
2
3
2
4
23
25
25
Low SES
Indigenous
Remote
High SES
Reading
Mathematics
Science




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