

## Executive Summary

### Background

As part of its *Policy for Schools: Students First* platform for the 2013 Federal Election, the Government committed to review the [My School](http://www.MySchool.edu.au) website ([www.MySchool.edu.au](http://www.MySchool.edu.au)). The Australian Department of Education subsequently commissioned a review of *My School* to provide advice on:

- The success of the site in meeting the original purpose of *My School*;
- How information published on *My School* is currently used and displayed;
- The level to which the current suite of information available supports the Government's reform agenda;
- The publication of additional indicators; and
- Opportunities for improvements.

The advice is to identify options for changes to the *My School* website and make recommendations for those changes. The full terms of reference for the review are at Appendix 1.

*My School* has not previously been formally reviewed although an evaluation of the website is being progressed by the Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA).

### Main issues

The *My School* website is inherently complex due to nature of the National Assessment Plan - Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) data covered and sensitivities about comparisons between schools and the interpretation of the data and information presented. This has been exacerbated by the status of ACARA as a multi-jurisdictional body and complex governance arrangements, which make decision making a process of negotiation and allow for jurisdictional vetos at both the senior official and Ministerial Council levels. The end result can be less than optimal outcomes in the policy framework in which *My School* is developed and implemented.

Much of the sensitivity around *My School* relates to the NAPLAN data and concerns about it being misinterpreted or used for unproductive purposes, such as development of "league tables", which can draw inappropriate comparisons between schools. The web site has been designed to try to overcome these problems, often at the expense of useability.

A related issue is the interpretation of "similar" schools, which are based on schools having students with statistically similar background known as the Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage (ICSEA). ACARA has put substantial effort into improving this index to make it more robust and stable over time. Nevertheless it is recognised that the ICSEA is not designed to capture the qualitative factors that influence parents and school communities' perceptions about their school.

A key issue that flows from consideration of these matters is the primary purpose of *My School* and the key audience it is expected to serve. During 2008 and 2009 the Commonwealth Government pushed a transparency and accountability agenda through the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) and Ministerial Council processes as part of a broader educational reform agenda.

In making the decision to establish *My School* the then Ministerial Council agreed that there were three key purposes for individual school performance reporting, namely:

1. To enable evaluation of school performance - to allow governments and researchers to analyse how well schools are performing by reference to nationally comparable data and to their own performance over time.
2. For public accountability (and transparency) purposes - to improve outcomes and equity for all students by using nationally comparable school performance data to build a substantive evidence base to support future improvements.
3. For better resource allocation – to enable identification of where resources are most needed to lift attainment as an aid to policy makers and to build pressure for change by placing parents and the broader community in the same position as education officials.

The current *My School* website says that the website “has two main purposes:

- It provides parents and students with information on each school – its view of itself and its mission, its staffing, its resources and its students’ characteristics and their performances.
- It provides schools and their communities with comparisons of their students’ performances in literacy and numeracy with those of students in other schools, most importantly those in schools that serve similar students. These comparisons provide information to support improvements in schools.”

The Government’s *Policy for Schools: Students First* undertakes to improving schools and education outcomes through policies to deliver more say for parents and teachers, a sound national curriculum, improved quality teaching, and certainty over school funding. The key government policies relevant to this review are parent and community engagement; school autonomy; Indigenous closing the gap targets; and development of an evidence base of performance data. The *My School* website has the capability to help advance this agenda.

## Key findings

*My School* represents a valuable, nationally consistent data set on Australian schools across all jurisdictions and all sectors. The systematic collection of new data, the refinement of its statistical underpinnings and further development of the system architecture has increased the potential value of the website over time. However, *My School* is a complex website with a lot of technical and statistical information that is not designed to be general user friendly. Consequently, the national data repository that *My School* now represents is probably underutilised.

There is some lack of clarity among stakeholders about the core purpose of *My School* and therefore its audience. The Commonwealth has a policy focus on transparency and accountability through publication of nationally consistent school level data. This is based on the absence of such data prior to *My School* and international evidence that clear accountability assists create a learning environment that encourages innovation and excellence. From a Commonwealth perspective, as a major funder and with both social policy and economic interests in educational outcomes, *My School* serves a valuable purpose.

For parents qualitative research results suggest that *My School* is perceived to be mainly about NAPLAN scores and academic performance, which is one aspect of how they make choices about schools. Nevertheless some parents use the website for helping choose a school, monitoring school performance and providing context for their own child’s achievement. Use of *My School* by principals and school system administrators is limited, in part because school systems are using

NAPLAN and broader data to help drive school improvement. It would be useful to re-articulate the purpose of *My School* to focus on national transparency and accountability at the school level, while acknowledging its important benefits as a tool for educational improvement.

There is only limited data on the usage of *My School*, including by whom and for what purpose. In general usage of *My School* has been tending to decline but is still substantial. The available data shows that there is spike in usage of *My School* at the time that new releases are made and to a lesser extent at the time NAPLAN tests are conducted and when the results are released. It could be expected that the main users at these times would be parents and school leaders.

The functionality of *My School* has been enhanced over time and the quality of data improved, especially the ICSEA methodology. Moreover, the *My School* work plan provides for the addition of further data sets in a phased manner. However, the website's functionality and useability remains constrained by the complex Commonwealth, state and territory governance and policy framework in which ACARA operates. The *My School* design has been partly driven by the policy objective of making the collation and publication of league tables difficult, reflecting education union and other stakeholder concerns.

The available evidence suggests that the full functionality and utility of *My School* generally is not well understood, either by parents or teachers. As NAPLAN data relating to individual student performance is directly made available to parents and schools, the value added by *My School* relates to nationally consistent data for a school over time and comparative data for schools having students with statistically similar backgrounds and for all schools. Importantly, this includes where available student educational growth as presented in the NAPLAN student gain page.

*My School* website traffic data shows that the school profile, NAPLAN results in numbers and NAPLAN results in graphs pages together account for three-quarters of all page views. Other pages such as NAPLAN results in bands, VET in schools, local schools and school finances represent only a small proportions of total page views. The usage of the student gain page is small but appears to be increasing. This simple analysis indicates that most users are only interested in a small proportion of the information on offer or may find the website too complex to explore it more fully.

As a data rich website having a lot of information presented in graphical and tabular form with colour coding, statistical and educational terminology and explanatory notes and caveats, it is understandable that ordinary users may find the website challenging. Moreover, interpretation of the data can be difficult as, for example, the average NAPLAN results of students at a school can vary by year and by domain and margins of error overlap. A more sophisticated understanding of school performance than is offered by *My School* is required by school leaders in order to design educational interventions but the website can prompt important conversations.

With the 2015 release of *My School* a total of seven years of school level data will be publicly available. This means that for the first time results will be available for students who sat the first NAPLAN tests in year 3 in 2008 and have completed the full cycle of year 3, 5, 7 and 9 annual assessments. This data set will be very valuable to anyone interested in school performance and student gain over the 2008 to 2014 period. It also opens up the possibility of different ways of presenting data such as in time series form, which would be welcomed by parents.

Available research indicates that parents are interested in other indicators of school quality as well as those presented on *My School*, such as the 'feel' of a school, relationships and behaviour management, programs and facilities and other qualitative factors that are best determined by

visiting a school and talking to teachers and other parents. The survey research also suggests that only a minority of parents utilise *My School*. Development of a specific summary page to better meet the needs of parents would help them make the most of the website. This approach could be broadened to create similar pathways for other stakeholder groups over time, depending on need.

The presentation of much of the content on *My School* may need significant reworking to meet current policy for accessibility for users with a disability – that is, compliance with the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines version 2 (WCAG 2.0). For example, while colour and audio options are available on some pages, the presentation of graphs, which do not specify the end points, and the use of colour coding make access by people using screen reading technology quite difficult.

In terms of international comparisons, a study undertaken under the auspices of the OECD noted that the transparency achieved through *My School* has placed the broader community in the same position as education officials in having access to national data. It also noted that *My School* presents school data in a way that places each school at the centre of the reports and is designed to avoid the misinterpretation that often arises with school league tables. A brief look at some similar websites in the United States of America (USA) and United Kingdom (UK) indicates that *My School* will need further development to remain a world-class mechanism for school accountability and reporting.

There is deal of interest from state and territory jurisdictions, academics, media and some other users to accessing the data repository that supports the *My School* website. ACARA agrees to requests for information that are judged to be for a good purpose. A more liberal policy of data release would be beneficial.

Under current arrangements any changes to the policy and protocols under which *My School* operates would require the endorsement of the Education Council.

A more detailed of analysis of *My School* is provided in the body of this report.

## Recommendations

The following recommendations are designed to improve the longevity, useability and utility of *My School* consistent with its role in improving the transparency and accountability of Australia's school education system. The recommendations are grouped into higher level and more detailed recommendations for ease of reference