

An increasing number of schools are attempting to report student achievement on school reports by reporting performance on each syllabus outcome. John Gore, Chairman of TCFNSW, outlines the background, some practices in primary and secondary schools, the possible issues for both primary and secondary schools related to the Board of Studies Curriculum Framework. Throughout the article consideration is given to a Christian perspective on assessment.

### In the beginning...

As Christians, accountability is always a close at heart issue. As teachers we are accountable to our employer, our school communities and the students we teach. To ensure our own good practice we want to know how well our students are doing and to be able to document and report their achievement. As Christians, we want to reflect a loving and a just God, and to be fair in our judgements, positive in our reporting and accurate in what we say about achievement. For these reasons we need to consider carefully the assessment and reporting processes that schools set-up and ensure that they are consistent with what we believe as Christians.

During the 1990s, in a context of changing syllabuses and outcomes approaches to teaching, assessment and reporting, schools were continually under pressure to provide more information to parents on school reports about student achievement.

In the 1990 Education Act, the Board of Studies (BOS) is required to include outcomes in syllabuses. Its first attempt was in Years 7-10 syllabuses where the outcomes were not mandatory and examples only of student achievement. These syllabuses and their outcomes, mostly still current, do not represent a framework for reporting student achievement.

When developing the primary syllabuses the Board considered the nationally developed statements and profiles that proposed a standards framework. This framework comprised eight levels of achievement that were independent of students' age and grade. Each standard was illustrated by a level statement, outcomes, pointers and annotated student work samples. Together, these standards provided a framework against which a student's performance could be described at a level for each outcome. The outcomes achievement data could then be aggregated for a strand or subject. On-balance teacher judgements, based on all the components of the framework (level statements, outcomes, pointers and work samples), could be made about the level of student achievement i.e. was a student's work more like one level or another.

The Board of Studies never fully adopted this approach but used it to explore, through the K-6 English syllabus, issues about how standards would be represented in syllabuses. Later it acted on the recommendations of the Eltis Review and commenced a program of developing standards in syllabuses based on outcomes in stages. Three types of syllabuses have emerged:

- Primary syllabuses with stage statements, outcomes, indicators and subject matter for each stage. Some syllabuses have content written as *learn to* and *learn about* statements.
- Years 7-10 syllabuses with outcomes and subject matter (science, history and geography only).
- Years 11-12 syllabuses with separate outcomes for the Preliminary and HSC Years and statements of content in the form of *learn to* and *learn about* statements.

By 2001, there was a full set of primary school syllabuses and schools have been experimenting with providing feedback to students and parents about student achievement of outcomes and have been increasingly providing school reports, which include syllabus outcomes and descriptions of performance on these outcomes. To assist this task, the Department of Education and Training has been distributing to its schools increasingly sophisticated versions of *Kidmap*, a program that allows teachers, among other things, to record student achievement of outcomes and to aggregate this data for reporting purposes.

### Primary schools

Primary schools have moved considerably towards an outcomes approach by:

- developing teaching programs that focus on the outcomes and by providing indicators of student achievement

- developing teaching activities that provide students with the knowledge, skills and understandings to achieve the outcomes and opportunities to demonstrate that achievement including assessment for learning.
- setting up processes to capture and record evidence of student achievement of outcomes involving, amongst other things, observation, performance assessment, the use of student work portfolios and Kidmap
- using the evidence gathered to provide feedback to students and parents using a version of the Kidmap performance scales. This evidence has also been used to report student achievement against syllabus outcomes or syllabus strands on school reports.

In English and mathematics, work sample projects have produced examples of student work in relation to indicators and outcomes as a way of assisting comparable teacher judgements. These samples are useful in providing information on achievement but are not part of any system-wide standards setting exercise.

While primary schools have done extremely well in engaging an outcomes approach to teaching, assessing and reporting student achievement a number of difficulties exist.

While stage statements, outcomes, indicators and subject matter provide a standards framework to report student achievement there is an essential component missing – assessment tasks producing validated annotated student work samples. Without a set of validated and annotated work samples to illustrate what achievement of an outcome looks like, teachers have an inadequate description of the syllabus content standard to make comparable judgements. Some schools have recognised this point and attempted to document work samples within their schools. Some may even be doing this across schools and districts.

However, there is no validated work sample description of the syllabus content standard that would allow comparable judgements about the achievement of an outcome across all schools.

If individual or school standards are what teachers base their judgements on, then what is being reported to parents about achievement of individual outcomes is not consistent across schools. Rather than reporting state standards, subjective standards, based on individual teacher or at best school judgements, are being reported.

### **Comparable performance standards.**

The second issue is, if teachers are having difficulty making comparable judgements about the achievement of an outcome, how much more difficult is it to make judgements against performance scales using levels of achievement. Some performance scales, for example, those used in *Kidmap*, indicate progression towards achievement of an outcome, its achievement and working beyond the outcome. Other scales indicate levels of performance based on numbers, letters or descriptors. Lack of comparability means inconsistent messages to parents and the community about what standards mean. One of the strengths of a public education system should be its ability to report consistently against standards so that the community has confidence in the comparability of judgements across schools.

As Christians, these points raise serious questions about the fairness of our judgements and the accuracy of our reporting.

To implement reporting of student achievement on individual outcomes, it would be necessary to develop, validate and annotate a set of tasks and work samples for every outcome in every syllabus. This would be an enormous and resource hungry undertaking.

Victoria has recognised the need to undertake a standards setting project, involving calibrated tasks and validated annotated work samples to support its standards framework that is a modified version of the nationally developed profiles with outcomes in levels. Its work involves statewide testing of assessment criteria and the development of subject progress maps with validated annotated work samples. The project brief involves the development of tasks, assessment criteria/marking guidelines, teaching context statements, calibrated tasks and validated work samples which are annotated and published on CD-ROM. This huge undertaking will result in material to support the reporting of achievement of outcomes at levels for individual outcomes, and their aggregation to strand and subject levels for Years K-10.

Given the nature and number of outcomes in each NSW syllabus and the number of syllabuses, such an undertaking would be far greater and require enormous resources. As the BOS has not signaled any intention to do this, or to report achievement of individual outcomes, this task would fall on systems should they wish to pursue school reports that report achievement on individual outcomes.

### Secondary schools

In secondary schools, providing feedback and reporting on outcomes has been more problematic because of the lack of Years 7-10 syllabuses developed on the post-Eltis model of outcomes in stages. None-the-less, some secondary schools have attempted to use outcomes (not always syllabus outcomes) to report student achievement on school reports. *Kidmap* has been trialled in a significant number of secondary schools, mainly by teachers of science, history and geography, where the syllabuses have outcomes in stages using the post-Eltis BOS model. Other schools continue to use a variety of more traditional assessment and reporting processes.

With responsibility for the School Certificate, the NSW BOS has provided schools with course performance descriptors to report student course performance using A-E grades that match the descriptor. School reports usually contain additional information about student achievement, interest and abilities.

Currently, in Years 11-12, schools have developed programs for teaching and learning to meet the syllabus outcomes using the *learn to* and *learn about* statements of the new HSC syllabuses. The BOS sets the process for assessment and reporting student achievement for the HSC. This process involves developing assessment schedules of tasks and the weighting according to the assessment components and then conducting a series of 3-5 tasks over each of the preliminary course and the HSC course. In this process, teachers develop tasks based on selected outcomes from the syllabus and at the same time prepare marking guidelines. These marking guidelines reflect the content of the task, the outcomes and rubric and make use of some of the wording of the performance bands for the purpose of distributing marks by rewarding higher performance. The marks for these tasks are aggregated according to the weightings in the assessment schedule and a final mark and position in course is determined. This process provides a holistic assessment of performance of the outcomes of the course and, in the HSC Year, the final mark and rank are reported to the BOS as the school assessment mark.

This process is outcomes reporting. It is reporting holistically on the outcomes of the syllabus and as teachers become more aware of the HSC standards they will be able to match these final marks with the bands, the end of course performance descriptors.

An increasing number of schools are attempting to report student achievement on school reports by reporting performance on each syllabus outcome. Last month, in the first of two special presentations on this issue, John Gore, Chairman, TCFNSW, outlined some of the background and current practice in primary schools. Since then, the Government has announced an inquiry into assessment and reporting practice in schools to be led by Professor Ken Eltis, and in this issue John Gore completes his comments on this issue encouraging teachers to understand the debate and to participate in it.

*It's not fair. Why did Susan get a five for that outcome and I only got a three?* Not an easy question if you don't have evidence of student achievement that matches whatever a "five" or a "three" looks like. This is the reporting dilemma that many secondary teachers have faced when their school has moved to reporting performance on individual outcomes. The issues are: What do the performance scales mean and where is the evidence to apply these scales fairly? In particular, Christian teachers are concerned about being fair to students when making judgements about their performance. Truth, fairness and accuracy must go hand in hand.

### Issues in secondary schools

In relation to the new HSC, secondary schools have found difficulty describing student performance during the Preliminary and HSC years. Some schools have attempted to report student performance in Years 11 and 12 by providing feedback to students on each task based on the achievement of individual syllabus outcomes. School reports show a variety of reporting formats and appear to increasingly include reporting achievement on individual syllabus outcomes.

Some secondary schools have been moving to provide feedback and to report performance on each outcome in Years 7-10, even though most of these syllabuses have been unsuitable for this purpose. This movement appears to have increased as schools attempt to align their reporting processes in Years 11-12 with Years 7-10 and to focus on both providing feedback to students about the achievement of outcomes and to report, on school reports, performance on individual outcomes for Years 7-12. This intention has been fraught with difficulties. The situation for primary schools and Years 7-10 is likely to be complicated by the implementation of the draft K-10 Curriculum Framework of the BOS. Standards are likely to be described by stage statements, outcomes and end of stage course performance descriptors in levels and supported by annotated work samples illustrating performance at different levels. This proposal is similar to the Years 11-12 requirements of the BOS, but has the additional benefit of annotated work samples (like the HSC Standards Packages) to support the description of the standard represented by each end of stage course performance descriptor, not each outcome. Such reporting constitutes outcomes reporting. It's about reporting performance holistically based on all the course outcomes, rather than attempting to report on each outcome.

because an appropriate standards framework, as proposed in the BOS Draft K-10 Curriculum Framework, does not yet exist for Years 7-10.

Some reporting on individual outcomes may be possible in Years 7-10 science, geography and history, where these new syllabuses have outcomes in stages. However, these moves are subject to the same problems, described in last month's article, for primary schools. In addition, many schools have not yet developed and implemented teaching programs that focus on outcomes or implemented processes to gather evidence of achievement that would facilitate feedback and reporting on the achievement of each outcome.

In Years 11-12, secondary schools have engaged the new assessment processes set down by the BOS for the HSC. Most schools want to report a mark and position, additional student profile information and more specific information about achievement on each course. Even the reporting of marks raises issues about what marks mean in relation to standards and the HSC reporting of marks. More specific information may include listing the outcomes that have been the focus of teaching and learning during the reporting period.

Some schools, after attempting to use inappropriately the HSC performance bands at times other than the end of Year 12, have opted to engage a form of reporting on school reports involving performance on each outcome. They take all the course outcomes, or the outcomes that have been the focus of a semester, and attempt to report performance on each one, sometimes using numbers or letters to represent different levels of achievement.

There are a number of problems with these approaches:

#### **Comparable achievement of an outcome**

(As per Primary Schools - see Part 1)

#### **Comparable performance standards.**

(As per Primary Schools - see Part 1)

#### **Outcomes programming**

Although secondary schools are developing improved programming methods to show how outcomes relate to each teaching and learning activity, they are not as far advanced as primary schools. To report achievement of each outcome, teaching programs will need to clearly and identify the outcome(s) that is the focus of each learning activity.

#### **Gathering evidence**

Secondary schools are becoming familiar with processes that can be used to gather and document evidence of achievement of outcomes. However, many schools are attempting to report achievement of each outcome without having processes to gather and record evidence.

#### **The nature of the outcomes**

The BOS outcomes pose particular problems for reporting. Some outcomes are multifaceted and only achieved in part within particular topics in a course. Reporting on part achievement is not allowed for in most schemes.

The outcomes are complex and their language is difficult to unpack. Some outcomes may have little meaning to parents and some schools have attempted to write *plain Jane* versions to communicate better to parents about student achievement.

### Computer reporting

Some schools have software packages to generate reports to parents that encourage reporting performance on individual outcomes. Some packages limit the number of outcomes that can be reported and introduce examples of inappropriate performance scales as continuums of 1-5, or satisfactory to excellent. Some schools add *not achieved* to these scales to give a six-point scale so that they can relate them, inappropriately, to the six BOS end of course performance bands.

### Tick a box

In some schools with computer generated reporting, outcomes matrixes are used by teachers in a best guess ticking exercise rather than reporting from evidence of achievement. Such reports can have little credibility in reporting standards. The Department of Education and Training's *Assessment Bulletin 6* sets some boundaries and draws the attention of schools to some of the problems that they might encounter in attempting to report on individual outcomes. Rather than set boundaries, this document has been used by schools to initiate action.

Many schools have moved, or are debating a move, to provide feedback to students on each outcome including reporting on school reports performance on each outcome. Some teachers seem unaware that this is not the policy of the Department or the direction that is being promoted in the Board of Studies K-10 Curriculum Framework.

As Christians, members of TCF need to take seriously the way that schools report student achievement. While there are many possible systems, methods of assessment that are not based on evidence or related to standards that are understood by teachers are not creditable. Such systems develop mistrust between students and teachers and undermine the confidence of parents in schools to provide accurate information about student achievement.

For these reasons, Christian teachers have supported standards-referenced assessment. They understand what it means in their own lives to be measured against the highest standard, the very nature of God. They understand what it means to work towards such high standards and the forgiveness that comes when they fall short. They have a perfect work sample to model their lives on (Jesus Christ) and would want to encourage others to engage that standard so that they might be able to come into relationship with God.

Measuring student work against explicit standards is fair and reliable and provides students with a measure of performance described in levels and not only in relation to the achievement of the student's peers. In seeking truth in assessment and reporting, Christian teachers can make judgements against known and understood standards. They should resist any system that asks them to make judgements where the evidence is not available or, that involve using individualised standards that provide subjective judgements that are not comparable between teachers and schools. The situation for primary schools and Years 7-10 is likely to be complicated by the implementation of the draft K-10 Curriculum Framework of the BOS. Standards are likely to be described by stage statements, outcomes and end of stage course performance descriptors in levels and supported by annotated work samples illustrating performance at different levels. This proposal is similar to the Years 11-12 requirements of the BOS, but has the additional benefit of annotated work samples (like the HSC Standards Packages) to support the description of the standard represented by each end of stage course performance descriptor, not each outcome. Such reporting constitutes outcomes reporting. It's about reporting performance holistically based on all the course outcomes, rather than attempting to report on each outcome.

### Where to?

Given that secondary schools have to use the processes for assessment set down by the BOS for the School Certificate and the HSC, should secondary or primary schools be reporting, on school reports,

achievement on each outcome? The seven points listed above are compelling reasons to not go in this direction.

A further reason is that teachers are struggling to meet all the requirements around programming and teaching the new primary syllabuses, the new HSC syllabuses and the soon to be released new Years 7-10 syllabuses. In addition, secondary teachers are still working on the requirements to develop assessment schedules, tasks and marking guidelines as indicated in the BOS policy for the HSC. To implement reporting on each outcome on school reports is unnecessary, a flawed approach without fully described standards and one that leads to reporting frameworks and judgements that are not credible or able to withstand scrutiny.

Given the nature of the outcomes and the number of syllabuses in NSW, to properly document these standards an undertaking greater than what has occurred in Victoria would be needed and require enormous resources within the education budget. Even if achieved, secondary schools would still have to follow the BOS requirements for the School Certificate and HSC thus imposing an overlay of an additional system of assessing and reporting processes.

Primary schools have greater flexibility in these matters as the Board does not have an assessment responsibility under the Act for primary schools. Systems and independent schools can set their own requirements.

Finally, requiring reporting on individual outcomes will mean processes of documentation and evidence gathering that will undoubtedly increase the workload of teachers. Such a change has resource implications in terms of changes to the working conditions of teacher and for the funds to set up standards, as described above, for each outcome.

While my personal recommendation is to report achievement of course outcomes holistically at the end of a stage by using BOS course performance descriptors and associated support (standards), it will not solve the issue of how to report student achievement during a stage. Most schools could continue to identify on a school report the outcomes that were the focus of teaching and learning during the reporting period and, similar to HSC assessment, report a course mark and position in class/subject based on an assessment program with a series of tasks, each focused on a number of outcomes). Feedback could be provided to students in relation to individual outcomes, but no attempt would be made to report on the achievement of each outcome on school reports, let alone the level of achievement on each outcome.

While schools continue to struggle with these assessment and reporting issues, Christians have a particular responsibility to explore each proposal thoroughly, to understand the issues, to help other teachers understand the implications of proposals for assessing and reporting and to advocate a system that is fair for students providing reliable and creditable information for parents about what their children have achieved and how they are progressing.

John Gore