

# **Conclusions and Recommendations**

**Submission to the Senate Education Committee Inquiry  
into the Administration and Reporting of NAPLAN**

**Part 5**

**SAVE OUR SCHOOLS**

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**<http://www.saveourschools.com.au>**

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## **1. Introduction**

The former Federal Minister for Education claims that publishing school results for NAPLAN on the My School website will create pressures for school improvement and better inform parental choice of school. Parts 1 to 3 of this submission demonstrate that these claims are not substantiated by the evidence. Instead, the evidence suggests exercise of school choice, facilitated by the publication of such results often leads to a situation in which children, whose parents have the resources to move to another school, abandon a school serving a largely disadvantaged community, therefore further marginalising the school. Put simply, school choice advantages the already advantaged, and disadvantages the disadvantaged. It therefore does not contribute to the equity goals articulated by the now Prime Minister.

The former Education Minister also claims that publishing school results is needed to identify struggling schools. This submission argues firstly that there is ample information on disadvantage in schools, certainly enough to inform educational funding decisions, and that the reason that disadvantage remains such a major factor in educational outcomes in Australia is that governments, both State and Commonwealth, have failed to provide the funding to support the complex and often expensive programs need to change things. This submission also argues that any possible benefits from NAPLAN do not depend on publication of school results.

Finally, the former Education Minister has argued that publication of NAPLAN results is necessary simply because parents and the public have a right to be informed about school results. This submission does not reject the general principle of the right of the public, and in this case parents in particular, to information, but suggests where release of information is likely to enhance rather reduce disadvantage, there is a clear public benefit case for restricting the use of this information to areas where it might be beneficial.

## **2. The case against publishing school results and league tables**

### **2.1 Publication of school results and league tables does not improve student achievement**

As demonstrated in Part 1 of this submission, there is no conclusive research evidence that publishing school results improves school performance. Even the chief executive of ACARA, Peter Hill, admits there is little evidence to support his Minister's claim.

Very few studies have separately assessed the impact of reporting school results, but the key studies show no significant effect on student achievement. For example, a Brookings Institution study found "no discernable effect". A frequently cited study by Professor Eric Hanushek and Margaret Raymond of Stanford University on the positive effects of accountability measures found that reporting school results alone has no impact on student achievement.

Most studies assess reporting school results along with a range of 'high-stakes accountability' measures. These include rewards for improved performance and sanctions such as reconstitution of schools, replacing the principal or teachers, permitting students to enrol elsewhere, grade promotion standards and having a high school graduation exam.

The major studies of so-called 'high-stakes accountability' for school results show no significant gains in student achievement or reduced achievement gaps. A recent sophisticated

meta-analysis of 14 major accountability studies in the US found mixed effects on reading and mathematics achievement. Seven studies favoured states with high stakes testing and reporting, six studies had mixed or insignificant findings, and one study favoured states with low-stakes testing. Student accountability requirements, such as grade promotion standards, end-of-course and graduation exams, appear to contribute a major part of the positive effect shown in some ‘high stakes accountability’ studies.

The major academic reviews of the research studies on ‘high stakes accountability’ measures conclude that the evidence is mixed and that there is little scientific foundation for these policies.

There is also no conclusive evidence that reporting school results will increase student achievement by promoting choice and competition. The weight of evidence from the most comprehensive studies of the impact of choice and competition is that it does not improve student achievement once social and demographic factors are taken into account. As Professor of Economics at the University of Chicago and the co-author of *Freakonomics*, Steven Levitt, says of school choice, “the theory sounds great, but evidence confirming it has been hard to find” [Levitt 2007]. A recent study by the London School of Economics concluded that “choice and competition does not seem to be generally effective in raising standards”.

Increased competition as a result of school comparisons and rankings appears to more lead to standardization rather than innovation in classroom practice and curriculum. A study published by the OECD summarising evidence on innovations in more market-driven education systems in over 20 countries found that competition between schools tends to promote uniformity rather than innovation and an emphasis on marketing rather than educational change [Lubienski 2009].

## **2.2 Publishing school results and league tables harm education**

Part 2 of this submission demonstrated that, far from improving student achievement, there is strong evidence that publishing school results and league tables harm education because they:

- Narrow the curriculum;
- Distort teaching practice;
- Disadvantage low and high achieving students;
- Unfairly stigmatise low achieving students;
- Make it more difficult for low performing schools to retain high quality teachers;
- Discourage co-operation and collaboration between schools and teachers; and
- Increase social segregation and inequity in education.

The curriculum is narrowed in at least two ways. More time is devoted to the tested subjects of literacy and maths while untested subjects such as science, history, social studies, languages, arts and music, physical education and health receive much less time. Even recess gets cut. Second, in the subjects that are tested, greater emphasis is given to the areas that are most conducive to testing by multiple-choice questions and there is less teaching of more complex skills.

Teaching is distorted because schools and teachers tend to respond to pressure created by publication of school results and league tables by focusing more on teaching test-taking skills and practicing for tests. Publishing school results and league tables can undermine efforts to

improve the quality of teaching because they turn the notion of a “good teacher” into one who increases test scores.

Schools tend to concentrate on improving the results of students who are on the border of accepted benchmarks at the expense of both high and low achieving students. Publication of the results of individual schools and public rankings of schools may unfairly stigmatise and humiliate some students and alienate them from schooling. Published school results and league tables may be used as a job guide and make it more difficult for schools with low results to retain and attract quality teachers and principals. Publication of school results and competition for league table rankings can reduce collaboration between schools and between teachers within schools.

Publication of school results and league tables tends to increase socio-economic and ethnic segregation between schools which exacerbates inequity in education. Student learning needs in some schools increase without proportionate increases in resources to meet those needs and increasing concentrations of students from low socio-economic status families in some schools tend to lead to lower overall outcomes.

There is evidence of some of these effects already in Australia after only one year of publishing school results.

### **2.3 Published school results are misleading and unreliable**

In addition to their harmful effects, school NAPLAN results are often an inaccurate and misleading measure of school quality. Part 3 of this submission showed that published school results and league tables are likely to mislead parents who use them to inform their choice of school because:

- Differences in school composition affect school results;
- Many other factors outside schools influence school results;
- They are a selective measure of education;
- They are subject to manipulation and rorting; and,
- There may be significant statistical errors on school test results.

School results often more reflect the socio-economic background of its students. They are strongly influenced also by other external factors such as student absenteeism, student turnover, parent involvement in learning at home, and the proportion of students receiving private tutoring.

School results may be artificially boosted by being manipulated and rorted under the pressure to maintain rankings. Overseas studies show that schools often resort to poaching high achieving students from other schools; denying entry to, or expelling, low achieving students; suspending low achieving students on test days; using special dispensations for tests; and outright cheating. Some of this is already happening in Australia.

Differences in school test results may be largely due to chance because of inevitable measurement and sampling error in tests. Several studies, including one Australian study, show that the results of up to 80% of schools are statistically indistinguishable when measurement error is taken into account. Real differences in school results can be only identified for a small minority of schools.

In addition, the much greater variation in test scores within schools than between schools in Australia means that parents cannot be assured that their child will be in a “better class” in a high performing school than in a low performing school. The much greater variation in test results within schools means that any given school with higher scores than another is likely to have classes that perform worse than the best classes in the lower achieving school.

The combined effect of incomplete information on important socio-demographic variables, statistical reliability and sorting make the NAPLAN results quite unreliable for fine discriminations between schools, when most schools are statistically indistinguishable. It means that parents who make decisions about school choice based on what are statistically indistinguishable results may be misled. Perceived differences in school results which in fact are not statistically distinguishable may also mislead decision-makers and schools in recommending and adopting particular educational programs. Some education practices and programs could be incorrectly identified as having more success than others.

### **3. Like school comparisons are no answer**

It is argued that so-called “like school”, or “statistically similar” school, comparisons provide contextual information that obviates the harm of simplistic comparisons of school results and league tables.

Part 4 of this submission demonstrated that My School makes misleading and unreliable comparisons of so-called “like schools” because its measure of like schools is flawed and omits many factors outside the control of schools which affect test results. It does not consistently compare like with like.

The Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage (ICSEA) which is used to measure the socio-economic status (SES) of schools is flawed. It attributes each student with the average SES of the area in which they live rather than the actual SES of their family. This leads to misclassifications of students because high and low income families often live in the same areas.

A major flaw is that comparisons of “like schools” on My School systematically and unfairly favour private schools over government schools. The average SES of private schools is artificially lowered by ICSEA while the average SES of government schools is artificially inflated because high income families choose private schools at double the rate of low income families. This leads to comparisons of unlike schools rather than like schools.

The “like school” comparisons on My School are also misleading because they ignore other differences in the student composition of schools which strongly influence school test results, including differences by gender, ethnic sub-groups and students with disabilities. They do not take account of large differences in school funding between the states and between high SES private schools and high SES government schools. Nor do they take account of the impact of several other factors on school test results, including high student mobility between schools; school size differences, student selection and private tutoring.

The measure of school SES is already 4 years out of date, being based on the 2006 Census data and will become up to 7 years out of date before the next Census data is available. ICSEA may mismeasure the SES of some schools because it fails to distinguish between families with and without school-age children and because the family income and

qualifications data it uses may be distorted by relatively high non-response rates to the Census questions.

Because of its flaws and omissions, ICSEA exaggerates the differences in quality between 'like schools' and thereby misleads those who choose schools or make policy decisions based on these comparisons.

“Like school” comparisons are, in effect, partial league tables and they incur the same problems as full league tables. They do not fully account for the influence of outside factors on school results. They narrow student learning in the same way. They provide the same incentives for schools to rig their results. The lowest ranked schools in each like school group will be pilloried and humiliated. They discourage collaboration and co-operation between schools. Moreover, the error margins on school NAPLAN results are likely to be so large as to invalidate many comparisons of like school results.

#### **4. Revisions to My School will not resolve fundamental problems**

A number of revisions are planned for My School in 2010 and 2011 [ACARA 2010]. They include measures to minimise misuse of My School data, providing additional contextual information for each school, enhancements of ICSEA and additional student outcome data. None of the measures will resolve the fundamental problems with My School outlined above. Some are likely to compound existing problems.

It is proposed that ACARA will investigate ways of deterring or preventing electronic collection of data from the My School website as a way of deterring the publication of league tables. It remains to be seen whether this is possible, but even if it is it only addresses the issue of league tables in the media.

The fundamental issue is publishing the results of individual schools. Using published school results to compare school performance and as a guide to school choice harms education and misleads parents and the public about school problems. This is exacerbated by the publication of league tables in the media.

My School itself will continue to publish what, in effect, are partial league tables in the form of “like school” comparisons and local area school comparisons. These have the same problems as full league tables and compound the problems of publishing school results.

The additional contextual information on schools will include funding, students with disabilities, students with a language background other than English, teacher level of expertise, and the results of parent, teacher and student satisfaction surveys. While these enhancements provide additional information with which to interpret schools' results, they will not reduce the harm of publishing school results.

Education Ministers have requested ACARA to investigate the feasibility and appropriateness of making use of student-level SES data on their parents' or carers' education and occupation. ACARA is also to investigate:

- obtaining updated and comprehensive home address data for all students to improve the accuracy of ICSEA in cases where area-based data are used;
- including within the ICSEA formula a variable to take account of the effect of language background other than English;

- improving the process for quality assuring ICSEA values for individual schools and, for those for which area-based data are used, identifying instances where the initial estimate is inappropriate.

Presumably, these measures are intended as a way to reduce the problems of using an area-based measure of school SES. Given the complexity of some of the variables and the difficulty in obtaining reliable disaggregated data, it remains to be seen whether these changes can enhance the accuracy of “like school” comparisons.

In principle, the inherent bias against government schools in comparison with private schools caused by the area-based measure of socio-economic status used by My School could be overcome by resort to information obtained directly from families. However, a large proportion of families choose not to provide information about their income, education and occupation on enrolment forms and those not providing this information appear to be largely concentrated in the lower income, education and occupational groups. According to NAPLAN [2009], 17 to 25% of families of students at different Year levels did not provide parent education and occupation information on enrolment forms. The average literacy and numeracy results for students of these families (grouped as ‘non-stated’) are similar to those of students whose parents completed Year 12 and work in low skilled occupations. In addition, once children are enrolled it appears that schools make little effort to update information as family circumstances change.

Similar problems arise in obtaining more detailed information on school composition according to different ethnic sub-groups as not all families provide information on their background. Even today, some Indigenous families are apparently reluctant to identify themselves.

The incorporation of growth data on literacy and numeracy results for schools and the publication of senior secondary outcomes will add to the problems of My School in the harm it does to education and in misleading parents and the public about school quality. From a basic statistical perspective, the errors in estimates at the school level are already large. If change over time is compared, then the statistical errors of the two estimates add to make these estimates even more unreliable. It is therefore unlikely that examining changes over time will overcome the fundamental problem that most schools are statistically indistinguishable.

While the proposed revisions to My School may tighten up the analysis of value-added compared to expectation, they seem to be based on the idea that fine discriminations in school performance are what is required. This ignores the basic statistical problem of drawing conclusions about school quality when most schools are statistically indistinguishable. The proposed changes are unlikely to add much to the precision of the data.

The proposed revisions do not address the fundamental problem associated with publishing school results – the harm it does to education. The incentives for schools to narrow the curriculum and teaching will remain. They will remain for as long as school results continue to be published, even if the publication of league tables is somehow reduced or prohibited.

There is also little prospect that the incentives for schools to manipulate and sort their results can be reduced without abandoning My School. Certainly, overseas systems that have been in place for up to 20 years have had little success in this regard. Manipulation and sorting

continue to be a feature of systems that publish school results and league tables. Manipulation and rorting of results is an inevitable outcome of publishing school results because of its “high stakes” implications for school reputations and the careers of teachers and principals.

## **5. Other arguments to publish school results are not valid**

As Education Minister, Julia Gillard made much of the proposition that reporting of school results is necessary to identify struggling schools and those in need of intervention programs and additional resources. This is a grave case of ignorance. It is nonsense that publishing school results is needed to better allocate resources. This information was already available to education departments and schools. Governments have failed to provide the necessary resources and support for struggling schools

A further argument used to justify publication of school results is that parents and the public have a right to this information. This is also a flawed case.

There can be no absolute right for information as is recognised in the case of some court hearings, national security issues and Cabinet meeting minutes. While there should be a strong presumption in favour of releasing information about public institutions and others supported by government funding, these decisions should have regard to the public benefit versus public harm. In the case of school results, the evidence is that it brings no significant gains, but has significant negative effects on education and school communities while being subject to manipulation and rorting.

The right to information is a very important principle in a democracy. It is critical to keeping governments and government agencies accountable. However, there are some circumstances in which the provision of information can do greater harm than good. Reporting school results, and the inevitable league tables that follow, is one among many such circumstances.

Eminent overseas and Australian commentators on the use of performance indicators have acknowledged that publication of school results is not an unambiguous benefit to society and that there is a strong case for withholding such information. For example:

As a reaction to unreasonable secrecy the belief in open access to information seems wholly healthy and undoubtedly has led to many benefits. Yet public disclosure of information cannot be upheld as an absolute principle. This is recognized by governments, for example, when they reserve the right to withhold information they deem to threaten national ‘security’. Likewise, if publication of information is likely to harm individuals unfairly, or to mislead, then there is a case for refusing to publish. It is our contention that some published performance indicators which make statements about schools or other institutions fall into this category. Their capacity to reflect reality accurately may be extremely limited and their publication may cause inappropriate inferences to be drawn about institutions. [Myers & Goldstein 1997; see also Goldstein & Myers 1996]

...if the publication of certain information has the potential for harming individuals, or may be seriously misleading, then a justifiable case can be mounted for refusing its publication. It could be contended that much of what might be described as *educational performance indicators* based on measures of student achievement falls into this category. Its ability to reflect objective reality may be extremely limited, and its publication may therefore cause both misleading and incorrect inferences about schools and ‘school effectiveness’ to be drawn. In such circumstances, there is strong case for withholding publication. [Rowe 2000; see also 2004]

Decisions on the disclosure of information have long had regard to the public harm and benefit. This is widely acknowledged by governments, the courts and many organizations

with an interest in government information and data. The Prime Minister herself would be the first to argue that Cabinet documents and minutes should not be released to the public because it could inhibit or damage government processes. It is a pity that she will not recognize the damage releasing school results can do to the education of children.

Freedom of Information laws around the world contain provisions setting out categories of information that can be withheld from release [Banisar 2006; see also Independent Review Panel 2008]. There are a number of common exemptions found in nearly all laws. These include the protection of national security and international relations, personal privacy, commercial-in-confidence, law enforcement and public order, information received in confidence, and internal government discussions. Cabinet documents, for example, are kept secret for 30 years in Australia. These exemptions are based on the general assessment that public or private harm could be incurred which exceeds any benefits that may be obtained by releasing such information.

Courts also often apply restrictions on the release of information. In some types of case the courts issue restraining orders on publicity or, which may come to much the same thing, conduct some proceedings in private. This occurs when a trial in open court would render the proceedings nugatory. Examples are when the subject matter affects national security or is a trade secret. Another instance is proceedings concerning the welfare of a child, where a public hearing would undermine the object of the proceedings. For the same reasons the courts sometimes make orders restraining publicity concerning certain aspects of cases.

Now, publication of school results hardly falls within these typical exemptions to the principle of freedom of information. However, they serve to remind that this worthy principle is not absolute, as the rhetoric of the former Federal Education Minister implies.

Most national laws also include a “public interest test” that requires governments to balance the interest in withholding information against the public interest in disclosure. School results are the property of State and Territory governments which have explicit or implied statutory requirements for public interest tests for the release of information. Good public policy also demands that the costs and benefits of major new proposals be fully assessed.

The basic question at issue in deciding whether school results should be published is whether it will cause undue harm to some people and/or seriously mislead the public compared to the benefits. This elementary principle was not followed before the governmental agreement to publish school results. The Federal and State/Territory governments assume that transparency of government data on schools is absolute. There is no evidence that governments have properly assessed the public harm against the benefits. It was a decision taken on ideological and political grounds and not one based on evidence.

This imbalance in the harm and benefit of publishing school results demands a re-consideration by Australian governments. Its introduction was planned in secrecy without public consultation and debate. The Prime Minister wants schools to be open and transparent about their performance but she has been totally unwilling to subject her proposal to full public scrutiny.

## 6. Alternative approach

The major recommendation of this submission is that the My School site should be abandoned because of the harm it will do to education and because of the fundamental difficulty of comparing schools in a meaningful, reliable and useful way.

There is some case for publishing aggregated school results, without identifying individual schools. The results can be used to demonstrate whether the proportion of students not achieving satisfactory outcomes is general across the system or largely associated with particular schools and communities. Publication of these results can also inform the public as to whether average school results are improving over time, or not, and whether poor and good results are concentrated in a relatively few schools, and whether poor and good results are associated with aspects of student background. Publication of consolidated data of this kind could act as a performance marker for education systems and governments, because if differences associated with disadvantage are not being reduced, then it is clearly government policies that are failing.

Publication of the distribution of school averages across score ranges is sufficient to provide an accountability measure for systems and governments. The distribution of school results can be presented by indicating the number of schools whose average score falls within different ranges. This information could be summarised as a histogram for each strand and Year level for both literacy and numeracy.

While this submission argues that the My School approach is fundamentally flawed, and should be scrapped, there are some minor improvements which should be supported even by those who continue to support it.

At the very least, some key changes should be made. One change would be to dispense with the colour coding of school results because it contravenes the policies and protocols for reporting school results published by the national education ministers' council and because it is highly prejudicial to schools that are "red flagged".

As Federal Education Minister, Julia Gillard gave an absolute guarantee that *My School* would not "name and shame schools". Yet, this is precisely what it does. Schools with the lowest results are to be flagged 'red', meaning 'red for danger'. Many schools serving the most disadvantaged communities in Australia have been given red flags on My School. It is a signal to parents to keep away. This is public shaming of the worst possible, and most socially noxious, kind.

Giving schools a 'red flag' is designed to punish. Why else was the colour red chosen for these schools? By 'red flagging' schools, the Government is aiding and abetting an annual ritual hunt for the worst performing schools around Australia that happens in England and the United States. It unfairly condemns schools in the most difficult circumstances and makes their task harder. Punishing schools by publicly labelling them as 'failures' in this way is not the path to school improvement. It is likely to be counter-productive by undermining teaching and learning.

Another area where some improvement could be made to My School to reduce the scope for misleading parents and the public is to report the margin of error on each school results for each subject tested at each Year level. The current approach is inadequate as it does not

report numbers participating in tests. It does not meet requirements of MCEETYA policies and protocols.

However, this reporting would need to be accompanied by very strong caveats warning the public of the implications of the margins for error for comparing school results. There will be a strong temptation for parents to conclude that, say, a 30 point difference in results between two small schools means one is better than another, despite the fact that the two results are not statistically distinguishable.

## **7. Recommendations**

1. The My School site should be abandoned because the data it provides is likely to lead to invalid comparisons of schools because of fundamental statistical issues concerning test results, as well as deficiencies in background information. This may lead to parents making choices which can undermine schools doing a good job in disadvantaged communities. In addition, the focus on literacy and numeracy is likely to lead to narrowing of the curriculum and teaching.
2. The costs of the proposed changes to data collection for My School should be considered because they are unlikely to make the comparisons on the My School site much more reliable.
3. Consideration should be given to collection and reporting of data which is consolidated in a way that avoids identifying schools, but which reports on how well systems and governments are achieving equity goals in relation to educational outcomes. Publication of a simple histogram of the number of schools in each state/territory whose average NAPLAN results for each domain and Year level tested fall within different score ranges should be considered. This does not require individual schools to be identified.
4. At the very least, two important changes should be made to the My School website:
  - The colour coding of individual school results should be abandoned because it is highly prejudicial; and,
  - The number of students participating in each test at each Year level in each school should be published so that the margin of error can be ascertained in each case.

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