

## Code of Silence Public Reporting of School Performance

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### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

**T**he current system of accountability in Australian education is not as transparent or as open as it needs to be. While there is some reporting of highly aggregated educational outcomes, there is no systematic or comprehensive reporting on individual school achievements.

The NSW Teachers Federation strongly opposes the release of any information that would allow schools to be compared on any level and government education departments refuse to release any informative data. For parents and the general public the media is the main source of information on comparative school performance. But the media is also hampered by the state education departments' monopoly over education data.

Objections to testing and publicly reporting school performance include:

- Issues relating to school assessments;
  - Concerns with using academic performance as an indicator of school success;
  - The effects of student background factors in school performance, and;
  - The consequential declining enrolments of poorly performing schools.
- These objections are dealt with in this paper. But although it is necessary to address such concerns, they do not outweigh the positive impact of releasing school performance data.

The release of comparative school data would benefit:

- *Parents*: comparative school data would be useful for parents in choosing a school for their child or in evaluating their current school's performance.
- *The general public*: comparative school data could empower the public to do something about an underperforming school by putting pressure on the school to improve or pressure on the government to remedy the situation.
- *Policymakers and researchers*: comprehensive and reliable data on school performance is essential for good education research, without which education policy suffers.
- *Teachers and schools*: areas in a school requiring attention and improvement can be highlighted by making comparisons between schools, thus enabling schools to grow and improve.

Australia needs an assessment programme that encompasses both absolute and relative measures of school performance. To improve schools and enhance the educational experiences and achievements of all students we must have an open reporting system that provides information about individual schools and allows the public to get involved in educational issues.

## THE CURRENT STATUS OF SCHOOL TESTING AND REPORTING IN AUSTRALIA

Very limited amounts of information regarding school performance are available to the public in Australia. The monopoly over education data is maintained by state education departments despite the large numbers of consumers and investors in public education and the strong individual and public interest in educational achievement.

It is not that this data is not collected (although one can argue that not enough 'good' data is collected), but rather that there seems to be strong outright resistance to releasing any data which may indicate how individual schools are performing. Even Dr. Ken Boston, Director General of Education in NSW, notes that 'there is a conspiracy of silence . . . and a determination to avoid making public any information which might indicate that one school is more effective than another' (Boston 1996: 2).

The education system is responsible for consuming large amounts of taxpayers' money, yet the public is kept in the dark about the performance of the schools to which this money goes. Poorly performing schools continue to operate in a system that accepts little public accountability and reveals little about school performance. We do not know whether all schools are reaching high educational standards and maintaining the quality of education expected by those who are paying for it.

To tackle the issue of accountability, there have been moves in recent years towards increased school assessment and statewide testing by both state and federal governments. Nevertheless, the present system of accountability remains neither transparent nor open.

### Reporting at the national and state level

#### *National Report on Schooling in Australia*

The *National Report on Schooling in Australia*, released each year by the Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs (MCEETYA), aims to build public awareness about what is going on in our schools. The majority of the report covers income, expenditure, staffing levels, student numbers and so on. The report contains little information on student learning or school or system performance. It provides only highly aggregated data on participation and retention rates, and literacy and numeracy levels.

Only recently has an attempt been made to release data that is comparable across the different states and territories. In a revision of national educational goals, the 1999 Adelaide Declaration stated that results from the National Literacy and Numeracy Plan are to be published in the National Report. A preliminary report released by MCEETYA in 1999 shows the percentage of students in each state that reached the reading benchmark. However, the comparability of the data is questionable since participation rates varied considerably between the states.

#### *NSW Basic Skills Test*

The NSW Basic Skills Testing programme was introduced in 1989. As it stands today there are two components to the programme, literacy and numeracy. Students in Years 3 and 5 from all government schools and most non-government schools are tested each year. Students are then graded and placed in one of four skill bands. Parents and schools receive individual student results.

Despite strong opposition by the NSW Teachers' Federation and calls to boycott the tests, attendance rates at school on testing days are often the highest in the year (McGaw 1995). This strongly suggests that parents are in favour of these tests and that they are keen for information on their children's

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schooling achievements. The opposition to such tests is a barrier to increasing the quality of education in this country. As Barry McGaw (1995: 46) puts it, 'the cost of opposition is not disruption to the assessment programmes but rather a weakening of any productive, shared commitment to the raising of standards and the monitoring of performance.'

As a result of negotiations between the NSW Teachers' Federation and the state government, no data is released that would allow any assessment of how a particular school is performing. The data is protected by a regulation in the Education Act which states: 'The results of basic skills testing must not be publicly revealed in a way that ranks or otherwise compares the results of particular schools' (Education Regulation 1996).

In 1996 the Department of Education released a performance table which listed 25 top performing schools in the Basic Skills Tests. The schools listed had performed well in a value-added measure. That is, students in Year 3 had performed in the bottom half of the state, but two years later this same group of students then performed in the top half of the state in Year 5.

The release of the table, published in the *Sydney Morning Herald* on 25 November 1996, sparked controversy over the usefulness of such a table and, indeed, the legalities of releasing the information. The NSW Teachers' Federation claimed that the Department of Education had breached the Education Act. But the Department claimed that the table did not show schools on a ranking ladder and as such it did not compromise the Basic Skills Test regulation. The Department said that the table was part of its plan to increase reporting to parents on school performance. No such table has been released since 1996.

## Reporting at the school level

### *School annual reports*

In 1997 the NSW Department of Education and Training introduced the School Accountability and Improvement Model. This required schools to publish an annual report based on a self-evaluation process. It was intended that these reports would increase accountability to the public and provide parents with fair, reliable and objective information on aspects of schooling, including student learning and achievement. Among others things, the Department asserted that the report would lead to improvements in schools and help parents in making decisions about their child's education (Department of Education and Training 1997).

In February 1997, the NSW Teachers' Federation placed industrial bans on the School Accountability and Improvement Model, as they believed the annual reports would be used to rank and compare schools. The bans were lifted in August 1997, but only after a new protocol for school reporting was set in place. The outcome of the negotiations was that school reports had to be based on general guidelines. However, actual decisions about precisely what information went into the reports and how it was presented was up to the self evaluation committee, over which the principal has a right of veto. In addition, principals were not compelled to report any specific data about their school's performance.

An audit evaluation of the department's model of school reporting (NSW Audit Office, 1999) found that in both 1997 and 1998 there were substantial differences between schools in terms of what they reported and how they presented their information. The audit found that schools tended to report good performance clearly, but glossed over areas where performance was not so good.

As a consequence of the NSW Teachers' Federation's restrictions, the annual school reports fail to achieve their objectives. They do not 'provide an opportunity for schools to account to their community' nor do they 'give fair,

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reliable and objective information' as intended by the Department of Education and Training (1997). Instead comparability between school reports is inhibited and parents are left without enough information to make informed decisions about their children's education.

#### *Media reports in NSW*

When the HSC results are released each year a media frenzy erupts. Newspapers try to piece together any sources of data so that they can report to the public on how students and schools performed. For many years the NSW Board of Studies (BOS) has released a merit list. The specific information contained in the merit list varies over the years according to changes in the HSC. The latest merit list had data on each individual HSC subject, listing students who performed above 90% in all subjects. This list also included the school attended by each student.

Based on this merit list, the *Sydney Morning Herald* publishes a list of NSW schools showing the total number of times a score above 90% was achieved in the school, and the number of times each school scored above 90% in both Mathematics and English. This is a very crude means of presenting HSC school performance data, for merely reporting the very top performers gives no indication of a school's overall performance in the HSC. However, the media are constrained by the lack of more detailed and accurate information.

Results of other school assessments, such as the NSW Basic Skills Test (BST), have proven even more difficult for the media to report on. Aside from highly aggregated state and national results, the media has struggled to provide any further performance information. After a nine month battle the *Herald* was given access to regional BST data, but only after appealing to the Administrative Appeals Tribunal. On 27 September 1999 they published the percentage of students in the low, mid and high bands of performance for each region in NSW in literacy and numeracy. They were unable to obtain data at the postcode or school level.

The public and parents therefore miss out. Even when some school performance information is made public, it is rarely in a form that allows clear judgements to be made about schools or an adequate assessment of the overall performance of one school compared to another.

#### **Opposition to the reporting of comparative school results**

The NSW Teachers Federation has long opposed the release of any educational performance data to the public. They opposed school performance results being published in school annual reports, so as to prevent comparisons between different schools. And they lifted bans on the NSW Basic Skills Test only after agreements were in place not to release test results in any way that would allow schools to be compared.

The refusal by the state government and the Teachers' Federation to take responsibility for educational outcomes means that the public and parents are powerless to combat bad schools and bad teachers. Teacher unions insist on focusing on inputs such as funding, resources, number of teachers and class size. But a school's effectiveness cannot be judged by considering inputs alone.

#### *Assessing school achievement*

Some argue that increased testing in our schools will only get in the way of teachers doing their real job in the classroom and that the results will lead to some schools and teachers being branded as 'poor performers'. Admittedly, establishing an effective assessment system is not an easy task. However, it is possible to develop a system that serves the purpose of fairly assessing the effectiveness of schools by objectively measuring student achievement. As

pointed out by Geoff Masters (1991: 3), 'a well designed assessment system can be an effective means of focusing students' attention on valued learning outcomes, encouraging higher order thinking and reflection, reinforcing curriculum intentions, and setting learners' sights on still higher levels of attainment.'

It is imperative that we continue to push for reliable and valuable testing procedures. The benefits that can arise from a successful assessment and reporting programme will positively affect education quality and serve to increase the standards and levels of achievement of all students in all schools.

#### *Academic achievement as an indicator of school success*

Some claim that simply reporting on academic performance fails to capture all that a school achieves. Admittedly schools offer more to their students than purely academic learning. However, the academic development of students is a central focus of all schools, or at least it should be. It is therefore not 'unfair' to judge a school's performance on academic assessments. A school's failure to seek and achieve academic development in its students is a betrayal of its central purpose.

No supporter of school achievement tests believes that such testing will provide an overall indication of school effectiveness. However, as Watson (1996: 116) points out 'the usefulness of performance indicators is simply to provide an *indication* of where a system appears to be performing well or poorly.' Testing a school's academic achievement is meant to be an indicator of its academic performance, and not of any other aspect of schooling.

#### *School versus student effects*

Some contend that it is misleading to compare school results because student background factors and natural ability are overriding factors in school performance. It has become fashionable to argue that student achievements are merely a reflection of their social and economic circumstances, and that schools can attribute their poor performance to the background features of their students.

One cannot deny the large body of evidence showing that socioeconomic factors play a large role in the education of children and that children from lower socioeconomic status backgrounds often lag behind their classmates of a higher socioeconomic status. However, it becomes dangerous when this evidence is used to justify poor performance in these students, or even worse, to expect poor performance of these students and the schools they attend. It is hypocritical to claim that all children have the potential to learn and concurrently argue that not all schools can reach certain standards of achievement because of their student intake.

#### *Declining enrolments in poor performing schools*

There is a trade-off involved in the public reporting of a school's poor performance. A common fear is that alerting the public to poor performing schools will result in a decline in enrolments at those schools. Indeed there is a serious risk that enrolments will decline, leaving a small number of students at a disadvantage in a poorly performing school. But, the resultant loss of students and the potential loss of funding, combined with pressure from the remaining parents, will mean that the problems will be addressed more urgently.

The alternative is to keep the public and parents in the dark, allowing the school and the authorities to take their time in improving the situation, meanwhile sacrificing the education of *all* students in the school as the school continues in a pattern of poor performance. In the latter scenario, the education of many students is sacrificed so as not to disadvantage a few, or so as not give the school a bad name and have the teachers' performance questioned.

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Disruption for a short time will hopefully lead to improvements, and seems to be the better option.

### **Why do we need comparative data on school performance?**

Naturally, students have different abilities, motivations and goals and come from different backgrounds. But part of a school's role is to identify the needs and motivations of its students and recognise their backgrounds and family situations. Whatever picture a school gets when looking at its student body, it must try to enhance its students' academic development and expect a certain standard of performance. If we are unable to measure and report on each school's ability to do this, many students may be left with an education that is unacceptable because their school was not identified as underperforming and pressured to improve.

The Fraser Institute in Canada publishes report cards providing information about schools on a range of different performance indicators. In the *1999 Report Card on Alberta's High Schools* (Cowley & Easton 1999: 3) it was stated that the purpose of such report cards was to invite comparisons between schools on a range of measures which could be used as 'an effective tool in the effort to improve our schools and a useful input for parents interested in selecting the school best suited to their children's needs.' These reports are based on the philosophy that all schools have the potential to improve and that by comparing schools and making public their achievements, schools will be encouraged to improve. No such reports are available in Australia making it very difficult to determine whether or not certain schools or systems are providing the quality of education that is expected.

#### *Parents*

Parents do not decide which school to send their child to based on a school's academic reputation alone (Cuttance & Stokes 2000). However, a school's academic performance in various aspects of learning is certainly an important consideration when it comes to choosing a school.

Furthermore, parents can use school performance data to evaluate how their child is progressing compared to others at the same stage and can determine whether or not they are satisfied with their school's performance. This information is important in giving parents the opportunity to evaluate the quality of education that their child is receiving.

#### *The general public*

The public has a large vested interest in the performance of schools. If there are schools operating that are not performing at an acceptable level, then this should be made public. Such information could empower the community to do something about an underperforming school by putting pressure on the school to lift its game or pressure on the government to remedy the situation.

Leaving the public in the dark can lead to increased suspicion and a lack of support for the education system for which it pays. It is crucial that the public be empowered to enter educational debates. Being well informed is vital for their effective participation.

#### *Policymakers and researchers*

Too often education debates in Australia are inhibited by the lack of clear and accurate data on school performance and effectiveness. The restrictions on the release of such data applies also to education researchers and policymakers, resulting in frustrating attempts to create accurate and substantial research reports to help the formulation of policy. Research reports are often attacked on the grounds that the data used to compare school sectors, states or individual

schools is 'old', 'vague' or 'lacking'. Unfortunately, more recent comprehensive and reliable data is simply not available.

Based on my own experiences it seems that states differ in their willingness to release education data for the purposes of research. The New South Wales Board of Studies releases HSC course data at the postcode level, but TER data is not released by the NSW Technical Committee on scaling. Other states such as Victoria and Queensland are more willing to allow *all* education data to be obtained for research—at the postcode level. However, it appears that all states prohibit the release of school data, thereby placing restrictions on research.

#### *Teachers and schools*

Feedback on student learning is useful for teachers to identify students' current levels of understanding, knowledge and skills; that is, to see where their weaknesses and strengths are. Teachers in the past have reported that external test results have brought to their attention areas where improvement is needed for their students that may have otherwise gone undetected (Masters 1991: 23). It is important for teachers to be able to assess what is being expected of and achieved by their students compared to others in different schools; this information cannot be obtained through their own in-class assessments.

Principals use feedback about student performance to make informed decisions on curricula and other school policies. With dependable data, principles can gauge their success against other schools, broaden their school policies and set goals for future improvements.

### **The impact of informing the public**

Despite the lack of comparable school data in Australia, there have been occasions when public reporting on school performance has resulted in positive progression.

#### *Manly High School*

Using the 1999 HSC Merit List published by the *Sydney Morning Herald*, parents of Manly High School were able to determine that their school was underperforming compared to other selective schools. Although the Manly High media attention sparked debate on various educational issues, the point is that comparative school information enabled parents to evaluate their school's performance. On realising that it was underperforming relative to other similar schools, they were able to instigate action. The debate over Manly High's performance led to pressure from the public and the school's parents for the school to improve and also to a departmental inquiry into the school. Perhaps if more comprehensive data were made available for the purpose of school comparisons the problem at Manly High would have been detected earlier.

#### *Mount Druitt High School*

The media reporting of Mount Druitt's performance in the 1996 HSC was considered by many to be distasteful, as the Year 12's school photo appeared on the front page of the *Daily Telegraph* under the heading 'Class That Failed'. It was perhaps not the ideal way for the media to bring to the public's attention the poor HSC performance of this school.

Nonetheless, the attention promptly led to a school review by the Department (Laughlin 1997). This set out to determine why the school had performed so poorly, and to implement strategies to combat the school's problems so that future students would have a better chance of doing well in the HSC. One has to wonder how many other schools performed as poorly as Mount Druitt High, but went unnoticed by the public and are still educating students at a level that is below standard.

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## Value added versus raw measures of school performance

Given that a school's student intake influences its performance, there is a strong push towards value-added measures of school performance. Value-added measures indicate what a school has added to its students' academic ability above and beyond prior attainment. Value added is a relative measure of achievement. It evaluates a school's performance in relation to its starting point, and therefore controls for the fact that some schools enrol bright students or students from advantaged backgrounds. Using value-added measures a school may be considered effective if its students perform well above what was expected, even though it may not have performed as well as another school in absolute terms.

Value-added reporting seems to be the answer to providing a fair evaluation of a school's performance. But it is not foolproof. Focussing educational performance reports solely on 'value added' measurements fails to provide the full picture on how schools are performing. Regardless of students' economic or social backgrounds we should be able to expect that a school will provide a quality education that will not only add to a student's education but will also ensure that they perform at an acceptable level. Reynolds (1997: 6) provides a concise example of this point: 'a school doing moderately well in a poor catchment area would, on a value-added criteria, be an effective school. Yet the children coming out of the school might well not be literate or numerate.'

Striking a balance in how we report on schools is ideal. Schools should not be allowed to fall below a certain standard of performance, measured by absolute performance indicators. But, at the same time, a relative (i.e. value-added) measure of the school's effectiveness would be useful in reporting on a school's success or otherwise.

## Conclusion

Australia needs a more transparent system of accountability in public education. A well balanced school reporting system based on a good assessment programme would make a substantial difference to our schools by leading to an improved and more open system of education.

Data is needed that compares schools and allows judgements to be made about the effectiveness of all schools—that is, whether or not they are reaching acceptable standards of education and whether or not they are enhancing the academic development of their students. Parents and the general public have a right to know which schools are not performing up to scratch so that, if not, they can be pressured to improve. In addition, provided individual confidentiality is respected, detailed data essential to bona fide researchers should be routinely available. This is essential to the formulation of sound schooling policies.

The purpose of public reporting is not to create a battleground in the education system, but rather to constructively involve parents and the public, to increase system and school accountability and to stir immediate action in addressing areas of real concern in underperforming schools. An open system also recognises effective schools and awards credit where it is due.

**For a list of references, please visit our website [www.cis.org.au](http://www.cis.org.au).**