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The Policy Challenge of Delivering School Transparency

This case study describes the policy-making process in Australia leading to the public release of information on every school in Australia through the My School website.

Policy lessons are described to provide insight for OECD member countries which may be grappling with similar issues in developing school accountability systems, particularly those working within federal-state contexts.

While some of the lessons from this policy development and implementation process relate specifically to Australia's circumstances, there are general policy prescriptions of broader interest to other countries seeking to improve school education through measurement and reporting of key factors of school operations and performance.

The area of school accountability is notable for arousing strong opinions and producing strongly contested empirical findings from scientific work on what makes a difference to school outcomes. There is no way to avoid this in staking out a policy reform that has as its purpose the publication of sensitive information about schools.

This case study shows that difficult policy problems can be solved by marshalling the evidence, articulating a clear case for policy change, investing resources in improved measurement to provide high quality comparable data, understanding the broader public interest in better information, and providing strong political leadership to overcome what can be formidable opposition.

Australia historically has delivered high quality education to children in schools. This has continued to today with international benchmarking consistently showing Australia among the top performers. On average, and compared with other OECD countries, most Australian school children are performing well.

The performance of Australian schools in the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) has however dropped in recent times relative to that of other OECD countries:

- In the period between 2003 and 2006, Australia declined in both its absolute and relative performance in reading literacy. The 2009 results show that no further decline has occurred but the lost ground has not yet been regained.
- Australia has too long a “tail” of underperformance linked to disadvantage. The PISA results indicate that over the last nine years, the percentage of students who are less than proficient at reading or maths has not reduced.
- International testing also shows that the reading performance of Australian students at the high end of the achievement scale has declined between 2003 and 2006, and again between 2006 and 2009.

The “tail” of underperformance in Australian schools is concentrated amongst students from low socio-economic status (SES) families and Indigenous students. For example, the difference between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students in PISA mathematics and reading literacy is equivalent to more than two years of formal schooling. The difference between students from the lowest SES quartile and those in the highest is also more than two years of schooling in both reading literacy and mathematics. Australian students in schools in remote locations achieve at a level equivalent to a year and a half lower than their metropolitan counterparts in all PISA assessment areas.

Similarly, the 2009 National Assessment Programme – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) results showed that the majority of Australian students in Years 3, 5, 7 and 9 achieved or exceeded the national minimum standards in reading, writing and numeracy. However, levels of achievement amongst Indigenous students, and students living in very remote regions, remain significantly lower than the overall standard.

For example, the NAPLAN results for Indigenous very remote students in Year 7 numeracy showed that less than half met or exceeded the minimum standards in 2009. Forty-two per cent of Indigenous very remote students achieved the minimum standards in Year 7 numeracy compared to 58.7% of Indigenous remote students.

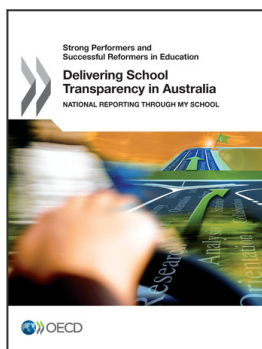
The international scientific literature shows that clear accountability for school results helps create a learning environment that encourages innovation and excellence from school leaders, teachers and students. Publishing school information also means that students, parents and teachers have the evidence they need to make informed decisions about student learning.

There is good evidence, primarily from the United States and PISA, that the publication of school-level test scores tends to improve the performance of all schools. The information permits the community to influence the quality of delivery of schooling.



Prior to the advent of My School, parents of school children were unable to understand the operations and achievements of their schools on common national definitions and measures. While ultimate responsibility for determining the standards and content of schooling rests with government, the families who fund and use the services (through taxes and private household contributions) play a key role in setting expectations. Without quality national data on delivery of schooling, this influence over delivery standards is constrained.

In addition to the needs of families who have children at school, there has been a long-term issue in Australia confronting successive federal education Ministers who lacked good data for policy. These ministers routinely received representations from different school system stakeholders presenting conflicting or inconsistent data to support claims for extra funding. There was no nationally-comparable data or single source of data on all schools to provide a basis for analysis for policy options and rational and equitable distribution of national resources.



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