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# Policy Background

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## THE AUSTRALIAN EDUCATION SYSTEM

Australia has a federal system of government comprising the Australian Government at the national level and eight state and territory governments. Under the Australian constitution, the state and territory governments are responsible for the delivery of schooling to all children of school age.

The Australian Government has limited legislative authority for schools under the Australian constitution. It does not own or operate any schools nor employ any teachers. The Australian Government's role in school education is to provide national policy leadership to set delivery standards, drive school reform, fund innovation, ensure national performance measurement and reporting, and represent Australia in international school projects.

The states and territories own, operate and regulate around 6 800 schools. Non-government schools (Catholic and independent schools) operate under conditions determined by state and territory government registration authorities. The Catholic system operates approximately 1 700 schools and there are about 1 020 independent schools.

The eight state and territory education systems traditionally have each managed their own curricula and assessment and reporting procedures.

Funding for schools is provided by the Australian Government, state and territory governments, and households. The proportional distribution of funding for each school from these sources varies across school sectors.

Based on data published in the My School dataset, on average 80% of funding for government schools comes from the state government and 14% from the Australian Government, with 6% from private sources. For Catholic schools, 20% comes from the state government, 60% from the Australian Government and 20% from private sources including households. For independent schools, on average 13% comes from the state government, 34% from the Australian Government and 53% from private sources including households.

Two key intergovernmental forums exist in the Australian context that provided the formal mechanisms for policy making for My School:

- The Council of Australian Governments (COAG) – is the peak intergovernmental forum in Australia and comprises the Prime Minister, state Premiers, territory Chief Ministers and the President of the Australian Local Government Association.
- The Ministerial Council for Education, Early Childhood Development and Youth Affairs (MCEECDYA<sup>1</sup>) comprises Australian, state and territory and New Zealand education Ministers, and is the principal forum for developing national priorities and strategies for schooling.

## INTRODUCTION OF THE NATIONAL ASSESSMENT PROGRAMME - LITERACY AND NUMERACY

Historically, each state and territory operated their own curriculum and assessments including their own literacy and numeracy tests. These were used to report against the national benchmarks by statistically aligning the state test results with a nominal national scale.

The Australian Government commenced in 2004 a concerted effort to develop national performance measures and reporting for the school system, with the inclusion in the Schools Assistance Act 2004 of requirements on schools and school systems and the state and territory governments to participate in the development and implementation of a variety of school and student performance measures and reports. The required level of reporting at this point was for each jurisdiction and for important sub-populations nationally such as SES groups and Indigenous students.

Education Ministers endorsed a common equating method to be used by all jurisdictions and a common standardised process for calculating and reporting of student achievement against the national benchmarks. While there was still no national curriculum or assessment at this stage, there were sufficient common elements in state curriculum to develop a national measurement framework.



Australian Government legislation that provided funding to the states and territories for schooling required all government and non-government schools to participate in national common literacy and numeracy assessments at Years 3, 5, 7 and 9 by 1 January 2008. Receipt of funding was conditional upon participation in the national testing programme.

Education Ministers agreed in Council in 2005 that Australia would have genuinely national, rather than separate state and territory, full population literacy and numeracy assessments. Ministers agreed that the 2006-07 period be devoted to developing the national assessment instruments and the reporting scales, and the establishment of the model of operation to support the full implementation of the national testing regime in 2008 – to be called the National Assessment Programme – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN).

This included the appointment of a group of assessment and measurement experts to provide advice on and guide the psychometric work. While each state and territory had expertise of this kind for their own assessment programmes, an important factor in the development of a high quality national assessment was that this expert advisory group was comprised of the very best scientists from Australia's universities who had both a national and international reputation in the field.

This expert group developed the scales for each domain assessed, a key feature of which for each was a common assessment scale consisting of ten reported bands representing the increasing complexity of the skills and understandings assessed by NAPLAN from Years 3 to 9. This would allow the tracking of students' progress in literacy and numeracy as they advanced through their schooling years.

The first NAPLAN tests were conducted in May 2008. For the first time a truly national picture for Years 3, 5, 7 and 9 showed the full range of student achievement and provided results by sex, Indigenous status, language background other than English, parental occupation and education, and geo-location (metropolitan, provincial, remote and very remote). These results provided valuable information to all education stakeholders from individual parents through to governments, policy makers and researchers, and an important and robust mechanism for highlighting where educational disadvantage existed most prominently.

Since then, NAPLAN has been conducted in the month of May each year. Reports are provided to parents on each student assessed, and a variety of national reports are released by ministers. More information is available at [www.naplan.edu.au](http://www.naplan.edu.au).

The development of NAPLAN provided some key policy lessons which informed the later move to national school level reporting, as well as the main performance data that would populate each school's profile and allow comparisons between schools with students from similar backgrounds<sup>2</sup> when the My School website was launched.

A defining feature of the success of the programme was the establishment of a group of independent experts to advise senior officials on the options for instrument development and the process for trialling test items and calibrating the national scale. This was crucial in an environment where each state and territory had a pre-existing test programme developed with advice from their own experts.

In 2007, nominations were sought from Australian Education System Officials Committee (AESOC) members and the peak non-government education bodies for the establishment of an independent Expert Advisory Group (EAG). The EAG was to provide expert research knowledge and technical advice on educational assessment and measurement to the steering group which was set up to oversee the introduction of national literacy and numeracy testing. Nominations were predominantly for people from universities, with areas of expertise ranging across psychometrics, educational assessment and measurement, and a number had internationally recognised work and/or international experience.

The EAG comprised five members who were independent of state and territory literacy and numeracy testing, which preceded the move to national testing. Most jurisdictions had a psychometric practitioner who managed their own test programme, including test development, marking, analysis and reporting of test results, either in-house or through contractors. An expert panel of preeminent educational measurement advisors was required to develop the achievement scale, check the tests for measurement validity, and ensure valid and reliable equating processes were used.



Long lead times were necessary along with sustained ministerial leadership from the Australian Government to keep the eight state and territory governments invested in the process. The commitment of senior state and territory officials played a pivotal role in delivering the new national assessments. Both government and non-government systems had representation in the NAPLAN steering group to ensure that the implementation of the new programme was supported in all sectors.

## **POLITICAL SUPPORT FOR BETTER PUBLIC ACCESS TO COMPARATIVE INFORMATION ABOUT SCHOOLS**

The Schools Assistance Act 2004 led to a number of innovations in performance measurement and reporting. The national performance reports, however, were limited to state and territory and sub-population aggregates, with no national reports on individual schools. Reports are required by schools themselves to their local communities on a number of national indicators.

Another important innovation was the requirement for each school to provide “plain English” reports to parents on each subject studied by their children on a five point A to E or equivalent scale. This ensures that parents receive information about how well their children are doing at school in comparison with their peers, rather than simply being told that their children are “doing well”.

Australia held a federal election in 2007. The incoming government’s commitments included a policy to ensure greater accountability through the introduction of annual reports comparing the performance of schools. This represented a major policy change that would:

- publish results of individual primary and secondary schools on Years 3, 5, 7 and 9 NAPLAN results;
- include trend line improvements or decline in like schools (that is schools enrolling students from similar family backgrounds);
- reflect challenges faced by each school;
- allow more to be done to improve a school’s performance; and
- allow additional resources to be directed to where they were most needed.

The strength of the Australian Government’s drive to improve transparency and accountability, and in particular to facilitate performance comparisons of schools, was a new and uncertain concept not only to the states and territories, but also to the non-government sector, for whom the exposure of school characteristics and performance in this way would also be a first.

A key factor in building their trust and support came through a commitment to move data responsibility away from committees of the ministerial council, having committee membership drawn primarily from Ministers’ departments, to an independent body. The intention for such a body was to ensure a separation of responsibility for scientific advising on performance measurement from policy concerns relating to performance reporting.

## **PUBLIC DEBATE ABOUT TRANSPARENCY**

The 2007 announcement precipitated a robust public debate marked by strongly polarised views on the merit of school performance reports. Internationally, there had been much debate about school league tables. Some opponents of school performance reports characterised schooling as a service best monitored by teachers, who were promoted as the sole rightful custodians of student progress and, for some, the moral guardians of the self esteem of students. On this view, students would suffer social stigma from being at a school reported as having poor results. These views were generally not shared by parents.

In December 2008, ministers declared in the Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians ([www.mceetya.edu.au/mceecdya/melbourne\\_declaration,25979.html](http://www.mceetya.edu.au/mceecdya/melbourne_declaration,25979.html)) that parents should have access to data on



student outcomes and data that allows them to assess a school's performance overall and in improving student outcomes.

During 2008 and 2009, intense public debate continued with ongoing opposition from teacher unions. Considerable correspondence went to the federal education Minister, and to the Prime Minister, totalling in the thousands.

Much of the concern centred around the belief that providing school performance information nationally would lead to unfair league tables comparing schools. It was also felt that Australian policy was simply following in the footsteps of international practices such as those of the United Kingdom and some areas of the United States. The Australian Government was clear in its communication that it was not adopting overseas practices but rather, was tailoring national school reporting to suit Australia's unique circumstances.

### Box 2.1 **Managing opposition: Challenges and responses**

<i>Challenge</i>	<i>Response</i>
The validity of comparing schools on the basis of their academic results.	<p>Education Ministers agreed that a range of information should be published to provide a context for understanding student outcomes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Information about each school's student population, including information about the social background of students, and the proportions Indigenous, students with disabilities, and students with a language background other than English.</li> <li>▪ Information about a school's capacity or capability, including school income, and teacher workforce.</li> <li>▪ Information from parent, student and teacher satisfaction surveys.</li> <li>▪ Information about the type of school, student and staff numbers, and its location (such as metropolitan or remote).</li> </ul>
The notion of comparing one school with another given each school's unique characteristics.	<p>Each school can be defined using elements which are unique to its setting, while still characterised by similarities such as the socio-economic background of the student population, remoteness and Indigenous population.</p> <p>All of these have been shown to be significant factors in determining educational achievement.</p> <p>It is important that we use each element or subsets of these elements in appropriate ways when we are making decisions about further support, setting future directions or introducing new programmes.</p>



<i>Challenge</i>	<i>Response</i>
<p>The ability to create a valid measure enabling meaningful performance comparisons among schools.</p>	<p>Family background is recognised to have a strong association with educational achievement, as well as other factors such as a school's remoteness and its Indigenous population.</p> <p>In order to identify like schools, a new socio-educational index has been developed specifically for the Australian school education sector. The index is known as the Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage, or ICSEA. It places schools on a numerical scale by reference to their relative socio-educational advantage.</p> <p>ICSEA is thus "tailor-made" for the purpose of identifying schools serving students from similar backgrounds.</p>
<p>Teachers' unions in particular were opposed to the publication of school level information. They objected to making this information public and suggested that it could be collected and used internally.</p>	<p>The Australian Government argued that the community should have access to information that enables an understanding of the decisions taken by governments and the status and performance of schooling in Australia.</p> <p>It was further argued that without this information, any debate in the community cannot be properly informed.</p> <p>Collection, provision and publication of data on student outcomes and school performance are essential for public accountability.</p> <p>The information published will provide the evidence necessary to support the continuous improvement of students, schools and education systems over time, and inform decisions by government about where resources should be allocated.</p>
<p>Publication of these results could lead to a "narrowing of the curriculum" as schools directed more time and resources at achieving better NAPLAN test results.</p>	<p>The main purpose of the NAPLAN tests is to identify whether all students have the literacy and numeracy skills and knowledge which provide the critical foundation for other learning and for their productive and rewarding participation in the community. Inadequate attention to the fundamental areas of literacy and numeracy undermines students' ability to participate in other important areas of the curriculum.</p> <p>There is no reason for students to be put under pressure to perform for NAPLAN. Adequate preparation, including practice on sample tests, ensures that students feel comfortable in the testing environment and are able to confidently demonstrate what they know and can do. Beyond this basic preparation for the tests, the only way to prepare students for the tests is to make them more literate and numerate.</p>



Challenge	Response
<p>Publication of results could lead to the stigmatisation of schools that did not perform well on NAPLAN tests.</p>	<p>Through the publication of school contextual information, it was acknowledged that student performance on NAPLAN tests is influenced by a number of factors both inside and outside the classroom, including the educational attainment and occupation of parents, for example, which are strong predictors of student performance.</p> <p>My School was designed to encourage parents and members of the community to engage in meaningful conversation with school principals and education officials about the direction and resourcing of schools in their community and beyond.</p>
<p>Concern that the website would allow the media and others to publish school league tables.</p>	<p>It was argued that the media has always been able to publish information about schools and that prior to My School, this was in the absence of sophisticated transparency measures. The best way of ensuring an honest comprehensive public debate is to ensure accurate, clear information is publicly available rather than placing limitations on what can be published.</p> <p>Strong protocols for data collection and reporting were agreed to by education Ministers to support meaningful and comparable reporting of school data, and the responsible use of this information. These protocols include the protection of individual student privacy, not publishing comparative data without contextual information, and the publication of error margins, caveats and explanatory notes to ensure accurate interpretation.</p> <p>Ministers also agreed that: <i>“the Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) will be supported in providing strong and active management of information it provides to prevent the identification of individual students and to promote the meaningful use of data by third parties. ACARA will work actively with the media to explain the information published and how to properly interpret it, and will take steps to counter unfair or inaccurate reporting.”</i></p>

The Prime Minister addressed the National Press Club in August 2008 on the Australian Government “Education Revolution”. He stated in explicit terms that the Government would be seeking agreement at COAG to national school performance reporting on individual schools. Later that year Mr. Joel Klein, then the Chancellor of New York City Education Department, visited Australia at the request of the then education Minister, the Hon Julia Gillard MP. In November 2009, the education Minister held a principals’ forum at which the participants made their concerns about the Government’s agenda known.

The concerted union campaign gained strength when the resolve of the Government to proceed with school reporting became more strongly apparent. Final policy authority for new school performance reports was provided during



2009 through COAG and MCEECDYA, and included authority to establish the Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA).

Continuing through to 2010, with My School launched in January, the initial media commentary with school performance tables strengthened the teacher union's opposition and prompted the national teacher union body to call for a boycott of the NAPLAN tests to be held in May that year. This is further explored later in the case study.

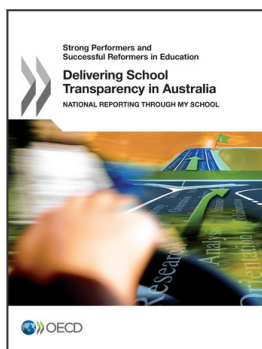
Throughout this period and through to the present, despite the loud protestations of some segments of the community, there was and is also clear support from the general community with the balance overall appearing to favour transparency of school performance information nationally.





## Notes

1. During much of the lead-up to the introduction of My School, this group was called MCEETYA (Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs), however for ease of reference it is called MCEECDYA throughout this case study.
2. On My School, similar schools are schools serving students from statistically similar backgrounds. Factors used to determine a group of similar schools are the socio-educational backgrounds of the students' parents, whether the school is remote, the proportion of Indigenous students, the proportion of students from a language background other than English, or a combination of these factors. These factors are used to create an Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage (ICSEA) value for each school. A school may have up to 60 similar schools, but it is possible that a school has no similar schools. Special schools do not have an ICSEA value and therefore do not have similar schools. A school will have similar schools if it has an ICSEA value.



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