



3

Decision Making

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Implementation of reform to school performance reporting in Australia requires the authority of nine education Ministers, both collectively in council and individually within their own governments to set policy and direct its implementation. Some of this can be achieved by education Ministers themselves. On occasion, the task requires the attention of heads of government. When the opportunity arises to include education in a broader review of intergovernmental service delivery, this can be pivotal to the achievement of major reforms.

AUSTRALIA'S SCHOOL REFORM AGENDA

The Australian Government's "Education Revolution" involves a sharper focus on improving outcomes as students move through school. The transparency and accountability mechanisms are aimed at improving outcomes and equity for all students by using nationally comparable school performance data to build a substantive evidence base to support future improvements.

In May 2008, the federal budget included funding provision for a National Schools Assessment and Data Centre (NSADC). The federal Education Department had formed the view that the continued handling of national school performance measurement and reporting by an inter-governmental committee of Education Department officials was unlikely to deliver hard reforms. The Australian Government decided to direct its resources instead to an independent body and to require state and territory support as part of the funding obligations attached to federal grants. The data centre would act as an independent source of advice on performance measurement and collection point for school data.

Subsequently a report commissioned under the COAG process, *A New National Architecture for School Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting*, recommended that a new national statutory body be established with a legislative mandate to report to the Ministerial Council for Education, Early Childhood Development and Youth Affairs (MCEECDYA) and to be tasked by MCEECDYA to execute its policy decisions in relation to curriculum, assessment and reporting. Bringing together these three linked elements of national school system governance was an important policy innovation and laid the foundations for the establishment of ACARA.

MANDATE FROM THE COUNCIL OF AUSTRALIAN GOVERNMENTS (COAG)

In 2008, at the highest levels of government in both the federal and state spheres, COAG undertook the most significant reform of Australia's federal-state financial relations in decades through the introduction of an Intergovernmental Agreement (IGA).

This was a broad-ranging reform of shared funding and responsibility for key areas of service delivery including health and education. In addition to a major rationalisation of the number of payments to the states and territories by the Australian Government, the IGA also involved a changing focus from inputs to outcomes – in exchange for more flexibility in how states and territories spent their funding, they would be required to undertake enhanced, transparent reporting.

As noted above, in August 2008 the then Prime Minister gave an address at the National Press Club which announced the government's plan for an "Education Revolution", including the transparency agenda. The Prime Minister stated specifically that individual school performance reporting would be a condition of future funding arrangements. At the same time, the Australian Government released a booklet which reinforced the transparency and accountability message given by the Prime Minister in his speech. This and other instances of public advocacy by the Australian Government were important in reinforcing the right of parents and the community to have transparent information on all schools.

At the COAG meeting of 29 November 2008, the Council agreed:

- that greater transparency and accountability for the performance of schools is essential to ensure that every Australian child receives the highest quality education and opportunity to achieve through participation in employment and society;
- to national reporting on the performance of individual schools to inform parents and carers and for evaluation by governments of school performance; and



- that a new body, ACARA – the independent body referred to above – would be supplied with the information necessary to enable it to publish relevant, nationally comparable information on all schools to support accountability, school evaluation, collaborative policy development and resource allocation.

Box 3.1 My School: Australian Government and COAG Involvement

Federal Government

November 2007 - Federal Labor party **election commitment** to Lift School Standards, focussing on greater accountability through the introduction of annual reports comparing the performance of schools.

August 2008 - the Australian Government launched its policy paper "Quality Education: The Case for an Education Revolution in our Schools".

Productivity Agenda Working Group (PAWG)

One of the seven working groups established by COAG to deliver election commitments and progress work on the **productivity** component of the national reform agenda.

Chaired by Julia Gillard MP, Deputy Prime Minister with senior public servants from the Commonwealth, state and territory Governments.

Tasked with delivering implementation plans for **election commitments** (including the Digital Education Revolution, universal access to early childhood education, delivery of a National Curriculum) and determining key priorities to support the Productivity Agenda.

Developed a nationally agreed **Participation and Productivity framework**, endorsed by COAG March 2008 and which outlined key aspirations, outcomes, progress measures and future policy directions for early childhood development, schooling, skilling and training.

Council of Australian Governments (COAG)

(peak intergovernmental forum comprising the Prime Minister, state Premiers, territory Chief Ministers and the President of the Australian Local Government Association)

20 December 2007 -

Agreed to a new reform agenda across health and aging, **productivity**, climate change and water, infrastructure, business regulation and competition, housing and indigenous reform. Agenda initially driven by the implementation of federal **election commitments**.

Agreed to improve **funding arrangements** and a more collaborative Australian Government - state relationship.

Established seven working groups to progress this work.

September 2008

Commissioned a **report** to review the governance arrangements for national curriculum, assessment and reporting.

November 2008

COAG agreed on the need for greater educational transparency and accountability.

Gained jurisdictional support for a new school **performance reporting framework**, including national reporting on the performance of individual schools.

Endorsed the establishment of the **Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA)**.

Agreed **ACARA** would be supplied with the information necessary to enable it to publish relevant, nationally comparable information on all schools to support accountability, school evaluation, collaborative policy development and resource allocation.

Intergovernmental Agreement on Federal Financial Relations (IGA) - March 2008

Outlines the Australian Government's financial commitments to state and territory governments and overall policy objectives for each key service sector.

Includes Specific Purpose Payments to states and territories for the provision of services in key service delivery sectors.

Schools Specific Purpose Payment.

National Education Agreement (NEA) 1 January 2009

Sets out objectives, outcomes, outputs, performance indicators and state and federal roles and responsibilities relating to the provision of school education.

Details reporting requirements under the **performance reporting framework**, including national reporting on individual schools.

Schools Assistance Act and Regulations

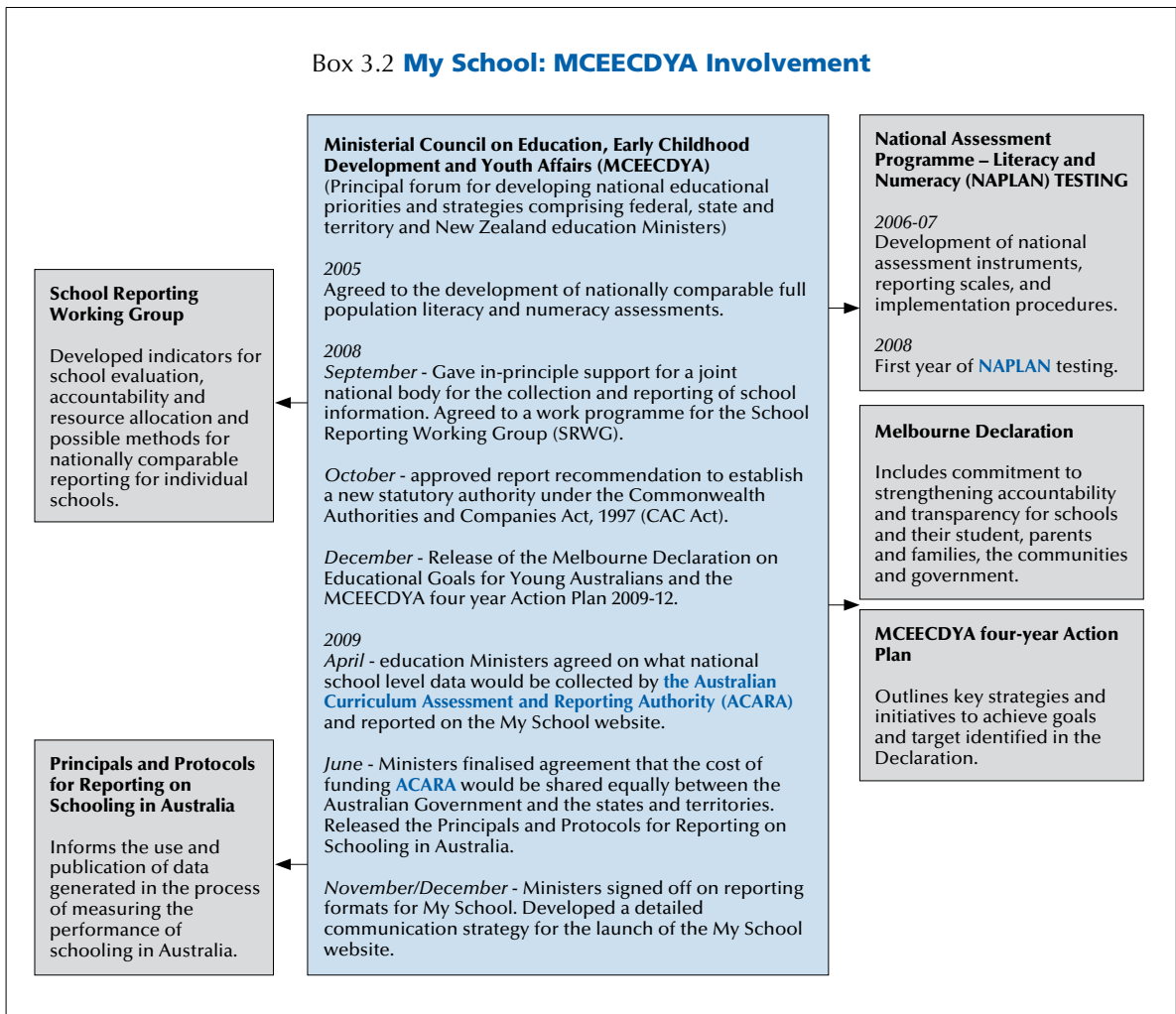
Details the Australian Government's financial assistance to non-government schools for 2009-12.

Provides a legislative basis for placing the same NEA reporting requirements on non-government schools.

Outlines performance and transparency requirements consistent with the **performance reporting framework** in the NEA.



Box 3.2 My School: MCEECDYA Involvement



The Australian Government recommended to COAG that it would be important to accompany school performance information with two other categories of information – the context in which a school operates (student background, for example) and the resources available to a school. This is a key design feature of My School. The release of school income data for each school for the first time in March 2011 confirmed that the public is much better placed to understand and discuss school performance with this additional element.

The policy authority for current education reforms, including My School, is set out in the NEA which forms a schedule to the Intergovernmental Agreement on Federal Financial Relations reached by COAG in 2008.

Service delivery schedules to the IGA locked in the requirement for both government and non-government schools for national reporting on the performance of individual schools for the purposes of accountability, school evaluation and resource allocation. Getting agreement at this high level laid the foundations for where national school level reporting was headed. COAG then tasked education Ministers (MCEECDYA) with determining the details of how this would be achieved for all schools across the country.

EDUCATION MINISTERS DETERMINED THE POLICY DETAILS

The Australian Government led MCEECDYA's consideration of how the transparency agenda should be delivered. Similarly to the development of NAPLAN, ministers decided to form an expert working group to provide them with advice. The group comprised members of the states and territories, the non-government sector and the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER).



Box 3.3 **My School: Establishing the delivery capability for national school reporting**

Budget funding for independent data collection and reporting

- Funding received in 2008-09 federal budget for new independent collection agency for school data.
- COAG commissioned [report](#) *A new national architecture for school curriculum, assessment and reporting*, recommended that a single new national statutory body be established to implement curriculum, assessment and reporting policy (Sept 2008). Budget funding directed towards this.
- Adopting this recommendation and linking the three elements of national school system governance - curriculum, assessment and reporting - was the basis for establishing **ACARA**.

Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA)

- Established under the ACARA Act 2008 tabled in Parliament October 2008.
- Independent authority responsible for the development of a national curriculum, a national assessment programme and the collection and reporting of national school performance data.
- Became fully operational May 2009.
- Legislated to perform its functions and exercise its powers in accordance with the Charter and under direction of MCEECDYA.
- Developed a website to present publicly, for the first time, nationally comparable school performance information for all Australian schools.

MY SCHOOL (launched 28/1/2010)

Ministers asked the expert working group to provide advice on the indicators and data needed for school evaluation, accountability and resource allocation, together with possible methods for reporting information on individual schools. They did this with the assistance of a report on reporting and comparing school performances commissioned from ACER (see references).

Some of the key recommendations from the ACER analysis were that:

- nationally-comparable data should be collected on students' literacy and numeracy skills using NAPLAN, and on tertiary entrance results of students in each senior secondary school;
- nationally-comparable data should be collected on sources and amounts of funding received by each school, and on the numbers and qualifications of teaching staff in each school;
- nationally-comparable data should be collected on the socio-economic background of students in each school, preferably based on information collected at the individual student level using at least parental occupation and possibly parental education levels;
- in reporting student outcome data, data for like-schools should be provided as a point of comparison and that in determining like-schools, account should be taken of the percentage of students from Indigenous backgrounds and language backgrounds other than English, and the socio-economic backgrounds of students in the school;
- for purposes of providing public information about schools, a common national website should be used to provide parents and the public with access to rich information about individual schools, and that this website should provide information about each school's programmes, philosophies, values and purposes, provided by the school itself, as well as nationally-comparable data provided centrally; and
- nationally-comparable student outcome data should, wherever possible, provide information about current levels of attainment, gain/growth across the years of school, and improvement in a school over time.



Box 3.4 School Profile

2010

2009

2008

School comments 2010

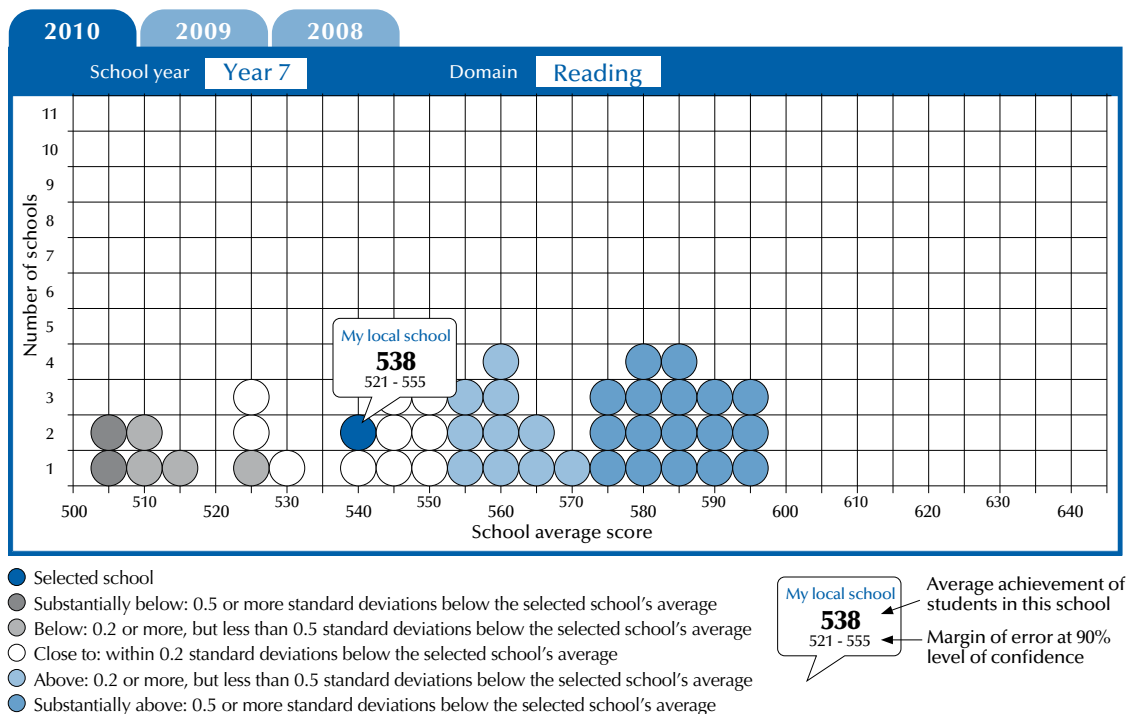
Mylocal school is a large comprehensive co-educational high school in the north western suburbs of NSW. Although it is located in an area well known for its highly regarded schools, including selective, single-sex and non-government schools, Mylocal school has experienced a steadily increasing enrolment during the last few years. The school prides itself on academic, vocational, cultural and sporting success. With a focus on Quality Teaching, it aims to meet the needs of students in a technology rich environment. For the last four years Extension classes have been established in our Stage 4 curriculum and Extension courses are available in Stage 6 across a broad curriculum range for our talented students. There are high expectations for student learning, behaviour and school uniform. Sixty-eight per cent of students are from a language background other than English. Mylocal school's mission is to develop considerate, responsible people who can learn independently to achieve personal excellence. The school aims to develop in its students, the skills, knowledge, attitudes and values necessary for participation in society.

Box 3.5 Similar Schools

'Similar schools' in this context 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. For more information on the method used to identify statistically similar schools.

The graph compares the average achievement of students from the selected school with the average achievement of schools serving students from statistically similar backgrounds. Each circle represents a school. The colours indicate whether the selected school's average score is above, close to, or below a similar school score.

Hover on a circle to show a school's average score. Click on a circle to view a school's profile page.














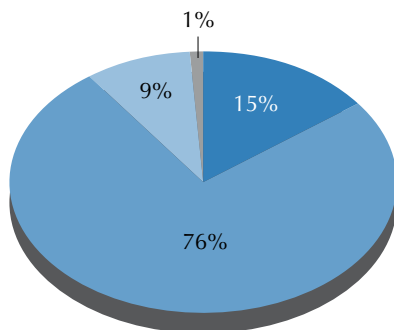
Box 3.6 School Finances: Full-time equivalent (FTE) enrolments (2009)

Interpreting school financial information

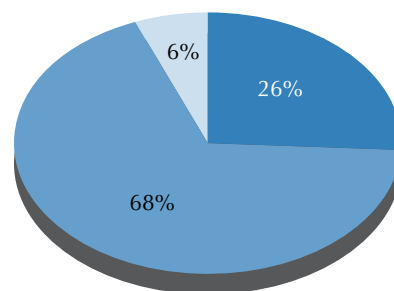
The following table and charts summarise the recurrent and other income of the selected school together with its capital expenditure for the 2009 calendar year. Caution should be taken in using the information presented below when making direct funding comparisons between schools. The financial resources available to schools are directly influenced by the nature of the school (including its location and profile), its programmes and its operations. For further information on the methods used and on the comparability of the data.

Net recurrent income 2009		Total	Per student
	Australian Government recurrent funding	1 921 049	1 546
	State/Territory Government recurrent funding	9 714 561	7 817
	Fees, charges and parent contributions	1 136 115	914
	Other private sources	91 944	74
Total gross income (excluding income from government capital grants)		AUD 12 863 669	AUD 10 351
Deductions			
	Income allocated to current capital projects	140 329	113
	Income allocated to future capital projects and diocesan capital funds	0	0
	Income allocated to debt servicing (including principal repayments and interest on loans)	0	0
Subtotal		AUD 140 329	AUD 113
Total net recurrent income		AUD 12 723 340	AUD 10 238
Capital expenditure 2009		Total	
	Australian Government capital expenditure	584 946	
	State/Territory Government capital expenditure	1 508 149	
	New school loans	0	
	Income allocated to current capital projects	140 329	
	Other	0	
Total capital expenditure		AUD 2 233 423	

Total gross income 2009
(excluding income from government capital grants)



Total capital expenditure 2009



Note: Percentages are rounded and may not add up to 100.

The value of commissioning advice from internationally recognised experts in the field cannot be over-estimated, especially in a federal system of government where each government will have its own expertise. If the national minister is able to bring to the table carefully considered propositions informed by experts who are independent of government, the discussion with other ministers can be based on ideal outcomes more than entrenched interests.

Throughout 2009, ministers considered the advice of the School Reporting Working Group (a sub-group of MCEECDYA) and reached agreement on each aspect of national school level reporting:

- that reporting on individual schools would cover the three key areas endorsed by COAG – a school's context (for example, the type and number of students), capacity (such as financial resources and teaching levels of expertise) and outcomes (including NAPLAN performance and senior secondary outcomes);
- that the most effective channel of reporting would be via a national website;
- that the format of the website and the way data was presented would place the school at the centre of the report;
- that socio-economic information for each school would be displayed to provide context for interpreting a school's performance;
- that the construction of an index and details of the methodology for grouping like schools based on socio-economic status and other variables – later known as the Index for Community Socio-Educational Advantage (ICSEA) – be developed. This was vital in addressing state and territory sensitivities to the possibility of unfair comparisons between schools and would provide the first ever capacity of Australia to determine the relative levels of educational advantage or disadvantage of all schools; and
- that all states and territories and the non-government sector would provide full data sets to ACARA. As mentioned above, the establishment of an independent authority was integral in gaining the support of the states and territories, and ensured their comfort in providing data direct to an independent body rather than to the Australian Government.

In June 2009, education Ministers finalised agreement that the cost of funding ACARA would be shared equally between the Australian Government and the states and territories. ACARA was established under Commonwealth

Box 3.7 **NAPLAN Summary**

	2008		2009		2010					
	Reading		Writing		Spelling		Grammar & Punctuation		Numeracy	
Year 7	▶ 538 521 - 555		553 636 - 570		571 544 - 588		542 525 - 559		588 671 - 605	
	SIM 538 521 - 555	ALL 546	SIM 554 541 - 567	ALL 533	SIM 562 549 - 575	ALL 546	SIM 561 548 - 574	ALL 535	SIM 578 565 - 591	ALL 548
Year 9	▶ 587 570 - 604		577 560 - 594		614 597 - 631		576 569 - 593		649 632 - 666	
	SIM 603 591 - 580	ALL 580	SIM 594 582 - 666	ALL 569	SIM 595 583 - 607	ALL 576	SIM 599 587 - 611	ALL 574	SIM 614 602 - 626	ALL 589

- ▶ Average achievement of students in this school
- SIM** School serving students from statistically similar backgrounds
- ALL** Australian schools' average
- [-] Student population below reporting threshold
- [] Year level not tested

Selected school's average is:

- substantially above
- above
- close to
- below
- substantially below these schools' average



legislation with a Board comprising nominees from each state and territory, the National Catholic Education Commission, the Independent Schools Council of Australia and the Australian Government, and is answerable to MCEECDYA. ACARA's work to develop the My School website was written into their Charter and work plan, and was also made a condition of their funding.

Education Ministers agreed to proceed with the available national data for the inaugural My School, and agreed an ambitious work programme to add further data as it became available. With My School first launched in January 2010, the Government delivered the first set of national school performance reports in Australia's history.

These were very well received by parents, who to that point had no means of comparing schools on a national basis irrespective of the jurisdiction the schools are in or who owns and operates them.

In particular, a key feature of My School that was accessed by parents was the summary table of NAPLAN performance. Here a user can see at a glance a school's performance in all domains and year levels compared to the national average and the statistically similar schools average. The table is also colour coded to show if the school's performance is substantially above (dark green), above (light green), close to (white), below (light red) or substantially below (dark red), that of the similar school groups.

In relation to reporting of school income, the inherent differences in the way schools are resourced and managed across jurisdictions and sectors create challenges for ensuring comparability of financial data. A phased approach with collaborative work between ACARA, the Australian Government, states and territories and non-government sector ensured comparable financial information was published when My School 2.0 was released in March 2011.

The other addition to the website that was only possible for the first time in My School 2.0 is growth data on literacy and numeracy, which shows overall improvement of student cohorts that remained in each school between 2008 and 2010. This provides a measure of the influence of the school itself on student progress, the value schools have added to their students' learning over a two-year period.

THE KEY FACTORS IN POLICY MAKING

Strong leadership

From the outset, years before My School was released, there was strong national leadership by the Australian Government and strong political leadership by both the then Prime Minister and the then Deputy Prime Minister, who was also the Minister for Education. School reporting was clearly a centrepiece of the Government's broader education reforms.

The strong view expressed repeatedly, over time, by the Australian Government, particularly by the Deputy Prime Minister, was that parents want and have a right to public information about all schools, that the nation needs this information and that it is certainly in the interests of every Australian school child.

Having adopted this view, a number of challenges presented immediately. Chief among them was significant criticism from some of the key stakeholders.

Preparedness to manage opposition

Initially, there was resistance from the states and territories whose paramount concern was that national reporting would lead to unfair comparisons being made between schools. The resistance of the states and territories was not trivial because, without their agreement, it would not be possible to access the data they held. There is no constitutional capacity for the Australian Government to override or mandate what the states and territories must do. Rather, it had to lead and negotiate to gain agreement, which it did over a period of years.

Secondly, there was vigorous criticism from teacher unions, particularly the federal body representing government school teachers, the Australian Education Union (AEU). The Deputy Prime Minister was frequently challenged by the unions. In the face of a concerted campaign of correspondence and media comment, the Deputy Prime Minister patiently reiterated the case for transparency in the public interest.



The My School story shows the importance of policy makers considering conflicting stakeholder interests and views regarding empowering parents with potentially sensitive information. The balance of judgement formed by the Australian Government was that it was more in the public interest to publish the information than not. Moreover, the fact of a Labor government Minister disagreeing with the federal teachers' union demonstrated the strength of the Government's resolve to support the right of the community to have this information and not allow unions to control public access to school information.

Box 3.8 **Development of Australian System**

In developing the Australian position a number of overseas systems were examined by both the Expert Advisory Group and ACER on school level reporting. As a result of the analysis, including experiences from overseas, the following key principles were used as a guide:

- The measures would be used to guide school evaluation, accountability and resource allocation.
- The primary purpose of performance data is to support each school to improve the outcomes of their students.
- It would be a shared national framework, to allow parents and the community to gain a better understanding of the performance of schools than would otherwise be possible.
- Balanced information would be made available, by accompanying the publication of attainment data with publication of contextual information about a school as well as information about the resources available to it.
- The focus of the development should not be if data is available to support an indicator. Once the indicators are identified, then work can begin on what data is available and what areas need to be further investigated.
- Comparative information would be generated, noting simplistic league tables will not be produced. Instead options should be developed that support high quality, fair and reasonable methodologies for comparing school performance.

This enabled the selection of key elements for a model to reflect the Australian system, such as:

- The information would be presented in a way that made the school the centre of the report rather than data presented in a table format and listing schools.
- Schools would also have the opportunity to be able to provide information on its ethos, programmes and achievements.
- Schools would not be graded or ranked.
- More than one single measure of school performance would be used.
- Student assessment outcomes would not be adjusted to reflect contextual factors. Instead the actual school results would be displayed, with contextual information published also. This decision was based on advice from ACER and including work from Goldstein and Leckie (2008), and Rowley (2006).
- Point in time (i.e. status) measures should also be supplemented with gain or growth indicators to provide a measure for making judgements about the value that schools are adding.
- The only performance comparisons offered would be among schools that have students from statistically similar backgrounds.
- In the development of the like school methodology, consideration was given to a number of models, including statistical near neighbours and assigning each school to a pre-defined group. The pre-defined grouping method was rejected due to problems with schools located on a boundary of a group wanting to be on the other side of the boundary.
- The model selected by Australia ensures that every school has its own unique similar schools group as the school is always in the centre of this group.



Marshalling the evidence

Other key factors in the policy-making phase centred around grounding the policy in evidence from international experiences and from this, building a model suited to Australia's needs. Feeding into this at key stages in the process was advice from experts in performance measurement and reporting. This provided the scientific basis for taking sound decisions and ensuring that the political and government stance was persuasive and carried credibility on the broader community. The use of experts continues to be an on-going practice in developing future iterations of the website.

Effective decision making

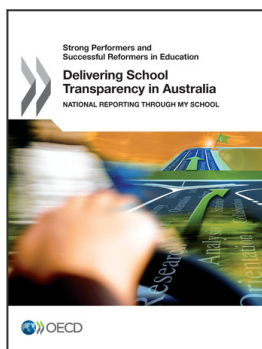
The related major reform to service delivery performance monitoring through COAG placed an emphasis on collection and reporting of delivery and outcomes data. This afforded the Australian Government an ideal means for securing the authority needed for the public provision of national school performance reporting. Through the COAG funding agreements, the Australian Government was able to make judicious use of a major funding injection to schools by making provision of national data on every school in Australia a condition of federal funding.

The process managed by the education Ministers to develop and implement the details of school reporting entailed careful consideration of the options and the issues, with intensive scientific and policy analysis drawing on a variety of conceptual propositions and empirical testing of these, with well-documented outcomes and follow up from meetings. In a federal system of government, rigorous processes are particularly important to keep track of the decision making and ensure that the analytical work needed between decision points is carried out.

Long-term planning

The success of My School is as much a function of exercising the discipline needed to scope the project and keep track of progress through project monitoring and reporting to ministers as it is a function of the merit of the policy. This kind of reform cannot be achieved in the short term.

Good planning over a long time period contributed to the success of getting the initiative off the ground, as did flexibility on the part of all governments in being prepared to publish what data was available initially, rather than wait until all data was perfect before launching My School.



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