

My School Website: Report on APPA Member Views

This paper outlines responses by Australian primary principals to the Australian Government's *My School* website. The responses were collected in two ways:

- Through an open invitation to members of the Australian Primary Principals Association (APPA) to comment on the association's website. These data have been analysed to identify the key issues raised by a significant proportion of respondents, but no claim is made to statistical validity.
- Through a formal survey conducted by the NSWPPA, which was completed by almost 800 principals from throughout NSW.

The APPA members responding to the website invitation provided overwhelmingly negative commentary on the *My School* website. While a number commented positively on the initiative, reservations about the site led most to the view that it was not making a positive contribution. Those who were positive argued for the value of good quality data, and the need for transparency and accountability. Some principals felt that the site gave positive feedback to hard-working staff who had achieved improvements in student results over time.

There were seven key criticisms of the website evident in the APPA members' contributions. These are outlined below. While the NSW survey followed a different format, some of the data from the analysis of survey responses bears on the same issues. In the NSW survey, 67% of principals described the *My School* website as 'a "time bomb" potentially damaging to a broad primary curriculum', while 77% saw it as a 'political exercise with little benefit to schools or communities' (these responses were among those provided with the survey, and respondents could choose more than one). About 35% saw it as a valuable tool for some purposes.

1. The most widespread criticism from the APPA website responses concerned the use of ICSEA to provide groups of like schools for comparison. Respondents argued that the ICSEA rankings did not reflect the school population, and that this distorted the between-school comparisons. Among the specific issues raised were the following:
 - ICSEA data seemed at odds with other data used to identify disadvantaged schools. Schools noted that ratings of schools based on Student Family Occupation (SFO) or Education Maintenance Allowance (EMA) data were significantly different from ICSEA rankings. Some schools which are targeted by DEEWR because of disadvantage felt that they were ranked as advantaged schools on *My School*.

- Principals drew attention to perceived weaknesses in the ICSEA methodology, notably the fact that schools from the same area drawing different clientele would be ranked the same, and that schools drawing students from outside their zone could be advantaged or disadvantaged in comparisons.
 - In some cases large schools were grouped with very small schools. This ignored the weakness and inconsistency of aggregated and average data with very small sample sizes in small schools. Some small schools generate little or no comparison data in some years with some cohorts.
 - In the NSW survey, 65% of principals regarded the ICSEA rating of their own school as not accurate or effective while only 20% regarded it as somewhat or highly accurate and effective. In the same survey, 76% of principals said that the comparison of their school with other schools on the website was not helpful, while only 17% said it was helpful or somewhat helpful.
2. The second most common criticism concerned weaknesses in the way the data represented student achievement. Among the points most commonly made were the following:
- The data took no account of Non-English Speaking Background (NESB) students and new arrivals, and made no reference to this as a contextual factor.
 - The data ignored significant differences between the circumstances of students in urban regional and remote schools.
 - The data focus on only two out of seven year levels in many schools, and ignore cohort differences.
 - The data appear to disadvantage those schools which welcome students with disabilities and learning difficulties.
 - New or rapidly growing schools can have a large population that has spent little time in the school. In these cases, schools are ranked on the basis of the results of many students with whom they have had little teaching time.
 - The data ignore variations in the number of students who are absent or exempt from NAPLAN testing.
3. Many respondents noted that the website was based on a somewhat narrow body of data. They argued that it did not paint the full picture of the school's performance, ignoring such priorities as a focus on values, social and emotional health, self-esteem and curriculum breadth. It was also seen as ignoring contextual factors important to transparency and accountability.
4. A number of respondents were concerned about the misuse of data provided on the site. The most consistent criticism concerned the use by newspapers of data to construct lists of the 'worst' schools and of those schools with the lowest ICSEA ranking. Some respondents also noted other examples of misuse, including one case of use by a local member of parliament to advance a political point, and cases where the data was used to provide what were seen as misleading comparisons between local schools. There was seen to be a need to establish protocols to safeguard the data and prevent misuse, and to educate the media about the data and its use.

5. Respondents were concerned that the website and its use would have a negative effect on schools. They noted that some schools had already lost or gained students because of the availability of the data, in some cases because publication of socioeconomic data led parents to believe that low ICSEA rankings meant schools were poor performers. In the NSW survey, 7% of principals claimed that parents had withdrawn children from their school as a result of the website and publication of data, while 15% claimed parents had requested enrolment at their school.

There was also reference to the effect on students, who felt that the identification of poorly performing students implied that the school had many 'bad' students. Principals were concerned that line managers would want to take a tough line with schools which performed poorly based on the data, without taking account of ameliorating factors or weaknesses in the data. Some noted that other principals were using the data to 'poach' students from nearby schools, and that the data would make it harder for some schools to attract better students, whom they needed if they were to improve.

In the NSW survey, most principals felt that the publication of school data had had little effect on them, their staff or their communities. Where there was an effect, it was regarded as mainly negative. Principals claimed that in 35% of cases it had had a negative effect on them (with only 4% positive), in 29% of cases a negative effect on staff (3% positive) and in 13% of cases a negative effect on communities (10% positive).

6. Respondents argued that one effect of the website would be a narrowing of the curriculum. Parents were already leaving schools with excellent breadth in favour of schools with good scores. This would encourage schools to teach to the tests in order to improve results, to mandate the teaching of test-related content, and to tighten up on innovative and exploratory approaches. In the NSW survey, 59% of principals said that in response to the publication their communication with the community had emphasised the breadth of the school's curriculum, while 63% had argued that the school should not be judged on NAPLAN results alone.
7. Some respondents were also concerned that the site fails to take account of or provide information about relative funding and resourcing levels of schools in comparison groups, which is a critical variable affecting results.