

Principles and protocols for reporting on schooling in Australia

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Background

In November 2008 the Council of Australian Governments met and agreed on a National Education Agreement which acts as a foundation for an unprecedented shared investment in Australian schooling and a new era of transparency and accountability achieved through collaborative reform.

COAG agreed that greater transparency and high quality accountability and reporting on the performance of Australian schools are essential to ensure that every child receives the highest quality education and the opportunity to achieve through participation in employment and society.

In December 2008, Federal, State and Territory Ministers with responsibility for school education released the new Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians. Acknowledging that Australia already has a high quality schooling system, Ministers committed to a series of actions to ensure excellence and equity for all Australian students.

In support of this goal, Ministers agreed that good quality information on schooling is important for schools and their students, for parents and families, for the community and for governments, and committed to working with all school sectors to ensure that public reporting on Australian schools would:

- support improving performance and school outcomes
- be both locally and nationally relevant
- be timely, consistent and comparable.

The reporting agreed by all governments includes annual national reports on the outcomes of schooling in Australia, a biennial COAG report on Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage and, for the first time, national reporting on the performance of individual schools.

The principles and protocols for reporting on schooling in Australia are intended to guide and inform the use and publication of data generated in the process of measuring the performance of schooling in Australia.

Principles for reporting on schooling in Australia

There is a vast amount of information collected on Australian schooling and individual schools, including by schools themselves. This includes information about the educational approach of schools, their enrolment profile, staffing, facilities and programs, and the education environment they offer, as well as information on the performance of students, schools and systems.

To improve student outcomes, and ensure excellence and equity for all students, governments have agreed to a performance reporting framework which governs the collection and publication of student and school data for three purposes:

- high quality accountability to students, parents, carers and the community
- tracking the achievement of the COAG targets
- providing evidence to support future policy reforms and system improvements including the aim of better directed resources.

While considerable investment in data collection has occurred, the potential to improve data quality remains. Good quality information on schooling is important as different groups, such as schools and their students, parents and families, the community and governments have different information needs.

Meaningful school performance information enables parents and the community to see how schools are performing, provides evidence about the effectiveness of resource allocation to achieve the best results for every child, and ensures schools are accountable for the results they achieve with the public funding they receive.

Governments invest substantially in schools to maximise learning outcomes for all students, and the collection, provision and publication of data on student outcomes and school performance is essential for showing progress towards delivering excellence and equity in Australian schooling. This data provides the evidence necessary to support the continuous improvement of students, schools and education systems over time.

Clear accountability helps create an environment that encourages innovation and excellence from school leaders, teachers and students. Access to timely and robust performance information is crucial so that governments, education authorities and schools can further improve student outcomes by identifying excellent practice and directing assistance and additional resources to areas of need.

The following principles underpin the national framework for reporting on schooling.

General principles adopted by governments to support reporting

Principle 1: Reporting should be in the broad public interest.

Principle 2: Reporting on the outcomes of schooling should use data that is valid, reliable and contextualised.

Principle 3: Reporting should be sufficiently comprehensive to enable proper interpretation and understanding of the information.

Principle 4: Reporting should involve balancing the community's right to know with the need to avoid the misinterpretation or misuse of the information.

For schools and their students

Principle 5: *Schools require reliable, rich data on the performance of their students because they have the primary accountability for student outcomes.*

Good quality data supports each school to improve outcomes for all of their students. It supports effective diagnosis of student progress and the design of quality learning programs. It also informs schools' approaches to the provision of programs, development of school policies, allocation of resources, relationships with parents and partnerships with the community and business.

Schools should have access to:

- Comprehensive data on the performance of their own students that uses a broad set of indicators
- Data that enables each school to compare and benchmark its own performance against all schools, with schools in its jurisdiction and with schools of similar characteristics
- Data demonstrating the performance of the school and students over time
- Diagnostic data to inform the professional judgement of teachers in maximising student achievement.

For parents and families

Principle 6: *Parents and families need information about schooling, including data on the performance of their child, schools and systems, to help them to develop informed judgements, make choices and engage with their children's education and the school community.*

Parents and families should have access to:

- Information about the goals, values and educational approach of schools, and their resources, staffing, facilities, programs and extra-curricular activities that enables them to draw meaningful comparisons on the education environment offered by schools
- Information about a school's enrolment profile, taking care not to encourage the use of data on student characteristics in a way that may stigmatise schools or undermine social inclusion
- Data on student outcomes that enables them to monitor the individual performance of their child. Importantly this includes what their child knows and is able to do and how this relates to what is expected for children in their cohort, and how they can contribute to their child's progress
- Information that allows them to assess a school's performance overall and in improving student outcomes, including in relation to other schools with similar characteristics in their jurisdiction and nationally.

Any use or publication of information relating to a school's enrolment profile should ensure that the privacy of individual students and teachers is protected. Where the small size of a school population or of a specific student cohort may enable identification of individuals, publication of any information must not compromise their privacy.

For the community

Principle 7: *The community should have access to information that enables them to understand the performance of schools and the context in which they perform and to evaluate the decisions taken by governments. This ensures schools are accountable for the results they achieve with the public funding they receive and governments are accountable for the decisions they take.*

The provision of school information to the community should be done in such a way as to enhance community engagement and understanding of the educational enterprise.

The community should have access to:

- Information about the goals, values and educational approach of schools, and their resources, staffing, facilities, programs and extra-curricular activities that enables parents and families to draw meaningful comparisons about the education environment offered by schools
- Information about individual schools' enrolment profile, taking care not to use data on student characteristics in a way that may stigmatise schools or undermine social inclusion
- Reporting on the performance of all schools with data that allows them to view a school's performance overall and in improving student outcomes, including in relation to other schools with similar characteristics, that allows them to develop an understanding of school performance and the performance of Australia's school systems.

For school systems and governments

Principle 8: *School systems and governments need sound information on school performance to support ongoing improvement for students and schools. They also need to monitor and evaluate the impacts of the use and release of this information to improve its application over time, and to assess and address the outcomes for schools and their students resulting from the public release of this data.*

Good quality information on schooling enables school systems and governments to:

- Analyse school performance
- Identify schools with particular needs
- Determine where resources are most needed to lift attainment
- Identify best practice and innovation in high-performing schools to support improvements in schools with poorer performance
- Conduct national and international comparisons of approaches and performance
- Develop a substantive evidence base on what works.

This will enable future improvements in school performance that support the achievement of the agreed education outcomes of both MCEETYA and COAG.

Measurement and reporting on Australian school education

A new measurement and reporting framework for Australian schools has been established following agreements made by COAG and MCEETYA Education Ministers.

The Intergovernmental Agreement on Federal Financial Relations (IGA) and the National Education Agreement (NEA) include targets for the outcomes of schooling, and a process by which performance in meeting these targets can be measured.

Under the NEA and the *Schools Assistance Act 2008*, a national report on Australian schooling will continue to be published annually. The national report will contain a range of information on education in Australia, covering the *National Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians* and the *MCEETYA Measurement Framework for National Key Performance Measures*.

The *Measurement Framework for National Key Performance Measures* takes account of all MCEETYA decisions related to measuring performance against the National Goals, including:

- literacy
- numeracy
- scientific literacy
- civics and citizenship education
- information and communication technologies (ICT) literacy
- vocational education and training (VET) in schools
- student participation and attainment.

The Framework maintains the current schedule of key performance measures and the agreed assessment and reporting cycle, updated annually, through to 2014. Schools, systems and governments have committed to continue adhering to the Framework.

Ministers have also agreed to the creation of a national data collection on individual schools to support school evaluation, accountability, resource allocation and policy development. Data for this collection will be provided to a national data repository, housed by the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA). Ministers have agreed to a range of indicators that measure capacity, context and performance that will be published on each school.

Responsible use of data measuring the performance of Australian schools

Ministers are aware that under Australia's new school reporting framework, a greater range of data on individual schools will be publicly released. With the release of this information, Ministers are committed to reporting which is fair and accurate, and that:

- information approved for publication on schools contains accurate and verified data, contextual information and a range of indicators to provide a more reliable and complete view of performance
- protects the privacy of individual students
- governments will not publish simplistic league tables or rankings, and will put in place strategies to manage the risk that third parties may seek to produce such tables or rankings.

Ministers have agreed to the following strategies to promote fair and balanced interpretation and representation of the data.

1. Protocols that support and underpin meaningful and comparable reporting across Australia will be implemented. These are set out in the following section.
2. ACARA will implement policies and procedures on data handling and storage to ensure the highest possible data security is maintained. These policies and procedures will specify the conditions under which the full data sets on school performance will be accessible to third parties.
3. The establishment of ACARA to provide independent, authoritative and credible governance of a high-quality national information resource. ACARA will advise MCEETYA on the collection and reporting of data, and monitor the release and use of the national data on school performance.

Under its Charter, MCEETYA has invested in ACARA the responsibility to:

- collect, manage and analyse student assessment data and other data relating to schools and comparative school performance
- facilitate information sharing arrangements between Australian government bodies in relation to the collection, management and analysis of school data
- publish information relating to school education, including information relating to comparative school performance.

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 actively work with the media and other parties to explain the information published and how to properly interpret it. ACARA will monitor third-party publications of school performance data and take steps to counter unfair or inaccurate reporting.

4. The national school level performance reporting website will include information explaining to users how to properly interpret the information, and a statement about the responsible use of data.

Through the school profile page, schools will have the opportunity to provide additional information on their background and context, and links to pages on their own school, system or education authority website that provide detailed information about the broader range of achievements and challenges faced by the school.

Protocols for reporting on Australian schools

The following protocols support and underpin meaningful and comparable reporting across Australia.

- Reporting will be against the nationally agreed reporting arrangements endorsed by COAG and MCEETYA.
- No information that permits the identification of individual students will be reported publicly.
- Data will not be published in a form that compares the performance of individual schools without contextual information.
- Reporting in the annual national report should be disaggregated to support public understanding of schooling, with disaggregation of data occurring only where the data is assessed as reliable to a suitable level of confidence and valid, and where adequate contextual information is provided to help explain variability in performance.
- Any methodology developed for like school comparison should be made transparent with appropriate explanation and caveats prominently displayed.
- Published data should be reported against common standards, collected on a nationally comparable basis with common, standardised processes for calculating and reporting known forms of error wherever possible. Error margins, caveats and explanatory notes should be published with data where appropriate to ensure accurate interpretation.
- Where there are nationally agreed definitions of student background characteristics, the data should be collected, coded and reported in accordance with these definitions.
- Time-series and longitudinal reporting should be used wherever possible, with readers made aware of any statistical limitations in comparing the performance and trends of different cohorts and data series.
- Data should be presented so that it can be clearly understood without the need for complex statistical knowledge.
- Where reports of national and international assessments are provided, these should be accompanied by contextual information to aid interpretation of the information.
- School authorities should be given the opportunity to review aggregate-level performance information and data prior to its publication.
- Organisations responsible for providing and publishing data should arrange for its systematic storage and establish protocols for accessing the data that they hold. Data and technical information should be made accessible for verification purposes.
- To the extent practicable and appropriate, information should be provided in advance, for both administrative forms and statistical surveys, about how that information will be reported.

Protocols for third party access to National Assessment Program data

Data included in the National Assessment Program will be gathered and maintained nationally by ACARA on behalf of Ministers.

Ministers have delegated to ACARA the role of implementing access rights to this data. All third-party requests for data arising from the National Assessment Program are subject to protocols and processes developed by ACARA and approved by Ministers.

ACARA will consider applications to access National Assessment Program data sets for research purposes that have institutional ethics clearance. In general, the data refers to data from the MCEETYA National Assessment Program in literacy and numeracy and for the sample assessments in science literacy, civics and citizenship, and information and communication technology literacy that have not been released in the public domain or other national assessments agreed by Ministers.

Authorised users of the data will be required to maintain the confidentiality of the data. No data will be provided that identifies, or could lead to the identification of, individual students.