

I am a primary school teacher of 11 years teaching experience, all of which I have spent in ACT government schools. I am extremely concerned about the way that NAPLAN data is presented on the My School website and the failure of the Federal government to put protections in place that prevent the media manipulating the data and publishing league tables.

In January of this year, the Canberra Times used data from the My School website to publish a league table that presented our school in a very negative light. One of our year cohorts was singled out as having performed very badly compared to its "like schools", resulting in our school being targeted for negative comment not just by the Canberra Times but also by local talkback radio. This drastically affected parent confidence and teacher morale, and ultimately put more pressure on our students.

When I first saw the league table in the newspaper I actually cried because I was so distressed at how unfairly our school had been portrayed when our staff are so committed and work so hard for our students. In the week following the publication of the Canberra Times league table, several children were withdrawn from the school and we did not receive the number of new enrolments that we normally expect at the beginning of a school year.

We received abusive emails from parents and school staff were placed "under the microscope" from the School Board and P&C about our results. There was considerable pressure from parents regarding how we were preparing for the 2010 tests, with many staff expressing concerns that NAPLAN was beginning to dominate the curriculum as a result. Teaching staff felt extremely demoralised, with many believing that the trust that parents placed in their children's teachers had been destroyed. Some fantastic part-time teachers indicated that they would not be prepared to teach on a class in future years as they did not want to be blamed for poor test results.

Some people may think, "Well, so what, it's the school's fault that these students performed so poorly". It may seem so on the surface however other factors separate from the school's approach to teaching and learning have impacted significantly on our performance.

Firstly, our school is fully committed to inclusive education. We have a significant number of students with challenging needs and we believe that we have a responsibility for helping these students learn to be functional members of society, not just pass on the problem in the hope that someone else will fix it. This inclusive approach is not taken into consideration in the way our test results are presented on My School, particularly compared with our "like" schools, many of whom are private schools who pick and choose their students.

Secondly, one of our year cohorts tested last year was small, so the one or two students who performed poorly had a more significant effect on that cohort's average than would occur in a larger cohort. Why is the number of students tested at each school not included on My School? This is one of the most basic considerations in any interpretation of statistical data and should be included if we are to make true comparisons between schools.

Thirdly, the process for devising the ICSEA rating for schools seems inherently flawed. Our school was given an incorrect postcode on My School - have we therefore been compared to the correct "like" schools? How many other schools have had the same problem? Of grave concern is

the fact that the socio-economic status of the suburb in which the school is located forms part of each school's ICSEA rating. What about schools located in wealthier suburbs where residents tend to send their children to private/independent schools rather than the local government school? The only way to get an accurate picture of the socio-economic makeup of a school is to use the socio-economic data of the parents at that school, not data from the surrounding suburb.

Finally, there is absolutely no special consideration given in My School to schools with large populations of mobile students. There are a number of schools in Australia who have a large proportion of students from Defence Force families, or families with diplomatic or academic tenure. Students from such families move frequently and often develop gaps in their learning. Schools that cater for significant proportions of these students have little control over the learning that has taken place in the years before the children arrive at their present schools, yet they are being held accountable for these students' test results. Is this really fair, particularly when they are also being compared with schools that do not have similar levels of mobility?

I would like to see the government take action to:

- a) put some protections in place to stop the media manipulating data to create league tables (eg. a Terms of Use agreement or some form of copyright protection)
- b) provide more information on My School, including:
 - * how much funding each school has available to it
 - * whether each school receives special funding (eg. for special needs, disadvantaged students etc)
 - * the size of each student cohort that was tested
- c) revise the ICSEA rating to include only the socio-economic status of families actually attending the school, not the socio-economic status of the surrounding suburb
- d) remove the comparison with "like" schools. No two schools in Australia are the same and it is ridiculous to think that we can compare them. If comparisons must be made, why can't schools just be compared to the national average and leave it at that?

The final opinion that I would like to express is that I take issue with the Federal government's promises that schools with underperforming students would receive support to improve student outcomes. Despite being publicly targeted as an underperforming school we did not receive any direct funding to assist us to improve student outcomes. Apparently 14 schools in the ACT did receive funding but despite our poor test results, ours was not one of them. We received no explanation as to why we missed out on any assistance. We have continued to support our underperforming students as best we can within our school budget. How many other schools have had to do the same?

The fact is that the current incarnation of My School is damaging to schools and must be changed. The government needs to take strong action to ensure that if My School is going to continue, more detailed information needs to be included that provides true transparency rather than the pretence currently available to the community on the My School site.