

The MySchool Myths

Alan Reid, 2 March 2010

It is only a month since the MySchool website was launched with great fanfare at the end of January. In the short time since, the warnings issued prior to the launch by many educators about the possible negative effects of the website are being realised.

The dominant information that appears on the current version of MySchool about each school is its annual NAPLAN (national assessment program - literacy and numeracy) results. NAPLAN is used currently by schools as a diagnostic tool to assess standards and to target areas for improvement in literacy and numeracy. This is a useful function. However, now that MySchool has been introduced, NAPLAN has moved from being an aid for assisting teaching and learning, to being a high stakes test which purports to measure the quality of a whole school and then compare it with other schools.

We are told that more information about schools may be added in the future. But since we don't know what that might look like, we can only assess the version of MySchool that currently exists. This task is made more difficult by a number of myths which need to be dispelled if we are to move to a situation where MySchool can become a useful tool in Australian education.

Myth 1: That MySchool captures the quality of a school

Proponents of MySchool in its current form say that it is only one piece of information about a school. Parents can gather other data to complete the picture. This is a bit of a stretch. Many people don't have the time or the knowledge to piece together the full range of information about a school, so they will tend to rely on a single source such as MySchool. After all, it is officially sanctioned information. Unfortunately, the NAPLAN test results, as they appear on the MySchool site, project a scientific objectivity which masks the fact that like any such tests, they contain measurement errors.

More than this, even if you accept the accuracy of NAPLAN tests, the fact is they give us very narrow and limited information. They don't tell us anything about the quality of a school in relation to important aspects of schooling such as social and cultural outcomes. After all, NAPLAN was not designed for this purpose. Understanding NAPLAN results as a representation of the quality of a school is a corruption of its original purpose.

Myth 2: That publishing school results on MySchool will help to increase quality in education

Minister Gillard claims that MySchool will arm parents with information that will enable them to put pressure on principals to improve NAPLAN results. Apart from the incorrect assumption that teachers don't try unless pressure is exerted by parents, this proposition ignores a number of things. In particular, it fails to recognise the evidence from other countries like England which shows that testing, when it becomes high stakes, has deleterious effects on the quality of education.

The most well known effect is that school systems and schools will begin to expect teachers to teach for the NAPLAN test in an effort to improve individual school and state results. In Victoria last week a regional director issued an instruction that schools should prepare students well in advance of the test; and many principals around the country freely admit that many months of practice tests and coaching are spent preparing for the tests. And who can blame them? Apart from a school's reputation riding on the results of a test done on one day by one set of students, the national partnership deal with the States insists that if NAPLAN results are not improved, the system and its schools will get less money. There is a lot at stake.

The problem with this approach is that it narrows the curriculum, causing schools to set aside or place less emphasis on those areas of the curriculum which are not being tested. If you think that schools should provide a broad and general education, including the arts, health and physical education, citizenship education and so on, then you should be concerned about this narrow focus.

Myth 3: That MySchool information will not be used to establish 'simplistic' league tables.

The dangers of league tables of schools are now well recognised, not least by Minister Gillard who has described them as 'simplistic'. These include the impact on many school communities of being publicly labelled and stigmatised through comparisons with other schools made on the basis of such limited information. The MySchool site attempts to side-step this danger by comparing each school with 60 'like' schools. There are two problems with this approach. First, it is very difficult to establish 'like' schools, as has been demonstrated by the many puzzling school groupings that exist on the site. Second, since no action has been taken to prevent the MySchool data from being used to create across the board league tables, newspapers in New South Wales, Tasmania, the ACT and Queensland have begun to create such tables anyway. Indeed, there is now a private company which is producing and selling league tables based on the MySchool data. The cost to many fine school communities will be counted in the coming years.

Myth 4: That MySchool will help the government to target resources to schools

Recently Minister Gillard used this myth when she announced an extra \$11 million in funding to disadvantaged schools, claiming that the grant was made as a response to data from the MySchool website. Of course such a claim is disingenuous. The fact is that NAPLAN results have been available to governments and school communities and systems for many years, well before the development of the MySchool site. It is great that extra money is flowing into schools, but making claims like this only undermines the case for MySchool.

There is another troubling aspect to the resources argument. It suggests that quality improvement in schools is just a matter of identifying some low NAPLAN scores and throwing money at the problem. Unfortunately it doesn't happen like that. Learning outcomes are influenced by a range of social and cultural as well as educational factors, many of which are deep seated. These have to be identified and worked on over time. There is no quick fix. And yet, under the national partnership arrangements, unless NAPLAN scores are improved quickly, schools and systems will lose money!

Myth 5: That MySchool will help parents to select schools

The fifth myth upon which the website is based is that information like this will help parents select schools. It suggests that people should shop around for schools as though they are consumer items like plasma TVs. This tends to create the impression that education is a commodity, rather than a public good. It diminishes the sense of school community - that feeling of all working together to make this a great school - because it assumes that if you are unhappy you simply choose somewhere else to send your child.

Further, it promotes the belief that everyone is in a position to choose. In fact, choice is limited to those who can afford the school fees or the relocation or transport costs if the chosen school is a long way away. It ignores the fact that in many states, government schools are zoned. You can't just decide to move to another school if it is not in your zone. It also assumes that the 'top' schools will be able to take all comers. They won't be able to of course and so people who don't get their choice, or who can't choose will feel they are being short changed. In short, choice does not exist for a large percentage of the population.

Myth 6: That if you oppose MySchool you are opposed to transparency and accountability

Somehow proponents of MySchool have been able to promulgate the myth that opposition to aspects of MySchool is synonymous with opposition to accountability and transparency. Nothing could be further from the truth. I have yet to meet an educator who would disagree with the premise that good education demands good information. Indeed, it is precisely an interest in real accountability that is motivating opposition to the current version of MySchool which, for the reasons outlined above, may well diminish rather than enhance quality.

If a large number of doctors were aware that a drug or some aspect of medical practice might harm patients, would we object to them banning the drug or practice until we are sure there are no toxic effects? If not, why is this different? In this case we have many in the education profession taking a stand in relation to a so-called 'accountability' policy which may do harm to school communities and students. They should not be pilloried for this. Rather it is incumbent on those who disagree with their case to demonstrate why they are wrong; not to impugn their motives.

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