

Accountability and the appropriate reporting of school performance.

Rupert Macgregor, 17 July 2009

There is a great deal of discussion and debate around the establishment of new and far more extensive and comprehensive processes for the appropriate measurement and reporting of school performance.

The driving and motivational forces behind these moves for change are broadly and rather simplistically summed up as: the need and desire of parents to know more.

Certainly every parent wants - and is entitled to expect - the best outcomes and best learning and development opportunities for their child; and needs to know - on a continuous and progressive basis - how their child is progressing towards the achievement of their full potential - against appropriate, realistic but challenging expectations of their capacity.

They also want to gain a clear and practical understanding of the ways in which they can work in partnership with the school to sustain progress against those outcomes.

It is therefore essential to each and every parent that they and the teachers of the school are jointly provided with the information necessary to underpin those proactive and formative discussions.

Parents also understand that the reporting should also encompass measurement against criteria that will inform – on their behalf – those other key stakeholders in the education processes to whom parents entrust the more systemic decisions that affect the provision and resourcing of an appropriate range of high quality learning and development opportunities for their child and all the other children and families in their community.

That is: reporting at the school leadership level, area and regional levels, state and national levels, which enables any of the more “macro” factors negatively affecting performance to be identified and remedied, and for innovative good practice to be identified, endorsed, promoted, replicated and built upon.

As the national parent representative organisations, our discussions with the government are directed towards ensuring that the performance criteria and the forms and processes of assessment and reporting, are cost-effectively designed to ensure that the levers of positive change, at all levels of decision making about education, are moved smoothly and synchronistically for the ultimate benefit of every child in every school community in every part of the country.

We bring to these discussions a soundly based understanding of the needs, expectations and priorities of parents right across the country, drawing not only on our national networks linking with each school community, but also because we regularly conduct and publish leading research with parents and families – most recently *“What parents want to know about schools & school performance”* (December 2008).

We can confidently say that on the important question of choosing the right school for their child, the vast majority of parent - from any community or walk of life - would see the sort of “league tables” approach that has been featured periodically in the media in Australia (and endemically in the UK for many years) as of remarkably little relevance in the real scheme of things. Rather, as a negative and unproductive distraction with little if anything to do with the parents’ concept of the important issues of education – about as useful as assuring them that the meaning of life can really be simplified down to the number 42.

For this reason – and because research across the world consistently shows the extent to which crude “league tables” trail in their wake an array of totally negative and potentially

damaging consequences totally at odds with the real purposes of education – we are in total agreement with Minister Gillard that such things are an abomination.

Instead, parents want access to a far more complex, sophisticated and extensive array of information about their local schools and school performance in the wider context, because they understand there is a matrix of factors they need to be aware of in choosing a school. And they want as much contextual information as possible on each of these factors, to help them in weighing them up in terms of their relative importance in shaping their decision.

Similarly, as their child proceeds through the year and from year to year, parents are both consciously and instinctively aware of a wide array of factors they continuously keep in view in determining how their child is proceeding and how well the school is meeting their expectations in respect of their child's learning and personal development.

We know from ongoing research and interaction over a decade and more that every parent wants their child to be safe, happy, healthy, respected, with a good relationship with their teacher and other students, a positive outlook and attitudes to learning – as the essential underpinning of their scholastic development, and the formation of important life skills.

Then, of course, they turn to their children's learning, the question of their progress in terms of their peers in the school – and in relation to broader benchmarks which indicate the extent to which their achievement level is appropriate in terms of their age group, their evident potential and reasonable expectations of their parents and their teachers. And, importantly, the ways in which parents can work in well-informed and mutually respectful partnership with the teachers to encourage and support their children's progress.

Again, these are vitally important issues for parents – essential but complex elements in respect of which "league tables" have nothing useful to contribute.

In essence, therefore, we are keen to encourage the Education Minister to consider an even wider array of relevant information to parents in the future – for example, we envisage reporting that not only takes in such central issues as literacy and numeracy, but also assessment against measures of well-being and of social and emotional learning and development.

And then, over and above the essential information needs of parents, in terms of informing and shaping policy and good practice at whole-school and system levels, we certainly do need greater transparency and accountability through timely reporting – not to "name, blame and shame", but to determine where further assistance is needed; and to enable this to be provided.

Accordingly, we endorse the importance of establishing a national framework and processes to enable comprehensive collection, assembly and analysis, consistently across all systems and across the country, of school and system data that demonstrates – and appropriately disaggregates – participation and performance against a range of relevant strategic criteria, to ensure an essential level of accountability – and the identification of areas of need in ways that ensure that these can be speedily and appropriately addressed.

The importance of this is highlighted in several recent reviews of critically important aspects of education – which have drawn attention to the alarming extent to which policy and practice in the jurisdictions is being formulated and implemented in the absence of reliable or comprehensive data – a state of things which also precludes appropriate quality assurance and evaluation.

This also raises questions of relevance to every parent and family – and to us as their national representative - questions that are unable to be resolved in the absence of such information - about the extent to which Australia's young people and their families are getting real value for their taxpayer dollars and the ways those dollars are being invested on their behalf.

Every parent wants the best for their child - and to be assured that their child has access to the appropriate range of opportunities and facilities which support their effective learning and personal development at each stage of schooling and their achievement of their full potential.

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