



Australian Parents Council Inc.

Assessing and reporting student achievement

A report of the national parent consensus

Canberra, February 1996

About the project and the partners

This Report was developed as the result of the Assessment and Reporting for Parents Project conducted by the Australian Council of State School Organisations (ACSSO) and the Australian Parents' Council (APC). It was supported by a grant under the Quality Schooling Program from the Commonwealth Department of Employment, Education and Training.

Through a process of national consultation with parents, using a Discussion Paper and followed by a two-day workshop to distil parent themes and issues, the two peak national parent associations provided parents with the opportunity to investigate and debate their views. This Report sets out the position of parents and twelve key principles for assessment and reporting children's achievements in schools.

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Assessment and reporting - a parent perspective

Quality schooling for all

Parents believe that quality school education is the entitlement of every young Australian. Parents also believe that the school curriculum should be designed to enrich their children's lives and to help prepare them to participate fully in society and the workplace.

Assessment and reporting should be integral to the curriculum that students follow and should not narrow or distort the experience of schooling. An appropriate, well thought out school curriculum should encompass equally appropriate and well thought out assessment procedures. The latter should not drive the former.

Learning begins with parents

As the first educators, parents play a primary role in their children's learning. Their role and influence begins long before schooling commences, and continues to have particular significance for learning during all their children's schooling years. Hence it is important for parents to work in active partnership with teachers.

Assessment & reporting to improve learning

Parents understand that the primary purpose of assessment and reporting, to improve learning, can only be achieved in limited ways without a mutually respectful and open partnership. Assessment and reporting are critical activities through which this partnership around learning can be constructed and maintained. They can be dynamic interactions when the arrangements and contexts allow all participants to learn about student performance in order to improve what students learn, think, make, and do.

Two-way communication

Sustained two-way communication about progress and the improvement of learning is vital throughout the school years. It should be grounded in carefully collected and interpreted information. Assessment is the process of gathering information about student learning, especially in relation to curriculum goals. Reporting should relay information in ways which are supported, accessible and meaningful to parents and students. Analysing information, making judgements and developing plans for future learning are ongoing outcomes of these activities. The most powerful results occur when parents, students and teachers actively participate in all facets of these processes.

Common language & better strategies needed

Several needs unmet to date demand attention. The first is to develop a clear, common language for communicating about student learning and the goals of schooling. The second is to explore a wider range of strategies for assessment and reporting which can reflect and celebrate the variety of student achievements, including aspects which are not amenable to comparative and competitive procedures. The third is flexibility in the nature, timing and frequency of formal and informal contact with teachers.

Assessment & reporting for data collection

A second purpose for assessment and reporting is to respond to increasing pressure from State and Commonwealth Governments to make available data to inform policy considerations about the effectiveness of schools and schooling. Any requirement for the provision of such data must be consistent with the educational role of schools, and must maintain student confidence and contribute to the achievement of social justice and equity.

Tertiary & vocational considerations

Potential employers and further education institutions also seek information to help meet their needs. Assessment and reporting become enmeshed with issues of credentialling at this point. Credentialling methods and criteria must contain the capacity to recognise and reconcile the breadth and complexity of student learning. The needs of employers and tertiary institutions deserve balanced consideration in the thirteen years of schooling which most students experience. They should not distort the curriculum or allow the use of methods contrary to the principles advocated in this document.

Proper resourcing needed

As active partners in the education enterprise, parents need well grounded assessment and reporting procedures. As citizens, parents believe that sufficient resources should be provided for the education of children and that the resourcing of soundly based assessment and reporting procedures as part of the school curriculum is essential.

Parents' concerns and considerations

From extensive consultations with parents about assessing and reporting their children's progress, some common attitudes emerge which encapsulate their concerns and requirements.

Parents would like

- to feel welcome and comfortable in their children's school, and confident in offering suggestions and comments
- opportunities and encouragement to share knowledge of their children and their children's experience of school with their children's teachers
- to realise a partnership with teachers for their children's learning at school
- to ensure and be assured that their children achieve optimum levels of literacy and numeracy
- written reports covering all facets of their children's progress at school and which describe a relationship to the progress of children their age
- exit reports encompassing the range of their children's academic and co-curricular achievements and participation at school

From these same consultations and a national workshop where parent representatives from every State and Territory discussed the issues, the following twelve key principles were negotiated and agreed. In addition to school level questions, these principles also incorporate parent concerns about the use of assessment and reporting data collected at State and Territory level and provide a parent view on acceptable practice in these areas.

In essence, the principles assert that effective assessment and reporting procedures must provide balanced, comprehensive and valid information and be conducted in just, equitable and ethically defensible ways.

The Key Principles

1. Parents are entitled to continuing, quality information regarding their children's education through a variety of reporting mechanisms.
2. Any form of assessment should be integral to the curriculum and designed to inform, support and improve learning outcomes.
3. Assessment and reporting processes should make provision for parent and student input about teaching and learning.
4. Parents and their organisations must have an active role in developing and implementing assessment and reporting policies and processes at the school, the system, the state and the nation.
5. Schools, systems and Governments, State and Federal, must make explicit and public the purposes for which they wish to collect assessment data.
6. Assessment data must not be used for the purpose of establishing and publishing competitive judgments about schools/systems/states or territories.
7. Parents must be informed by all those who seek such data about student performance, of the uses to which such information will be put.
8. Data collected from students in schools should be used in accordance with its stated purposes. Any other subsequent uses should be specifically negotiated.
9. Individual student assessments are confidential to the student, his/her parents and appropriate school staff.
10. Parents have the right to withdraw their children from specific system, statewide and national testing.
11. Assessment data for statewide or national purposes should be collected by statistically valid, light sampling procedures only.
12. Appropriate appeal mechanisms should be established and made public to protect the rights of students and parents in matters of student assessment and reporting at the school, state and national level.

The case for improved assessment and reporting

The goal of improvement

Just as it is the goal of assessment and reporting that there is ongoing improvement for the student, so too it is important that the processes of assessment and reporting are themselves improved. It is the belief of parents that the time is now appropriate for schools and systems to examine the ways in which assessment and reporting are currently being conducted, and how they might be improved to reflect parents' views as well as the interests of the students and Australian society at large.

Assessment and reporting are subject to the conflicting needs of a range of stakeholders. It is the contention of this paper that ethical and human considerations override the rationalist and the economic.

Partnership for learning

School education works best when it is based upon a mutually respectful partnership between families and schools. Partnership is not merely a matter of each recognising the other but it involves each partner being active in the enterprise. Parents have a wealth of knowledge regarding their children's life histories: their health; their relationships; their likes and dislikes; their accomplishments; and their concerns.

Equally, schools accumulate knowledge regarding their students: what they have learnt; how they have learnt; what they have mastered and what they have found difficult. They see young people as individual students and as members of the many groups found within the school. When schools and parents can exchange and build upon this joint knowledge base, there is a greater likelihood of enhanced and improved learning.

Conditions need to be created which support sound and meaningful interactions between schools and parents about student learning and achievement. Well structured and well grounded information provided by all partners is essential, as are opportunities to exchange and interpret the information to come to common understandings. These need to be underpinned by a mutually recognised primary concern for the well-being of the student.

Providing information

Reporting effectively is a two way process. Information about student learning comes from both school and home. As active partners in their children's schooling, parents have responsibilities to supply relevant information to teachers. Equally, schools have a responsibility to provide information to parents.

School information should flow from the students' educational program as well as from their various co-curricular activities. There is a need to indicate whether these attainments appear to reflect the student's ability and the steps proposed to enhance and consolidate learning. School information should be collected in systematic ways and be supported by evidence. By examining the evidence, parents can come to know and understand the basis for judgements about what students can learn, think, make, and do.

Interpreting information

Good quality information is essential, but it is not an end in itself. The meaning it contains has to be discovered. Parents' and students' interpretations deserve consideration alongside those of the teacher. Through sharing, jointly analysing and coming to common interpretations, educational growth can be facilitated. Future directions, the potential to ameliorate problems and to build on strengths and weaknesses can be explored. Plans to facilitate further progress and achievement can then be put in place.

The well-being of the student

The corner stone of authentic assessment and reporting should be the well-being of the student. If an assessment procedure results in a serious diminishing of a student's sense of self worth, then it is inappropriate. When the emphasis is on fair, accurate and honest descriptions of performance it is possible to have a basis for positive development. The sorting, grading and labelling of students is neither helpful to them nor to the larger social good.

That is not to suggest that areas of concern should not be identified. Parents wish to know what their children can do and what they can not yet do and whether this is reasonable in the circumstances. They wish to know what kind of assistance is available and the ways in which families can also support learning. The goal is to promote improvement.

The Changing Context For Schooling

Major changes in Australian society and culture, and in the labour market and technology, present challenges for today's schools. Education must be responsive and responsible in its practices to ensure that the benefits of education are fairly and equitably distributed for the next generation. Additionally, there are many changes in the way education is conceived and conducted.

Social and cultural change

The organisation and mix of contemporary Australia is very different from that of a generation ago. Society continually debates and redefines our ideas about justice, citizenship, the care of the environment, gender relations and multiculturalism. The composition and management of the family has changed, with many more single parent and blended families. Women's participation in both full time and part time work has increased markedly and fewer parents are able to stay home during the early years of their children's lives.

Labour market change

Many who wish to work cannot find employment and few will be engaged in the same employment for a working life. Workplace restructuring, the peaks and troughs in economic cycles, and the impact of new technologies will mean continuing change.

Technological change

Technology has led to changes in the composition of the workforce, and the nature of the work itself. It is also impacting upon the ways in which families and individuals spend their leisure time.

Participatory decision making

Attitudes and values have also changed. People are concerned that their voices are heard about the matters which shape their lives and those of their children. Parents wish to have a say in the governance of their schools, particularly in the development of school policies.

Changes in educational thinking and practices - the 'outcomes' approach

As the decade progresses, concern for 'outcomes' has increasingly influenced curriculum design, implementation, and assessment and reporting processes. The focus on 'outcomes' attempts to move the overwhelming emphasis away from inputs (teachers, facilities and equipment, etc.) and processes (what actually happens in classrooms), and to concentrate instead on results ('outcomes'). This concept has merit if well applied, but it has not yet been adequately explained to parents and many teachers.

<i>Potential of 'outcomes'</i>	<p>On the one hand, 'outcomes' as descriptions of intended and actual learning can help recognition of achievement and where this fits on an individual learning continuum. 'Outcomes' can be an important element in teachers working together to make judgements about achievement, and the teaching necessary to facilitate future student learning. Their implementation can lead to procedures which reflect the integrity of the curriculum, enhance student engagement and help parents to remain informed about children's progress.</p>
<i>Emerging pitfalls</i>	<p>On the other hand, the 'outcomes' approach can lead to the breaking down of complex learnings into a myriad of disconnected parts, all of which require assessing. When this form of 'outcomes' is injected into statewide curriculum syllabuses, significance is lost, over-assessing occurs, and teaching is prescribed rather than informed by the child's needs and the teacher's expertise. Further tensions are created when this form of 'outcomes' is aggregated into a standardised device against which achievement is measured. Children's progress is not gauged in terms of what has been done and what this represents, but how it compares to a statistical model. Parents believe this 'outcomes' approach should be resisted.</p> <p>Valued outcomes of schooling are often not apparent until after students leave school. The 'outcomes' approach must not be allowed to restrict the curriculum to only those things which can be easily measured in the short term.</p>
<i>Caution urged</i>	<p>Parents have reservations about the 'outcomes' approach and are not convinced by some of the claims made for what is yet largely untried. Quality professional development should accompany any new approach, which should itself be implemented in a cautious and orderly manner. Parents are wary of proposals which ignore the equal importance of inputs and process.</p>

The Key Principles explained

1. Parents are entitled to continuing, quality information regarding their children's education through a variety of reporting mechanisms.

Parents are aware of debates which relate the importance of education to the community as a whole. However, they wish it to be recognised and understood that they have a primary role of caring for and nurturing their children. They have an entitlement to honest, clear information regarding their children's learning, both in the classroom and out of it.

2. Any form of assessment should be integral to the curriculum and designed to inform, support and improve learning .

The principal purpose of collecting and reporting assessment information is to benefit students and support their learning. There are many ways in which this can be done. Schools and systems should select those ways which reflect the intentions of the curriculum , i.e., the forms of assessment should grow from the curriculum. This is most important, otherwise there is a significant danger that the assessment practices will distort and drive the curriculum itself.

3. Assessment and reporting processes should make provision for parent and student input about teaching and learning.

While parents want and require soundly based information from schools regarding student learning, they regard it as essential that they also have opportunities to provide their own information regarding their children's progress and development. As well, they believe that the students themselves, particularly as they grow more mature and responsible, should be provided with the means to assess and report upon their own learning. Equally, the process should allow for some commentary upon the provisions made for learning through teaching and the curriculum.

4. Parents and their organisations must have an active role in developing and implementing assessment and reporting policies and processes at the school, the system, the state and the nation.

It is not sufficient for parents to be the respondents to the policies of others regarding assessment and reporting. They believe that they have the right to initiate debates and participate in the development of practices, not only in their local schools, but also in regions, systems and throughout the nation.

5. Schools, systems and Governments, State and Federal, must make explicit and public the purposes for which they wish to collect assessment data.
For comment see 8 (below)

6. Assessment data must not be used for the purpose of establishing and publishing competitive judgments about schools/systems/states or territories.

Parents recognise that schools operate in a wide variety of contexts. They believe that assessment should be supportive rather than punitive. Parents see dangers in using simplistic measures such as 'league tables' to make comparisons between schools, systems, states or territories.

7. All those who seek data about student performance must inform parents of the uses to which such information will be put. *For comment see 8 (below)*

8. Data collected from students in schools should be used in accordance with its stated purposes. Any other subsequent uses should be specifically negotiated.

While parents recognise that educational bureaucracies and governments may seek assessment data as a source of evidence of their own achievements, the collection of such data should only occur following consultation with parents and the purposes should be openly declared. Having collected the data it should not then be used for any purposes other than those previously agreed to, unless there has been specific negotiation for arriving at such a new use.

9. Individual student assessments are confidential to the student, his/her parents and appropriate school staff.

While from time to time aggregated data may be used, individual student results are confidential. They should be known only to the student, his/her parents and those school staff who may require the results to assist in developing an appropriate learning program for the student.

10. Parents have the right to withdraw their children from specific system, state-wide and national testing.

Having been consulted regarding specific assessment procedures (see 5, 7 and 8 above), parents have a right to decide about their children's involvement. That right must be respected and no penalties should arise if parents choose to withdraw their child from a specific procedure.

11. Assessment data for statewide or national purposes should be collected by statistically valid, light sampling procedures only.

Parents acknowledge that systems providers may seek assessment data as one of many sources of evidence regarding systems' achievements. However, it is unnecessary and costly to use the whole population of students across a given age cohort for these purposes. Where such data is required, it is possible to use statistically valid sampling procedures.

12. Appropriate appeal mechanisms should be established and made public to protect the rights of students and parents in matters of student assessment and reporting at the school, state and national levels.

In order to enable all of the above principles to be enacted it is essential that there be appropriate appeal mechanisms so that students and their parents have recourse to natural justice where a dispute occurs.

What next?

It is intended that this paper be widely distributed to assist the formulation of policies and practices on assessment and reporting. Publication of the parent perspective makes an important contribution to the debate regarding assessment and reporting in Australian schools. It issues a challenge for partnership. We are optimistic that it contains a set of principles which deserve support and implementation.

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