Case Study

Australia: Using open school data to improve transparency and accountability

Stanley Rabinowitz

Australia

Ethics and corruption in education

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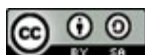
Presentation of the series:
Ethics and Corruption in Education

Several studies conducted over the last two decades have emphasized the negative impact of corruption on the economic, social, and political development of countries. Corruption increases transaction costs, reduces the efficiency of public services, distorts the decision-making process, and undermines social values. Studies have also shown a strong correlation between corruption and poverty: statistical regressions suggest that an improvement in the 'control of corruption' indicator by one standard deviation (two points) is associated with an increase of some $11,000 in gross domestic product (GDP) per capita (Sturm, 2013, in OECD, 2015). Moreover, corruption tends to contribute to the reinforcement of inequities by placing a disproportionate economic burden on the poor and limiting their access to public services.

As a consequence, fighting corruption has become a major concern for policy-makers and actors involved in development. In view of the decrease in international aid flows and the increasingly stringent conditions for the provision of aid – due to growing pressure on public resources within donor countries and the pressure exerted by taxpayers on governments to increase transparency and accountability in resource management – fighting corruption is now regarded as a major priority on the agendas of countries and international agencies of development cooperation. The Drafting Committee of the World Education Forum expressed this concern in the following terms: 'Corruption is a major drain on the effective use of resources for education and should be drastically curbed' (UNESCO, 2000). In other words, to 'ensure inclusive and quality education for all and promote lifelong learning' – the fourth of the 2015 Sustainable Development Goals – the issue of corruption must be properly addressed.

A brief review of the literature highlights a number of global and sectoral attempts to tackle the issue of corruption. In the social sector, for example, several studies have been conducted on corruption in relation to the provision of healthcare services. However, it appears that the education sector has not received adequate attention from national education authorities and donors, despite numerous grounds for prioritizing the challenge of combating corruption in education:

- Public sector reforms aimed at improving governance and limiting corruption-related phenomena cannot produce significant results unless adequate attention is paid to the education sector, as in most countries this constitutes the largest or second-largest public sector in both human and financial terms.

- Any attempt to improve the functioning of the education sector to increase access to quality education for all will be undermined if problems related to corruption, which have severe implications for the efficient use of resources and the quality of education and school performance, are not being properly addressed.

- Lack of integrity and unethical behaviour within the education sector are inconsistent with one of the primary aims of education: to produce 'good citizens' who are respectful of the law, human rights, and equity. They are also incompatible with any strategy that considers education as a principal means of fighting corruption.

In this context, the UNESCO International Institute for Educational Planning (IIEP) launched a research project entitled 'Ethics and Corruption in Education'. Corruption is defined as the systematic use of public office for private benefit that results in a reduction in the quality or availability of public goods and services. The main objective of this project is to improve decision-making and the management of educational systems by integrating

governance and corruption concerns into methodologies of planning and administration of education. More specifically, it seeks to develop methodological approaches for studying and addressing the issue of corruption in education and to collect and share information on the best approaches for promoting transparency, accountability, and integrity in the management of educational systems in both developing and industrialized countries.

The project includes publications on topics such as school financing, pro-poor education incentives, teacher codes of conduct, textbook production and distribution, and academic fraud. It also features monographs on success stories in improving management and governance, as well as case studies that facilitate the development of methodologies for analysing transparency and integrity in education management.[*]

Within this framework, IIEP conducted research to explore the recent development of school report cards and to examine cases in which report cards prove especially successful in helping to improve transparency and accountability in education systems. This research included the preparation of case studies on the use of open school data in six countries from Asia and the Pacific – namely Australia, Bangladesh, India, Indonesia, Pakistan (Punjab), and the Philippines – as well as two state-of-the-art papers on Africa and Latin America.

This publication presents the case of Australia. It is based on interviews with key informants and a survey of school-level actors. It analyses the design and implementation of the *My School* project, which is led by the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA). It investigates the type of information published, those who publish it, and how it is accessed. It highlights the most critical data for improving transparency and accountability, and explores how different categories of stakeholder access and utilize the information. It also identifies the conditions required to improve transparency and accountability in the education system, and the limits of such processes.

It concludes by highlighting the tension between displaying data in a form widely understood by users and at the same time minimizing risks associated with the misinterpretation of data. The publication ends with a series of recommendations including: making *My School* mobile-friendly, developing a best practice forum, adding a local map function, and above all releasing *My School* data through a more incremental process (when data are available) to improve the site's currency.

IIEP is very grateful to Stanley Rabinowitz for his valuable insights; accordingly, it would like to thank him as well as the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA). It would also like to thank all those interviewed as part of this research for their availability and kind collaboration.

Jacques Hallak** and Muriel Poisson***

Foreword

The number of countries providing the general public with access to school data has grown rapidly over the past decade, encouraged by the development of information technologies and under the pressure of social movements demanding the right to information and greater accountability in service delivery. A wide variety of initiatives have been developed to share school-level information in the form of school report cards. These provide key information about a school, including student enrolment, funding, number of teachers, teacher qualifications, pupil/teacher ratios, conditions of school facilities, textbooks, and student achievement. In some countries, governments have taken the lead in disseminating such data, relying on existing educational management information systems. Elsewhere, civil society organizations have taken the initiative to produce school report cards for selected schools, placing the emphasis on community engagement in data collection and use.

In recent years, the Asia-Pacific region in particular has become a hub for increased initiatives for access to information and has called for more transparent and accountable government. Australia, New Zealand, and Singapore have pioneered innovative and comprehensive uses of new technologies with the launching of *My School*, Education Sector Indicators, and the School Information Service respectively. Grassroots movements in India have stimulated the passing of Right to Information Acts in many states during the last decades; furthermore, initiatives aimed at displaying information through district report cards and school boards have spread throughout the country. Bangladesh now has more than a decade of experience in developing school report cards with the support of civil society, and the Check My School initiative has spread from the Philippines to Cambodia and Indonesia. These are but a few examples which highlight the opening up of school data to the general public throughout the region.

It is widely acknowledged in the literature that public access to information is one of the most efficient means of achieving better transparency and accountability in the education sector. It enables education authorities not only to better monitor educational progress and outcomes, but also to detect bottlenecks in the system and take adequate measures to address them. It also enables school communities to check whether they have received all the resources they were entitled to, in terms of funding, teachers, textbooks, and so on. Finally, it enables parents to exert pressure on school authorities and public officials to improve service delivery. Nevertheless, experience shows that the link between data, transparency, and accountability is not straightforward in practice, and needs to be unpacked carefully.

Indeed, while open school data are important, the information published is not always the kind most urgently needed to improve accountability in the management of education systems. In addition, when data are available to the public, they are not necessarily in easily accessible formats, and people are often unaware of how to access and utilize those data. Moreover, sharing best practices in this area has not yet been carried out in a useful and systematic manner. Essential to addressing these issues is an increased dialogue between key stakeholders, that is to say government education officers and planners responsible for data collection and dissemination, civil society organizations (CSOs) involved in the empowerment of citizens through information, and parent representatives.

This raises a number of questions:

- What data are most relevant to improving transparency and accountability in the system?
- What format is most likely to encourage school communities to make better use of data?
- What can be done to ensure that the data provided benefit more than a small proportion of the population, allowing all the community to make informed decisions?

- What mechanisms need to be put in place to ensure that parents and communities can make proper use of data?
- What incentives are needed to help stakeholders improve their practice?

Such questions can be seen as all the more relevant as the amount of school data – and the number of countries adopting school report cards – continues to grow. They are also timely, as there is still a lack of robust assessment of the actual efficacy of such initiatives: the 'lessons learned' so far rely predominantly on desk reviews and anecdotal evidence. They are also critical for ascertaining whether the conditions for the usefulness of open school data are properly taken into account, together with other factors critical for improving transparency and accountability in a sustainable way.

In this context, the UNESCO International Institute for Educational Planning (IIEP) initiated a research project in 2014 on 'Using open school data to improve transparency and accountability in education', so as to compare the motivations, purposes, audiences, data sources, contents, uses, and impacts of school report cards developed in different regions of the world.

The overall goals of this programme are to: develop an evidence base for the most critical data needed and the most effective open education policies for improving government transparency and accountability in education; help decision-makers and educational managers make informed decisions about the design and implementation of open education data policies, so as to promote transparency and empower citizens to fight against corruption; build the commitment and capacity of civil society organizations, media representatives, in addition to education officials in charge of access to information, to work together to develop access to more practical, effective, and usable educational data.

The research addresses the necessary conditions for enabling open education data to promote transparency and accountability in education. It pays particular attention to data published at school level through school report cards, in the belief that the school level is particularly critical for encouraging citizens to make the best use of the information provided and to act upon it. It analyses the chain of action needed for developing school report cards successfully at each of the steps involved in their design and implementation.

The main assumptions underlying the research are as follows: First, open data initiatives are powerful tools to improve transparency, hold schools accountable, and reduce corruption risks in education. Second, government-led initiatives are less likely than citizen-led initiatives to respond to users' needs, engage them, and generate real impact, since they are often more supply- than demand-driven. And third, all users do not benefit equally from open data initiatives. In the absence of adequate safeguards, such initiatives can enhance inequalities and result in 'elite capture of information'. Within this framework, the research attempts to address and document the following questions:

- What is an enabling legal framework for access to information initiatives in the countries under analysis?
- What are the most critical data for revealing corruption in different areas such as school funding, infrastructure procurement, or school and teacher management?
- Which information model has proven to be more effective: supply-driven (for top-down management) or demand-driven (for bottom-up control)?
- How can we ensure that the information is actually being used by the target audiences in the desired manner?
- What is an effective setup that will facilitate participation by the general public?
- How can demand for information be created among a desired range of audiences?
- What successful actions following the publication of school-level data have a real impact in improving transparency and accountability in the education sector?
- What are the potential adverse effects of access to information on the existing education systems?

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The research focuses on countries from Asia and the Pacific which have developed innovative projects during recent years in the area of open data in education, including Australia, Bangladesh, India, Indonesia, Pakistan (Punjab province), and the Philippines. In each participating country, national researchers have analysed in detail these initiatives' aim to share access to school data with the general public in order to improve transparency and accountability and fight corruption in education systems. They have compared, as far as possible, two types of initiative, one that is government-led (the collection and distribution of school-level information is initiated by the central authority of the country or of a jurisdiction), and one that is citizen-led (the collection and distribution of school-level information is initiated at the community level). The following activities were accordingly undertaken at country level:

- The analysis and collection of relevant documentation and laws related to the right to access information, including legislation specific to the education sector, if any;
- A review of the list of education data shared with the public at all levels of the system, but particularly at the school level, produced and disseminated by government authorities and also through large-scale civil society initiatives;
- A series of semi-structured interviews with key informants (people in charge of the implementation of the right to information legislation, education sector managers, actors from civil society organizations involved in the empowerment of citizens though public access to data, members of parents' associations, and representatives from the media);
- A survey of 250 school-level actors, using a multi-stage stratified sample method to illustrate the diversity of perspectives and perceptions about the usefulness of open education data, considering socio-economic, educational, and geographical factors. Informants included head teachers, teachers, parent–teacher associations, parents, and community leaders.

At the school level, field surveys helped to identify the type of information published, those publishing it, and how it is accessed; the most critical data for improving transparency; how different categories of stakeholder access and use the information; the conditions required to impact the level of transparency and accountability in the education system; and the limits of such processes, particularly from a legal perspective. Their main findings are analysed in detail in a set of case studies published by IIEP in its series, 'Ethics and corruption in education'. This report presents the results of the case study conducted in Australia.

It is hoped that the results of this work will help build the capacities of education officials, as well as civil society representatives in charge of the management of school data, to develop access to practical, effective, and usable open data in education; to encourage further dialogue and cooperation between stakeholders within individual countries and in the wider region with respect to the conditions in which such initiatives can improve accountability in education; and beyond this, to enable promoters of public access to information based in different regions of the world to learn from the success and limits of the experiences of other regions.

IIEP would like to thank Stanley Rabinowitz for his valuable contribution and the interviewees for sharing their knowledge and experience. It would also like to express its gratitude to the high-level decision-makers from the six countries under review, who agreed to discuss the main findings of the research during a policy forum organized by IIEP in Manila, Philippines, from 24 to 26 January 2018.

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* The six case studies have been published as part of the IIEP Series on Ethics and Corruption in Education, and are available on the Institute's publication website: www.iiep.unesco.org

This study was prepared under the supervision of Muriel Poisson, Programme Specialist at the International Institute for Educational Planning (IIEP-UNESCO).

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Abbreviations

ACARA	Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority
CSPA	Catholic School Parents Australia
FOI	Freedom of Information
ICSEA	Index of Community Socio-educational Advantage
ISCA	Independent Schools Council of Australia
NAP	National Assessment Program
NAPLAN	National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy
NCEC	National Catholic Education Commission
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
SES	socio-economic status
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
VET	vocational education and training

Executive summary

Australian legislation regarding transparency of information and accountability in education includes the Australian Commonwealth Freedom of Information Act (FOI Act), the Education Act 2013 (Education Act), the national Education Regulation 2013 (Education Regulation), and the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority Act 2008 (ACARA Act).

Public expectations regarding transparency in the provision of official information have been a particular feature of public policy in Australia since the FOI Act was passed in 1982. In addition to the FOI Act, the Education Act and the Education Regulation ensure that state and territory authorities adhere to nationally agreed requirements regarding the provision of specific information about each school. The legislation binds school authorities to allow publication of this information by ACARA on the *My School* website. Legislative provisions designed to ensure transparency and accountability around the *My School* data collection are also imposed under the ACARA Act.

This case study focuses on the My School website, managed by the Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA), and is the platform for the country's 'school report cards'. The approach taken was to generate new knowledge regarding *My School* and to utilize existing data based on two recent relevant reports on *My School*, namely the *Review of My School website: Final report to the Australian government Department of Education* and the market research report, *Perspectives on the My School website.*

New data were acquired from three main groups of actors: a sample of school actors (principals or, in some cases, assistants, deputy principals, or other school leaders), parent and community actors (representatives from peak parent organizations and community stakeholder organizations), and policy actors who work at a jurisdictional level in the analysis and reporting of school performance data.

The mixed-method research methodology applied to this study involved an examination of key source documents (including the two recent reports on *My School*), the analysis of data obtained from the semi-structured interviews with the policy, parent, and community actors, and data obtained from the written survey of school actors. Analysis of the source material and survey data were coded and categorized to identify patterns, similarities, and differences through a process of comparative analysis. Nine key themes were developed from this process: Usage; Purpose; Usefulness; Limitations; Enhancements (proposed by ACARA); Enhancements (proposed by actors); Transparency; Accountability; Risks.

The following conclusions were reached:

- *My School* provides a broad audience of parents, the general public, politicians, community groups, the media, school authorities, researchers, principals, and other school personnel with specific data on each Australian school in a central location. Prior to *My School*, these data were not available to these stakeholders.

- While there are some concerns, primarily from school leaders, regarding the provision of the data on *My School*, other stakeholders value access to such data for a range of purposes, including better targeting of resources and services, and analysing and monitoring key input and performance data in and across schools.

- Opinions regarding the usefulness and core purpose of *My School* differ. There are, in fact, several purposes; as a result, the website's usefulness for individuals and groups as a source of school-level data depends on each purpose. For some, its purpose is limited. For others, it is an invaluable resource.

- There is a clear tension between displaying data in a form widely understood by users and at the same time minimizing risks associated with the misinterpretation of the data. While there are various requests and suggestions regarding improving the 'user-friendliness' of *My School*, the balance needs to favour maintaining technical accuracy over efforts to simplify the presentation of data.

- Seven enhancements are under consideration by ACARA for the further development of *My School*. While some reservations were expressed about most of these, the enhancements favoured by most participants included making *My School* mobile-friendly, ensuring *My School* complies with the WCAG2.0 AAA,[1] and improving the time-series charts.

- The proposed development of a best practice forum (through a blog) was not strongly supported. However, the proposed inclusion of a user survey/feedback facility should be explored, with steps taken to ensure that the focus of the data collection tool is feedback on the usefulness of data sets, the usability of the site, and the clarity of the information, rather than commenting on individual school data or information.

- Consideration should also be given to enhancing *My School* with the proposed local map function. There is also consensus that improvements should be made to the way National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (known as NAPLAN) results are displayed and to the language used regarding the results. However, as indicated above, it is important for ACARA to maintain the technical accuracy of displayed data and to avoid oversimplifying the data and increasing the risks associated with inaccurate interpretations of the information.

- Consideration should continue to be given to the release of *My School* data through a more incremental process (when data are available) to improve its currency and to lessen the tendency to give what many see as undue attention and focus to the data on *My School* over other important outcomes of schooling.

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1. The WCAG (Web Content Accessibility Guidelines) 2.0 standards have been developed to make websites more accessible for a wider range of people including individuals with disabilities (e.g. hearing impairment, speech impairment, blindness, or sight difficulties). AAA is the highest standard of accessibility.

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1. Introduction

1.1 Education and schooling in Australia

Australia has a mix of state and territory authorities with legislative powers for assessment, curriculum, and other schooling matters. These powers are held by a single authority in some jurisdictions and several authorities in others.

There are approximately 9,400 schools in Australia. *Figure 1* shows the number and proportion of schools by school sector in 2016.

Figure 1.   **Number and proportion of schools by school sector in Australia in 2016**
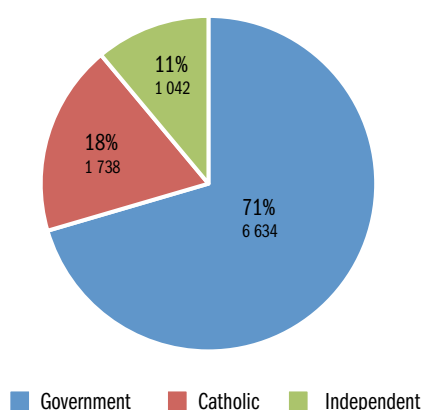
Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2017 (Cat. No. 4221.0, Schools, Australia).

A large majority of Australian schools, both government (public) and non-government (private institutions, inclusive of faith-based systemic schooling systems such as the Catholic schooling systems and a range of independent schools) receive state and Australian government funding. Parents of students enrolled in non-government schools also pay annual enrolment fees, which are set by the relevant schooling authorities.

Schooling in Australia was originally established on religious grounds; this is now reflected in the number and range of faith-based schools in the country, with Catholic systemic schools constituting the largest number in the non-government schooling sector, as illustrated in *Figure 1*.

1.2 Rationale for conducting the research

The rationale for UNESCO's study, *Using School Report Cards to Improve Transparency and Accountability in Education in the Asia-Pacific Region*, is 'To compare and draw lessons from government-led and citizen-led school report cards in order to help decision-makers and educational managers make informed decisions about the design and implementation of open education data policies, with a view to promote transparency and accountability and empower citizens to fight corruption in education.'

Given this, and the nature of schooling and the form of federalism in Australia, it is important to clarify the applicability of the terms 'transparency' and 'accountability' in relation to school report cards in Australia. It is also important to clarify that owing to the transparency of school-level data in Australia and the absence of citizen-led report cards, the focus of this study is solely the government-led report card initiative *My School*.

1.3   School report cards in the Australian context (*My School*)

Australian legislation regarding transparency of information and accountability in education relevant to this study includes the Australian Commonwealth Freedom of Information Act (FOI Act); the Education Act 2013 (Education Act); the national Education Regulation 2013 (Education Regulation); and the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority Act 2008 (ACARA Act). This last act established the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) as an independent statutory authority and a corporate Commonwealth entity. One of the major initiatives undertaken by ACARA under its reporting responsibilities was the development of *My School*, a website resource produced for parents, educators, and the community to receive information about each of Australia's schools and campuses.[2]

Public expectations regarding transparency in the provision of official information have been a particular feature of public policy in Australia since the FOI Act was passed in 1982. As acknowledged by Transparency International, a global independent agency (2016), 'Australian governments have been progressive in adopting freedom of information and rights to information regimes since the 1980s, as well as embracing new information technology as a tool of government engagement and openness'. Prior to the FOI Act, which is considered a landmark in the development of Australian democracy (Stubbs, 2008, p.1), the various governments in Australia had no obligation to release information to the public.

The 1982 FOI Act was amended in 2010, the establishment of the Office of the Australian Information Commissioner being one of a number of significant reforms introduced under the amended act. In the following year, the former Australian Information Commissioner described the changes to the FOI Act as significant, suggesting that the reforms would 'change government practice in Australia' (McMillan, 2011). To illustrate the changed thinking and practices arising from the reforms, the Commissioner referred to ACARA's *My School* website as an example of innovation in the provision of data and in terms of its impact on policy discourse and practice, stating that the 'aggregation on a single site of all information held by government on school performance and funding has stimulated a broad community debate that is certain to change educational delivery in Australia'.

While the responsibility for the operation and performance of schools rests with state and territory jurisdictions and school authorities, these bodies and the Australian government have certain obligations under national agreements regarding reporting and accountability. These obligations, underpinned by the Education Act and the Education Regulation, include national reporting of performance data and the provision of school-level information for the *My School* website.

The Education Act and the Education Regulation ensure that authorities adhere to nationally agreed requirements mandated through the Education Council, the council of education ministers in Australia (inclusive of the federal, state, and territory education ministers). Under the Education Act, schools must provide certain information about the school, its financial arrangements and performance, and demographic data on the student body so that funding can be both properly accounted for and calculated. The legislation also binds school authorities to allow publication of this information by ACARA on the *My School* website.

Legislative provisions designed to ensure transparency and accountability around *My School* data collection are also imposed under the ACARA Act, which tasks ACARA with three functions:

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2. Some schools in Australia have one or more campuses in separate locations with separate schooling provisions (i.e. a primary school campus or a secondary school campus).

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

Transparency and accountability in terms of ACARA's establishment and purpose were described in the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority Bill 2008 ('the Bill') when the Act was introduced by the government in Parliament in October 2008.

In the second reading of the Bill, the then education minister explained the government's proposed establishment of ACARA as a new development in education in Australia (J. Gillard, Speech to the ISCA, 2008). In outlining the proposed agency's responsibilities, the education minister proclaimed, 'We believe this new approach requires a new era of transparency and accountability'. With respect to transparency, the minister made particular reference to parents as a key stakeholder group, stating that the provision of comparative school data would provide better sources of information, and specifically that: 'For parents to fully understand the choices they can make for their children, we need a more transparent and consistent basis for them to examine the options'. With respect to accountability, the minister justified the proposed publication of comparative school data along with contextual information, emphasizing that:

> [In order to] target resources in a way that will best improve our education, we need rich sources of information. We need to know where efforts are bearing fruit and where they are not so we can take effective action. For schools, teachers and education authorities to learn which strategies work in which circumstances, we need comprehensive information about both the performance and the circumstances (Gillard, Speech to the ISCA, 2008).

Commitments such as those made by the minister required a mechanism to enable meaningful and 'fair' school comparisons. This mechanism, which was created by ACARA, is the index of community socio-educational advantage (ICSEA). ICSEA takes account of key factors in students' family backgrounds (parents' occupation, school education, and non-school education) which are known to have an influence on students' educational outcomes at school. In addition to these student-level factors, school-level factors (a school's geographical location and the proportion of Indigenous students it caters for) are considered when summarizing educational advantage or disadvantage at the school level. ICSEA provides a scale that numerically represents the relative magnitude of this influence, and takes into account both student- and school-level factors. It thus provides a basis for fair comparisons between schools in which students have comparable levels of educational advantage.

Accountability in school education has been a focus for policy development over several decades (Darling–Hammond, 2004; Anderson, 2005; Woessmann *et al.*, 2009). While there are different kinds of accountability system, such as compliance monitoring through school inspections and cyclic programme reviews, the publication of performance data (including test results, per-student funding, and student attendance figures), referred to as an example of results-based accountability (Anderson, 2005; Friedman, 2005), has become a feature of contemporary school accountability in many countries. As Anderson observed in *Accountability in Education* (2005) regarding the impact of such accountability measures on educators and schooling authorities, 'this requires that teachers and administrators become comfortable discussing strengths and weaknesses, explaining a variety of statistical data and facilitating positive change. This new communications role for educators can be intimidating as educators struggle both to understand underperformance and to inspire confidence that they can lead the change process needed to improve performance'.

It is widely recognized that the *My School* website is a key element in the broader national assessment and reporting framework in Australia (OECD, 2012; Thompson, 2014; Redden and Low, 2012; Cook, 2014). In acknowledging its contribution in terms of accountability, Jensen (2010) asserts that *My School* is 'a significant step forward to inform school choice and improve school accountability and school improvement initiatives'.

1.4 ACARA and its reporting responsibilities

ACARA has been operational since 28 May 2009, with a mission to improve the learning of all young Australians through world-class school curriculum, assessment, and reporting. ACARA executes policy directions determined by the Education Council regarding curriculum, assessment, data, and reporting at the national level.

Reporting in Australia through ACARA takes three forms. One is the annual collection and publication of information about schooling in Australia. This annual publication, called the *National report on schooling in Australia*, is produced on behalf of the Education Council. The report summarizes national achievements, initiatives, and reports relative to agreed key performance measures for student achievement, participation, and attainment regarding school and staff numbers as well as student enrolments, attendance, progression, achievement, and attainment. These data are presented at national, state/territory, and school sector levels rather than at the individual school level.

Another form of reporting relates to the National Assessment Program (NAP). The NAP includes NAPLAN (the National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy, an annual skills assessment of reading, writing, language conventions, and numeracy for students in Years 3, 5, 7, and 9) and the three-yearly sample assessments in science literacy, civics and citizenship literacy, and information and communication technology literacy. ACARA manages the NAP and provides reports that demonstrate how students have performed compared to established standards. The results from these assessments are reported in a number of different ways, including:

- Public reports: These include national reports for NAPLAN and the NAP sample assessments.

- Individual student reports: All students who participate in the NAPLAN tests receive an individual report of their results. The individual student reports provide information about what students know and have achieved in the areas of reading, writing, language conventions, and numeracy. They also provide information on how students have performed in relation to other students in the same year group, and against the national average (over one million students participate in NAPLAN tests each year) and the national minimum standards. An extract from an individual student report is included in *Annex A*.

- The *My School* website (https://www.myschool.edu.au). Detailed information about *My School* is also provided in *Chapter 2*.

Several source documents provide the legal basis for *My School*, the rationale and vision concerning the provision of school data through *My School*, and its intended purposes. These source documents include the Education Act, the Education Regulation, the ACARA Act, and the FOI Act (1982).

While *My School* was developed to provide transparent information on the performance of schools, it has also generated criticism from some quarters. It has been described in the literature by some detractors, for example, as contributing to the abstraction of teaching practice (Hardy and Boyle, 2011), the marketization of education (Gorur, 2013), and an emerging culture of auditing schools (Redden and Low, 2012; Gannon, 2013). School principal organizations and teacher unions have also at times been critical of *My*

School, primarily owing to concerns in cases where the data have been misinterpreted or attempts have been made by some journalists to 'rank' schools.[3]

However, others have commented more favourably on *My School's* contribution to transparency of information about schooling in Australia, with *My School* described as dramatically closing a gap in the provision of data to ministers and the public (OECD, 2012), a transformation in what is known about Australia's schools (Bonnor and Shepherd, 2016), and 'a wonderful new resource, offering potential for parents to assess more widely their child's school' (Loader, 2011). High praise has been offered by others, such as Lux-Lee, Lawry, and Atinc (2017) in their assessment of *My School* as 'a unique achievement', adding that 'Before its creation, public information was limited to what schools chose to make available, and even state and federal governments (let alone the public) had trouble accessing comparable information about school performance and resources'.

1.5   Methodology

The approach taken in this study was to generate new knowledge regarding *My School* and to utilize existing data based on two recent relevant reports on *My School*. The existing data considered relevant to this study were provided from two sources: the 2014 review of the *My School* website undertaken by Graham Cook Consulting at the request of the Australian government Department of Education and Training,[4] and *My School* market research commissioned by ACARA and undertaken by market research agency Colmar Brunton in November 2014.[5]

Particular observations, findings, and recommendations from these reports[6] informed some of the areas of inquiry covered by questions in the oral and written survey for this study. The findings from these reports were also considered along with those from this study when developing the conclusions (*Chapter 6*). For reference, summary findings from the Cook and Colmar Brunton reports are included in *Annex B*.

In addition to these data, ACARA initiated the collection of data from three main groups of actors to acquire perspectives and insights and generate new knowledge. The three groups included a sample of school actors (principals or, in some cases, assistant or deputy principals or other leaders); parent and community actors (representatives from peak parent organizations and community stakeholder organizations); and policy actors who work at a jurisdictional level in the analysis and reporting of school performance data and/or in school operations.

Characteristics of the participants in this study

The participants in this study were drawn from three main groups: policy officers, representatives nominated by peak parent organizations and community stakeholder organizations, and school leaders (principals and others in school leadership positions). See *Annex C* for a detailed breakdown.

Policy officers whose responsibilities are primarily the provision and analysis of school performance data or school operations at the jurisdictional level in Australia were interviewed.

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3. To minimize the chance of *My School* data being used for such a purpose ACARA has put in place procedures when considering data requests; it also works with media where it can to minimize the publication of simple league tables or school comparisons which ignore the difference in levels of advantage that students bring to school. Further information on ACARA's communications and media strategy is included in Chapter 2.
4. The 2014 Cook review report is *Review of My School Website: Final report to the Australian government Department of Education*.
5. The 2014 Colmar Brunton market research report is *Perspectives on the My School Website*.
6. Such as the perceived purpose of *My School*, parents' use of the data on *My School*, and the relationship between data that are publicly available on *My School* and the other data sets that schools and state/schooling authorities use.

Representatives from peak parent organizations inclusive of the three main schooling sectors (government, Catholic, and independent schools) were also interviewed, along with representatives from some community stakeholder organizations which rely on data to target schools for particular interventions and support.

A sample of primary and secondary school leaders from each state and territory, and from each schooling sector in Australia, was invited to contribute to the study through a written survey. The sample was purposeful, targeting leaders in schools where improvements in performance had been shown over a number of years. Notwithstanding the targeting of these schools and leaders, the response was low. This was not unexpected, given that participation was voluntary and principals in Australia tend to prioritize mandatory requirements over non-mandatory requests from groups outside their schooling authorities.

Data collection and analysis

The written survey was distributed to school leaders from 250 schools. A total of 41 out of the 250 invited school leaders responded to the survey. Semi-structured interviews were undertaken with both the policy actors and the parent and community actors over a four-week period (from late May to late June 2017). Fifteen policy actors, four parent actors, and three community actors were interviewed.

The mixed-method research methodology (Creswell and Plano-Clark, 2011; Leech and Onwuegbuzie, 2008) applied to this study involved an examination of key source documents, the analysis of data obtained from the semi-structured interviews with the policy, parent, and community actors, and data obtained from the written survey of school actors.

The source material and survey data were coded and categorized to identify patterns, similarities, and differences through a process of comparative analysis (Caracelli and Greene, 1993; Bazeley, 2009).

1.6   Structure of the report

Information about *My School* and findings from this case study are presented in the following pages, commencing with the main features of *My School* in *Chapter 2* and an analysis of the accountability model used to inform *My School* as a mechanism for reporting on individual schools in *Chapter 3*. In *Chapters 4* and *5* the analysis of stakeholders' perspectives on the usefulness of *My School* to improve transparency and accountability in education is presented along with the conditions of success, limits, and strategies for improving *My School*. Conclusions from the study are presented in *Chapter 6*.

2. *My School*

Launched in January 2010, *My School* is a website that provides free access for schools, parents, and the general public to information about Australia's schools at the individual school level.

2.1 Main features

The information on the *My School* website is collected and acquired through national consensus and agreed protocols that have been established over a number of years following determinations reached by the authorizing bodies.

Authority for determining the nature of the data sets and any further development of *My School* rests with the Australian education ministers through the Education Council.

While there has been some opposition to the inclusion of some data sets from particular groups at different times,[7] agreement has been obtained through negotiation on the inclusion of the following information and features of *My School* for each Australian school:

- A profile page developed by the school, which provides contextual information about the school (enrolment, staff counts, student background);

- A local map used to identify and access the data for neighbouring schools;

- Financial information about the school including the school's recurrent and other income (Australian and state governments' recurrent funding, fees, charges, parental contributions, and other private sources of income) together with its capital expenditure per calendar year;

- Student attendance data by the subgroups of Indigenous and non-Indigenous students;

- Students' NAPLAN performance data over a period of years for Years 3 and 5 for primary schools, and Years 7 and 9 for secondary schools, which are presented in various forms including performance of the various cohorts from previous years;

- ICSEA, a mechanism to compare students' performance with schools serving similar student populations based on the categorization of school groupings. ICSEA provides a numerical scale of socio-educational advantage computed for each school. ICSEA enables visitors to the *My School* website to make comparisons between schools based on their ICSEA levels. The scale is based on a substantial body of research evidence which shows that the educational performance of students, among many other things, is related to certain characteristics of their family and school, such as parental education and occupation and school characteristics such as location and the socio-economic background of the students it serves. Further information about ICSEA can be found at www.acaraweb.blob.core.windows.net/resources/ Guide_to_understanding_2013_ICSEA_values.pdf;

- For secondary schools, information about Year 12 completions, outcomes, and the participation of students in vocational education and training (VET[8]) courses.

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7. For example, it took a few years for agreement to be reached regarding the collection and reporting processes for school finance data. As one of its quality assurance measures ACARA engages an accounting company to undertake a check and verification of processes used to collect and submit data. ACARA has also had to respond to concerns raised from time to time about ICSEA groupings for some schools, including, for example, why despite their students having comparable levels of advantage, single-sex schools can be compared to co-educational schools and metropolitan schools can be compared to rural schools.
8. Secondary school students are able to undertake VET courses as part of their school programme.

In addition to the above, discussion has taken place in recent years regarding the inclusion of additional school level data on *My School*, specifically in relation to students with disabilities and to teachers (such as the qualifications of teaching staff and teacher absences).

At this stage data about students with disabilities are expected to be included in the 2017 *National Report on Schooling* at the state/territory and aggregated schooling sector levels, with the possibility of including such data at an individual school level on *My School* in the future. However, the publication of data on teachers is currently not under consideration for publication on *My School.*

Box 1. Extract from *My School*

An extract from a secondary school report on *My School* showing the school's comparative performance in Years 7 and 9 against all Australian secondary schools as well as like-schools (SIM) in NAPLAN for reading, writing, spelling, grammar and punctuation, and numeracy. Other extracts from *My School* (school profile, school finances data, NAPLAN data, etc.) are provided in *Annex D.*
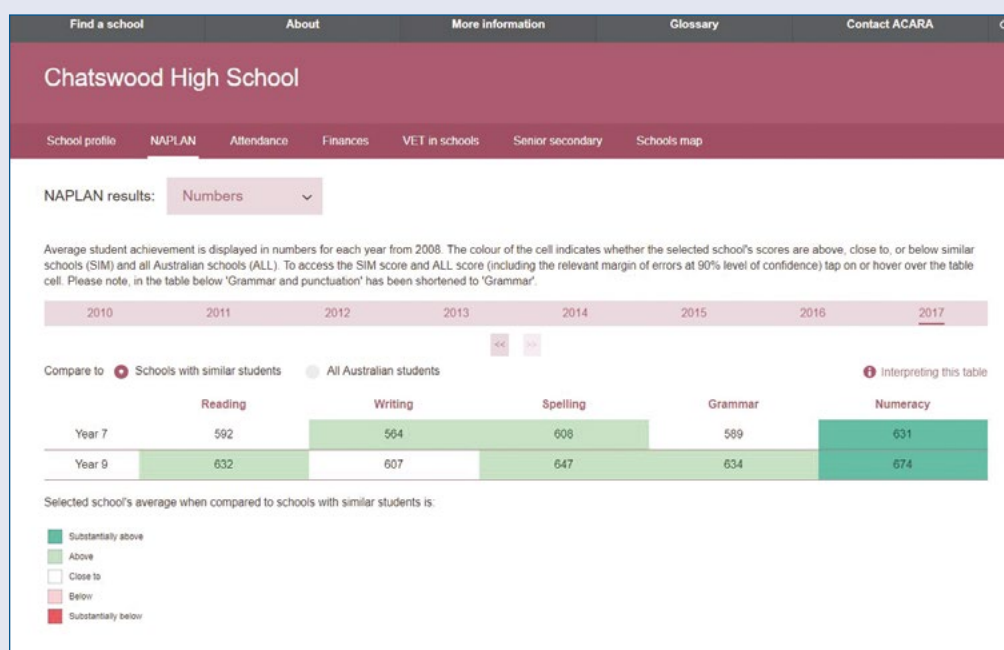
2.2   Communications and media strategy and support

ACARA has developed a communications and media strategy to support the annual release of data on *My School*. This strategy is aimed at providing accurate information to the state/territory and schooling authorities, key stakeholders, and media. It is also seen as a way of minimizing incorrect interpretation and use of the data.

Prior to the annual release of the data on *My School*, stakeholder and media briefings are conducted to provide these groups with embargoed information about the data. Information about a selection of schools around Australia which have achieved substantial gain/growth or high gain/growth in NAPLAN from previous years is also provided to these groups.

On the release date, ACARA provides information about and commentary on the data to schools and other stakeholders electronically through emails, social media, and a newsletter, and conducts media interviews as required.

Following the release date, ACARA also responds to enquiries from stakeholders and the media regarding the data and, where appropriate, the data for particular schools.

3. Analysis of the accountability model

3.1 The areas of accountability targeted

My School provides the Australian public with specific data regarding each school. The areas targeted are:

- contextual information about each school including student enrolment numbers;
- student performance in NAPLAN (for Years 3 and 5 for primary schools and Years 7 and 9 for secondary schools);
- student attendance data (for all students and Indigenous students);
- school finance data.

Information regarding Year 12 completions and VET outcomes are also provided for secondary schools.

3.2 The accountability model used

Cheng and Moses (2016) have identified three main channels through which information may lead to better accountability in education:[9] the market, formal sanctions and rewards, and public participation. When considered in relation to public statements, advice, and strategies and initiatives undertaken by governments and other authorities in Australia, the approach used for *My School* would be best described as primarily a focus on transparency and public participation.

Reference has been made, for example, to *My School* enabling parents to base the choice of schooling for their children on transparent information about each school. In this sense *My School* could be seen as being orientated to a market model. However, ACARA's position has consistently been that *My School* drives conversations among parents, community stakeholder groups, and teachers and school leaders about certain components of performance; school culture contains many elements not included on *My School* and parents are encouraged to examine the total fit between child and school.

When seen and described as a mechanism for mobilizing effort and support, *My School* is a channel for public participation. Moreover, ACARA's efforts to bring particular focus to gain/growth data for each school can be seen as promoting action aimed at targeting areas for improvement at the school level rather than promoting competition between schools.

3.3 Accountability lines/routes

The data on *My School* are collected from various sources based on agreements reached by the respective state and territory governments and schooling authorities. These data are used for multiple purposes on the principle of 'collect once, use many times'. For example, non-government school finance data must be provided by non-government school authorities to the Commonwealth Department of Education to account for funding provided to these schools by the Australian government . Some of these data are provided to ACARA by the Australian government for reporting purposes.

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9. These three channels can be summarized as: 1) the market (where information about schools is aimed at increasing market competition); 2) formal sanctions or rewards (where information about schools facilitates school authorities' decisions regarding sanctioning or rewarding particular schools based on their performance); and 3) public participation (where information about schools creates a call for action by parents and the community).

3.4   Consequences of the publication of school data

A common theme from previous reports on *My School* (see *Annex B*) and findings from this study was that schools and schooling authorities have considerable data sets to draw on for planning and development purposes, including the data on *My School*. In this sense, the annual release of *My School* data enables those outside of the school and its school authority to gain some insight into performance.

There are consequences arising from the publication of data on *My School*. However, the impact experienced with the initial launch of the data in 2010, which attracted considerable media attention and also resulted in concerns being expressed by some parents to principals about the performance of their schools, is less considerable now. This appears to be partly because principals more openly (and accurately) share information about the performance of their schools, and stakeholders and media are better informed about the limitations of the data when it comes to making conclusive judgements of performance based on single year results, rather than more telling indicators such as trend data (performance over time) and gain/growth data. ACARA's communication and media strategy and support outlined in *Chapter 2* could be seen as lessening the impact of *My School* data on schools on their release each year.

When interviewed for this study about the systemic response to the data, the policy officers with operational responsibility for schools talked about the range of strategies used to improve the performance of schools and what accountability means in terms of rewards or sanctions in their respective jurisdictions and *My School* data. One of these officers linked accountability to improving school performance: 'We have a school audit process that ensures schools comply with the collection and provision of data. Our operational structure requires performance progress with line management in place to ensure accountability. Our directors have professional discussions all the time with their principals. We also have annual programme reviews that target particular aspects of learning.'

He also outlined the process used in his jurisdiction for ensuring the accurate representation of each school's performance when reporting to parents and the community, explaining that 'Each principal reports to a director at the local level who reads and endorses the information provided for several purposes such as for the school's annual report which, by the way, needs to be consistent with the centrally held data and what is published on *My School*'.

A different policy officer talked about her jurisdiction's response to impressive performance by schools and those schools where improvement is lacking, saying, 'We work closely with schools needing improvement and "celebrate" rather than reward or punish schools. We "celebrate" by featuring the journey taken by some schools as case studies of success at an annual forum of school leaders (principals and deputy principals)'. With respect to the extent to which *My School* adds to or drives accountability in relation to other measures, she added, 'I feel *My School* has had some impact in terms of accountability but I would not say it is high. It is variable'.

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4. Analysis of stakeholders' perspectives on the usefulness of *My School*

4.1 Stakeholders' perspectives on the relevance of information on *My School*

The relevance of *My School* to meeting a particular purpose was a key matter discussed in interviews and addressed in the written survey. Perspectives varied within and across the actors on this matter.

Figure 2.   School actors' purpose for accessing *My School* data
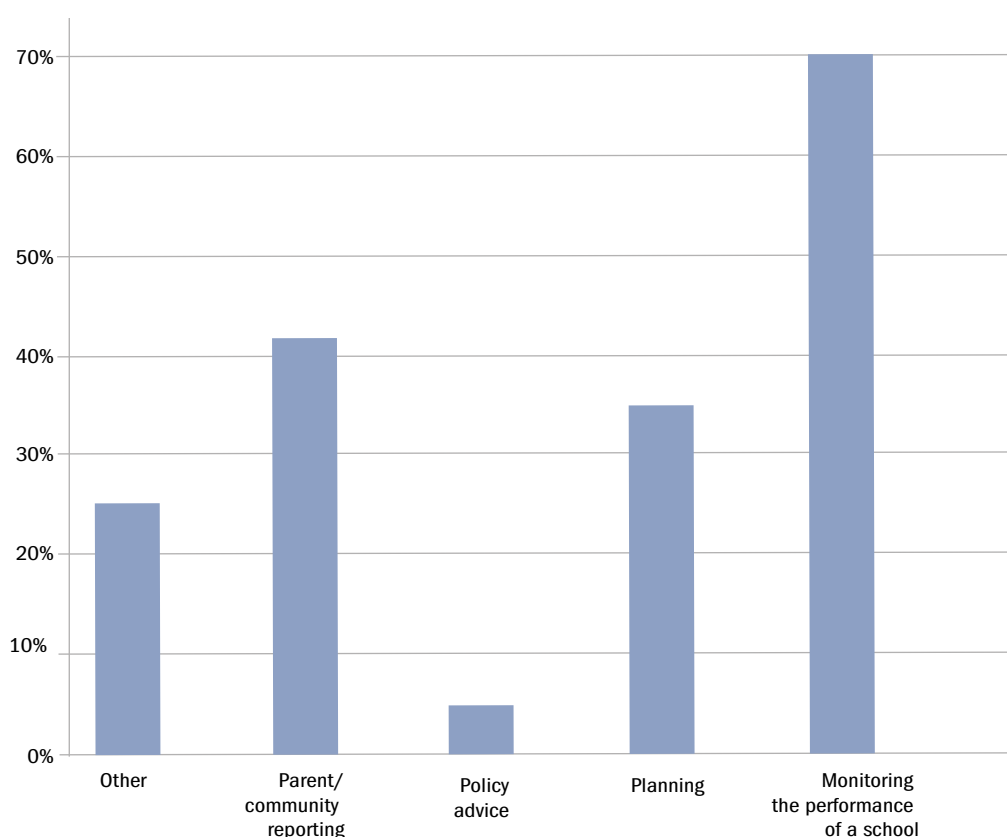
Source: Prepared by the author.[10]

The majority of school actors (69.05 per cent) confirmed that their main purpose in using the site was monitoring their own school's performance; some commented on related purposes such as using the site to find comparative data for neighbouring or like schools, with one describing this as 'competitor analysis'. A third of the school actors indicated that they used the *My School* data for planning, and around 40 per cent mentioned its use for reporting to parents and the community, particularly through their newsletters and school annual reports.

The most consistent view from those interviewed was that the purpose served by *My School* was to provide the public with agreed information about Australian schools in 'a single location'. One actor summed this view up as *My School* providing 'A line of sight

10. Unless indicated otherwise, the sources and tables in this case study have been prepared by the author.

across Australia'. Other identified purposes mentioned were undertaking 'spot checks' on particular schools, checking claims made about the performance of a school against that of comparable schools, checking the site's usefulness for an organization's stakeholders (for accessibility and clarity), identifying high-performing schools, and identifying trends (in enrolments, attendance, academic performance, and finances).

One of the policy actors from a small jurisdiction spoke about the important role *My School* plays in assisting her schooling system to make like-school comparisons, stating that owing to the level of diversity within the sector they need to look beyond the jurisdiction for like-school 'matches'. Such comparisons, she observed, enabled her schooling system to better understand how well their high-performing schools were tracking against similar schools in other jurisdictions. A contrasting view on like-school data was provided by a different policy officer, who stated: 'We don't use the like-school data as a key measure as we have other data. The gain measure is more important to us'.

From the perspective of one policy actor from the non-government sector, *My School* is an invaluable resource (specifically in relation to the publication of financial data, NAPLAN data, and ICSEA) as the data on the site provide 'characteristics we can't get anywhere else'. Some policy actors also made reference to the purpose *My School* serves for principals monitoring the performance of their schools against other schools and for parents choosing a school for their children. This last point was exemplified by a policy officer who acknowledged that she had used the site herself 'as a parent' when considering a school enrolment for her own children.

From the perspective of the parent and community actors, the site provides valuable information for various purposes, with one community actor indicating that her organization uses the site for 'checking up on individual schools' to 'distinguish between schools [that] we feel we need to assist and to decide which schools will be part of our program', and that 'we couldn't do our job without the data'.

Similar views were expressed by other community actors about the value they place on accessing data through *My School* for their particular purposes. The benefits arising from this are best illustrated through the vignette in *Box* 2.

One of the parent actors described *My School* data as 'a good reference', and highlighted its use by parents when considering a school for their child. Another parent actor explained that from her organization's perspective the purpose varied from working with a specific school to looking at trends and, from a research perspective, finding out whether or not benefits from particular 'treatments' are becoming observable.

4.2 Stakeholders' perspectives on the accessibility of the information on *My School*

More than half of the school actors (57.14 per cent) reported visiting the *My School* website periodically, with a further group (23.81 per cent) saying that they visit it at least annually.

This level of use differs for parent and community actors who both reported accessing the website more often, with four actors describing their own usage as 'daily' and community actors describing their use in terms such as 'diligently three to four times a week', 'regularly during the week', and 'extensively at times'.

One of the community actors, whose organization focuses its work in education on supporting improvements in low ICSEA schools, uses *My School* to identify and support the 'outlier schools', those whose performances are 'extraordinary', adding: 'We believe they are the schools that can lead their systems – they are the true assets of their systems.'

The vignette in *Box* 3 provides insight into this organization's approach and how *My School* data serves as background to the targeting of schools and for monitoring student achievement against other factors related to school improvement.

> **Box 2. The value of *My School* data in connecting donors with schools, as expressed by a respondent**
>
> We are a national charity that connects donors with schools in disadvantaged communities to support initiatives that improve students' learning outcomes. We believe every Australian child should have access to the education opportunities that enable them to fulfil their potential, regardless of their background or location.
>
> *My School* data has become critical in enabling us to better match supporters and schools facing disadvantage. We have built an interactive map, allowing people to determine which schools they can support in a particular region, and we can quickly pinpoint eligible schools for potential donors.
>
> This was particularly useful when the team at a major national retailer was interested in supporting schools near its stores. The data allowed us to pinpoint suitable schools and make a 'match' between schools and stores, resulting in 10 schools receiving funding for strategic, evidence-based projects that are making a significant difference in students' lives.
>
> One example of this is a secondary school in South Australia, which has used the support to grow a tutoring and support program aimed primarily at Indigenous students to lift low literacy and numeracy levels and improve their well-being.
>
> Over 100 students now have access to up to 12 hours of support per week including an individualized literacy and numeracy program and a focus on work and life skills. The school has also introduced weekly sessions based on healthy lifestyles, Indigenous cultures, social skills, and helping young people to deal with bullying, grief or anger challenges.
>
> The list of achievements from this project is considerable. Attendance has increased by 5 per cent and over 85 per cent of Indigenous students are consistently engaged in internal support. Students' literacy grades rose by 12.5 per cent and numeracy grades rose by an impressive 15.6 per cent. All senior students are now engaging in career and transition.

The policy actors indicated that they access the *My School* website infrequently or, as one participant stated, 'irregularly'. This is because they have access to full data sets for their schools, including the data uploaded by ACARA on the *My School* website as well as additional data they collect through their own systems and processes at jurisdictional and/or schooling sector levels, such as student level NAPLAN data. One of these actors commented on the contribution that *My School* had made both within and across jurisdictions, describing the data underpinning *My School* as cohesive and an illustration of 'policy in action'.

When the policy actors do access the site it is generally for a specific need, such as to respond to an urgent inquiry or ad hoc requests for information about a particular school. Some actors also mentioned accessing the site to provide 'snapshot' information to a minister or senior executive about a school or a set of schools, as required. As one policy officer observed about using the site for this purpose, 'It's convenient … I don't really use the site for analysis (I use our own data sets for this).'

Most of the actors indicated that on the whole *My School* is currently fit for purpose; as one policy actor observed, 'it's about right'. However, a few improvements were suggested by five actors, including more detail and specificity regarding the financial information. Another improvement requested by three parent actors was for more information to be included by schools about the role and contribution of the school community, particularly 'how the school provides opportunities for parents to have input' into school priorities, programmes, and governance. This was seen as a way of requiring schools to report on current levels of parent participation, as well as a possible lever for increasing levels of parent participation.

Box 3. The value of *My School* data in identifying schools in need of support, as expressed by a respondent

We undertake a due diligence process to identify schools for involvement in our initiatives.

My School helps our team to identify the level of challenge that exists in each school and is used alongside other information (school documents, interviews and testimonials) when selecting schools. In particular, we look at:

* demographic information (a low ICSEA) for eligibility, Indigenous and language backgrounds other than English data and how these have changed over time
* NAPLAN – we focus on gain, taking note of the percentage of students retained between cohorts which can be very high for the schools we are working with.

The value here is that because we work across states *My School* provides a platform to look at data sets which all the schools have in common and it enables us to draw comparisons where needed.

One of the schools we are working with, for example, is a primary school in Victoria, which has a student population with 88 per cent of students from language backgrounds other than English and where 58 per cent of their students fall in the bottom quartile.

The school's NAPLAN results are very strong with their achievement and growth sitting above like schools and close to the average for all schools for a number of years. This consistently strong performance is one of the reasons why they are included in our program.

Their challenge oncerned staff retention. The gains we are capturing relate to teacher capacity. The school is using their data aligned to Australia's quality teaching standards to evaluate growth in the capabilities of their teachers. In just two years many of their young teachers are demonstrating the capabilities of those you would expect with 5 to 7 years of teaching experience.

Figure 3.   School actors' use of *My School*.

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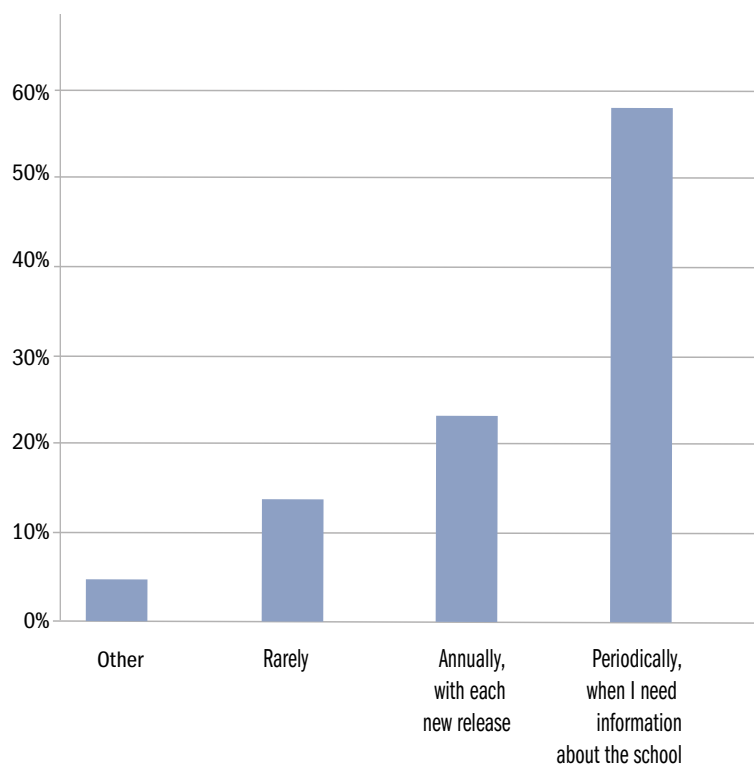
Another desire expressed by 10 actors was that more 'local' content and data should be incorporated into a school's profile. Actors who raised this either spoke about incorporating a link between *My School* data and the outcomes of school reviews (both internal and external) as further verification of data, or about obtaining a more comprehensive picture of a school's achievements and priorities. This latter desire, which was raised by actors from different groups, promoted the inclusion of outcomes from different data sources including those in non-cognitive areas. In some cases, this was aligned with one actor's view of the focus on NAPLAN, which in her or his opinion devalued the other curricular and co-curricular programmes in a school. Additional areas that three school actors suggested for inclusion were 'important initiatives that a school might be involved in, for example … sport programs, wellbeing initiatives'; 'measures other than academic. Wellbeing, percentage participating in sport, percentage participating in music, the money the school spends per staff member on professional growth and development etc.'; 'all the other aspects that schools offer … the co-curricular options, afterschool support structures, pastoral programs, developing the whole person'.

Having the capacity to display the profiles of a number of schools at a time (with at least three as the suggested number) was raised by a few policy and community actors. This was seen as a useful tool for those looking to search across school profiles for particular characteristics. However, the response from school actors to such a capability was less supportive, with more than a third (36.11 per cent) rating this as not important at all, and only 13.89 per cent rating it as extremely or very important.

Most of the comments from the school actors indicated a concern with the production of 'local league tables', with comparisons being based solely on NAPLAN and without a proper understanding of contextual factors or the other outcomes of schooling. These concerns are reflected in such comments as, 'We don't want league tables'; 'Could be misinterpreted, encourages ranking between schools, making it more high stakes'; 'I would be concerned if parents were focusing solely on NAPLAN data to choose schools'. One actor offered qualified support: 'We would only be favourable if the comparisons were made on student gain (Year 3-5) rather than single cohort data'.

In terms of the desire for readers to better understand contextual factors related to a school's data, a policy officer responded, 'The school context information is a device to accurately represent what the school stands for … we encourage schools to update it each year and most of the experienced principals take up the opportunity as they know how important it is to keep the information current. We give them multiple reminders about this.'

4.3 Stakeholders' perspectives on the usability of information on *My School*

NAPLAN data

A significant majority of school actors identified NAPLAN data as useful for their purposes, with just over half of the participants (51.22 per cent) rating these data very useful and 29.27 per cent moderately useful.

The views of school actors who chose to comment on the usefulness of NAPLAN data on *My School* were mixed. One described the data as 'a critical benchmark for our school', while another observed that the publication of the data 'makes NAPLAN seem like the only data schools depend on'.

Another school actor singled out the NAPLAN data for its usefulness for monitoring school performance, observing: 'This [NAPLAN data] is where we can view performance and see data trends. We are particularly interested in the Year 3–5 student growth data and the ability to make comparisons to other schools.'

Figure 4.   **School actors' views regarding the comparison of data from a small number of schools**
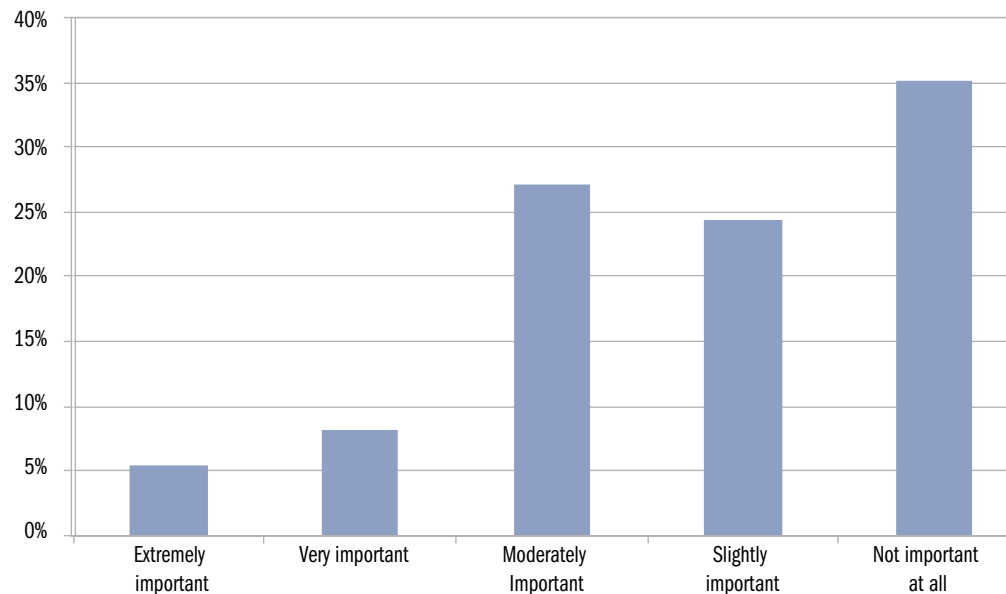
Year 3 and Year 5 comparisons are of particular interest to different stakeholders, as these data provide a valid comparison of student gain/growth and school (teaching and learning) effectiveness. The value of these data was explained by a policy officer responsible for school operations in terms of its fair analysis of actual school performance: 'We feel the growth data on *My School* cuts across segmentation: the socio-economic backgrounds of the students is not a factor when these data are examined. It's the degree of gain (or lack of gain) that matters. I feel the first graph/data shown should be about growth'.

A similar view was expressed by a different policy officer, who stated: 'The gain measure is particularly important. Averages are bare – they don't give any indication of what you might expect for a particular cohort to gain. We want to ensure that every child is learning every day. The gain measure exposes "cruising" schools – high performing schools are not exposed in any other data sets.'

The most valuable data, according to other policy actors, are the financial information and NAPLAN data. These data when considered in conjunction with ICSEA, it was claimed, provide a snapshot from which further analysis can follow using other resources and processes based on one's particular need. In emphasizing this point, one of the policy actors observed: 'NAPLAN is the focus. It is a powerful tool and gives us an opportunity to make valid comparisons'.

The majority of school leaders found the financial data useful, with 11.90 per cent finding these data very useful and a further 47.62 per cent finding the information moderately useful. However, 40.48 per cent view the financial data as not at all useful. One commented that the financial data were 'important for transparency', while another described them as 'too general' to serve any useful purpose.

Finance data

From the perspective of a policy actor, the financial information is 'telling', particularly in relation to the 'per student amount', while another policy actor explained that such data are 'very useful' as the information is simply 'not available publicly elsewhere'. When asked to comment further about these points the policy actors referred to the often debated relationship between funding and student performance and how the school-level data on finances have the potential to shine a light on assumptions and beliefs about funding as a 'school performance and improvement factor'.

Figure 5. School actors' views regarding the usefulness of *My School* NAPLAN data
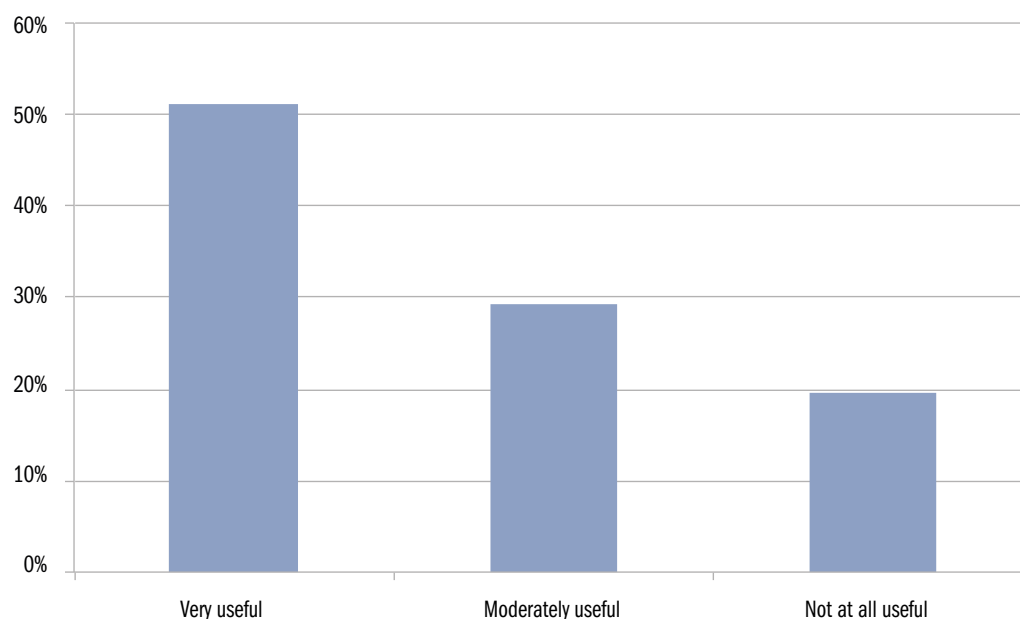
Figure 6. School actors' views regarding the usefulness of *My School* financial data
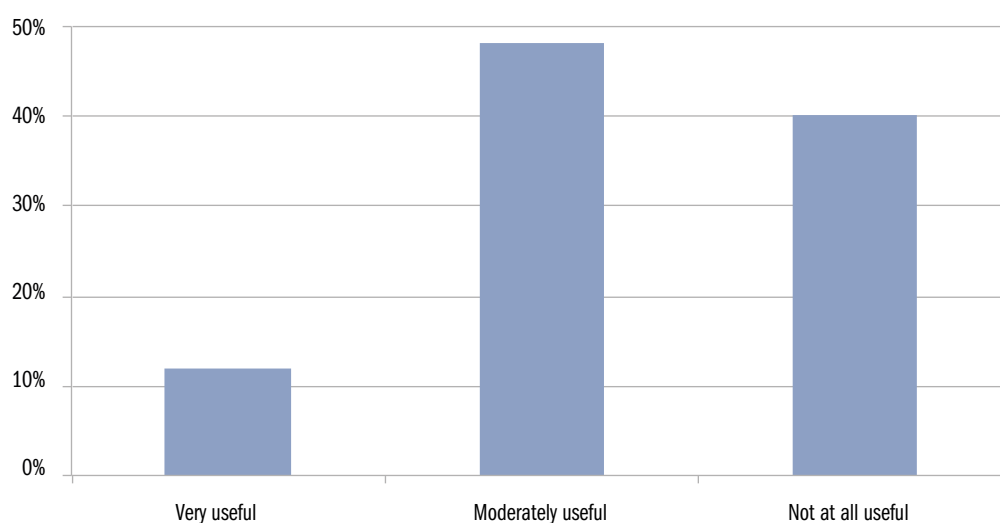
For parents

The response from school actors regarding the extent to which parents find *My School* useful was more equivocal than their responses to the other survey items, with close to half of the actors (46.15 per cent) neither agreeing nor disagreeing with the proposition. This is possibly because they have no real way of knowing the answer except when individual parents have specifically commented to them about the site. While only a few of their peers affirmed its usefulness for parents, nine school actors commented that in their experience few if any parents refer to *My School.*

Figure 7.   **School actors' views regarding the usefulness of *My School* for parents**
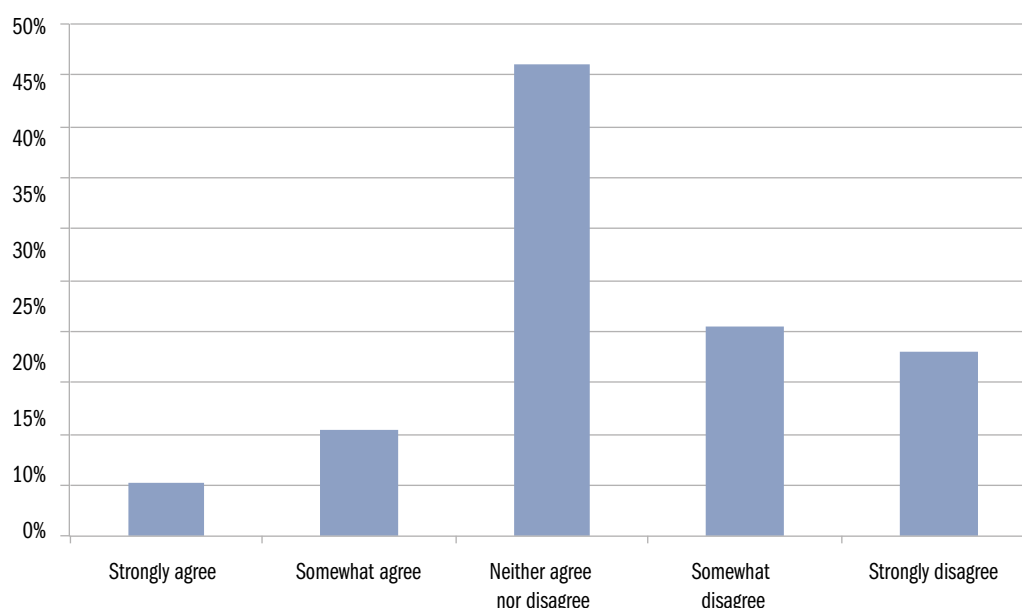
A different view was presented by the parents and policy officers, particularly those involved in school operations. Both of these groups identified the use of *My School* by parents as variable, with those from locations where there is a wide choice of schooling options more likely to use the site than other parent groups. This point was emphasized by a policy officer who noted that the provision of data on schools impacted more on some principals than others. He commented: 'On the whole I would say our principals realise the public facing of data about their schools provides a level of accountability. My sense is that some feel accountability through this more than others with those where there is local "competition" for enrolments feeling it the most.'

A fifth of the school actors found the attendance data on *My School* very useful, with 40 per cent finding the information moderately useful and the remaining 40 per cent rating it as not at all useful. Comments from school actors reflected this range of views; one questioned the separate publication of Indigenous and non-Indigenous data, noting 'There are many sub-groups within our society and I don't feel it appropriate to single out one group and not the others', while others focused more on their own data, for example, 'This relates to our annual goals', and 'We already have this data'.

Four policy officers and two community actors mentioned the availability of attendance and enrolment data, including the figures for Indigenous students, as being important for them in the work they do, and specifically for targeting schools for particular programmes and interventions. This point was emphasized by another community actor who highlighted the importance of attendance data for her organization, explaining that it points to where their programmes are needed and also where their programmes are 'making a difference'.

Attendance data (including its relationship to other data sets)

One of the community actors referred to *My School* as being an 'invaluable reference', finding the demographic and performance data particularly useful for her organization compared to state-based measures. She added that *My School* was a 'touch-point' and in terms of the focus for her organization, 'We like to look at trajectories (particularly the schools making great gains)'.

Figure 8.   School actors' views regarding the usefulness of *My School* attendance data

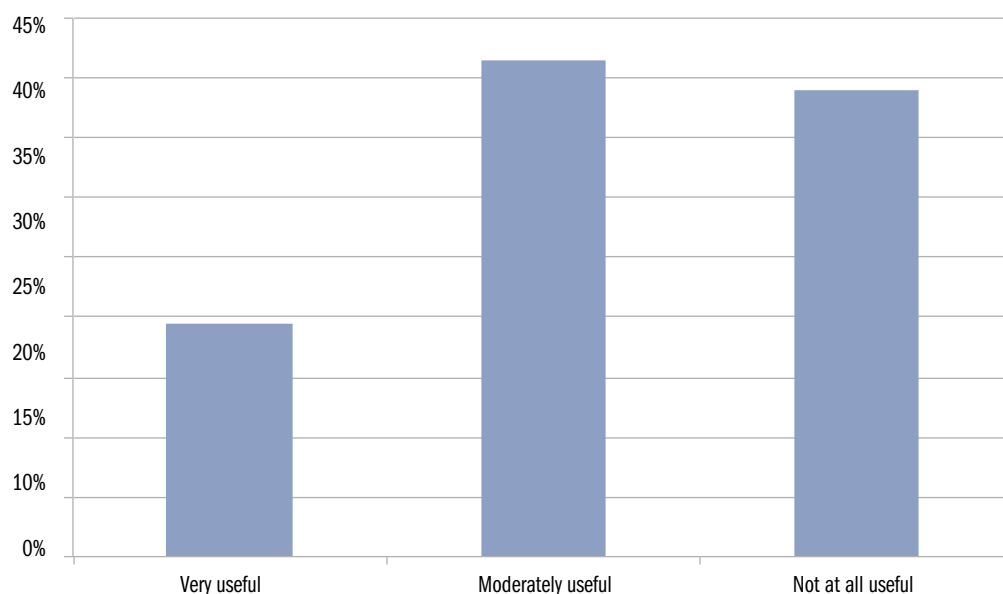### Other uses

A policy actor made the point that in addition to the purposes often cited for *My School* it should also be recognized that in terms of research potential the site contains 'one of the best data sets in Australia'. Its use in this regard was also referred to by a school actor who mentioned using *My School* data for a personal doctoral study.

5. Conditions of success, limits, and strategies for improvement: Comparing the perspectives of various stakeholders

The OECD study of national reporting in Australia through *My School, Delivering School Transparency in Australia* (OECD, 2012), highlighted the Australian government's preparedness to manage opposition as a key factor in the successful development and implementation of the website. Following is a summary of the government's response to each of the challenges presented by those opposed to *My School* (based on findings from the OECD study):

Challenge	Response
The validity of comparing schools on the basis of their academic results	A range of information is published to provide a context for understanding student outcomes.
The notion of comparing one school with another given each school's unique characteristics	Each school can be defined using elements which are unique to its setting while still characterized by similarities such as the socio-economic background of the student population, remoteness, and Indigenous population.
The ability to create a valid measure enabling meaningful performance comparisons among schools	Family background is recognized as having a strong association with educational achievement as well as other factors such as a school's remoteness and its Indigenous population. The development of a new index (ICSEA) is 'tailor-made' for the purpose of identifying schools serving students from similar backgrounds.
Teacher unions in particular were opposed to the publication of school-level information, objecting to making this information public and suggesting that it could be collected and used internally	The community should have access to information which enables understanding of the decisions taken by government and the status and performance of schooling in Australia. The information published will provide the evidence necessary to support continuous improvement of students, schools, and education systems over time, and inform decisions about where resources should be allocated.
Publication of these results could lead to 'narrowing of the curriculum' as schools direct more time and resources to achieving better NAPLAN test results	The main purpose of the NAPLAN tests is to identify whether all students have the literacy and numeracy skills and knowledge which provide the critical foundation for other learning and for productive and rewarding participation in the community. There is no reason for students to be put under pressure for NAPLAN.
Publication of results could lead to the stigmatization of schools that did not perform well on NAPLAN results	Through the publication of school contextual information it was acknowledged that students' performance in NAPLAN tests is influenced by a number of factors both inside and outside the classroom. *My School* was designed to encourage parents and members of the community to engage in meaningful conversation with school principals and education officials about the direction and resourcing of schools in their community and beyond.
Concern that the website would allow the media and others to publish 'league tables'	Strong protocols of data collection and reporting were agreed to by education ministers to support meaningful and comparable reporting of school data and the responsible use of this information.

Source: OECD, 2012

5.1　Stakeholders' perspectives on the conditions of success of *My School*

There was general agreement among policy, parent, and community actors that *My School* provides a level of transparency that is, as one stated, 'Very high given the need to get agreement across the country'.

Many commented on the circumstances in Australia prior to *My School* and stated that while the nature of the information was in some places 'dense' and 'technical', its level of transparency based on standards and the range of school-level data provided was a valuable addition to public and professional discourse concerning school and educational policy. Some of the specific comments from actors were that there had been 'A massive improvement from where things were before *My School* was developed. [*My School*] rates highly particularly compared to the previous situation. A quantum leap forward', and that 'The general perception is that *My School* has made a very positive contribution across all school sectors'.

While six school actors commented positively about the level of transparency offered through *My School*, eight were less supportive, claiming that one of the outcomes from the publication of schools' data was, as one actor said, 'More competition. [I am] not a fan of all schools seeing each other's data', and from another, 'This has undoubtedly created a competitive response amongst families, school staffs, and schools'.

However, transparency in the performance of schools in Australia was seen by one policy officer as a platform for greater and better dialogue about policy intentions, practice, and outcomes. In elaborating on this point, she spoke about *My School* not being 'an end in itself', that it is important that educators and the public understand that 'What sits behind this [the data; *My School*] is a national conversation about what these measures mean – it is a balancing act in terms of trust and accountability'.

5.2　Stakeholders' perspectives on strategies to improve the impact of *My School*

While it was acknowledged by the policy, parent, and community actors that *My School* contributed to accountability at school and jurisdictional levels, views varied on whether the publication of schools' data on the site in itself offered major assurance compared to other accountability processes.

The opinions of school actors varied regarding the impact on schools arising from *My School*. Five school actors stated that no or little change had occurred as an outcome of the publication of schools' data on *My School*. Eight actors made reference to increased levels of stress and criticism of schools, and of 'teaching to the test'. Still others commented favourably on its impact, ranging from such observations as 'Perhaps a little more emphasis from schools on certain data/achievement' to 'Schools have become much more data conscious and this has led to planning based on hard evidence rather than speculation'. One school actor noted, 'Parents are much more savvy [now] about results that schools are producing'.

While acknowledging other jurisdictional or systemic tools and processes that contribute to accountability, the policy actors were, on the whole, unequivocal about the positive contribution *My School* had made. One spoke about NAPLAN data, particularly in relation to student gain/growth measures, as contributing significantly to school accountability and as a 'catalyst for change', stating that it 'holds schools to account regardless of the SES background of their students'. Similar views were offered by other policy actors, including one who stated that there was now 'nowhere to hide' and that before the availability of *My School*'s data, 'We didn't really know the conditions of implementation'.

The parent and community actors agreed that *My School* was contributing to accountability at all levels. One parent actor suggested that he had noticed 'improvements since the beginning' of *My School* in relation to accountability, while a community actor stated that from her experience, 'Schools care about what is on the site … is it the be-all and end-all? – No, but it's a form of accountability and that's a healthy perspective'.

## 5.3 Stakeholders' perspectives on the limits and risks of *My School*

Limits

Policy officers indicated that *My School* served its purpose of informing the Australian community about Australian schools well, and that, given this, there were few if any limitations worth raising. One commented that a limitation that was actually 'outside' *My School* was that it was 'an uphill battle to get principals to look at the information'.

However, when school actors were asked about the extent to which the information provided a balanced picture of their schools, the majority disagreed, with 39.47 per cent somewhat disagreeing and 21.05 per cent strongly disagreeing. This level of disagreement was discussed with two of the policy officers, who independently observed, 'I am aware of the concern … I feel it is primarily because schools are complex places that are hard to "capture" through any data sets. Our principals tend to be passionate educators who know that what schools deliver is not solely based on a list of data. They change lives and *My School* can't accurately represent all that is done', and 'I am not surprised that principals are not as positive about *My School* as others. They use the data "under" it … for them *My School* generates viewpoints about their schools that may be false. They are not in control of the story'.

Further, when asked whether *My School* provided an accurate representation of students' achievements, the school actors were divided in their views, as indicated in *Figure 10*.

Figure 9.   **School actors' views regarding *My School* data (balanced picture)**
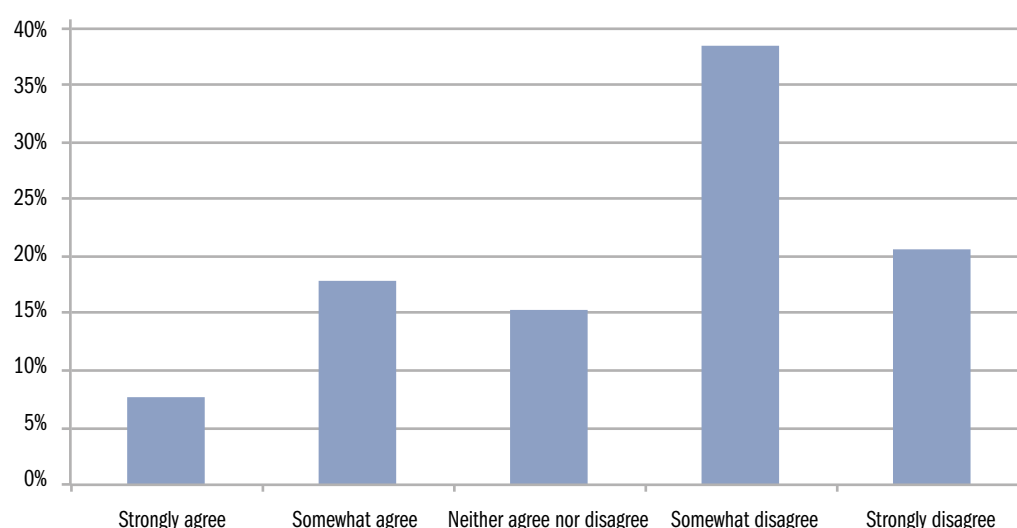
Senior secondary data

Senior secondary data include information about the number of senior secondary certificates received by students. Reporting of senior secondary data represents the commitment by Australian governments to support the senior years of school and to facilitate effective transitions between further study, training, and/or employment.

Figure 10.   School actors' views regarding *My School* data (accurate representation)
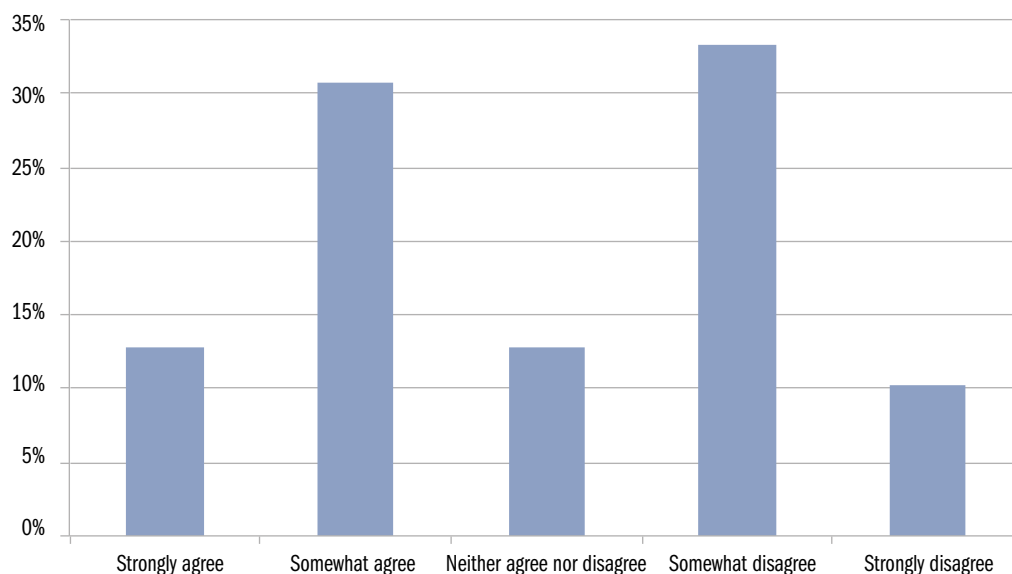
Two policy actors said that while it had been a positive step to include senior secondary outcomes data on *My School,* more could be done in this area to gain insight into 'what's happening across the country'. Similarly, a community actor highlighted the importance her organization places on Year 12 completions; while it is important to have such data, the information currently made available about schools is, in her opinion, 'Not great. We can't get good visibility. There is not enough information to get a feel for what is happening and a lack of consistency. It is an important data set but at the moment it is "messy".'

When asked to explain why Year 12 completion data are important, this actor commented on action taken across the country to raise the school-leaving age and the research supporting the benefits (for students' personal health and economic wellbeing) of completing senior secondary schooling and transitioning to post-schooling training or study.

The actors from one of the parents' organizations spoke about the need for more 'user-directed' capability within the site so that various views can be available depending on how one applies filters. Another actor from this group mentioned the need for parent information sheets on particular data sets which could be downloaded and distributed by schools to enhance parents' understanding of the different data sets and how to interpret the information.

Gaps

Other *My School* limitations mentioned were gaps in the provision of key data sets. Two missing data sets suggested by one policy actor were information about disabilities (the number of students with disability within a school and the level of support provided) and teacher workforce data. In summing up her views on *My School*'s limitations, another policy actor commented that the site 'does a very good job' and then added, 'In the ideal world there would be a richer array of data (including for example more about early learning) but I recognise this would take detailed and extensive conversations'.

Enhancements to My School suggested by actors

Eleven actors referred to the need for enhancements to be made, and five policy actors spoke about the tension between providing information in a way to avoid or minimize misinterpretation, but also in an accessible form for the general reader/viewer.

This last matter was raised by actors from the different groups, most often when commenting on the purpose of *My School* and its mixed audience (parents, the general public, politicians, stakeholder groups, the media, school authorities, researchers, principals, and other school personnel).

One parent expressed the view that a mechanism was needed within the data sets for accessing detail 'as required'. It was suggested, for example, that the opening screens in each section should be general in nature and avoid language and data displays that are overly technical and complex in design. Then, through user-friendly navigation devices, further and more detailed and technical displays of the same data set could be accessed by those looking for a higher level of specificity and analysis. As another parent actor observed, 'Let people select for detail so that the information is unpacked as needed as some people, not all, have a need for detail and want to "drill down"'.

Risks

Two main risks concerning the *My School* website were raised. One of these was the misinterpretation of school performance based solely on the data presented on the site. The second was the ongoing potential for journalists and media sources to develop 'league tables' based on their own data-trawling efforts.

Misinterpretation of the data was seen by most of the interviewed actors as an inevitable outcome, given the difficulty of presenting data for the broad audience *My School* serves in a robust yet meaningful manner. One of the policy actors claimed that not enough is done with the data and information ACARA has at its disposal, suggesting that the agency should 'unpack NAPLAN' for schools, parents, and teachers to make the data 'come alive'.

Though the potential construction of 'league tables' was identified as a risk by five of the policy and community actors, it was also seen as an acceptable risk when considered against the overall benefits of publishing the data. Moreover, five of the actors spoke about the need for ACARA to be more proactive in terms of telling the story about the performance of schools in Australia. One of the policy actors emphasized that since the responsibility for schooling in Australia rests with the state, territory, and schooling authorities, it was (in her view) not ACARA's role to comment on such matters, but the views of some others differed. One parent actor, for example, stated that ACARA as an organization has appropriately earned 'a lot of professional respect', while a community actor encouraged ACARA to use its 'authoritative voice' to 'take the wind out of' attempts by individual journalists or media sources to report to the public about the performance of schools.

An issue identified by seven actors was the attention drawn to the *My School* data each year, when the new data sets are launched. This was seen as inviting undue focus from the media and essentially facilitating 'front page stories'. An alternative approach to the scheduled release of the data, which was raised by three of the actors, was the uploading of data as they are available or at least through staggered releases rather than as a single package at one point in time. Such an approach was seen as a way of mitigating the risk of superficial and often negative media attention. A related risk with the timing of the release of the data was suggested by a school leader as a lag-time issue for schools, emphasizing that this 'does not come out until well after the test dates by which time much of the data is outdated'.

5.4 Enhancements to *My School* proposed by ACARA

As a part of this study, ACARA identified seven enhancements under consideration for the further development of the *My School* website. These seven enhancements, based on findings from the 2014 Cook review and subsequent discussions held by ACARA with state and territory jurisdictions and school authorities, are:

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- becoming mobile-friendly: redeveloping the *My School* website so that two presentations are available – one for desktops/laptops as is currently the case, the other with simplified charts and tables, making it accessible on mobile devices including tablets;

- ensuring accessibility: developing the site to comply with the WCAG2.0 AAA standard;

- time series charts: creating new visualizations of the time series chart (and potentially other measures) to enable a time series longer than that now available and with a greater focus on school improvement (for example, gains made in student achievement over time);

- user survey/feedback page: developing a function to acquire data regarding the users' purpose for visiting *My School* and to enable users to provide feedback on aspects of the site;

- local map for school selection: providing a local map for each school which also identifies the neighbouring schools;

- further simplification of NAPLAN results and language: redesigning the NAPLAN results charts to declutter tables and charts, introducing interactive tools to enable access to different views of the data using a single-click option, improving the explanations of the statistical concepts, and hiding some statistical measures by default to keep the presentation as simple as possible and to avoid confusion;

- best practice forum: creating a blog in which high-gain schools can describe how they achieved the improvements.

Each of the seven proposed enhancements was discussed with the policy actors and the parent and community actors; the enhancements were also addressed in the written survey. The following subsections outline the level of support (or otherwise) each proposed enhancement received from the actors.

Figure 11.   School actors' views regarding making *My School* mobile-friendly
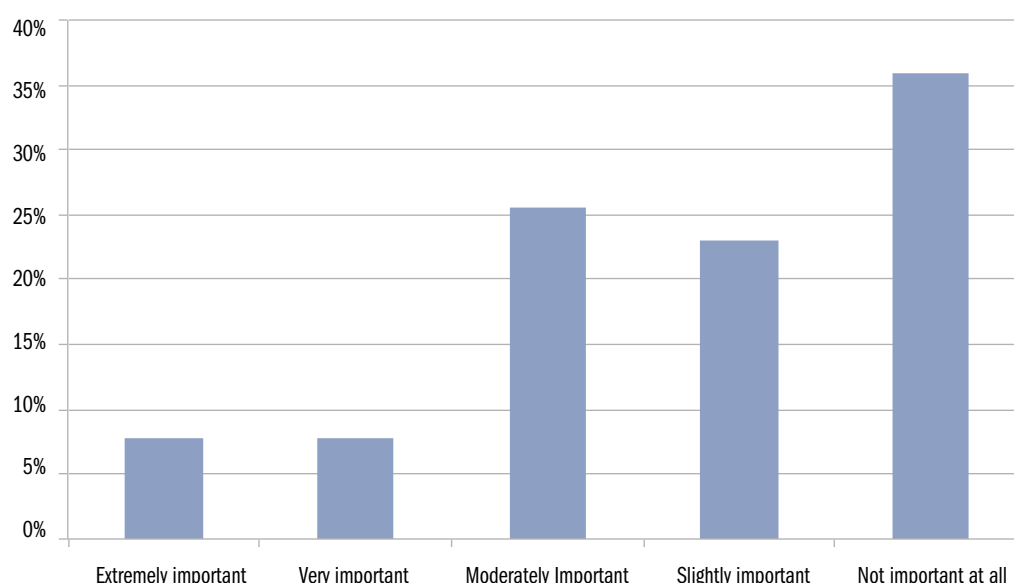

Becoming mobile-friendly

School actors gave little support to this proposed enhancement, with just over a third (35.90 per cent) rating it as not important, and almost a quarter (23.08 per cent) seeing it

as only slightly important. From one actor's perspective, making *My School* mobile-friendly (for tablet and other mobile devices) was more about extending its platforms than its usefulness, suggesting, 'Simply to keep up to date with modern technology this might be important, but I am not sure what other value it would have'. In contrast, most of the policy, parent, and community actors saw this enhancement as necessary in the context of contemporary use by individuals, with five actors commenting on the ubiquitous nature of such technologies. Two policy actors doubted the extent to which an individual would realistically use a mobile phone to search, review, or analyse *My School* data. However, one of the parent actors placed the proposal as 'top of the list' and a policy actor described it as a 'no-brainer', adding that in terms of enabling access to the public, in her jurisdiction, 'Everything needs to be mobile … for some [people] that's all they have'.

Ensuring accessibility

None of the actors questioned the need for the site to comply with the WCAG2.0 AAA standard. However, one of the parent actors qualified his support, stating that it would be important when applying the standard that the current clarity and usefulness of the data are not compromised by 'oversimplifying matters'.

Figure 12.   School actors' views regarding enhancing *My School*'s time-series capability
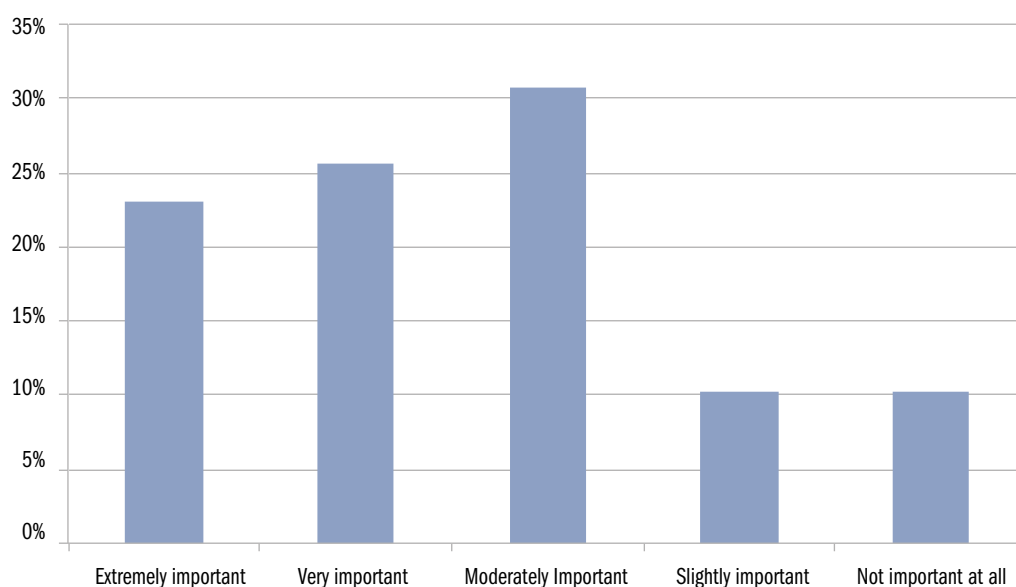
School actors gave strong support for the inclusion of time series charts, with only 10.5 per cent indicating the enhancement was not important; one school actor suggested that if anything was to be shown it should be gain/growth, but 'for students, not schools'.

While two school actors noted that there can be wide variations in the performance of students between cohorts in a school, almost half of the actors (47.37 per cent) rated this enhancement as either extremely important (21.05 per cent) or very important (26.32 per cent), with one stating, 'I believe data trends are very useful and give a more accurate version of school data that may be skewed by the results of only one reporting period'.

All but one of the policy actors identified the capacity to view time series data for each school over an extended period as a high priority. This function was seen by the policy actors as particularly helpful if focused on illustrating gain/growth over time, so that regardless of a school's starting point one could identify its performance trajectories. One actor observed: 'Most people see this enhancement as the bit that most people want – showing

improvement over time. While there might be some limitations to what can be shown, this [time series data] is the link back to standards that we need.'

One policy actor observed that achieving national consensus on how the proposed charts are constructed and displayed would be 'quite an issue' to be worked through by the jurisdictional advisers, due to the diverse range of views. However, she added that while this would present some challenging debates and negotiations, it was nonetheless important to recognize that schools were 'on a journey over time' and this needed to be illustrated.

Figure 13.   School actors' views regarding a user survey/feedback enhancement for *My School*
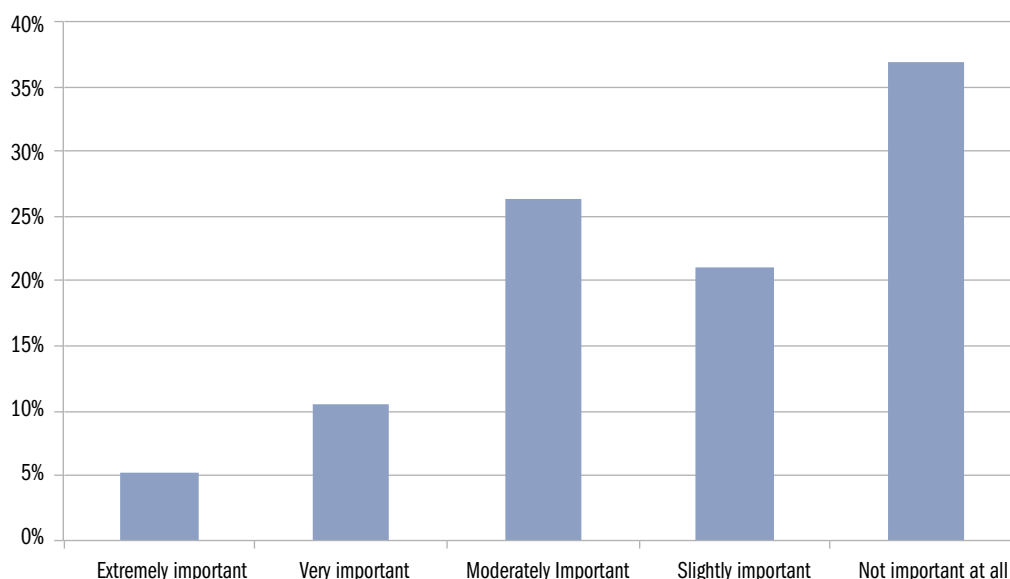
All the parent and community actors saw this enhancement as particularly valuable, with one actor describing the proposal as 'super important' because it 'feeds into informing the broader community about the value schools make regardless of their starting point'. Another community actor highlighted its particular importance in terms of comparative school data: 'This is what we want – to overlay gain when we compare schools'.

User survey/feedback page

Concern expressed by school actors about a user survey function tended to focus on the potential for negative feedback to be directed at individual schools, with 16.22 per cent rating the enhancement as extremely or very important and more than a third (37.84 per cent) rating it as not important at all. Two responses which illustrate this concern are, 'What happens if it becomes a complaints vehicle for unhappy parents?' and 'This may reflect on students attending schools – they should not have to bear the comments of sometimes irreverent public'.

However, the policy, parent, and community actors supported this proposed enhancement. One policy actor observed that it would be important that ACARA's management of the feedback not be resource-intensive. She added that if the data were collected through simple checklist responses rather than extended commentary, then it would be helpful in monitoring the site's usefulness and limitations and would also minimize maintenance costs.

Three parent actors saw this enhancement as being 'absolutely needed', as one described it, as it would assist ACARA in monitoring the extent to which users' needs are met. They also suggested the use of a rating method, such as a five-star system which, one suggested, would enable ACARA to measure the level of support for, and interest (or otherwise) in, particular sections and data sets on the site. However, a community actor

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indicated that from her experience, periodic user surveys were more useful for acquiring accurate feedback than feedback pages on websites, adding that the responses on these are usually from 'grumpy people'.

Local map for school selection

School actors were divided in their views on this enhancement. Just under a third (31.58 per cent) rated it as moderately important, while another third (34.21 per cent) scored it

Figure 14.   School actors' views regarding the provision of a local map on *My School*
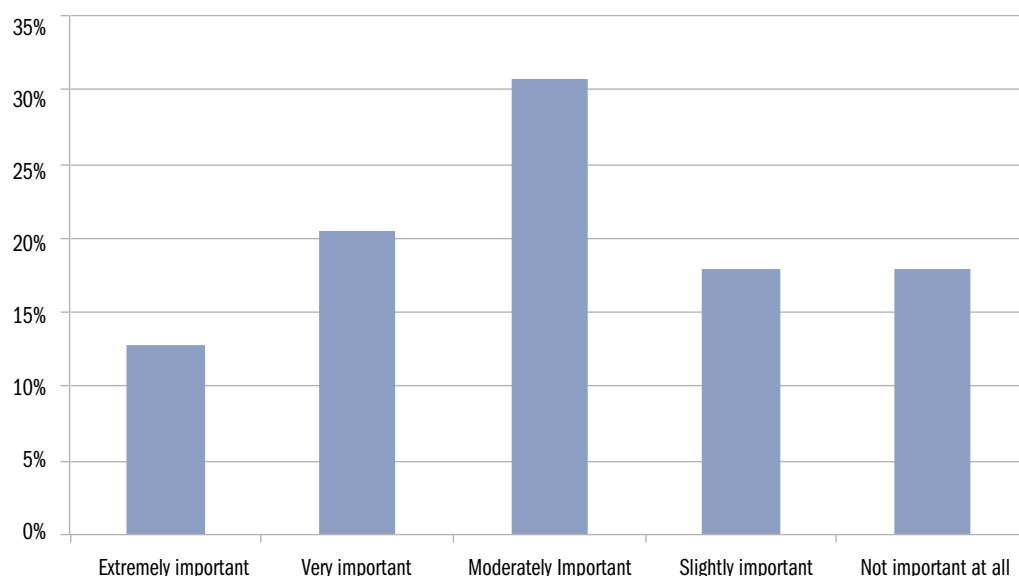
as extremely or very important, and the remaining actors rated it as either not important at all or only slightly important.

While a local map is already provided when viewing a school profile on the site, the enhancement of this function was seen as worthwhile by most of the actors. A policy officer from the non-government sector observed that while she would probably not make use of it in her own work, parents would, as from her experience there is a 'high proportion [of parents] who look at the site for this purpose'.

One policy actor commented that she was 'a bit worried about this one [enhancement]', suggesting that it needs to be done carefully as there are local factors and the data on *My School* are 'not enough to form judgements'.

### *Further simplification of NAPLAN results and language*

This was another enhancement for which the school actors were divided in their opinions, with only 8.33 per cent rating it as extremely important and the remainder equally divided in their ratings between very important (22.22 per cent), moderately important (22.22 per cent), slightly important (19.44 per cent), and not important at all (27.78 per cent). Comments from school actors reflect these differing opinions about the presentation of the data, such as, 'It might make it easier to navigate and understand', and 'The removal of the other elements increases the risk of the data being misinterpreted', and also about the users – 'Many can't interpret data appropriately anyway'.

Eight of the actors interviewed agreed that the site was not particularly 'friendly' for the general viewer, with a policy actor offering as an aside, 'It's not a very interesting website … [there are] no pictures of kids on it, for example'.

Another policy actor commented that improving interactivity would help people get what they need, while a parent actor encouraged as much interactivity as possible, favouring 'user-generated' capability rather than the current suite of predetermined views and pathways.

Five of the actors commented that the technical descriptions and the displayed data, while compliant with the agreed national protocols developed to avoid or minimize misinterpretation, should be improved to enable greater accessibility. This was emphasized by one of the policy actors who observed: 'Bureaucrats insist on detail. But you have to

Figure 15. School actors' views regarding further simplifying NAPLAN data on *My School*
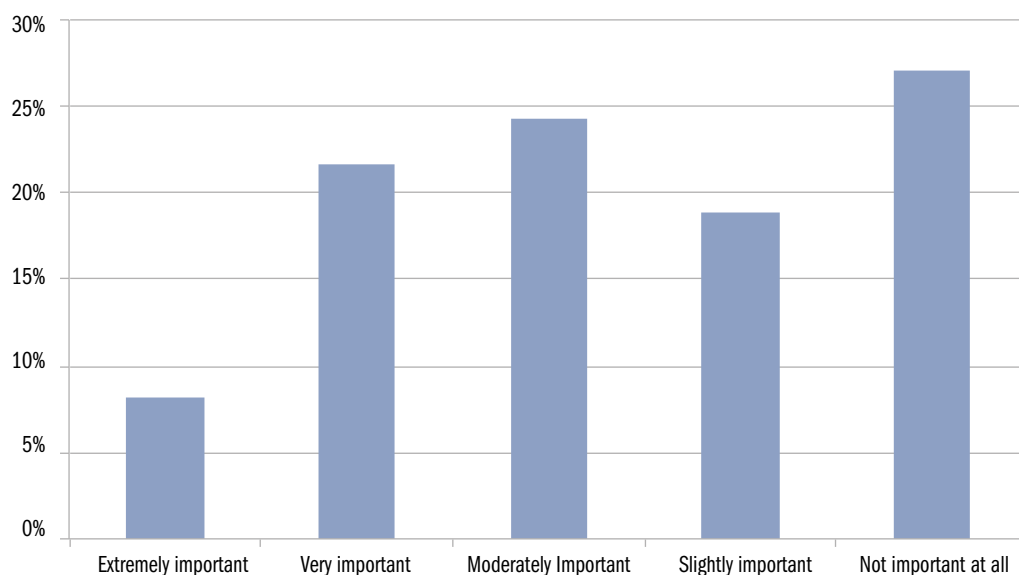
get the balance right as accessibility is lost because of the over-emphasis and effort to avoid misinterpretation'.

This tension between displaying data that are widely understood in charts, graphs, and diagrams and providing explanations and caveats for technical accuracy was also mentioned by other policy actors throughout the interviews. One of the community actors stated that while her organization preferred high-level information, it would be important to 'unpack' this for others and 'declutter' the views. Similarly, a policy actor spoke about how this proposed change would support parents as a key audience, particularly in understanding ICSEA.

Best practice forum

This enhancement, which was discussed during the interviews, was given little support by the actors. Most of the policy actors questioned whether it was needed, with one suggesting that while it might be 'good for parents', it would probably end up as a 'marketing tool' for some schools. Another described the proposal as 'not appealing', explaining that from her perspective it was important to 'let the data tell the story ... but what could be helpful is greater analysis'.

Three of the policy actors also questioned whether it was ACARA's role to manage such a facility, indicating that it was the responsibility of schooling authorities, not ACARA, to monitor and highlight best practice. A similar view was expressed by the actors from one of the parent organizations who, while expressing support for 'holding up good schools', added that it was 'someone's role' to do this but it 'might not necessarily be linked to *My School* or ACARA'.

However, one of the community actors stated, 'I really love the idea of this', and that her only hesitation with blogs was the 'tall poppy syndrome' and the likelihood that only 'self-promoters' would tell their stories, not those who have 'more impressive stories to tell'. Similarly, an actor from a parent group was of the view that 'in an ideal world' such an enhancement would be a worthwhile addition, but he also wondered how it would work in practice.

A community actor suggested that one of the challenges would be resourcing the initiative to a level that enables ACARA to 'get the high-gain schools behind it'. Still others simply felt that the cost in sourcing, monitoring, verifying, and operating the content on the site was not justified compared to other more important priorities.

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6. Conclusions

Following an analysis of the findings from the mixed-method approach, the following conclusions were reached:

- *My School* provides a broad audience of parents, the general public, politicians, community groups, the media, school authorities, researchers, principals, and other school personnel with specific data on each Australian school in a central location. Prior to *My School,* these data were not available to these stakeholders.

- While there are some concerns from school leaders regarding the provision of the data on *My School*, other stakeholders value access for a range of purposes, including the better targeting of resources and services, and for analysing and monitoring key input and performance data in and across schools.

- Opinions differ regarding the usefulness and core purpose of *My School*. There are, in fact, several purposes and as a result its usefulness for individuals and groups as a source of school-level data depends on each purpose. For some, its purpose is limited. For others, it is an invaluable resource.

- There is clear tension between displaying data in a way that will be widely understood by users and at the same time minimizing risks associated with the misinterpretation of the data. While there are various requests and advice regarding improving the 'user-friendliness' of *My School*, the balance needs to favour maintaining technical accuracy over efforts to simplify the presentation of data.

- ACARA is considering seven enhancements for the further development of *My School*. While some reservations were expressed about most of these, three enhancements were seen as positive by study participants: making *My School* mobile-friendly, ensuring *My School* complies with the WCAG2.0 AAA, and improving the time series chart, as proposed.

- The proposed development of a best practice forum (through a blog) received little support. However, the proposed inclusion of a user survey/feedback facility was viewed much more favourably, with steps taken to ensure the data collection tool has as its focus feedback on the usefulness of data sets, the usability of the site, and the clarity of the information, rather than enabling comments to be made about individual school data or information.

- There is strong support for improvements to be made to the way NAPLAN results are displayed and to the language used to characterize the results. However, as indicated above, it is important for ACARA to maintain the technical accuracy of displayed data, and to avoid oversimplifying the data and increasing the risks associated with inaccurate interpretations of the information.

- Consideration should be given to the release of *My School* data through a more incremental process (when data are available) to improve its currency and to lessen the tendency for what many see as undue attention given to *My School* data over other important outcomes of schooling.

The *My School* website has changed the education landscape in Australia regarding the transparency of information about schools.

While jurisdictions and schooling authorities use various accountability strategies and processes to monitor the performance of their schools, *My School* makes a contribution to school accountability at a national cross-sectoral level.

There are varying viewpoints regarding the intentions, uses, limitations, and related risks of *My School*. However, there is little doubt that provision of the information on the website generates discussions on several key matters of major importance in and across schools.

The transparency of school-level data on *My School*, based on standards and nationally agreed procedures and protocols, is a valuable addition to public and professional discourse in Australia concerning educational policy and practice.

Annexes

Annex A. Extract from an individual student's NAPLAN report

Student Report 2017
National Assessment Program — Literacy and Numeracy

Year 7

acara AUSTRALIAN CURRICULUM, ASSESSMENT AND REPORTING AUTHORITY

This report shows the results for

The National Assessment Program — Literacy and Numeracy

In May 2017, national literacy and numeracy assessments were administered to students in Years 3, 5, 7 and 9 throughout Australia.

This report shows your child's achievement in those assessments.

The information contained in this report should be considered together with school-based assessments and reports.

Literacy Assessment

The literacy assessment tasks measured student achievement in reading, writing and language conventions.

Reading

Students were required to read a range of texts similar to those used in Year 7 classrooms and answer questions of varying difficulty to show their understanding of the material.

Writing

Students were directed to write in response to stimulus material. This writing task required students to generate and organise ideas and demonstrate their skills in vocabulary use, sentence structure, spelling and punctuation.

Language Conventions

Students were required to identify and correct spelling errors and answer multiple-choice questions on aspects of grammar and punctuation.

Numeracy Assessment

The numeracy assessment task measured student achievement across number and algebra; measurement and geometry; and statistics and probability. Questions required students to apply mathematical knowledge, skills and understandings in a variety of contexts.

VICTORIAN CURRICULUM AND ASSESSMENT AUTHORITY

VICTORIA State Government

How to read the student report

A student's result is shown on an achievement scale for each assessment area.

Results across the Years 3, 5, 7 and 9 literacy and numeracy assessments are reported on a scale from Band 1 to Band 10. The achievement scale represents increasing levels of skills and understandings demonstrated in the assessments.

Results for Year 7 are reported across the range of Band 4 to Band 9, with Band 5 representing the national minimum standard for this year level.

The national average and the range of achievement for Year 7 students are also shown on the scale.

Your child's results are shown on the inside pages of this report.

Band 9

If a student's result is here, it means the result is well above the expected level of achievement for Year 7 students.

Band 8

Band 7

The dot shows an individual student's result.

example only

Band 6

The triangle shows the national average for Year 7 students.

The lightly shaded area shows the range of achievement for the middle 60% of Year 7 students in Australia.

Band 5

Band 4

Year 7 students with results in Band 4 are below the national minimum standard.

Annex B. Contributing reports

The findings from two key source documents from 2014, *Review of My School Website: Final Report to the Australian Government Department of Education* (the Cook review report) and *Perspectives on the My School Website* (the Colmar Brunton market research report), were analysed as a part of this study. The particular focus of and relevant findings from each of these reports are outlined below.

Cook review report: Focus and relevant findings

A review of *My School* was listed as one of several policy commitments of the then Opposition prior to the 2013 Australian federal election. Following the election and a change in government, the Cook review was commissioned by the new Australian government. The review examined five areas: the success of the *My School* website in meeting the original purpose of *My School*; how information published on *My School* is used and displayed; the level to which the suite of information available supports the government's reform agenda; the publication of additional indicators; and opportunities for improvement.

The methodology used for the Cook review included the examination of background documentation and ministerial decisions; discussions with relevant Australian government Department of Education and ACARA personnel; analysis of *My School* information and data; targeted discussions with some stakeholders; a survey of relevant official and stakeholder reports; and consideration of similar websites used in other countries. The final review report, *Review of My School website: Final Report to the Australian Government Department of Education,* included findings and recommendations for changes to *My School*. The key findings from this review relevant to this study are that:

- *My School* represents a valuable, nationally consistent data set on Australian schools across all jurisdictions and all sectors.

- *My School* has placed the broader community in the same position as education officials in having access to national data.

- *My School* presents school data in a way that places each school at the centre of the reports and is designed to avoid the misinterpretation that often arises with school league tables.

- There is a lack of clarity among stakeholders about the core purpose of *My School* and therefore its audience.

- Qualitative research suggests that parents perceive *My School* as being mainly about NAPLAN scores and academic performance.

- Use of *My School* by principals and school system administrators is limited, in part because school systems are using NAPLAN and broader data to help drive improvement.

- The website's functionality and usability are constrained by the complex Commonwealth, state, and territory governance and policy framework within which ACARA operates.

- The value added by *My School* to the provision of other data to schools and parents resides in nationally consistent data for a school over time and comparative data for schools having students with statistically similar backgrounds and for all schools.

- Considering the website is data-rich, with a lot of information presented in graphical and tabular form with colour-coding, statistical and educational terminology, and explanatory notes and caveats, it is understandable that ordinary users may find the *My School* website challenging.

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Colmar Brunton market research report: Focus and relevant findings

Market research on *My School* was commissioned by ACARA to acquire feedback on the appropriateness of the site with respect to the composition of the target audience and the type of information provided, and its effectiveness in achieving specific expected outcomes, such as enhancing accountability and transparency.

The methodology in this research involved qualitative analysis of data obtained from 10 focus groups composed of parents (five groups) and principals (five groups). Some in-depth interviews were also conducted with ACARA's partner organizations and principal representative groups.

The final market research report, *Perspectives on the My School Website,* included findings based on the focus group discussions. The key findings from this research relevant to this study are that:

- *My School* is generally perceived to be aimed at, and primarily used by, parents.

- The website plays a lesser role for principals and other stakeholders who, while they may use *My School* data for some purposes, often have alternative sources of information available to them.

- In general, parents appreciate having a range of information about schools available in a central online location, as provided by *My School.*

- Principals and other stakeholders have mixed views on the provision of NAPLAN and other data about individual schools via *My School*.

- For some, initial concerns that *My School* would lead to the development of league tables, or to parents selecting schools based solely on information from the website, have not been realized.

- Some principals and stakeholders have strong reservations about the merits of providing data in a publicly available form because of the perceived potential for misinterpretation by parents.

- Overall, *My School* provides information in a format that is relatively easy to navigate and understand.

- The information featured on *My School* is generally believed to be reported accurately.

- Principals and stakeholders have a greater appreciation than parents of the processes and constraints involved in the collection of the data featured on the *My School* website.

Annex C. Groups/Actors (demographic data)

Written survey

School actors: Which of the following best describes your role in education?
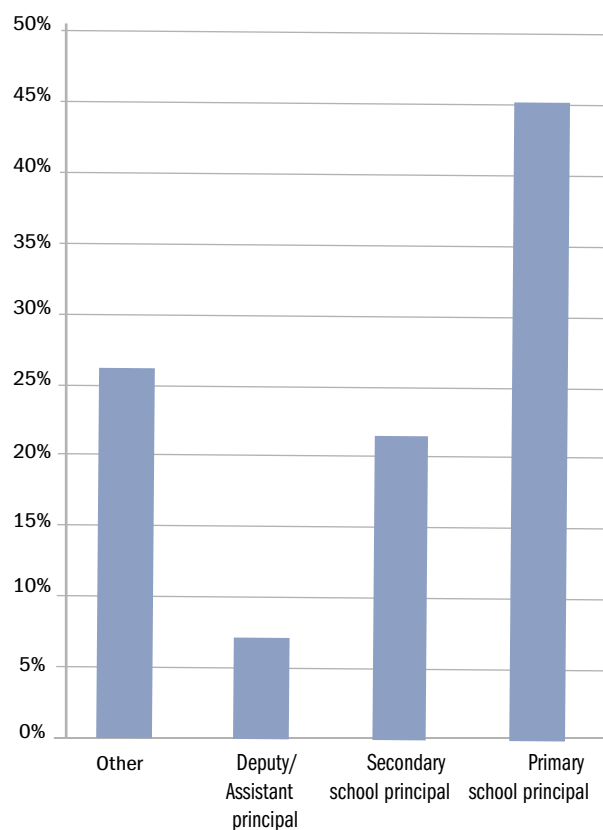
Organization	Role/position	Number
Primary school	Principals	18
Secondary school	Principals	9
	Deputy/assistant principals	3
	Others (made up of combined primary and secondary principals and business managers)	11
	Total school actors who responded[10]	41

Oral survey (interviews)

Peak parent organizations

Organization	Role/position	Number
ACCSO	Representatives	3
CSPA	Representative	1
	Total parent actors	4

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11. Note: of the 250 schools sent the survey, 209 school actors from these schools did not respond.

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Community organizations

Organization	Role/position	Number
Schools Plus	Representative	1
Smith Family	Representative	1
Social Adventures Australia	Representative	1
	Total community actors	3

Policy officers

Organization/jurisdiction	Role/position	Number
Commonwealth	Policy officers	2
Australian Capital Territory	Policy officer	1
New South Wales	Policy officers	2
Victoria	Policy officers	2
Northern Territory	Policy officer	1
Western Australia	Policy officer	1
Tasmania	Policy officer	1
Queensland	Policy officers	2
NCEC	Policy officers	2
ISCA	Policy officer	1
	Total policy officers	15

Annex D. Extracts from *My School*

School profile

School finances data

NAPLAN data

Student attendance data

The table below shows the student attendance rate and student attendance level for students from Year 1 to Year 10 at this school, by Indigenous status. Student attendance level information is collected by schools and reported on *My School* twice yearly by Indigenous status for Semester 1 (Terms 1 and 2) and Term 3.

2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017

Reporting period: ○ Semester 1   ● Term 3

Student attendance rate	Percent [1]
All students	94%
Indigenous students	-
Non-Indigenous students	-

Student attendance level (proportion of students attending 90% or more of the time) [2]	Percent [1]
All students	-
Indigenous students	-
Non-Indigenous students	-

[1] When a school's results are unavailable or there are fewer than, or equal to, five Indigenous or non-Indigenous students, a dash '–' will be displayed. This is to protect the privacy of students.

[2] Student attendance level results are unavailable for NSW government schools for 2015 - 2017.

NB Student attendance level data were not collected in 2014.

VET in schools data

School-based apprenticeships and traineeships: 1

Enrolments	Qualifications completed

Engineering and Related Technologies Total: 4	∨
Architecture and Building Total: 10	∨
Health Total: 1	∨
Management and Commerce Total: 24	∨
Society and Culture Total: 1	∨
Creative Arts Total: 4	∨
Food, Hospitality and Personal Services Total: 47	∨
Mixed Field Programmes Total: 3	∨

Caveats for 2010-2016

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Senior secondary and post school destinations data

Chatswood High School

| School profile | NAPLAN | Attendance | Finances | VET in schools | Senior secondary | Schools map |

The table below shows the senior secondary outcomes for the students who left the school in the reporting year.

| 2010 | 2011 | 2012 | 2013 | 2014 | 2015 | 2016 | 2017 |

<< >>

Year 12 results	Number
Senior secondary certificate awarded	182
Completed senior secondary school	183

Post school destinations	Percent
Students at university	-
Students at TAFE/vocational study	-
Students in employment	-

NB Data presented on this page should be read in conjunction with the senior secondary caveats and post-school destinations caveats provided by each state and territory.

NB Post-school destinations data are only collected and reported for Victoria, Queensland, Western Australia (government schools only) and ACT (government schools only).

NB Post-school destinations values do not always add to 100%. This is due to the field "Other" not being reported.

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The case study

The number of countries providing access to school data to the general public has grown rapidly over the past decade, encouraged by the development of information technologies and under the pressure of social movements demanding the right to information. A wide variety of initiatives have been developed by both governments and civil society, to share school-level information in the form of 'school report cards'. These provide key information about a school, e.g. on student enrolment, funding, number of teachers, teacher qualifications, pupil–teacher ratios, conditions of school facilities, textbooks, and student achievement. But now that such data are in the public domain, how can it be ensured that they are used to promote not only transparency but also accountability in the education sector?

This case study analyses the design and implementation of a major open school data initiative implemented in Australia – My School – led by the Australian Curriculum, Assessment, and Reporting Authority. It covers the types of information published, who publishes it and how it is accessed; the critical data for improving transparency and accountability; how different categories of stakeholders access and use it; the requisite conditions for improving transparency and accountability; and the limitations of such processes.

The publication concludes with a discussion of the balance to strike between displaying data which are beneficial because widely understood by users, while minimizing the risk of misinterpretation of data. It ends with a set of recommendations, including making My School mobile-friendly, developing a best practice forum, integrating a local map facility, and releasing My School data through a more incremental process to improve its currency.

The author

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