



Australian Education Union
Response to the Department of
Education, Employment and Workplace Relations
on the
MCEETYA Principles and Protocols for
Reporting
on Schooling in Australia

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WITHOUT PREJUDICE

The AEU believes that:

- Effective assessment is at the heart of successful teaching and learning, as it provides information on student progress to students and their parents and important diagnostic evidence that assists teachers in planning for ongoing improvement.
- All parents have the right to access relevant information on their child's progress in school. Information about student performance belongs to students, their parents and their teachers.
- School and teacher accountability is essential. Parents, students and the public have a right to know that schools are implementing high quality, effective teaching and learning programs.
- Schools should report in a clear and meaningful way to their communities. This assists parents and prospective parents to make informed judgements about the effectiveness of school programs.
- Governments have a responsibility to ensure that the release and publication of data is not only valid, comprehensive and reliable, but does not harm students, cohorts, schools, or the quality of education delivered by Australian schools.

As a profession, teachers collect and interrogate data, formal and informal, every day. Schools and systems aggregate and interrogate data and governments have an obligation to act on advice informed by such data. The AEU believes that the appropriate Government response to such processes must be to target resources necessary to lift overall student performance and underachievement.

The AEU believes that the release of school data as outlined in the MCEETYA document, *The Principles and Protocols for Reporting on Schooling in Australia*, will (as has been seen recently in Tasmania and Queensland) lead to the creation and publication of league tables.

The damage to curriculum provision, students and entire school communities caused by league tables is well-documented in international research.¹ The greatest negative effect of

¹ Gillborn, D. and Youdell, D. (2000) *Rationing Education*. Buckingham. Open University Press.
Mansell, W. (2007) *Education by Numbers. The Tyranny of Testing*. London. Politicos Publishing.
Nichols, S and Berliner, D. (2007) *Collateral Damage. How High Stakes Testing Corrupts America's Schools*. Harvard Education Press.
Lee, J. (2006) *Tracking Achievement Gaps and Assessing the Impact of NCLB on the Gaps: An In-depth Look into National and State Reading and Math Outcome Trend*. Cambridge, Massachusetts. The Civil Rights Project, Harvard University.
West, H. and Hind. H. (2006) *Selectivity, Admissions and Intakes to "Comprehensive" Schools in London, England*. Educational Studies, Vol. 32, pp. 145 – 155.

league tables has been seen in England. Negative consequences include teaching to the test and a subsequent narrowing of the curriculum; an exacerbation of problems created by misleading and inaccurate information about school performance; and a public debasement of schools with poor results, which consequently undermines the implementation of effective school improvement processes. Research clearly shows that league tables result in shifts in student enrolment patterns, which creates greater inequality and increased segregation between schools.

Given the evidence, the AEU strongly opposes the release of disaggregated school data or any measures that would allow the creation of league tables. It should be noted that in England, and now in Australia, it is the media rather than governments which have created and published league tables. A simple statement from governments that they themselves will not create league tables is not sufficient, nor is a statement that governments will manage or monitor these developments. The AEU believes it is essential that governments legislate to prevent the publication of league tables.

Principles for reporting on schooling in Australia

The AEU agrees with the contention that “*good quality information on schooling is important*” and that “*different groups such as schools and their students, parents and families, the community and government have different information needs*”. This should be reflected in the type of information each group has access to.

Ultimately, student performance data is the property of the individual student, his/her parents and teachers and thus, protection of their privacy is vital. This is especially so given that misuse of data could result in damage to student outcomes and have a negative impact on the goal of achieving equity within the education system.

The AEU agrees that “*reporting should be in the broad public interest*”. The public interest is not well served by policy that allows the creation and publication of league tables. In this context the AEU is concerned with the statement in Principle 4 that, “*reporting involves balancing the principle of the community’s right to know with the need to avoid the misinterpretation or misuse of the information*”.

Because of the damage misinterpretation or misuse of information could cause to the educational outcomes of Australian students, it is, not sufficient to simply “*avoid the misrepresentation or misuse of the information*”. Governments must implement measures to prevent this from occurring. The AEU is concerned that the present draft protocols contain no indication of such measures.

The AEU agrees with the contention expressed in Principle 5 that schools require reliable data on the performance of their students, based on a broad range of indicators. However, it is important that this data be of sufficient validity and quality to be useful in effective school decision making. The assessment processes of schools and the professional judgement of teachers constitute a most valuable source of information concerning students, their needs, difficulties and achievements.

The AEU is concerned with the inherent unquestioning adherence to notions of like-school groups evident in Principle 5, which states that schools should have “*data that enables each school to compare its own performance against all schools and with schools with similar characteristics*”. There is no credible academic evidence that like-school models are a valid method for the assessment of schools’ educational achievements.

The complexity of different school cohorts, with students who have different characteristics, needs, achievements, backgrounds and difficulties means that attempts at direct “performance” comparisons are fraught and problematical. Even year-to-year variations within a single school are considerable. Any set of like-school assumptions and variables is inevitably subjective and would produce different results from other like-school models based on other assumptions and variables. There are presently several like-schools models in place at present in Australia, in New South Wales, Victoria and Western Australia.² Each state uses a different methodology for identifying like-schools and each would lead to a different set of results.

Any attempt to infer best educational practice on metrics-based comparisons of supposedly similar schools is therefore likely to be unreliable, confusing and potentially educationally counter-productive. Such models also undermine the duties and capacities of teachers and schools to use their professional judgement to assess the needs of their students based on multiple qualitative factors. Accordingly, the AEU is opposed to the use of like-school models.

As mentioned, parents, students and the public have a right to know that schools are implementing high quality, effective teaching and learning programs. Information can and should be meaningfully reported to each school’s community in ways that will enable parents and prospective parents to make informed judgements about the effectiveness of school programs. However, the contentions expressed in Principle 6 are of considerable concern to the AEU. Parents have no right to information about the educational achievement of students other than their own children, and as previously discussed, there is considerable evidence that

² Cobbold, T. (2008) *Models of Like Schools Comparisons*. Save Our Schools. <http://soscanberra.com/national-issues/models-of-like-school-comparisons>

comparative data on the performance of individual schools and groups of schools within systems is both misleading and harmful.

Nor is the argument that such data assists parental choice of school convincing. Evidence from England and elsewhere indicates that where school hierarchies are created by league tables and other so-called ‘performance reporting’ mechanisms, higher-ranking schools are placed in a situation where they are able to choose their students rather than the other way around.³ Parents may express a preference for a school, but they have no guarantee of entry. As schools place greater priority on the importance of maintaining their positions in league tables, they then enrol students likely to assist them to do so. This has a detrimental impact upon students from lower socio-economic and minority backgrounds and increases social segregation.

The contention under Principles 6 and 7 that parents, families and communities should have access to information about a school’s enrolment profile is also of considerable concern. The document states that care should be taken “*not to use data on student characteristics in a way that may stigmatise schools or undermine social inclusion*”, yet it is difficult to understand how such information would serve any other purpose. It is therefore significant that these draft protocols no longer contain a statement similar to the following, from the *Principles and Protocols for the Collection and National Reporting of MCEETYA Key Performance Measures for Schooling in Australia*, July 2008:

“The avoidance of harm to members of the community: this could occur where the privacy of individuals would be compromised or where the reputation of an institution or group of people would be damaged through the publication of misleading information or stereotyping”⁴

As the public release of information about a school’s enrolment profile has the potential to stigmatise communities and increase social segregation, a statement similar to that quoted above is essential to any ethical set of protocols concerning the release of school data.

Under Principle 6 the document also states that “*publication of information relating to a school’s enrolment profile should ensure that the privacy of individual students and teachers should be protected*”, and that publication of information that may lead to the identification of individual students “*should be avoided*”. This is inadequate. Measures must be put in place to ensure that the publication of such data does not occur.

³ West and Hind, (2006) Op Cit.

⁴ MCEETYA, July 2008. *Principles and Protocols for the Collection and National Reporting of MCEETYA Key Performance Measures for Schooling in Australia*. p. 4.

Measurement and reporting on Australian school education

The AEU is deeply concerned that protocols concerning the release of data in the national data repository, housed by the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) are unclear. Will such data, for example, be accessible under Freedom of Information (FOI)? If so, such access would be tantamount to publication. If disaggregated school data is held in a national database, measures must be put into place to prevent its release and publication in ways that would damage the provision of education and increase inequality and segregation.

Responsible use of data measuring the performance of Australian schools

AEU is concerned with a number of statements under this heading:

1. “...information approved for publication on schools contains accurate and verified data, contextual information and a range of indicators to provide a more reliable and complete view of performance”.

If the above statement refers to mechanisms regarding ‘like-schools models’ or ‘value-added measures’, there is a great deal of evidence that, in the context of performance reporting, such measures are problematic, unreliable and will be likely to further confuse and complicate the understanding of already simplistic and unreliable full cohort test-based data.⁵

2. “...governments will not publish simplistic league tables or rankings, and will put in place strategies to manage the risk that third parties may seek to produce such tables or rankings.”

While the AEU agrees that governments should not publish league tables, such undertakings are meaningless unless measures are in place to ensure that other parties do not publish them. In England and in most of the United States, governments themselves do not publish league tables – the media publish them based on data in the public domain. On May 6, the Hobart Mercury published a league table of Tasmanian secondary schools based on data released into the public domain by the Tasmanian Government.

In this context it is not sufficient for protocols to state that strategies will be enacted to “manage the risk” of the tabulation of league tables. As we have previously argued – measures must be developed and applied to prevent the publication of league tables.

⁵ Gorard, S. (2006) *Value-Added is of Little Value*. Journal of Education Policy, Vol. 21, No. 2, pp. 239 - 243.
Wilson, D. and Piebalga, A. (2008) *Accurate Performance Measure but Meaningless Ranking Exercise? An Analysis of the English School League Tables*. The Centre for Market and Public Organisation. Bristol Institute of Public Affairs, University of Bristol.

3. *ACARA will be supported in providing strong and active management of information it provides to prevent the identification of individual students and to promote the meaningful use of data by third parties.....ACARA will monitor third-party publications of school performance data and take steps to counter unfair or inaccurate reporting.*

It is not clear what these “*strong and active*” measures to manage information will entail. Further to this, it is not clear what the mechanisms preventing the misuse of data will be; what the promotion of “meaningful data” will entail; and whether such measures will be valid or effective. Once again, the AEU believes that to monitor the misuse of data by third parties is insufficient. Only steps that prevent the publication of data will be sufficient.

Protocols for reporting on Australian schools

The AEU is concerned with the statement that the annual report will contain data disaggregated by sector and system. Despite claims that contextual information will be provided; there are no guarantees that such information will be properly understood or reported by the media. Indeed, experience would suggest that in at least some sections of the media, the data is unlikely to be reported in its proper context.

The AEU believes that the publication of such sector and system disaggregated data will not be educationally beneficial. The likely effect of such reporting will be to increase misunderstanding of a range of complex educational issues, both across sectors and within systems themselves. As such, the publication of this data will almost certainly be educationally counterproductive and likely to perpetuate dangerous and counterproductive stereotypes. Such data should not be released. Measures should be taken to prevent its publication.

Protocols for third party access to National Assessment Program data

The AEU believes it is the responsibility of State, Territory and Federal Governments to prevent the misuse of school and student data. While the draft MCEETYA document claims that the release of data will be limited to parties with valid research interests and that data that could lead to the identification of individual students will not be released, the strength and certainty of these assurances is not clear. If, for example, information is available through the FOI process, protocols against the release and misuse of data are virtually meaningless. The AEU believes that measures must be in place to prevent the release of data that could result in the publication of league tables. This would be in the public interest.