

# Passing the FUNDING test

The government is heading in the wrong direction for the wrong reasons with its new approach to school accountability, say many education professionals. Suzanne Keen reports.

## ATAGLANCE

■ The AEU says the federal government's new school accountability measures are a way of coercing the states into complying with its interference in teaching

■ School-based assessment and reporting is seen as a fairer and more effective means of accountability than national comparisons

■ Research shows that the priority for parents is clear communication with schools.

**T**he federal government's plan to link school funding with the public release of performance information will undermine schools and be counter-productive, says the AEU.

The government announced in April that the \$31 billion of federal funding earmarked for schools over the next four years will be conditional upon state governments and school authorities publicly releasing performance information for every school. This would include academic results—for example, average Year 12 results and the percentage of students achieving national benchmarks in literacy and numeracy—as well as school-leaver destinations, teacher qualifications, and staff and student retention and absenteeism rates.

Although Education Minister Brendan Nelson said the requirements were “not about ‘league tables’ but about parents’ rights to full information”, the AEU sees it as an

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attempt to coerce states and territories into complying with the government's interference in teaching and learning.

AEU president Pat Byrne says all states have already signed up to the new funding arrangements. “There are worrying signs that some may also attempt to implement even more draconian measures—for example, full-blown public league tables—using: ‘Our hands were tied, Howard and Nelson made us do it’ as their rationale,” she says.

The government has taken a very narrow view of accountability, defining it largely as student achievement in paper-and-pencil tests that assess a narrowly defined set of literacy and numeracy skills, says Byrne. Such tests are not seen as an accurate measure of students' total understanding, skills and abilities.

There is also concern that the accountability measures are likely to have a negative effect if ‘teaching to the test’ is either implicitly or explicitly encouraged. The tests are seen as little help in addressing serious educational problems, such as improving literacy for socio-economically disadvantaged students, and are regarded as incompatible with the diversity of a rich curriculum.

One complication is that the volatility of enrolment numbers, particularly in rural or remote schools, can cause broad deviations in data.

The AEU says the tests will create extra work for teachers while undermining them as professionals able to do their jobs well and in the best interests of their students.

Multiple factors influence a school's average test scores, says Byrne, including school and class size, the socio-economic status of students, and concentrations of student ethnicity.

“The regulation demands the provision of an array of decontextualised school performance information in hard copy, on the internet or on a billboard visible to the public and it is therefore of major concern.”

### **Reporting trial**

Meanwhile, NSW Premier Bob Carr has raised the ire of education professionals by announcing the major trial of



a new system of annual reporting that will compare the performance of schools across the state.

NSW Teachers Federation deputy president Jennifer Leete says Carr's plans go further than Nelson's by requiring that schools publish the proportion of students who achieve results in bands one to six in the Year 3 and 5 basic skills test, the Year 7 and 8 English language and literacy assessment, and Year 7 secondary numeracy assessment.

The federation has taken its case to the Australian Industrial Relations Commission on the basis that the changes conflict with a clause in the teachers' award stating that schools can choose which aspects of test data are reported externally. The clause was introduced in 1996 to ensure that data released was supportive of schools and to prevent the ranking of schools.

The federation favours a more personalised approach to accountability, says Leete.

"Our focus is on getting parents into schools so they can have a greater understanding and involvement in what is going on, together with processes to further

communication—for example, where parents are invited into schools for assessment and reporting, rather than just receiving a report in the mail."

Alan Reid, professor of education at the University of South Australia, says the government's method of enforcing accountability is a superficial, 'blame and shame' approach. It assumes that schools and teachers are entirely responsible for test results, when outcomes are affected by many other factors, such as the level of support given by education systems, and the background and experiences of students.

"They unfairly compare schools when there's no basis for comparison," says Reid, "and they don't look at how schools have added value. Some schools without a lot of advantages may be adding wonderfully to student learning, but that may not show up in a standardised test."

The publication of league tables in the United Kingdom led to parents removing their children from schools that were seen as under-performing, which resulted in those schools struggling even more, he says.

He believes accountability should be focused at the level of individual schools, with more resources allocated to help school communities work together to establish a culture of research and 'deep inquiry' that identifies achievements and areas for improvement.

"It's about really trying to get to the root cause of problems, but doing it collaboratively and democratically. The danger of the government's approach is that, rather than trying to explore the issues causing learning problems, schools will just worry about how they can improve test results."

### Picture of progress

The AEU supports formal, school-based student assessment and reporting as vital. It believes a more comprehensive picture of student progress will be achieved when assessment is linked to the school-based curriculum and not political interests.

Rather than encouraging comparisons and competition between schools, the government should better resource accountability methods such as school action plans, which are developed by parents, teachers, school administrators and students working together. These promote better performance while taking into consideration students' particular needs and creating solutions to help them succeed.

Byrne says classroom teachers are in the best position to assess and report on real student achievements, and professional expertise must be recognised as integral to school-based planning and evaluation. Constant interaction between parents and teachers ensures that assessment and reporting are responsive to the needs of each group.

To provide system-wide information to support planning, resource allocation and accountability, light sampling approaches—such as looking at a representative sample of students across a state in a particular area of the curriculum—can provide accurate information without the negative influences of mass, standardised testing.

AEU SA research officer Jenni Devereaux says that,

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contrary to Nelson’s claims that parents want the publication of academic outcomes, research has shown that they would prefer clear, frequent communication between the school, individual teachers and parents. Parents want specific information about whether their child is achieving what could reasonably be expected at their age and level. They want to be told about strategies that can be used at home and will be used at school, and about the criteria by

which their child’s progress is measured. They want discussion at parent-teacher meetings to be based on examples of their child’s work.

A survey by Parents Victoria found that parents wanted to know how their child was doing in all areas, including curriculum, social skills and abilities, attitude and attendance. In terms of accountability, a main concern was the school’s priorities and goals.

The survey report concluded that comparisons between students and schools were generally seen as unproductive: “There was strong recognition of each child being accepted as an individual, and that direct comparisons were not conducive to positive outcomes.” ■

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Cartoon courtesy of Fiona Katauskas [www.fionakatauskas.com](http://www.fionakatauskas.com)

**W** Download a copy of the Schools Assistance Act 2004: AEU submission to the educational accountability requirements at [www.aeufederal.org.au/Publications/accountabilitysub.pdf](http://www.aeufederal.org.au/Publications/accountabilitysub.pdf)

# Anti-Poverty Week

## 16-22 October 2005

Poverty and severe hardship affect more than a million Australians. Around the world, more than a billion people are desperately poor.

**In Anti-Poverty Week help fight Poverty and Hardship.**

Why not organise a display, stall or award?  
Maybe a workshop, lecture or forum?  
How about a fundraiser, fact sheet or petition?

**Get your students involved.**

For information and ideas visit the AEU Anti-poverty week website at: [www.aeufederal.org.au/Campaigns/antipoverty.html](http://www.aeufederal.org.au/Campaigns/antipoverty.html)

