Frequently asked questions about *My School*

About the *My School* website

What is the *My School* website?

The *My School* website has been developed so that parents and the community have access to information about their child's school and other schools in Australia.

The *My School* website provides information about almost 10,000 Australian schools that can be searched by school name, location and/or sector. Each school has a dedicated profile page displaying a range of information about that school and including a link to the school's own website. Statistical and contextual information about schools is provided, along with results achieved by students participating in vocational training programs and apprenticeships, and summary information about the tertiary education placements attained by schools' graduating year cohorts. Results from the National Assessment Program—Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) are also provided and compared across schools with students from similar backgrounds in meaningful ways (see www.naplan.edu.au).

Why was the *My School* website developed?

In 2008 all Australian education ministers agreed that greater transparency and accountability for the performance of schools was essential to ensure that every Australian child received the highest-quality education and the opportunity to achieve through participation in employment and society.

Ministers committed to the publication of school information under the National Education Agreement and the Schools Assistance Act 2008.

This information is being delivered through the *My School* website.

Who is responsible for the *My School* website?

The Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) is responsible for administration of the website. ACARA is an independent Australian Government authority with functions that include publishing nationally comparable data on all Australian schools. This responsibility is outlined in the ACARA Act 2008 (see www.comlaw.gov.au) and through the decisions of the Ministerial Council for Education, Early Childhood Development and Youth Affairs (MCEECDYA) (see www.mceecdya.edu.au). To help achieve its reporting responsibilities, ACARA works with Australian Government, State, Territory and non-government school authorities to publish relevant, nationally comparable information on all schools.

What information about schools will be published on the *My School* website?

In summary, the *My School* website provides profile information on each school's:

- student population—the level of socio-educational advantage (SEA) of the school student body, the proportion of students with an Indigenous background, and students with a language background other than English, as well as student attendance rates
- capacity or capability—the type of school, the year range, student and staff numbers, school financial information, and location
- educational achievements—the results of national literacy and numeracy testing and an indication of students' improvement as they progress through school, senior secondary outcomes and, for States with relevant data, post-school destinations.

Not all of the information planned for publication on the *My School* website is currently available. As additional information becomes available it will be published on the website.

Each school's profile page also contains a short description provided by the school to describe the school's context and character. In most cases a link to the school's website is provided so that more information about the school community can be obtained.

For each school, the *My School* website provides comparative NAPLAN outcomes for other schools across Australia that are statistically similar in terms of their student intakes.

Financial data are also displayed for each school. These data include recurrent income and capital expenditure, broken down by funding source, for all government and non-government schools for 2009.

What's new on *My School* in 2011?

The key additions are:

- data about growth in student's literacy and numeracy achievement from 2008 to 2010
- data about school finances
- a more accurate method of calculating the Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage (ICSEA)
- new graphical methods of displaying NAPLAN data
- security features to ensure that data is used appropriately.

What other information on schools will become available on the *My School* website in the future?

Education ministers have agreed that a number of areas being investigated by ACARA should be published in future *My School* website updates as part of enhancing the information about each school. Work is underway to develop a facility for schools to provide a commentary on their NAPLAN and senior secondary results, and to obtain more nationally consistent data, especially indicators of senior secondary outcomes and information relating to Year 12 attainment, tertiary entrance scores and student destinations.

ACARA is investigating options to survey parents, teachers and students to enable nationally comparable information about their satisfaction with schools to be published on the *My School* website in the future.

Once a definition of disability has been agreed and implemented nationally, information about students with disabilities will be published on the *My School* website as additional contextual information.

Why does some of the information look different on this version of the website to how it appeared on the first version?

ACARA has undertaken focus groups with parents and principals and ascertained their views on the presentation of information on the website. A *My School* Working Party comprising nominees from principals and parents associations and unions, as well as independent experts advised ACARA on enhancements to the website. The outcomes of the work of these groups have informed the development of the presentation and content of the updated release of the website in 2011.

What does the "senior secondary outcomes" section report?

The measures depicted as senior secondary school outcomes record the following key areas of student achievement:

- awarding of senior secondary certificate
- completion of senior secondary school
- awarding of Vocational and Education and Training (VET) certificate
- undertaking Australian School-based Apprenticeships (ASbA)

- post-school destinations: proportions (by percentage) of graduating year students who gained university placements, engaged in TAFE/vocational study, or commenced employment.

Measurement data is provided on senior secondary outcomes by the Australasian Curriculum, Assessment and Certification Authorities (ACACA). It is important to note that the VET outcomes data are not comparable between States and Territories, as jurisdictions use different definitions.

Are all schools listed on the *My School* website?

All schools from all sectors that receive funding from governments through either the National Education Agreement or the Schools Assistance Act 2008 have their information published on the *My School* website.

Could individuals be identified from published results?

ACARA has carefully considered the privacy issues involved when publishing information about school performance on the *My School* website. Rules have been adopted to suppress the publication of information in situations where it could result in the identification of individual students.

How do I find out about schools in my local area?

The *My School* website lists up to 20 government and non-government schools situated closest to the selected school. In a city these schools may be quite close together. In remote and rural areas, schools may be separated by great distances and so the list may contain fewer than 20 schools. The profiles for each of the schools situated closest to the selected school can be accessed from this list.

How can the *My School* website be used?

Teachers, schools and parents already use information at the individual school level. For instance, teachers and schools use regular student assessments and data from the National Assessment Program—Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) to monitor student progress and inform teaching programs and improvement initiatives. From January 2010, for the first time, information on all Australian schools became available in one location on the *My School* website, providing nationally comparable data on students' performance in literacy and numeracy, as well as contextual information. It is an additional resource for schools and their communities.

For parents and other members of school communities some constructive ways in which information from the *My School* website can be used include:

- understanding how their local school is performing relative to other schools with a similar intake of students
- gaining a broader understanding of the learning environments and performance of schools in their local community, as well as within their State or Territory and across the nation
- initiating communication with a school based on comprehensive and detailed information
- seeking a greater level of engagement with a school in support of their child's learning
- becoming involved in advocating for and supporting improvement initiatives within the school.

Appropriate use of information

Does the website publish 'league tables' ranking schools by performance?

No. Simple league tables that rank and compare schools with very different student populations can be misleading and are not to be published on the *My School* website.

What measures are in place to ensure that school data are reported responsibly?

Education ministers have agreed to rules that support meaningful and comparable reporting of school data and responsible use of this information. These rules include:

- the protection of individual student privacy
- not publishing comparative data without contextual information
- the publication of error margins, caveats and explanatory notes to ensure accurate interpretation.

Ministers have also agreed that ACARA will manage the information it publishes to prevent individual students from being identified and to promote the meaningful use of data by third parties. ACARA will work with the media to explain the information published on the *My School* website, advise on how to properly interpret it and take steps to counter any inaccurate reporting.

The Principles and Protocols for Reporting on Schooling in Australia are available on the MCEECDYA website at www.mceecdya.edu.au.

How is data on the *My School* website secured against misuse by third-parties?

Users of the website are required to agree to a set of terms and conditions about how they will use the information on the site before they are permitted to access the information on the school pages of the website.

A website login tool is then used that requires users to enter an alpha-numeric code before they are able to access further pages displaying school information. This security measure reduces the likelihood of computerised data-gathering, such as by web robots.

ACARA's security protocols around data collection, storage, access and use comply with best-practices.

The Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage

What is the Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage (ICSEA)?

The Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage (ICSEA) is a measure that enables meaningful comparisons to be made about student performance across schools that have students with similar levels of socio-educational advantage or disadvantage. It has been developed by ACARA specifically for the *My School* website to create accurate indicators of schools' student populations, allowing identification and meaningful comparison of schools serving similar student populations.

ICSEA values were first published on the *My School* website at the end of January 2010. For the second version of the *My School* website the ICSEA formula has been revised and additional student data collected to enhance the accuracy of the measure.

The construction of the second version of the Index is based on two alternative data sources:

- Information relating to parent occupation, school education, non-school education and language background obtained from student enrolment records
- Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) census data.

The first type of data is collected by schools when parents/carers first enrol their child. This is done by schools in all jurisdictions and sectors and includes information on parental/ carer occupation, educational achievement level, and whether they speak any language other than English.

The ABS data includes the variables that make up socio-economic characteristics of the small areas where students live (areas called Census Collection Districts).

The family background and ABS data are combined with other school information, including location (whether a school is in a metropolitan, regional or remote area), and the proportions of Indigenous students and students with a language background other than English enrolled at the school.

For each school, ICSEA values are used to create a grouping of up to 60 statistically similar schools to enable fair comparisons to be made between schools with students from similar backgrounds.

Detailed information about the statistical methodology used to create the index is available on the website ICSEA Fact Sheet and the *2010 ICSEA Generation Report*.

Why has the group of schools in my 'similar schools group' changed since last year?

An improved formula has been used to calculate ICSEA for *My School*. Also as student cohorts change each year so do the data used in the calculation. For some schools, this has resulted in a change between their 2009 and 2010 ICSEA values and therefore some schools may find that their grouping of similar schools has changed since last year.

What is the purpose of the "distribution of students" table shown in the student background section of the profile page?

The purpose of this table is to show a representation of a student population grouped in four general quarters by a measure of socio-educational advantage, determined by students' family backgrounds. For each school the makeup of its student population is displayed in percentages spread across the quarters. This gives contextual information about the socio-educational composition of the student population.

For detailed descriptions of the data used to determine student backgrounds refer to the *2010 ICSEA Generation Report*.

What is the benefit of comparing schools if they are in another part of the country?

The benefit is in knowing that there are schools that have similar student intakes but which can perform at quite different levels. The high-performing schools within a grouping show what is possible and can raise expectations for other schools. They may also hold the key to working out what needs to happen for all schools to perform at a high level. In many instances, high performing schools will not be in the local area or in the same State or Territory, but there may still be a lot to learn from them. The chief benefit of a national approach to comparing schools is that it focuses attention on ways to improve the performance of all schools across the nation.

Financial information

Why report school financial data on the *My School* website?

In 2009, the Ministerial Council for Education, Early Childhood Development and Youth Affairs requested that information about each school's calendar year recurrent income and capital expenditure be included in the next iteration of the *My School* website. The purpose of this inclusion is to form part of the information provided about a school's capacity to support educational outcomes for students.

School financial data provides valuable information about the context of a school, and the resources it has available to deliver educational outcomes to students.

This is the first year that national school-based financial data has been provided. It will continue to be improved over time to enhance its comparability.

How is financial data collected?

The same data were collected for schools in the government and non-government sectors, although the method for collecting data was slightly different due to differences from where data were sourced.

For government jurisdictions and Catholic systems, each government department and State and Territory Catholic Education Commission (CEC) was responsible for collecting financial data for their schools and providing these data directly to ACARA. All government jurisdictions and CECs have continuously reviewed their own data and updated their data as any errors in the collection process were identified.

For independent schools, data has been sourced from:

- The school's DEEWR Financial Questionnaire (FQ) which the school completes and returns to DEEWR. This information was provided to ACARA by DEEWR.
- The Financial Data Collection (FDC)—in August 2010, DEEWR advised ACARA that the current FQ did not have financial information about the source of funding for capital expenditure. As such, this information needed to be sourced directly from independent schools/systems. DEEWR together with ACARA and the Independent Schools Council of Australia (ISCA) developed the communication (email and spreadsheet) which was sent to all independent schools/systems in September 2010. Schools completed the FDC and sent this back to DEEWR. DEEWR managed the communication and collection of this FDC and provided the FDC data to ACARA.

- Costs of Independent Block Grants Authorities (BGA)—each State and Territory Association of Independent Schools (AIS) has a BGA which assists member schools with professional and technical expertise for capital projects funded by Australian and State Government capital grants (such as Building Education Revolution (BER) grants). Administration costs of each BGA are added to schools' financial information (both recurrent income and capital expenditure). AISs provide this information to DEEWR, who then provide it to ACARA.

- ACARA collected information about independent schools' capital expenditure broken down by source of funds. An additional data collection was undertaken to determine the use of gross recurrent income for capital purposes.

Where do schools get their income? What things do schools spend money on?

Schools have different funding sources depending on sector (government, non-government) and to a lesser extent, the State or Territory in which they are located. Government schools receive State or Territory and federal government funding and may generate income through private sources such as fund-raising or donations. The majority of government school funding comes from the State and Territory governments. Non-government schools' income is mainly sourced from Australian government funding. It also includes student fees and income from other private sources, including fund-raising, donations, and interest on savings.

Schools expend money on a range of areas, with the largest cost typically being teacher

salaries. Other areas of expenditure include:

- Infrastructure
- Capital works and maintenance
- Information and communication technologies
- Teaching support
- Equity
- School corporate/running costs

Are school assets reported?

The physical assets of schools are not reported on the *My School* website, as it was considered that the time and expense in valuing assets for over 10,000 schools outweighed the benefit in reporting assets as part of school financial data.

Trust funds that are not directly controlled by the school or its legal entity are not reported on the *My School* website. Where interest earned on these funds passes through the school accounts, such interest is reflected as a source of income.

How was financial data checked for accuracy?

ACARA appointed accounting firm Deloitte to provide accounting expertise and advice regarding the collection and reporting of school financial data. The purpose of this advice was to assist ACARA in the evaluation of the appropriateness of the methodology used in the context of Ministerial Council objectives.

In addition, State and Territory government jurisdictions and Catholic Education Commissions undertook a review of their own data and updated these data where appropriate.

Independent schools were provided with an opportunity to check and validate their data before it was reported on *My School*.

Deloitte's assurance letter can also be found under further information on the financial data page of the website.

Why is the financial data for some schools marked with an asterisk?

During the quality assurance process and review of school financial data, it was found for some independent schools that the data were incomplete or had not been provided. ACARA has reported data available at the time of publication and is working with those identified schools to obtain complete and accurate financial data.

How can schools' finances be compared across the country?

The Ministerial Council directed ACARA to engage independent accounting experts to ensure that the methodology for reporting school income and capital expenditure is comparable. This has been undertaken and while differences have been identified between States and Territories and sectors due to the different accounting systems used, the advice from the accounting experts is that the financial data is materially comparable.

Deloitte's letter of accounting advice to ACARA (available on the *My School* website) concluded that, except for certain comparability limitations outlined in the letter, the methodology provides a reasonable basis for the collection of materially comparable financial data by school on a national basis.

What are the explanations and limitations on the financial data pages?

State and territory education departments provided explanations and caveats for the financial pages of the *My School* website. These caveats provide contextual information for visitors to the website to consider when viewing a school's financial data. The caveats provided by each State and Territory jurisdiction are under 'Further Information' on the financial data page of the website. An overarching caveat is displayed at the top of the school financial data page. This caveat includes cautions in using information on the financial data page to make direct funding comparisons between schools.

NAPLAN

More information on NAPLAN can be found at www.naplan.edu.au.

What is the purpose of conducting NAPLAN testing?

The main purpose of the NAPLAN tests is to identify whether students have the literacy and numeracy skills and knowledge that provide the critical foundation for other learning and for their productive and rewarding participation in the community. The introduction of the tests in 2008 has provided consistency, comparability and transferability of information on students' literacy and numeracy performance across all jurisdictions.

NAPLAN test results provide an objective view of students' performance and a basis for evidence-based decision-making about literacy and numeracy policies, practices and resourcing.

They provide a national perspective on student achievement and the performance of schools.

repeated for 2010 test results. Consequently, changes in performance of schools and school systems over time can be tracked.

How will the *My School* website include information on student progress over time?

ACARA has worked with education authorities to develop measures to track student progress over time and represent this in a graphical form on the *My School* website. As the years of NAPLAN assessment data increase, even more meaningful information on students' progress will be reported.

Student progress information provides a measure of the influence of the school on student outcomes—the value schools have added to their students' learning over the two years. Growth measures show how well students have progressed no matter what school they attend. They present a level playing field for all schools from selective schools with students with high levels of aptitude who are already highly proficient, to schools with students with lower levels of aptitude who may be able to demonstrate their students have made large gains in their growth while not necessarily achieving at the highest proficiency levels. Growth measures allow us to see and acknowledge progress at all levels.

Can NAPLAN test results be compared from one year to the next?

Yes. An expert advisory group is responsible for monitoring the reliability of NAPLAN tests between years. A rigorous process of 'equating' the tests was undertaken in 2009 to ensure that the 2008 and 2009 results could be compared. This process has been

How accurate are school results?

The NAPLAN average score for a school is a good indication of school performance based on the students who were tested in the school. The greater the proportion of students tested, the greater the accuracy. The *My School* website displays confidence intervals around school average scores to indicate the degree of confidence we can have in them.

Reliability of NAPLAN

A range of factors provide confidence about the reliability and validity of NAPLAN assessments and results. They include:

- Procedures for NAPLAN testing are set out in the National Protocols for Test Administration and the Test Administration Manuals to ensure the integrity and consistency of the testing process
- The tests are constructed using assessment guides and test specifications that show the relationship of the items in the tests to the nationally agreed statements of learning
- Draft tests are reviewed by subject specialists, as well as language background other than English (LBOTE), Indigenous and disabilities representatives within each jurisdiction with respect to curriculum content and potential cultural or other biases
- The tests are trialled in each State and Territory to ensure the items measure the curriculum in the intended manner

Does the website show numbers of students who don't participate in NAPLAN?

Yes. As well as NAPLAN outcomes, participation data including exempt, absent and withdrawn students, are reported for all schools on the *My School* website along with the national average.

Exempt—students with severe intellectual disabilities or students from a non-English speaking background who have been learning English in Australia for less than one year are eligible for exemption. However, this is not automatic and parents may choose for their child to participate.

Absent—students unable to do the test because of illness or some other acceptable reason are regarded as absent. They are not awarded a NAPLAN score.

Withdrawn—students whose parents withdraw them from participating in NAPLAN for their own personal reasons. Written consent is required.

I can't locate my child's NAPLAN results. Can students' results be provided through the *My School* website?

No, the *My School* website does not provide information on individual students. Parents receive a report on their child's NAPLAN results in September each year. Inquiries about a student's NAPLAN results should be directed to your test administration authority. Please visit the NAPLAN website (see www.naplan.edu.au) for the contact details in your State or Territory.

Selective enrolments, cohort variations and unique populations

What information will be provided about schools catering for students with learning disabilities or for students in juvenile detention?

These schools are categorised as 'special purpose' on the *My School* website and NAPLAN results and the Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage (ICSEA) value for the school will not be reported. These schools will also not be included in the groups of statistically similar schools. A short description of these schools is provided, along with a link to the current school website, where the school can identify any specific school programs it has.

How are schools that are selective or have selective streams, or have groups of students with special needs, reported?

These schools are reported in the same way as all other schools. Schools are able to draw attention to their particular circumstances, such as being a selective school, through their school statement on the school profile page. Schools may wish to outline their enrolment policies, promote any special programs that they operate or detail their student profile. A link to the school's own website is provided so that users of the *My School* website can better understand the unique characteristics of each school.