



What parents want to know

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Over the past four years I have been presented with the challenge of finding out and understanding what **parents** really want to know in their child's report and indeed how their child is going throughout their year at school. The clear consensus with all parents was that they wished no surprises in their child's report and that they understand the primary purpose of assessment and reporting is to improve student learning. This can only be achieved by mutually respectful and open partnerships between home and school, and consistent communication between the teacher and parents regarding a student's progress, so that the student's learning opportunities can be optimised throughout the school year.

In conjunction with the Tasmanian Department of Education (DoE), through the Office for Educational Review, I co-facilitated 33 parent forums throughout 2004 to inform and seek comment from parents on the proposed new reporting format for 2005. The new format would be used to report against the DoE's new curriculum, *Essential Learnings*, in Tasmania. From discussions with parents there was a need to develop a clear common language for communicating to parents about their child's progress at school, and based on the fact that in Tasmania there were 216 public schools delivering 216 different report formats, there was a need for consistency across the State.

With a consistent reporting format in place:

- There would be a view on how a child is doing in comparison with others in the same year group around the State.
- Teachers could apply the same assessment process regardless of which school they worked at, because of their involvement in rigorous moderation processes.
- Parents (in particular transient families) would benefit from the knowledge that the assessment result received in school A was the same as school B.
- There would be continuity of reporting from Kinder to Year 10.

I have been the parent representative on the DoE's *Assessment, Monitoring and Reporting Reference Group* in Tasmania for the past four years. This has provided me with the opportunities to get out there and talk to many Tasmanian parents about how they feel about their child's report and indeed how they communicate (or not) with their child's school. Often the views of parents could be seen as extreme, with one stating *'I want to know whether to give my child a clip under the ear or a bar of chocolate'*.

Clearly they were identifying they wanted an honest informative report about their child. More importantly to note, parents commented that they received the best and most informative information about their child's progress through the written comments of school reports. This was seen by almost all parents as the key to understanding their child's progress not only academically,

but socially and emotionally, as well as their wellbeing as a student at the school.

Some of the recommendations derived from *Cuttance Report - Reporting on Students and School Achievement* and *Report of the National Parent Consensus, Assessing and Reporting Student Achievement*, by the Australian Council of State School Organisations and the APC National Parent Council, together with wide consultation, resulted in the development of the Tasmanian model. I was also heartened to hear first-hand supportive comments from Tasmanian parents.

Within Tasmanian Government schools in 2004, the new report format against the new curriculum, *Essential Learnings*, was trialled at several schools across the State. Teachers tried very hard to produce meaningful comments in the students' reports and should be praised for their efforts. However, upon discussions with parents they felt teachers had tried to use too much of the jargon of the Essential Learning which for many parents they saw as 'gobbledygook'. The lesson here was that without a deeper understanding of the new curriculum and the reporting document, parents had great difficulty trying to grasp what the new format was actually telling them.

The parents' feedback from those trial schools was '*Keep it simple*', a clear message heard time and time again. They also wanted '*... clear information when reading the report*'. They also said '*... we value the timing of reports*'. They did not want to receive their child's report on the last day of the school year. They wanted time to talk to the teacher about any issues raised in the report. Reports at the end of the year are not very helpful. It is helpful to have information on how a child is settling in early in the year. Parents also wanted to be alerted as soon as possible to any problems that a child is experiencing and this is a compulsory

requirement of the Tasmanian Assessment and Reporting Policy.

Parents were also aware that some assessments could be potentially damaging to their children, especially those children who have special needs and learning difficulties where it is important that assessment shows improvements in a child's progress, however small the steps.

There was also concern from parents, when they reflected upon how their own school reports which were subjectively assessed all those years ago. They would often say something like '*We had A,B,C,D,E and F, but I don't think it was really that fair...I only failed on one test and the teacher and I just didn't get along...*' or '*...Mrs Smith always marks really hard*'. These comments indicate that parents recognise teacher assessment judgements will always be subjective to some degree and can be influenced by a number of factors. Look at how much judges' opinions differed in the reality TV program *Dancing with the Stars*!

However, test results are not necessarily more accurate than teacher judgement. Although many people believe that the result of a test is somehow more objective and accurate than a teacher's subjective judgement, people who have been involved in the development and implementation of educational tests know that there is a great deal of room for error. There is nothing magical about a single test result. In addition, a child's test result is only one result for one aspect of the child's school work on a particular day - it should be kept in perspective. Wise parents understand that a single result does not mean much on its own and look for trends in their child's progress over time. These days we know we must give an on-balance judgment on how a student is working. Not only must we give them opportunities to repeat the knowledge,

such as in rote learning, but also encourage them to demonstrate their understanding of the knowledge and how it is applicable to a real-life context, as ultimately this is what we are preparing students for.

We should ensure students are not disadvantaged or hindered by a learning progress or early attempts. Remembering a single test answer or a piece of work is unlikely to enable a student to demonstrate the understanding of their learning. I always remember my own mother saying '*... the only reason I passed Shorthand at school in final exams was I remembered the piece off by heart. I never could do Shorthand, and couldn't when I left school.*'

I believe with our understanding of the complexities and pressures of today's world, the advancement in technology and the ever-increasing pace of life we now live in, we must give our children every opportunity to succeed. Let us not go back 30 years, where a school report was simply accepted by parents as 'right', but realise as parents and educators that we need to understand that not all interpretation of learning is the same. Curriculum should be relevant to the 21st century, and the way that a child's learning about the curriculum is assessed should also reflect 21st century thinking. This is a complicated issue that cannot be resolved with a report card assessing achievement on the ABCDEF scale.

Similarly, providing parents with a report on how their child is doing against national benchmarks will not mean anything unless parents understand the meaning of the benchmarks and how they relate to the curriculum their child is studying in the classroom. A report about assessment and reporting, prepared in 2003 for Education Ministers, suggested that the benchmarks were poorly understood by both parents and teachers,

and that parents would need to be educated about the benchmarks.

During my look at Tasmanian public schools I was fortunate to come across a number of schools where assessment and reporting were simple, clear and meaningful. One such school was a primary school on the outskirts of Hobart bordering on rural. Cambridge Primary School was a delight to walk into, and soon after talking to teachers, staff, students and parents I realised this school had already begun a journey to truly engage everyone in how they assess and report against student learning. Teachers were engaged with improving communication between school and home. Brochures were developed that clearly outlined the unit of work, what students would be doing and the expectations the teacher had for them, any excursions involved, and how parents could support their child at home. During assemblies these units of work were presented for the whole school to share in, and newsletters were used to keep everyone up-to-date with how the school was progressing with assessment, reporting and the overarching goals of the school.

I also want to acknowledge the value of all paths in life our children follow when finding their way to a career. For too long we have over-emphasised to our children, the concept that they must get a university degree to be successful in their working life, and conveniently forget the other important options available for them. It is human nature as parents to want the very best for our children and expect that they bring home outstanding academic reports to ultimately earn them a university placement. By the same token, we also need to realise that not all children are cut out for a university education. Some children are very practical with their hands and already decided upon their chosen career such as

a builder, a nurse or an electrician. Fortunately I can see some change occurring, as we know further studies in technical colleges, apprenticeships and accreditation are vitally important to provide Australia with a well-balanced working community to build on a country which offers so much to its people. This is clearly being supported by the economic climate of Australia in 2005 and its identified skill shortage. To build a nation of strong economic growth we need to create pathways for our children that lead not just to university but produce the foundations of our nation through technical skills, apprenticeships and vocational courses as well as university degrees.

In conclusion, *'Keep it simple'* are words I believe we must all keep in our minds when communicating student achievement. I think we would all agree with this, but we must guard against being so simple that the report is meaningless, again supporting my apprehension of giving a child a rating of A, B, C, D, E or F against the child's peers in the same class. This may be simple for parents to understand but is fairly meaningless when we consider how much classes vary. A child who may be 'top of the class' in one school may only be in the middle of the class in another school. Parents may get a misleading impression of their child's progress. More importantly we must constantly remind ourselves that the end of year report means nothing if we have not clearly communicated between home and school the students progress all year long and used assessment to improve student learning and celebrate their achievements along the way. Let the end of year report NOT have parents asking, *'I wonder how my child did this year?'* Let it be a confirmation of their achievements.

In the theme of this conference, *Closing the Gap*, we can see this happening all over

Australia where schools, teachers and parents are working hard to close the gap. Having this opportunity to talk to you at this conference confirms to me parents are becoming increasingly involved and listened to at many levels.

Food for thought: maybe it is time we looked again at when a formal report is given. Should this occur at major stepping stones in the student's educational life? Maybe it would be more appropriate to report formally at Years 3, 6, 10 and 12, using a less formal approach for the other years and, in line with what parents are saying, using parent-teacher interviews, phone calls, emails, incidental meetings, assemblies and other unthought of ways in the 21st century to communicate student learning. Let us always remember the importance of conversation. I believe nothing can replace an opportunity to share information verbally between teachers and parents about a student. This is where a deep and meaningful exchange can take place about a child's progress. If assessment and reporting helps improve a child's learning by accurately communicating progress this process will be a positive thing. If it confuses the parents or adversely affects the child it will be negative.

In this presentation I have only been able to touch on some of the issues that surround such an important part of our child's educational life but I know as parents and educators we will be having this conversation again and again as we strive to improve student learning.

Closing the Gap to form better partnerships

Acknowledgments

Tasmanian Department of Education, *Cuttance Report*

Essential Learnings, Tasmanian Department of Education

A Report of the National Consensus, Assessing & Reporting Student Achievement, ACSSO & APC