



Reporting to parents and the community

Current issues and initiatives

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Overview of influences

There is considerable public debate and action around Australia concerning reporting to parents and the community. Three prominent influences are:

- 1) parent difficulty in understanding the meaning of (some) school reports;
- 2) teacher uncertainty about how to enact recent curriculum reforms effectively; and
- 3) government interest in monitoring and improving the effectiveness of schools.

1) Parent difficulty in understanding the meaning of (some) school reports

Parents want the best for their children and expect to play a key role in advancing their child's progress in life. They cannot support their child's learning if they cannot fathom what and how well their child is learning. Most schools make earnest attempts to communicate with parents and there are many examples of excellent school-home connections. But the plethora of ways in which schools report on student progress causes confusion among parents. This can be provoked by the proverbial discussion over the back fence or by direct encounter with different practices in other schools. These differences make the education system look incoherent and inconsistent.

Part of the problem here is lack of a common language to describe student progress. This is illustrated by a humorous story retold by Thomas Guskey in a recent edition (December 2004) of the United States education

journal, *Phi Delta Kappan*. The story concerns a son arriving home from school and announcing that his teacher had given him 'super' for his project. His mother says 'Wow! That sounds great. Is that the best?' 'Oh no', he says, 'Stupendous, outrageous and magnificent are all better. Super is just OK.' Guskey collected examples of school reports in the United States and researched what parents thought of them. His collated list is shown in Table 1. A similar list could be compiled in Australia.

Four points can be made here. First, the use of such labels is an honest attempt to communicate something quite useful – student performance judged against specific learning goals or standards. It is the standards that lie behind the labels that are important, not the labels themselves. Second, labels need to be explained to parents, with examples of what they signify, that is, with some illustration of the standards to which they refer. Third, according to Guskey, some labels are more naturally meaningful to parents than others. This is a question of effective communication, not simply running a popularity poll. Fourth, it may be helpful to develop a consistent approach so that the parents can become familiar with a single system. However, that will not, of itself, ensure common understanding. Deliberate strategies need to be developed to help parents understand what lies behind the labels and to participate in meaningful discussions about their child's progress.

Table 1. Indicators of Student Performance			
1. Levels of Understanding/Quality			
Modest	Beginning	Novice	Unsatisfactory
Intermediate	Progressing	Apprentice	Needs Improvement
Proficient	Adequate	Proficient	Satisfactory
Superior	Exemplary	Distinguished	Outstanding
2. Levels of Mastery/Proficiency			
Below Basic	Below Standard	Pre-Emergent	Incomplete
Basic	Approaching Standard	Emerging	Limited
Proficient	Meets Standard	Acquiring	Partial
Advanced	Exceeds Standard	Extending	Thorough
3. Frequency of Display			
Rarely	Never		
Occasionally	Seldom		
Frequently	Usually		
Consistently	Always		
4. Degree of Effectiveness			
Ineffective	Poor		
Moderately Effective	Acceptable		
Highly Effective	Excellent		
5. Evidence of Accomplishment			
Little or No Evidence			
Partial Evidence			
Sufficient Evidence			
Extensive Evidence			

Source: Phi Delta Kappan, December 2004/

2) Teacher uncertainty about how to enact recent curriculum reforms effectively

The curriculum reforms of the past decade had as their starting point the development of frameworks of learning outcomes. The intention, not yet fully realised, was to shift the focus from the act of teaching (what the teacher does) to the act of learning (what the student does). This was achieved by mapping detailed developmental sequences of learning outcomes. In time, these frameworks have come to be seen as offering both too much and too little.

The 'too much' concerns the difficulty in handling so many learning outcomes, a problem that some schools have tried to resolve through the use of specialised computer programs. This complexity prompted the current moves to define the 'essentials' and to 'unclutter' the curriculum.

The 'too little' concerns insufficient guidance to schools on how to use the frameworks to assess and report student progress. It is all very well to have a comprehensive framework, but teachers need some way of condensing it into manageable components. Charting progress on every learning outcome becomes laborious and, for parents, unintelligible. Some simpler ways of recording and reporting progress are needed. This does not necessarily mean abandoning existing frameworks, just restructuring so that the detail is situated within more general concepts and structures. This helps locate discussion about student learning at an appropriate level of generality or detail. For example, learning research shows that good problem solvers know a lot. They have rich and detailed knowledge that is relevant to the problem, but this knowledge is well-organised into conceptual structures so that they can readily access the detail when it is

needed. Curriculum, assessment and reporting needs to manage those higher-level conceptual structures as well as the detail that lies below them.

It should be emphasised, too, that the curriculum reforms of the past decade were well-intentioned and carry some important principles that need to be preserved. Three of these principles are:

- Learning is most effective if it builds on what students already know and proceeds by manageable steps that consolidate and extend the learning.
- All students are entitled to learning experiences that are manageable for them and lead to progress. This is the 'personalised learning' principle that is gaining considerable traction from the work of David Hargreaves and others in the United Kingdom.
- Continued engagement in learning is dependent on experiencing success. There is nothing more damaging to student learning than persistent messages of failure.

3) Government interest in monitoring and improving the effectiveness of schools and in public information and accountability

Education is now a large expenditure of government budgets. Governments are naturally interested in the effectiveness of that expenditure. Assessing the quality of schools is not a simple matter and needs to extend much beyond student outcome data. However, student outcomes are an important starting point in any discussion of system and school effectiveness. But what outcomes? And how should we measure them? Some outcomes are student learning or performance outcomes. Other outcomes might be more long-term such as personal success and fulfilment, labour-force participation and citizenship, and engagement in life-long learning. The national process of defining performance benchmarks for literacy and

numeracy in Years 3, 5 and 7 was an attempt to provide some common language for learning outcomes. Attention to the benchmarks themselves, as rich descriptions of learning targets, was subverted by translating them into minimum cut-scores on tests. The new national process of defining National Learning Statements may realise this ambition for a common focus more effectively. The point here is that monitoring the effectiveness of schools requires a common language about what is to be assessed and how the standard of performance is to be represented. State and Federal jurisdictions in Australia are grappling with this issue.

Currently, tests are seen as the means to providing this kind of information. But tests assess only some aspects of student learning, often only those aspects that have 'right/wrong' answers, involve small and disaggregated tasks, and require immediate response. While this can provide some useful information – what Malcolm Gladwell (see his book *Blink*) would probably call a 'thin-slice' – it represents only a part of the learning outcomes that schools seek to foster.

Teachers themselves assess a much broader range of student performance than can be assessed by external means. The question is how to assure the quality of the teachers' assessments. In Queensland, we have been valuing teacher assessments for Year 12 certification for over 30 years. Quality is assured through a process of state-wide moderation based on panels of expert teachers. The level of comparability between schools is constantly monitored and is overall quite high; higher, one study showed than is typically the case between markers of external examinations. So there is widespread confidence in this system. There may be some lessons that can be learned from this for assessment in other contexts. An

important issue is whether moderation processes of some form can be developed to quality-assure teacher assessments in the early and middle years of schooling as well.

Again, to do this requires a common language for assessment and reporting. By clarifying what is to be assessed and how is it to be reported, it becomes more possible to have conversations across schools about the quality of their assessments and the comparability of their judgments of student achievement. This can serve government ambition to monitor effectiveness and help to focus attention on improving the overall quality of student learning. Participation in moderation processes in senior schooling in Queensland is recognised as a powerful professional development mechanism for teachers. It has the advantage of enlisting teachers in continual school improvement while also creating greater coherence across the system. Can these kinds of processes and effects be grown more widely across the school system at all levels? Both state and federal jurisdictions are moving to require schools to report various forms of information about themselves. This can be seen as deriving from an interest by government in greater accountability of schools and a public interest in more information about schools.

I turn now from background issues to a consideration first of reporting to parents on their child's progress and then to reporting to the community on school outcomes.

Reporting to parents on their child's progress

In 2004, the Queensland Studies Authority (QSA) conducted focus groups with parents on their views of assessment and reporting in relation to the Key Learning Areas (KLA's). The focus group parents revealed a strong interest in

finding out about their child's progress in school and how they can help in improving that learning. But they felt they should be informed of any problems as soon as they arise, not wait for a formal semester report. In fact they recognised that formal reports cannot contain all the information that could be useful. Other means of communication between home and school were valued. Concerning assessment, the parent focus groups:

- saw a relationship between assessment and reporting but were not sure of how this occurs, that is, they did not understand what assessments were used and how what was reported related to what was assessed;
- wanted more information about assessment in schools; and
- believed assessment should occur in each of the KLA's.

Concerning reporting, the parent focus groups:

- wanted to know how their child was going in general, with specific details of strengths and weaknesses;
- liked to have other information besides academic, particularly behaviour and effort;
- wanted to be informed of student development or progress from one report to another;
- wanted reports that were clear of educational jargon, that is, reports written in plain English;
- wanted a balance between too much detail and not enough;
- understood assessing and reporting information easiest when organised into KLA's/subjects;
- valued seeing student work;
- valued parent-teacher communication;
- accepted that there may be differences in student performance/behaviour from one context to another (one KLA to another, learning/assessment

- opportunity) and would like this information reported accordingly;
- wanted an indication of standard, but typically meant this to mean comparison to a cohort of peers on a state-wide (not classroom) basis;
 - had difficulty with anything too complex or beyond their own experiences;
 - liked specific personalised comments;
 - believed there would be an advantage of an overall system for assessing and reporting that would lead to comparability across schools;
 - recognised that there may be different emphases in reports depending on the phase of schooling; and
 - were able to understand the concept of a continuum of levels, but had difficulty with the outcome statements used to describe this.

None of this is very surprising. The essence of the findings is that parents need some simple messages:

- How is my child going (against standards and showing progress)?
- How does this compare with others (preferably against the cohort)?
- What next? (how can I assist further learning and development)?

In many ways, the most interesting aspect of these findings is that parents are puzzled about assessment. They seem to be saying that reporting might be informative but '... we do not understand how you arrive at the reported information'. That is, they do not understand how you collect and interpret the evidence on which the report is based. This means that the evidence base needs to be more transparent. Collecting all the evidence on the student's progress into a portfolio allows the evidence to be shared with parents directly. But more than that is needed. There needs to be deliberate sharing of the frameworks by which the teacher plans, monitors and reports student learning. In doing so, it should be

possible to show how assessment is an integral part of learning (built-in not bolt-on) and serves other purposes (sometimes referred to as 'assessment for learning') than simply reporting to parents at the end of each semester (sometimes referred to as 'assessment of learning'). However, this does not resolve the issues of 'what' and 'how' to report, especially if this is to be done in a coherent way across schools. Where do we currently stand in resolving these issues?

Some recent developments on reporting to parents

Some recent developments that move towards clarifying the what and the how of reporting to parents are Tasmania's *Essential Learnings*, Victoria's *Essential Learning Standards (VELS)*, Western Australia's *Progress Maps*, and Queensland's *Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Framework (QCAR)*. All of these are 'work-in-progress'. Here, I will refer to the current developments in Queensland.

In early October 2004, following a consultation process, the Queensland Government endorsed a set of eight actions under the title, *Changes to Schools Reporting*. Of particular note here are:

- a set of principles to guide school reporting practices in all Queensland schools '... to provide parents with a guarantee of comprehensive and regular information about their child'; and
- a commitment to further consideration of a common framework for school report cards '... in the context of aligning activities across curriculum, teaching, assessment and reporting'.

Subsequently, the Queensland Government announced the development of '... a new Queensland Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting (QCAR) Framework setting new standards to

define what is studied in all Queensland schools, and how it is assessed and reported', and released a background paper, *Smarter Learning: The Queensland Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Framework*. Schools will be involved in trials from 2006, with state-wide implementation in 2008. Work is continuing on the implementation details of this initiative but some of the characteristics of the new approach are indicated in the background paper. This states that the framework will:

- define what is 'essential curriculum' for all students in Years P-10;
- assist schools to continue to provide other curriculum appropriate to local needs;
- set standards of student achievement in the essential curriculum;
- create a bank of assessment tools for teachers;
- establish, at three key points in the P-10 years, rigorous comparable assessment against the defined standards which will result in consistent teacher judgements of student achievement; and
- specify a common framework for reporting student achievement against standards.

The intention is to develop a reporting framework that:

- is clear, meaningful and easy to read;
- has consistent ways of describing student performance;
- specifies common categories of information; and
- is used by all schools for reporting at particular junctures of schooling.

Work is proceeding on developing the details for implementation of this framework, and the Minister for Education and The Arts has announced that she will take those details to Cabinet for approval shortly. One important issue will be how to ensure an appropriate degree of comparability across all schools

at the junctures. This may perhaps involve some form of moderation of teacher judgements. It is unlikely that the panel-based approach to moderation for senior certification would be appropriate at other levels. Stage-appropriate comparability strategies will be needed that build on current practices developed by some schools.

Reporting to the community on school outcomes

Actions 7 and 8 of the Queensland Government initiative Changes to Schools Reporting were:

- a requirement that all schools publish information about the school and its outcomes '... to support continuous improvement and enhanced accountability'; and
- annual publication in the media of a profile of data for each school with students in Year 12, plus '... an annual state-wide survey of the study, employment and other destinations of Year 12 students in the year after leaving school'.

The first of these is now overridden by the requirements on all schools of the *Schools Assistance (Learning Together – Achievement Through Choice and Opportunity) Act 2004* passed in December 2004 by the Australian Government. The Regulations for this *Act* will specify what each school must report annually to parents and prospective parents.

The second is actually in two parts: performance and destinations. These two parts were initially modelled on similar activities in Victoria but are necessarily different in their detail because of the different curriculum contexts and data characteristics. The first part is being delivered by the Queensland Year 12 School Performance Report. The second part is being delivered by the Queensland Year 12 Destination Survey (*Next Step*).

The Queensland Year 12 School Performance Report (see attached) is being trialled in 2005. Schools are being given access to their own Year 12 data from 2003 and 2004 and invited to provide feedback about the usefulness of the data and any suggestions for improvement. Each school has been provided by the QSA with access to its own data. In 2006, the Year 12 data for 2005 will be published in the newspapers in an alphabetic listing of schools. The range of data is intended to reflect the variety of options provided by the school to its students, the ways these are taken up by students, and the outcomes of their studies by the end of Year 12. What the data mean depends on the school. Interpretation depends on the context in which the school operates. Different schools have strengths in different areas and this should be reflected in the data. It would be inappropriate to suggest that all schools should have the same profile. The report will celebrate diversity. But it will also provide a basis for reflection by the school on whether it provides the most appropriate programs, support and opportunities for its students. Used in this way, it can be an agent for school improvement. What will parents get out of it? There is no simple answer. What might be the best school for one student might not be for another. Sometimes there is no choice anyway. The best question might be whether the school caters adequately for the range of students that attend it. In some cases, what the school offers will be constrained by its size, location and resources. The issue is what it does with what it has. The profile of student performance data is a useful starting point for parent discussions with the school about how the school is making appropriate provision for your child.

The Queensland Year 12 Destination Survey (*Next Step*) is being conducted for the first time in 2005. The survey is

managed by the Department of Education and The Arts. Students completing Year 12 in 2004 have been mailed a survey questionnaire. Details are available at <http://education.qld.gov.au/nextstep/>.

The survey asks what each person is doing, about five months after completing Year 12, in terms of study, employment and life choices. In 2005, the findings of the survey will be released in a summary school report to each school, a summary state-wide report and regional reports. Individual student data will not be reported.

As for the performance data, the way in which these data are interpreted depends on the school. Post-school opportunities differ across the state. Schools that are located where jobs are readily available or where tertiary institutions are easily accessible may have different patterns of post-school participation than those where this is not the case. A follow-up of a sample of each cohort for six years will provide state-wide data on the longer-term outcomes. This survey will provide schools with comprehensive data on the immediate destinations of their students and some comparative information on other schools. This will enable schools to gauge the relevance of their school programs in terms of the post-school pathways taken by their students. There is no simple way of assessing the connection between school programs and post-school destinations but schools need to consider the relationship between what they provide and what students need. There is also a potential lag of three years before any adjustment can be made and its consequences assessed, during which time the social and economic circumstances may change. That is, the current survey will report on choices offered and made in Year 10, three years ago, before the current talk about skill shortages was widespread and before the current shift to emphasise trades had begun. In assessing the data on

destinations then, schools and parents need to be mindful of possible changes in work and study opportunities of the future.

Conclusion

Reporting to parents is multi-faceted. The focus of government policy at the moment is on developing common frameworks for school reports – reports on student progress and reports on school outcomes. The aim is to create greater consistency in the ways these things are reported across schools. However, ‘reporting’ is more than ‘reports’. Formal reports allow the possibility of greater transparency and comparability. But reports need to be interpreted within their context. A lot more needs to be known about the individual student and the individual school to make sense of the formal reports and draw appropriate conclusions. For formal reports to serve a useful role, parents need to be engaged in an ongoing conversation with the school. Both the parents and the school can contribute to this conversation. The school holds a lot more information than can be condensed into a written report, and parents can contribute background information about the child and their expectations of the school. In that sense ‘reporting’ should be seen as a process of engagement with parents and the community rather than just a formal statement of individual and collective learning outcomes. It should be a process that aims at openness, communication and connection rather than simply fulfilment of a legislated requirement.

Queensland Year 12 School Performance Report

Col. 1	Col. 2	Col. 3	Col. 4	Col. 5	Col. 6					Col. 7	Col. 8	Col. 9	Col. 10	Col. 11	Col. 12	Col. 13	Col. 14	Col. 15	Col. 16	
					Number of Senior Certificates awarded															
School	Locality	Gender	Breadth of curriculum No. of subject area categories offered	No. of CPCSEs awarded	OP-eligible with no VET quals	OP-eligible with one or more VET quals	OP-ineligible with no VET qualifications	OP-ineligible with one or more VET quals	Total Senior Certs awarded	No. of students completing VET competencies	No. of VET quals awarded	No. of students completing/ continuing a SAT	% of OP-eligible students with an OP 1-15	% of students with VET quals	% of OP-eligible students with VET quals					
Green College	Sun Coast	C	12	1	45	21	12	61	139	127	125	15	37	59	91					

The Year 12 performance information is presented in 16 columns. Green College is a fictitious school but the data used in this example is real.

Column 3 The C in the gender column stands for co-educational, M for males and F for females.

Column 4 This indicator maps all Authority, Authority-registered and VET subjects which contribute towards a Senior Certificate.

Note: Columns 6 to 10 indicate the number of senior certificates awarded. The categories in these columns are mutually exclusive, and Column 10 is the sum of Columns 6 to 9. Columns 6 and 7 relate to Senior Certificates with OP eligibility. Columns 8 and 9 relate to Senior Certificates without OP eligibility.

Column 6 A school with a high number in this column may run an academic program with tertiary education as the priority. This does not mean, however, that a school with a low student number in this column is not academically oriented.

Column 7 Many schools have incorporated a range of programs which deliver OP eligibility and the successful completion of one or more VET qualifications.

Column 8 High numbers in this column could mean the school has many students undertaking school-based apprenticeships and traineeships (SATs). Some students reported in this



column may have successfully completed VET-in-school competencies but not in sufficient quantities, or in a sequence, to achieve a VET qualification.

Column 9 Some schools have a VET-in-schools strategy to diversify their curriculum and provide more options for students.

Column 11 This column reports the number of students completing VET competencies.

Column 12 The column reports the number of VET qualifications awarded. Some students may receive more than one.

Column 13 Students undertaking a SAT may not have completed it by the time they complete Year 12.

Column 14 This column reports the percentage of students with OP 1 to 15 who constitute approximately 80 per cent of OP-eligible students who are offered a tertiary place.

Column 15 This measure reports the percentage of students who received one or more VET qualifications of all students in the school receiving a Senior Certificate.

Column 16 This column reports the percentage of OP-eligible students with one or more VET qualifications. This column provides the most comprehensive estimate of the percentage of students in the school who successfully achieved OP eligibility and/or who gained one or more VET qualifications.