

ACARA.

Perspectives on the My School website.

Prepared for: Robyn Ziino and Peter Matheson

CB Contact: Carolyn Taig, Research Director. Cathy North, Senior Qualitative Researcher

Phone: (03) 8640 5220

Email: carolyn.taig@colmarbrunton.com.au, cathy.north@colmarbrunton.com.au

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www.colmarbrunton.com.au

1. Executive Summary

1.1. Introduction and Background

The Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) is responsible for the development of rigorous, world class national curriculum from Kindergarten to Year 12.

To complement the development of a national curriculum, ACARA is also responsible for developing and administering a national assessment program aligned to the national curriculum that measures students' progress, and the provision of information, resources, support and guidance to the teaching profession.

ACARA is also charged with the collection, management and analysis of data on a national scale that relates to broader achievements in student assessment, resource allocation, and accountability and reporting on school performance.

Colmar Brunton was commissioned by the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) to conduct research with parents, principals, partners and representative groups (parent, teacher and principal) on the My School website.

1.2. Research objectives

Overall aim of the research

To assess the My School website against a framework of evaluation questions, seeking feedback from partners and key stakeholders, specifically school principals and parents.

Research Questions

In general, the questions to be addressed relate to the appropriateness of the site in terms of the composition of the target audience and the type of information provided; and its effectiveness in terms of specific expected outcomes such as enhancing accountability and transparency. Specifically, these questions are:

- Is My School reporting consistent with relevant aspects of the Principles and Protocols for Reporting on Schooling in Australia¹, specifically;
 - Is My School reporting in the broad public interest?
 - Does My School reporting use data that is valid, reliable and contextualised?
 - Is My School reporting sufficiently comprehensive to enable proper interpretation and understanding of the information?
 - Does My School reporting balance the community's right to know with the need to avoid the misinterpretation or misuse of the information?

¹ http://www.mceecdya.edu.au/mceecdya/nap_principles_protocols_for_rep_on_school_2009.27896.html

- Does My School reporting provide schools (who have the primary accountability for student outcomes) with reliable, rich data on the performance of their students?
 - Does My School reporting provide parents and families with information they need to develop informed judgements, make choices and engage with their children's education and the school community?
 - Does My School reporting provide the community with access to information that enables them to understand the performance of schools and the context in which they perform and to evaluate the decisions taken by governments?
 - Does My School reporting provide school systems and governments sound information on school performance to support ongoing improvement for students and schools?
- ➡ Has My School reporting increased accountability, a key objective cited by COAG? and
 - ➡ Has My School reporting increased transparency, a key objective cited by COAG?

1.3. Methodology

Colmar Brunton designed a qualitative research approach to address the research objectives. A series of focus groups was conducted to explore the questions with parents and principals and in-depth interviews were being held with ACARA partners and principal representative groups.

Focus groups with parents and principals

A total of ten focus groups were conducted, five with parents and five with teachers, all of whom were aware of and had visited the My School website in the previous 12 months.

Parent Focus Groups n=5

Group #	Description	Location
1	Parents of children at state and Catholic primary schools	Sydney
2	Parents of children at state and Catholic primary schools	Adelaide
3	Parents of children at state and Catholic secondary schools	Sydney
4	Parents of children at state and Catholic secondary schools	Brisbane
5	Parents of children at primary, secondary and K-12 Independent schools	Melbourne

Principals Focus Groups n=5

Group #	Description	Location
6	Principals at state and Catholic primary schools	Melbourne
7	Principals at state and Catholic primary schools	Brisbane
8	Principals at state and Catholic secondary schools	Melbourne
9	Principals at state and Catholic secondary schools	Adelaide
10	Principals at primary, secondary and K-12 independent schools	Sydney

Each parent and principal focus group session comprised between 7 and 9 participants.

Interviews with ACARA partners and other stakeholders

Interview #	Description	Location
N=14	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● ACARA partners: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Representatives from government, Catholic and independent school sectors. ● Test administration authorities. ● Principal representative groups. 	Face-to-face and via telephone in NSW, QLD, SA, NT, Vic, ACT, Tas, WA.

1.4. Key Findings

This report summarises the feedback given by parents, principals, partners and other stakeholders in the group discussions and individual interviews. As a qualitative methodology was used there is a depth of information about perceptions, understanding and opinions in relation to the My School website. However, it is not possible to provide a quantified measure of the prevalence of each view expressed. Instead, where a particular perspective was widespread amongst a specific group, wording such as “generally” or “overall” is used. Where there were two or more different themes around a specific issue this is indicated by terminology such as “mixed views”, “differing opinions” or “some (parents, principals, partners and other stakeholders)” is used.

1.4.1. Overview

My School is generally perceived to be aimed at, and primarily used by, parents. The website plays a lesser role for principals, partners and other stakeholders who, while they may use My School data for some purposes, often have alternative sources of information available to them.

In general, parents appreciate having a range of information about schools available in a central online location as provided by My School. My School is a starting point for parents who are in the process of selecting a school for their child or children. It is also used by some parents to monitor the progress of a specific school over time. My School is one of many sources of information considered by parents and is not commonly used as the sole input for decision making.

Principals, partners and other stakeholders have mixed views on the provision of NAPLAN and other data about individual schools via My School. For some, initial concerns that My School would lead to the development of league tables or to parents selecting schools based solely on information from the website have not been realised. Thus fears that My School data would be misused or misinterpreted to the detriment of certain schools or to the school system in general have been alleviated. However, there are some principals, partners and other stakeholders who continue to have strong reservations about the merits of providing this information in a publicly available form due to the perceived potential for misinterpretation by parents.

Overall My School provides information in a format which is relatively easy to navigate and understand. However, there is scope to develop the website further to enhance the way in which information is presented and accessed. For example, through simplification and clarification of some statistical concepts and the facility to self-select schools for comparison instead of using the “similar schools” feature.

Many of the concerns expressed about My School, however, centre on the reliability and validity of the information provided there rather than on the nature of the website itself. The information featured on My School is generally believed to be reported accurately. However, parents, principals, partners and other stakeholders all raised issues about factors affecting the actual collection of the data with some concerns about the impact on its accuracy or comparability. For example, differences between reporting requirements for financial data across school systems are perceived by some principals to compromise the comparability. Similarly NAPLAN scores may not provide a true reflection of the situation at a given school if, as some parents believe, certain schools place greater emphasis on “coaching” children for NAPLAN tests and/or exclude some less able children from the test. The possibility of misinterpretation of NAPLAN results due to a lack of contextual information (for example, the number of special needs or non-English speaking background [NESB] children in a given school) was also raised as an issue by parents, principals, partners and other stakeholders.

Principals, partners and other stakeholders have a greater appreciation than parents of the processes and constraints involved in the collection of that data featured on the My School website. Hence they were less likely than parents to take it at face value and frequently expressed concern about the possibility of parents misinterpreting the information.

1.4.2. Research objectives

Responses to the specific research objectives are summarised below. In each case, views were mixed both across and within the key target groups; parents, principals, partners and other stakeholders. Hence it is difficult to draw a single conclusion about each objective.

- **Is My School reporting in the broad public interest?**

Parents had generally not given this issue prior thought and, when questioned, found it difficult to see a reason why the information on the My School website would not be freely available in the public domain.

For principals the question of whether the My School website is in the public interest is more complex. The risk of parents selecting schools or making other education-related decisions using information which is perceived (by some principals) to be inaccurate, non-comparable or otherwise open to misinterpretation is a major source of concern and, for some, outweighs the advantages of having the information publically available.

Partners and other stakeholders generally agree that this information should be publically available at some level. However, they question whether My School provides the required context for parents to interpret figures in a meaningful way or a broad enough range of information to allow them to form a holistic view of a given school.

- **Does My School reporting balance the community's right to know with the need to avoid the misinterpretation or misuse of the information?**

Parents, principals, partners and other stakeholders all accept that the community has a right to know the outcomes of NAPLAN testing and the other school-related information available on the website. In fact, much of it is believed to already be in the public domain.

Apart from some understanding of the limitations of NAPLAN testing, most parents do not have sufficient awareness of the complexities (as described by principals, partners and other stakeholders) behind the information on My School to have an appreciation of how it may be misinterpreted or misused.

Principals, however, have concerns about potential misinterpretation or misuse by parents. The main issues here are the possibility of parents comparing NAPLAN results without an understanding of the broader context, using financial data when this may not give an accurate view of school finances and/or taking into account other data which may be inaccurate or out of date.

While partners and other stakeholders feel that there is a danger that parents could place too much emphasis on My School data, this concern is mitigated by the belief that most parents are using My School only as a starting point in their decision making.

- **Has My School reporting increased accountability and transparency (of schools, of the Government, of school systems)?**

Accountability was often perceived to go hand in hand with transparency and to have a very similar meaning. Due to the website's focus on individual schools rather than aggregate data it is believed to provide transparency and accountability at a school level, but is not perceived to have had the same impact on governments or school systems.

Transparency and accountability at individual school level

Parents, principals, partners and other stakeholders generally agree that placing the information on a public website does, by definition, provide transparency at an individual school level. However, there is also a widespread view amongst parents, principals, partners and other stakeholders that the information on the My School website is also publically available from other sources (for example, school annual reports and websites) and that My School does not therefore represent an increase in transparency. However, there is also agreement that My School provides a gathering together of information into one website which is more accessible to parents.

Parents recognise that having information publically available in a transparent format means that schools can potentially be held accountable for their academic outcomes and use of funding. Some parents observed improvements in outcomes for children which they attributed to this increased accountability. Principals, on the whole, are of the belief that My School has had little impact on accountability at school level. Schools, particularly those in the state and Catholic systems, have other accountability mechanisms in place and therefore tend not to see a significant role for My School in this respect.

Transparency and accountability at government level

Parents are often unsure whether My School makes governments more transparent and accountable as the relationship between government policy or performance and the information on individual schools contained in the website is unclear.

From the principals' point of view, publication of NAPLAN scores can be seen as making the government more accountable to tax payers. However, the focus on individual schools is interpreted by some to be moving accountability away from governments or school systems to the school level.

Generally partners and stakeholders did not believe that My School was making governments more accountable and transparent, and often noted that this was not its intended purpose.

Transparency and accountability at school system level

Parents find it difficult to comment on whether school systems have become more transparent or accountable as a result of My School. As the information is not presented in aggregate form it is difficult for parents to compare the achievements of one school system against another.

Principals were generally of the opinion that State and Catholic systems have their own internal accountability measures. From this point of view My School is not generally perceived to play a major role in providing transparency or accountability at this level.

Some partners and other stakeholders believe that My School has not had a major role in increasing accountability or transparency at the school system level as the information is available elsewhere. Others are of the opinion that having the data more readily available inevitably helps school systems be more transparent and accountable.

- **Does My School reporting use data which is valid, reliable and contextualised? Is My School reporting sufficiently comprehensive to enable proper interpretation and understanding of the information?**

Principals, partners and other stakeholders have very different perspectives than parents on the validity, reliability and contextualisation of My School data. The extent to which the data is considered comprehensive, and is therefore able to be accurately interpreted and understood, relates largely to issues of contextualisation.

Parents tend not to question the reliability or validity of most of the school profile information presented on My School. They do, however, express a need for more contextual information to help them form a rounded, holistic view of a given school. Principals, partners and other stakeholders also believe that parents would benefit from more contextual information to prevent misinterpretation. Parents have some concerns about the validity of NAPLAN data due to factors which are perceived to influence the results of testing, such as the exclusion of some pupils or "coaching" at some schools. Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage (ICSEA) scores are difficult for parents to use as the statistical concepts here are not presented in a manner which is easily understood by the lay person. There is also some question as to the reliability of these scores as they are based on data reported by parents, given the views of some that some parents may provide inaccurate or incomplete data.

Due to their more specialised knowledge of the origin and context of some of the My School information, principals express greater concern than parents over its reliability, validity and

contextualisation. The main area of concern is around the validity of NAPLAN scores as a basis of comparison between schools due to a lack of contextualisation, for example, information about a given school's size and location, proportion of children with special needs or special entry criteria. Principals also identified a number of other factors which potentially reduce the comparability of NAPLAN scores, such as changes within cohorts over time or low statistical reliability of results from smaller schools. The ICSEA score is generally not perceived to aid comparison between schools because it is not perceived to take into account other relevant factors such as location and school size. Some principals also express concern around the comparability of financial information, particularly across school systems which may have different reporting methods.

While partners and other stakeholders overall believe that My School contains valid and reliable information, some did raise concerns regarding the reliability, validity and contextualisation of data. For example, the reliability of financial information, the validity of ICSEA scores as a basis for comparison between schools and lack of contextual information, for example around students with special needs. Overall, partners and other stakeholders report that the data on My School is presented in such a way that they are able to understand and interpret it, with the exception of the ICSEA data for some who do not understand it.

- **Does My School reporting provide schools (who have the primary accountability for student outcomes) with reliable, rich data on the performance of their students?**

Parents believe schools to have alternative and more comprehensive sources of data on the performance of their students and do not therefore expect them to be using My School to monitor the progress of their own students.

With a few exceptions, principals were not using the My School website to help them evaluate the performance of their students. Several referred to alternative sources of information which were both more comprehensive, easier to manipulate and more up to date. Some had attempted to compare their school with "similar schools" as defined on the website but had found it difficult to identify commonalities with the "similar schools" generated. My School information is, however, sometimes used to demonstrate the performance of the school to parents or to staff members.

Partners and other stakeholders' understand that schools have alternative, more detailed sources of the data than is available on My School. However, they also acknowledge that My School provides the facility, not available elsewhere, to compare their own performance to other schools of interest to them.

- **Does My School reporting provide parents and families with information they need to develop informed judgements, make choices and engage with their children's education and the school community?**

My School is seen by many parents as a starting point for research leading to a decision about their child's education. Some parents also use My School to follow the progress of their child's school's NAPLAN scores over time or to put their child's NAPLAN scores in context. However, none of the parents participating in this research had made a decision based solely on information from My School. There is widespread acknowledgement that My School is just one of many resources which feed into decision making.

While My School does provide parents with one avenue through which to "engage with their children's education", there is little evidence that it is directly assisting them to engage with the school

community. In general, it appears that parents do not use My School information specifically as a starting point for discussions with teachers or other parents.

Both principals, partners and other stakeholders express concerns about parents' ability to use NAPLAN results to make informed judgements and choices about schools. Few principals reported having conversations with parents on the topic of My School in general or specific information drawn from the website. From this perspective it appears that My School is not generally instigating greater engagement with the school community.

- **Does My School reporting provide the community with access to information that enables them to understand the performance of schools and the context in which they perform and to evaluate the decisions taken by governments?**

Although members of the community more broadly were not interviewed as part of this study it is assumed that many of the issues encountered by parents in relation to understanding the performance of schools would also apply to the community at large.

The second part of this research criterion, i.e. whether My School enables the community to evaluate decisions taken by governments, was more difficult for participants to comment on. "Decisions taken by governments" is often taken by parents to mean decisions around funding and they generally displayed little interest in, or knowledge of, this topic. In addition, as My School only presents information on an individual school basis it is difficult for parents to envisage how the website could assist them in understanding the impact of government funding decisions on schools in general.

Again, as the data is only presented at individual school level, principals felt that it would be difficult to use My School to see or understand the broad impact of any government funding or other policy-related decisions. Where their own school is concerned principals have other, more comprehensive, data sources at their disposal.

Partners and other stakeholders are not commonly using the My School website to evaluate decisions taken by governments and do not perceive significant scope for parents or schools to do so. However, a number of partners and other stakeholders referred to the new schools' funding model and the potential use of the website to evaluate government funding decisions.

- **Does My School reporting provide school systems and governments with sound information on school performance to support ongoing improvement for students and schools?**

Parents generally found it difficult to comment on this criterion, having little understanding of how school systems or governments may potentially use My School information. The usual assumption is that alternative and more comprehensive sources of information would be available at this level.

Principals, partners and other stakeholders also believe that school systems and governments would be using alternative sources. In particular, they expect these bodies to have access to NAPLAN information considerably in advance of its inclusion on the My School website. However, partners and other stakeholders did feel that school systems may use My School to compare performance of their schools to schools in other sectors.

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2. Introduction

2.1. Background

The Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) is responsible for the development of rigorous, world class national curriculum from Kindergarten to Year 12.

To complement the development of a national curriculum, ACARA is also responsible for developing and administering a national assessment program aligned to the national curriculum that measures students' progress, and the provision of information, resources, support and guidance to the teaching profession.

ACARA is also charged with the collection, management and analysis of data on a national scale that relates to broader achievements in student assessment, resource allocation, and accountability and reporting on school performance.

Colmar Brunton was commissioned by ACARA to conduct research with parents, principals, partners and principal representative groups on the My School website.

2.2. Research objectives

Overall aim of the research

To assess the My School website against a framework of evaluation questions, seeking feedback from ACARA partners and key stakeholders, specifically school principals and parents.

Research Questions

In general, the specific questions to be addressed relate to the appropriateness of the site in terms of the composition of the target audience and the type of information provided; and the effectiveness of the site in terms of specific expected outcomes such as enhancing accountability and transparency. Specifically, these questions are:

- Is My School reporting consistent with relevant aspects of the Principles and Protocols for Reporting on Schooling in Australia², specifically;
 - Is My School reporting in the broad public interest?
 - Does My School reporting use data that is valid, reliable and contextualised?
 - Is My School reporting sufficiently comprehensive to enable proper interpretation and understanding of the information?

² http://www.mceecdya.edu.au/mceecdya/nap_principles_protocols_for_rep_on_school_2009,27896.html

- Does My School reporting balance the community's right to know with the need to avoid the misinterpretation or misuse of the information?
 - Does My School reporting provide schools (who have the primary accountability for student outcomes) with reliable, rich data on the performance of their students?
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 - Does My School reporting provide school systems and governments sound information on school performance to support ongoing improvement for students and schools?
- Has My School reporting increased accountability, a key objective cited by COAG? And
- Has My School reporting increased transparency, a key objective cited by COAG?

3. Methodology

Colmar Brunton designed a qualitative research approach to address the research objectives. A series of focus groups was conducted to explore the questions with parents and principals and in-depth interviews held with ACARA partners, parent, teacher and principal representative groups.

Focus groups with parents and principals

All parents and teachers recruited were aware of and had visited the My School website in the previous 12 months. For the focus groups, parents of Catholic and state schools participated in groups together and separate groups were conducted with parents of independent schools. Similarly, principals from Catholic and state schools were combined while principals from independent schools attended separate focus groups. For state and Catholic sectors, separate focus groups were conducted with primary and secondary school parents and principals.

Parent Focus Groups n=5

Group #	Description	Location
1	Parents of children at state and Catholic primary schools	Sydney
2	Parents of children at state and Catholic primary schools	Adelaide
3	Parents of children at state and Catholic secondary schools	Sydney
4	Parents of children at state and Catholic secondary schools	Brisbane
5	Parents of children at primary, secondary and K-12 Independent schools	Melbourne

Each group included parents with children across a range of primary and/or secondary school years. A mix of male and female parents was also included in each group. All parents were jointly or wholly responsible for decisions related to their child or children's education.

Principals Focus Groups n=5

Group #	Description	Location
6	Principals at state and Catholic primary schools	Melbourne
7	Principals at state and Catholic primary schools	Brisbane
8	Principals at state and Catholic secondary schools	Melbourne
9	Principals at state and Catholic secondary schools	Adelaide
10	Principals at primary, secondary and K-12 independent schools	Sydney

Each parent and principal focus group session comprised between 7 and 9 participants.

Interviews with ACARA Partners, Parent, Teacher and Principal Representative Groups

Interview #	Description	Location
n=14	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● ACARA partners: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Representatives from government, Catholic and independent school sectors. ● Test administration authorities. ● Principal representative groups. 	Face-to-face and via telephone in NSW, QLD, SA, NT, Vic, ACT, Tas, WA.

Partner and other stakeholder interviews were conducted either face to face at the participant's workplace or via telephone. The lists of partners and other stakeholders were provided by ACARA. The following organisations were represented:

- ACT Education and Training Directorate
- Department for Education and Child Development, SA
- The Department of Education, WA
- Australian Primary Principal's Association
- Australian Council of State School Organisations
- Catholic Education Commission
- Catholic Education Office
- Independent Schools Queensland
- Independent Schools Tasmania
- Association of Independent Schools of the Northern Territory
- Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority
- School Curriculum and Standards Authority, WA

4. Research objectives

Each of the specific research objectives is considered in detail in this section.

4.1. Is My School reporting in the broad public interest?

Partners, other stakeholders and principals differ to parents in their assessment of whether provision of this information is in the public interest. Discussion around the topic of public interest generally also brought up the issue of the public's "right to know". As these two concepts go hand in hand they are covered together here.

Parents' perspective

From the parents' perspective it is difficult to see a reason why the information on the My School website would not be freely available in the public domain. To the extent that it serves as a tool to provide a starting point for school selection, or to monitor NAPLAN results, My School is considered to be in the public interest.

"I think we have the right to know. Whether we want to make a comparison I think it's here or there to be honest" Parent. State/Catholic secondary school.

"It's freedom of information, you can't hide it" Parent. Independent school.

The phrase "the right to know" however, can be considered a little incongruous in the context of the My School website, particularly given that the information is believed to be available from other sources.

"I guess if you're using to compare your child's school then the information is there. But whether it's a right that they need to know the school gets this much funding and they have this many NAPLAN results and that kind of thing, I don't know that it's a right...I think a right to know is a bit strong" Parent. State/Catholic secondary school.

Principal's perspective

Principals do not generally question the community's "right to know" about NAPLAN and other school related information. They do point out, however, that equivalent data from other government funded organisations such as the police force is not similarly available for public scrutiny or comparison.

The question of whether the publication of this information on the My School website is in the public interest is more complex from the principals' point of view. The risk of parents selecting schools or making other education-related decisions using information which is perceived by principals to be inaccurate, non-comparable or open to misinterpretation is a major source of concern. For some, the potential dangers outweigh the benefits of providing the information.

"The right to know what? The second (danger of misinterpretation or misuse) outweighs the first if it's misleading" Principal. State/Catholic secondary school.

"They have a right to know valid information that's predicated on statistically valid processes. I'm sorry, there is very little on My School website that is statistically valid" Principal. Independent school.

The phrase "right to know" implies that the information has, at some time, not been freely available. From the principals' perspective this is not necessarily a meaningful concept, given that much of the My School data is available on school websites or easily accessed via school staff.

"The fact you're saying people have the right to know actually says that somebody said at some stage that they don't have the right to know.... But you could always go to the school have a meeting with the principal, assistant principal, the programs were there" Principal. State/Catholic secondary school.

The perceived danger of league tables being prepared from NAPLAN data also calls into question, from the principals' point of view, whether My School is in the public interest.

"The forerunner to NAPLAN was all about Government accountability and there was enough controversy about that. I didn't have a problem with it. If we receive money from the Government I thought they're entitled to have a snapshot of information to know we're doing a reasonable job. But the agreement then was that it would never be published. We've watched what's happened in the States and the UK with published league tables and it's absolutely diabolical in some situations" Principal. State/Catholic primary school.

In addition, My School is not believed to satisfy the community's right to know about schools in a more holistic sense.

"The community wants to know about how successful schools are. They're just telling them how successful students are on NAPLAN. NAPLAN is not the measure of the school. What parents have a right to know is how well their children will be educated within a particular school. You don't measure that with NAPLAN" Principal. State/Catholic primary school.

ACARA partners' and other stakeholders' perspective

Partners and other stakeholders held a similar view to principals in terms of the information provided via the My School website. While it was generally agreed that this information should be publically available at some level, partners and other stakeholders questioned whether My School provided the required context for parents to interpret figures in a meaningful way.

'It's the parents right to know but it's also important that the context is also considered because if it's interpreted too simplistically parents aren't really being informed in a way that would really truly represent what's happening in schools'. Government School Sector representative.

It is understood by partners and other stakeholders that the nature of the information is too focussed to allow for a true understanding of what a school can offer its students. This focussed information it was felt could influence parents' perceptions of a school before other, equally important information is sourced.

"What we don't believe is necessary is for this to be published in a way that damages the reputations of schools and for the stories to be told as though these were the only pieces of data that were important. They are not. NAPLAN scores are not the only way that a school should be judged and what we do is focus everybody's attention on a very small slice of the work of a school at the expense of the others" Principals' Representative.

"We are not in support of any form of league table or use of the data without context. Every school is different and they're grappling with different issues, they have to be understood in that context" Executive Director, Catholic Education Commission.

Comparing schools that are not similar, cater to different demographics, and are not an option for the parent seeking the information was thought to be of limited value.

Does My School reporting balance the community's right to know with the need to avoid the misinterpretation or misuse of the information?

Parents, principals, partners and other stakeholders all accept that the community has a right to know the outcomes of NAPLAN testing and other school-related information, or at least that there is no reason to conceal this data. In fact, much of it is believed to be in the public domain in other formats such as school websites and annual reports.

My School has taken steps to prevent misinterpretation or misuse. For example, there is a glossary, explanation of statistical concepts and several links which can lead an interested reader to further information to aid their understanding. However, for there remains confusion in a number of areas as described below:

- In relation to statistical information, principals and parents felt explanations remain at an academic rather than general public level of understanding.

- Given that most parents appear to skim the website and take very high level information from it, it is perhaps unlikely that they will follow links to find out more about the data they are using.
- Some of the relevant contextual information which would allow for more accurate interpretation of results is missing or at least goes unnoticed. For example, whether children have been excluded from NAPLAN testing, the number of children with disabilities or the fact that the school has select entry.

Parents' perspective

Apart from some understanding of the limitations of NAPLAN testing, most parents do not have sufficient awareness of the complexities behind the data (as described by principals) to have much of an appreciation of how it may be misinterpreted or misused. They therefore do not generally regard potential misinterpretation or misuse as an issue of concern.

"I don't think anyone would misconstrue why it's doing what it's doing. I think it's just supplying general information" Parent. State/Catholic secondary school.

However, there is some understanding among parents that NAPLAN results do not necessarily reflect either the progress of the entire school population (as students may be excluded), or the benefits/achievements of the school in a more holistic sense.

Misinterpretation in relation to NAPLAN data could potentially occur if a parent misreads the information due to a lack of statistical knowledge or does not understand the wider context in which the school operates in, for example the socio-economic profile of school community. ICSEA is designed to provide some of this context but is apparently little used or understood by parents. Out of date information could also lead to misinterpretation of the current situation.

Principals are concerned that financial data could be misinterpreted by parents as there are nuances in the accounting process which render the data non-comparable, particularly between school systems. Parents, however, do not appear to be using this information in their decision making. Hence the danger of misinterpretation is minimal here.

Misuse of My School data by parents could take place if a school is selected solely on information contained on the website, for example, NAPLAN scores or implied student-teacher ratios. As they are generally not using My School as their sole source of information for decision making, however, the danger for misuse of the data by parents in this sense is minimal.

Potential for misuse does not, however, necessarily imply that the information should not be made available.

"I don't think you can do anything about that (the potential for misuse). It is facts and people will read into it however they want... It's the parent's responsibility anyway to see or if they hear information on the media to follow it up to see what it's based on" Parent. State/Catholic primary school.

In relation to the research objective here, My School has taken steps to balance the community's right to know with the need to avoid misinterpretation. However, these measures are not necessarily taken up by parents and used to this end. While My School contains a considerable amount of information

(e.g. glossary, ICSEA scores) which aims to give context to or caveats around the information provided, many parents are unlikely to go into this level of detail in order to gain a full understanding.

Principals' perspective

While principals do not generally disagree with the overall premise of the community's right to know the information on the My School website, several express strong concerns about potential misinterpretation or misuse by parents. From their point of view, many of the nuances behind reporting of data which could lead to misinterpretation are unlikely to be understood and taken into account by parents. Some principals, therefore, feel that the information should not be provided without further contextualisation.

"Perhaps if you look at pages like this for an educator these numbers mean different things perhaps than a parent who is not an educator, who may not understand or be able to read into it. So it's simply a number and then you look at the next school, 'Is their number the same? No, it's better. They must be a better school'. Is that misinterpretation or perhaps less knowledge about what the numbers mean in order to make a judgement?" Principal. State/Catholic primary school.

"I think they have the right to know but I think it should be from the school not external. Even have the same information and be presented the same but within our school websites, whatever it might be so maybe schools can contextualise the information like you were talking about before with the huge influx of students. I think there should be some opportunity to contextualise some of the data" Principal. State/Catholic primary school.

Principals' main concerns are the possibility of parents:

- Comparing NAPLAN results across schools or year on year within one school without an understanding of the broader context. For example, when comparing between schools, does a given school have selective entry, a dual curriculum, a very small student base or other factors which would potentially compromise meaningful comparison? Or when comparing an individual school's performance year on year, have there been changes to cohort composition or other circumstances which have contributed to differences in NAPLAN scores?
- Using financial data in their decision making when this may not, from the principals' point of view, give an accurate view of school finances. This is of particular concern if parents are comparing across school systems e.g. state, Catholic or independent.
- Taking into account other data which may be (as perceived by principals) inaccurate or out of date, for example, student and teacher population numbers or post-school destinations.

ACARA partners' and other stakeholders' perspective

Many partners and other stakeholders took a similar stance as principals on the availability of information to the public. While they agreed it was important that the information was available to parents, it was felt likely that they could place too much emphasis on these figures when deciding on a school for their children.

"I'm not about the parents not getting the information; I'm on about them getting the information where context will be provided as to its significance within the range of issues"

people might like to think about when you decide whether a school is good, bad or indifferent”
Executive Director, Catholic Education Commission.

However, similar to parent feedback, some partners and other stakeholders believed that information taken by parents from My School was only a small part of the decision making process. It was believed that this information acted only as a starting point for further conversation at parent introductory meetings.

“The data is difficult for them to understand but we say people don’t move from schools because of NAPLAN results or because what they read on the My School web site and nor do they enrol students based on that data alone. They may visit schools because they looked on the My School web site to see where the local schools are situated and what their scores are but in the end it is the interview and the school tour and the programs that are offered that make the difference not the score and our survey results clearly show that” Principals’ Representative.

4.2. Has My School reporting increased accountability and transparency (of schools, of the government, of school systems)?

Accountability was often perceived to go hand in hand with transparency and to have a very similar or interchangeable meaning. “Transparency” is taken to refer more to the availability of information.

“You’re seeing exactly what’s going on in that particular school” Parent. State/Catholic primary school.

“Accountability” as either seen as the same as transparency or as the use of information by schools, governments, school systems or parents to justify, question or improve performance.

Due to the website’s focus on individual schools rather than aggregate data, it is believed to provide transparency and accountability at a school level, but is not perceived to have had the same impact on governments or school systems.

Parents’ perspective

Transparency and accountability at individual school level

When asked to consider whether My School makes schools more transparent and accountable, responses from parents are mixed. However, there is general agreement that publication of NAPLAN results and other My School information does provide transparency and accountability on an individual school basis.

“It’s like their private life is out there” Parent. State/Catholic primary school.

“It’s put them under the microscope a little bit” Parent. State/Catholic secondary school.

From the parents’ perspective, much of the information contained on the My School website is already perceived to be in the public domain via school websites and annual reports. Therefore My School

does not necessarily represent an increase in transparency or accountability, but rather a gathering together of information into one website.

"It's an overlap of information and I don't think it has caused them to become more transparent by having that information there. I think it's in annual reports and financials, you get all that anyway" Parent. State/Catholic secondary school.

While the information on My School may be available in other locations, My School has made it more accessible to parents.

"I think this website we didn't know about a lot of this beforehand now we know about it. It definitely has brought to light results" Parent. State/Catholic secondary school.

"(Has My School made parents more accountable?) Well, the information is published. It's on the net for all to see. Perhaps in the past it was in policy folders in the office which you could ask to read which as a parent you could do. It's all open to you there" Parent. Independent school.

Having information available in a transparent format means that schools can be held accountable for their academic outcomes and use of funding.

"I think when talking about transparency they deliver upon on whatever they basically promise. You send your kid to that school for a particular reason, whatever it is it's that they deliver. Transparency is they put everything at the table, at the end of the year there is the numbers they either deliver or didn't deliver" Parent. State/Catholic secondary school.

"I think the funding is definitely more transparent, anyone could go on and look at how much any other school got. Before that I don't know where you could go to find that, it makes it more accessible to people maybe. There is funding which makes them accountable for where the money is going and why" Parent. State/Catholic secondary school.

Some parents feel that increased accountability from schools is improving outcomes for children.

"I suspect children actually benefit from it. I can see the results improving. Okay it's NAPLAN but it's still curriculum that they're actually testing against" Parent. State/Catholic primary school.

"Absolutely (schools have become more accountable) which I think is why they do all the preparing for NAPLAN, the data is there. They want to raise the levels so people can see the performance improvements" Parent. State/Catholic secondary school.

Transparency also potentially means that schools cannot over-claim their successes.

"I don't think they can fudge their figures. For example, 'Our school is sitting in the top 5%'. It's there in black and white for us to look at it so we can say that's not necessarily the case" Parent. Independent school.

Transparency and accountability at government level

Parents are often unsure as to whether or not My School makes governments more transparent and accountable. The relationship between government policy or performance and the information on

individual schools contained in the website is unclear to many parents. Potentially, My School could be a “*tool for parents to be more aware, to question more*” (Parent. State/Catholic primary school.) but it can be difficult for parents to envisage how this might be played out in practice.

Governments are expected to have access to NAPLAN results and other information on school performance in more detail than is featured on the My School website. Therefore, while NAPLAN in general may serve to make governments more accountable, the website itself is not expected to play a significant role here.

Parents tend to associate governments with funding and refer to the funding information on the website when talking about transparency and accountability in this context.

“It displays their funding, how much they provide...so you can hold them accountable I guess”
Parent. Independent school.

“They can't favour whether it be the private or public schools. It puts the numbers out there”
Parent. State/Catholic secondary school.

While it is possible to see whether funding has increased or decreased for a particular school over time, it is difficult to see how this could be related to government decision making, especially since a) the information is only available for individual schools, not in aggregate form and b) no reasons are given for changes in funding.

One of the ways in which My School was thought to potentially provide accountability from a government perspective is in the global context. I.e. My School may serve to illustrate how well the Australian school system is doing compared to that of other countries.

Transparency and accountability at school system level

Parents find it difficult to comment on whether school systems have become more transparent or accountable as a result of My School. Again, as the information is not presented in aggregate form it is difficult for parents to compare the achievements of one school system against another. From the parents' perspective My School operates at an individual school level.

“No, (My School does not make school systems more transparent) because it's very individualised. It doesn't tell you how much the Government is providing to all state schools in this area, all state schools in Victoria. You can't make comparisons unless you're very diligent and write down all the figures” Parent. Independent school.

“They would have had their systems in terms of balances before. I don't know that having a public website forum as opposed to annual reports or reports to Education of Qld or board members or whoever (would make them more transparent)” Parent. State/Catholic secondary school.

Principals' perspective

Transparency and accountability at individual school level

Principals, on the whole, are of the belief that My School has had little impact on transparency and accountability at school level. NAPLAN, financial and other data is already available on school

websites, in annual reports and directly from school staff. Hence, transparency is already perceived to be in place from that point of view.

“But in terms of the My School website, we all have that data on our school websites. It’s not a secret it’s all on our school websites. In fact there is more data on your school websites like number of teachers that have a master’s degree, staff absences” Principal. State/Catholic primary school.

“If you took My School out of the mix, we’re as transparent as we can possibly be. We want everyone to know about our school” Principal. Independent school. Schools, particularly those in the state and Catholic systems, have other accountability mechanisms in place and therefore tend not to see a significant role for My School in this respect.

“The Catholic system already has, because the Government was funding the Catholic system, they already had a huge number of accountabilities in place. We have been use to reporting in this way for quite a long time. We have to report back to the Catholic System and the Catholic system reports back to the Government” Principal, Catholic primary school.

“There are things like the Student Attitude to School Survey, Parent Survey, Staff Survey even though we haven’t had one for a couple of years. And then the VCE results, the NAPLAN results.... I think there are 40 measures that a high school can be measured against so that whole gambit is how we’re accountable” Principal, state secondary school.

Transparency and accountability at government level

Publication of NAPLAN scores can be seen as making the government more accountable to tax payers.

“It’s also because the Government NAPLAN is standardised testing throughout the country.... then there is also accountability back to the population to say ‘OK, you’re paying all this money for this to happen. This is where you can find the data’. That was my impression. It was a way of reinforcing these tests. Here is where you can actually see what we’ve done” Principal. State/Catholic primary school.

However, not all principals view My School in this light. For some, there is a political agenda behind the provision of My School which is not necessarily related to transparency or accountability for the purpose of enhancing school outcomes.

“It’s a conduit for pretty poor data and then what it’s used for is by many politicians to say we’re keeping these schools accountable” Principal. Independent school.

“All the economic data was driven by a political agenda about private schools taking education dollars from public schools. All of that economic data, socio economic, ICSEA scores is driven by political agenda, which I think was actually aimed at reallocating the financial pie” Principal. Independent school.

Others comment that My School is a government initiative and, as such, its purpose is to make schools more transparent and accountable, not the government itself.

In fact, the focus on individual schools can be seen as moving accountability away from governments or school systems to the school level.

“My school says that this could suit some systems because it takes the system away from the school and puts the school up front and there is no other responsibility around that school around what’s happening in the education system. While you keep putting the school out there, there is less responsibility for either the Federal or State Government” Principal. State/Catholic secondary school.

The issue of transparency around the cost of providing the My School website was also raised.

“No, (My School has not made governments more transparent) because otherwise you would have the cost benefit analysis. Yeah, we would know how much it cost” Principal. State/Catholic secondary school.

Transparency and accountability at a school system level

State and Catholic systems are believed to have their own internal accountability measures. From this point of view My School is not perceived to play a major role in providing transparency or accountability at this level.

One Queensland principal, however, commented on the positive impact of increased accountability for that state’s school system.

“Well I think NAPLAN was a wakeup call for Queensland state schools. We needed it. I think as a system we were looking inwardly at our own state. And I know people in the system were aware that results were going backwards. I think bringing it out as a public accountability for our system, we didn’t really like it, but we all have done something about it... I think it was a wakeup call. Queensland needed to be public” Principal. State/Catholic primary school.

ACARA partners’ and other stakeholders’ perspective

Transparency and accountability at individual school level

Partners and other stakeholders agree the My School website increases accountability of schools due to the public nature of the information. Partners and other stakeholders also believe that schools acknowledge this information may be used by parents when deciding on a school for their children and therefore, positive figures provided a selling point.

“Yes, clearly; it’s an objective fact. There is more information about local schools out there than there ever has been, how much of it parents want, how much of it is used well, how much of it parents can access in a meaningful way that’s a whole other question entirely. But it’s certainly transparent” Catholic School Sector representative.

However, some partners and other stakeholders expressed concern that schools were placing too high an emphasis within their curriculum on succeeding within the NAPLAN test, and therefore students could be losing out in other areas of learning.

“You can have a scenario where kids in poorer parts of town have their curriculum narrowed right down so maybe they can go a bit better on the test. The facts are their learning experience can become narrowed down because at the end of the day people feel like they’re

under the hammer with a high stakes test” Executive Director, Catholic Education Commission.

“That’s part of the dilemma because you might get improvement in those measures but not the impact you want for a society because we want young people to be able to be happy and creative and socially responsible individuals” Government School Sector representative.

Some partners and other stakeholders believe that the My School website may have given rise to dialogue between parents and schools, making schools more accountable and transparent to individuals and the public.

“It has probably given them an opportunity to be more accountable and probably increase transparency because we do push that the data provides an opportunity for parents to go and talk to the school about what’s happening, so that helps to increase transparency” Government School Sector representative.

“There would probably be individual instances where parents would have taken schools to task having been able to do the comparisons and I think again where schools have been able to coast on a reputation in a competitive environment” Catholic School Sector representative.

However, others believe that My School has not made schools any more accountable or transparent. Partners and other stakeholders’ perceive that transparency has always been there as such data has been available through various other sources, although they may recognise that parents or the community may perceive that My School has made schools more accountable.

“Look honestly as I said earlier our sector has always been fairly highly accountable because other way we are funded etc., and that’s always been there. And the fact that most of our schools are funded by smaller systems or individually that accountability has always been there. I think people will think it’s made the Department of Education and the bigger systems of education and Catholic education more accountable but I don’t think it has because it boils down to how they allocate where that funding is allotted again as to what gets reported on My School website so in actual fact I don’t think its necessary made education any more accountable. People probably think it has” Independent School Sector representative.

“No the key point there is that as we said before there is nothing on there from a transparency point of view that wasn’t already publically available through the school community” Catholic School Sector representative.

Transparency and accountability at government level

There are few partners or other stakeholders who perceived My School as increasing accountability and transparency of governments outright.

“I think that it’s good that we’re that government is genuine about transparency and about making information available, and certainly parents have that information to use if they want to. And I think it reminds us as government to continue to try and make information available and more accessible” Government School Sector representative.

Generally partners and other stakeholders did not believe that My School was making governments more accountable and transparent, and often noted that this was never its purpose. Some partners

and other stakeholders indicated that it may make the government look more accountable and transparent but this may not be the reality.

“I don’t think you can say that I mean if you go and have a look at who uses and how many hits the My School website gets it’s not that great from what I understand and therefore I have to wonder, it has the capacity I suppose to look at those making it more accountable but in actual fact I don’t think it actually is” Independent School Sector representative.

“I don’t see it as its intention as being impact on government, I think that as I said earlier to some extent it’s been a useful way for government to say look we are making things transparent, but again whether that’s the right place to spend the money I would have doubt” Independent School Sector representative.

Similar to principals, some partners and other stakeholders believe there is a political agenda behind My School beyond that of increasing accountability and transparency of the government.

“Politicians love to be able to tell parents who are voters that they’ve made all this data available out there to help you make your decisions” Independent School Sector representative.

Transparency and accountability at a school system level

Once again a number of partners and other stakeholders believe that My School has not had a major role in increasing accountability or transparency at the school system level, simply because it has always been in place.

“We were already transparent and accountable if you are looking at our financial data we already have to report that to ASIC and to the Australian Tax office. In terms of what happens in our schools individually it’s all out there parents know about levies that have to be paid potentially and all those sorts of things so no I wouldn’t say we were any more transparent because of it” Catholic School Sector representative.

“Independent schools have always been quite responsible to boards anyway about the performance of their school, about the financial management of their schools and the like but it probably doesn’t change much for them” Government School Sector representative.

Whereas, others believe that having the data more readily available inevitably helps schools systems be more transparent and accountable.

“I think to some extent. A lot of this information was available before in different places it has consolidated it in to one place. Some schools, none of that information was available but a lot of the good schools and a lot of the schools I dealt with, that information was available it just wasn’t all in one space looking like that” Government School Sector representative.

4.3. Does My School reporting use data which is valid, reliable and contextualised? Is My School reporting sufficiently comprehensive to enable proper interpretation and understanding of the information?

To avoid repetition, these two closely related research objectives are covered in this section. For the purposes of this report “reliability” refers to the accurate reporting of data and validity to the perceived value or accuracy of the data for use in decision making.

Principals, partners and other stakeholders have very different perspectives compared to parents on the validity, reliability and contextualisation of My School data. This is largely due to partners, other stakeholders’ and principals’ “insider” knowledge of the way in which the information is collected and/or calculated and some of the nuances which could lead to misinterpretation. Parents, who generally do not have this knowledge, are more likely to take the information presented on the My School website at face value.

The extent to which the data is considered comprehensive and is therefore able to be accurately interpreted and understood relates largely to issues of contextualisation.

Detailed discussion of the accuracy, usability and presentation of My School information is contained in section 3.4. This section contains a summary of points relevant to the research objective.

Parents’ perspective

Parents tend not to question the reliability or validity of most of the school profile information presented on my school, for example the description of the school, staff and student numbers etc. They do, however, express a need for more contextual information, such as an outline of special programs offered, to help them form a rounded, holistic view of the school.

Parents have some concerns about the validity of NAPLAN data as a tool for comparing schools. The issue here is not inaccurate reporting of NAPLAN scores but factors which may have influenced the results of testing:

- Possible exclusion of some pupils from NAPLAN testing meaning that results are not reflective of the entire school population
- A perceived focus on “coaching” students for NAPLAN in some schools

At a broader level, some parents question the validity of NAPLAN scores as a measure of comparison on the basis that they do not reflect a holistic view of the school. NAPLAN’s focus on literacy and numeracy is considered narrow and does not, by definition, take into account strengths and weaknesses in other areas of the curriculum or specific features of the school.

ICSEA scores are difficult for parents to both understand and use in the context of comparing similar schools. This could be attributed to a lack of contextualisation in the sense that statistical concepts are not presented in a manner which is easily understood by the lay person. There is also some question as to the reliability of these scores, given that they are partially based on information

supplied by parents, given the views of some that some parents may provide inaccurate or incomplete data.

Reliability of the financial information provided is not generally questioned by parents. However, they did not appear to be using this information when comparing schools.

Overall, then, parents find some of the My School information to be reliable and valid. However, they do have concerns about the reliability and validity of NAPLAN and ICSEA scores, some of which relate to a lack of contextualisation. While a comprehensive range of NAPLAN data is provided, the lack of contextualisation can inhibit accurate interpretation.

Principals' perspective

Due to their more specialised knowledge of the origin and context of some of the My School information, principals express greater concern than parents over its reliability, validity and contextualisation.

The main area of concern for principals is around the validity of NAPLAN scores as a measure of comparison between schools, especially when used by parents. For principals a key issue here is contextualisation. From their point of view, there are numerous contextual factors which can render comparison of NAPLAN results between schools, or even year on year within one school, invalid. In terms of comparison between schools, these factors include size and location, proportion of children with special needs or from non-English speaking backgrounds, single or dual curriculum, single sex or co-ed, selective entry or comprehensive.

Size of school can affect the statistical reliability of results with smaller schools more prone to variations in NAPLAN scores due to changes within small cohorts. This, along with other factors which may influence the makeup of a given cohort (for example, an influx of new students or the loss of more able students to a selective entry school), can impact on the validity of comparisons over time within one school.

While the ICSEA score is intended to provide some contextualisation to the NAPLAN results, principals generally feel that it does not provide an accurate basis for comparison. In fact, the use of ICSEA scores appears to result in the selection of some "similar schools" which are not perceived to be at all comparable from the principals' point of view. Again, the key issue here is a lack of contextualisation, with factors such as school location, type of curriculum and characteristics of the school population (other than education and occupation of parents) not having been taken into consideration.

Some principals also express concern around the comparability of financial information, especially since the various school systems (state, Catholic and independent) are understood to have different reporting requirements. Here the issue is not so much around the reliability of the actual data included but the validity of its use as a means of comparison.

There were also some more minor concerns around the accuracy of maps and the reliability of information about post-school destinations.

The timeliness of some information on the My School website is also an issue for principals. For example, data on NAPLAN scores and financial position is believed to take some time to be featured on the site and is therefore out of date.

In summary, principals find some of the My School information to be reliable and valid. However, they do have some major concerns parents' use of NAPLAN scores to compare schools in the absence of an understanding of the wider context. The perceived danger here is that a lack of comprehensive context will lead to misinterpretation of the information provided. ICSEA scores go some way towards contextualising but, in isolation, do not appear to meet the needs of principals or parents in this regard.

ACARA partners' and other stakeholders' perspective

While My School is broadly thought to contain valid and reliable data, partners and other stakeholders do have a range of concerns regarding the reliability, validity and contextualisation of data as presented on the website.

The publication of NAPLAN data on My School is believed to lack the context required for parents to accurately interpret the data. Contextual information that partners and other stakeholders suggested would aid interpretation include the proportion of Indigenous students, students with special needs or students from non-English speaking backgrounds, impacts of changes to cohorts year on year, and the increased likelihood of fluctuations in NAPLAN results for small cohorts. While some of this information is available on My School, not all stakeholders are fully aware of the extent of information on My School.

"We don't believe that a school this year is like the same school last year because changes of students, changes of staff, demographic changes in the school community all serve to make schools evolving organisations so they don't remain static over time and we don't believe you can say that one school is like another simply because there are a set of student characteristics that might be similar. They are not the same in our opinion so to compare two schools and to say these schools are alike to the extent that we can say this one is better than that one because of their NAPLAN scores, we don't think there is any validity in it at all, we don't think it should be done" Principals' Representative.

An exception to the general feeling of confidence partners and other stakeholders have in regard to interpreting the data on My School is the ICSEA. While some partners and other stakeholders are confident they understand the metric and that is it useful, others either do not feel they understand it or feel it is not a valid metric to identify like schools.

"It's quite interesting for me that ICSEA has been most problematic for some sectors not others. That's where you get the notion of value adding when you measure performance against like schools" Government School Sector representative.

Again, similar to principals, some partners and other stakeholders also express concern around the comparability of financial information across state, Catholic and independent schools.

Comparisons across jurisdictions are also problematic for some partners and other stakeholders who note that Year 12 completions and certificates awarded and VET enrolments and traineeships data on the school profile page is not collected consistently across jurisdictions. Therefore, comparing schools across jurisdictions on these measures is not valid. Furthermore, it was felt that parents in some lower socioeconomic communities may be less likely to provide this information.

4.4. Does My School reporting provide schools (who have the primary accountability for student outcomes) with reliable, rich data on the performance of their students?

Parents' perspective

Parents expect schools have alternative and more comprehensive sources of data on the performance of their students. As such, they do not envisage schools using My School to monitor or evaluate the progress of their own students.

Principals' perspective

With a few exceptions, principals were not using the My School website to help them evaluate the performance of their students. Several referred to alternative sources of information which were both more comprehensive, easier to manipulate and more up to date.

Some had attempted to compare their school with "similar schools" as defined on the website but had found it difficult to identify commonalities with the "similar schools" generated.

My School information is, however, sometimes used to demonstrate the performance of the school to parents or to staff members.

ACARA partners' and other stakeholders' perspective

Partners and other stakeholders understand that schools have alternative, more detailed sources of the data that is available on My School. However, they also acknowledge specific instances where My School is likely to provide information in a format not as readily available elsewhere. Namely comparing their own performance to other similar schools (not necessarily schools identified as similar on the My School website), schools in their local area, or schools in other sectors.

"The schools are saying they can use it to inform their own thinking about their planning, their strategies, they can contextualize their performance. I think it's really important for teachers to be making judgments which they are doing all the time, understanding the broader environment so schools can be insular places, they can be focusing entirely on their own cohort and their own frame of reference and the external frame of reference country and cohort is very important" Test Administration Authority.

4.5. Does My School reporting provide parents and families with information they need to develop informed judgements, make choices and engage with their children's education and the school community?

Parents' perspective

My School is seen by many parents as a starting point for research leading to a decision about their child's education. It can be used, for example, to identify schools within a given area, to compare the performance of local schools from different school systems, to short list schools of a particular size or to identify local schools with the highest NAPLAN scores.

Once a child is enrolled in a school, some parents use My School to follow the progress of that school's NAPLAN scores over time or to put their child's NAPLAN scores in context. One of the key aims here is to reconfirm the parents' decision making or, potentially, to take action if the school is interpreted to be underperforming.

None of the parents participating in this research had made a decision based solely on information from My School. There is widespread acknowledgement that My School is just one of many resources which feed into decision making. Visits to a prospective school and/or its website and discussions with other parents form an essential role here. While it provides some useful information, My School cannot, in isolation, give parents the comprehensive view of a school which many are seeking. In particular, it does not provide information on programs and achievements outside the NAPLAN sphere, nor a more qualitative sense of the spirit or ethos of the school.

My School does provide parents with one avenue through which to "engage with their children's education". There is little evidence, however, that My School is directly assisting parents to engage with the school community. In general, it appears that parents do not use My School information specifically as a starting point for discussions with teachers or other parents.

Principal's perspective

As discussed above (in section 4.5.4), principals have some concerns about parents' use of NAPLAN results to make judgements and choices about schools. The main concern here is around a lack of contextualisation of the results which mean that the judgements made by parents are not well informed.

Few principals reported having conversations with parents on the topic of My School in general or specific information drawn from the website. From this perspective it appears that My School is not generally instigating greater engagement with the school community.

Partners and other stakeholders' perspective

As discussed above (in section 4.5.4), partners and other stakeholders have concerns regarding the ability of parents to interpret the data on the website, thus, parents' ability to develop informed judgements and make choices is not perceived to be enhanced significantly by My School. However, a number of partners and other stakeholders note that My School could be used by parents to engage with their child's school or schools their child/ren may attend in the future.

"I think they're wanting to get a basic understanding of some of the sort of the basic attributes of a school. So they might look at it to see how big a school is, the diversity of the school population, some of those sorts of things. So if I was using it as a parent I would want to know some of the basic demographics of that school, attendance patterns, I'd be interested in. so I don't know how much weight, and my understanding that parents don't place a lot of weight on NAPLAN results on the whole. I can think of one or two examples when parents have been interested in NAPLAN results, but on the whole I think they are more interested in some of the other schools' characteristics" Government School Sector representative.

Some partners and other stakeholders acknowledged My School as a tool for parents' choosing a school in situations where they have a choice of a number of schools.

"My hunch would be that the people that get the most benefit from the My School website would be the parents of kids in tight educational marketplaces where there are, where there is strong competition between schools for enrolment. Some of the work that has been done I think by the Whitlam Institute in recent times around NAPLAN would indicate that certainly parents in less well-off areas where there is a looser market probably pay very little attention to NAPLAN scores and My School website is a factor influencing the decision. But that would be mobile aspirational parents in an area where schools are competing for enrolment I think would get the most benefits out of it from their perspective" Catholic School Sector representative.

4.6. Does My School reporting provide the community with access to information that enables them to understand the performance of schools and the context in which they perform and to evaluate the decisions taken by governments?

The first part of this research criterion, “Does My School reporting provide the community with access to information that enables them to understand the performance of schools and the context in which they perform?”, is addressed in detail in section 4.5.4 above to the extent that it applies to parents. While members of the community more broadly were not interviewed as part of this study, it is assumed that many of the issues encountered by parents in relation to understanding the performance of schools and the context in which they perform, would also apply to the community at large.

Although the website is believed to be primarily aimed at parents and schools, the wider community can use My School information, and particularly the NAPLAN scores, to help them understand the performance of schools. Parents, principals, partners and other stakeholders acknowledge that this only provides one part of the picture, i.e. a snapshot focus on literacy and numeracy, and that there are issues in comparing NAPLAN data in the absence of an understanding of the wider context.

The second part of this research criterion, i.e. whether My School enables the community to evaluate decisions taken by governments, was more difficult for parents and principals to comment on.

Parents’ perspective

“Decisions taken by governments” is generally taken to mean decisions around funding. Parents in general displayed little interest in, or knowledge of, school funding. In addition, as My School only presents information on an individual school basis it is difficult for parents to envisage how the website could assist them in understanding the impact of government funding decisions on schools in general. At individual school level, the minority who do look at school financial information may notice a change in government funding from year to year. However, as My School is not expected to provide a reason for this, parents believe that it would be difficult to relate this to government decision making.

Principals’ perspective

Again, as the data is only presented at individual school level, rather than in aggregate, it would be difficult for principals to use My School to see or understand the broad impact of any government funding or other policy-related decisions.

Where their own school is concerned principals have other, more comprehensive, data sources at their disposal so would not generally need to use My School for this purpose.

ACARA partners and other stakeholders' perspective

Partners and other stakeholders did not commonly indicate they use the My School website to evaluate decisions taken by governments and did not perceive significant scope for parents or schools to do so.

"If it becomes a vehicle for explaining public policy are you in danger then of feeling that the data is influenced by that story that the public policy wants to tell?" Government School Sector representative.

However, an exception is decisions related to funding. A number of partners and other stakeholders referred to My School in reference to the new schools' funding model and indicated use of the website to evaluate government funding decisions and if necessary advocate on behalf of schools to government.

"Yes we do, we look at government decisions on school funding, the one I just talked about being a case in point and we see how that decision was made and we are then able to advocate for other considerations to be brought into the argument and that's just one case. We use it all the time to understand why things are happening" Principals' Representative.

"The reason I actually went to the My School website is because in the Education Bill it does say that for some of the funding elements under the new funding model they actually get the data from ACARA and the data is actually displayed on the website, and so that's one of the major reasons I went in and used My School because I had to look at that data to see what the government was using to fund our schools and then it was a case to looking to see whether that was actually accurate and whether our schools are being fairly funded, based on that information. And there are a whole lot of anomalies; there was a whole lot of bad information up there that disadvantaged our schools" Independent School Sector representative.

Partners and other stakeholders do not perceive parents use My School to evaluate decisions taken by government, though there was some acknowledgement that My School could have the potential to support parents to do so, given that parents use the website.

"Yes given the audience, given we know a lot of parents are using it across the community and beyond Australia are using it; it is a potential tool for explaining Government policy" Government School Sector representative.

4.7. Does My School reporting provide school systems and governments with sound information on school performance to support ongoing improvement for students and schools?

Parents' perspective

Parents generally found it difficult to comment on this criterion, having little understanding of how school systems or governments may potentially use My School information. The usual assumption is that school systems and governments would have alternative and more comprehensive sources of information at their disposal than provided on the My School website.

Principals' perspective

Principals also believe that school systems and governments would be using alternative and more comprehensive sources of information. In particular, they expect these bodies to have access to NAPLAN information considerably in advance of its inclusion on the My School website.

ACARA partners' and other stakeholders' perspective

Partners and other stakeholders by and large feel that school systems and governments do not use My School to source information on school performance or to support ongoing improvement for students and schools because they have the same, or more detailed data available through other sources. The exception is that school systems may use My School to compare performance of their schools to schools in other sectors.

"The performance systems of schooling they would have all of the data that is on My School so they would not have the need to access it through My School" Independent School Sector representative.

"You could try and put it on the My School website but it would be an absolute, well you couldn't really because of the privacy issues but the level of detail required to make that sort of, to inform improvement etc., you need that high level of detail which comes in the school report. And there are all sorts of issues around confidentiality of that data that I don't think you could use the My School website in a way that it's going to inform an improvement over a system or even at a school level. It gives you general trend information that would be it." Independent School Sector representative.

5. Attitudes towards and usage of the My School website

5.1. Perceived purpose of the My School website

There is a range of perspectives amongst parents, principals, partners and other stakeholders on the purpose of the My School website and the motivations behind its provision.

Parents' perspective

From the point of view of parents' My School is believed to exist to assist them in selecting and monitoring the progress of schools by providing a range of information, including NAPLAN scores, in a central location.

"To empower you as a parent. It gives you the information to go away and make that decision jointly or however. It's enabling you to access the information" Parent. Independent school.

There is some understanding among parents that My School was prompted by a perceived need, at government level, for increased transparency and accountability from schools.

"I think it was transparency initially" Parent. State/Catholic primary school.

"Governments trying to make them (schools) accountable" Parent. State/Catholic primary school.

Much of the information on My School is also believed to be available via school websites and annual reports. Therefore the purpose of the website is to bring it together in a central location, rather than necessarily to provide new information.

Principals' perspective

Principals had stronger and more wide ranging opinions than parents on the purpose of My School.

Principals acknowledge that a key role of the website is to help parents to select schools.

"I think it's purely for parents as a shopping tool essentially" Principal. State/Catholic primary school.

Taking a broader view, a key purpose of My School is perceived to be to create competition between schools and, as a result, improve performance. Transparency and accountability are important precursors to creating competition and, as such, are considered to be key reasons for the provision of My School.

"I think initially, from a cynical point of view, it was because they wanted some way of driving schools to improve. If your results were more out then perhaps that was a factor to drive schools to improve" Principal. State/Catholic secondary school.

“I think that was the primary reason, when we go back to the beginning of the Labour Government and the end of the Howard Government, it was accountability. We had to sign off on things every year. This was one other measure by which schools were going to be held accountable. Transparency across Australia” Principal. State/Catholic secondary school.

Apart from creating competition between schools, My School is can be perceived to have been instigated with a view to holding governments more accountable.

“I think it would've been more around accountability and transparency and how the state is going” Principal. Independent school.

Facilitating consistent reporting between school systems or between states is also identified as an aim of the My School website.

“The motivation behind it was a deficit model: Bashing education departments by suggesting non-Government schools do this stuff all the time and department schools don't. Therefore let's make them do it” Principal. State/Catholic secondary school.

“I think there is a federalism issue. I think there were some states that did the accountability well. They required their schools to do it and they had versions of this and there were others that didn't. I think the Federal Government said we're going to mandate some particular things. How reporting is done was one example” Principal. State/Catholic secondary school.

Some principals referred to their understanding of the political context underlying the provision of the website when asked to explain its intended purpose.

A common theme here was discussion around the application of market principles to the Australian education system:

“There is an argument in the literature around a neo liberal view of where we're at in the creation of markets. This was about defining a market for education through this. People had information. You got information, you can compare things see what you're getting. That was heavy in the logic but it was divorced from the reality” Principal. State/Catholic secondary school.

Julia Gillard's visit to New York and adoption of some related policies and practices based on the “New York model” was also cited, by some principals, as the impetus behind My School. The effectiveness of this model and the appropriateness of introducing similar principles to the Australian education system was questioned.

“We moved to the My School website in 2006 or 7 and that was at a time where there was this belief, based on Julia Gillard and what was happening in New York, that we needed to go to a nationalised curriculum and we needed to ensure transparency. Transparency was the go to at that stage in terms of improving school performance. Schools could be held accountable if you had a standardised measure to do that. So it's the accountability drive. By measuring the pigs, so to speak, we would improve the pig” Principal. Independent school.

From another perspective, the provision of My School is believed to be motivated from a more public relations based political agenda.

“I think it was a very calculated attempt by Government to show parents that they were driving school improvement agenda by weighing the pig but not doing anything to fatten up the pig. They haven't been prepared to put anything else behind it. Has it led to redistribution of resources or giving money to schools that needed it? Fantastic! But it hasn't done that. It's led everyone to compete and some schools are taking it very seriously. When they're worried about where they're going to come we see things that are unethical. I think the original attempt would have been a very political one and very calculated” Principal. Independent school.

ACARA partners' and other stakeholders' perspective

Similar to principals, partners and other stakeholders had strong and fairly consistent views on the purpose of the My School website. Overwhelmingly, the website was understood to be for parents, and or the broader community.

“Well it's designed for parents and the broader community would be my perception” Independent School Sector representative.

For those who felt the website was for parents, the website was understood to be intended to provide information for school selection and or to evaluate the performance of the schools their children attend. Some mentioned transient families or those moving interstate as among specific groups of parents who could benefit from use of the website.

“It's also giving some information for parents when they are picking a school that they want to attend especially people that come from interstate so I think there is an advantage there because it gives them a feel for what type of school it is, there's some demographic information there's information about the school it leads to the school web site and I think that it's a really good starting point for people when they are transient and moving around Australia” Test Administration Authority.

The notion of transparency, in particular around school performance, was mentioned frequently in relation to the intended purpose of the website. However not all partners or other stakeholders agreed that the My School website necessarily achieved this intended purpose.

“I don't think NAPLAN results or student test results in any way should be ever used to measure school performance and to compare school performance is a totally flawed concept. I think the valuable part of NAPLAN results is they can be used as a diagnostic tool for teachers and I am totally opposed to it going anything beyond that” Independent School Sector representative.

“Well it's about transparency and accountability and comparing schools. So in theory two schools with the same ICSEA score should be getting the same NAPLAN outcomes. So the theory is if two schools have the same ICSEA score you look at their NAPLAN scores, one is way below the others you'd say well there are not achieving very well and therefore they are not a very good school. That's the blunt purpose” Independent School Sector representative.

The website was also understood by some to be an attempt by Government to make schools and teachers more accountable and to drive school improvement. However, again, not all necessarily believed that this objective was achieved through the website.

“My understanding is that it’s an attempt to provide parents with enough information to make informed decisions about selection of schools and I think there is probably an unspoken agenda which goes to my belief that politicians find it convenient to shoot the messenger so that it’s easy to sort of argue that teachers are not sufficiently accountable and that this is one way of holding teachers accountable by putting it all out there and in public so that if their scores are low by putting it on the public record then they’ll pull up their socks. I don’t agree with that but I’m hoping that that’s certainly been one of the agendas” Catholic School Sector representative.

A few partners and other stakeholders mentioned the broader political context, for example the Gonski review, and subsequent desire to make schools’ financial information public and a move towards commodifying education.

“When it was first brought out if we look at Julia Gillard’s media exposure when My School was all posted around with ‘making schools transparent and accountable’ and what a great benefit it would be to the parents. That’s the political win” Independent School Sector representative.

“I think the My School website was part of the whole movement to commodify and supporting so-called choice but in some ways that was linked to maintaining the privilege. That whole notion. It came about at the same time when there was increased pressure on parents to believe that quality education was not public” Government School Sector representative.

5.2. Overall opinions of My School website

Opinions of and overall feelings towards My School vary widely, both within and between the parent and principal groups and across partners and other stakeholders. Reasons behind this diversity of response are complex and are outlined in detail throughout this report. This section provides an overview of parents’, principals’, partners’ and other stakeholders’ orientation towards the website.

Parents’ perspective

Parents’ feelings towards My School predominantly range from indifferent to positive. In general they are supportive of the website’s existence.

“What I have found with My School website, it’s trying to inform and trying to also assist people in getting a better idea about... what school, what they’re doing and how they’re funded. I think it’s trying to be inclusive... I think it’s proactive. It’s a good site” Parent.
State/Catholic secondary school.

Among parents who feel more positive about My School are those who view it as a useful starting point to assist them in selecting a school for their child.

“I felt that the website is more like a door to all educational information, actual information on schools. So many different things about education all in one place” Parent. State/Catholic secondary school.

In addition, the ability to use My School to short list schools is valued by some parents.

“When I went looking on their site I figured it saves a lot of the footwork. You can do a lot of reading. This sort of culls (schools). Particularly in our area where we have a lot of schools I could have chosen from. I actually could narrow it down a little bit” Parent. Independent school.

For some other parents, however, My School is perceived to offer a limited range of information, much of which is available elsewhere, for example via school websites. As such it is felt to be of little relevance. Still others are indifferent because they have only taken a cursory look at the site and not been motivated to look further.

Parents do not generally expect to have all of their questions answered by My School or to make decisions based on My School information alone. Instead they use it in conjunction with school websites, school visits and discussions with other parents.

“I think the website is potentially a starting point but there are a lot of other things you need help from. Whether that’s knowledge you get elsewhere, from other people and doing your own research of the school” Parent. State/Catholic primary school.

In the context of selecting schools, My School can be seen as an impartial source of information.

“You can go around and have interviews with all the different schools and they put their best information to you but an unbiased opinion on a website is probably a little more truthful in that respect” Parent. State/Catholic secondary school.

A further positive, from the point of view of some parents, is the ability to use My School to monitor the progress of the school they have chosen for their child. This was mentioned across school systems but appears to be particularly important for parents whose children attend independent schools with high fees as they see themselves as making a significant investment.

At an individual level, some parents find My School useful in providing context to the NAPLAN scores of their own children.

Parents tend to talk about My School in terms of its relevance to them personally. However, a few did comment spontaneously on the wider role of the site in increasing transparency and accountability in the education sector.

“I think it drives discipline around education in the schools and that’s really at the end of the day what it’s all about; helping your children” Parent. State/Catholic primary school.

From the parents’ point of view there are two key issues which can compromise My School’s usefulness: First, the focus on statistical information in general, and on literacy and numeracy specifically, is perceived to present a narrow and rather dry picture of a given school. Several parents had visited the website hoping to get a more holistic view of individual schools. For example, an understanding of specific programs offered or a sense of the overall approach of the school.

"I think there are a lot more important things than that (My School information) as well ... The school's values and beliefs and other things about the school that you can't put in statistics" State/Catholic secondary school.

In particular, some parents visit My School in the hope that it will help them identify schools which have programs for children with special needs or interests and are disappointed to find that this level of information is not provided.

"I have a child with autism so looking at the website didn't give me a lot of information as to where to put her because she is high functioning and doesn't need a special ed unit ... It doesn't give me that information" Parent. State/Catholic secondary school.

Second, the overall layout of the site and, again, the heavy focus on statistics can make it difficult for parents to find and/or understand relevant information. Both of these points are discussed in more detail later in this report.

Principals' perspective

Principals differ widely in their responses to My School. At one end of the spectrum are those who describe the website as a useful source of information for schools and/or parents.

"I didn't like it to start with because I thought it was detrimental in terms it creates a league ladder for schools and that's how parents often use it. But there is very useful data there we use with our staff, our parent community. I do use what's there. Initially I was quite concerned about it" Principal. State/Catholic primary school.

For schools with high NAPLAN scores, My School can provide a positive source of PR.

"It actually works quite well for us. We do quite well in NAPLAN. It helps us because we're not a ... (independent school named) or a ... (independent school named). People do need to check us out a bit more and that's a key thing. It's helpful because we do well. It wouldn't be helpful if our results weren't particularly good" Principal. Independent school.

In the middle ground there are those who see My School as a benign, but not particularly relevant, resource sitting in the background. From this perspective, My School is perceived to have little value, either for schools or for the community in general.

"It's totally irrelevant to my community and has nothing to do with why people come to our school. Nobody ever chooses to look at My School website and that's how I like it... It's just another hoop we have to jump through. It's totally irrelevant, just a task" Principal. State/Catholic primary school. (Low ICSEA score)

"I haven't looked at the website since it first came up only because I don't see why I need to. I know where I am, I know where my kids are. I think it's only a snap shot. I don't think a site like that can actually reflect the efforts and work that individual schools do and in which particular areas they do" Principal, secondary, state/Catholic school

Principals with this point of view may be of the opinion that both schools and the community have alternative, and often more comprehensive, sources of information available to them which render My School unnecessary. Word of mouth and school websites can be considered more valuable sources of information for parents.

"I would also suggest the most pertinent ways of communication with parents is through your own website. Word of mouth is the most powerful means of advertising your school or community to the local community. This is just a white elephant" Principal, secondary, state/Catholic school

Some principals who had initially experienced a degree of anxiety or negativity when My School was launched now feel that their concerns have been alleviated. There are two main contributing factors here: Parents are not believed to be using My School to the degree initially expected, and the preparation of league tables from the NAPLAN data has not eventuated.

"The concern was is this going to mean we get ranked? I think that perception has altered, as people realise not many people refer to it" Principal. State/Catholic secondary school.

"We had done a lot of work for parents in representing what My School means and what it didn't. Certainly, my current parent body and previous parent body were feeling much less anxious about the interpretation, misinterpretation and the misuse of My School. We're finding its coming up less and less in conversations with people. People's consciousness of it, our paranoia as a school about it is diminishing" Principal. Independent school.

At the other end of the spectrum, some principals express more strongly negative views towards My School. Their concerns are wide ranging, however the main themes are outlined below:

➡ **Potential for misinterpretation of the data by parents when comparing schools**

"I don't think it's a reliable tool for parents and we're surrounded by schools that are quite competitive. When I say competitive - enrolments wise. You have a small school down the road, a bigger school down our end. I think parents look at it thinking that it gives them a clear picture of where that school sits and I don't believe that does justice" Principal. State/Catholic primary school.

➡ **Concern that My School does not provide a holistic or contextualised view of individual schools**

"There is no way you could ever document on a site like this the complexities of every individual (school) site. Every family is different, every school is different and that won't be reflected in that. It's reflected in the feeling you get when you walk into the school" Principal. State/Catholic primary school.

● **Potential negative implications of comparison for schools in lower socioeconomic areas and/or with low NAPLAN scores.**

"The potential is...If your school has not got great results, you can seem to be pushed down quickly and go into freefall. Part of that is the potential lack of understanding. You feel people see the raw numbers and say 'This is good, bad' or whatever and either will or won't send their kids to your school" Principal, state/Catholic school

"Our school does quite well but I am on the board of two other little schools in the West. I see the devastation that goes on for those schools and its heart wrenching and destroying...As a result of the website. People read it simplistically" Principal. Independent school.

"I feel for those particular schools. We've got a linked school with (school). It's a Government school in the centre of Australia. It's an indigenous school and they don't do well

at all. But those people are working their butts off, those teachers. What they're managing with those students is outstanding and My School doesn't give them much" Principal. Independent school.

ACARA partners' and other stakeholders' perspective

Partners and other stakeholders express a broadly similar range of views to principals and parents regarding the My School website. The majority of partners and other stakeholders we spoke to perceive the website as essentially positive, though most note potential concerns related to its use. A smaller number of partners and other stakeholders had essentially negative views of the website or expressed a neutral perspective.

Those partners and other stakeholders who had a more positive view of the My School website felt that the website was in line with a general move from government towards greater transparency more broadly and in relation to education.

"I think it increases transparency of Australian education and what's happening in schools and I think that is a good thing" Government School Sector representative.

Related to this is the benefit that information about schooling is not withheld from the public. My School was also understood by some to have influenced schools to publish more data on their websites than was the case prior to the launch of My School.

"We recognise the potential values that publication of school results can have from the point of view of transparency and if one of the aims of establishing My School was to ensure that schools were not hiding their results or withholding their results from the community then My School has achieved that" Executive Director, Catholic Education Commission.

"There's a whole greater push for accountability for transparency, schools are publishing more and more data and publishing things on their own individual websites" Test Administration Authority.

Furthermore, there was acknowledgement that attitudes towards the website have become more positive over time, and fears such as the large-scale publication of league tables and negative outcomes for schools that perform not as well on NAPLAN have not eventuated.

"But I think that as the site continues to mature and be refined and I think too as we continue to refine the way we utilise the data that is captured there I think there is a more positive mindset that has come into play around it" Government School Sector representative.

However, even those who felt the website was generally positive, acknowledged potential limitations including some audiences' limited ability to interpret some of the information (such as the ICSEA) and (necessary) simplification of data, such as financial data, making some of the data harder to interpret.

"I think different schools have different financial situations depending on, and I don't mean to divide between public and independent I mean even within the public system that the level of detail that is provided doesn't necessarily provide a justification as to why finances are in the state that they are in" Test Administration Authority.

"It is probably very useful but a bit too technical for most people. I think that for bureaucrats like myself with a lot of background in data and NAPLAN and performance data more

generally it is fine and the same for people in my division who work in the space but I would say for the vast majority of principals and certainly for parents it's probably overly technical and complex" Government School Sector representative.

Those with a more negative view cite the too narrow perspective of schools' performance provided by My School (in particular the heavy focus on NAPLAN), and the ICSEA which some felt to be limited in its ability to identify like schools.

"From the perspective of providing an accurate performance record of what schools achieve I don't think it does that ... In particular from a Catholic education perspective there is the fact that we know that the whole person education is provided in the Catholic school to what we try and develop and it is also a key factor in why parents choose our schools so a simple display of literacy and numeracy results obviously doesn't encapsulate the development of the whole person" Catholic School Sector representative.

5.3. Use of My School website

Participants in this research were selected on the basis that they had visited the My School website at least once in the previous 12 months. Use of My School varied widely among both parents and principals participating in this research, with some having only given it a quick glance and others visiting the site several times or on a semi-regular basis. Partners and other stakeholders on the whole were not heavy users of the website.

5.3.1. Use of My School by parents

Parents visit the My School website for a variety of reasons. Some had looked out of curiosity when the site was first launched or at some time since. Others had visited mainly during the period when they were in the process of selecting a primary or secondary school for their child. My School is also used by some to monitor the progress of the school that their child attends or compare their child's progress with that of the school as a whole.

School selection

As previously discussed, the My School website is often viewed as a "starting point" or "stepping stone" in the school selection process. As such, parents are not generally basing decisions solely on information from My School. While My School provides some basic information, parents tend to make their decisions based on visits to school websites, to the school itself and discussions with other parents.

Examples of ways in which parents report using the website to help them select schools include:

- Identifying schools in their local area to form a short list for further investigation via the school websites or visits
- Comparing state and Catholic schools on factors such as class size and NAPLAN score to decide which school system to enrol a child in
- Reading the school profile section to get a general idea of the school's ethos and strengths
- Looking at number of enrolments to help select a school of the desired size. Often the aim is to find a school which is not too large

- Looking at teacher numbers and comparing these with student numbers to give an idea of the student/teacher ratio and class sizes
- Comparing NAPLAN scores across schools as an indication of school achievements in the literacy and numeracy areas
- Noting senior secondary outcomes, particularly the proportion of students going on to further education. This was strong among parents with children at independent schools
- Looking for alternative schools for children with special needs, high ability or particular interests
- Following links to individual school websites for further information

In general parents do not appear to be making much use of the financial information section of the website or the ICSEA scores. Reasons for this are discussed in section 4.4.

Prior to visiting My School some parents had the expectation that the website would contain more comprehensive information on particular schools. For example, a listing of specific programs offered (e.g. for gifted children or those with special needs), particular strengths of the school (e.g. in sport or the arts), more contextual information about the profile of the school population or an overall impression of the ethos or character of the school.

“I looked at the My School website to check the local schools in the area and I found I didn’t get the information that I was looking for about the culture of the school, what they taught there. In primary school I guess you want to know more about what options are available as far as languages, music and drama and it didn’t give me that information” Parent. Independent school.

Most of this information, however, is known to be available via school websites or annual reports.

Monitoring progress

Parents who visit the NAPLAN section of the My School website use the information for a range of purposes, including monitoring the progress of their child’s school over time.

“I like to check the progress of the primary school and it’s interesting to see the changes. It’s improving in ranking and you can see it in the school. They spend weeks swotting for NAPLAN and the results have crept up. You can check how it’s tracking compared to comparative schools” Parent. State/Catholic primary school.

“Different levels: Say when they’re in Year 3 and then gone to Year 5 is there a difference in the year levels?” Parent. State/Catholic primary school.

Or to compare the NAPLAN results from their child’s school to those of other local schools.

“I think also looking at how the other schools in your immediate locality are performing. So if your kids are at one particular school how are they comparing to kids around the same area, similar school” Parent. State/Catholic primary school.

In part, the aim of this monitoring is to reassure a parent that they have made the right decision in selecting a particular school for their child.

“For me I go to the My School website on an annual basis just to reassure myself that I have picked the right school for them. Also, because it is such a financial burden to make sure I

feel comfortable that yes okay I'm doing the right thing, I'm working these ridiculous hours because I'm doing the right thing for them. I find time and time again I'm not finding the information I am wanting" Parent. Independent school.

"Just to see if the school is above or below average. If they're middle of the road or above average I don't think there is anything to worry about. If they're below then make a decision" Parent. State/Catholic primary school.

Visits to My School can be prompted by a range of factors:

- Receipt of a child's NAPLAN results

"When my son has done NAPLAN I had looked to see what the previous year's NAPLAN results were like and I did look at some other schools in the area to just compare. And especially where our school might have excelled in certain areas or in schools that were below" Parent. State/Catholic secondary school.

- An invitation from the school

"I was prompted by the school. They sent us a newsletter saying 'Go to My School'. I went on and didn't find it interesting at the time. Then when he went to high school I started looking at NAPLAN and was able to compare" Parent. State/Catholic secondary school.

- Information in the media

"Every now and then they (media) have stories about school performances and that sort of thing. That has prompted me to have a look otherwise you don't tend to think about it. It's not right up there on the list" Parent. State/Catholic primary school.

- A fee rise

"(Prompted to look at My School) When the fees kept going up. They jumped 20% from Year 4 to Year 5 so I did look at it quite a few times and went 'Hmm, then it is what it is'" Parent. Independent school.

- An election

"I suppose I have looked at it at election time, looked at the money spent. How much per student is being spent at private schools compared to state schools" Parent. State/Catholic primary school.

While NAPLAN is the main data source used for monitoring progress, parents may also look at school completion and post-school destination information.

"The school my boys are at, I have gone there to look at what their Year 12 results were last year, how many are working and how many are at Uni" State/Catholic secondary school

Principals' perceptions of parents' use of My School

Principals' awareness of the way in which parents use My School is limited to the interactions that they have had with parents on the subject. Some principals had no evidence of parental use of My School.

"For us in 6 or 5 years I have had one question from a parent. For our parents it's not a massive deal breaker about whether they're going to send their kids through to us" Principal. Independent school.

While others could cite instances where parents had clearly been informed by the My School website. For example:

- Prospective parents may comment that the school is doing particularly well in terms of NAPLAN scores, or that they have decided to consider the school based on its NAPLAN scores.
- More rarely, they may question why a school is not doing as well as they would like in terms of NAPLAN. This usually necessitates principals or teachers giving further context to the scores by explaining contributing factors. For example, changes to composition of cohorts, specific features of the school population etc.

Some principals believe that parents use My School only as a starting point or one of several sources of information about a school.

Others express concern about parents relying on My School data to draw conclusions when it is not perceived to give a holistic picture of the school concerned.

"I'm frustrated by it because we do have parents that go shopping and look at it and believe it's the sum of the school and there are other stories there that we can't tell. Schools that have special-ed units of 58, the one down the road has none. I have got 26 ES kids" Principal. State/Catholic primary school.

Partners' and other stakeholders' perceptions of parents' usage

The majority of partners and other stakeholders noted that they had either heard anecdotally or had been approached by parents intending to use the My School website as a tool for school selection. However, most mentioned that they did not feel this would be the only source or that final school selection decisions would be made based on the information on My School. Use of My School as a means of compiling a list of schools to investigate further was mentioned frequently. Some indicated it would likely be more useful for transient families or families moving to another state who did not have knowledge of local schools.

Among those who mentioned school selection as a use of My School, most added that it would likely be used to generate a short list of schools to investigate further and in conjunction with other information, such as information gathered directly from the school at a school visit, and discussions with teachers or principals.

"Our understanding of the research is that parents formulate a list to short list a number of schools and then the determining factors are what they experience on visiting that school and coming to an understanding of that community be that discussions with the principal, the staff,

other parents the fit for their child so it's a really experiential thing about when they actually get to the school" Catholic School Sector representative.

"I would expect that it is mostly used by parents to have an initial look in an area that they might be interested in to have a look at individual schools that they might be considering. And then potentially to form opinions or decide which ones to look further at" Independent School Sector representative.

Specific information that partners and other stakeholders felt parents may use includes the ISCEA, to better understand the makeup of the students at the school, school size, diversity, demographics and attendance patterns, NAPLAN performance and VET enrolments.

"For parents who don't feel that their existing knowledge of a school is sufficient then they will go to this but I would have a hunch that reputation in the community and playground or playgroup gossip might be of more use than the website" Catholic School Sector representative.

5.3.2. Use of My School by principals

Principals visit My School for a variety of reasons including:

- Curiosity: To see what is on the website
- To check that information included on the site about their particular school is correct
- To view their school through the eyes of a parent (and therefore be prepared to answer any questions that may arise when parents look at My School)
- To find information about other schools or compare their school to others
- To show and/or discuss NAPLAN results with parents
- To discuss the school's progress with teachers
- To summarise the information at the request of the school board
- For parent information evenings or newsletters (i.e. to explain the nature of My School or to direct parents to it to view NAPLAN scores)
- To get background information about a school at which they were applying for a new position

The various ways in which principals use My School data are described in more detail below.

Apart from initial visits prompted by curiosity, one of the main reasons for principals, or their staff, to visit the website on a regular basis is to check that the information included about their particular school is correct. This task often appears to be part of the role of a specific staff member, for example, the principal, a deputy principal or personal assistant.

"I check what's on the website is right, the NAPLAN results are right, NAPLAN results and those are correct. I wouldn't want it to be incorrect" Principal. State/Catholic secondary school.

In addition to checking for accuracy, some principals look at the NAPLAN data make sure that their school is not performing below average or below expectations.

“I just look at that page to make sure we’re green and there is no pink and then I close it down.... It’s probably a marketing thing just to make sure we’re all green. Just doing the double check” Principal. State/Catholic primary school.

Another reason for principals to access My School is to maintain an awareness of the information that parents may be looking at.

“I have (looked at My School) both at my current and previous school but that’s to imagine what potential parents could be (seeing) and to construct a narrative around that. There is a lot of narrative construction to say what’s happening on the My School website” Principal. Independent school.

In schools for which NAPLAN results are particularly positive, the My School website can be used as a marketing tool. For example, NAPLAN data is shown to educate visiting parents about the school.

“Every tour we do, all families have had a look. They’re interested in the comparative between what is a like school, where you sit on the graph with the dots, what the value add is to each student. They’re educated in terms of knowing what they’re choosing” Principal. State/Catholic primary school.

A few principals had used the site to make comparisons with other schools as part of their own research with a view to improving their school’s performance.

“I have looked at the like schools particularly in relation to NAPLAN results. I was keen to know the schools performing at the top end. What was it that they were doing that I might not be doing? I’ve done a bit of research into some of those things - as to what the literacy programs are and numeracy programs etc.” Principal. State/Catholic secondary school.

Some also use NAPLAN data to monitor and review their own progress with a particular cohort. The facility to graph student gain is considered particularly useful here.

“I think the relative gain, for our context, the relative gain represents the quality of the educational program in the school more so than the mean. I can compare to some of my local schools and those kids just have to turn up. It doesn’t say anything about the quality of the teaching” Principal. State/Catholic primary school.

NAPLAN data on the My School website is also used by principals in discussions or information sessions with teachers. Again, the student gain information is valued in this context.

“I use the student gains to celebrate with my staff the improvement they’ve made. It’s quite significant when you’re starting high to go back and say look at what we’re doing, what do we need to do to keep building on that” Principal. State/Catholic primary school.

Parents’ perceptions of principals’ usage

Parents expect principals to have alternative, and more comprehensive, sources of information at their disposal. Principals are not, therefore, believed to have much cause to use the My School website to evaluate their own school’s performance or that of other schools.

“I can't imagine a school wanting to hop on and ‘Oh, let's see how we're going through My School’. I am sure they get that through the Education Department. If they want to benchmark themselves I am sure there is a forum for them” Parent. State/Catholic primary school.

However, parents did expect principals at high performing schools to use NAPLAN information for marketing purposes.

Partners' and other stakeholders' perceptions of principals' usage

On the whole, partners and other stakeholders expected principals would primarily source the type of information available on My School from alternative sources which provided a greater level of detail (i.e. unit level data), a greater ability to interrogate the data, additional splits or filters (i.e. state and national means), and additional data types (for example workers compensation claims compared to similar schools).

“Individual schools would again use the results that they get sent to them, there is far more detail in those results, and it drills down into how each student is going against each question basically. And schools would be using that. They would use the files that they get sent from ACARA with all the results, I doubt very much that they would go to the website to get that information. Independent School Sector representative.

“We've got in WA a public school system which is what we call school performance monitoring system and that system does similar things to the My School web site but it also includes other information like how does workers compensation claims in your school compare to other similar schools or more generally what's the leave take like in your school compared to other schools. Financial audits to cover school also. There is a lot more information which is available to our principals through performance monitoring system and what we have developed is a system which rolls all that information up to a couple of very high levels and it's got the traffic light system which enables anybody looking at a school or a group of schools to say are they tracking ok or are they in trouble in one or more areas and they can drill down to information so I doubt very much than other than curiosity that our principals or our schools would use the my schools web site. Government School Sector representative.

However, there was acknowledgement that schools were likely to use My School to compare their own performance to other similar schools (which may not necessarily be schools identified as similar on the My School website), schools in their local area, or schools in other sectors.

“They might take a peek at what neighbouring schools are putting up if they are in one of those competitive marketplaces” Catholic School Sector representative.

There was also a suggestion that schools may look at My School to find out which schools they were being compared to nationally.

“I think they probably check it and look at who they are compared to across the country and who falls into similar type of category” Test Administration Authority.

There were varying opinions on the extent to which principals were thought to check the data on My School. Some partners and other stakeholders felt that principals were likely to be quite diligent in checking the data on the website relating to their own school, whilst others felt the principals would be confident about the data and may therefore not feel the need to check it.

“When ACARA opened up their portal for the principals to check their data prior to the release. There’s a fairly low uptake of that in terms of principals getting in beforehand so I think maybe you could miss-read that as being disinterest but I think it is probably more around the fact that they know the type of information that is going up on the web site” Test Administration Authority.

5.3.3. Use of My School by ACARA partners and other stakeholders

Some of the partners and other stakeholders we spoke to indicated they use the My School website to find information for their own organisations’ internal purposes while others indicated their use of the website is limited to checking accuracy of data or investigating possible discrepancies in the data, either prompted by their own review of the data or at the request of schools.

Uses of the data by those who indicated they sourced data for their organisations included:

- To find information about the make-up of schools
- To gain an understanding of the performance of schools in one’s own jurisdiction

“... gaining an understanding of the performance of ACT schools. Mainly we use it in trying to understand performance of schools as a group rather than looking at individual schools. But obviously because the My School website reports data by individual schools we do get a look at the data for individual schools but mainly in terms of gaining a bigger picture and understanding of what’s happening across the ACT” Government School Sector representative.

“Although we have most of the data ourselves but sometimes it’s just easy to look at one source in terms of their own educational outcomes, performances etc.” Independent School Sector representative.

- To get information on schools in other sectors
- To source data to help schools in their sector in their strategic planning processes
- To help schools measure their own effectiveness

“The data that’s used in My School will also be added to the data suites we use to help schools gauge their effectiveness” Government School Sector representative.

- Looking at My School occasionally out of curiosity

At times the use of My School by partners and other stakeholders relates to queries about or raised by the data on My School. In these instances the need to refer to the website is highlighted or created by the existence of the website. Examples mentioned include:

- To provide interpretation to schools who query data on My School (for example interpretation of ICSEA) and if necessary follow up

“I get inquiries ... about interpretation, about differences that they (schools) for see for the data presented there and our own schools online system because we’ve got, it’s not the same as this but it’s not dissimilar either, where we represent a lot of information about performance of schools and summarising it so in particular the people in that division, the School of Accountability and Performance division would be quite often involved in comparing the data

on this site with our own data and responding to questions from principals in our schools and informing them how they could use it. When it was first posted; now they have become a little bit more of the landscape” Government School Sector representative.

“For schools making sense of what’s on the My School website the use of the index of community education advantage is an ongoing...it’s a cause of concerns because schools don’t really have a good handle on what it means about their particular community. They see a mismatch between their relative ranking compared with the socio economics and the cultural background of their community. In many cases, most often it occurs when a school feels they’re being compared with schools they perceive would be better off than them” Executive Director, Catholic Education Commission.

- To compare data to data received from schools, investigating any differences and based on discrepancies possibly making submissions to government regarding funding

“I’ve used the website to get their data and compare it and then through the anomalies we’ve put papers and information back up to government to have issues around funding dealt with” Independent School Sector representative.

- To monitor significant changes to a school’s ICSEA scores which may have implications for funding

“Sometimes the ICSEA scores change from year to year so where there is a large difference in the number we look further into that and try to look at what is different within that school, why has that gone up or down because there is that implication for the funding on that” Government School Sector representative.

- To Look at NAPLAN or other data for own sector schools to understand how their schools are being represented on My School
- To support a school which feels it has been misrepresented by the media (using data from My School)

5.4. Perceived accuracy, usability and presentation of information on My School website

General presentation and user interface

Overall, the My School website is described as having a strong focus on statistics and a somewhat dry, functional look and feel. Some parents commented on the lack of visual appeal (for example, the absence of photographs) and the difficulty in forming a more holistic “feel” for a given school from the website. Principals also made reference to the more functional presentation of My School compared to some school websites, which are acknowledged to have a more marketing-led focus. Use of “jargon” is identified as an issue.

“Particularly from a body that’s talking about reporting in simple language this is so full of jargon. Even the attempts of explanation, looking at the NAPLAN data you need a statistician to understand the numbers” Principal. State/Catholic secondary school.

The rather dry nature of the website and the focus on statistical information can be construed as missing the opportunity to communicate some of the more positive elements of the Australian education system.

"It doesn't affirm that we have one of the best education systems in the world with highly qualified people running them for a range of programs meeting the needs of a range of 'communities.... This is very dry, very bureaucratic" Principal. State/Catholic secondary school.

In terms of user interface and navigation, some parents and principals appear to be able to find their way around the site and locate the information they are seeking with ease. Some others find the user experience confusing, at least at the initial visit.

"I think the actual website was a bit confusing at the beginning and I felt a bit lost...It wasn't very straightforward" Parent. Independent school.

"I find it overwhelming. There are lots of things and you can spend hours on there. If you're looking for one specific thing, it's easy but if you want a general overview I find it difficult and then just give up. Some things I have looked at are confusing, complicated to work out quickly" Parent. State/Catholic secondary school.

Specific aspects of website which are not considered particularly user-friendly include:

- The need to move backwards and forwards between school pages if comparing two schools, rather than being able to compare side by side on one page.
- Similarly, the need to move between screens containing information from the previous few years or when comparing NAPLAN results from different domains, rather than having that information collated as time series data
- The use of statistical or education sector terminology which is not familiar to the general public

Some principals had noted positive changes in the usability of the site since it was first launched.

"It's far more pragmatic than it used to be to negotiate the site, there is a lot more on it from my memory of the last time looking at it" Principal. State/Catholic primary school.

"Well certainly, it's become easier to use, it's less clunky, and it used to take longer to load. I think the NAPLAN graphs have developed over time from when it originally came out" Principal. State/Catholic secondary school.

Some partners and other stakeholders noted the broadening of the range of data presented on the website as a positive.

"The major benefits is that there is now a fairly good contextual bit of data about schools that we can see how the schools are moving forward and seeing the value add to what they have been doing over the years hoping that the schools use the data for forward planning and for school improvement and that's what we have been encouraging the schools to do and hoping that parents will see the positive in their school that come from that so some of the contextual data" Government School Sector representative.

Less positive was the concern that the My School website publishes data in a way that allows league tables to be developed. While this was mentioned as a concern by a number of partners and other stakeholders, there was also recognition by some, but not all, that this had not happened to the extent that they and others had been concerned would occur when the website was originally launched.

“We have grave concerns about the publication of NAPLAN scores in a way that allows league tables to be developed and we have really serious reservations about the validity of the like schools categories that are published” Principals’ Representative.

Accuracy and usability of data

A number of issues were raised in relation to the accuracy and usability of specific types of information included on the website. Among parents and principals, the majority of the discussion centred around NAPLAN results. While there were some concerns about the presentation of the NAPLAN results on the site, the focus was often on broader issues around the purpose and usage of NAPLAN in general, and its impact on schools, parents and students. Both parents and principals express concern about the potential for inaccuracy in results due to exclusion of some students from the tests and extra coaching by teachers, and the potential for the focus of the school to narrow to literacy and numeracy.

It is outside the scope of this research to provide detailed feedback on the perceived pros and cons of NAPLAN testing. However, points raised about NAPLAN by parents and principals are included in this report in as far as they relate to the research objectives.

As would be expected, parents, principals, partners and stakeholders are all at very different starting points in terms of being able to understand, evaluate and use the information provided on the website.

Partners and other stakeholders expressed similar concerns regarding the publishing of NAPLAN data; however, many were more or as concerned with other data presented on the website as is discussed further below.

Parents’ perspective

Parents are largely unaware of, and have rarely considered, the origins and validity of My School information. They are therefore more likely than principals, partners and stakeholders to take it on face value. Some parents do, however, have some understanding of the potential limitations of NAPLAN testing and results.

Principals’ perspective

Principals have detailed knowledge of the origins of much, but not all, of the information included and the context in which schools operate. They are therefore acutely aware of the factors which may, in their view, cause some of the data to be misrepresented or inaccurate. For example, differences in reporting requirements for financial data across school systems or specific characteristics of schools which may impact NAPLAN results. In some cases the issue is not the accuracy of the data itself but the lack of context provided to help the user to interpret it. The net result of this is that some information which appears to enable comparison across schools is not, in fact, directly comparable in the view of some principals. While principals and teachers may have sufficient knowledge to identify when they can or cannot compare data, their concern is that parents do not have this knowledge and are therefore at risk of making poor decisions.

Principals also express concern that some of the information on My School is out of date. This can apply to both NAPLAN data and other statistical information, for example school population figures.

The perceived inaccuracy of some My School information, which will be discussed in detail later in this section, can render it difficult for some principals to see the benefit of the website.

ACARA partners' and other stakeholders' perspective

Overall, partners and other stakeholders believe that the data on My School is presented in such a way that they and other partners or stakeholders are able to understand and interpret the data. However, partners and other stakeholders perceive that parents, are the intended audience for the website and similar to principals, partners and other stakeholders' express concerns regarding the ability of most parents to interpret the data on the website.

Most partners and other stakeholders also had a good knowledge of the sources of data presented on the My School website and in some cases were the providers of data to ACARA for their state. Most partners and other stakeholders mentioned the potential to misinterpret data due to lack of contextual information, some feeling this was a risk not only for parents but also principals and teachers. Issues related to data collection including differences across jurisdiction and the non-compulsory provision of some data (such as parental educational attainment and income and post-school destinations) were among those most frequently mentioned as contributing to the perceived inaccuracy of data on My School.

5.4.1. NAPLAN data

NAPLAN data is considered by both parents and principals to be the main focus of the website. While partners and other stakeholders also acknowledged the NAPLAN data as comprising a significant amount of the total data presented on the website, they tended to place more emphasis on data on the school profile page, than did principals and parents.

Parents' perspective

As previously described, parents access NAPLAN data for a number of reasons. For example to:

- Compare among a short list of local schools
- Monitor the progress of their chosen school (across years or within one cohort)
- Compare their child's progress to his/her peers either at school level or against the national average

Some parents appear to be able to access NAPLAN scores with relative ease and to understand them to a certain extent, whether viewing graphs, results in numbers or results in bands. They tend to use the information at a simplistic level rather than going into detail. For example, particular attention is paid to the "red & green" key as an indication of whether their child's school is achieving at above or below the average level.

There are, however, some areas of confusion:

- Unless they have a background in statistics, many parents are not familiar with concepts such as "margin of error at 90% level of confidence" or "median" and are unlikely to either

read or understand the definition given. As such, this information has little meaning for them and they focus solely on the dots or diamonds indicating the average scores.

- Parents can find it difficult to understand the definition of “similar schools” due to unfamiliarity with the concept of statistical similarity. They tend to expect the term “similar schools” to refer to local schools with similar school-related characteristics to their own e.g. other Catholic schools or other boy’s schools. Comparisons with “similar schools” based on the ICSEA data caused some confusion (see next section for further discussion).

Apart from the issues with statistical terminology outlined above, the presentation of NAPLAN data in a range of formats and using colour coding to indicate variations from average can itself be confusing for those unused to viewing data in this way.

“When I said before about it being confusing. I looked at the NAPLAN things and it gives you different options of how to view it – a graph or as numbers... I thought why show it in all these different formats and I looked at some and there were little pink lines and it was too confusing” Parent. State/Catholic secondary school.

“It is very statistical based which I suppose that’s what you tend to look at it for but I’m the same, when I originally looked at it it was ‘Eh?’. I got more interested when my children started participating in NAPLAN and that’s probably when I would consult it once a year. But it is still very confusing to work out the numbers” Parent. State/Catholic primary school.

Parents suggested the following enhancements to the functionality of the site to improve ease of use:

- Ability to select which schools they wish to compare NAPLAN results between. For example, a self-selected list of schools, all high schools in the local area, all Catholic schools within a certain radius. In addition a facility to view comparable information on one screen rather than needing to see each school’s results separately would be useful.
- A function to graph change over time, rather than just from one year to the next.
- A function to graph progress in all domains over time (i.e. time series information for all domains on one graph).

In terms of reliability, parents expect the NAPLAN scores used on My School to be an accurate reflection of the test results. The tests are known to be standardised and generally believed to be administered in a controlled way with results then collated centrally.

However, parents raised several concerns about NAPLAN testing in general, some of which draw into the question the validity of the data as a means to compare schools and make decisions about their child’s education.

The main issue for parents is the perception, or actual evidence, that NAPLAN testing does not accurately reflect the achievements of all children in a given school. Some children are believed to be excluded or excused from NAPLAN tests. Those who are having difficulties in the literacy or numeracy area may be excused from the tests at the request of teachers or parents. These can include children with disabilities and those from non-English speaking backgrounds.

“You hear things at school and I have one child that is not doing as well as the others. When NAPLAN is on she goes to the library she doesn’t participate. I don’t know if that happens at different schools. We don’t get an understanding of what other schools are doing. That kind of

upsets me a little bit. I know some kids that are not present on days when NAPLAN is on. I kind of feel like schools are hanging in there because a lot of people judge the My School website” Parent. State/Catholic primary school.

“Well like we have heard the school selecting (out) bad performers in order to pass that test to get good results. That doesn’t reflect that school” Parent. State/Catholic primary school.

Parents also spoke of schools “coaching” children specifically to do well in NAPLAN tests. This is felt to both give some schools an unfair advantage and, at the same time, potentially narrow the educational focus within the school to the detriment of subject areas outside literacy and numeracy.

“I think there is information there. It does make it transparent. The only problem is the coaching to get results. It’s put them under so much pressure to perform that the numbers get skewed” Parent. State/Catholic secondary school.

“(At) my son’s school they’re doing very specific targeting of kids that are sitting just below a band and pull them up a band. It’s the kids that give the schools the result” Parent. State/Catholic secondary school.

Variations in testing conditions from school to school could also potentially impact on the accuracy of NAPLAN results.

“At our school you don’t have to do NAPLAN and the kids that do it are competent to do it and in an unlimited time. That pressure is taken off. My daughter performed high when she did it in Grade 7, people wouldn’t know that, they would think look at the good results but it doesn’t really reflect how they really are. She is a C grade student except for two subjects. But in NAPLAN she went really well because she had unlimited time to do it” Parent. State/Catholic secondary school.

Principals’ perspective

Principals, especially those in the state system, frequently report having access to more comprehensive NAPLAN data than is presented on the My School website and to other sources of data on student progress. As such they do not necessarily need to access this information via My School.

“Education collects its own data we run a smart tool across the NAPLAN data as a sector and a school. We do all our own analysis” Principal. State/Catholic secondary school.

“Within the school we use a variety of different ways to collect data and analyse data. In the last 5 years, there has been a real push to look at that. The My School data is probably not going deep enough. It’s just comparing to other schools and where you’re at and we get that data and put it in our annual reports. But we’re going a little deeper in professional learning teams and groups of teachers looking at specific areas. It’s not specific enough” Principal. State/Catholic primary school.

Principals express a number of concerns about validity of NAPLAN data for decision making. One factor here is the delay between testing and the appearance of results on the My School website.

“If you test the children in May, get results in September and the results of the May test are uploaded in March the following year. If someone is looking for a school in February and

they're going on results from the previous months...I was surprised you said a couple of months out of date because it can be 18 months out of date. It's very, very historical information" Principal. Independent school.

Principals are also highly conscious of the impact that the operating context of a given school will have on NAPLAN scores and the consequent difficulty in comparing like with like. In particular, factors such as the size and location of the school, whether single or dual curriculum or the number of children with disabilities or from non-English speaking backgrounds could have a major impact on NAPLAN scores.

Changes in the composition of cohorts over time have the potential to influence NAPLAN outcomes so that they are not reflective of the school's achievements.

"One of the primary schools as part of the college I was at had a decline in NAPLAN results but it was a shift in enrolment. We were suddenly attracting all these boys with special needs because we had programs. The NAPLAN data went down. If you look at the figures on here you see this and say 'Holy Moly. What's going on here?' But if you read the annual reports the kids are doing well" Principal. State/Catholic secondary school.

Variations in treatment or preparation of children on testing days could also potentially influence outcomes.

"But even the inconsistencies across schools for example of the day of NAPLAN, for Year 3 and 5 students we supply a breakfast for them. They have gym sessions, all kinds of things. They don't do that at other schools, not my previous school" Principal. State/Catholic primary school.

The achievements of schools from disadvantaged areas which are doing well in improving NAPLAN scores from a low base are also not necessarily reflected. These schools still appear to be underachieving and may therefore be disregarded by parents.

While the ICSEA scores are intended to address some of the above concerns by enabling comparisons with similar schools, they are perceived to have a very narrow focus resulting in comparisons between disparate schools in diverse locations which are not particularly meaningful (See next section for further discussion of ICSEA scores).

ACARA partners' and other stakeholders' perspective

Partners and other stakeholders indicate that they, as well as principals and schools generally, have access to more comprehensive NAPLAN data than is presented on the My School website. Thus, whilst, partners and other stakeholders indicate they do not generally need to access this information via My School, they may still do so in specific circumstances, for example when making comparisons to schools in other sectors, they may use My School along with other resources.

"Schools might look at it in terms of looking at their own school and comparing their performance to like schools but particularly around NAPLAN data we provide some really detailed sophisticated data broken down schools performance in terms of regions etc. So in addition to the information available through the My School web we provide a suite of reports that provide them with much more detailed information to be able to make decisions about teaching and learning" Government School Sector representative.

Whilst some concerns were noted regarding the NAPLAN data, such as it not representing full school populations, generally, the My School website is understood to present the NAPLAN data accurately and in a format in which partners and other stakeholders can understand and interpret.

“(NAPLAN) It doesn’t cover the whole school enrolment population so that’s probably the only weakness of it. I think that again the data as far as it is collected I think is ok. It’s relates to a small proportion of a child’s education” Independent School Sector representative.

However, some partners and other stakeholders expressed concern that accurate interpretation of NAPLAN data would be beyond the skills of a significant proportion of parents.

“I think it probably calls for a degree of both technological and educational and mathematical expertise. So for example you know if you want to go to that recent example you’ve got an option where you’ve got student gain and it has the domain so parents need to be aware of what the domains are, the calendar year range, the achievement type, then categories so to get that to generate meaningful output is easy enough for me but I’m wondering whether the average parent who doesn’t work in an environment like this would be able to make use of it” Catholic School Sector representative.

Although NAPLAN results are thought to be accurate and reliable, there is concern for how they are being used. Partners and other stakeholders are mindful that NAPLAN results only tell a part of a story of the school and believe that there needs to be a clear understanding among the public that NAPLAN cannot give a full picture of what a school is all about.

“For example for small schools NAPLAN results will often widely fluctuate year to year because of small cohorts of kids and different kids and it doesn’t necessarily tell that story very well, it’s very statistically based. Tell the story about their kids and basically the My School website gives a statistical score that the Year 3’s got on reading NAPLAN, doesn’t tell us anything about that group of kids or what the school is doing for them or so forth” Independent School Sector representative.

Furthermore, there is concern about media misuse of the NAPLAN data, in particular the generation and publication of league tables as an overview of schools and their capabilities.

“I just simply don’t like NAPLAN results being published for schools, the whole league table thing even though newspapers are sort of banned from preparing league tables...that sort of comparison I just don’t believe that NAPLAN results in the small range of disciplines that can be measured in NAPLAN testing really tell the whole story about the student outcomes particularly in independent schools where school communities are looking for something more than literacy and numeracy outcomes for their children and the opportunity for that story to be told is certainly there but it has to come through in a narrative way” Independent School Sector representative.

Additionally, some partners and other stakeholders mentioned their concern for NAPLAN tests becoming the focus of a curriculum (rather than other learnings outside of what can be tested) in order for a school to ensure superior NAPLAN results.

“The danger that by focusing on a very narrow band of the work, a narrow section of the work that schools do you get schools applying more pressure in that area, more effort, the teachers teach so that to teach children in a way that allows them to get better NAPLAN scores rather than in a way that allows them to have a rich meaningful and life long, long lasting educational

experience and I think that's a very real danger that My School places on our education system" Independent School Sector representative.

"We like the website but there is evidence I think that we would have that over time it's almost inevitable that people are going to narrow their curriculum down in some ways because of the high stakes nature of those results when people are making enrolment choices. Catholic School Sector Representative

Some partners and other stakeholders mentioned that to overcome a number of these problems they would prefer not to see NAPLAN results published on the My School website and rather have them only available on individual schools' websites.

"Our schools have to compile annual reports and as part of that annual report they actually have to say how they've gone in NAPLAN and stuff like that and those reports are available on individual schools websites. I think that's a far better way to go about a process such as being accountable to your community and informing parents" Independent School Sector representative.

5.4.2. Student background (ICSEA)

Among parents and principals, the overall concept of the Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage (ICSEA) is a source of some confusion, as is its use in selecting 'similar schools' for comparison. Partners and other stakeholders ranged from feeling confident they understood how the ICSEA is calculated to having only a cursory understanding of the measure.

Parents' perspective

In general parents had not looked at the ICSEA section on the school profile page or had quickly glossed over it without understanding it. For those without a statistical background, distribution by quartiles and the use of indices are unfamiliar concepts. Even when asked to look more closely at the ICSEA score section during the focus groups parents still had difficulty in grasping the meaning of this information.

Some parents make the connection that ICSEA is related to information that they have provided to schools about their own personal education levels and occupational status. This in turn raised further issues:

First, the ICSEA data may not be accurate or complete due to misreporting or non-reporting by parents. Second, and more importantly, using parental education and occupation to classify schools as "similar" is perceived to be a very narrow approach which does not take into account the many other ways in which schools may differ e.g. size, curriculum, rural or urban, single sex or co-ed. The result of this, in terms of comparing NAPLAN results, is that schools which are defined as "similar" based on their ICSEA score are actually perceived to be very different and therefore not suitable for comparison.

For parents in particular, comparison with schools having similar ICSEA scores from outside their area is not considered useful. Their aim in comparing schools is to select from a short list from within their own area which are possible destinations for their child.

Principals' perspective

Principals on the whole have fewer difficulties in understanding the meaning and origin of ICSEA scores. Some, however, were not aware of how the ICSEA score is calculated and/or question its validity given that is based partly on parent provided information.

In common with parents, principals do not necessarily consider ICSEA scores useful for making comparisons between schools. The ICSEA based definition of a "similar school" is regarded as narrow and does not take into account the numerous other factors which would make schools truly comparable. These factors include school system, curriculum (e.g. whether single or dual), co-ed or single sex, location, number of students with disabilities or from non-English speaking backgrounds.

The following comments are indicative of the issues faced by principals when using the Similar Schools function of the My School website.

"I was fascinated to find out who our like schools were and I went into every one of them and it was really interesting because they weren't the same sort of ethnic complexity, they weren't the same size, they weren't in an urban demographic. They were really odd things. I personally could not figure out why most of those schools were like schools. I did it once and 'haven't bothered since" Principal. State/Catholic secondary school.

"(Comparing) from ... (suburb) to ... (suburb) is one example of that when you get your like schools. These kids are all white beach goers compared with my 70% of kids who are refugee status. It doesn't really tell you those things" Principal. State/Catholic secondary school.

"We're compared against selective girls' schools and things like that. We're a comprehensive school. I just can't understand how they could even put us in with some of those different groups. It baffles logic" Principal. Independent school.

The ability to self-define the schools for comparison would be more useful for principals. For example, the facility to select a list of schools that they are interested in comparing NAPLAN scores with, or a function which allows selection of schools based on specific contextual criteria.

ACARA partners and other stakeholders' perspective

Partners and other stakeholders' knowledge of how ICSEA is calculated varies significantly, similarly, the degree to which ICSEA is accepted as a reliable and meaningful metric also varied significantly. Issues raised with ICSEA include, the potential for data on which the ICSEA is based to be incomplete or out of date.

"There is no requirement for schools to update their data every year and clearly what would be required to update it every year would be to provide parents with the same pro forma every year and update all the records. I'm not sure the extent which that happens or which parents would be happy about happening" Executive Director, Catholic Education Commission.

"Most often, the data comes from what parents provide on enrolments and in many cases the issue, and it can be a community-based thing is that parents are not prepared to put down what level of schooling they have themselves or what the highest level of after school education was" Executive Director, Catholic Education Commission.

Similar to principals some partners and other stakeholders are wary of how like schools are determined and therefore the comparisons of like schools data. Some felt it would be more relevant if parents/principals were able to choose like schools according to their own judgements and were able to compare such schools that they deemed relevant.

“We have really serious reservations about the validity of the like schools categories that are published. We don’t believe that a school this year is like the same school last year because changes of students, changes of staff, demographic changes in the school community all serve to make schools evolving organisations so they don’t remain static over time and we don’t believe you can say that one school is like another simply because there are a set of student characteristics that might be similar. They are not the same in our opinion so to compare two schools and to say these schools are alike to the extent that we can say this one is better than that one because of their NAPLAN scores” Principals’ Representative.

Furthermore, those who felt ICSEA to be a valid measure, questioned parents’ ability to understand the metric. A smaller number of partners and other stakeholders indicated they themselves also had limited understanding of the metric.

“I think ICSEA is a mystery to everyone” Government School Sector representative.

“I think the ICSEA is relevant. I am just not sure how many people totally understand it” Government School Sector representative.

An alternative perspective of partners and other stakeholders is that the ICSEA is a sound measure and basis for comparison, but that ACARA has not communicated that very successfully.

“I think there is a vague notion that it takes into account socio economic I doubt that there is much knowledge beyond the other elements that go into it, so what distinguishes it from purely a socio economic index. I think it’s conceptually very sound but I don’t know if the communication been that successful about that” Test Administration Authority.

5.4.3. School profile page

The text based school comments section is one of the most important elements of My School for parents, principals, partners and other stakeholders. Factual information on enrolments, student population, staff numbers and attendance featured on the school profile page is generally straight forward, easy to understand and generally considered accurate by both parents and principals. Partners and other stakeholders are more likely to note limitations of the data found on the school profile page.

Parents’ perspective

Parents pay particular attention to the school comments section as they are seeking information which will give them a more holistic impression of the overall nature of the school, its ethos and particular strengths. While it is acknowledged that the information included here is necessarily limited, it provides a useful starting point from which to move on to find out more detail via the school website.

School size in terms of number of enrolments is one of the key pieces of information sought by parents when short listing schools, particularly for those looking for a small or medium sized school

environment. To complement this information they may also look at the number of teaching staff and, from this, form an idea of teacher-student ratios.

Some parents had also looked at student attendance rates. However, information on gender balance, Indigenous students and language background appears to have less relevance.

Senior secondary schools outcomes are also important to some parents, particularly in terms of the proportion of students going on to university. There was some questioning, however, of where this information is drawn from. In addition, providing figures on secondary school completion in numbers, rather than percentages, can make the data difficult to interpret.

Principals' perspective

The school comments section gives principals the opportunity to communicate crucial contextual information to parents and emphasise the positive and unique aspects of their school. While the word limit is constraining, principals expect parents to go on to visit the school or the school website for further detail.

As information in the school comments section can only be updated once a year, schools do not have the opportunity to use this section to communicate changes in context which may affect results e.g. an influx of students changing the nature of a cohort.

In addition, the school comments section is not believed to be verified by sources external to the school providing the information. Hence, there is potential for misrepresentation here.

"We have this discussion in my principals group I'm involved with. One of the interesting conversations for at least three schools, they said we know of neighbouring schools what they've put on is not true... and they're doing that I assume because it's almost seen like a neutral player. They've done it for advantage, to market" Principal, state/Catholic school

There were some comments about potential misinterpretation of information around staff numbers and their use to calculate student-teacher ratios; particularly where schools have special circumstances e.g. boarding schools requiring extra staff. Some principals also question the origin or accuracy of the post-school destination data and identify complexities which can impact on it. These include the distinction between students being offered a tertiary place and actually taking it up, and the non-recording of destinations for international students.

ACARA partners' and other stakeholders' perspective

Among partners and other stakeholders, the school profile page was felt to be one of the most important aspects of the website. The most valuable aspect of the school profile page was generally considered to be the text narrative about the school which is provided by the school. There has been increased scope for schools to input into the school profile page since the introduction of the website which partners and other stakeholders are positive about. However, most indicated that further additional narrative about the schools, both in the school profile page and throughout the website, for example further explanations of changes to NAPLAN or other data, would improve the website.

"I'd go back to say it needs to be made more narrative about what schools are doing, say 300-500 words a school put in to tell their story, any school will tell you they can't tell their story. And narrative around the statistical data. If a school this year has a major drop in its NAPLAN Year 5 numeracy performance they can say what's going on why is that the case. Is

it suddenly to do with the cohort of kids or I don't know, is there a story I suppose...and again my view is that there is probably far too much statistical stuff there" Independent School Sector representative.

There is a sense among some partners and other stakeholders that My School is very data driven, and while some see this as a positive, there are also partners and other stakeholders who question many parents' interest or ability to interpret a large amount of statistical information. For these partners and other stakeholders, narrative on the school profile page is particularly valuable. A small number of partners and other stakeholders suggested that images of the school would complement the narrative and enable users to gain a deeper understanding of a school.

"I would like to see some photos of the school perhaps. Some visual images of the school on the My School website. That would allow me to get a sense of what is this school like? Why is it a good school? What are its qualities that would impress me?" Principals' Representative.

The suggestion for additional narrative to contextualise the data (including both the NAPLAN data and school statistical and financial information) provided on My School came from both partners and other stakeholders who strongly support the website as well as those who were less positive about it.

"I think every jurisdiction is trying to work out how you have rich data measures about the things that are harder to measure like culture, learning environment, well-being etc. What I would say is it provides one narrow and useful thread. But it has to be seen in the right context, measures, in terms of school performance that is also very important" Government School Sector representative.

For example in relation to staff and student numbers:

"That again is a one day this is when the data is collected which is all the census days, school populations go up and down, staffing goes up and down so they are certainly reliable for that one day when it's collected but it's fluid ... it doesn't give a very comprehensive background on why one school may need more staffing than another. And again the very remote school as opposed to very middle class high SES capital city schools. So different cohorts require different staffing levels" Independent School Sector representative.

School population data

Partners and other stakeholders had no significant problems with the school population data, although some mentioned that this data can fluctuate so must be understood as a snapshot of the school at the time the data was collected.

"Well obviously that again is a one day this is when the data is collected which is all the census days, school populations go up and down, staffing goes up and down so they are certainly reliable for that one day when it's collected but it's fluid" Independent School Sector representative.

Year 12 completions and certificates awarded

On the whole, partners and other stakeholders had issues with the reliability of the data on Year 12 completions and certificates awarded. Specifically, this stemmed from the concern that there are serious inconsistencies between states and territories, as well as within states and territories, on how such data is calculated and therefore it cannot be compared.

“That’s where there is some rubberiness because of the different ways school completion and qualifications is counted in the different states and territories so I think there is some area there where people don’t understand how the different systems work and the figures. That could be an area of concern” Government School Sector representative.

“Well it’s a valid measure but it’s not reliable no. It’s inconsistent across states and territories and the methodology is different across states and territories” Government School Sector representative.

VET enrolments and traineeships

Where some partners and other stakeholders believed that the VET enrolments and traineeships were accurate, at least at the point in time when the data was collected, some believe there are issues around reliability in terms of consistency across states and territories around the country.

“It’s a valid measure but there are issues around reliability in terms of how well it’s collected and how consistent it is across states and territories” Government School Sector representative.

“Again there’s so much variation around the country and then the way schools deal with it and maybe at the highest level it is fine. I think when you start drilling down into detailed comparisons a school in WA and a school somewhere else I think potentially flawed but if it is mainly to give parents a sense of the programs and courses on offer and then they go and talk to the school then I think that is fine so it is depending on what purpose the information is being put to” Government School Sector representative.

Post-school destinations

There was a strong consensus among partners and other stakeholders that post-school destinations data was unreliable. This was mainly attributed to the fact that it is difficult to collect the data from past students, sometimes they cannot be contacted and the percentage of surveys returned varies.

“That relies on surveys and again I think that it is going to be based on the return of those surveys. The surveys are very very useful but you don’t really know how many surveys were returned, what percentage of the population have returned that so therefore in terms of that post school destinations I think it could mislead where the kids have actually gone. Very difficult to collect but very useful” Independent School Sector representative.

“It isn’t always that easy to determine cause it’s not always possible to contact kids...so that one might be one that’s a bit rubbery would be my guess” Catholic School Sector representative.

5.4.4. Financial information

School finances are summarised on the school profile page and provided in more detail under the relevant tab.

Parents' perspective

Financial information does not appear to be considered by parents when short listing or selecting schools. They have often given minimal thought to school funding and, even within the focus group situation, expressed little interest in this information when it was shown to them. Hence, financial information does not appear to play a role in parental decision making. In addition, financial information is believed to be available on the school's website and/or in the annual report so does not therefore need to be accessed via My School.

Principal's perspective

Principals express some concern about the potential use of financial information by parents. They identify issues which can impact on how financial information is reported and render it non-comparable.

"I think the data that they have dollars per student is extremely misleading and there needs to be something in there that says this might be the amount of dollars if we divide all the bureaucrats salaries and all the other jobs and the running of the system, because that's how the figure is arrived at. The general public don't know that so they think that we get \$12,000 per student. That's nonsense. It's not a true representation of what the money is going towards to fund education" Principal. State/Catholic secondary school.

"There is inaccuracy in that data. Why is all our wages data in there? Because it reads like the money is ours and we use it, we never see it. There is a whole lot of stuff that's disaggregated into that that never comes into our school budget. I think that's a problem for us" Principal. State/Catholic primary school.

There is particular concern around differences in accounting practices or requirements between the various school systems.

"Well if it's (financial information) going to be out there, it's got to be a level playing field. You can't have the state schools where they're asked for certain data and independent schools put all their financials. That's ridiculous it should be all out there" Principal. Independent school.

"It's not very transparent. The difference between a Catholic School and Government school for example the Catholic School all the funds are responsible in house. The building funds and things like that come externally for Government schools. You're not comparing apples with apples" Principal. State/Catholic secondary school.

ACARA partners' and other stakeholder's perspective

Similar to principals, partners and other stakeholders had issues with how financial information is reported, often being under the impression that these figures do not always provide an accurate picture of a schools' financial situation.

“Now looking at that data someone would say that is a very very well off school but it isn’t because there is no way of seeing in that data what of that money is available to the school, what is used to keep central office running, what is used to keep regional office running and what is in the non-discretionary part of the school budget the teacher’s salaries which are the enormous amount of that. What’s left over to actually spend on students is a tiny amount compared to the amount that is published on the My School web site” Principals’ Representative.

“There is some rubberiness there in terms of how much of tuition income is used for recurrent expenditure and how much is used of capital purposes or just how much is actually spent on the students education is unclear and also it doesn’t take into account special circumstances of the school which are now trying to be picked up in the funding regime with great difficulty such as remoteness and size of school and so on” Independent School Sector representative.

Accordingly, due to differences in reporting financial information partners and other stakeholders highlighted issues of comparability across different schools, noting that incorrect assumptions could be made when doing so.

“Financial numbers tend to be compared across all schools and many schools are totally different and can’t be compared in that way. So the numbers being drawn upon are not very reliable and the comparisons are not valid” Independent School Sector representative.

“I am a little bit concerned about the school finance area in the sense that I am not sure that it accurately captures what is going on in terms of government v non-government schools simply because of the different way they deal with capital and those sorts of things” Government School Sector representative.

5.4.5. Local schools

For parents, being able to list, sort and map local schools is a useful first starting point for research.

One of the principals, however, pointed out that the mapping function does not give the actual location of a given school.

Colmar Brunton

1-4 Layfield Street

South Melbourne

PH. (03) 8640 5200

FAX. (03) 8640 5255

ACN No: 003 748 981

ABN No: 22 003 748 981

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