

ACARA the acronym we had to have?

According to its website, The Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) is responsible for:

- A national curriculum from Kindergarten to Year 12 in specified learning areas.
- A national assessment program aligned to the national curriculum that measures students' progress.
- A national data collection and reporting program that supports:
 - analysis, evaluation, research and resource allocation; and
 - accountability and reporting on schools and broader national achievement.

The long history of attempts to establish a national curriculum and associated national reporting of student performance and progress has been well documented in previous editions of *TCFNews* and the national curriculum was the focus of the 2009 Annual Conference.

The responsibilities outlined above are threefold: a responsibility for developing a national curriculum, a responsibility for assessing student progress on that curriculum and a responsibility to report on other data collections related to student performance.

In this edition of *TCFNews* comments are made about the third of these responsibilities about national data.

A national data collection and reporting program

In this area of responsibility ACARA is the tool of a political will to report nationally on literacy and numeracy. The national benchmark program has been operating for some years and now the Commonwealth has put financial pressure on the states to make available this data to the public on a school by school basis.

By the time you read this newsletter the reports on literacy and numeracy will be available on the ACARA website and will provide information against the national average and against a "similar" set of schools. Although there will not be a rank order or league tables there will be all the information necessary for others, namely the media to construct them, even though NSW laws carry fines for such publications.

The *My School* section of the website <http://www.myschool.edu.au/> makes it clear how this data might be used by the public:

My School will enable you to:

- *Search for schools all over the country*
- *Find local schools in your area*
- *Compare statistically similar schools*
- *View school-level NAPLAN results*
- *Identify schools that are doing well and share successful strategies*

The last three points make it clear: "compare", "view results" "identify schools that are doing well". Everyone can now have access to the data on literacy and numeracy and make their own decisions about how well a school is doing in these areas related to all schools and to a "similar" set of schools (those with a similar socioeconomic profile).

The sample school report form

<http://www.myschool.edu.au/Resources/FactSheets/My%20School%20SAMPLE%20SCHOOL%20REPORT.pdf>

indicates that much more will be shown than these literacy and numeracy results including a descriptive statement about the school context and the following:

School facts	
School sector:	GOVT
School type:	Primary
Year range:	K-7
Total enrolments:	450 (Boys 230, Girls 220)
Full time equivalent enrolments:	448
Location:	Metropolitan
Student attendance rate:	95%
Teaching staff no.:	30
Full time equivalent teaching staff no.:	18
Non-teaching staff no.:	6
Full time equivalent non-teaching no.:	4
% Indigenous students:	3%

In this information there are some points of interest including how many full time and part time staff a school has which will be of interest to parents with primary aged students, the number of Indigenous students which may be a cause of concern for some rural schools and attendance data which also be of interest to communities. But there is more.

Senior secondary outcomes		
Vocational Education and Training		
Lorem ipsum dolor sit ame:	00%	
Lorem ipsum dolor sit ame:	00%	
YEAR 12 results		
Lorem ipsum dolor sit ame:	00%	
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Post school movement		
Lorem ipsum dolor sit ame:	00%	
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Lorem ipsum dolor sit ame:	00%	
Lorem ipsum dolor sit ame:	00%	
Student background		
Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage (ICSEA). ?		
School ICSEA value: 927.15		
Bottom quarter	Middle quarters	Top quarter
30%	25% 20%	25%
Links		
School website: Elsewhere Primary School QLD		
School authority website: Name of school authority		

Secondary schools with senior students will have information about vocational educational courses, the results of students from Year 12 (presumably the results from a further development of a national Year 12 credential) and a most interesting section of the post school destination of students.

Student background information will also be included placing with school population with four quartiles of socio-economic (dis)advantage.

All this information and we still haven't got to any figures on student performance.

The National Assessment Program - Literacy and Numeracy results are set out firstly in a comparative table:

2009	2008									
	Reading		Writing		Spelling		Grammar & Punctuation		Numeracy	
Year 3	▶ 417		428		419		417		409	
	SIM 396	ALL 400	SIM 426	ALL 414	SIM 415	ALL 399	SIM 428	ALL 402	SIM 417	ALL 396
Year 5	▶ 483		477		472		493		464	
	SIM 470	ALL 484	SIM 481	ALL 487	SIM 480	ALL 484	SIM 471	ALL 496	SIM 488	ALL 476
Year 7	▶ 523		523		528		518		539	
	SIM 525	ALL 537	SIM 531	ALL 538	SIM 529	ALL 539	SIM 501	ALL 529	SIM 514	ALL 545
Year 9										

What about the schools? With this amount of publicity about results and other school information which school is not going to try and focus on achieving the best possible results in literacy and numeracy? Even before this development some NSW primary schools prided themselves on being literacy and numeracy schools in which little time was devoted to science, languages, the humanities and the arts. I am not sure I want my child to be excellent at literacy and numeracy and ignorant about their cultural heritage, the arts and science.

A further consideration should be the pressure placed on students to perform in literacy and numeracy. Many of us know the difficulties caused even for bright children from parent and teacher expectations that lead to anxious children who don't enjoy school even though they perform well. Such anxiety can lead to difficulties in forming relationships, loss of confidence and under performance. Schools retain a responsibility to develop the whole child and the whole curriculum.

As Christians we would want to support schools to have a focus on literacy and numeracy but not at the expense of the rest of the curriculum or the welfare of students. Christian education has always been about knowing God and not only knowing about him. As argued elsewhere, the whole curriculum helps students to know God and explicit teaching about God is also part of this curriculum. Without knowing about the life, death and resurrection of Jesus students are denied essential knowledge to make their Christian education complete. How important does this make Special Religious Education in Government schools? Yet its continued under-resourcing may eventually result in its demise.

For Christians working in Government schools there is a need to remember that they are to be *the salt of the earth*. They need to be outspoken about the breadth of the curriculum and care for students and not be overwhelmed by the political agenda generated by vested interests to hold schools accountable based on such a narrow definition of student achievements. Literacy and numeracy are important, but they should not become secular gods to be worshiped by schools. What is the point of being at the top of scores in literacy and numeracy and being ignorant about the world we live in and unable to form meaningful relationships with others? Such achievements are not Christian.

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