

My School website

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“My School enables you to search the profiles of almost 10,000 Australian schools.

You can quickly locate statistical and contextual information about schools in your community and compare them with statistically similar schools across the country.”

<http://www.myschool.edu.au/>

The new *My School* website should be viewed as a tool of perspicacity and as an artefact of the Age of Enlightenment which in many ways, reflects the current *zeitgeist*. The Enlightenment set the stage for much of our thinking today about the reform of existing conditions and institutions. With increased empirical knowledge at their disposal, the thinkers of the late eighteenth century were confident that their reforms were both reasonable and achievable. Similarly, educational reformers today seek to be reasonable and have achieved much already, in terms of national comparability, with the *My School* website.

The ACARA *My School* site became live on Friday 29 January. Infused with a spirit of ‘rationality’, it is intended to shed light on individual school performance and allow parents to dissect a school’s weaknesses and strengths by viewing snapshots of aggregated NAPLAN scores across Year 3, 5, 7 and 9. Importantly, it allows parents to see how a given school compares statistically with other ‘like’ schools in the areas of reading, writing, spelling, grammar and punctuation and numeracy. All of this is also then viewed in the context of state and national benchmarks. Its functionality is impressive and Radford parents are encouraged ‘to surf’ the data to analyse and digest the information available.

So, does the website help us? Not for some time has schooling been opened to so much investigation and scrutiny. Such investigation is, in reality, just a form of accountability which some might consider well overdue. In general, schools should have nothing to fear from anything that adds to the body of information available to parents. Instead, if sensibly used, this snapshot can help identify areas of strength or weakness which, both individually and aggregated might be used to guide improvement or confirm achievement.

At Radford we accept public accountability and transparency. We do not, however, accept that schools should be set against each other as a spur to improvement. This kind of dialectic seems out of place in a more enlightened and cooperative world. The social engineering and marketing framework that comes with the notion of competition is at odds with the need to develop cooperation and inclusion in a 21st Century that is beset by problems that far exceed local self-interest.

While there is value in the development of the website, there are also some potential dangers, that must to be identified. One is the reductive nature of the snapshot. The *My School* lens uses NAPLAN as the only measure of a school’s overall effectiveness to educate students. We all know that schools are organic places that grow students and develop staff in ways that are not readily measureable. A school’s values (Truth, Compassion, Wisdom), its spirit and ethos, do not translate to grids and numbers. Another possible weakness is to forget that the data is aggregated across a cohort and therefore does not show the progress of individual student

achievement nor does it, at this stage of its release, fully reveal the 'value add' impact of a school. And finally a third danger is the temptation to respond competitively, to crow over perceived superiority or sink under the pressure of unhelpful media rankings. Radford College performed very strongly at all levels but this in itself does not lead us to feel like winners.

What really matters to teachers and parents is improving student learning – this is when we feel like we are winning! It is important therefore to acknowledge that there are many valuable diagnostic tools and valid indicators (including the student well being and happiness) that point a school to where and how improvements can be achieved.

Radford College is a non-selective school, and we are blessed to educate students of all abilities, broad interests and talents. As a school, we welcome input from parents and draw upon the insight of teachers, coaches and others to help us improve the learning for each student.

Ultimately, the new *My School* website is for us a tool which will help us add to our understanding of where to direct attention and teaching energy and expertise. And, although cognizant of the value of data, at Radford we do not adhere to a utilitarian philosophy of schooling - the whole child is and will remain our focus.

Should parents wish to comment on *My School* site or on an aspect of the data, we invite you to contact us.

The key staff to contact are:

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Peter Dodd (Director of Studies – High School)
Paul Southwell (Head of the Junior School).