

My Private School

by Stefan Dimou

While the introduction of the Federal Government's newest website designed to provide more information to constituents has been met with wide opposition, notably from the Australian Education Union itself, the *My School* website certainly serves as an interesting tool for parents who are weighing up non-government school options.

The *My School* website, launched on the 28th of January this year, gives parents access to the results of national literacy and numeracy testing (NAPLAN) at their child's school. This unprecedented level of information is designed to allow parents to make comparisons between similar schools from both government and non-government sectors. However, it is this very point that has caused such friction between Education Minister, Julia Gillard, and the nation's teachers and principals, with the consequences of the publication of Australia's worst performing schools, most notably on student and teacher morale having come into public focus.

According to its critics, the site sets up a 'league-table' leading to the veritable 'naming and shaming' of the country's worst performing schools, often government schools located in areas of socio-economic disadvantage. This has sparked outrage from the AEU, led by the vocal protestations of its President, Angelo Gavrielatos, who has called for the banning of what he sees as "misleading and simplistic league tables" branding the launch of the site as "a sad day for education in Australia."

Added to this ill-sentiment, came the recent revelation that the Victorian Education Department specifically instructs its teachers to teach for the NAPLAN tests, the results of which form the basis of the *My School* website.

At this point one might appreciate that the arguments against the *My School* website and the Government's policy are many and varied, particularly relating to public schools and the lack of choice available to parents confronted by the reality that their child may be enrolled at an underachieving institution. Pledges from the Government to up funding to schools in this category may do little to allay the concerns of such parents who are understandably looking for solutions in the here and now, rather than money in the pipeline for use at a time when their child may have already graduated. For families in this situation it all seems too little, too late.

However, despite the concerns raised by a range of interest groups, one part of this equation has not been adequately addressed. With regards the non-government school sector, one thing is certain; the *My School* website will see teachers and principals at Australia's independent schools take notice. For the first time our non-government schools

can be easily and accurately compared on the basis of the academic proficiencies of its students. The website takes parents inside the classroom to directly measure the performance of pupils. As a result, would-be private school parents now have a key tool to assist them in sifting through the often hefty jargon of non-government schools' paraphernalia and advertising.

The *My School* website, though maligned for its potential negative effects on underperforming public schools, stands to aid the decision-making processes of parents nationwide who are contemplating the non-government education option. This may be an unforeseen but potentially welcome side effect nonetheless, for a Labor Government that has received much criticism regarding its, in some cases, overuse of websites as tools to solve or alleviate issues they identify within the community.

It must also be noted however, that the site only takes into account the competencies of students up to the year 9 level, and only outlines the abilities of such students in the rigid categories of literacy and numeracy. For this reason, attributes examined by the NAPLAN testing may not fully represent other key areas of focus that a school might value including the creative arts, or extra curricular activities such as sport or community involvement.

The take home message being: simple collections of results in basic academic tests can give some information about a school's performance, but they cannot possibly reflect the full experience that an institution offers. This last point is especially poignant in the realm of private education, where parents often elect to enrol their child at a school based on its religious or philosophical base as well as extra curricular activities undertaken. Nonetheless, to a large number of parents, academic performance is the key issue which motivates their choice of schooling, to which end the *My School* website can only serve to help.

Any information is good information when it comes to making choices regarding the education of one's children. Therefore, and as far as the private education sector is concerned, the end result of the *My School* website is choice. All that remains is for the Government to engender the same level of choice in the public sector - a difficult but no less worthy task, and one that would make this website all the more relevant.