



# How to get the best out of the *My School* website...

## What is the My School website?

My School is an Australian Government-sponsored website that gives information about nearly 10,000 schools – Independent, Catholic and Government – across Australia.

There has been a lot of debate about whether it is a fair way to present information about schools, and whether it is going to be useful to parents. It adds to information available to parents about schools but is a narrow basis for assessing school performance. At the same time, the “three Rs” – which is what it concentrates on -- are really important to the life chances of students.

Here, the Australian Parents Council provides parents with a guide on how to get the best out of My School, understand its limitations and avoid the pitfalls.

## What information is on My School?

1. **Basic facts about each school:** including a brief statement about the school, whether it is Independent, Catholic or Government; primary or secondary or both; enrolments; number of teachers and other staff; attendance rate; proportion of Indigenous students; gender mix among students.
2. **The school's rating for social/educational advantage:** how it scores for a range of 14 factors that are known to affect student performance, including household income, education level of parents, whether the parents have jobs, the type of jobs they have, internet access, and geographic remoteness.
3. **The school's test results:** how the students performed, on average, in national tests of reading, writing, spelling, grammar and punctuation, and numeracy (arithmetic) at years 3, 5, 7 and 9.

4. **A comparison of the school's test results:** how the school's average results in each of those subjects compared with the results of other schools that have a similar rating for social/educational advantage.
5. **A link to a list of other schools in the local area.**
6. **Students' destinations:** for secondary schools, the proportion of students who went on to university or training or into the workforce.

There are also some technical explanations about the tests and the social/educational advantage index.

## How can parents use this information?

The first thing to remember is that this is about the performance of the school, not of individual students.

Say you want to see how your child's school compares on its test results with other schools. Go to the website ([www.myschool.edu.au](http://www.myschool.edu.au)) and type your school's name in the search window.

This brings up a page showing a statement by the school about itself, all the basic facts, and a table of NAPLAN results. NAPLAN means National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy. These are the national tests mentioned earlier.

The website uses the word “domain” for the different skills tested, such as reading and writing. It gives results for 2008 and 2009.

Here is a sample of what the NAPLAN results for 2009 look like on the website for a primary school we will call School X:

	2009		2008							
	Reading		Writing		Spelling		Grammar & Punctuation		Numeracy	
Year 3	▶ 456		455		476		450		443	
	SIM 466	ALL 411	SIM 449	ALL 414	SIM 447	ALL 405	SIM 469	ALL 420	SIM 440	ALL 394
Year 5	▶ 527		539		539		533		531	
	SIM 540	ALL 494	SIM 519	ALL 485	SIM 521	ALL 487	SIM 545	ALL 500	SIM 530	ALL 487

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“SIM” compares the school’s average score with the average for schools with a similar social/educational advantage rating. In plain language, this means other schools with students from backgrounds similar to those of the students in School X.

“ALL” compares School X’s average score with the average for all Australian schools. This is of less value because so much of the difference between schools is accounted for by social factors.

The site has little coloured strips showing at a glance whether the school’s score (in blue) is above, close to, or below the average for similar schools and all schools: green for above, white for close, red for below.

### What information can you draw from these numbers?

Let’s focus on the “SIM” scores because they give a fairer and more sensible comparison. The differences between School X’s average scores and those of its “similar” schools for 2009 are set out here:

Year 3	
Domain	Differences with similar schools
	2009
Reading	-10
Writing	+6
Spelling	+29
Grammar & Punctuation	-19
Numeracy	+3

So School X’s Year 3 students are below on Reading and Grammar & Punctuation, and above on Writing, Spelling and Numeracy.

Year 5	
Domain	Differences with similar schools
	2009
Reading	-13
Writing	+20
Spelling	+18
Grammar & Punctuation	-12
Numeracy	+1

Exactly the same pattern appears for Year 5 students: below on Reading and Grammar & Punctuation; above on everything else.

You can also do a comparison between the school’s performance in 2008 and in 2009. If you did this for School X you would find that:

1. Its Year 3 results in 2009 were weaker than in 2008, but it was still above the average in 3 of the 5 domains.
2. Its Year 5 results were weaker in some domains but stronger in others in 2009 than in 2008, but it was still above the average in 3 of the 5 domains.
3. An apparent strength is spelling, where it is clearly above the average for both year levels in both years.
4. An apparent weakness is reading, which is uneven in Year 3 and below average over both years in Year 5.

You can see these in the tables below:

Year 3		
Domain	Differences with similar schools	
	2008	2009
Reading	+ 17	- 10
Writing	+ 19	+ 6
Spelling	+ 41	+ 29
Grammar & Punctuation	+ 7	- 19
Numeracy	+ 11	+ 3



Year 5		
Domain	Differences with similar schools	
	2008	2009
Reading	- 19	- 13
Writing	+ 12	+ 20
Spelling	+ 41	+ 18
Grammar & Punctuation	+ 7	- 12
Numeracy	+ 11	+ 1

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## What can we make of this?

First, these are small movements. We are talking about movements of generally fewer than 20 points on a scale where the average is 500, and where two-thirds of schools fall between 400 and 600. So don't attach more importance to them than they deserve.

Second, they show student performance on a very narrow base. Schools teach many things other than the "three Rs". For many parents there are plenty of more important reasons for choosing a school, including its breadth of curriculum, its culture, its religious affiliation and above all, its suitability for their child.

Third, all measurement contains measurement error. These tests have been designed and administered by competent people, but you can't eliminate measurement error because perfect precision in this field is not possible.

Fourth, there is also non-measurement error. Things change in ways the tests can't pick up: a very experienced teacher retires and is replaced by an inexperienced one; a new principal comes in and changes the school's curriculum priorities; you get a very bright group of students one year and an ordinary group the next.

Fifth, this is a snapshot of student performance: how they went on one test on one day.

So be careful about attaching too much importance to these numbers alone. They give good information, but it is only a small part of the picture.

The *My School* website takes pains to point this out.

You certainly can't say, on the basis of these figures, that School X is better for my child than School Y.

As you can see, extracting just what the numbers really say about a school is time-consuming, and the picture is often messy: a school does better on some things than others, and this can change from year to year.

Above all, resist the "league table" idea. You just can't rank schools from 1 to 10,000 based on this kind of information. There are too many factors to take into account, and most of them are not reflected in the figures.

## What use can we make of the figures?

*If your child is already at a school* and you want to ask the school about what it is doing in the areas of the "three Rs", use the figures by all means as a starting point for discussion, but in doing so bear in mind their limitations.

*If you are choosing a school*, you can go to the website and pull together all these numbers for each of the schools you are choosing from. You will probably find the variations to be quite small if the schools are in the same neighbourhood. If the variations are large -- say, more than

50 points -- you are probably on to an important difference between the schools concerned.

Whatever you get from doing this, though, there is no substitute for visiting the school, talking to the principal, observing the students, and talking to other parents.

It is astonishing how much you can learn about a school's atmosphere and "feel" by sitting in the foyer for five minutes: how the staff treat you; how they speak to one another and to the students; the appearance and demeanour of the students; what the school thinks is important enough to display on the walls.

In a survey of parents by the Australian Parents Council in 2008, it was clear what factors parents regarded as important in choosing a school. For choosing a *primary* school, there were five first-order factors:

- number of pupils per teacher
- quality of the school's facilities and resources
- average size of classes
- support for struggling or gifted students
- approach to discipline.

For choosing a *secondary* school, parents identified a quite similar cluster of five factors of equal top importance:

- pupils per teacher
- facilities and resources
- support for struggling or gifted students
- approach to discipline
- complaints/issues handling.

The bases for judging school performance considered by parents to be of highest importance were factors associated with the happiness of students, the general direction of the school, the quality of relationships between staff and students, quality of the teaching staff and behaviour management. These were, in a sense, all people-related factors rather than achievement-related.



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PARENTAL BASES FOR JUDGING	MEAN SCORE (ON 0-10 SCALE)
How happy the students seem to be	8.7
Whether the school is basically heading in the right direction	8.6
The kind of people the students generally turn out to be	8.5
How well the principal and teachers seem to know the students	8.5
The academic qualifications of teaching staff	8.5
Behaviour management strategies	8.5
Participation of teaching staff in professional development	8.4
The atmosphere or “feel” of the school	8.4
Students’ results in public tests or exams	8.4
What you hear about the school from other people	8.0
Students’ sporting or artistic achievements	7.4
How the school expresses its faith (if a faith-based school)	7.3

## So to get the best out of *My School*...

- keep a sense of proportion about the importance of the figures
- use them to start a discussion with the school, and
- treat them as only a part of the picture.



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