

## THE CONVERSATION

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# Parents shouldn't rely on My School data when choosing a school for their child

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The most reliable way to find the best school for your child is to visit and find out about its philosophy and programs. Shutterstock

Parents are often overwhelmed by the decision about choosing the right school for their children. The My School website, which was updated last week, provides useful information, but should not be used as the sole guide to the best school for your child.

## What is the My School website?

My School provides national comparable data on all primary and secondary schools. It shows annual NAPLAN results and demographic and financial reporting, so that parents can supposedly make informed choices about where to send their children.

The site allows users to compare schools by postcode and also with “like” schools that share similar student populations. It contains useful information on things such as school finances, staffing, student background and other contextual factors.

It is popular, with over 1.4 million site visits in 2016.

In 2008, the prime minister, Kevin Rudd, announced plans to introduce these national school comparisons. He said this was because school standards were not high enough and parents should “vote with their feet” in choosing more successful schools.

In other words, if you pick a school with higher NAPLAN results, you'll be guaranteed a return on investment.

But this is simply wrong.

In his book, *Measuring Up*, Daniel Koretz warns of the dangers of using test scores to make judgments about schools, students and teachers. He argues that the two common misunderstandings about testing are:

*That scores on a single test tell us all we need to know about student achievement, and that this information tells us all we need to know about school quality.*

## Things to keep in mind when using My School

Recent news reports suggested that parents could use MySchool data to compare children's results, referred to students as strugglers, coasters or improvers, and generated league tables of schools.

Each of these reports misuse or misunderstand the data in some way and are therefore misleading for parents.

There are two main issues with using My School and NAPLAN data to make judgments about schools and teachers.

### 1. Test results say nothing about teaching quality

There is no clear link between student achievement on tests and school performance or the quality of teaching within particular classrooms.

Take a hypothetical Year 9 student, who has multiple teachers across the school week, not to mention an array of teachers before starting Year 9. How much of that student's success on NAPLAN can be attributed to their Year 9 history teacher, as opposed to their Year 8 mathematics teacher?

What if our hypothetical student has moved around a lot during their schooling, or has English as a second or third language, or parents who are unemployed and have low literacy levels?

How are any of these individual student factors accounted for in the aggregated scores presented on My School? The answer is simple: they are not.

While the Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage (ICSEA) attempts to allow for socioeconomic differences at the school level, so that schools with similar student populations can be compared, it has its own issues.

## 2. School rankings and comparisons are misleading

There are multiple concerns with the overly simplified way that test data are extrapolated to construct league tables of schools, despite this being inappropriate as a measure of school performance.

Most of the difference in student performance can be attributed to socioeconomic background. The 2015 ICSEA Technical Report states that:

*78% of variance in school performance is accounted for by ICSEA values.*

In other words, less than a quarter of school performance is due to school-based factors such as the quality of teaching.

The attempt to make comparisons across years for individual students, schools or states is problematic due to assumptions about the reliability and comparability of the data.

Also, the onus is placed on parents to calculate the worth and performance of schools through using My School. As Curtin University researcher Brad Gobby explains, it is assumed that:

*parents share the website's normative assumptions about the value of tests, the quality of the measures, and what defines performance.*

## What is important when choosing a school?

A recent review of My School, commissioned by the federal government, argued that:

*... parent choice of school is informed by a range of factors such as the "feel" of a school, relationships and behaviour management, extra-curricular activities and other qualitative*

*factors that are best determined by visiting a school and talking to teachers and other parents.*

The best way to get a sense of the community and culture of a school is to visit that school, speak with the principal and see the students and staff in the classroom and out in the playground.

Attending school information evenings and parent-teacher conferences, as well as talking with other parents, also provides useful information.

My School cannot tell you about the quality of a school's facilities, nor about the engagement, respect and relationships in the school. It does not tell you if there is a vibrant arts program or whether sporting activities are available. It also tells you nothing about the subject options available, particularly for secondary schools.

Parents can end up spending many thousands of dollars sending their children to expensive private schools with glossy brochures and lush sporting fields.

But often the best school for your child is the public school just down the road.

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