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# Measuring What Matters: Student Progress

Dr. Ben Jensen



Founding Members

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Australian Government

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This report was written by Dr. Ben Jensen, Program Director, School Education, Grattan Institute. All recommendations and errors contained in this report belong to the author and not Grattan Institute. Extensive research assistance was provided by Katherine Molyneux and Amelie Hunter who made a substantial contribution to this report.

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## Executive Summary

In Australia, a large percentage of students only reach minimum standards of literacy and numeracy. These students are spread throughout Australia's school education systems; there are few schools that do not have poor performing students who would benefit from improved education. Despite decades of increasing expenditure, student performance has stagnated (Thomson & De Bortoli 2008). We have a moral imperative to improve the performance of the 30% of year 9 students who have progressed to only the very basic elements of writing literacy.

Accurate measures of school performance are vital to improvement. The measures need to focus on student progress so that schools and teachers can focus on improving all students – particularly those most in need.

The National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) assesses students' literacy and numeracy skills and is an important advance in addressing poor performance. The Federal Government's *'My School'* website<sup>1</sup> publishes school performance scores for each school as the average of their students' NAPLAN results, comparing them to the results of 'like' schools (based on proxies of students' socio-economic background).

The publication of school performance measures is a significant step forward in achieving transparency and lifting standards in the Australian education system. However, the school performance measures published on the *'My School'* website are prone to mismeasurement and may be biased against schools serving lower socio-economic communities (Ballou et al. 2004; Ladd & Walsh 2002; Raudenbush 2004; Raudenbush & Willms 1995).

Value-added scores consistently measure school performance more accurately, because they are better able to isolate the performance of schools from other factors that affect student performance. This creates a fairer system that is not biased against schools serving more disadvantaged communities. For these reasons, teachers, school associations and education unions in other countries have advocated for the introduction of value-added measures of school performance (Doran & Izumi 2004; Fitz-Gibbon 1997; Jakubowski 2008; NASBE 2005; OECD, 2008; Raudenbush 2004).

School value-added scores are calculated by comparing the progress made by each student between assessments, measuring the contribution the school makes to that progress, controlling for students' background. A school's contribution to student progress would be measured between NAPLAN assessments of literacy and numeracy at years 3, 5, 7, and 9, and students' grades in the final year of secondary school.

Value-added measures of school performance shift the focus to the student – they focus on how students learn and progress. Significant improvements come from building individualised instruction and lesson plans around multiple assessments that identify each student's learning trajectory.

School principals need to be able to identify for which students, in which subject areas and in which grade levels their school is effectively contributing to student progress. Effective programs and instruction can be expanded and less effective areas developed.

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1. See [www.myschool.edu.au](http://www.myschool.edu.au).

In this report it is advocated that:

- The current measures of school performance published on the 'My School' website should be replaced with value-added measures of school performance because:
  - Their greater accuracy creates a fairer system, particularly for schools in lower socio-economic communities;
  - A focus on student progress rather than performance at a single point in time serves a variety of policy objectives and is more effective in improving instruction and school education.
- School principals and teachers should be empowered to use value-added measures to improve instruction and school programs. To achieve this:
  - A user-friendly information technology system should be developed that allows school principals and teachers to better analyse and then act upon their own performance data;
  - Education and training to incorporate performance assessment into instruction and school programs should be provided;
  - Resources should be provided for teachers and schools to develop programs based on value-added measures and disseminate best practice.
- Value-added measures of school performance should become an important benchmark in school evaluation. School evaluators should make their qualitative judgements of good practice in the context of value-added performance measures;
- Value-added measures of student progress should be the basis for categorising schools as under-performing. Developmental steps should be explicit, with additional support for under-performing schools; and
- School principals should be granted autonomy to effectively lead the school for which they are being held accountable. Individual teachers have continually been shown to have the greatest impact upon student performance and school principals should be empowered to determine who teaches in their school.