

My school's better than *My School*

Primary school teacher Annie Facchinetti looks at *My School*



Grade 2 and 3 children at Our Lady Help of Christians Primary School, Eltham

My *School* reportedly had nine million hits in its first days of operation, yet I could only find one person who had actually been on it. At my school, we were far more concerned with meeting our new classes and conducting start of year testing than rushing to look at *My School*. Had there been a media black out on Wednesday, I would never have known that the website had been launched.

The testing we carry out at the start of the year is purely diagnostic. It is used to assess where students are at and helps set the direction for teaching and learning in the early weeks of school. The results are not released to the public, and yet they say more about Our Lady Help of Christians Primary School (Our Lady's) than a national website ever could. Our testing underscores our commitment to helping children meet their potential by developing learning opportunities that meet their needs and interests, a commitment that, I would contend, few schools would not share.

Teachers

Kate Godden has been teaching at Our Lady's for seven years. Three days after *My School* went live, she still hadn't accessed it. "I haven't had time and I'm not really that interested if it's only based on two year's worth of NAPLAN data. It doesn't really reflect our teaching style and practice."

Linda Lawrence has been at Our Lady's for more than 10 years and shares Godden's views. "I've heard there's not enough information on it and that it's not that great," she explains.

The validity of the information on the site has been vigorously questioned by some, and defended by others. One of the most

contentious aspects is the Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage (ICSEA). While a wealth of research has gone into developing the ICSEA based on 16 variables that were found to influence educational outcomes, such as the education levels, income and occupations of parents, the results of these groupings are perplexing to say the least.

Our Lady's is located in Melbourne's outer north eastern suburbs. Our "statistically similar schools" based on the ICSEA are from all over Australia except the Northern Territory. Included are government primary schools in what would be considered fairly privileged areas of Melbourne, Sydney and the ACT, four Melbourne private schools, and country schools in Victoria, Western Australia and South Australia. Three schools on the list, including a primary school near Geraldton in Western Australia with only 14 students, have a "student population below the reporting threshold". This narrows the field for comparison somewhat. In some cases, though not in ours, primary schools are grouped with secondary schools, with whom they cannot be compared based on NAPLAN.

Kate Godden explains that the only comparisons she is interested in are with "Our competition" – the other primary schools in our immediate area, none of whom we are grouped with on *My School*. Statistically valid the ICSEA may be, but in practical terms, even though we measure up well, I'm not sure it means much.

Parents

From the media hype and the political spin you would assume that nearly every parent in the country had jumped on the internet to access *My School* as soon as it was available in the early

hours of the morning. The reality is that none of the five parents I interviewed had felt the need to log on.

Karen Higgins has one son heading to secondary school in 2011 and another starting primary school in the same year. She believes *My School* is just a "political push from the number crunchers". According to Higgins, the information about Year 12 results published each year is far more meaningful. "It tells me how many students completed Year 12, how many went to TAFE or uni and how many got jobs. That's far more important"

Higgins had looked at the *My School* data that was printed in the newspaper, but she found it confusing. "It tells me nothing about the school and the area it is in," she says. "I like to see for myself, speak to people involved in a school, check out the area." Teacher Linda Lawrence, who also believes that you really have to go and see a school agreed. "Results aren't everything," she maintains.

Of the other parents I spoke to, most had only a vague idea about what *My School* would tell them and none had felt the need to check out where their children's schools ranked. Shaureen Carpenter, mother of sons starting Year 1 and Year 3 in 2010 summed up the general feeling. "I'm happy with the school. The kids are reading and writing. Why would I need to look at the site?"

Whether politicians and the media are responsible for the bulk of the 9 million hits on the *My School* website is a matter for speculation. On the ground where it counts, teachers and parents appear far more concerned about their real life experiences than a website that for the majority, is not telling them anything they don't already know.