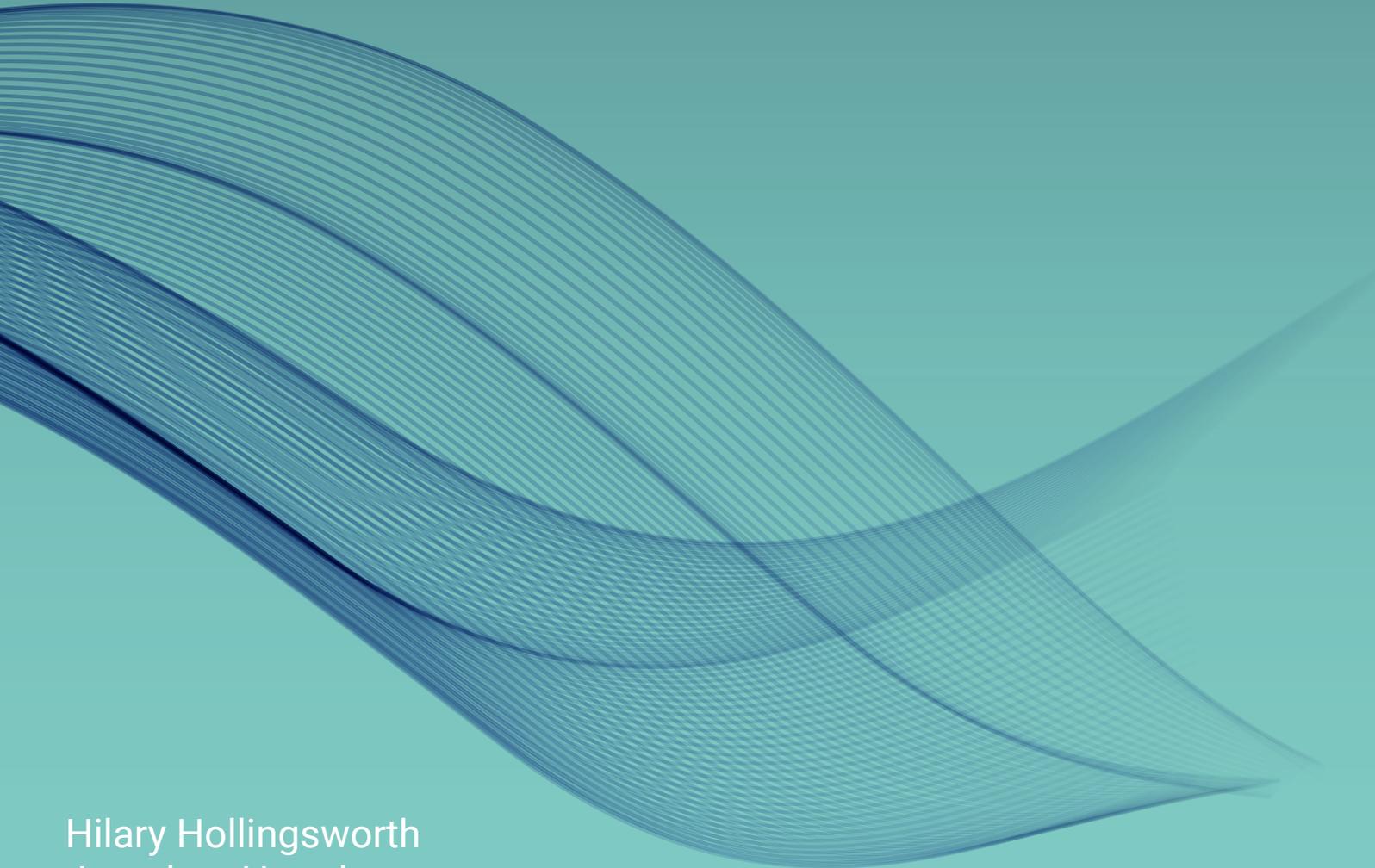




Communicating Student Learning Progress

A Review of Student Reporting in Australia



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Australian Council for Educational Research



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Foreword

Student reports are a longstanding and ubiquitous feature of school education. Teachers and school leaders spend considerable effort, time and money writing and checking student reports. But how effective are existing school reports? What is known about the best ways to communicate information about student learning to parents and carers? And do the benefits of current student reports justify the time and expense?

A remarkable finding of this ground-breaking study is that reporting on student learning is a significantly under-researched area of educational practice. Despite the money that is spent globally on the preparation of student reports, there is a dearth of international research into effective forms of communicating student learning, and few established principles to guide this aspect of schools' work. Perhaps as a result, this study found enormous variability in the formats and content of student reports currently provided by Australian schools.

A significant concern is that parents and carers reported paying little attention to much of the content of student reports. They often focus only on written comments, ignoring other reported information. They are critical of what they see as educational jargon, reports that simply reproduce material from curriculum documents, and comments that are exclusively positive. And they may see reports as outdated by the time they arrive. Parents and carers want information about how students are tracking against expectations, whether they are making good progress, and what they can do to support next steps in learning.

Many of the teachers and schools in this study clearly believe that student reports can be improved and are working to achieve this. However, they work within the constraints of government and system requirements and, often, report formats provided by technology companies. Schools also respond to parents'/carers' expectations, including beliefs about the value and meaning of percentages and grades.

Interestingly, although teachers and schools place a high priority on communicating student progress, and commonly describe their reports as providing such information, the study found very few examples of reports that make clear the nature and magnitude of students' improvements or gains over time.

Most significantly, this study raises questions about the future of the traditional school report. Advances in technology are enabling schools to provide more continuous, personalised information about students and their learning, including the possibility of parents/carers accessing online the level of detail they desire.

This study is a timely and significant contribution to a topic that should be of vital interest to education policy makers and every parent and teacher.

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Geoff Masters". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Geoff Masters AO

Acknowledgements

The investigation undertaken and described in this report would not have been possible without the contributions of a large number of people across the three-year duration of the project.

Many individuals provided the project team with copies of school reports – including those of their own children, other relatives, friends, or sourced through professional networks – making it possible to examine, analyse and understand the current practice of how schools report about student learning. Thank you to all of those who supplied report examples.

Thanks are also extended to members of the following schools and organisations for their generous contributions to the project, including participation in workshops, focus groups, and interviews, and the preparation of vignettes of practice.

- Australian Council of State School Organisations (ACSSO)
- Australian Primary Principals Association (APPA)
- Camberwell Grammar School, Victoria
- Catholic Education Melbourne - Collective of Southern Region Primary Schools
- Chifley College – Bidwell Campus, New South Wales
- Compass
- Edumate
- Kincoppal-Rose Bay School of the Sacred Heart, New South Wales
- Kingswood High School, New South Wales
- Kingswood Park Public School, New South Wales
- Penrith Public School, New South Wales
- Perth Primary School, Tasmania
- Rethinking Schools Network, Victoria
- Riverside Primary School, Tasmania
- Schoolbox
- SEQTA
- St Helena Secondary College, Victoria
- St Paul's Catholic Primary School, Nightcliff, Northern Territory
- Sunshine College, Victoria
- Taroona High School, Tasmania
- The Department of Education Tasmania

Executive summary

About the project

Each year teachers and principals in schools across Australia invest much time and effort, and considerable expense, in activities related to communicating student learning progress. However little is known about the effectiveness of these activities, including the extent to which they are valued by stakeholders, whether they are considered to provide quality information about student learning, and whether there are alternative designs for these activities that might be more effective.

The *Communicating Student Learning Progress* project was initiated to investigate these questions. Focusing on the national research, policy and practice landscape related to how information about student learning is communicated, the project focused particularly on student reports as interest in this widely used form of communication about student learning was determined to be very strong. Interestingly, the project found that there is a dearth of research about student reporting and therefore there is little evidence about it. The project thus provides a starting point for the gathering of evidence about student reporting in Australia.

Communicating Student Learning Progress was a project conducted by ACER as part of a strategic initiative focussed on assessment reform and innovation. The project took place over a three-year period from July 2016 to June 2019. Project activities included:

- Scans of the research literature to review formal research conducted into the quality of reporting about student learning progress.
- Reviews of national, state and territory policies and guidelines across government, Catholic and independent education systems.
- Examination of online platforms that schools use to communicate student learning, including desk reviews and interviews with providers to investigate what the platforms offered schools in terms of communicating student learning progress, and how the platforms were influencing student reporting design and practice.
- Collection and analysis of student report examples from primary and secondary schools in different locations and in different systems across Australia to examine current practice in the design and use of student reports.
- Collection and analysis of key stakeholder perspectives about communicating student learning – including students, parents/carers, teachers, principals, and education systems personnel – to understand their views about what works, what doesn't and what's needed with respect to student reporting.

This report presents details of the data collection, analysis, and findings for each of the project investigation areas. It also presents a set of recommendations for communicating student learning informed by the project findings, and some recommendations for further research in this area. It is anticipated that the project findings and the recommendations might usefully provoke an agenda for discussion, debate, and a reimagining of the purpose and design of student reporting in Australia, and beyond.

What has been learned?

The future place and role of the traditional semester report is uncertain

Teachers and school leaders invest considerable effort, time and cost in the writing, proof-reading and production of twice-yearly student reports, a process that is often initiated several weeks – or even months – before reports are eventually released. School leaders suggest that the numbers of teachers taking personal or sick leave spikes at the end of each semester at report-writing times, and teachers report that their attention at these times is diverted from the core aspects of their job such as planning high-quality instruction and continuing the delivery of curriculum. As teachers feel pressured to meet uniform reporting deadlines at the end of each semester and rush to assign final assessments in preparation for reporting, students can feel overwhelmed as their assignments start to pile up. Meanwhile, parents and carers express significant dissatisfaction with the timing and frequency of semester reports, and a desire for more frequent communication about their child's learning to enable them to provide timely support.

To the extent that semester reports serve their traditional function, to summarise the grades obtained and comment on a student's achievement across a half-year period, they are increasingly being seen as redundant, often communicating information that is outdated and un-actionable. This is particularly true now that many schools are embracing the use of online communication tools and platforms to continuously report student achievement to parents and carers throughout each semester. Teachers suggest continuous reporting is more useful to students and to parents and carers than semester reports. In this current context, it is an open question as to whether the traditional semester report as we know it has a role in the future.

Student reports tend to communicate a student's achievement, but few appear to communicate a student's progress

A significant issue arising from multiple lines of investigation in the project is that, among all stakeholders, the concept of communicating a student's progress (as distinct from their performance) is not clearly understood. Federal Government policy mandates that schools report "progress and achievement", and schools and teachers claim that communicating progress is a key purpose of schools reports. Yet with few exceptions, analysis of the various forms and content in student reports reveals that currently schools tend to report student achievement in terms of performance only, such as through the use of grades, scores, marks and rankings. Teacher comments similarly tend to describe what a student has achieved or how well a student has performed, but provide little clear insight into that student's learning growth.

To communicate student learning progress requires not simply a measure of performance at a point in time, but tracking a student's increasing skills, knowledge and understandings within an area of learning over time. This requires assessments capable of providing such information. In the absence of such information, a sense of how that student is 'progressing' can only be interpreted – possibly incorrectly – by their performance on discrete and sometimes unrelated tasks. Many members of teacher, parent/carer and student forum groups expressed an understanding that student reports currently do not communicate learning growth over time, and concerns amongst all stakeholders were expressed for how a singular focus on performance indicators in reports can mask the extent to which a student has or has not demonstrated growth in their learning.

There is scope to improve the clarity of information communicated about student learning

Project investigations found that the production of uniform, static, paper-based or pdf reports require schools to make ‘one-size-fits-all’ decisions for their school communities related to communicating about student learning. This includes decisions about how much information and detail to include in reports, how to represent this information visually or verbally, how to write comments, and so on. Unsurprisingly, and despite the best efforts and varied approaches of schools to this task, satisfaction with the contents and format of student reports is rarely consistent. While some parents and carers have the capacity and the desire to understand and interrogate reports that present multiple, finer-grain levels of detail and evidence about a child’s learning, others only require an overview of their child’s performance and progress gleaned from grades and graphical displays with some supportive general commentary.

Discussions with parents and carers about reports and analysis of teachers’ report comments reveal that communication is clearer when it is not singularly positive: when reports convey both what a student has *and has not yet* been able to demonstrate, and when parents and carers can see that their child’s performance, progress and achievement is being measured and tracked against some benchmark or standard. Within the context of a school’s broader approach to communicating about student learning, clarity also would be achieved by aligning the foci of different forms of communication – written reports, continuous reporting, parent-teacher interviews and conferences, portfolios – such that greater continuity of information is presented.

Recommendations in brief

Recommendations for communicating student learning

The following eight recommendations reflect the project team’s conclusions from the current investigation. It is anticipated that these recommendations can inform future directions for student reporting policy and practice. The recommendations are elaborated further in Section 4: Recommendations.

1. Schools and systems should use consistent terminology to communicate student learning

Terms associated with reporting (such as ‘achievement’, ‘performance’ and ‘progress’) should be clearly explained and used with consistency to enable accurate and meaningful interpretation among stakeholders.

2. Student reporting should be continuous and aligned to the assessment cycle

School reporting systems should be continuous and accommodate the naturally different cycles of teaching, learning and assessment of different subjects and courses rather than scheduled according to an inherited, traditional end-of-semester reporting cycle.

3. Student reporting should explicitly represent and communicate learning progress

Student reporting should show and describe not only what students have achieved or their performance in assessments, but how students are developing, and the growth they have made over time, in terms of the typical pathway of learning in each area.

4. Student reporting should explicitly communicate student learning against expectations

In addition to reporting the learning gains students make, student reporting should make clear how students are performing and progressing against expectations (for example, against levels, benchmarks or achievement standards).

5. Student reporting should clearly articulate how performance ratings are defined

Student reporting should include explicit information about how performance ratings are defined and determined by the school, and the extent to which these are believed to be standard gradings used consistently across schools, or particular to student performance within the school.

6. Student reporting should present information that is accessible and provides different levels of detail

Student reporting should present information in clear and accessible ways but should also afford opportunity to easily obtain more detail about a student's learning and school work as required.

7. Student reporting should include specific directions for future learning

There is overwhelming support among students for reports that provide them with specific information about how to improve – in particular, what they need to do next to progress in a learning area.

8. Methods used to communicate student learning should have distinct but complementary purposes

An effective school reporting system will make explicit the distinct role of different forms of communication – continuous reports, written reports, interviews, portfolios, etc. – and the ways that these are intended to work together to ensure cohesion and maximise efficiencies with respect to communicating student learning progress.

Recommendations for further research

This project has uncovered many issues related to communicating student learning. The project team considers that further research would be invaluable in order to include broader national and international representation, and to extend the investigations of areas initiated in this project.

The following potential research and investigation items are of particular interest.

- Undertake a more substantial collection of student reports to include broader representation across all Australian jurisdictions, systems and levels (early years, primary, secondary) as well as international contexts and other sectors of education.
- Identify and investigate schools working on the design and use of reporting formats that support, monitor and represent progress (gain or growth over time) to determine what's possible and what works.
- Identify and investigate schools working on the design and use of coherent school reporting systems that explicitly connect different communication methods to better understand how these systems work.
- In conjunction with education systems and providers of learning management systems and online assessment and reporting software, design a model for a school reporting system that follows the recommendations related to communicating student learning identified in Section 4.1, including prototypes of effective online and print-based student reports.

1. Introduction

1.1 Project background

Across Australia, as in many other locations, there is a long tradition of schools engaging each year, each semester, or each school term, in activities intended to communicate information about student learning to students themselves, to parents and caregivers, and to other stakeholders. Given the tremendous investment of effort in these activities by teachers and principals, and their significant cost, questions of great interest are:

- How effective are these activities considered to be?
- To what extent are they valued by stakeholders?
- Do stakeholders believe they are provided with quality information about student learning?
- Are there alternative designs for these activities that might provide 'better' information about student learning?

The Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER) initiated the *Communicating Student Learning Progress* project to investigate these questions. The project is part of an ACER strategic initiative focussed on assessment reform and innovation. It involved an investigation of the national research, policy and practice landscape related to how information about student learning is communicated. The investigation comprised five key areas of work:

1. a scan of the research about communicating student learning
2. a review of national, State and Territory policies relevant to communicating student learning
3. an examination of technology platforms schools use to communicate student learning
4. the collection and analysis of student report examples currently used in schools
5. the collection and analysis of stakeholder perspectives about communicating student learning.

Initially it was anticipated that the project would investigate the various ways that schools communicate about student learning. However as the project unfolded, the project scope was refined to focus particularly on student reports, enabling a deep investigation of this widely used form of communication about student learning.

From the outset, interest in student reports was very strong among the education community. Many opportunities emerged to involve different stakeholders in the investigation. The project team was contacted by individual principals and teachers who wanted to be involved with or connected to the project, as well as representatives of a number of education systems and national education organisations. Recommendations related to reporting were made in *Through Growth to Achievement: Report of the Review to Achieve Educational Excellence in Australian Schools* published by the Australian Government in 2018, and these prompted significant further interest in the project.

The project found that while there was a substantial body of research related to assessment, and to some extent parent engagement, there was a dearth of research about student reporting and therefore little evidence about it. This project provided a starting point for the gathering of evidence about student reporting in Australia.

Descriptions of the project design and the report format follow.

1.2 Project design

The *Communicating Student Learning Progress* project was a small-scale project conducted by ACER as part of a broader strategic initiative focussed on assessment reform and innovation. The project commenced in July 2016 and was completed in June 2019. Table 1 presents a timeline of project activities conducted over that time.

Table 1 Project activities and timeline

TIMELINE	2016		2017				2018				2019	
	Q3	Q4	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Q1	Q2
Research scans												
Policy reviews	*											
Online platforms review												
Student reports												
Stakeholder perspectives												
Project reporting												
<i>Teacher articles 1, 2, 3</i>												
<i>Research Conference 2018</i>												
<i>Final Report</i>												

* A preliminary policy review was completed in December 2015

As shown in Table 1, the project involved five key areas of work as well as project reporting tasks. These work areas were determined at the commencement of the project, with the design of activities within each work area evolving as the project progressed.

Several of the activities within each work area displayed in Table 1 were supported by stakeholders in different states and territories. These included individuals, schools and organisations. A list of project participants and supporters is included in *Acknowledgements*.

A description of each work area and the project reporting follows.

Research scans

Scans of existing research into the reporting of student learning were conducted throughout the project, with a review formally conducted initially in 2016, and revised in February 2018. The focus of these reviews was to determine whether any formal research (preferably but not exclusively within an Australian context) had been conducted into the quality of reporting about student learning progress. The review focus was intentionally narrowed to include only formal instances of reporting with a focus specifically on report cards or other equivalent means of periodic written reporting. The scope thereby excluded other means by which schools communicate learning progress such as parent-teacher interviews, three-way conferences, presentations and portfolios. School assessment practices, which also inform and impact on student reporting, were excluded from the research review.

Policy reviews

A policy review was undertaken in December 2015 to provide background information for the development of the project before it began formally in 2016. The initial question asked was how are schools reporting student progress to parents and students? The first stage considered legislation and policy:

- What is mandated by departments? (for example, policies, and guidelines)
- What form or format does it take? (for example, templates)
- Is any software involved?

Actual student reports were out of scope at this point. The interest was in the policies under which schools were required to operate. The review involved an online search for relevant documentation across Australian state and territory education jurisdictions, the Catholic education sector, as well as any guidelines present in the independent education sector.

The 2015 review was updated using the same methodology in April 2017 and again in March 2019. Findings of the policy reviews are summarised in section 2.2.

Online platform review

A review of online and software platforms used by schools to assist them in the reporting of student learning was conducted in 2017-18. This comprised both a desk review of the websites of a number of major providers to Australian schools, followed up with either face-to-face or email interviews with representatives of several of these companies. The review focused primarily on what these online platforms offered schools in terms of assessing, tracking and communicating student learning progress and performance. It also considered the effect these new products had on how and what schools chose to report about student learning.

Collection and analysis of student reports

The collection and analysis of report examples was a key component of the project investigation. This provided an opportunity to examine current practice in the design and use of student reports in different locations and in different systems across Australia.

The project team requested copies of reports from networks of colleagues across ACER and extended this call to their professional and personal contacts across the country. As the project progressed, copies of reports were collected at every opportunity from individuals and groups who participated in other data collections associated with the project, and also from readers of project publications and attendees at conferences and other project reporting events.

The reports collected were scanned, de-identified, and archived in two collections according to whether they were primary or secondary school examples. Each report example was given a unique identification number for tracking and analysis purposes. Importantly, no reference to schools or students was made in any analysis or reporting related to the example reports collected.

Report examples were analysed in the following ways:

1. coded for presence or absence of specified report elements
2. coded related to the term 'progress', including count and categorisation with respect to use
3. report 'Comments' categorised according to:
 - comment purpose/function
 - comment generality/specificity/grain size

- comment foci, including learning activities and tasks undertaken, demonstrated skills, achievement against standards, improvement/next steps.

Preliminary findings related to these analyses were reported in two ways. One involved a presentation at ACER's Research Conference in August 2018, together with the publication of a paper in the conference proceedings titled: *Communicating student learning progress: What does that mean and can it make a difference?* The second involved the publication of an article in ACER's *Teacher* magazine in December 2018, titled: *Teacher comments in school reports: What's effective?*

Findings of the analysis of the student report examples are presented in Section 3.1.

Collection and analysis of stakeholder perspectives

Another important part of the project investigation related to understanding the practice of student reporting involved collection and analysis of key stakeholder perspectives about what works, what doesn't and what's needed. The views of students, parents, teachers, principals, and education systems personnel were considered important to examine. Their perspectives were gathered using the following methods: informal meetings and conversations, focus groups, briefings and workshops, and surveys. A description of each method is presented below.

Meetings and conversations

Throughout the project individual principals, teachers and parents from several Australian states and territories contacted the project team to share their views on communicating student learning progress, and reporting more specifically. On occasion they also requested assistance to improve current reporting approaches at their location. At times these communications were prompted because individuals had been asked to supply the project team with report examples, other times they heard about the project at conferences or read about it in publications, or contacted ACER for assistance in this area and were referred to the project team. The perspectives of individuals provided in these meetings and conversations were documented and are reported, de-identified, in Section 3.2.

Focus Groups

To ensure that the perspectives of students, parents, and teachers were collected, the project team conducted a number of focus groups in the final year of the project. Focus groups were held in schools in five states (New South Wales, Queensland, South Australia, Tasmania and Victoria) and included primary and secondary settings in government, independent and Catholic systems.

In the student focus groups project team members worked with groups of students through a series of questions related to the purpose and nature of the existing arrangements for communicating student learning progress at their school. The questions asked of students are presented in Appendix A. Project team members were careful to ensure that all students in the groups had opportunity to share their perspectives. These were recorded, de-identified, and are reported in Section 3.2.

The project team designed the focus groups for parents/carers and the focus groups for teachers to provide opportunity for participants to first consider and record their individual views about communicating student learning, and then engage in a group discussion. The discussion was based around three themes: what they would like to 'retain' with respect to the current approaches used to communicate about student learning in their school, what they would like to 'remove' from the current approaches, and what they would like to 'reimagine' to make the approaches more effective. Participants in each parent/carer or teacher focus group individually recorded their ideas

on sticky notes, then worked together in small groups to sort them into categories based on commonalities with respect to the three themes. Once groups had sorted the different perspectives recorded on the sticky notes, the entire focus group discussed each theme in turn. Project team members probed for additional details that would facilitate their understanding of the parents/carers' and teachers' perspectives. In each of the parent and teacher focus groups, this method provoked robust discussion related to current approaches, as well as possibilities for approaches they considered might be more effective.

The perspectives of all participants in each parent/carer and teacher focus group were collated, de-identified, in spreadsheet files and coded. Findings are reported in Section 3.2.

Briefings and workshops

The project team was fortunate to have the opportunity to meet and work with a number of associations, organisations and networks during the project investigation period. These included national, state and territory associations and organisations, government and system-level groups, and individual schools who are listed on the Acknowledgements page.

Many of these opportunities were by invitation, with different groups seeking to learn about the project scope and preliminary findings and how these might influence their own work in this area. These groups also shared with the project team their perspectives about current approaches at their own locations – what works, what doesn't and what's needed. These perspectives are also reported in Section 3.2.

Vignettes of practice

Through the various face-to-face activities that were part of the project, the project team became aware of many schools that were actively engaged in rethinking and reshaping their approaches to communicating student learning progress. To gain deeper understanding of the methods and processes schools are using in these efforts, the project team invited four schools and one school collective to describe and document vignettes of practice. Staff members from each school and the facilitator of the school collective were provided with a template to record information. This template included description of their school context, their motivation for rethinking practice related to student reports and communicating student learning progress, implications for deciding how to work, steps taken, challenges encountered, reflections and current status of initiatives. Information about the vignettes is presented in Section 3.3 and each of the vignettes is presented in Appendix B.

Teacher survey

A voluntary online teacher perception survey was administered between November 2018 and April 2019. The survey was promoted through ACER's *Teacher* magazine, and was designed to capture a broader representation of teacher voice than was possible through focus groups alone. The questions asked of teachers are provided in Appendix C. The survey was divided into questions about teachers' own perceptions of semester-reporting, questions about their perceptions of continuous reporting, and the extent to which teachers felt they reported on student performance and/or student learning progress.

Project reporting

During the period of the project there were a number of opportunities to share preliminary findings with different audiences through presentations and publications. As mentioned earlier, these presentations and publications often prompted further interest and participation of groups and individuals in the project.

Presentations related to the project included:

- Catholic Education Melbourne – A Southern Region Reporting Collective – presentation at regional meeting, Elwood, Victoria, May 2018
- Australian Primary Principals Association (APPA) – presentation at national meeting, Canberra, May 2018
- ACER Research Conference 2018 – presentation at annual conference, Sydney, August 2018
- Australian Council of State School Organisations (ACSSO) – presentation at ACSSO Roundtable, Adelaide, November 2018
- The Department of Education, Tasmania – presentation to Senior Education Officials, Hobart, November 2018
- Rethinking Schools Network, Victoria – presentation at network meeting, Camberwell, Victoria, November 2018

Publications about the project included three articles prepared for ACER’s *Teacher* magazine and a conference presentation at Research Conference 2018:

- [*Does the old school report have a future?*](#) (April 2018)
- [*Continuous student reporting – the next step?*](#) (June 2018)
- [*Teacher comments in school reports: What’s effective?*](#) (December 2018)

Hollingsworth, H. & Heard, J. (2018). [*Communicating student learning progress: What does that mean and can it make a difference?*](#) In, *Research Conference 2018 Teaching practices that make a difference: Insights from research*, pp. 44-48. Melbourne: ACER.

1.3 Terminology

An observation made when undertaking this project is that terms associated with reporting and communicating about student learning such as those displayed in Table 2 appear to be used in different ways across the education community. Some terms appear to have meanings specific to particular times or particular initiatives, some terms appear to have multiple meanings, and some terms appear to be used interchangeably.

Table 2 Terms associated with reporting and communicating about student learning

<i>achievement</i>	<i>attainment</i>	<i>continuous reporting</i>
<i>formative assessment</i>	<i>gain</i>	<i>grades</i>
<i>grading</i>	<i>growth</i>	<i>improvement</i>
<i>indicator</i>	<i>level</i>	<i>normative</i>
<i>outcome</i>	<i>performance</i>	<i>progress</i>
<i>progress task</i>	<i>progressive reporting</i>	<i>report card</i>
<i>standard</i>	<i>student report</i>	<i>summative assessment</i>

One potential outcome of this is the possibility of misrepresenting or misinterpreting statements made about reporting or communicating student learning – including statements made in research papers, policy documents, student reports, and participant interviews and focus groups. To minimise possible misrepresentations, statements from any of these contexts that are included in this report are presented using the precise terms that were used originally. And, for clarity, when discussing particular observations and outcomes of the project, terms with a specific intended meaning are explained in the text. Further discussion and examples are provided in Section 3.1.

For clarity, throughout this project report we use the language ‘student reports’ when referring to the documents schools produce to communicate about student learning (to account for all terms used to describe these, e.g. ‘school reports’, ‘report cards’).

1.4 Project report structure

The project report is structured in three sections.

The first section presents contextual details related to communicating about student learning in Australia. It outlines the recent history of student reports, presents a scan of the current Australian policy landscape, and describes influences on and opportunities for communicating about student learning provoked by available technologies.

The second section reports on an investigation of current practices related to communicating about student learning. This includes a glimpse of what student reports look like currently, and what key stakeholders make of these.

The final section presents implications of this project including recommendations to inform future policy and practice related to communicating about student learning. It concludes with consideration of future research anticipated to be important in this area.

1.5 A note about scope and intent

This is a report of a small-scale project fuelled by the strong interest of project team members and the generous contributions of groups and individuals across the country. As work progressed on the various project components, it became obvious that there has been little systematic investment in reviewing the purpose and nature of reporting about student learning in Australia. More questions emerged than answers. It is hoped this report provokes thoughtful conversation, robust debate, and considered action with respect to current and future policy, practice and research on communicating about student learning.

2. Context

2.1 Student reporting across Australia in recent years

Reporting on student learning in Australia, as elsewhere, is a vexed and contentious issue. Emerging trends in schooling, curriculum and assessment are reflected in changes to established reporting formats and practices, sometimes creating a gulf between community and parental expectations of student reports on the one hand, and the intentions of education systems and schools on the other.

One such shift in Australian schools was the introduction in the 1990s of outcomes-based education. This had significant implications for the ways in which students were taught and assessed, and subsequently how schools reported on student achievement (Griffin, 1998). A 1995 submission to the NSW Minister for Education and Training from a panel reviewing that state's introduction of outcomes and profiles, explained that these new curriculum frameworks focused teacher assessment on measuring individual student attainment against statements of expected learning outcomes. These learning outcomes were presented in various curriculum profiles and were intended to describe a typical progression of learning within a subject (Eltis, 1995, p. 3). Consequently teachers needed "to focus on [a child's] progress along predetermined continua of learning and changes in the learner" (Griffin, 1998, p. 18).

Outcomes-based assessment and reporting sought to positively describe what each individual child could demonstrate. This appears to have resulted in a reduced emphasis in some student reports on comparative forms of assessment and traditional performance-based indicators, such as letter grades and marks. It was noted in the Eltis review that a new emphasis on positive reporting of what a child could do failed to communicate other information considered valuable to parents and carers, such as how well their child had achieved a particular outcome, what their child could not yet do, how they compared to other students in the class and how parents and carers might be able to help (Eltis, 1995). The panel noted an additional concern about the language used in outcomes reporting: "when outcomes statements themselves have been incorporated into reports...the language of the outcome has not been readily understandable by parents" (p. 72).

In January 2000, a national research report for the Commonwealth Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs provided a comprehensive insight into the expectations parents and the wider community had of schools, in both their reporting of student achievement and also school achievement (Cuttance & Stokes, 2000). This national review, which sought the opinions of 522 parents across five states in Australia, revealed that there was much variation in the formats, features and perceived quality of student reports. It found that the most common way schools communicated student progress was through performance ratings such as A-E letter grades or an equivalent scale, numerical marks, exam results and class rankings. However, the report also noted that many parents received descriptive reports linked to outcomes-based curricula, with indicators of whether – or to what extent – a child had achieved certain outcomes.

Cuttance and Stokes (2000) found that parents wanted to be kept well informed "about their child's progress" through student reports, and placed a higher priority on this information than any other information they receive from the school (p. ix). Indicators of a child's performance such as grades, were seen as useful indicators of this, but the teachers' comments were valued much more highly as an interpretation of their child's results. For this reason, vague, trite, or meaningless comments – or "computer-generated" (menu-selected) comments – were singled out as being less helpful, as were comments that parents perceived as avoiding telling 'hard truths'. The lack of objective standards that reliably positioned their child's achievement against state or national benchmarks was also a

point of contention noted by the reviewers. Parents also, however, commented on the limitations of reports that merely communicated performance or achievement and wanted reports that communicated what the child needed to do to improve, and how they as parents could help.

Outcomes reporting was also a target of some criticism. Some parents who received, and had adjusted to, outcomes reporting found the information they contained to be specific and informative. However for others, the transition away from familiar, traditional performance indicators such as the A-E scale, and towards descriptions such as 'Beginning', 'Consolidating' or having 'Established' attainment of two-year level standards was seen as needlessly confusing. Similarly, much of the jargon-laden curriculum language appearing as outcomes statements in the reports was perceived as unhelpful. As the reviewers noted, "When too much detail is provided to parents about the outcomes achieved by their children, especially when the outcomes are described in jargon, parents find the information overwhelming and the detail can obscure the overall picture of the child's performance" (Cuttance & Stokes, 2000, p. 50).

In November 2003, Eltis published a second report in New South Wales. This was an evaluation of the impact of outcomes-based reporting and assessment in that state. The report found that despite the hard work of schools in engaging their communities in approaches to communicating student achievement via outcomes-based reporting, both teachers and parents were disappointed with these new systems. The "nub of the reporting problem", according to Eltis, was that in spite of the efforts teachers and schools took to create detailed reports about a child based on outcomes, such reports were found to be overly-complex and in some ways uninformative. Parents really only wanted a final grade, and an indication of where their child sat in relation to others (2003, p. 89). The report also noted how emerging forms of standardised testing, which could inform parents and teachers about how a child's performance compared to a state-wide population of students, were increasingly being valued for their diagnostic potential and as a reference point for conversations between parents and teachers about a child's progress and the need for intervention (2003, p.50).

In 2004, against the backdrop of such findings, and in response to a growing perception that student reports had become opaque and effectively meaningless, the Commonwealth Government announced a plan to impose conditions on federal education funding to the states and territories, including changes to the way schools reported to parents on their children's learning. It proposed that funding to the states would be tied to a requirement that schools write "plain language" reports, and that "student progress be reported in terms of which quartile in the class" the student is placed (Howard & Nelson, 2004). The Australian Government Department of Education Science and Training 2004/05 Annual Report listed the new requirement thus:

Schools to provide plain English reports to parents that clearly explain their child's progress at school. Student reports will include an assessment of the child's achievement, labelled as A to E (or equivalent), against the standard expected of that year and relative to the child's peer group by quartile at the school (DEST, 2002, p.48).

Hence, the 'back to basics' changes proposed by the federal government were intended to provide clearer messaging to parents and carers about how their child was performing at school, through the types of comparative measures largely eschewed by outcomes-based education.

Problems with an A to E scale

While the move from the government appeared to have been welcomed by many parents and carers, it was also met with some discontent – particularly among education professionals. Few argued with the need to improve the language used in reports, which was variously seen as jargonistic and uninformative for parents (Bligh & Blair, 2005; Middleton, 2005, Roff, 2006; Reporting to Parents Taskforce, 2006). However, the imposition of quartile comparative rankings, and the introduction of the A to E scale, proved to be sticking points.

Then Deputy Premier of Queensland, Anna Bligh, was supportive of changes that made reports clearer, but warned that a five-point rating scale “will be meaningless unless it is grounded in a consistent, comparable, standards-based curriculum” (Bligh & Blair, 2005, p. 4). Some educators argued that the return to an A to E performance scale blunted the ability of assessment to be individually diagnostic of students’ progress, or descriptive of students’ needs and abilities. It also directed students to be concerned with how well they performed rather than what they needed to do to improve (Keen, 2006). Others questioned the impact on student motivation of rankings and grades, because of their potential to define and label students. This was particularly a concern for students demonstrating low-performance who might still make significant learning progress (albeit at a lower comparative standard), but whose sense of their own growth might be masked by consistently receiving low grades and rankings (Roff, 2006). Several branches of the Australian Education Union urged their members not to comply with the new federal requirements, as the use of comparative measures and performance grades was seen as antithetical to the philosophy of outcomes-based education, with its emphasis on individual growth and progress (Keen, 2006).

Amidst this debate, Masters and Forster (2005) provided six indicators of what they defined as highly informative student reports. Among these they included the question of whether or not a report shows what a student is now able to do, whether it communicates what is expected of students at a given year level, and whether or not a report shows a child’s progress in such a way as to permit parents to monitor their child’s growth over time. Grades, they suggested, do not allow this as they “simply record how well a child has learned what has just been taught” (2005, p. 9).

Seeing a distinction between reporting *about* learning and reporting *for* learning, Forster (2005) proposed an alternative to the traditional student report: an “integrated web-based reporting system” for parents consisting of “password-protected individual student website[s] within the school website” (Forster, 2005). Within each student website, Forster proposed teachers would upload examples of student work, with both teacher and student comments about the work. The accumulation of work samples, each with their own teacher and student comments sequenced in a chronological digital portfolio, would illustrate and explain the progress the child was making in their learning. The website would also contain links to explanations of national benchmarks, state-wide testing results and other explanatory information to assist the parent in understanding not only what progress their child is making, but where such progress locates them in a broader context. However, to report progress, Forster (2006) pointed out that teachers need to first know what it means to grow in an area of learning, and suggested there is some evidence, at least anecdotally, that this is not in fact always the case.

Despite such objections and alternatives to the new A to E reporting requirements, the Commonwealth’s mandate to the states also garnered considerable support, not least of which from parents. For example, in a 2006 series of parent forums conducted in New South Wales, support for the new ‘plain language’ reports – and the A to E grade scale in particular – was consistently high (Ridgway & NSW DET, 2006). Parents variously referred to the A to E system as honest, factual and definitive, providing them a clear picture of how their child is performing at school, allowing them to

identify more readily when to seek or provide additional support. However, while letter grades satisfied parent demand to know how their child's performance in a subject was judged against the familiar five-point scale, it may also have worked against parents' own desire to know whether their child was making sufficient progress in learning. As Masters and Forster (2005) pointed out at the time, and as has been repeated, "letter grades do not provide useful long-term pictures of student progress because they relate only to short-term success on defined bodies of taught content" (Masters, 2013). Nevertheless, and despite news articles and opinion columns regarding the inadequacy of student reports being a regular fixture in national print media, the apparently simpler, clearer and more familiar set of requirements for student reports, to which schools were obliged to return in 2005, has largely remained in place since.

The recent history of student reporting in Australia thus appears to be characterised by a contest between competing opinions about the purpose of student reports (and perhaps also competing philosophies about the role of curriculum and assessment more broadly). Are student reports intended to communicate how a child has performed in tasks (for instance, relative to their classmates, their cohort, a teacher's own standards, or year-level standards)? Or, are reports intended to communicate what achievements and progress a child has made in their learning (what new skills, knowledge and understandings they have acquired) as they develop towards mastery in each subject? Of course this is a needlessly false dichotomy to draw, as parents and carers have consistently expressed a desire for both, and indeed current Australian policy as shown in section 2.2 mandates that schools communicate both in student reports.

A confusion, however, seems to have permeated the ways in which stakeholders have discussed reporting in the past. This stems from an apparent conflation of terms and concepts: the assumption that how a child is 'performing' is an indication of how they are 'progressing'. If one wishes to know, in vague, colloquial terms, how one's child 'is going' or is 'keeping up' at school, comparative measures and performance indicators such as grades in student reports certainly provide one kind of answer. However, they do not indicate how the child is *progressing* in their learning, in the way outcomes based assessment and reporting intended. By the same token, parents and carers have failed to be convinced that checklists of achieved outcomes statements, in isolation and without reference to a curriculum standard or an expected position on a learning progression, provide useful insight into their child's learning.

These lessons from recent history should inform future discussions if any further reform to student reporting is to be considered.

2.2. The current policy landscape: What's required?

This section provides details of policy and guideline documents related to student reporting in Australia. The most recent review of these documents was undertaken in March 2019. Unless otherwise indicated, the document was current at that time.

In this section, footnotes, rather than in-text citations, provide information about the documents cited. Most of the documents cited are grey literature – published online, often in Word or PDF format with no formal identification such as ISBN, author, or date. In several cases, documents have been revised or replaced or are no longer available online. The footnotes provide original and updated information where possible.

What is mandated?

While under the Australian Constitution, state and territory governments are responsible for schooling, in the 1970s the Commonwealth government began providing funding assistance to schools. Over the last three decades, and particularly since the nationally agreed *Hobart Declaration on Schooling* (1989) that funding assistance has been increasingly tied to adherence to national education policies. The Schools Assistance Acts of 2004 and 2008 both included requirements related to student reports.¹ These requirements included:

- the use of plain language,
- a minimum of twice yearly reporting, and
- an assessment of student achievement
 - against national standards (where available), and
 - relative to the performance of a student's peer group.

The national reporting requirements apply to the government and non-government school sectors.

The acts did not specify how achievement was to be reported. That is, there is no mention of the need for a five-point scale. However, both Acts when mentioning student reports, also note that schools must meet any other requirements specified in the regulations, which are additional legislated guidelines on how the provisions of the Act must be applied.

The earliest national expression of the use of a five-point scale in student reporting appears to be in the Schools Assistance Regulations 2005, legislation under the 2004 Act which came into force in August 2005.² Regulation 2.3 stated:

(d) the student report must include, for subjects studied, an assessment against achievement levels or bands defined by the education authority or school, being levels or bands that:

(i) must be labelled as A, B, C, D, E (or an equivalent); and

(ii) should be clearly defined against specific learning standards; and

(e) the student report must also include, for subjects studied, the child's achievement relative to the achievement of the child's peer group at the school by at least quartile bands.

¹ For the Schools Assistance Act. (2004), see <https://www.legislation.gov.au/Details/C2011C00334>. The 2004 Act was last updated in 2016. For the Schools Assistance Act. (2008), see <https://www.legislation.gov.au/Details/C2008A00153>. The 2008 Act was last updated in 2016.

² For the Schools Assistance Regulations (2005), see: <https://www.legislation.gov.au/Details/F2005L02328>

The *National Education Agreement* (NEA) was endorsed by the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) in November 2008.³ In Schedule E of that agreement (Page D-41), the following requirements for student reports were stipulated.

E3 Provision to parents and carers by all schools of plain language reports twice a year that:

- (a) are readily understandable to those responsible for the student and give an accurate and objective assessment of the student's progress and achievement;*
- (b) include an assessment of the student's achievement against any available national standards; and*
- (c) include, for subjects studied, an assessment of the student's achievement -*
 - (i) reported as A, B, C, D and E (or an equivalent five-point scale), clearly defined against specific learning standards; and*
 - (ii) relative to the performance of the student's peer group.*

Subsequently, the *Schools Assistance Regulations* (2009) (the regulations of the *Schools Assistance Act* 2008) incorporated the same requirement in legislation:

5.1 Student reports

- (1) For paragraphs 20(3)(d) and (e) of the Act, and subject to subregulation (2), a report of a student's achievement must include, for subjects studied, an assessment against achievement levels defined by the education authority or school, being levels:*
 - (a) labelled as A, B, C, D or E (or on an equivalent 5 point scale); and*
 - (b) clearly defined against specific learning standards.*
- (2) The Minister may approve a different form of student report for this regulation.*
- (3) The report must be provided at least twice in a program year.⁴*

The *Australian Education Act* (2013) is the current federal legislation providing Commonwealth financial assistance for state and non-government schools.⁵ The funding is conditional on the implementation of intergovernmental agreements and nationally agreed policy initiatives. The Act requires approved authorities to 'provide information in accordance with the regulations' (Paragraph 77(2)(f)). The Act itself does not specify the nature of student reports.

The relevant document for student reports is the *Australian Education Regulations* 2013, separate or subsidiary legislation to the Act that are guidelines dictating how the provisions of the Act are applied.⁶ The Regulations document has been updated numerous times since 2013, including January, August, October and December 2018, and January 2019. The current document has not changed its 2013 stipulations regarding student reports and reads as follows:

³ For background, see the *National Education Agreement: performance report for 2009*: <https://www.pc.gov.au/research/supporting/national-agreements/education/education-agreement-2009.pdf>. The Council of Australian Governments (COAG) *National Education Agreements* (2008) can be found at http://federalfinancialrelations.gov.au/content/npa/national_agreements/national-education-agreement.doc

⁴ For the *Schools Assistance Regulations* 2009, see <https://www.legislation.gov.au/Details/F2013C00864>

⁵ For the *Australian Education Act* (2013), see <https://www.legislation.gov.au/Details/C2018C00012>

⁶ For the *Australian Education Regulation* (2013), see <https://www.legislation.gov.au/Details/F2019C00086>

- (1) For paragraph 77(2)(f) of the Act, an approved authority for a school must provide a report to each person responsible for each student at the school in accordance with this section.*
 - (2) A report must be readily understandable to a person responsible for a student at the school.*
 - (3) A report must be given to each person responsible for the student at least twice a year.*
 - (4) For a student who is in any of years 1 to 10, the report must:*
 - (a) give an accurate and objective assessment of the student's progress and achievement, including an assessment of the student's achievement:*
 - (i) against any available national standards; and*
 - (ii) relative to the performance of the student's peer group; and*
 - (iii) reported as A, B, C, D or E (or on an equivalent 5 point scale) for each subject studied, clearly defined against specific learning standards; or*
 - (b) contain the information that the Minister determines is equivalent to the information in paragraph (a).*
- Note: An approved authority for a school may have obligations under the Privacy Act 1988 in providing information.*
- (5) For paragraph (4)(b), the Minister may, in writing, determine information that the Minister considers is equivalent to the information in paragraph (4)(a).*

The legislation requires that schools provide reports for each student in two ways – showing progress and achievement. Although an assessment of progress is mandated, the legislation does not indicate how progress should be reported. The assessment of achievement is more prominent, and requires three measures: learning standards for each subject, a comparison against any national standards and a comparison against the student's peers.

It is worth noting that although the 2009 and 2013 legislation specifically indicates a requirement for the use of a five-point scale, this only appears to be required for subjects studied where "specific learning standards" are clearly defined. Such a scale is not required for reporting progress, reporting against national standards (e.g. NAPLAN) or reporting relative to the performance of a peer group. There is also scope to use an alternative to a five-point scale, although this would need to be approved by the minister in charge of the national education portfolio.

Policy documents and guidelines

The legislation on school reports applies to all schools, across states and sectors. However, the legislation is fairly generic and allows scope for systems and schools to design much of their own reports. The majority of documents sourced for this review were from the government sector in each state, and are described here. Government policy documents and webpages generally provide an overview that repeats the legislative mandate.

New South Wales

In New South Wales (NSW), an information brochure produced in multiple languages for parents in 2006 is still available via a website last updated in 2017.⁷ The brochure is no longer dated but provides the same information. The A-E scale in NSW is described as the Common Grade Scale and its performance descriptions are provided in Table 3.

Table 3 NSW Common Grade Scale performance descriptions⁸

Grade	Description
A	<i>The student has an extensive knowledge and understanding of the content and can readily apply this knowledge. In addition, the student has achieved a very high level of competence in the processes and skills and can apply these skills to new situations.</i>
B	<i>The student has a thorough knowledge and understanding of the content and a high level of competence in the processes and skills. In addition, the student is able to apply this knowledge and these skills to most situations.</i>
C	<i>The student has a sound knowledge and understanding of the main areas of content and has achieved an adequate level of competence in the processes and skills.</i>
D	<i>The student has a basic knowledge and understanding of the content and has achieved a limited level of competence in the processes and skills.</i>
E	<i>The student has an elementary knowledge and understanding in few areas of the content and has achieved very limited competence in some of the processes and skills.</i>

The NSW Education Standards Authority (NESA) maintains a website which provides advice to teachers on the use of A to E grades.⁹ The site notes that:

As a teacher, you will make a professional on-balance judgement to decide which grade best matches the standards your students have achieved, based on assessment information you have collected.

The Assessment Resource Centre (the ARC) provides work samples and other information to help you see the standards associated with each grade.

The site goes on to provide information to teachers on becoming familiar with the standards and methods of assessment, including examples:

The Board of Studies is gathering the work of real students who have done some syllabus-based tasks and activities. These work samples are published on the Assessment Resource Centre (the ARC).

The samples come from a range of schools. Many samples have already been graded, and the grades agreed by a number of experienced practising teachers.

⁷ For the parent information brochure, see: <https://education.nsw.gov.au/public-schools/going-to-a-public-school/translated-documents/written-reports-for-school-students>

⁸ For the Common Grade Scale, see the parent brochure and: <https://arc.nesa.nsw.edu.au/go/k-6/common-grade-scale/>

⁹ NESA website for teachers on the use of A to E grades: <https://arc.nesa.nsw.edu.au/go/gen-info>

They did this on the basis that the work sample displays characteristics of work typically produced by students performing at that grade. Explanations called grade commentaries will help you see the reasons for each grading.

The collections of work samples provided show the quality of work typically produced by students who will receive each grade at the end of the stage.

Queensland

The Queensland government has a *P-12 curriculum, assessment and reporting framework*¹⁰, which refers to a word document titled *Reporting to Parents*.¹¹ This document expands on the requirements by providing additional information on the five-point scales to be used. This information is reproduced in Table 4.

Table 4 Five-point scale used in Queensland government schools

	Prep	Years 1 – 2	Years 3 – 10	Years 11 – 12
Achievement	Australian Curriculum: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Applying ▪ Making Connections ▪ Working With ▪ Exploring ▪ Becoming Aware Queensland Curriculum: (until the end of 2020): <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Comment 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Very High ▪ High ▪ Sound ▪ Developing ▪ Support Required 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ A ▪ B ▪ C ▪ D ▪ E 	QCAA subjects studied <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ For students in Year 12 in 2019: A – E; or VHA, HA, SA, LA, VLA ▪ For students in Year 11 from 2019 and Year 12 from 2020: A – E VET <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Competency Achieved ▪ Working Towards Competency ▪ Competency Not Achieved International Baccalaureate <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ 1 – 7 Scale
Effort and Behaviour	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Comment 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Very High ▪ High ▪ Sound ▪ Developing ▪ Support required 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Excellent ▪ Very good ▪ Satisfactory ▪ Needs attention ▪ Unacceptable 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Excellent ▪ Very good ▪ Satisfactory ▪ Needs attention ▪ Unacceptable Effort and behaviour are not reported at exit

¹⁰ See <https://education.qld.gov.au/curriculum/school-curriculum/p-12> (website) and <https://education.qld.gov.au/curriculums/Documents/p12-carf-framework.pdf> (PDF framework document)

¹¹ See <https://education.qld.gov.au/curriculums/Documents/policy-reporting.docx>

In the Queensland document, an appendix provides further clarification on what is meant by the A-E scale, as shown in Table 5. The descriptions at each level make it clear that the scale is referenced against an expected standard (meeting the standard is the equivalent of the middle of the scale, or C), as opposed to a norm-referenced comparison (setting the student against a defined population such as the other students in a class). Other scales are noted. For example, schools providing the International Baccalaureate have the option of reporting to parents using a 1-7 scale. While these scales are still to be used, the *Reporting to Parents* document notes that reports are now expected to be differentiated, to consider student development-related level rather than their year level, and to be assessed against the year level they are taught rather than the one they are in.

Table 5 Years 3 - 10 reporting scales in Queensland

Grade	Description
A	<i>Evidence in the student's work typically demonstrates a sophistication of conceptual understanding and skills from the standard that are able to be transferred to new situations.</i>
B	<i>Evidence in the student's work typically demonstrates a developing sophistication of conceptual understanding and skills from the standard and these are beginning to be transferred to new situations.</i>
C	<i>Evidence in a student's work typically demonstrates that they have developed the required conceptual understandings and skills to meet the standard and are able to apply them in familiar situations.</i>
D	<i>Evidence in the student's work typically demonstrates that they are still developing the required conceptual understandings and skills from the standard and that they are beginning to be applied in familiar situations.</i>
E	<i>Evidence in the student's work typically demonstrates that the student has not yet developed the required understanding and skills to meet the standard and that they can only apply them in scaffolded situations.</i>
N	<i>Insufficient evidence to make a judgment</i>

South Australia

The South Australian government website¹² is the same now as it was in 2015. Teachers are required to 'include achievement levels for all learning areas' and 'provide a professional assessment of children's progress and achievements' using the A-E ratings described in Table 6.

Table 6 South Australian A-E grade descriptions

Grade	Description
A	<i>Excellent achievement of what is expected</i>
B	<i>Good achievement</i>
C	<i>Satisfactory achievement</i>
D	<i>Partial achievement</i>
E	<i>Minimal achievement.</i>

¹² See <https://www.sa.gov.au/topics/education-and-learning/curriculum-and-learning/assessment-and-school-reports>

The site also recommends that for parents 'To find out how your child's progress at school compares with other students at the same level, ask your child's teacher.' In a 2012 document *Guidelines for DECD schools R-10*¹³ this is further explained:

Schools with more than 10 students in a particular year level prepare information that shows the number of students in each of the 5 achievement levels (A – E) for each learning area. If parents request it, schools are to provide this comparative information about their child's progress. The exact wording to be used on the report is: 'You can ask the school to provide you with written information that clearly shows your child's achievements in the subjects studied in comparison to that of other children in the child's peer group at school. This information will show you the number of students in each of the five achievement levels' (p. 4).

It is not clear whether this guideline document is still current.¹⁴ It does, however, expand upon the A-E wording indicated on the current webpage by noting that achievement is related to 'what is expected at this year level' (p. 7). The document goes on to provide appendices that give examples of reporting against the Australian Curriculum achievement standards for different year levels and subjects, such as the achievement standard for Year 8 History below (p. 12) and the corresponding grade descriptions shown in Table 7.

Achievement Standard Year 8 History

By the end of Year 8, students recognise and explain patterns of change and continuity over time. They explain the causes and effects of events and developments. They identify the motives and actions of people at the time. Students explain the significance of individuals and groups and how they were influenced by the beliefs and values of their society. They describe different interpretations of the past.

Students sequence events and developments within a chronological framework with reference to periods of time. When researching, students develop questions to frame an historical inquiry. They analyse, select and organise information from primary and secondary sources and use it as evidence to answer inquiry questions. Students identify and explain different points of view in sources. When interpreting sources, they identify their origin and purpose, and distinguish between fact and opinion. Students develop texts, particularly descriptions and explanations, incorporating analysis. In developing these texts, and organising and presenting their findings, they use historical terms and concepts, evidence identified in sources, and acknowledge their sources of information.

¹³ See online version retrieved from <http://www.stuarths.sa.edu.au/docs/reporting.pdf>

¹⁴ The document contains a link (<http://www.decd.sa.gov.au/assessment/pages/Guidelines>) that is no longer current, and the document itself does not appear on the current government website.

Table 7 Example of Achievement Standard, Year 8 History

In relation to the achievement standard, the student has demonstrated ...	Word description	Grade
<i>high level capacity to apply knowledge, skills and understandings in new contexts deep understanding of concepts and key ideas and connections between them outstanding development of skills comprehensive knowledge of content</i>	<i>Your child is demonstrating excellent achievement of what is expected at this year level</i>	A
<i>strong capacity to apply knowledge, skills and understandings in new contexts some depth of understanding of concepts and key ideas high level development of skills thorough knowledge of content</i>	<i>Your child is demonstrating good achievement of what is expected at this year level</i>	B
<i>capacity to apply knowledge, skills and understandings in new contexts sound understanding of concepts and key ideas sound development of skills adequate knowledge of content</i>	<i>Your child is demonstrating satisfactory achievement of what is expected at this year level</i>	C
<i>capacity to apply knowledge, skills and understandings in familiar contexts some understanding of concepts and key ideas some development of skills basic knowledge of content</i>	<i>Your child is demonstrating partial achievement of what is expected at this year level</i>	D
<i>beginning capacity to apply knowledge, skills and understandings in a familiar context beginning understanding of concepts and key ideas initial development of skills limited knowledge of content</i>	<i>Your child is demonstrating minimal achievement of what is expected at this year level</i>	E

Tasmania

In a paper distributed by the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) to Directors from states and territories in August 2010, each of the assessment and reporting policies of the states and territories was compared. This document indicated that, at the time, Tasmania was not using the five-point A-E grading. Rather, they had five standards, each made up of three stages, allowing for 15 stages between kindergarten and Year 10. The report template showed current achievement against the expected level as well as the previously reported achievement level, thus also showing growth.

There are no publicly available policies or guidelines for Tasmanian government schools currently, however the Department of Education website aimed at parents indicates that Tasmania is currently using the A-E levels based on the Australian Curriculum standards.

Victoria

The Victorian government website in 2017 stated the following:

Overview of reporting requirements

All Victorian government schools are required to report on student achievement against the Victorian Curriculum F-10 achievement standards for every student at least twice a year. Schools have the flexibility to determine the timing, frequency and format of reports in partnership with students, parents and the local community. A single common report format is no longer mandated.

Student reports will be issued to parents/carers using a five point scale or equivalent to show student progress and achievement at the time of reporting. The five point scale will enable schools to provide a greater level of detail to parents about how well the student has performed against the achievement standard.¹⁵

The 2019 Victorian Reporting Student Progress and Achievement policy¹⁶ is similar:

Student reports for parents/carers are confidential documents that schools are required to produce at least twice a year using a five-point rating scale. The purpose of student reports is to:

- *report student progress and achievement in Years Prep to 10*
- *provide parents/carers with clear, individualised information about progress against the achievement standards*
- *identify the student's areas of strength and areas for improvement.*

Note that there may be specific instances where a school decides in partnership with an individual student's parents/carers that it is unnecessary to provide a report for that student.

In addition to producing student reports, schools will offer a parent-teacher conference to discuss the student's progress.

Schools are advised to develop a school-based policy on assessment and reporting to complement their school's teaching and learning plan. Schools need to assess and report student progress against the Victorian Curriculum F-10 achievement standards for the teaching and learning programs they have designed.

In Victoria, there appears to have been a recent shift away from the use of the A-E scale. The revised reporting guidelines produced by the VCAA in late 2015 provided an example of the mandated reporting format in 2014, which included A-E reporting. Unlike other state systems, which define the A-E grade ratings in relation to the quality of student achievement *at an expected standard*, the example Victorian report of 2014 defines the A-E ratings as indicators of *where in relation to the expected standard a child is judged to be operating*, as shown in Table 8.

¹⁵ From archived version of Student reporting website:

<https://web.archive.org/web/20170309183003/http://www.education.vic.gov.au/school/teachers/support/Pages/studentreports.aspx>

¹⁶ See <https://www.education.vic.gov.au/school/principals/spag/curriculum/pages/reporting.aspx>

Table 8 Mandated Victorian A-E rating scale in 2014

Grade	Description
A	Well above the standard expected at this time of year
B	Above the standard expected at this time of year
C	At the standard expected at this time of year
D	Below the standard expected at this time of year
E	Well below the standard expected at this time of year

As explained within the guideline document, this decision was made in acknowledgment of research showing that children in the same year level are often operating with a five or six-year difference in developmental attainment. To enable reports to still communicate a child’s learning progress, the 2014 example report also shows the mandated use of a graphic (a sliding dot) which provided an indication of a child’s growth against the standards over a 12-month period.¹⁷ An example of this graphic is displayed in Figure 1.

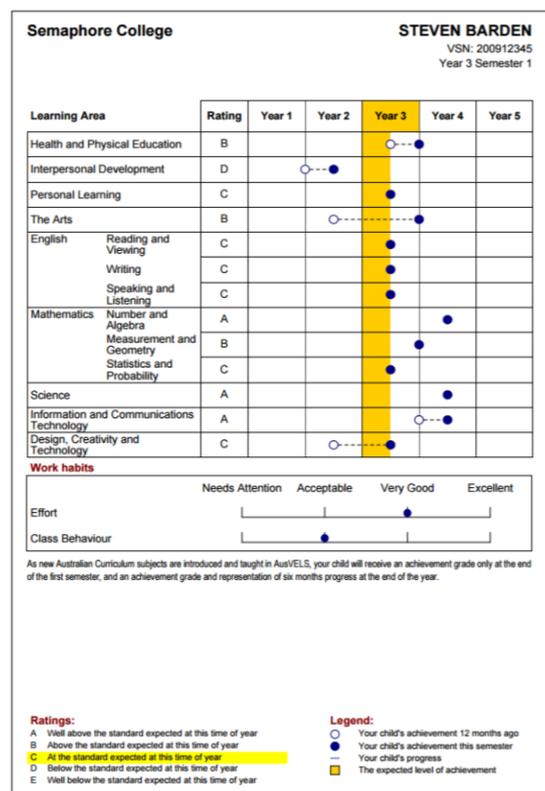


Figure 1 Example 2014 Victorian student report containing a ‘sliding dot’ graphic

¹⁷ The VCAA 2015 document is available from: <https://www.vcaa.vic.edu.au/Documents/viccurric/RevisedF-10CurriculumPlanningReportingGuidelines.pdf>

The webpage dated May 2019, still requires the use of a five-point scale but the linked Word document makes no mention of the previously mandated A-E scale, noting:

A five point scale is required to be used when reporting to parents, either as a written or graphical representation; if worded descriptors are not used, the scale must be explained.

A five point scale is to be included in every student report to rate the quality of the student's achievement and progress against the achievement standards and provide more detail on student learning.

Schools will determine how student progress, achievement and other information in the student report will be displayed in a five point scale.¹⁸

The same document acknowledges that a five-point scale may be used to express different types of achievement:

Some types of five point scales that can be used are:

- *Age-related expected scale: used for reporting a student's level of achievement against the achievement standards only in English, Mathematics and Science.*
- *Learning goals scale: to show how well a student is progressing towards learning goals and targets within a particular unit of work.*
- *Learning dimensions scale: to show how well a student has achieved targeted knowledge and understanding, skills and capabilities, and/or dispositions within a particular unit of work.*

The Victorian guidelines also mandate the use of a continuum to show both achievement and progress:

Achievement means:

- *locating a student on a continuum of learning for a learning area and/or capability by making an on-balance, holistic, evidence-based and defensible judgement of assessment evidence gathered during a reporting period.*

Progress means:

- *representing the growth in learning that has occurred by referencing the last time such achievement standards were reported against for that student in the school.*

Victorian government schools currently appear to be able to create their own reporting templates and scales, as long as they meet the policy mandates.

¹⁸ Student reporting requirements webpage:

<https://www.education.vic.gov.au/school/teachers/teachingresources/practice/Pages/reportsregs.aspx> and Five-point scale Word document:

<https://www.education.vic.gov.au/school/teachers/teachingresources/practice/Documents/fivepointscale.doc>
[X](#)

Western Australia

The Western Australian (WA) government provides a webpage with the policy for reporting on student achievement.¹⁹ The policy states that schools provide plain language reports which:

- a. are readily understandable to those responsible for the student
- b. give an accurate and objective assessment of the student's progress and achievement
- c. include an assessment of the student's achievement in terms of the Western Australian achievement standards detailed in the Outline
- d. include, for subjects studied, an assessment of the student's achievement:
 - i. in terms of the grades A, B, C, D and E (or an equivalent five-point scale/achievement descriptor), clearly defined in terms of Western Australian achievement standards, and
 - ii. in relation to the performance of the student's peer group
- e. include information about the student's attitude, behaviour and effort in terms other than the five-point scale which is used as a measure of achievement
- f. include any additional information the school considers relevant, including an overall teacher comment.

The WA policy also includes A-E letter grades and achievement descriptors as displayed in Table 9.

Table 9 Western Australian A-E letter grades achievement descriptors

Letter grade	Achievement descriptor
A	<i>The student demonstrates excellent achievement of what is expected for this year level</i>
B	<i>The student demonstrates high achievement of what is expected for this year level</i>
C	<i>The student demonstrates satisfactory achievement of what is expected for this year level</i>
D	<i>The student demonstrates limited achievement of what is expected for this year level</i>
E	<i>The student demonstrates very low achievement of what is expected for this year level</i>

¹⁹ The WA policy is at: <https://k10outline.scsa.wa.edu.au/home/policy/policy-standards/reporting-on-student-achievement>

2.3. Online tools and continuous reporting

This section provides an overview of the recent uptake of electronic tools and systems used by schools to report student learning. It considers how continuous online reporting systems afford opportunities to improve reporting of student performance and progress. This discussion is based on desk reviews and interviews with several product providers conducted in 2018.

In the last 10 years, schools have adopted sophisticated electronic management systems for multiple functions. Various referred to as School Management Systems (SMS), Student or School Information Systems (SIS), Learning Management Systems (LMS) or Virtual Learning Environments (VLE), these products allow schools to centralise much of their administration, record-keeping, assessment data, curriculum delivery and communication in a single, secure online environment. School administrators, teachers, parents and students typically each have access to the system via a login, allowing for differentiated communication and access to information within the platform.

While some schools use stand-alone reporting software, many of the emerging school, student and learning management systems include the capacity to generate semester reports by collating and aggregating learning data, grades and feedback comments stored in a teacher's electronic mark book. According to several product providers, client schools believe they need this functionality to satisfy the mandated government requirement that all schools produce two summative written reports per year.

However, product providers who were interviewed observe that the semester report is quickly changing. In place of detailed teacher comments and information about a student's performance, many schools are publishing much more succinct, auto-generated academic transcripts, which are sometimes little more than graphs, Likert scales and grades, often without any teacher comments. A decreasing emphasis on the production of full written semester reports in some schools is explained by an increasing preference for the new reporting functionality these new electronic systems offer – continuous online reporting.

Continuous reporting

Continuous reporting refers to the practice of reporting in regular instalments. Typically, at key moments throughout the semester, teachers provide updated assessment information to the system online, which is then made visible to students and parents and carers in an ongoing way.

Depending on school policy decisions about how teachers are to continuously report, and the features offered by the product they use, the data shared with parents and students can range significantly, from an updated teacher's summation of a child's learning, to evidence of student work, a measure of a child's work habits or an indication of newly-attained curriculum outcomes as shown on a continuum.

Particularly within secondary contexts, continuous reporting often refers to teachers posting results and feedback on the latest (sometimes formative, but mostly summative) assessment tasks. Continuous online reporting is thus often associated with the functionality many systems offer to enable online task submission, through which teachers set assignments online and students electronically submit their work and receive their feedback and grades. The continuous reporting of how a student is performing in assessment tasks throughout the year is achieved through parents and carers regularly logging in to the system to view the marks or grades received, reading over teacher comments and sometimes even being able to view a copy of the student's submitted work with electronic annotations from the teacher. In addition, some systems offer simple visual displays of student achievement, such as column graphs showing grades achieved across the year, grade

point average charts, student-to-cohort comparison tables and 'learning alert' systems that indicate any scores a student obtains that fall significantly outside their usual performance.

The main benefit schools perceive in continuous reporting is the timely manner in which parents and carers are informed of their child's achievement. It is often seen as 'too late' at the end of a semester for parents and carers to be formally notified of how their child has been performing. The added capacity to upload annotated copies of the student's work, to include a copy of the assessment rubric indicating how a child performed in a task, and to type limitless feedback comments to the student (visible to parents and carers as well), is also seen as vastly more informative, and provides parents with much greater insight into their child's performance at school than the restrictive, and often outdated, summary comments offered in a semester report.

Though continuously reporting throughout the semester could be seen as burdensome, many schools are instead seeing it as a redistribution of the considerable time teachers would otherwise take writing and proof-reading detailed reports at the end of semester. Assessing several tasks and providing feedback to students throughout the semester is already established practice in schools. Ensuring parents and carers also have access to the latest assessment information for their child as it becomes available means teachers need not 're-hash' this information in lengthy, summary comments at the end of a semester, when the information is perhaps no longer current.

However, the existing federal legislation requiring that schools report at least twice a year, appears to be interpreted by many schools as requiring two *additional* summative, semester reports over-and-above whatever continuous reporting practices the school has adopted. While semester reports appear to be more automated and perfunctory compared to more detailed continuous reporting, their production requires checking and proof-reading additional to the work required to continuously report. This no doubt adds to the reporting workload of teachers.

Progressive reporting versus reporting progress

As an emerging solution to improve feedback to parents and carers about their child's learning, continuous reporting technologies enable more detailed, more frequent and timely communication than do semester reports. The progressive instalments of information about how a child is performing at school as the term or semester unfolds allows parents the opportunity to intervene with their child where necessary, or communicate with the teacher or the school to address any concerns.

However, the extent to which continuous reporting mechanisms can provide the Gonski 2.0 recommendation of "meaningful information to students and their parents and carers about [both] individual achievement and learning growth" (Gonski et al., 2018) is not so much a matter of how, or how frequently, reporting occurs, but what information is being reported. Reporting in progressive instalments does not in itself lead to the reporting of learning progress. Being able to track a child's *performance* in real time, is not necessarily synonymous with measuring their *progress* over time.

Consultation with providers of LMS and SMS-like products would appear to suggest that schools are still heavily focussed on using reporting features that measure performance in tasks rather than measuring growth in learning. Within continuous reporting applications, demand is still high for features such as the previously mentioned grade point averages, student-to-cohort comparison charts, and 'learning alerts'. It is conceivable that schools might use functions such as these to track or compare student performance, but misconstrue them as indicating 'progress', if a student's progress is defined as whether their grades are maintaining, improving or worsening over time.

Some providers of continuous reporting technologies claim they are seeking to create reporting solutions that would help schools to also represent learning growth. They talk about standardised rubrics for common forms of assessment across year levels, or curriculum continuum trackers. They report that many of their client schools appear as yet unprepared to measure and monitor learning gain in their assessments, however, and so are less able to make this transition in their reporting.

Nevertheless, the functionality already offered by online continuous reporting provides possible directions for improving reporting along the lines recommended in the Gonski 2.0 report, and pre-empted by Forster in 2005 (see Section 2.1). Functionality already technically possible includes:

- the capacity for teachers to report in regular instalments in place of (or perhaps in addition to) semester reports,
- to collate and store digital samples of student work in electronic portfolios as evidence of learning growth over time,
- to digitally annotate these work samples to describe the features that show increased proficiency,
- to track these gains against either a school-designed rubric, state-wide curriculum standards continuum or a national or international learning progression,
- the ability to correlate such evidence with student data obtained by external standardised testing.

What limits schools in their endeavour to communicate student learning progress as well as attainment and performance, is not the currently available reporting technology, but the inherited policy directives and assessment practices of the past. This has resulted in a narrow focus on grading students' performance and achievement against year level expectations, rather than monitoring the gains that learners make over time. A broader focus, coupled with a reimagining of how existing technologies could be used, provides a clear first step towards reporting that enables us to better value and communicate the growth our students make.

3. Practice

The section reports findings of the investigation of current practice related to communicating about student learning. It describes what student reports look like currently and what key stakeholders make of these. It presents vignettes from four schools and one school collective in the process of reshaping their reporting practice.

3.1 Current practice landscape: What’s in reports?

Our examination of what student reports look like currently involved the collection and analysis of reports and other related documents (e.g. reporting policy documents, documents explaining reporting practice, etc.) from Australian primary and secondary schools. Reports were collected from different jurisdictions and systems using informal networks, and include examples from Foundation to Year 12. Table 10 provides an overview of the reports collected. It displays the levels (primary and secondary) and the systems (government, Catholic, independent) of reports collected from different jurisdictions.

Table 10 Overview of reports collected

Jurisdictions	Primary	Secondary	Government	Catholic	Independent
ACT					
New South Wales	•		•		
Northern Territory	•		•	•	
Queensland	•		•		
South Australia		•	•		•
Tasmania	•	•	•	•	•
Victoria	•	•	•	•	•
Western Australia	•	•	•	•	

The project team acknowledges that the sample analysed is not representative and that a more comprehensive analysis of reports from across the country would provide a more definitive picture of what Australian student reports entail. This is discussed further in Section 4.2.

A total of 74 reports were collected, de-identified and then analysed in three ways.

1. each report was reviewed and coded according to the presence or absence of particular report elements;
2. each report was examined to determine whether the term ‘progress’ was used and how it was used; and
3. all reports that included comments about a student’s learning were reviewed and coded according to the form and foci of those comments.

This section reports findings related to each of these analyses.

3.1.1 Report elements: presence and absence

As noted, each report collected was examined and coded according to the presence or absence of particular elements. Table 11 displays the report elements that were coded and the code options for each one. For elements that had more coding options than either presence or absence (i.e. *Included/Not included*), all options that applied were coded.

Table 11 Report elements and coding options

Report elements	Coding options
Report guide/explanation	<i>Included/Not included</i>
Areas reported	<i>Academic achievement; Learning dispositions; Work habits; Social and emotional development</i>
Learning domains reported	<i>All subjects; English and mathematics only; General capabilities; Domain-level only; Sub-domain level</i>
Learning context descriptions	<i>Included/Not included</i>
Assessment task descriptions	<i>Formative/summative; Continuous/discrete; Not included</i>
Assessment forms/measures	<i>Performance indicator rubrics; Scales; Grades; Level indicators; Visual displays</i>
Reference to evidence of performance	<i>Included/Not included</i>
Comments	<i>Included/Not included</i>
Comparative assessment information (cohort results)	<i>Class; Cohort; Not included</i>
Indication of next steps in learning	<i>Specific next steps; Generic next steps; Not included</i>
Contributors	<i>Learning domain teachers; Home room teachers; Pastoral teachers; School leaders; Students; Parents</i>
Additional artefacts (e.g. photos, sound bites)	<i>Included/Not included</i>
Links to other assessment information types	<i>Interviews and meetings; Portfolios</i>

Examining the reports according to the presence or absence of different elements provided a broad overview of the kinds of information schools are communicating in student reports. The main observation from this analysis is that the contents and formats of student reports vary considerably. For example, reports vary in:

- their format and appearance
- the information provided about different aspects of learning (e.g. academic performance, work habits, social and emotional development, extra-curricular activities)
- the information provided about the context of learning for the reporting period
- the information provided about assessment tasks completed
- the use of performance indicators – for example, grades (e.g. A-E), levels (e.g. Below standard, At standard, Above standard), scores (e.g. percentages), rankings (class or cohort)
- the use of visual displays
- the information provided about student performance and/or progress over time
- the information provided about next steps for learning or areas for improvement.

Figure 2 displays images of five of the reports collected. These reports have different formats and look different visually; they make use of different performance indicators; some focus only on subject domains, others include sub-domains and other aspects of learning; some include information about performance and/or progress over time, others don't; some make use of visual displays (graphs, 'sliding dots', web diagrams), others don't; some include comments, others don't; some provide information about next steps/areas for improvement, others don't; and so on.



Figure 2 Example report formats

While there was great variation in the contents and formats of the collected reports, one trend observed was a difference between primary and secondary report designs.

Primary reports tended to include a range of information about students in a 'mosaic-like' format. This appeared to be aimed at presenting a holistic view of the student as a learner, with the composite of the comments communicating a fairly detailed overall impression of each student over the reporting period (often a term or semester). Typically in primary reports comments are not explicitly concerned with the quality of performance on particular tasks. Instead they provide comments related to the knowledge, skills and dispositions demonstrated by the student, either itemised in fine-grain detail (e.g. 'recognises most regular words and high-frequency words and can answer basic questions about the contents of a text'), or more generalised in form (e.g. 'frequently demonstrates effort towards his learning and usually adheres to classroom expectations').

Secondary reports, on the other hand, tended to provide a 'snapshot-like' summative view of a student's performance in distinct areas of learning. Secondary reports often include comments itemised to refer to distinct summative assessment tasks being reported. From this a reader can get a sense of the student's performance on each of these tasks but less of an overall impression of them as a learner. In the secondary reports examined, even those that composed comments

differently – for example, with sections such as ‘What [student] has achieved’ and ‘Areas for future learning’ – the comments about a student’s achievement were often related explicitly to each task completed (e.g. “In her research assignment on Louis Pasteur, she was able to...”).

The considerable variation in the contents and formats of student reports that was observed provokes questions such as:

- What are the consequences of this variability? For students? For parents? For teachers? For schools? For systems?
- How does the ‘grain-size’ of what is reported impact the interpretation of information for different stakeholders?
- To what extent should all reports – primary and secondary – ‘zoom out’ from the individual achievements a child has made to compose a holistic picture of the learner? Is there a reason why we accept or expect this at the primary years but not at the secondary level?
- What are essential inclusions for a meaningful report?
- What is the purpose of student reports?

3.1.2 Reporting progress

Learning progress has been defined as the gain, growth or increasing proficiency along a continuum of learning (or learning progression), as measured over time (Masters, 2017). This definition aligns with the perspective presented in the Australian Government Department of Education and Training’s *Through growth to achievement: Report of the review to achieve educational excellence in Australian schools*, which states:

Assessment and reporting arrangements must be updated to accurately describe the progress a student has made in the acquisition of knowledge, skill and understanding over time, and the level of attainment that has been reached, regardless of how other students are performing or what the standards may be for a certain age or year level. A prerequisite for such arrangements is a sound understanding of what long-term progress across the curriculum looks like, informed by student performance data. (Gonski et al., 2018, p.30)

Analysis of the student reports collected indicated that the term ‘progress’ is used in a variety of ways and some of these are inconsistent with the government’s perspective.

Many of the student reports analysed professed to communicate student learning progress. It was common for the explanatory preamble of these reports to claim that the student report is a means ‘by which [parents] can learn about student progress’, or are part of the school’s efforts to ‘provide a coherent picture of each child’s academic progress’. Teachers commented on the ‘steady’, ‘significant’ or ‘solid’ progress a child had made in their learning. Progress was sometimes misapplied to a five-point scale and tied to performance in assessments where, for example, a student who received a grade of ‘Outstanding’ due to ‘performing well above the expected level of [the school’s] students at this year level’ was thus also said to have made ‘Outstanding progress’. In one report, colour-coded ‘progress indicators’ were applied to denote whether a student had ‘shown improvement’, was ‘holding steady’ or – worryingly – ‘has gone backwards’, but this again appeared to be linked to their grades rather than their learning growth. There appears to be a misconception that progress over time is synonymous with a student’s performance over time.

Examples of ways the term ‘progress’ was used in the reports collected are displayed in Table 12.

Table 12 Use of the term ‘progress’ in student reports

Use of the term ‘progress’ in student reports	Examples from student reports
Maps student learning against age-based curriculum standards	<p><i>Students, teachers and parents are provided with a clear and concise picture of a student’s achievement and progress at a point in time.</i></p> <p><i>Teachers map the student’s learning against the achievement standards, and place the student on the learning continuum that best reflects the student’s level of performance and progress.</i></p> <p><i>The report card’s A to E rating will tell you how your child is progressing against the expected standard.</i></p> <p><i>Teacher judgements about your child’s progress against AusVELS.</i></p> <p><i>Your child’s progress (Legend).</i></p>
Indicate a student’s performance on tasks relative to one another over time	<p><i>At a minimum there must be at least two items per term, spaced to give a sense of the student’s progress.</i></p>
Describes attainment of specific outcomes in a learning area	<p><i>A checklist is provided to show your child’s progress in each area.</i></p>
Comments positively about a student	<p><i>She has made steady progress this semester.</i></p> <p><i>He is progressing extremely well.</i></p> <p><i>Has shown progression in his science understanding this semester.</i></p> <p><i>She is making very pleasing progress.</i></p>
Indicates ways to support student learning	<p><i>Regular practice will support his progress.</i></p> <p><i>Things you can do at home to help her progress.</i></p>
Links to other forms of communication about student learning progress	<p><i>Teachers will give you a clear indication of progress at the upcoming parent-teacher meeting.</i></p>

Despite the relative frequency of the word ‘progress’ within reports, few seemed to convey a meaningful impression of how a student had progressed. Theoretically, we envisaged a report that communicated a student’s learning progress over a term or semester would, in metaphoric terms, produce a ‘time lapse’ impression of that child’s growth within a learning domain over that period, explaining the progress that child has made.

Our analysis uncovered very few student reports that communicated progress in any recognisable ‘time lapse’ manner. The most salient attempts at revealing progress were presented as simple, graphical representations. Many reports from Victorian schools made use of a ‘sliding dot’ graphic, as seen in Figure 1. This indicated teacher judgments of a student’s progress within the Victorian Curriculum over a twelve-month period. One report presented a line graph at six-weekly intervals to indicate the rise and fall in student achievement in undefined percentage terms, providing some sense of change over time (albeit score fluctuation rather than learning gain). Others presented term-by-term column graphs to similar effect. One report contained the student’s results in a sequence of formative assessment tasks (labelling them as ‘progress tasks’) in each subject, as well as their result in the end-of-unit summative task. However, here too, the impression was more of performance fluctuation rather than learning gain. Each formative task appeared to assess discrete,

rather than consistent, knowledge and skills, from which a sense of ‘gain’ in learning from task to task could not reasonably be inferred. Most reports either communicated a child’s performance in summative assessment tasks (in secondary schools) or provided a summative listing of a student’s attainment of various learning outcomes (in primary schools).

The kinds of questions provoked by these observations include:

- How might schools move towards a shared understanding of what progress means?
- Do teachers understand the difference between reporting attainment and reporting growth?
- Do teachers have a sound understanding of what long-term progress across the curriculum looks like, and ways to collect student performance data to enable them to accurately map student learning progress?

3.1.3 A close-up look at teacher comments

Our analysis of contemporary Australian student reports suggests that schools and teachers are grappling with the purpose – and even the place – of teacher comments in reports. This section highlights some of the observations arising from our analysis of teacher comments in student reports.

We examined the comments within our sample of reports and coded them according to the presence or absence of certain features or qualities, as outlined in Table 13.

Table 13 Report comment categories and coding options

Report comment categories	Coding
Content description	<i>Did the report contain a description of the semester’s course content; what was learned; what students did?</i>
Audience	<i>Was the audience for the comments assumed to be the parent/guardian, the student or both?</i>
Praise/affirmation	<i>Did the comments contain personal praise for, or positive affirmation of, the student generally, their efforts, their performance?</i>
General learning dispositions	<i>Did the comments contain references to general dispositional qualities of the student; their general ‘character’ as a learner?</i>
Domain learning dispositions	<i>Did the comments contain references to subject-related dispositional qualities of the student; their ‘character’ as a learner of English, of maths, of science etc.?</i>
Interpersonal qualities	<i>Did the comments contain references to the social skills and interpersonal qualities of the student?</i>
General capabilities	<i>Did the teacher comment on non-subject-specific learning skills such as critical thinking, creative thinking, communication, collaboration, problem-solving or research skills?</i>
Knowledge, skills, understandings	<i>Did the teacher comment on the knowledge, skills and understandings the student had demonstrated?</i>

Report comment categories	Coding
Task specific/generic/'agnostic' achievement	<i>Were the comments about the student's achievement made in reference to their performance in a specific task, in relation to a generic type of task, or without reference to any task?</i>
Levels	<i>Did the comments indicate the 'level' the student was working at (e.g. a curriculum standard, or 'at', 'above' or 'below' expected level)?</i>
Next steps for learning	<i>Did the report contain comments that suggest what the student needs to work on next to improve?</i>
School support	<i>Did the report contain comments that explained what the school would do to support the student to improve?</i>
Home support	<i>Did the report contain comments that suggested what the parent/guardian could do to support the student to improve?</i>
Student comments	<i>Did the report contain reflective comments written by the student about their learning?</i>
Structure of comments	<i>Did the report prescribe a certain structure for the teacher comments? (e.g. separate achievement and improvement sections, a single general comment section, assessment task-related comments, improvement comments only, no comments, etc.)?</i>
Contain "progress"	<i>Did the teacher comment contain the word "progress"? If so, how was it used?</i>

This analysis of the characteristics of teacher comments showed a similar level of variability to the analysis of the presence or absence of certain elements within reports discussed in Section 3.1.1. However, certain differences and tendencies did emerge between primary school and secondary school comments:

- Primary school report comments, more so than secondary school comments, tended to praise and affirm, and to highlight interpersonal skills and dispositional qualities. Comments that explained what the child had achieved were much less likely to include any reference to a task (or type of task) in which it was demonstrated.
- Secondary reports, by contrast, were more likely to not contain any teacher comments, or to only contain improvement-focused comments. Where achievement comments were included, these were more likely than primary school comments to be made in reference to the assessment task through which the skill or knowledge was demonstrated.

A further analysis of report comments, together with examples of comments from the reports we collected, is provided below.

General comments

A 'general comments' section was prevalent in primary reports and sometimes included in secondary reports. We identified that general comments served a number of different functions. One was simply the provision of praise or encouragement. Another was the provision of information about general learning dispositions and work habits. A third function was to describe student learning related to general capabilities, including such areas as critical thinking, creativity, communication, collaboration, problem solving and research.

[Student] is an absolute pleasure to teach.

[Student] has completed a great semester's work. He should be really proud of his efforts.

[Student] demonstrates a real commitment to her studies and approaches new learning in an enthusiastic manner. She shows great initiative and commitment. She is highly organised and works independently when required.

[Student] is a cheerful and enthusiastic class member. He shows an interest in most learning tasks but often needs reminders to remain focused on his work.

[Student] displays the ability to reason, solve problems and resolve difficulties.

[Student] displays an ability to work collaboratively. He takes responsibility in group tasks, listens to others and works towards a shared goal.

General comments tended to have a positive orientation and might be anticipated to provide a parent or carer with an overall impression of their child's approach to learning or behaviour. Given the focus on general capabilities in national and state curricula, it is interesting to note some comments about these. In the focus groups, several parents and carers indicated interest in this kind of information being included in reports, as they want to know whether or not their child is 'switched on and ready for learning'. However, because some comments were written at such a high level of generality, and they sometimes included emotive-evaluative language, some parents (and students) considered them to be superfluous, too vague, or difficult to interpret meaningfully. There is more detail about this in Section 3.2.2.

Learning achievement and progress comments

The majority of the comments that teachers prepared for student reports described a student's learning achievements and adopted an empirical style characterised by objective statements of facts and observed behaviours.

One category of comments in this style are statements of activities and learning tasks undertaken by the student in class.

During our Science unit on Simple Machines, [Student] explored wheels and axles, inclined planes, screws and pulleys. He conducted experiments where he made predictions and compared the results to his hypothesis.

[Student] has annotated texts, participated in group reading and discussion and made use of summaries to clarify his understanding of complex plot and language.

[Student] has used a variety of tools and machines to effectively and safely produce his products.

[Student] completed tasks to develop her chronological skills, showing an ability to sequence events [of WWII] in a timeline to support analysis of the causes and effects of these events.

Comments such as these may be valuable to parents or carers who want an insight into the content of the curriculum and what their child is learning about in each subject. However, for the parent-

reader looking to understand how their child is progressing, such comments may seem insufficient and leave them with some questions such as:

- Was this an exceptional feature of my child’s learning, or an expectation of all learners?
- How well did they perform these activities?
- Why are these activities being highlighted, specifically?

A similar empirical style was used by some teachers describing evidence not only of what a student ‘has done’, but what they have observed a student ‘can do’.

In Statistics and Probability, [Student] can ask and answer appropriate questions in order to obtain data. He is able to translate this data into a graph or a table.

When reading a variety of texts, [Student] can use a range of comprehension strategies to interpret and analyse information; can recall facts and detail and distinguish between fact and opinion.

[Student] can name the commonly used pieces of scientific equipment and can define their function. [Student] can outline the correct procedure for lighting a Bunsen burner.

[Student] can calculate probability of events and use tree and Venn diagrams to solve problems.

If accompanied by an indicator of where the student is judged to be operating along a curriculum continuum or learning progression, objective statements of what a student ‘can do’ may well be seen as evidence justifying the teacher’s judgment. Indeed, in many cases, such statements were taken directly from the curriculum outcomes or content descriptors. However, without a thorough knowledge of the curriculum, it would be difficult for a parent to discern from comments like these what progress their child has or has not made, or where it placed them in relation to level expectations. Similar questions to those above may emerge for the parent:

- How well can my child do this? Under what circumstances or contexts?
- Is this indicative of high-, medium- or low-level attainment?
- Can they – or should they be able to – do more than this?

In other comments, teachers sometimes adopted a more evaluative style. Although this introduces the risk that comments become mere subjective statements of opinion, evaluative comments function to signal how the student is performing against a standard (even if that standard is ‘only’ that of the teacher based on their experience and expertise) and relative to the class or cohort.

[Student] is an adept reader, tackling a variety of challenging fiction and non-fiction texts. She demonstrates excellent comprehension skills. [Student] is confident and articulate when presenting her point of view in discussions and during class debates.

[Student’s] clear understanding and sophisticated interpretation of the themes of “In Search of Owen Roe” demonstrated a refined awareness of the way performances can be presented. [Student’s] responses were well evidenced and displayed thoughtful consideration of the dramatic potential and intention as well as their effect on the audience.

[Student] has written an excellent essay. There are a few places where small modifications could be made but overall she has demonstrated an insightful and well-informed appreciation of the topic. In particular, [Student] has provided numerous references to sources to support her ideas along with detailed explanation.

[Student] has demonstrated a solid understanding in his ability to utilise a variety of applications and programs explored throughout the semester. He has displayed a particularly sound knowledge of building websites using WIX.

Such comments – whilst evaluative – are not necessarily subjective: some appear to describe, in short-hand, levels of proficiency that have plausible objective identifiers. An ‘adept’ reader is likely to be reading more complex texts for their age. A ‘thoughtful consideration’ is likely to mean the student has provided a reflective analysis, possibly considering multiple points of view. That a child has written an ‘excellent’ essay may, by itself, be purely subjective and say little of what made it so. However when supported by the supplementary details in the comments that follow, a picture quickly emerges. By contrast perhaps, it may not be quite so clear what constitutes a ‘solid’ or ‘sound’ understanding of ICT programming and web design, or whether in the mind of the teacher terms like ‘solid’ and ‘sound’ mean ‘basic’ or ‘proficient’ or ‘extensive’.

Tied to all of these questions of how, and how well, teachers’ comments communicate information about a child’s learning is the level of detail or ‘grain size’ teachers adopt. Consider, for example, the following comments, which all come from different subject-teachers in one Year 8 student’s report, but which illustrate the variation in detail we found more generally.

[Student] participated in all classes to a high level including following instructions and applying strategy/ techniques that were delivered by the teacher. (P.E.)

[Student] demonstrated a consistent understanding of physical and chemical changes. She demonstrated a good understanding of principles of density. (Science)

[Student] demonstrated her clear understanding of how to structure an essay through the use of paragraphs, topic and linking sentences, and an introduction and conclusion. She wrote a meaningful and informative essay on Medieval Women with strong relevant arguments. (History)

[Student] demonstrated an improved understanding of the Fractions and Decimals topic. Under test conditions, she was able to: identify equivalent fractions; simplify fractions; add and subtract basic fractions; and multiply and divide fractions. In class, with support materials, [Student] was also able to: add and subtract decimals; multiply and divide decimals; and round decimals to a specified number of places. (Mathematics)

The first comment is so general it could apply to any learning area, and the final comment provides a particularly fine-grained level of detail focused on one aspect of the student’s mathematics learning.

A question of much interest is: what grain size provides the most meaningful information to parents and carers and to students in reports? Too large a grain size – at the ‘boulder’ level – risks the information being so general that it is difficult to interpret much about a student’s learning. Too fine a grain size – at the ‘grain of sand’ level – risks either information overload, or information exclusions, in relation to a student’s learning. Deciding on the grain size for comments is not straightforward. The number of students one has to report on, the school’s policy on word or character limits in reports, and the capacity for assessment tasks to capture evidence at finer levels of detail may all play a part in determining the specificity of teacher comments.

Interestingly, given that an assumed purpose of student reports is to communicate a child’s learning progress, there were surprisingly few teacher comments we analysed that seemed intent on performing this function. Occasionally, and predominantly within primary student reports, teachers commented in general terms that a child is ‘progressing extremely well’ or ‘making great gains’. At other times, teachers suggested that some specified aspect of a child’s learning was ‘showing improvement’. However, no teacher comments we analysed detailed explicitly what a child could now do – or had mastered – that they had not been able to do at some previous point in time.

Improvement comments

Most of the student reports we analysed contained comments focused on how a student could improve. In a number of secondary reports, improvement-focused comments were the only comment provided by the teacher. In primary reports, improvement-focused comments were usually provided in addition to comments about learning within subjects and general comments.

One type of improvement comment we observed indicated a student's 'next steps for learning'. Such comments highlighted the specific skills or aspects of knowledge that a student needed to work on next to develop increasing proficiency in a learning area. Occasionally, these comments included advice and suggestions to the student for how they could consolidate this next level of learning.

An area of focus for [Student] is to include punctuation (e.g. commas, capital letters, speech marks, etc.) in his writing, as well as paragraph his ideas coherently.

A future goal for [Student] is to include more complex sentences, adding variance in sentence length to better engage the reader.

Consolidate writing skills by ensuring precise expression and then develop this skill through experimenting with more complex vocabulary and sentencing.

Revise how to calculate the density of an object and the signs of a chemical reaction and physical change.

Develop greater fluency in core numeracy skills. This can be achieved by regularly revising your multiplication tables, and practise applying basic mathematical operations (addition, subtraction, multiplication and division) to different types of numbers (positive numbers, negative numbers, decimal numbers, and fractions).

The specificity of these comments suggests to the reader that the teacher has a clear diagnostic sense of where the gaps are in a student's learning or in their skill development, and thus what the student needs to do to advance. Improvement comments that provide next steps advice such as these, give a strong impression that the teacher is focused on the child's learning growth. By contrast, consider the following improvement comments taken from a range of subject-area reports.

Proofread more carefully.

Practice under test conditions.

Seek assistance to clarify understanding.

Ensure you read the question thoroughly.

Such suggestions constitute sound habits and general study advice, and may indeed be helpful for students at all stages in their learning. However, they lack the specificity of focus that suggest these are the next steps in the trajectory of the student's learning within a discipline.

Which comments are most effective?

Focus group discussions with students, parents and teachers (see section 3.2.2) suggest that teacher comments are considered to be among the most important features of student reports. The potential they have to communicate not simply the performance of students in assessment tasks or their achievement over a term or a semester, but how they have progressed in their learning and what they need to work on to continue to demonstrate growth, is widely recognised and appreciated. In the only other study of teacher comments known to us, the authors of that study analysed several New Zealand student reports and concluded that they tend to "emphasise what students can do, and rarely report what they cannot do" judging that "too few reports provided information to parents and carers about their child's performance relative to specific standards,

while too few seem prepared to include negative comments when achievement appeared to be low” (Hattie & Peddie, 2003, p. 8).

Our own observations and analysis suggest that effective comments are the result of considered choices by teachers and schools. One consideration is identifying a clear purpose or function for the comments. For example, is the purpose of the teacher’s comment to praise and encourage? Should they be evaluative or objective, and about the learner or their school work? If objective, is there any obvious way the parent can infer whether their child is ‘going okay’ relative to a standard? Are the comments intended to provide information about how a child performed in a few summative assessment tasks, or are they intended to provide a broader picture of a child’s longer-term achievement than this? Should they describe what a child did do as a matter of course, or can do as a result of ability? Or, should the comments instead focus on what a child can *now* do, and is it also important to explain what a child cannot do *yet*?

A second consideration underlying all of these questions is, what level of detail (grain size) provides meaningful, clarifying information to parents, and achieves the explicitly understood purpose of teacher comments? And what level of detail is insufficient, or might prevent parents and carers from being able to see the ‘big picture’ of how their child is achieving? A further consideration related to clarity, (acknowledging that teachers need to report curriculum achievement), is the question of what constitutes a tolerable amount of subject-specific jargon in the comments. To a large extent, these questions are contingent upon several factors, including the curriculum taught, the level at which is being reported, the literacy and educational attainment of the parent or parent community, as well as what constitutes a reasonable expectation of teachers, given the time it takes to write carefully considered, personalised comments for each student. However, given the importance placed on the teacher’s written comments to explain and elucidate a child’s progress and performance, these are questions well worth schools considering.

3.2. Current practice landscape: Stakeholder perspectives

Together with investigating the current practice landscape in terms of what’s actually in student reports, the project sought to understand the perspectives of key stakeholders regarding the purpose, format, and effectiveness of approaches used to communicate about student learning. This section presents findings related to stakeholder perspectives investigated through an online survey of teachers, focus groups with parents, teachers and students, and a workshop with principals.

3.2.1 Online survey of teachers

A voluntary online teacher perception survey was administered between November 2018 and April 2019. The survey was designed to capture a broader representation of teacher voice than was possible through focus groups alone, and included questions about semester-reporting, continuous reporting, and the extent to which they felt they reported on student performance and/or student learning progress (see Appendix C).

We received 159 responses: approximately one third from teachers working in Catholic or independent schools and two thirds from government school teachers. Approximately 45 percent of respondents were primary teachers, 55 percent were secondary. Responses by State and Territory are displayed in Table 14.

Table 14 Participants in online teacher survey by state and territory

State or territory	Number	Percent
Victoria	55	34.59
New South Wales	33	20.75
South Australia	28	17.61
Queensland	15	9.43
Western Australia	13	8.18
Outside Australia	6	3.77
Australian Capital Territory	4	2.52
Tasmania	3	1.89
Northern Territory	2	1.26
Total	159	100

A discussion of responses to the survey questions is presented below.

Reporting progress, or performance?

Of 159 responses to the question ‘What is the purpose of reporting?’, 60 percent (96 responses) referred to the purpose of reporting as being – in some way – to communicate student progress:

- 80 responses referred to communicating a student’s ‘progress’ or ‘progression’
- 12 responses referred to providing an indication of the student’s ‘growth’
- 3 responses referred to indicating a student’s place on a learning ‘continuum’
- 1 response referred to communicating what the student ‘has gained’.

A total of 22 percent (35 responses) mentioned communicating ‘achievement’, or what a student has ‘achieved’. However it was unclear whether they meant the new skills or learning outcomes a student has demonstrated, or the grades, test scores and percentages a student obtained. Less than 6 percent (9 responses) referred to communicating how, or ‘how well’, a student ‘performed’ during the semester.

What is striking about the above responses is that they do not correspond with our own evaluation of the sample of student reports we analysed, as presented in Section 3.1. The reports we analysed tended mostly to report achievement in terms of performance rather than progress. With the exception of some reports – most notably from within the Victorian government system that provided a visual display (a sliding dot) of how much progress a student has made against the curriculum standards – few gave any quantitative or qualitative indication of what progress in learning the student had made.

Similarly, even when in the survey teachers were given definitions that distinguished ‘progress’ from ‘performance’, and were then asked which of these their own reports communicate to parents, half of respondents (51%) suggested that their reports communicate both progress and performance equally, with just less than a third (32%) saying the reports they write mostly or entirely communicate performance.

In the explanatory comments that followed, however, most seemed to qualify their response by explaining why it is their reports do not really do the job of reporting progress. Several claimed that it is difficult to measure progress, while others claimed that progress is measured but it is fed back to students informally and so doesn't appear – or isn't required – in reports. Others qualified their response by stating that they use the report comments to try to communicate progress, as their school's report does not otherwise communicate it. Other teachers claimed they only report progress against the standards, and not the 'specific progress' that would explain what a student could now do, or how they have progressed. Still others explained that they only report on the results of summative assessment tasks, and this prevents them from communicating what progress the student has made (if any) in achieving those results.

Grading scales

Teachers appeared to have mixed feelings about whether the grading scale used at their school in end-of-semester reports (the A to E scale or equivalent) is an appropriate way to report on students. As shown in Figure 3, while close to half (45%) expressed a level of support for the use of their school's grade scale, the majority of respondents were unsure or unsupportive of what they are required to use.

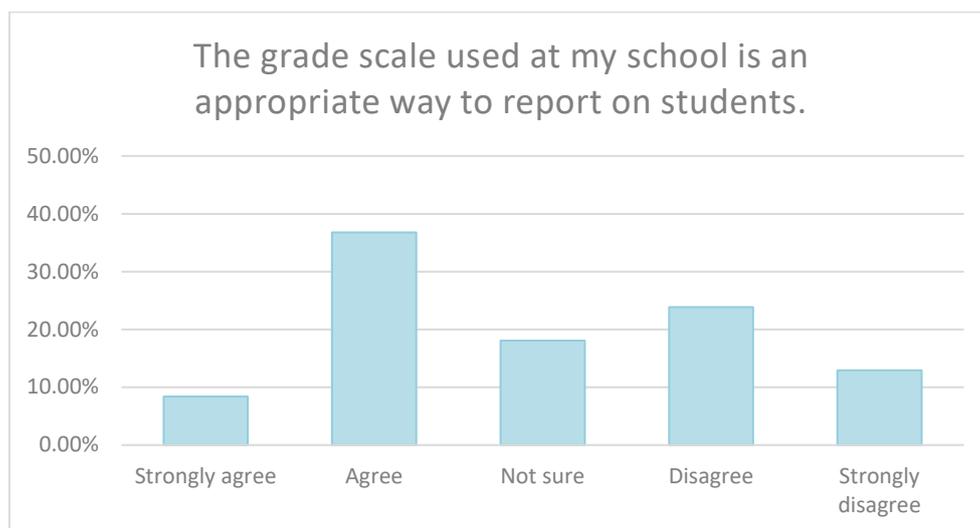


Figure 3 Teachers' views of appropriateness of grade scales used

Teacher perceptions of continuous reporting

Just over half of respondents said that they use some form of continuous reporting at their school. As shown in Figure 4, when asked how useful continuous reporting was compared to traditional end-of-semester reporting, these respondents clearly favoured continuous reporting, suggesting it was much more useful for both parents and for students.

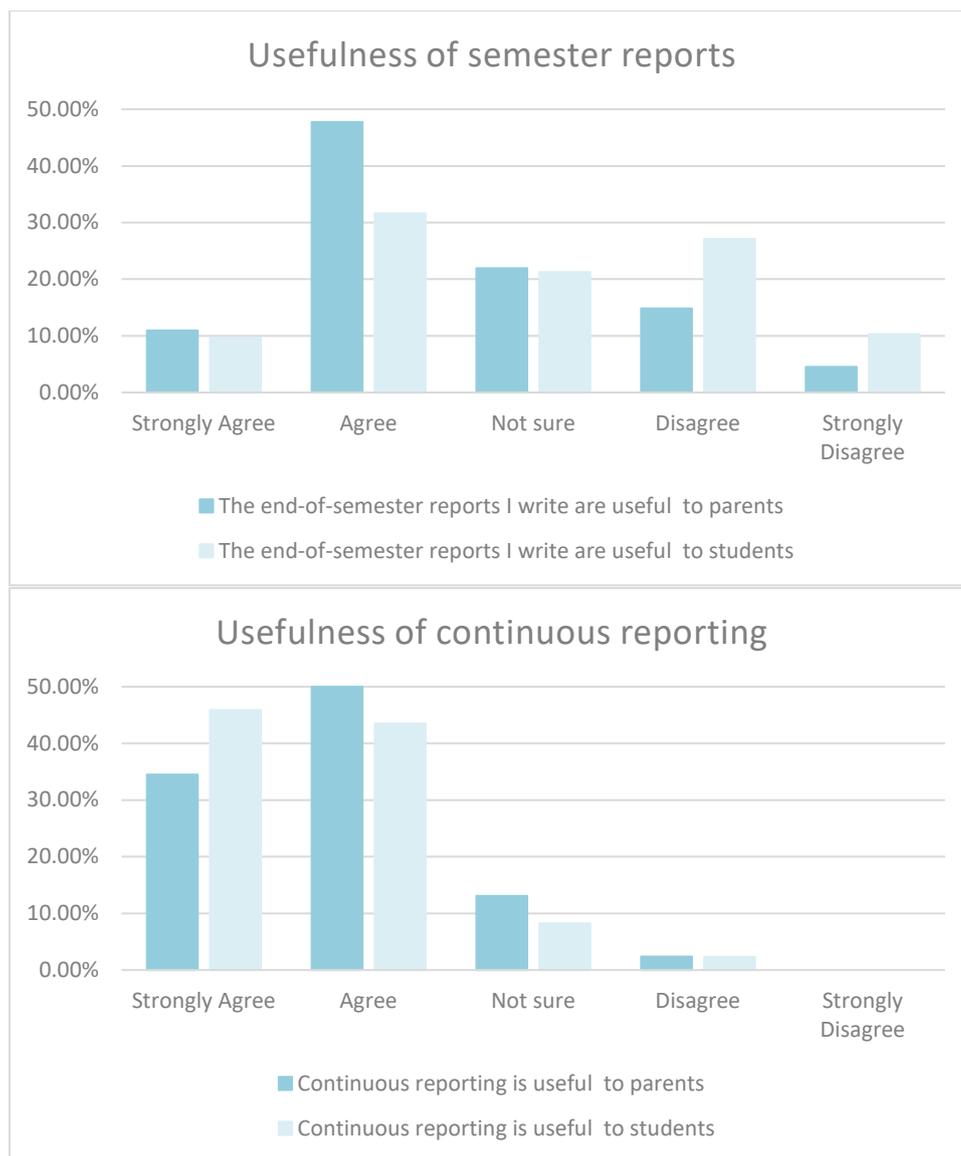


Figure 4 Teachers’ views of the usefulness of semester reports and continuous reporting

Even so, and despite expressing a clear preference for continuous reporting, as shown in Figure 4, a significant number of teachers indicated that continuous reporting has tended to lead to an increase in their workload, compared with traditional end-of-semester reporting as seen in Figure 5. Some propose that this has been true particularly in the set-up and transition towards this new way of reporting, and expressed a view that - with time – the workload would start to decrease. Others, however, cite the ‘double-handling’ involved in typing up the comments they’ve already written on the student’s work, or provided verbally to the student in class, for the purpose of then also reporting them to parents and carers.

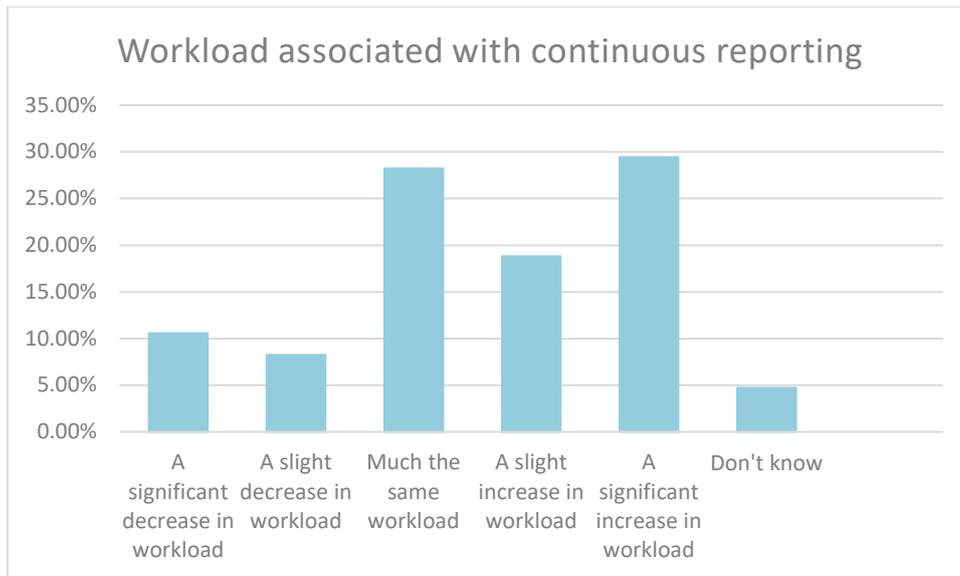


Figure 5 Teachers' views of the workload associated with continuous reporting

3.2.2 Focus groups with parents, teachers and students

As noted earlier, focus groups were held in schools in five states (New South Wales, Queensland, South Australia, Tasmania and Victoria) and included primary and secondary settings in government, independent and Catholic systems. A total of 51 parents, 36 students and 37 teachers participated. The purpose of the focus groups was to understand parents', students' and teachers' views of current practices used in their schools to communicate about student learning, and how these could be made more effective.

Focus group conversations with students were focused on the questions presented in Appendix A, with all students in the groups having opportunity to share their perspectives.

Activities in the parent and teacher focus groups were based around three themes: what they would like to 'retain', what they would like to 'remove', and what they would like to see 'reimagined' regarding current approaches used to communicate about student learning in their school. In each of the parent and teacher focus groups conducted, there was robust discussion related to current approaches used, as well as possibilities for approaches they considered might be more effective.

The perspectives of the students, parents and teachers were collated, de-identified, and coded according to themes that emerged. Seven themes were identified, including four that relate to the format of reports, two related to the contents of reports, and one additional theme related to teacher time, accountability and workload. A discussion of each identified theme and associated sub-themes follows. Comments from focus group participants have been included and are distinguished as being either from a parent (P), a teacher (T) or a student (S).

Themes related to the format of reports

Theme 1: Consistency in report formats

A minor theme that arose from focus group discussions was the notion of consistency in the format of reports. When mentioned, consistency of format was generally felt to be a positive:

We should retain whatever level of consistency of reporting exists between schools and systems, or increase this consistency. (P)

Remove the constant change to formats over reports, changes to the meaning of A to E. (P)

More consistency between schools. People are very mobile; why should reports vary? (P)

A uniform process across all schools that principals can't tamper with. (T)

Only once in discussions did the prospect of different reports for different audiences or purposes emerge:

Different reports for different audiences – the report seems to be something for the government, something for the child, something for teachers, and something else for the parent. (T)

However, this does raise several questions: To what extent do student reports, as they currently exist, serve those who need – or wish – to access them? Are the interests in a child's report (of the government, prospective employers, parents, students or the next year's school or teacher) all the same? Should all reports indicate a child's learning progress, or is it preferable that some report only on outcomes achieved, academic performance, interpersonal or enterprise skills and work habits, or behaviour?

Neither parents nor teachers put forward a case for schools having or retaining autonomy to develop reports tailored to their school community's needs or expectations, however as report consistency was not a major focus of discussion little can be drawn from this.

Theme 2: Written reports

Parents and teachers had much to say about the format of written reports. One consistent message was the need for reports to be written in jargon-free, accessible language. Parents expressed this and teachers also reported the need to simplify language, particularly the language of outcomes statements.

Outcomes statements in the checklists on reports are gobbledygook language. I scan the table with the ticks, but I'm really not paying attentions to the "Can do" (unless there is a tick out of 'normal' place). (P)

Simplify it, remove jargon. Tell us what they've worked on, what their strengths are, what they need to work on. A simple basis for judging. (P)

A need to simplify the language of outcomes statements for parents. (T)

Another aspect that was quite often discussed related to the use of visual representations in written reports. Some parents, teachers and students reported that they appreciated having visual representations because they can show improvement or progress. Others stated that they would like to have visual representations that could do this. And some others suggested that the representations currently used lack the precision or granularity needed to discriminate performance.

Keep the sliding scale/slider. The language about sitting at a D is problematic because they still sit at a D at the end of the year but they have made progress. The introduction of the slider scale is a way to communicate that progress has been made. (P)

I like the sliding dot. I like to see the growth "where he was, and where he is now". (P)

The sliders, 'Working towards', 'At' or 'Above' expected standard (and low/medium/high levels) for each of the sub-strands within a subject provide a good clear visual indicator of finer grain assessment. (T)

The dot shows you if you have gotten better, something to strive for to get better. (S)

Add a graph that shows how your results have improved, or some visual representation of your progress. (S)

Add some visual way to show improvement that is being made. (S)

The sliding bar doesn't discriminate; most students are at the top of the bar so it doesn't discriminate how I did. (S)

Further elements associated with the format of written reports that were spoken about repeatedly in focus groups were related to the timing, flexibility and responsiveness of written reports.

Several problems were identified with respect to the timing of traditional semester-based reports. The main concerns focussed on the amount of lead-time needed for their preparation, the diversion of attention away from teaching and learning across this time, and the subsequent lack of currency of the information presented in them.

'Big reporting deadlines' rush curriculum to get done, and leaves weeks of teaching time leftover that isn't assessed. (T)

Midyear reports can be a bit sketchy because they have to write them so early. Could be modified to a real time frequent update. (P)

Usually a [semester] report is old news, due to keeping track of my child's results through the term. (P)

Remove half-yearly/yearly reports – get rid of them entirely. The point of sending my kid to school is for the kid to progress, not to wait 6 months to learn she is struggling. I can't do anything with the report – it's too late to do anything. (P)

Problems were also noted regarding interim or term-based reports that included assessments of student achievement. These were often considered to be ineffective or meaningless because of the limited time that teachers had spent with students prior to having to complete them.

Progress/interim reports in term 1 are fine, but to include 'achievement' is hard so early in the year for once-per-week subjects. (T)

Some reports arise too early for the teacher to really get to know the child. (P)

Several parents and teachers appealed for reporting forms that are more flexible in the kinds of information being communicated and the timing for reporting. For example, some suggested that interim reports focus on such areas as work habits and how students are settling in to their class or subjects, rather than achievement scores or levels. Some suggested more frequent communications that are shorter. Others proposed that there could be different assessment and reporting blocks for different subjects.

Perhaps keep interim reports but restructure it. For example, what they need to be doing to get the B, the A or whatever. The categories could be revised to be more meaningful. (P)

Progress report in March – focus on work habits/learning behaviours. Only a couple of comments. (T)

More frequent generated communication that is shorter. (T)

Earlier updates on students' progress. (P)

More timely feedback to parents so they are better informed on their child's progress. (P)

Reports done continuously ala timeliness of formative assessment. (T)

Don't need a one-off reporting time – teachers could be uploading grades, comments, etc. gradually/continually. (T)

Not assessing the students all at the same time – stressful for students. Different subjects having different assessment blocks and reporting when they have enough to report on. (T)

Theme 3: Continuous reporting and the use of technology

Both parents and teachers spoke very favourably of using technologies to improve the frequency and timeliness of reporting to parents. Some parents we spoke to had children enrolled in schools who were using commercially available, purpose-built classroom communication and digital portfolio apps, which enabled the teacher to upload photos, video and text to communicate informally with parents about their child's learning. Others appeared to be using social media platforms to serve much the same function. These were highly valued by parents. Those who did not appear to be using such products tended to speak of a desire for more – and more frequent – email or phone communication with their child's teachers. Few parents appeared to be using an LMS or SMS platform (see Section 2.3), however some described a desire for a web-based continuous reporting solution.

Use of email or technology that provides more immediate feedback. (P)

Introduction of a real time chat or messaging app or web based form of communication. (P)

Regular updates electronically. (P)

Though teachers might have been more circumspect about continuous reporting, particularly with regards to what it might mean for their workload, none spoke negatively during the focus groups about the prospect of more ongoing forms of reporting to parents, with several citing the importance of more timely communication as a central feature of the reporting process they would like to use.

Reports as an ongoing process of timely, learning focussed communication. (T)

A system that can provide timely feedback accessible to parents and students. (T)

Not surprisingly, given the growing presence of LMS and SMS platforms in schools, teachers were better able than parents to articulate what a more sophisticated, dedicated web-based system of this kind might entail.

Online database allowing report information to be uploaded at any time by teachers and downloaded by parents – ongoing. (T)

A system/VLE that parents can log on to. (T)

A portal that regularly reports student achievement. (T)

Reporting housed in a live, school-wide electronic system that shows where students are 'at' and next steps (continuum of learning). (T)

A digital portfolio - a more paper friendly way to capture/retain student evidence. (T)

Use tech so parents can go "into" the student's work portfolios and have a look. (T)

Theme 4: Parent-teacher interviews and conferencing

There was much support among parents and teachers for having the opportunity to meet together to discuss student learning. However, several parents and teachers noted that current formats used for parent-teacher meetings and interviews were not meeting their needs.

One issue raised about parent-teacher interviews by both parents and teachers relates to the 'meaningfulness' of what gets discussed at interviews. Some parents and teachers reported that the interviews are not clearly focussed on student learning and they are often unconnected to students' reports.

Our parent-teacher interviews are of questionable value. It is the only opportunity to have a real interaction with the teacher, but what gets discussed, and the format doesn't help to make it a real interaction. The interviews are not meaningful. They should be linked to the report data. (P)

What is the point of the interviews if we don't talk about curriculum? We don't talk about the work habits in the report, or the academic results, so what is the point of them? It's unclear how the reports and the parent-interviews work together. (P)

We should have two parent-student-teacher conferences but with a better relationship between them and the reports. (T)

Some teachers noted that interviews would be enhanced if a different format were used that includes the provision of evidence of student performance.

Chats with the parent guided by a tick-a-box and with work samples ready to discuss growth made. (T)

Parent-teacher interviews as an exhibition, a portfolio presentation. (T)

The frequency and duration of parent-teacher interviews was seen by some parents to inhibit quality discussion.

Parent-teacher conferencing is essentially like speed-dating. More meaningful interactions are necessary. (P)

Parent-teacher interviews need more time for discussion. (P)

Parent-teacher interviews longer – not long enough. (P)

More parent-teacher interviews. More frequent communication. (P)

Other parents noted the need for engagement in communications 'outside of formal reporting' opportunities.

The most important thing should lie outside of formal reporting, that is engagement between teachers and parents and easy access for conversations, both parent to teacher and teacher to parent. (P)

In terms of student involvement in parent-teacher interviews and meetings, opinions were mixed. Some parents and teachers regarded student involvement as a positive, and others suggested that it did not allow for frank discussion.

Include children in parent-teacher conferences as they increase in age. (P)

Three-way parent-student-teacher interviews – child should be present for the interview. (T)

Students change the nature of the interview. Student-led conferences disallow the teacher from being able to be honest, and say 'hard truths'. (T)

Themes related to the contents of reports

Theme 5: Foci of reports

Views about the foci of reports were many and varied, and as such, four sub-themes were identified: achievement, standards and objectivity; progress and growth; work habits and learning dispositions; future learning and ways to support students.

Sub-theme 5A: Achievement, standards and objectivity

Opinions about the importance of retaining performance indicators like grades and rankings in reports were fairly mixed and fairly evenly split. Parents historically have embraced comparative measures such as A to E grades and class or cohort rankings, and one thread of parent discussion in the forums certainly focused on the desire to retain these features.

I like the A to E and being able to see where your child sits in the cohort. (P)

RETAIN: Where the student sits in the class (class ranking). Very important to give you a sense of how your kid is doing. (P)

Keep the statistics on how the marks averaged out across the Year group i.e. 6 As, 3 Cs etc. (P)

I like seeing the cohort mean and/or average. (P)

Relativities to other students in the class (P)

Retain the graph that goes with the grade that shows where the child sits on that grade. (P)

Other parents expressed more ambivalence about these measures of achievement, with several suggesting they be removed completely. In one forum, the five point scale was not necessarily all that popular, and some parents admitted they didn't really know what the A to E scale even meant, but most felt they might want to retain it lest they receive even less information about their child's learning. In another forum, when prompted to discuss whether they would wish to retain or remove A to E grades, the general mood was more one of inertia about it rather than an active embrace of it. In another forum, parents expressed confusion at the amount of measures they receive about their child, and what they all mean.

I wouldn't want to have even less information about my child. (P)

I don't understand the A-E scale – what does it mean? (P)

The 'Excellent', the 9.0 standard level, 'above expected standard', 'making above expected growth'... too confusing – what does it all mean? (P)

Grading doesn't mean what it used to mean, and communication about this could be improved. (P)

[Regarding A to E grades] It's just always been there in reports. (P)

Teachers, likewise, were fairly split on the issue, and for some of the same reasons. At one teacher forum, those who worked in a very socio-economically advantaged private school felt the cohort-referenced A to E grade scale they used was inconsistent with the broader state wide use of the same scale, and so was meaningless outside of their context.

Remove grades and marks. A 'C' here [at my school] is nothing to worry about, but it sends a message of being average. (T)

Grades are calculated on the cohort average: a 60% can be a C in one subject/test but a 70% could be a D in another. Inconsistent. (T)

Though many teachers also saw grades as an impediment to showing learning growth (see sub-theme 5B: Progress and growth), teachers were more inclined towards retaining marks, grades and

scores than they were rankings. Some teachers saw the inevitable ranking that occurs at year 12 as a justification for retaining it at younger year levels, however most seemed to feel the effect was detrimental to student motivation.

Remove mark/grade/position within the year group (T)

Remove rankings - more of a negative impact than positive; not constructive in the improvement process (T)

Class ranking – can have a positive effect, but feels like the impact is more negative than positive. Not constructive for improvement. Students compare, can have a detrimental impact on their motivation, socio-emotional impact. (T)

A thread of discussion within many of the parent forums was the question of how to interpret certain indicators. Parents were often not sure what standards the teachers used to determine certain measures of the student, whether these relate to school, state or national standards and whether they were norm-referenced or criterion-based.

To position a student against a standard doesn't actually tell me anything about my child. I could look up the national standards to find out what "at standard" means, but who does that? (P)

What is standard? If my child is at standard, what does that mean? What is an exemplar of standard work? (P)

Need a scale that teachers can use to show the standard and where the child is in relation to it (P)

Is a 60% in a level 10 test better than a 90% in a level 9 test? If a student chooses to complete a higher level task, but gets 50%, then do they progress to the next level, or do they go back to the lower level content to consolidate that? (P)

What does Outstanding, High, Sound, Basic, Limited actually mean? Is 'Outstanding' best in the class, or operating 12-months ahead of expected level? (P)

Grading [should place] a child in a broader context (not just a school or class context) so a parent knows where a child is at in a bigger context. (P)

Some scepticism about the objectivity of what and how teachers report was also detected, and relates to the parent's interest in knowing that their child is being fairly assessed.

Progress report (keep) – but how this is written, what evidence this is drawn from, could be better explained. (P)

Remove any information that isn't factual and true; teachers should restrict comments to observables. (P)

Learning profiles are too subjective. (P)

Effort scales – how is the teacher interpreting or measuring effort? Is it really being measured separate to [the student's] achievement? (P)

Even amongst teachers there was some lack of clarity about how standardised the results they report really were, to what standards their assessments were really based, and whether parents can infer usefully from these where their child is at within a broader context.

Curriculum benchmarks needed – a C is not the same if there are streamed classes, so what does a C mean? Do the students sit the same paper? If so, then does that mean a C is the same in every class? It would be useful for parents to know this. (T)

Are the assessments and grades school-based, or Board Of Studies-based? (T)

Report results in PAT, running records, standardised assessments etc. Not sure these results ever get communicated to parents. Perhaps they could/should. Reading age (Fountas and Pinnell), spelling age, etc. useful to know. (T)

Students also suspected that a lack of objective standards, or a broader range of evidence, influenced the ways in which teachers reported.

The teachers don't mark you on a broad range of things, it always is based on just one test. (S)

Ticks and comments can be a bit subjective. (S)

More consistent grading between teachers is needed to reduce bias – some teachers would give a mark that reflects a work ethic rather than skills. (S)

Sub-theme 5B: Progress and growth

Forum discussions with parents and teachers regularly turned to the issue of how – or indeed whether – student reports indicate a child's progress as opposed to their performance or achievement.

Some parents were quite attuned to the idea that grades and rankings do not represent the learning gains a child has made. The examples they drew upon suggested a concern particularly for the motivation of students who achieve lower grades.

A child who retains a D... how much does this show the progress they have made? (P)

Keep the slider [Tasmania]. They might still sit at a D at the end of the year but the slider shows they have made progress. (P)

With A-D grades could there be a scale to show how a child has improved rather than just giving an A, B, C or D grade so parents can see that the child has progressed? (P)

The child's growth needs to be the focus of the report no matter how small the gain. (P)

Remove: Class ranking – it's demoralising, and quite meaningless because it is limited to the context of the school. A learning continuum would be better. (P)

Parents also saw an opportunity for reports to be 'linked' so that they are not merely isolated snapshots of student achievement but could communicate the child's learning growth in a continuous way throughout their schooling.

Get a report that shows growth from the last report, not achievement against an age-based curriculum. (P)

Semester to semester comparison. (P)

Year to year comparison. (P)

Dots from grade 6 carried over to year 7 to show progress. (P)

A line graph of a student's progress over the year (or half-year) could be added. (P)

Some parents drew upon other forms of comparative growth measurement with which they were familiar as an analogy or example to explain their idea of what they would like to see included in student reports.

Use a chart system similar to NAPLAN to show individual progress and compare to class or general age level. (P)

Would prefer something like a baby growth chart, which shows your child's learning growth and the expected growth, so you can track it. To replace a five-point scale. (P)

Many other parents, when presented with suggestions such as these, were receptive to such ideas. However, some wondered how a comparison to an expected age-level standard would be achieved: via a child's year-level cohort at school, a state population or a national or international population.

Teachers in some forums appeared concerned with the same issues as parents: that grades can mask the fact that students are – or are not – making growth, and that ideally reports would help students and parents to understand what learning progress is being made, irrespective of grades.

What if the content becomes harder but the student's grades don't improve... does this mean they have achieved growth? (T)

Ratings – remove A to E: in favour of a continuum of learning. A to E doesn't focus on growth, and students can sit on a D or E for years and their report doesn't demonstrate growth, also doesn't communicate effort. (T)

There is no 'talking' between the semester 1 and semester 2 report – the difference in grades (a C and B) in each should be tracked and communicated. (T)

Reports should be measuring and reporting on student growth rather than an A to E. (T)

Teachers also expressed a preference for reports that could focus parents and students on a continuum of learning, including where the child is located and how much growth they have made.

Use a continuum of growth (T)

A re-focus on a continuum of learning (T)

Include previous report marker in continuum to show progress (T)

Reporting on growth as well/instead of standard i.e. how much growth in your learning from start to end of year (T)

Where students are at, and next steps for student learning. (T)

In one telling moment, a younger teacher expressed a realisation she'd had during the discussion that each report seems random and disconnected to a parent – that they don't tell a story of progress or growth or improvement, only of achievement and performance. She realised that this was true even if the parent goes back and checks previous reports, because past reports may not have reported on the same outcomes or learning tasks, or been based on the same assessments.

I never thought of that. (T)

When students were asked the question "How do you judge if you are progressing in your learning?" they tended to defer to discussions about checking grades and rankings: they look at their marks, they check where they sit in the cohort comparison chart or compare their grades with friends.

Marks tell you if you are doing well or not, compared to the average of the year level. (S)

This tended to suggest that, in the absence of any other way for teachers to measure and represent the learning growth of their students within reports, the students turn to the only other salient measure of their learning – grades and comparative rankings – and equate their performance with their progress.

However further discussion with students often revealed that they have an emerging awareness of the difference between how they perform and how they've progressed, admitting that they don't have any way of knowing their progress, or recalling the efforts of some of their teachers to engage in pre- and post-testing, or other means, to try to capture growth in achievement.

Our progress is never really reported. (S)

There is no way I can actually know if I have improved or not. (S)

In primary school we used a work sample portfolio. (S)

In music, you get a big quiz for theory, and the exact same quiz at the end of the year. (S)

Sometimes in Maths they give you a pre- and post- test. (S)

Some older students expressed a preference for reports to be more focussed on progress, both to avoid repetition of information already received, but also to assist with motivation.

Semester reports are more summative and should be more detailed on overall progress over the year, not referring to [performance on] specific assessment tasks all over again. (S)

Students who get Cs or Ds start giving up – there should be a way to show your progress. Grades don't reflect effort. PAT tests show progress and this is more motivating. That's what you come to school for – reports just show where you're at, not how much you have improved. (S)

Sub-theme 5C: Work habits and learning dispositions

Discussions in focus groups around ideas related to students' work habits were particularly interesting. Often, parents, teachers and students reported a lack of confidence in what's reported in this area. This appeared to be due to lack of meaningful measures and scales, observed inconsistencies in how teachers assessed student work habits, and uncertainty about how work habits information is used.

Learning profiles [including work habits] are too subjective. (P)

The language of learning profiles [including work habits] is not clear. (T)

Learning profiles, where you select on 4 categories whether a student is commendable, satisfactory or requires development are completely subjective. (T)

What happens with work habits information, and is it honest and reflective? (P)

Student work habits table – what is the purpose of it? What is that data used for? (P)

Students pay least amount of attention to these [work habits], because it's already known by the students. It's more for the parent. (S)

Ticks in a box for work habits seem less accurate than grades. How would teachers really be able to track organisation? Teachers just infer good work habits from the grades, because lots of students get the same result for work habits, and this is not accurate. (S)

However some parents and teachers regard reporting about work habits to be valuable.

Work habits are important because the performance grade alone doesn't tell the whole picture. Work habits are easy to read, easy to tick, and they are habits that are crucial to success. (T)

Ratings (scores) for organisation and attitude are helpful. (P)

Include behaviour, effort, approach, attitude tick boxes for an "at a glance" look at them. (T)

Approach to learning and effort ratings. (T)

A number of focus group participants suggested that comments about students' 'learning dispositions' would be good to include in reports.

Be more specific, comment on their soft skills. (P)

Include learning dispositions in reports (different to work habits). (T)

Reports would be more meaningful for future employers and schools etc. if they comment on the work ethic, talents, and effort of the student – qualities that aren't just a person's intelligence. (S)

Sub-theme 5D: Future learning and ways to support students

Several parents expressed a desire for teachers to identify areas of future learning in students' reports. Parents' comments indicated that they both sought to understand the areas that their children needed to work on to continue to improve, and ways that they might support their children at home.

An idea of what the student can do to improve. (P)

Areas for improvement comments, and ways you (the parent) can help the student improve. (P)

Convey to parents main focus of learning that needs improvement so that parents can assist. (P)

I want to know areas my child needs to work on. I want to know the real stuff. Tell me straight – they [teachers] try to be too nice. (P)

Comments and suggestions on how to continue growth. (P)

Improve detail on areas in which the student needs to focus for each subject. (P)

Personal improvement for each subject which is specific. (P)

Many students considered suggestions for future learning to be important inclusions in their reports, with some regarding these to be the most important element of reports. Students indicated that specific and personalised suggestions for improvement from their teachers were needed rather than directions that focussed on generic learning skills or targeted general class or cohort patterns. A detailed description of students' views about this area is presented in Theme 6: Teacher comments.

Theme 6: Teacher comments

One of the most exhaustively discussed themes among parents, teachers and students was the teacher comments that appear in reports.

Parents overwhelmingly supported the retention of the teachers' comments, as they are seen as a guide to understanding or translating the rest of the report. Parents were particularly in favour of 'personalised', 'individualised' or 'specific' comments about their child, using that language repeatedly.

Keep personalised comments, and the personal/social progress of the students. (P)

Retain personalised comments. Some reports have a grade rating without comments which doesn't really help to know where your child is at. (P)

Comments are important to me because it makes me feel like they are looking at my child as a person. (P)

Many expressed a desire for a holistic commentary about their child as a learner, including attitude, attention, effort, interpersonal skills and so on, but the main aspects on which parents appeared to want teachers to focus was their child's 'progress', their learning strengths and successes, and how they need to improve.

As consistently as parents praised personalised comments, they were equally as condemning of what they perceived as being 'cut-and-paste' or generic comments sourced from a comment databank. These were roundly seen as uninformative, particularly when they were taken from curriculum outcome statements.

Some students get a different student's name in their report. (P)

You can clearly see when a teacher knows a child. [If they don't] There are a lot of words, but they are not actually saying anything. (P)

Reports often feel vague, generalised, copy-and-pasted – could apply to any child. (P)

As a parent, I tend to skim those [copy-and-pasted outcome] statements. They're not helpful. The more individualised comments about what my child is doing well or needing help with is more helpful. (P)

Parents were also quite consistent in suggesting that the comments teachers write are overly focussed on positives about the child and their learning, with a suspicion that teachers are being indirect or guarded in their comments for fear of a negative reaction. There was a palpable sense of frustration with this purely positive focus to the teacher's comments.

Remove hollow platitudes – the feel good statements. (P)

Remove 'fluffy' bits that don't match classroom behaviour. (P)

We need to know strengths so we can foster those, but we need to know the weaknesses so that we can know what to work on at home. You don't read them [comments] after a while. (P)

Old reports were blunter, more informative, less 'sugar-coated'. Comments these days seem less direct. (P)

I want to know the real stuff. Tell me straight – they try to be too nice. (P)

Help me help her! [Comments need to do this]. (P)

Though teachers were more likely to suggest removing the need to produce long, "wordy" comments, this was not simply due to the fact that they are time-consuming to produce. Teachers pointed out that the comments they feel they need to write impact on their ability to plan effective lessons during that time, and are often inaccessible to parents, but also that in semester reports the comments are often out-of-date (if derived from a student's performance on an early assessment task).

Remove personalised comments – too time consuming, rife with errors of grammar. Reports are written too early because proof-reading takes so long. (T)

Writing comments does take away from teaching time – it is done in our own time, but this impacts on planning time. (T)

Remove wordy, curriculum outcome-phrased comments. Teachers are encouraged to use the language of the outcomes to show that they are not being subjective, to show that the outcomes have been achieved or not. (T)

Nevertheless, many teachers were positive about the place and importance of their comments in reports, though noticeably fewer teachers than parents mentioned the importance of the comments being personalised. Teachers were instead more likely to suggest that comments ought to be strength- and improvement-focused, objective and constructive.

Retain comments – based on student's work (learning focused, not your own personal view). (T)

Retain teacher comments – but they have to have depth, be meaningful and cannot be a string of negatives (strong emphasis on removing negative language at this school). Constructive advice. (T)

Retain comments pertaining to areas of improvement. (T)

Retain comments about what the student needs to work on to show further progress. (T)

Despite a strong expressed preference from most teachers for writing objective and constructive comments, some expressed a frustration with what they felt to be an overly-cautious or avoidant approach to commenting on a child if there were perceived problems.

Remove euphemistic teacher-talk comments: 'finds X challenging', 'with support', etc. Polite phrases in comments don't communicate what needs to be said. (T)

Teachers are being discouraged from making personal comments [meaning subjective/ from the teachers perspective]. Teachers are encouraged to use euphemisms. You've got to be very careful about what you say. (T)

This school used to use auto-generated comment banks, but we stopped because they were not helpful for really expressing what you would want to say. The parent wants an honest report, anything less is a complete waste of everyone's time (teachers included). Diplomatic comments don't have to be dishonest. (T)

God forbid you should give negative feedback! (T)

In discussions with students, as with parents, the importance of personalised, learner-specific comments from their teachers was also made plain. Many students felt they could detect when teachers were writing generic comments and tended to disregard these, particularly when these comments were statements of learning outcomes lifted directly from the curriculum, or simply statements of what work the class had done that semester.

Teacher comments vary – some just describe what has been done in class, others describe how we did. (S)

I don't think the comments are very useful. [But] Some teachers include more meaningful, less brief, more personalised comments. (S)

Sometimes students who all get a B all get the same comment, other teachers write a more personalised comment. (S)

Some comments I expect to be about me are just a course outline: what we have done in class. I'd prefer not to get these comments. (S)

I pay least attention to what we've done that semester [course outline] comments. (S)

Some teachers put the wrong name on a comment [evidence of copy-and-paste]. (S)

Some teachers reflect on the class, instead of you. (S)

A consistent message from all of the student forum groups we conducted, was that students want the teacher comments to be targeted and improvement-focused. Whilst almost all students admitted that they check their grades first, they were emphatic about their interest in learning from their report how to improve, and almost unanimously felt the role of the teachers' comments was to provide this feedback. Below are just a sample of the comments made to this effect.

Some teachers don't say how we can improve, they focus on how the cohort needs to improve. (S)

I want specific comments about how to improve. (S)

Some students just want to get the grades and don't care about feedback or comments, but some kids are really interested to see how they can improve. (S)

Comments about what I am good at not all that useful – I want to know more how I can improve. (S)

Reports could be more meaningful if they said what I can improve on, not just grades. (S)

More precise comments on how you can improve – it is a bit vague. (S)

Useful comments [would be] an in depth guide on how to improve: actual tips. If a teacher gives a grade below an A, then they should give advice for how to improve. (S)

Reports are useful for parents to find out how we're going at school, but not useful for students in terms of how to improve. (S)

Additional Theme

Theme 7: Teacher time, workload and accountability

In discussions with all three stakeholder groups, the issue of reporting as an accountability measure, and the burden this places on teachers' time, was raised. Parents were generally sympathetic with teachers, and mindful of any changes to reporting that would add any further burden to their workload that might also detract from their ability to deliver high-quality teaching.

Providing samples of student assignments might just be too much work for the teacher to upload to a parent portal and too much information for a parent to read. (P)

Teachers use them [curriculum statements as comments] because of time constraints [because] they can just insert them. It's not ideal, but this is what happens: 'This is what we have to teach; to prove we have done it, we insert these statements in the report.' It's an accountability that means nothing to parents. It might be useful as a school's internal accountability, but not for the parent. And for parents with ESL backgrounds, it is even more meaningless. (P)

Reporting should reduce admin burden for teachers. More timely feedback would be good, but not at the cost to the teacher. (P)

So much pressure on teachers! (P)

Unsurprisingly, this issue was raised by some teachers also, however it did not appear as a universal theme in their discussions. Most discussion of this sort centred on the time-consuming nature of writing, proofing and editing individualised report comments before they are placed into the system, as opposed to any other aspect of compiling reports, which may well be automated.

Teachers are writing comments in the holidays in order to be able to spend their term time planning their teaching. Mid-year reports are being written across all of term 2! (T)

Do you want me to teach, or do you want me to report all the time? It takes all of term two for us to write our reports [writing, editing, senior staff editing, rewriting, changing the wording of comments, etc.] (T)

Writing comments does take away from teaching time – done in own time, but this impacts on planning times. (T)

In one student group discussion, participants also suggested that they can tell when it is report-writing time because teachers appear to be more stressed. They also suspected that the time taken to write reports is detracting from the teachers' time to plan their teaching and complete their marking.

3.2.3 Workshop with principals: Estimating the 'costs' of student reports

As noted earlier and as evidenced in the findings presented above, much time and effort is expended by teachers and school leaders to prepare and disseminate student reports each year. Given this, a question of considerable interest is what are the estimated 'costs' associated with reporting? By costs we do not only mean financial outlay, but also opportunity costs including time, effort and diversion from other professional work associated with teaching.

The project team had the opportunity to workshop this question with a group of primary principals from different jurisdictions and systems during a project presentation. The principals were asked to prepare a 'back-of-the-envelope' estimate of any costs associated with the reporting methods and processes used at their schools. The principals identified a range of tasks associated with their reporting practices and provided estimated times for these. Several also estimated dollar amounts that the completion of these tasks represented. Examples of the types of tasks and estimates of the

times needed for each are displayed in Table 15. The tasks displayed and the time estimate ranges are those identified by the principals who participated in the workshop. Other tasks may be undertaken in different school locations, and the amount of time that tasks take may vary across locations, for example according to school size, class size, etc.

Table 15 Example of reporting practice tasks and time estimates per semester report

Tasks	Time estimates
<i>Class teachers</i>	
Meetings, communication, coordination	2 hours for all teaching staff
Writing of reports by class teacher*	2-3 hours per student for all class teachers
Review and proof reading by peer (“buddy”)	3-4 hours per class for each buddy teacher
<i>Specialist teachers</i>	
Writing of reports for specialist areas	5-6 hours per class for each specialist
<i>Leadership staff</i>	
Meetings, communication, coordination	2 hours for all leadership staff
Set up of report and liaison with IT	4-8 hours for one leadership staff member
Preparation of report writing style guide	1-2 hours for one leadership staff member
Trouble shooting, supervising process, etc.	2-5 hours for one leadership staff member
Review of reports by Deputy or Principal	3-5 hours per class
Signing by Principal	15-20 minutes per class
<i>IT staff</i>	
Report set up	8 hours
<i>Administrative staff</i>	
Printing, mailing, filing, telephone calls with parents/carers, etc.	10-15 hours
<i>Release time</i>	
Report Writing Day or teacher release	8 hours for all teaching staff
Staff meeting release	2-4 hours for all teaching staff
<i>Staff absence</i>	
Time off work, sick leave during reporting period**	5-10 teaching staff days

*For this activity principals were referring to primary class teachers

**The principals noted these staff absences represent a spike in absences around reporting times in their schools (i.e. over and above usual staff absences)

As the principals worked on their individual back-of-the-envelope estimates, they engaged in much conversation about the task. Several principals expressed surprise and concern regarding the large amount of time they identified is dedicated to the reporting process – in particular they raised concern about the loss of instructional time that is a necessary by-product of the process, and they questioned whether current reporting practices are sufficiently effective to warrant the time allocated to them. A number of principals also found their estimated financial outlay for student reports confronting.

To gain a more precise understanding of the time and financial costs of preparing current-style reports, the project team asked one school principal to prepare a detailed account of the reporting approach used at his school. This account is presented in Table 16 and accurately represents the reporting practice at his school in 2019. It should be noted that not all of the 'cost' amounts listed in Table 16 are costs incurred within the school budget. For example, the time indicated for the 'Writing of reports by class teachers' is 55 hours per class, however this includes hours outside of the nominated teaching day (before and after school, during lunch breaks, on weekends). As stated above, costs such as these are included to accurately present opportunity costs including time, effort and diversion from other professional work associated with teaching, in addition to direct financial outlay.

Table 16 Costs associated with reporting at a primary school of 14 classes, 345 students (per semester, 2019)

Task/resource	Description	'Cost' per semester
Reporting program	\$7.50/student	\$2587.50
Moderation time	two 1-hour staff meetings 14 class teachers x 2 hours x \$80/hour*	\$2240
Report writing staff meeting	one 1-hour staff meeting 18 teaching staff x \$80/hour	\$1440
Writing of reports by class teachers	14 teachers x 55 hours/class x \$80/hour	\$61600
Specialist teacher report writing – marks only	4 specialists x 5 hours x \$80/hour	\$1600
Report writing day (Semester 2 only)	25 staff x \$400/day divided by 2**	\$5000
Deputy Principal time	report set up; liaison with IT; review/proof reading; troubleshooting; printing; 30 hours x \$100/hour	\$3000
Principal time	reading/review, signing 25 hours x \$120/hour	\$3000
Administrative staff time	packaging envelopes 2 hours x \$50/hour	\$100
Paper	reams of paper	\$50
Parent interview meetings	11 hours scheduled over two days 19 teaching staff (14 class teachers, 1 shared class teacher, 4 specialists) x \$80/hour	\$16720
Teacher time off work	sick leave/staff absences at reporting team is typically around 5 days 5 staff days x \$400/day	\$2000
COST PER SEMESTER		\$99,337.50

*Amount (\$80) based on average of class teacher salaries

**Amount is divided by two to represent cost per semester

3.3. Examples of schools reshaping their practice

Accounts of the ways that schools are currently working to reshape their approaches to communicating student learning progress are presented in Appendix B. Vignettes from four schools and one school collective are presented. The project team’s awareness of the work of these groups emerged during the course of the project as they were collecting data and sharing preliminary findings with different audiences.

The vignettes were prepared by staff from each school and in the case of the collective, by one of the program facilitators. The vignettes describe ‘work in progress’ at each location, and are included to share examples and insights related to the methods and processes that some schools are using to rethink and reshape their practice.

The vignettes describe the schools’ particular contexts, their motivation for rethinking their practice related to student reports and communicating about student learning, implications for deciding how to work, steps taken, challenges encountered, and reflections and current status.

Table 17 displays information about the vignette schools and the school collective. The full vignettes for each of these are presented in Appendix B.

Table 17 Contextual details of vignette schools

School name	School type and size	Location
St Paul’s Catholic Primary School	Catholic Primary 200-300 students	Nightcliff, Northern Territory
Catholic Education Melbourne - A Collective of Southern Region Primary Schools	Catholic Primary 9 schools	Southern Region, Victoria
Camberwell Grammar School	Independent P-12 1300 students	Camberwell, Victoria
St Helena Secondary College	Government Secondary 1625 students	Eltham North, Victoria
Sunshine College	Government Secondary 1000 students	Sunshine, Victoria

4. Recommendations

This project investigated current national policies and practices related to the ways schools communicate student learning. The aim was to provide an evidence-base for effective reporting processes. The findings have prompted important questions about the purpose and form of student reports as well as school processes for communicating student learning progress.

This section presents a set of recommendations developed to reflect the project team's conclusions from the current investigation. We believe these can inform future directions for student reporting policy and practice. The project team acknowledges that the recommendations for communicating about student learning are aspirational. Systems and schools are at an early point in transition from a 'traditional' view of assessment focused on judging and grading students towards one of monitoring learning progress over time (Masters, 2017). Implementation of online or real-time reporting is at a similarly emergent stage.

The report concludes with a number of recommendations for future research. We recognise the value of extending the study to encompass a more systematic and comprehensive review of policy and practice that includes broader national and international perspectives, as well as from other education sectors.

4.1 Recommendations for communicating student learning

1. Schools and systems should use consistent terminology to communicate about student learning

Shared understanding of the terms used in discourse is key to effective communication.

To facilitate communication about student learning, terms associated with the ways that learning is described and measured need to be clearly explained and used with consistency to enable accurate and meaningful interpretation among stakeholders.

For example, shared understanding of what is meant by a student's 'performance' on learning and assessment tasks, their learning 'attainment' and their learning 'progress' is important in the context of student reporting for students, parents/carers, teachers, and school leaders. This extends at certain times to employers, further education providers, and the general community. The following is one example of how such concepts might be distinguished.

Descriptions of key concepts

Performance: a measure of 'how well' a child has done; sometimes in comparative terms, for example against a teacher's expectations as outlined in assessment criteria or rubric, others in the class or cohort, etc.; may be communicated as a letter grade, a ranking, a test score, or a total mark for a project or assignment, etc.

Attainment: where a child 'is at' now; a summative, descriptive indication of what a child has newly achieved, not simply what they can do, but what they can now do; may be communicated via indicators of progress such as standards reached, outcomes demonstrated, etc.

Progress (gain or growth): a measure or other indication of the 'learning made'; the difference between previous and current attainment along a continuum of learning as measured over time; may be indicated in terms of a visual shift in position along a progression, an increased score in standardised assessment, or (if an expected level of growth can be feasibly determined) descriptions such as 'below', 'at' or 'above' expected growth.

2. Student reporting should be continuous and aligned to the assessment cycle

Student reporting has traditionally been organised to present summative information coinciding with scheduled semester and year-long subjects, limiting its capacity to provide information that has currency and placing extra demands on teachers during these scheduled times.

Instead of scheduling student reporting as ‘an event’ that takes place at specified times for all teachers, all students and all subjects, a school reporting system that is continuous and aligned with the teaching-learning-assessment cycles of different subjects and courses is proposed. A reporting system of this kind would:

- provide teachers with greater flexibility and allow the teaching-learning-assessment cycle to drive reporting, rather than the reporting cycle to drive teaching, learning and assessment;
- allow parents and carers to follow the learning path of their child in subjects and courses in a more continuous way across multiple years, to better monitor how their child ‘is going’ and provide support for their child’s learning as it is needed;
- provide students with information about their learning that is current and that includes directions for future learning;
- reduce teacher workload and stress associated with peak times of report writing that can divert attention from the core activity of teaching and learning.

This kind of reporting system would not negate the possibility of including summative semester reports as a component of the reporting process for courses that conclude at the end of semester. However, consideration would need to be given to how these would:

- communicate something greater than the sum of the parts already communicated through continuous reporting;
- be auto-generated as much as possible using assessment data entered throughout the semester;
- ensure unwarranted extra reporting demands are not placed on teachers.

3. Student reporting should explicitly represent and communicate learning progress

It is an existing requirement that student reports provide “an accurate and objective assessment of the student’s progress and achievement” (COAG, 2008), yet it is not obvious that student reports in Australia do provide an assessment of a child’s learning through the prism of progress over time.

Communicating information of this nature first requires teachers to have a sophisticated understanding of what the progressive attainment of mastery – in knowledge, skills, and understanding – typically looks like in their subject, to be able to diagnose where along this progression a child appears, and what the next steps are in their learning.

At the macro level of progress, standards-based curriculum continua provide teachers a prescriptive outcomes progression against which a student’s growth can be progressively measured and represented over time in reports, and in some jurisdictions efforts to represent this growth have been made. Empirically-derived learning progressions that describe how students *typically* develop in an area of learning, are also becoming increasingly available, and it is anticipated that as they become more widely used they will inform both classroom assessment and student reporting.

At a micro-level of progress, teachers design learning sequences to enable students to incrementally develop knowledge, skills and understandings, and rubrics to assess increasing levels of proficiency. If used consistently across like tasks, or across tasks that assess the same component skills, student performance against these rubrics can provide the evidence teachers need to report smaller incremental gains students make in a learning area.

Given that the rate of progress of students is highly variable and not consistent, an important consideration for schools is how to show the progress each student makes across a reporting period. Detectable shifts along a learning progression may take years for some students to demonstrate, therefore another important consideration is how frequently to report, and at what levels, to expect to see growth. What is needed are classroom assessments that enable sufficiently fine-grained observations of student progress, and a report design that can communicate progress at micro- and macro-levels.

4. Student reporting should explicitly communicate student learning against expectations

Standards-based curricula set expectations for what students ought to be able to demonstrate at particular ages and stages. While student reporting should demonstrate the learning gains a student makes and communicate what a child can now do irrespective of their starting point, such information about a child's achievement is often found to be difficult to interpret by parents and carers unless measured against some kind of expectation, such as an achievement standard or age-based benchmark.

An important part of communicating student learning against expectations is clearly articulating not only what the student can do, but also what they cannot yet do (or have not yet demonstrated), and using both to make an inference about where that places the child in relation to the standard expected.

5. Student reporting should clearly articulate how performance ratings are defined

The return to an A to E (or equivalent) five-point rating scale was intended to restore a familiar, and presumably 'common sense', understanding of how a child's performance in their subjects was being judged. However, sometimes grades are determined and awarded inconsistently as teachers bring "their own mysterious system" to the process (London, 2012).

Some schools define grades as "equivalent" to percentage ranges (e.g. An A = 85-100%) despite the fact that not all assessments are scored via a numerical calculation, and not all assessments are of equivalent difficulty. While some schools use standards-based grading – linking performance grades to the demonstration of external, state wide standards – other schools (e.g. high-performing or select entry schools) impose an internal 'bell curve' via a class- or cohort-referenced distribution, to grade a student's performance in comparison to fellow students.

It is not clear in most student reports whether grades are awarded via teachers' use of an explicit and objective set of assessment criteria, or whether the teacher applies a more subjective 'professional judgment'. The extent to which grades are awarded as a result of moderation across classes, is also not often made clear. Further to this, international research into school grading practices reveals that while grades are often assumed to be an indication purely of academic

knowledge and achievement, teachers' grades are often coloured by dispositional and attitudinal aspects of the child such as persistence, behaviour, participation, and effort (Bowers, 2019).

It is therefore recommended that schools are explicit with parents and carers about how performance ratings in reports, such as grades, are determined, and the extent to which these communicate information about their child's performance relative to students in other classes, cohorts, schools or states.

6. Student reporting should present information that is accessible and provides different levels of detail

Parents and carers express a desire for student reports to be both accessible and informative. While many parents are content with simple overviews including easily understood rating scales and visual displays of their child's performance or progress, others want – and are able – to read more detailed information and data at finer levels of 'grain size'.

All methods of reporting should present information for parents and carers in clear and accessible ways. This includes using plain language and a minimum of curriculum jargon wherever possible, as well as intelligible visual displays of student learning data to indicate a child's performance, attainment and growth relative to expected standards.

Student reporting should also afford parents and carers the opportunity to easily obtain more detail about their child's learning and school work should they choose. This may simply involve school policies that formally enable parent-initiated communication with teachers in manageable ways. Parents and carers can then request the information they need to be better informed or assured about their child's learning. This could also involve the development of interactive interfaces to online reporting products. A parent could, for example, click on elements within graphs, continuums, tables and diagrams, and 'drill down' to the assessment data such as work samples, assessment rubrics, electronic tests, teacher comments, outcome statements achieved/not achieved, standardised testing scores and other data sources which are stored within the system and which sit behind the simplified visual displays.

7. Student reporting should include specific directions for future learning

There is overwhelming support among students for reports that provide them with specific information about how to improve – in particular, what they need to do next to progress in a learning area.

Students indicate that they are less interested in grades and marks in reports because they typically know about these well in advance of reports being distributed. They also indicate that many teacher comments in reports are not helpful to them, in particular those that are generic and not personalised, and those that are merely praise-oriented.

While parents and carers want to know what their child has achieved and in what areas they have done well, students appeal for information that is improvement-oriented and that details specific and personalised next steps towards mastery in areas of learning.

8. Methods used to communicate student learning should have distinct but complementary purposes

An effective school reporting system will make explicit the relationship between the different forms of communication about student learning that it includes.

Schools need to determine the distinct role of each form of communication – continuous reports, written reports, interviews, portfolios, etc. – and the ways that these are intended to work together to ensure cohesion and maximise efficiencies with respect to communicating student learning progress.

School communities need to be informed about their reporting systems and the connections between different methods used in their schools to communicate about student learning.

4.2 Recommendations for further research

This project has uncovered many issues related to communicating student learning. The project team considers that further research would be invaluable in order to include broader national and international representation, and to extend the investigations of areas initiated in this project.

The following potential research and investigation items are of particular interest.

- Undertake a more substantial collection of student reports to include broader representation across all Australian jurisdictions, systems and levels (early years, primary, secondary) as well as international contexts and other sectors of education.
- Identify and investigate schools working on the design and use of reporting formats that support, monitor and represent progress (gain or growth over time) to determine what's possible and what works.
- Identify and investigate schools working on the design and use of coherent school reporting systems that explicitly connect different communication methods to better understand how these systems work.
- In conjunction with education systems and providers of learning management systems and online assessment and reporting software, design a model for a school reporting system that follows the recommendations related to communicating student learning identified in Section 4.1, including prototypes of effective online and print-based student reports.

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Appendix A: Student focus group questions

1. When you get your reports, what information do you pay the most attention to?

Least attention?

2. Do you read your teachers' comments?

Why/why not?

3. After you have read through your report, what do you do with it then?

4. Do you consider your reports to be useful?

Why/why not?

5. How could your reports be made more useful/meaningful?

6. How do you judge whether or not you are progressing in your learning?

What information do you receive that helps you to make that judgment?

Appendix B: Vignettes of practice

St Paul's Catholic Primary School, Northern Territory

Context
<i>St Paul's Catholic Primary school is in the beachside suburb of Nightcliff in Darwin. It fluctuates between 200 and 300, given the transient nature of Darwin. It is a high performing school in NAPLAN and is usually ranked in the top few schools in the Northern Territory. The school is endeavouring to move to a more contemporary learning environment and is constantly looking for ways to improve.</i>
Motivation
<i>The school was not satisfied with its reporting to parents and staff believed the reports were not achieving the desired outcome of improving student learning. Some staff had been exploring the work of Geoff Masters in regards to school reporting and some staff had completed the Certified Assessors course from the Institute of Educational Assessors, SACE Board, South Australia, so we had started to question our practice. There was also a practical side as the school was changing our computer system so had to look at a new school report format. We realised that we had a real opportunity.</i>
Implications
<i>What we thought was that our school reports were too wordy, too long. We realised that a lot of effort went into a report that the parents were not reading. Most parents were looking at the mark their child received and having a quick glance at the comments. We knew from Masters' research that the comments could be highly effective, but we were not hitting the mark with ours. We had a couple of focus groups with parents and the school board and we were challenged by what they said. Some parents said they valued the comments, but overall, most admitted they did not spend a great deal of time reading them. They found the comments too full of teacher jargon and they had a sense that the same comment had been used for a number of students. Over the years, many had received a report with a wrong name inserted. With the amount of words in the reports it was no surprise. One teacher calculated that overall our reports had around 250 000 words in them and with a Principal reading all reports in a week, it can easily be seen how errors could get through, despite having several levels of checks and editing.</i> <i>The most confronting feedback was when several parents told us they would never show their child the school report as it was too negative. Our reports would be fairly stock standard, and not very different from most schools, so to hear that they were not shown to students we knew we had to do something.</i>
Steps taken
<i>To begin, we realised we did not know much about the theory of school reports and that we needed to know more of the 'why.' One of the first actions I took was to ring ACER and ask to speak to Geoff Masters. I did not think they would put me through directly to Geoff, but sometimes you get lucky. I explained to Geoff that we had to design a new school report and that we wanted to get it right. The conversation was very fruitful and we discussed school reports for about 10-15 minutes and then he put me in contact with Hilary Hollingsworth. I spoke to Hilary about it for about an hour the next day. Hilary's first question was, "Are our school reports effective and who</i>

are they effective for?" This was a great question that really got us thinking and challenged our practice.

As a leadership team we had many discussions and looked at further articles from Geoff and Hilary and we started to contact other schools around Australia.

At the same time, we began collaborating as a staff using the articles and having a lot of discussion. Our staff were also keen to change the reports as they were taking many hours to complete.

We were supported through the process by staff from Catholic Education Northern Territory who helped us to keep on track and ensure that we were attending to any Federal and Territory reporting regulations.

Challenges

Time: We had very little time to change, as initially we were bound to use the system wide reporting package and only got permission very late to make the changes. This meant we had about six weeks to design a new school report system from scratch. So, six weeks after talking to Geoff Masters, we had a new school report.

Software provider: Initially the software company told us they could not manage to meet our deadline and that it may be a year or two off. The difficulty was that we wanted our grade 3-6 students self-assessing directly onto the report. However, six weeks later we had our students self-assessing on a five-point scale, and the software company ringing to say they could see the benefits of what we were trying to do. We had sent the company all of Geoff and Hilary's articles, as they did not understand why we wanted to make the changes that we did.

The students: Our students had never self-assessed themselves against a five-point scale, so we had to help them to do this. The language and process of self-assessment were new experiences for the students.

Parents: We had also moved away from A-E reporting and used a different five-point scale. In our consultative groups some parents wanted to keep the A-E grades, but by taking the time to explain to them how ineffective they were, most could see why we changed. We had also shared parts of research through our newsletter and Facebook page. Consulting and communicating with the parent community was an important part of the process.

Reflections and current status

One year on and we are still looking to improve the reports. Having students write their own comments and reflections would be the next steps. We reduced the amount of areas students were self-reporting on as we did not think it was necessary and it was taking a huge amount of time and effort. The software company worked out a way for students to mark themselves directly by using a google form. In the first iteration, the teachers inserted each student's own marks which took substantial time.

Is the new report accepted by the community? Yes. Parents' feedback suggested they loved the student self-assessment and found the reports much easier to read.

Where would we go next? Refining how we write the comments, making them more effective for impacting growth in student learning.

We tried to include one or two points for parents for what to do with their child next. This proved to be quite difficult to do without sounding patronising. On reflection, using the achievement

standards, or the Literacy and Numeracy progressions could be a good way of advising families about what would be the next step for their child, and that would be worth exploring.

Have we got it right? Not yet. Are we on the right track? We think we are, and we are always looking to improve.

Anthony Hockey, Former Principal, St Paul's Catholic Primary School

Catholic Education Melbourne, Collective of Southern Region Primary Schools, Victoria

<p>Context</p>
<p><i>In August 2017 a collective of 9 Catholic Primary Schools in the Southern Region came together to explore ways of Reimagining Student Reporting, led by Sharon Armstrong and Danielle Fitton. Schools were supported to reflect on, and to transform the way they reported to parents with a particular emphasis on supplementing their existing biannual reporting with an ongoing or continuous form of reporting. The collective explored current research around best reporting practices, examined possible tools to support their schools in moving towards a more consistent and timely communication system, and collected survey data from the three key stakeholders in reporting - parents, students, and teachers.</i></p>
<p>Motivation</p>
<p><i>“At its best assessment should engage students, teachers and families in an authentic relationship about learning” (Horizons of Hope Foundation Statement Assessment in a Catholic School).</i></p> <p><i>The motivation for improving reporting was inspired by an imperative to engage families further in the learning, in a timely ongoing manner.</i></p> <p><i>There is much evidence to suggest that if ongoing reporting is done well, then true learning partnerships between home and school are enabled to thrive. There is also the suggestion that the mandated reports should become a less onerous task for teachers, as the bulk of reporting has been done at the time the learning occurred. Parents are informed of their child’s progress in an ongoing, timely, forward focused manner. The collective was motivated to explore these assertions.</i></p>
<p>Implications</p>
<p><i>Given that many existing reporting packages do not allow the less formal approach to reporting that is associated with Ongoing Reporting, schools were required to explore additional platforms that would better facilitate ongoing reporting. This required an investigation to what ongoing or continuous reporting should look like. It showed that a change is required in an approach to pedagogy and planning and designing for learning. As assessment needed to move from purely summative to formative, teachers and students are required to adjust their learning and teaching, incorporating a flow of communication, reflection and consultation.</i></p>
<p>Steps taken</p>
<p><i>The schools followed a Design Thinking Process in order to explore best practice in Ongoing Reporting and to reimagine the reporting process. Subject matter experts on Wellbeing and Parent Engagement were an integral part of the process, as was asking the key stakeholders - Students, Parents and Teachers, about what they wanted in student reporting. Schools conducted an audit of their existing practice, looking at the evidence they collected and shared about their students, and evaluated how this could be improved to better meet the needs of the stakeholders. Schools worked collaboratively together to share their findings and to evaluate research, so that reporting could become a less onerous task for teachers, but at the same time more adequately reflect student achievement in a timely manner. Schools also investigated different platforms that allow for sharing evidence of learning in an ongoing manner.</i></p>

Challenges

Stakeholder knowledge, experience and expectations posed the challenge of not always aligning with research and contemporary values. As is often the case with change, some of those involved don't know any different and will suggest there isn't a need for it. Schools had the challenge of bringing all on board with the same vision. Given that formal reports occur only twice per year, change has been slow in some cases. Often what reporting packages are offering and what is actually needed is not always aligned. Some participants are hesitant or have push back from others to reduce formalised reports to consist of only that which is necessary.

Reflections and current status

The collective has agreed to continue to trial various strategies to reimagine student reporting. There is a high level of enthusiasm for the collective to continue working in this area. Possible directions to move towards include an investigation into building assessment capability, honing teacher judgements and how technology can better support assessment and reporting in schools. At this point it is too early to see the full effects of implementing an ongoing reporting protocol however, there is evidence that demonstrates that parents want to be involved in their child's learning in order to encourage the full flourishing of their child in the school community. There is a strong demand for greater consistency, timeliness, clarity, stakeholder engagement, involvement and uptake and customisation of reporting in schools.

Sharon Armstrong, Learning Consultant, Catholic Education Melbourne

Camberwell Grammar School, Victoria

Context
<i>Camberwell Grammar is a boys-only independent school in Melbourne's eastern suburbs. The school has approximately 1300 students and a highly academic focus.</i>
Motivation
<i>We have always been looking for new ways of reporting and assessing, and have been aware of the shortcomings of any system we have tried. When Professor Geoff Masters' articles first came out we were really excited - this was the first approach that addressed our concerns about acknowledging the progress of all students, while not letting our higher achieving students coast.</i>
Implications
<i>We have grappled with a number of reporting approaches ever since the changes imposed on us by the Schools Assistance Act (Cth) 2004. Any move to reporting student growth – and we are only in the early stages – has impact on every other facet of teaching. Once you highlight where each individual is, and what they need to do next, you need to open up time in the course for them to do this – and have a quiver of resources the teacher can draw on for a range of common problems. This has meant a move from whole class lessons and activities to a more dynamic mix of standard lessons, just-in-time mini lessons, and prac work with a 'help desk'. Our reporting system will also need a complete change, and we are yet to find an off-the-shelf product that will do what we want.</i>
Steps taken
<i>We started with just a couple of classes, and we are still in this phase. The process was hit and miss – we had a few misses early on, but these were great learning experiences for us, reinforcing that children are not computers, and do not always learn in predictable, linear ways – and we needed to be ready for this. We started in two different areas, Science and Languages, simply because they are the teaching areas of the teachers who have been doing the development work. So at this stage our work has been confined to a couple of classes. The model has been to try a system, use it in real life, and adjust with feedback from students as well as reflection from teachers. We're on our third or fourth iteration now and it's looking strong enough to start rolling it out to a wider pilot group.</i>
Challenges
<i>We've found parents and students have been really supportive – they get the concept of assessment and reporting a student's growth really quickly, and can see both the value and the justice of it. Teaching is very much a case of habits, and changing the teaching habits of a lifetime should never be underestimated.</i>
Reflections and current status
<i>We have two options, and both work well – and both need more development and experimentation. Both of our models are in subjects with loads of knowledge and skills, and how these would translate to subjects with a smaller number of skills and a greater emphasis on the sophistication of producing those skills (such as writing an essay) is the next challenge to be taken.</i>
John Tuckfield, Teacher, Camberwell Grammar School

St Helena Secondary College, Victoria

Context
<p><i>St Helena is a co-educational state secondary school located in Eltham North, approximately 28 kilometres from the Melbourne CBD. The school has a population of around 1,625 students and is organised into three mini schools: Junior (Year 7), Middle (Years 8-9) and Senior (Years 10-12).</i></p> <p><i>The college community thrives on its culture of connectedness – a key pre-condition for learning. This sense of belonging extends beyond students and staff to parents, community volunteers and alumni, reflecting the values perpetuated over the school’s rich 35-year history.</i></p>
Motivation
<p><i>St Helena has embarked on a journey over recent years to improve the quality and accuracy of teacher judgements on students’ reports in order to better reflect student achievement with quality common assessments. In 2018 we paused and reflected on our reporting and assessment journey by undertaking a review of our past and current practices.</i></p>
Steps taken
<p><i>We began by acknowledging some key principles. Good reporting strives to accurately reflect key elements of the assessment process. It should also capture a student’s progress, performance, achievement and growth against standardised levels in all age groups. The format must be clear, easy to decipher and should ideally paint a picture of the learning progression from the start to end of a unit in a way that is easily understood by parents and the wider community. These principles guided our recent changes to reporting.</i></p> <p><i>Our teacher professional development sessions at St Helena have focused in recent years on the implementation of regular and very specific formative assessments for diagnostic and intervention purposes. This is now reflected in our reports which include ‘Progress Tasks’ (small, specific and common formative assessment tasks) leading to a summative ‘Assessment Task’ charting the individual learning progression for each student on their report. This is based on the premise that the more targeted the assessment, the more effective any learning interventions can be.</i></p> <p><i>Formative Progress Tasks provide feedback on a student’s degree of advancement in skills and knowledge and are now more distinct from the summative tasks that measure achievement. Our Progress Tasks are common, targeted and in 2019 will include timely written or verbal feedback to students together with a traffic light rating of red, amber or green, to reflect their learning status at many intervals throughout a topic or unit. This is uploaded to our online school learning management system within a two-week period, giving parents a more regular and timely update on their child’s progress throughout each unit, when compared to the more traditional printed semester report. The LMS used by the school allows teachers to complete aspects of the term reports, including Progress Task and Assessment Task comments and grades, during the course of the term. These are then automatically included in the printed term report.</i></p> <p><i>In addition to the Progress and Assessment Tasks on the report, each unit also contains a ‘Unit Overall Result’. This states the Victorian Curriculum Level achieved by the student, reported on a five-point scale. It identifies the learning progression, or growth, shown by the student throughout the unit, as well as indicating whether the student has satisfactorily completed the unit.</i></p> <p><i>In the past, teachers’ written comments in reports may have focused more on behavioural aspects of the learner, with minimal reference to achievement or progress. Similarly, many comments reflected what the student had completed rather than feedback on what they needed to do in the future to attain better results or outcomes. Our written feedback to parents has evolved over</i></p>

recent years in an attempt to provide more meaningful feedback for both parents and students. We now comment on the 'next steps' in the learning progress for the student; in other words, we comment on what the student needs to do next in order to show improvement in their understanding of the concept studied. Learning behaviours such as organisation and effort are captured each term in a 'Work Habits' section that is populated by staff, with students also self-assessing these. They are presented side-by-side in the report in a graphic format to allow parents, students and staff to compare.

Challenges

Increasingly sophisticated pedagogical discussions in recent years, have tackled many contentious questions: how to measure learning growth, how to effectively use pretesting measures to accurately establish a student's starting level, how to establish an individual pathway and what measures should be used to evaluate growth? Measuring growth with pre and post testing – or against standardised objective levels or improvements in the depth of knowledge and application of skills – both have their limitations. We continue to explore best practice in relation to the concept of learning growth in 2019.

To engage parents in the learning journey is somewhat challenging. The vast majority of parents in our learning community read their child's reports but from our review in 2018, it seems clear that many parents want more up-to-date and easy to understand information. Changes made in the 2019 reporting cycles will reflect parental requests, such as the re-inclusion of percentages along with the grade for each Assessment Task, and identified strategies for improvement in the feedback component. There are certain future possibilities to further engage parents in these reporting cycles with provision of written parental feedback and reflection on their child's learning journey.

Reflections and current status

We continue to tread this dynamic pedagogical landscape to provide the most informative and accurate feedback to students and parents in the best possible format. Through innovative thinking and the utilisation of best practice in reporting we are making great strides in the production of quality reports that improve on how we capture and communicate quality assessment and student learning. Like all good schools, we continue our quest to produce the elusive 'perfect report'.

Kate Williams & Natalie Manser, Assistant Principals, St Helena Secondary College

Sunshine College, Victoria

Context

Sunshine College is a Government Secondary College located within the Western Suburbs of Melbourne. Sunshine College is a three-site multi campus college (operating two year 7 – 10 campuses and one year 11 & 12 campus). The school enjoys a multi-cultural environment with more than 50 nationalities and a large EAL population although the school community suffers a significant degree of disadvantage. A substantial proportion of the students enter the school more than 2 years below expected level for both literacy and numeracy.

In 2008, Yvonne Reilly and Jodie Parsons began to trial a different approach to teaching mathematics. Over the years the program has been refined and recognised with a number of education awards.

Our “Maths Futures” program provides opportunities for students to develop conceptual understanding and to have agency in their learning. Students progress through an agreed continuum of learning and teachers team plan and teach students at their point of need. Students work collaboratively on differentiated learning tasks to develop their mathematical understanding, and their ability to think critically and creatively. These tasks are created to provide targeted challenge for all students.

Before the Maths Futures program was established at Sunshine College, mathematics was taught with a traditional, teacher-centred approach in which teachers would re-cap the previous lesson, then introduce the current lesson with worked examples on the board. Students copied the examples into their workbooks and then completed an exercise from the textbook (those on a modified program would perhaps complete only the left hand side of the exercise).

In February 2014, the Grattan Institute published a report, “Turning Around Schools: it can be done”, where Sunshine College was highlighted as one of five schools nationally that had achieved exceptional value added outcomes for students in VCE, Mathematics and Literacy.

In 2015 Sunshine College was again mentioned as a case study in a Grattan Institute Report, titled “Targeted Teaching: How better use of data can improve student learning”. Sunshine College was one of three Australian schools showcased nationally.

In 2015, the College was also recognised with the award for ‘Outstanding School Advancement’ at the Victorian Education Excellence Awards for its work in Mathematics and Numeracy. Sunshine College then went on to win the prestigious 2015 Lindsay Thompson Award for Excellence in Education.

Sunshine College is ranked in the top ten percent of Victorian Secondary Schools in regard to student connectedness to school, their peers and teachers and a complementary document showing us as an exemplar school in this area was tabled in the Victorian parliament.

Motivation

When we changed the way we delivered the curriculum we started to see exceptional knowledge growth in our students. But students and families didn’t always have evidence of this growth because of the restrictive nature of the graphic in our reports which only accommodates results which are at level +/- 2 years.

As required by the Department, we reported to parents on their child’s achievement level as determined by the Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority’s ongoing, adaptive, ‘On Demand Testing’.

Because the scale used to plot students' achievement was narrow (expected level +/- 2 years) many students registered at the lowest end of the scale. For these students the achievement window was too small to demonstrate the student start point, and what their progress had been, meaning that students were not being acknowledged for their learning growth. The same effect was mirrored for students who were above the expected level. The only students who could be celebrated were those who were at or near the expected achievement level for their chronological age.

In addition, the school values learning, growth, well-being, and relationships and the original reporting method needed to be changed to reflect these.

Implications

We recognised that we needed to be able to show parents how their child had progressed in mathematics whilst still acknowledging their child's achievement level with respect to age expectations.

Steps taken

The students at the school were already tracking their personal progress in mathematics on an excel spread sheet which graphed their growth between the adaptive On Demand tests. This graphic includes the line generated by the expected progression levels so that students still understand how their progress compares to an average Victorian student in secondary school.

Challenges

We found we had two main challenges to overcome. The first was the worry for teachers that they could potentially be exposed as not having generated growth in their students, and this might mean they had to have a difficult conversation with parents. The second, related to worrying that for some parents it might be the first time they are accurately informed of their child's ability level, as the previous reporting graphics only showed a maximum of 2 years above or below expected level. And, the older the student was when they were first given the newer, more accurate report, the greater the potential shock might be for parents.

We created a common language around sharing reports with parents based on honesty and growth, and moved completely away from the pass/fail mentality that prevails when talking about mathematics. We supported staff to understand and value the focus and importance of growth over achievement and worked together to establish reporting and parent meeting protocols.

Reflections and current status

Now, eighteen months into the new reporting format, parents are very clear about how their child is progressing in mathematics. It is easy to see when a child is working and improving at a higher than expected rate and it allows this effort to be seen and celebrated. Parents and teachers no longer use the language of passing or failing. It is also powerful for students who are above level but who are coasting and not demonstrating adequate growth. This allows the opportunity for conversations about effort and also about the challenge that the teaching team is providing to ensure all students are working at their maximum capacity and that the school is held to account.

This has been a revolutionary step towards more honest, accurate and growth focussed reporting in mathematics. It has expanded to include literacy reporting and it has started the conversation in other disciplines about how they can also report on growth.

Jodie Parsons & Yvonne Reilly, Teachers, Sunshine College

Appendix C: Teacher survey questions

Context
Location <i>[ACT, NSW, NT, QLD, SA, TAS, VIC, WA, Outside Australia]</i>
Which sector do you work in? <i>[Government, Catholic, Independent]</i>
What level do you mostly teach? <i>[Primary, Secondary]</i>
What subject do you mostly teach? <i>[Generalist (primary), English, Mathematics, Science, Humanities, PE Health, Languages, Arts, Technology, Other – please specify]</i>
Purpose
What is the purpose of reporting? <i>[Open response]</i>
Does your school engage in end-of-semester reporting? [Yes/No] If yes:
The end-of-semester reports I write are useful to parents/carers <i>[SA, A, NS, D, SD]*</i>
The end-of-semester reports I write are useful to my students <i>[SA, A, NS, D, SD]</i>
The time I spend preparing end-of-semester reports is time well-spent <i>[SA, A, NS, D, SD]</i>
When writing end-of-semester reports, I feel confident that I have sufficient assessment information to form an accurate judgment about each student <i>[SA, A, NS, D, SD]</i>
The grade scale used at my school in end-of-semester reports (e.g. A to E or worded equivalent) is an appropriate way to report on students <i>[SA, A, NS, D, SD]</i>
Other comments about end-of-semester reports <i>[Open response]</i>
Do you use some form of continuous reporting? [Yes/No] If yes:
For which of the following do you use continuous reporting? Select all that apply. <i>[Summative assessment tasks, Formative assessment tasks, Homework, Classwork, Work habits, Behaviour, Other – please specify]</i>
How frequently do you use continuous reporting each semester? <i>[2 times, 3-4 times, 5-6 times, more than 6 times]</i>
Continuous reporting is useful to parents/carers <i>[SA, A, NS, D, SD]</i>
Continuous reporting is useful to students <i>[SA, A, NS, D, SD]</i>
When compared to traditional end-of-semester reporting, which of these statements best describes the workload associated with continuous reporting? <i>[A significant decrease in workload, A slight decrease in workload, Much the same workload, A slight increase in workload, A significant increase in workload, Don't know]</i>
Other comments about continuous reporting <i>[Open response]</i>

'Student performance' and 'learning progress'

Consider the following distinction:

Student performance: the grades, scores or other indicators of how well a student has met the demands of a task or series of tasks, either according to a marking criteria, against a year level standard, or in comparison to other students.

Learning progress: the gain, growth or increasing proficiency in skills, knowledge and understanding in an area of learning that a student makes, as measured over time.

Which of the following statements best describes what your reports communicate to parents/carers and students?

[Performance only, Mostly performance, Performance and progress, Mostly progress, Progress only]

If you would like to add any comments to support or explain your answer, please do so in the text box provided *[Open response]*

* SA = Strongly Agree, A = Agree, NS = Not Sure, D = Disagree, SD = Strongly Disagree

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