



Communicating Student Learning Progress

A Review of Student Reporting in Australia

Findings in Brief



Hilary Hollingsworth
Jonathan Heard
Paul Weldon

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The Australian Council *for* Educational Research Ltd
19 Prospect Hill Road
Camberwell VIC 3124
Phone: (03) 9277 5555

ABN 19 004 398 145

www.acer.org

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Communicating Student Learning Progress: Findings in brief

Project background

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.

The full project 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. This publication presents the main findings of the project together with the recommendations. It is anticipated that these 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: Main findings

The future place and role of the traditional semester report appears 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/carer-teacher interviews and conferences, portfolios – such that greater continuity of information is presented.

What has been learned: Context and practice

The context for student reporting in Australia

A review of the current context for student reporting in Australia was undertaken via a scan of the recent national research literature published on the issue, a review of existing federal and state policies guiding current school practice, and interviews with several providers of electronic school and learning management systems whose products schools increasingly use for the purpose of reporting.

Student reporting across Australia in recent years

- ***In the 1990s, Australian schools moved away from employing content-focused syllabi towards outcomes-based curriculum***

Outcomes-based assessment practices shifted from comparatively assessing how well a student had learned defined curriculum content, to progressively and consistently assessing individual changes in the skills and knowledge of the learner.

- ***Successive reviews into reporting in Australia since the 1990s revealed a degree of ongoing dissatisfaction with some aspects of both 'traditional' and outcomes-based student reports***

Sources of dissatisfaction with student reports have included the use of curriculum jargon, a reduced emphasis in some reports on grades, standards and comparative measures of achievement in place of criterion-based assessment, and the use of depersonalised and singularly positive comments without an improvement focus.

- ***In 2004, the Federal Government imposed conditions on state education funding, including conditions on school reporting practices***

Schools were required to produce 'plain language' student reports for parents/carers, and report on each student's progress at least twice a year using an A to E (or equivalent) five-point scale and quartile class rankings.

- ***The need to improve the language in student reports was uncontroversial, however the response to the new federal requirements around A to E grades was mixed***

Parents and carers surveyed at the time appeared satisfied that the new reports – including the use of familiar A to E grades – provided honest, clear and meaningful information about their child's achievement. However many education professionals were concerned that A to E grades over-emphasised performance in tasks, masked progress in learning, and could therefore be demotivating for students.

- ***Debates about student reporting and assessment in the past appear to be based in philosophical differences about the purpose of assessment and reporting, and confusion about the differences between the concepts of student 'performance' and student 'progress'***

In colloquial terms, a measure of a child's performance in assessment tasks using grades is often taken to be an indicator of how the child 'is progressing' at school, even though grades reveal little of what a student can now do that they could not previously. A clearer distinction needs to be made in future between reporting student achievement in terms of performance in tasks and in terms of progress over time.

The current policy landscape

- ***Existing national regulation on school reporting, though having undergone several iterations, is largely unchanged from the Federal Government's requirements outlined in 2004***

The most recent 2013 regulation stipulates schools are to produce reports on student progress and achievement that are received twice yearly by parents/carers, are “readily understandable” and report a child’s achievement against national standards (if possible), relative to their peer group, and against learning standards using an A to E (or equivalent) five-point scale.

- ***All states have produced their own reporting documentation and guidelines that comply with the federal requirements***

With few exceptions, the various state government guidelines define A to E grades in similar ways: based on achievement against the expected curriculum standard for a child, from sophisticated and outstanding to elemental or minimal achievement. Past documentation from Tasmania and Victoria reveals some adaptation of the principle of a five-point scale for the purpose of instead measuring progress against the standards. Victoria appears recently to have further broadened how schools can use five-point scales to measure progress, achievement or indeed any other information they wish to report.

- ***There is greater clarity provided in national legislation and guidelines regarding how schools are to report student achievement than there is about reporting the progress a student makes over time***

Schools are required to maintain three measures of student achievement for the purpose of reporting: performance against learning standards for each subject, comparisons against any existing national standards and comparisons against a student’s peers. How schools are required to report a student’s learning progress, however, is not explicitly defined at either the federal or the state level.

Online tools and continuous reporting

- ***Schools are increasingly adopting electronic learning management or school management systems that enable teachers to continuously report to parents and carers***

At scheduled points throughout the semester, teachers provide updated assessment information to the system online, which is then made visible to students and their parents and carers in an ongoing way. Information can be presented in a number of ways, including the use of interactive graphical displays, curriculum continua, electronic rubrics, and annotated digital portfolios of student work.

- ***Continuous reporting is largely seen by schools as being beneficial***

Continuous reporting provides opportunities for parents and carers to be presented with frequent, detailed, and timely information about their child's learning, linked to evidence from assessment tasks. In secondary schools in particular, this is often achieved by allowing parents and carers online access to view the grades, teacher feedback and annotated student work located in the online system.

- ***Continuous reporting appears to be having an effect on the substance of written semester reports***

Semester reports are starting to take a 'back seat' as teachers are focussed on reporting more regularly via continuous reporting. Teachers are spending more time providing parents and carers with information closer to the point of assessing student learning, reducing the necessity for restating this information at the end of semester. As a result, semester reports in some schools are beginning to appear more like auto-generated academic transcripts without teacher comments, and in a few schools they have ceased to be produced altogether.

- ***Online continuous reporting systems hold much promise as vehicles for communicating student learning progress***

While the mere act of progressively reporting a student's results in assessments is not in itself reporting student learning progress, these new reporting technologies provide functionality that may be useful to improving the way schools represent and communicate the growth students make over time.

The practice of student reporting in Australia

What's actually in student reports?

Student reports from Australian primary and secondary schools were collected from different jurisdictions and systems using informal networks. These were coded and analysed in three ways: according to the presence or absence of specified report elements; according to whether and how the term 'progress' was used; and according to the purpose, function and level of generality or specificity of comments included in the reports. The analyses revealed:

➤ ***The contents of student reports across Australia varied considerably***

Student reports varied in their format and appearance, their use of performance indicators, and also in the scope of information provided about students, student achievement, the curriculum and assessment tasks.

➤ ***Despite this variation, there were similarities within primary school reports and within secondary school reports***

Information in primary school reports provided a more 'mosaic-like' picture of the student as a learner, whereas secondary school reports tended to present a less-holistic and 'snapshot-like' collection of information, focused particularly on the students' performance within specified assessment tasks.

➤ ***The term 'progress' was used in reports often, and in a variety of ways***

The term 'progress' was used in student reports often and in many different ways, including: to map student learning against standards; to indicate a student's performance on tasks over time; to describe attainment of specific outcomes in a learning area; to comment positively about a student; to indicate ways to support student learning; and to link to other forms of communication about student learning. Most of the ways that the term was used in reports were inconsistent with definitions of progress expressed in current policy statements and research articles.

➤ ***There appeared to be confusion in reports between the concepts of performance and progress***

There appeared to be confusion – both colloquially and professionally – between the concepts of performance and progress. Our observation is that performance over time was often (wrongly) taken to mean progress over time because it indicates 'how a child is going at school'. This finding was revealed across the different project components (scans of research scans; reviews of policies and guidelines; examination of online platforms; analyses of report examples; stakeholder perspectives). With some notable exceptions, most student reports largely presented information about a student's achievement and performance, whilst claiming in their preambles to be a communication of progress.

➤ ***Schools and teachers appeared to be grappling with the purpose and form of comments in reports***

Most primary school reports included comments and these were often used to praise and affirm, and to highlight interpersonal skills and dispositional qualities of the student. By contrast, secondary school reports were more likely than primary reports to contain no teacher comments at all, or to only contain improvement-focused comments. Where achievement comments were included, these were more likely in secondary school reports to be made in reference to the assessment task through which the skill or knowledge was demonstrated.

➤ **Comments in reports varied considerably**

Teacher comments varied in terms of generality or specificity, whether they described what a student *did* do or what a student *can* do, whether they were written entirely objectively or with some level of subjectivity, or whether they identified key 'next steps' for future learning or simply offered general study advice for improvement.

➤ **Few comments offered insights about learning growth**

Very few teacher comments offered any insight into the learning growth a student has made: what a student can *now* do that they were previously not able to demonstrate. At best, teachers commented in general terms that a child is 'progressing extremely well' or 'making great gains', but without any substantiation of what that means.

Stakeholder perspectives on student reports

A range of stakeholder perspectives were sought regarding the purpose, format, and effectiveness of approaches used to communicate student learning. These were investigated through an online survey of teachers, focus groups with parents/carers, teachers and students, and a workshop with principals.

Teacher online survey

A voluntary online survey sought teachers' perceptions of the efficacy of both semester reports and continuous reporting, as well as their view on the purpose of the reports they write. The survey revealed that:

➤ **Teachers questioned existing grading scales used in student reports**

Teachers reported mixed feelings about whether the grading scale used at their school in end-of-semester reports is an appropriate way to report on students.

➤ **Teachers considered reporting growth to be more challenging than reporting performance**

While the majority of teachers suggested the purpose of reports was to communicate progress, many raised the concern that there are greater impediments to reporting growth than there are in grading student performance.

➤ **Teachers recognised benefits associated with continuous reporting**

Though continuous reporting adds somewhat to the workload of teachers, they also recognise significant benefits to continuous reporting for both student and parents/carers as compared to semester reporting.

Focus groups with parents/carers, students and teachers

Parent/carer, student and teacher focus groups produced rich and ranging discussions about student reporting. While opinions and perspectives sometimes varied, some major areas of agreement emerged, including:

- ***There is an awareness of a lack of information in reports that allow parents and carers to track individual student progress over time***

Reference to the possibility for 'growth charts' or other visual representations of learning progress, as well as the inadequacy of grades in capturing the growth a student makes in his or her learning, were common among stakeholders.

- ***There is a degree of doubt about the consistency or reliability of how grading systems are used within or across schools, states and systems to measure student achievement***

While the use of grades was not in itself widely regarded as an issue, some doubt about how standardised these grades really were, and thus how consistently they were being applied to students across different classes, schools and systems, was commonly felt.

- ***There are problems with the timing and frequency of written semester-based reports and a preference for more ongoing forms of communication***

Parents and carers whose children attended schools that did not use some form of electronic continuous reporting expressed a desire for more frequent feedback on their child's learning; teachers similarly expressed a preference for continuous reporting to inform parents and carers earlier of areas of concern.

- ***There is an acknowledgement of the importance of honest and personalised teacher comments focussed on individual student achievement and improvement.***

Parents/carers and students appear to be very sensitive to teachers' use of generic comments drawn from a comment data bank, and descriptions of a child's achievement that merely repeat curriculum outcomes. A perception that teachers avoid saying 'hard truths' in their comments is also seen as detracting from their usefulness. All stakeholders expressed a preference for comments that reveal what a student's relative strengths have been. Students in particular were emphatic about wanting their teachers' comments to explain how they could improve.

- ***There is a lack of meaningful communication in parent/carer-student-teacher interviews and conferences***

Parents and carers particularly felt that parent/carer-student-teacher interviews and conferences needed to have a stronger relationship to the content of reports, to provide parents an opportunity to seek explanation and clarification, and ask how they can assist their child to improve. The format and time limitations of these conferences were also seen as impediments to meaningful, evidence-based discussion about student learning.

Principal workshop

Given the amount of time and effort that is expended by teachers and school leaders to prepare and disseminate student reports each year, a question of considerable interest is what are the estimated financial and opportunity 'costs' associated with reporting (including time, effort and diversion from other professional work associated with teaching)? During a project workshop, a group of primary principals from different jurisdictions and systems prepared 'back-of-the-envelope' estimates, identifying a range of tasks associated with their reporting practices and providing estimated times for these. Findings related to this task were:

➤ ***Principals questioned whether the considerable time devoted to the student reporting process is warranted***

Several principals expressed surprise and concern regarding the large amount of time they identified is dedicated to the reporting process, raising concern about the loss of instructional time that is a necessary by-product of the reporting process, and questioning whether current reporting practices are sufficiently effective to warrant the time allocated to them.

➤ ***Principals found their estimated financial outlays for student reports to be confronting***

Several principals noted that their estimated financial outlay associated with reporting was higher than they had anticipated. One principal was asked to prepare a detailed account of the costs of the reporting approach used at his school in 2019 (to gain a more precise understanding of the time and financial costs of preparing current-style reports) indicated a total financial cost equivalent to an additional full-time teaching salary.

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 the report. 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. These 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.

Recommendations in brief

The *Communicating Student Learning Progress* 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. Following are recommendations for communicating student learning and recommendations for further research prompted by the investigation. These recommendations are elaborated further in the full project report.

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.

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 relation to 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.

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