



Like it or not My School does give us data on schools

DAVID LOADER HOPES EVERYONE IS HAVING AS MUCH FUN AS HE IS WITH THE MY SCHOOL WEBSITE.

The revamped version of My School was launched in early March and the newspapers had a field day. An article in the *Saturday Age* for 5 March compared results from the National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) in a small public school in a low socioeconomic area, Footscray, with an ‘elite’ school, Geelong Grammar, with the headline, ‘Doing well in Footscray doesn’t cost \$14m.’

The article looked at the financial statements submitted by each school and noted that at Footscray the cost of educating a child is \$8,503 per student while at Geelong Grammar the cost is a little higher at \$20,452. There was a cartoon on the same page, with a teacher asking a student at Footscray, ‘Aren’t you pleased we’re doing better than Geelong Grammar?’ The student replies, ‘I’d still like to have their swimming pool, footy ground, gymnasium, landscape garden and cafeteria.’

Some would argue context is important. The article on Footscray and Geelong appeared on the front page, under an article on Melbourne’s sex trade.

I believe that the My School website will feed prejudice and politics. It may even lead to some changes in funding. Not all the comparisons will be valid and it will focus on only a part of what each school is doing. The media coverage may do something else. In the case of the article in the *Age*, it will increase enrolments at Geelong Grammar. After all, any publicity is good publicity, particularly when it infers that you are at the top of the pile. Other so-called elite schools could feel hard done by with no publicity as they appear to need an even larger income per student than Geelong; I won’t mention names!

My interest in the website was not just for fun, though; it was also for serious research. I was interested in the idea of economies of scale in independent schooling. My interest was to investigate whether, if a school grows in size, parents can expect a reduction in fees because the unit cost of educating a child decreases with that growth.

My research was not about the quality of the education, only the cost. I used as my measure the student-to-teacher ratio. Such a ratio allows me to examine the relative costs of schools, since the cost of teachers salaries and their on-costs amounts to about 60 per cent of a school’s recurrent costs in an average school. My assumption was that larger schools would have more students for each teacher as their classes would be full, without the many underpopulated classes you find when there’s a smaller Year 11 and 12 cohort.

I was surprised by the result. I found that school size didn’t define the cost of educating a child. For example, I examined schools with similar costs for educating a child and with a similar student-to-teacher ratio. For the exercise, I used a ratio of 10 students for every teacher. I found schools of every size with that ratio. It appears the ratio doesn’t necessarily change as schools get larger.

From this research into My School, there were some generalisations I could make. Primary schools are cheaper than Kindergarten to Year 12 schools; one primary school had 17.16 students for each teacher. Senior years are expensive, particularly if you offer two systems such as the International Baccalaureate alongside the state certificate. Apparently even in larger schools, the number of smaller classes with,

say, fewer than 10 students are many and expensive in all sizes of school. Additional services, like taking a year away from the main campus, such as at Geelong’s Timber-top, or providing additional resources for students and parents such as counselling or providing a broad co-curricular program in sport, drama and music, increase the cost dramatically.

My purpose in writing this month for *Teacher*, though, as opposed to my purpose in the research, was not to explore an important and relevant topic such as economies of scale. Rather, I wanted to share the fun that I’ve had exploring the website and to encourage others to use this resource to explore data on schools that have hitherto been inaccessible. We have a wonderful new resource, offering potential for parents to assess more widely their child’s school. And there are opportunities for researchers. I hope researchers somewhere will look to see if there is a correlation between NAPLAN results and state certificate scores, for example. There is one more group that could benefit: members of school boards. Now they can assess their school and its competitors directly.

I commend My School to you. Enjoy it, but remember, as the *Age* cartoon reminds us, My School doesn’t tell everything about a school. **T**

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