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1. INTRODUCTION

This advice is to help you and your school community with the introduction of the *My School* website which will be launched on 28 January 2010.

This website is an integral part of the Federal government’s education agenda to improve overall student and school performance and its objective to enhance the availability of information to parents and the wider community about school performance.

This advice recommends a strategic communication approach and includes two checklists of actions to assist you as you see fit.

2. CONTEXT

The *My School* website – [www.myschool.edu.au](http://www.myschool.edu.au) – will ‘go live’ on 28 January and will profile each Australian school by including information on the name, location, sector and a range of school performance data (e.g. student attendance rate, Year 12 results). In particular, it will provide NAPLAN results and senior secondary outcomes for each school. The website will enable comparisons of student performance with ‘statistically similar’ schools across the country and schools in your local area.

Other data such as income sources will be added to the website in the near future.

There has been a range of public reactions, but mainly negative, from education commentators and leaders. The main concerns are the timing of *My School*’s introduction and the preparedness of schools to respond, fears about publication of league tables and the way in which media and special interest groups might selectively use, interpret or present information that appears on the site. Underpinning much of the criticism is a fundamental question about the purpose of schooling and the questioning of the use of the website to drive improvement of the education of students.

Some parent organisations have expressed reservations about the website; however individual parents more recently have expressed support for the website; **hence the reaction of parents could vary within your school community.**
Detailed background information on the structure and content of the website is available on the *My School* website. In addition ACARA has distributed information packages to schools, via AISSA. Fact sheets, frequently asked questions and answers guidelines and a facility to email questions are also available on the ACARA website. A substantial communication strategy, including television advertisements, an overall media plan and a DVD have been developed by ACARA and the Federal government to support the launch of the website and to provide background information to schools, parents and the wider community.

An ACARA helpline (1300 895 563) has also been established.

### 3. COMMUNICATION STRATEGY

#### 3.1 Background

While interest in school performance and accountability has been piqued, most parents and students – the consumers of education services – do not have a comprehensive understanding of *My School* or perhaps as yet the motivation to look at it. However the interest and understanding is likely to heighten as the media campaign is implemented.

The prevailing environment for *My School* is one of minimal knowledge across the community, mixed with strong (sometimes hostile) objections to the website. On the other hand there are also some prominent individuals and groups that have supported the purpose of the website. The media is monitoring the development of the website and there have been frequent articles and radio talk-back discussions leading up to its launch.

The AISSA acknowledges that there is a range of views amongst the membership with regard to the purpose of the website. However the website is to be launched and over time will be more comprehensive in the range of information and data available on each school. It is also likely parents, the media, politicians and the wider community will quickly become more interested in the website and use it for a range of purposes.

The AISSA has sought advice from consultants involved in media monitoring and public relations to provide the suggestions presented below.

Within this context there are opportunities for Independent schools to be proactive and to play to their strengths and introduce *My School* on their home ground – to take the initiative with their ‘consumers’ ahead of others; to define *My School* with their school community on their terms and within their established framework of accountability and reporting, especially to parents and governments.
Take the initiative to define *My School* with your school community on your terms and within the established wider framework of your accountability and reporting and school improvement strategies. Adopt a philosophy of ‘accountability plus’, within which *My School* is but one communication tool within a more comprehensive communication strategy.

The tone of communication should be positive and should invite engagement and discussion with parents and the rest of the school community.

Your school should be first to engage your school community to introduce *My School*. This is not necessarily an endorsement of *My School* but recognition that the school leadership is proactive and committed to accountability.

A positive attitude will convey that your school is forward-thinking, embraces accountability and is committed to the continual improvement of education standards. There is nothing yet about your school on *My School* that is not already available via the school website and other sources (e.g. newsletters). The major differences are access to data and school profiles on a single website for all schools and the clustering of schools based on the Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage (ICSEA).

Highlight that *My School* is one mechanism of reporting and is focussed predominantly on NAPLAN results as a measure of school performance which are important but only one indicator of student and school performance.

The reporting of senior secondary outcomes will also be significant for secondary schools.

Your school’s excellence in pastoral care, diverse curriculum, extra-curriculum activities, explicit emphasis on values and beliefs and community involvement are also vital to the education experience and should be promoted alongside NAPLAN results. Hence the importance of linking the *My School* website to other elements of the school’s communication and promotion strategy (e.g. school website).

*My School* could also be characterised as a prompt to encourage parents to approach the school to discuss any concerns and encourage would-be parents to contact the school for further information. This, too, ensures that they direct their concerns to you and your school and don’t complain to others.

In terms of timing of the launch of the above website, the start of the school year is a good time to engage and be proactive with your school community. It is a time when many people visit the school and pay attention to what the school is saying with an open mind.
4. ENGAGING INTERNAL AUDIENCES: TEACHERS, OTHER STAFF AND SCHOOL BOARDS

4.1 Teachers

At the commencement of the school year, you could request all teachers and other appropriate staff to visit www.myschool.edu.au and read its introductory information. The aim is to be familiar with it, to understand it and to identify any questions or concerns.

You might want to organise a staff briefing session before the website goes live. This is an opportunity for you to brief teachers/staff on how the school proposes to respond to the site and any enquiries, interest and concern it generates. It is also an opportunity for staff to raise and discuss their concerns and to assist you in finalising and confirming your approach.

Take responsibility for or appoint a staff member to:

- Ensure the text about your school on the My School website is accurate and stays up to date;
- Ensure the link from the My School site works and links to the home page or correct page on your school’s own website are established;
- Ensure that your school website is updated, accurate and complements/expands upon the information on My School;
- Ensure all relevant staff (heads, class teachers, enrolment and reception staff) are equipped to respond to enquiries from parents, potential parents and students.

4.2 School Boards

Given the strategic governance role of school boards it is important that they are briefed about the website and that they consider how it might impact on the future directions of the school and its reputation within the community.

The more immediate task is to brief them about the implications of the data available on the My School website and how that may be handled in communication with parents, staff and the wider community.

4.3 Students
Given that some students at particular year levels are likely to take an interest in My School, it may be useful to as soon as possible in the school year, brief them about the site, its purpose and the context that it occupies within your school. You may wish to encourage them to visit the site and with staff assistance, understand and critically analyse it.

They should be reassured that individual student performance will not appear and that it is one of many mechanisms to help inform parents and assist potential parents in choosing and assessing the school that best suits their child. Students may be encouraged to ask questions and discuss the site with their parents. They, in turn, could encourage their parents to contact the school if they require further information.

4.4 Parents

At the start of school year, you might write to all parents to introduce My School on your terms. Without endorsing or commending it, your letter could support the underpinning principles of My School and explain why you support those principles, related to the school’s commitment to accountability and the improvement in the quality of education.

ACARA has prepared a brochure for parents which will be available on the My School website (My School-Information for Parents).

You may wish to consider conducting meetings with parents to explain the structure and content of the website and to assist them in understanding the data provided on student and school performance.

It is also important to note where parents can find more detailed and comprehensive information about your school and its achievements, what it stands for and how they can judge the quality of the services of your schools and its educational outcomes.

Parents that visit My School and the school website should be encouraged to speak to you or a designated staff member should they have any questions.

Explain to parents that the ultimate accountability tool is, of course, direct dialogue between you and them. Direct dialogue enables you to listen to parents and the school community and to respond to their particular and necessarily unique accountability requirements.
5. ENGAGING EXTERNAL AUDIENCES

5.1 Public / Prospective Parents

Prospective parents may contact you to discuss what they have seen on My School. As with current parents, the school’s response should be positive and also encourage them to visit ‘the ultimate sources’; you or other staff, your school and its website.

5.2 Media

The AISSA will take immediate responsibility for conveying the sector’s overall commitment to accountability and to explain where My School fits in informing parents and school communities. The AISSA may issue a media statement before 28 January to explain that:

- My School is one more signpost on the road to accountability – it is not the destination or the answer to accountability;
- It augments each Independent school’s website and their reporting to parents and governments;
- It is one of many starting points for parents to seek information and compare;
- The site is a ‘work in progress’ and there inevitably will be room for improvement;
- AISSA will monitor the site to suggest improvements that make My School more comprehensive and reliable;
- AISSA and Independent schools do not support simplistic ‘league tables’ but have always supported excellence, transparency and accountability;
- It is important that parents are provided with the background information and assisted to understand the My School website.

Advice is sought from member schools on these key messages.

6. MEDIA ENQUIRIES

The launch of My School by the Deputy Prime Minister will generate significant media interest and journalists are likely to approach politicians, prominent community leaders, business leaders, parents and school authorities.

It is also very likely they will contact individual schools. Principals will be questioned why their school is not doing as well as schools in their statistically similar group or why they are doing better. Your response in all situations should be positive, focused
on the future and your school. It is recommended you make no reference to any other school as this will promote the league table approach to the debate. Some key elements of your response to journalists might include:

- Acknowledgement that the My School is but one accountability avenue for schools in addition to their already detailed reporting to parents and to governments;
- Recognition that NAPLAN results are important but emphasise the importance of other achievements, attributes and plans for the future;
- Reaffirmation that all schools should use My School to identify their strengths and where there is room for improvement. The website should be used to improve standards, not criticise and compete;
- The need to educate parents and the community about the use of the website.

6.1 Key Messages

It is recommended your messages be consistent, positive, simple and unequivocal:

- Our school supports any initiative that assists and encourages accountability in schools and look forward to the development of My School over time;
- This is an excellent opportunity for all schools to confirm their strengths and improve on any areas where they could be stronger (big doubt about this one);
- Our school already uses data to inform us about school and student performance. This information is used to plan professional development and provide support to students in need;
- My School is an initial resource for parents but not the sole destination for accountability;
- Our school welcomes input from parents and we encourage parents to come and discover more about our school – our community, our achievements, our aspirations and their children

NAPLAN is, of course, just one measure of student and school achievement. When preparing messages and information for parents and others, be mindful of other factors that influence school choice and, therefore, drive school performance – quality teachers, teachers' depth of knowledge and experience, child security and safety, the school environment, values and beliefs, individual responsiveness, appropriate class size, good facilities and resources, discipline, co-curricular programs, sport, leadership, recreation and the like.

Please contact AISSA to advise of developments, parent responses or media interest and to seek assistance and advice.
7. COMMUNICATION CHECKLIST

☑ Adopt an ‘accountability plus’ and on-going improvement approach

☑ If you have not already, integrate school performance reporting in all of your communication materials and strategies. Include the *My School* website. Publish your annual performance reports (as required by your Commonwealth funding agreement), NAPLAN results and comparative analyses to provide context to the *My School* website. In the future don’t let *My School* reach your audiences ahead of your communication to parents

☑ Accept that *My School* is but one of a series of accountability mechanisms and is not comprehensive. Remember that ultimate accountability involves direct dialogue between a school and its parents

☑ Engage your school community and all of your audiences before they engage you

☑ Define *My School* on your terms and the context that it occupies in your school’s accountability regime

☑ Be familiar with the explanatory material on the *My School* website’ especially that directed to parents

☑ Brief teachers, staff and the school board and seek feedback – both before the *My School* website goes live and ongoing throughout the year as it is updated and changes.

☑ Make sure that all ‘front office’ staff and teachers who are in contact with parents are well-briefed to deal with inquiries and comments

☑ Brief students as appropriate, as soon as is possible in the school year

☑ Write to parents to introduce them to *My School* and where it fits in your school’s suite of accountability and reporting requirements. Remember that all letters and newsletters are in the public domain and could, for example, be discussed in the media. You may wish to consider holding briefing meetings for parents

☑ Never comment on other schools. Turn comparisons between schools to discussion of how your school measures success, takes pride in its performance and strives for constant improvement and personal best among all students
Take a positive approach to any media inquiries – show that you are committed to accountability and constant improvement and use a range of reporting and comparative tools, of which My School is just one.

Never make excuses; always explain.

Review your school media protocol and remind staff in advance of likely media interest.

8. MY SCHOOL MAINTENANCE CHECKLIST

One person – you or a member of staff – should be responsible for monitoring My School.

Register with My School for automatic notification of updates.

Monitor My School with a view to what parents and others are accessing.

Check all information about your school on My School and notify ACARA of any incorrect or incomplete information.

Check the link between My School and your school website. Make sure that it directs traffic to where you want it and make sure that your accountability and reporting information is accurate, easily found, relevant and easily understood.

Ensure the school website provides context to the My School data.

As soon as My School goes live, analyse any comparisons between your school and others, including 'statistically similar' and local schools Independent schools and like or nearby State schools, especially in regional areas. Confirm your approach and your messages in the event of contact by parents, others in the school community and media.

Check similar and competitor school websites and conduct web searches (Google, for example) to see what others are saying.

Seek advice from AISSA if you have any concerns about the implications of the website on your school community.
9. AISSA CONTACTS

Garry Le Duff (08 8179 1402)
Dr Bronwyn Donaghey (08 8179 1418)