



My School[®] A guide for parents



What is My School?

My School is an Australian Government-sponsored website that gives information about nearly 10,000 schools – Independent, Catholic and Government – across Australia.

There has been a lot of debate about whether it is a fair way to present information about schools, and whether it is useful to parents. While it adds to parents' information about schools, it is a narrow way to assess a school's performance.

Special care is needed when looking at a school's NAPLAN results on *My School* and trying to judge how good the school is, or trying to compare it with other schools.

What Information is on My School?

1. **Basic facts about each school:** including a brief statement about the school, whether it is Independent, Catholic or Government; primary or secondary or both; enrolments; number of teachers and other staff; attendance rate; proportion of Indigenous students; gender mix among students.
2. **The school's rating for social/educational advantage:** how it scores for a range of 14 factors that are known to affect student performance, including household income, education level of parents, whether the parents have jobs, the type of jobs they have, internet access, and geographic remoteness.
3. **The school's finances:** its annual recurrent income (for costs such as salaries) and the amount received annually in capital income (for costs such as buildings and equipment).
4. **The school's test results:** how the students performed, on average, in national tests of reading, writing, spelling, grammar and punctuation, and numeracy at years 3, 5, 7 and 9.
5. **A comparison of the school's test results:** how the school's average results in each of those subjects compared with the results of other schools.
6. **Student gain:** how the same students at the same school performed as a group in two successive NAPLAN tests (for example, Years 3 and 5). It also shows how the gain by students in one school compare with the gain by students in schools serving communities of similar socio-economic background, as well as gains by students with the same starting scores, and all schools in Australia.
7. **Vocational Education and Training (VET):** for secondary schools, the VET courses offered and the enrolments in them. There is a drop-down menu offering to show the proportion of completed VET qualifications, but not all schools have data on this.
8. **Students' destinations:** for secondary schools, the proportion of students who went on to university or training or into the workforce.

The website also has some technical explanations about the tests and the social/educational advantage index.

How Can Parents Use This Information?

The first thing to remember is that this is about the performance of the school, not of individual students. Say you want to see how your child's school compares on its test results with other schools. Go to the website (www.myschool.edu.au) and type your school's name in the search window.

This brings up a page showing a statement by the school about itself, all the basic facts, and a table of NAPLAN results.

The website uses the word "domain" for the different tests, such as reading and writing. It gives results for 2008 through to 2012.



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Below is a sample of what the NAPLAN results for 2012 look like on the website for a primary school we will call School X.

“SIM” compares the school’s average score with the average for schools with a similar social/educational advantage rating. In plain language, this means other schools with students from backgrounds similar to those of the students in School X.



2008	2009	2010	2011	2012						
Colour Scheme <div>Red & Green</div> <div>Submit</div> <div>Alternate view: Results in graphs</div>										
	Reading		Persuasive Writing		Spelling	Grammar and Punctuation		Numeracy		
Year 3	442 420 - 464		424 406 - 442		422 402 - 442		430 407 - 453		397 379 - 415	
	SIM 427 418 - 436	ALL 420	SIM 418 410 - 427	ALL 416	SIM 416 407 - 425	ALL 414	SIM 430 420 - 439	ALL 424	SIM 401 393 - 409	ALL 396
Year 5	487 469 - 505		459 442 - 476		489 473 - 505		487 468 - 506		495 480 - 510	
	SIM 499 490 - 508	ALL 494	SIM 478 470 - 486	ALL 477	SIM 494 486 - 502	ALL 495	SIM 496 487 - 505	ALL 491	SIM 492 484 - 500	ALL 489

“ALL” compares School X’s average score with the average for all Australian schools. This is less useful because so much of the difference between schools is accounted for by social factors. The green highlights show where School X is doing better than the average of similar schools, and the red highlights indicate where it is doing worse.

What information can you draw from these numbers? Let’s focus on the “SIM” scores because they give a fairer and more sensible comparison than “ALL”. The differences between School X’s average scores and those of its “similar” schools for 2012 are set out here:

YEAR 3

Domain	Difference with Similar Schools
2012	
Reading	+15
Persuasive writing	+6
Spelling	+6
Grammar & punctuation	0
Numeracy	-4

In the world of statistics these are very subtle differences, and it is important to remember that some differences may not matter. For this reason, the results are graded so that the ones that might matter are identified as being “substantially” above or below the scores for similar schools. On these scores, School X seems to be doing better on language tests than similar schools, but not quite as well on the numeracy tests.

Quite a different pattern emerges for Year 5 students on all domains except numeracy.

YEAR 5

Domain	Difference with Similar Schools
2012	
Reading	-12
Persuasive writing	-19
Spelling	-5
Grammar & punctuation	-9
Numeracy	+3

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You can also look at “student gain”: how did the same students at the same school go in two successive NAPLAN tests (Year 3 and Year 5)?

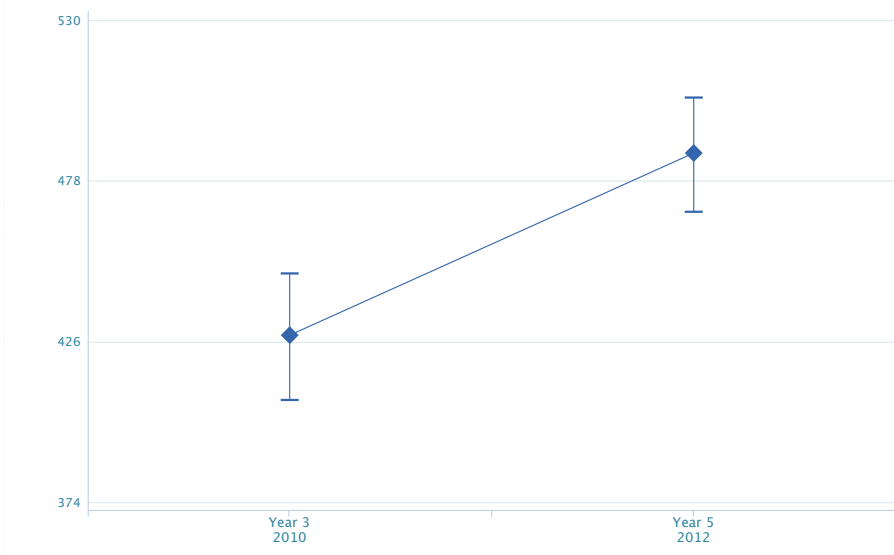


Domain: Year level range: Calendar year range: Achievement type: Results: ☐ Bands ☒ Score

Categories: ☒ Selected School ☐ Schools with similar students ☐ Students with the same starting scores ☐ All schools

Submit

Percentage of students in this school with NAPLAN results at two year levels: 83%



School X shows this for Reading and Numeracy. It seems to be a school with a stable enrolment because 83% per cent of students did NAPLAN there in both Year 3 and Year 5. This also tells us that the data are based on a big proportion of the students in that cohort.

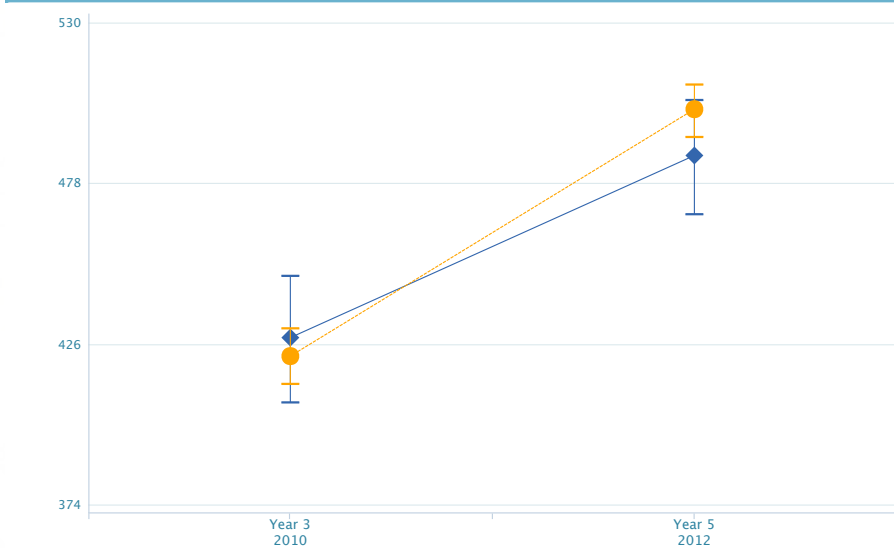
If you just look at the change in reading results for the students at School X, you see what you'd expect to see: their reading level has gone up. They've had two more years of schooling, so you'd hope so.

Domain: Year level range: Calendar year range: Achievement type: Results: ☐ Bands ☒ Score

Categories: ☒ Selected School ☒ Schools with similar students ☐ Students with the same starting scores ☐ All schools

Submit

Percentage of students in this school with NAPLAN results at two year levels: 83%

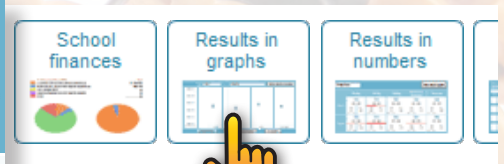
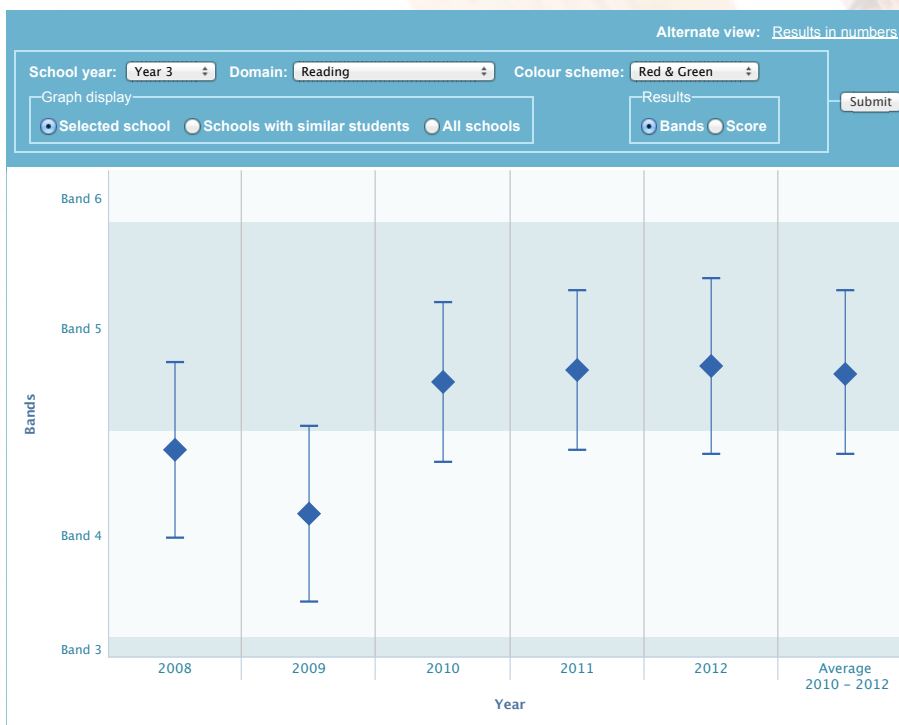


But if you then compare the change at School X with the change at “similar” schools, you would see that the students in School X haven't improved as much as those at similar schools, on average.

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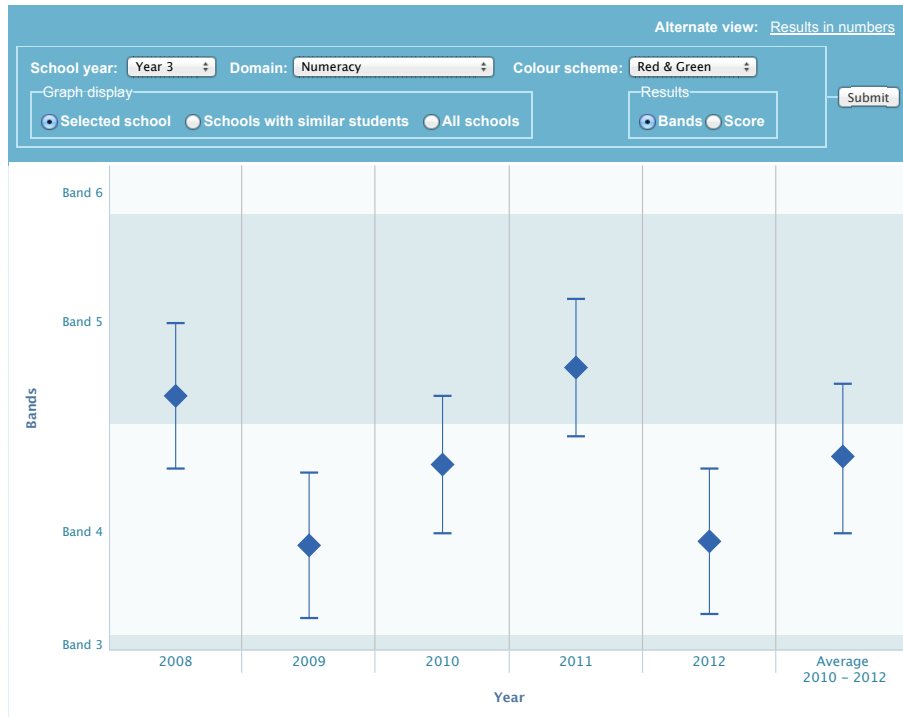
However, if you then do the same comparison with numeracy, you see that the students in School X are doing slightly better than the average of students at “similar” schools – and have done all along.



You can also look at School X's performance for each year since 2008 in each of the domains and see what the trends are.

If you look at Year 3 Reading, you see that it dipped in 2009 but then rose in 2010 and has maintained that improvement.

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If you look at Year 3 Numeracy, you see a steady improvement between 2009 and 2011 but then a decline in 2012.

What Can We Make of This?

First, most of these are small movements. We are talking about movements of fewer than 20 points on a scale where the average is 500, and where two-thirds of schools fall between 400 and 600. So don't attach more importance to them than they deserve.

Second, they show student performance on a very narrow base. Schools teach many things other than the "three Rs". For many parents there are plenty of more important reasons for choosing a school, including its breadth of curriculum, its culture, its religious affiliation and above all, its suitability for their child.

Third, all measurement contains measurement error. These tests have been designed and administered by competent people, but you can't eliminate measurement error because perfect precision in this field is not possible.

Fourth, there are factors that can't be measured. Things change in ways the tests can't pick up: a very experienced teacher retires and is replaced by an inexperienced one; a new principal comes in and changes the school's curriculum priorities; you get a very bright group of students one year and an ordinary group the next.

Fifth, this is a snapshot of student performance: how they went on one test on one day.

So be careful about attaching too much importance to these numbers alone. They give good information, but it is only a small part of the picture.

The *My School* website takes pains to point this out.

You certainly can't say, on the basis of these figures, that School X is better for my child than School Y.

As you can see, extracting just what the numbers really say about a school is time-consuming, and the picture is often messy: a school does better on some things than others, and this can change from year to year.

Above all, resist the "league table" idea. You just can't rank schools from 1 to 10,000 based on this kind of information. There are too many factors to take into account, and most of them are not reflected in the figures.



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What use can we make of the figures?

If your child is already at a school and you want to ask the school about what it is doing in the areas of the “three Rs”, use the figures by all means as a starting point for discussion, but in doing so bear in mind their limitations.

Say you had a child at our School X. There seems to be a bit of a loss of momentum between Years 3 and 5, especially in Writing, although not in Numeracy, where there seems to be a pick-up. It provides a starting point for a conversation with your child’s teacher or the principal about what might be going on.

If you are choosing a school, you can go to the website and pull together all these numbers for each of the schools you are choosing from. You will probably find the variations to be quite small if the schools are in the same neighbourhood. If the variations are large -- say, more than 50 points -- you are probably on to an important difference between the schools concerned.

Whatever you get from doing this, though, there is no substitute for visiting the school, talking to the principal, observing the students, and talking to other parents.

It is astonishing how much you can learn about a school’s atmosphere and “feel” by sitting in the foyer for five minutes: how the staff treat you; how they speak to one another and to the students; the appearance and demeanour of the students; what the school thinks is important enough to display on the walls.

So to get the best out of My School:

- keep a sense of proportion about the importance of the figures
- use them to start a discussion with the school, and
- treat them as only a part of the picture.



What parents think is important in choosing a school

In a survey of parents by the Australian Parents Council in 2008, it was clear what factors parents regarded as important in choosing a school. For choosing a primary school, there were five first-order factors:

- number of pupils per teacher
- quality of the school’s facilities and resources
- average size of classes
- support for struggling or gifted students
- approach to discipline.

For choosing a secondary school, parents identified a quite similar cluster of five factors of equal top importance:

- pupils per teacher
- facilities and resources
- support for struggling or gifted students
- approach to discipline
- complaints/issues handling.

Factors considered by parents to be of highest importance were associated with the happiness of students, the general direction of the school, the quality of relationships between staff and students, the quality of the teaching staff and behaviour management. These were, in a sense, all people-related factors rather than achievement-related, as the table below shows.

How happy the students seem to be	8.7
Whether the school is basically heading in the right direction	8.6
The kind of people the students generally turn out to be	8.5
How well the principal and teachers seem to know the students	8.5
The academic qualifications of teaching staff	8.5
Behaviour management strategies	8.5
Participation of teaching staff in professional development	8.4
The atmosphere or “feel” of the school	8.4
Students’ results in public tests or exams	8.4
What you hear about the school from other people	8.0
Students’ sporting or artistic achievements	7.4
How the school expresses its faith (if a faith-based school)	7.3