

Schools rated on students' progress

- Justine Ferrari, Education writer
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IN an Australian first, parents will be able to see how well their school is teaching their child, with the Victorian government introducing school report cards that measure the improvement students make.

The new system for assessing school effectiveness, which starts this month, adjusts academic results for the different student characteristics in the school and then assesses whether the school is performing above or below expectations.

Schools will also be measured on how well they engage students and the proportion entering tertiary study.

The assessment method developed by Melbourne University places Victoria at the forefront in the world of measuring the effectiveness of schools. It gives a model for other Australian states and territories that avoids contentious league tables ranking schools based on test scores.

Announcing the Victorian initiative, Education Minister Bronwyn Pike said the reports were a measure of improvement, "a productivity measure . . . looking at the value a school is adding to a child's education".

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"If you just look at raw results from a school, say national literacy and numeracy test results or VCE (Year 12) results or how many kids are retained at school, you only get half the picture," she said.

The reports will be available for all government schools in Victoria at the end of the month, with the government expecting the Catholic and independent schools to follow suit.

The reports use an assessment method developed by Melbourne University education professor Stephen Lamb, which adjusts results for variables in student and school characteristics, placing all schools on a level playing field and enabling the improvement in students to be measured.

"The approach we are using is new, it's a huge leap forward," Professor Lamb said. "No other system in Australia does this type of comparison.

"We're all moving towards it but Victoria is one of the few systems in the world to go this far. We are ahead of the game."

The move has been welcomed by government school principals, with the head of the Victorian Principals Association, Gabrielle Leigh, saying it was a model they hoped would be adopted in other states to report on the value a school added rather than straight test scores.

"It gives us really detailed information so we can break down groups as to how kids are performing and work with those schools to get the best possible results. It will assist our principals to help students in their school and provide the tools to do it," she said.

Principal Rhonda Knight, at Coburn Primary School in Melbourne's western suburbs, said her school was used to working with data and she did not expect the report would tell her anything she did not know about the school's performance.

"It's an extra piece of information our parents can access. Schools now are accountable and have to look at our data, and all have to improve, so it's another avenue," she said.

But the independent school sector is more wary, with Association of Independent Schools of Victoria chief executive Michelle Green saying it was happy to discuss models for measuring school improvement but had concerns this model was not the most rigorous.

The Victorian School Performance Summaries assess schools on three measures: student learning including test scores and school results; student engagement and wellbeing; and student pathways and transitions for high school.

A school comparison grade is then awarded whether the school, after taking into account its students, is performing higher than, lower than or broadly similar to other schools.

The method controls for variables such as the socio-economic status of students, whether they live in rural or urban areas, the location of the school, the proportion of indigenous students, the proportion of those with disabilities and from non-English speaking backgrounds.

Ms Pike said some schools may get lower results in literacy and numeracy tests but the contribution the school had made through its teaching strategies may be enormous, such as in the case of refugee children who were unable to speak English when they started school.

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- **Julie of Melbourne** Posted at 7:42 AM November 06, 2009

The model controls for all sorts of external things, but does it control for the effort put in by students? Ultimately, they're the ones being measured, so at best this is only an indirect measurement of teaching.

- **s.dimech** Posted at 2:22 AM November 06, 2009

Congratulations All! Really useful increase in vigour re. examining school effectiveness (and tool for the giving of due credit). Which then leads on to even more important questions: for example, why exactly was the government school my son attended from Year 9 able to work with him to move from critical mental illness to wellness/award level academic and social achievements?

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