Country case study prepared for the 2017/8 Global Education Monitoring Report

Accountability in education: Meeting our commitments

Australia Country Case Study

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3. Defining Accountability: accountability in local language

In Australia, reforms which aim to increase accountability in education are associated with language around transparency, school autonomy, data and evidence-driven reform, top-down and bottom-up accountability. The concept of accountability in education—and how this is understood and constituted—has fundamentally shifted within Australian policy-making since the 1970s. In earlier policy reform, such as the 1973 Karmel Report, accountability in education is framed through the notion of equity and quality schooling for the public (see, Australian Government 1973). Herein, the role of education is regarded as a public, civic good. From the 1990s onwards, top-down and bottom-up modes of accountability positions schools and teachers as accountable and liable to the market, framed through inputs, outputs and quality assurance processes (e.g. Australian Government Productivity Commission 2016, Australian Government 2015b). Within contemporary policy reforms in Australia, the role of education is more so regarded through frames of global economic competitiveness and productivity.

The report will first outline a brief country profile, as relevant to schooling in Australia; an explanation surrounding the education system, including decentralization of schools, and education challenges. The report will discuss actors within education, and how this relates to accountability, including an explanation around top-down and bottom-up accountability; followed by a case study regarding school funding and penalty payments. Finally, the report concludes with policy recommendations.

4. Introduction/country profile: political process, democracy and landscape

Australia is a representative democracy, with three levels of government: federal, state or territory, and local. The government consists of representatives who are democratically elected by the people, and based around a two-party preferred political system. The two major parties consist of a right-of-centre party, referred to as the Liberal Party of Australia, or the Coalition; and a centre-left party referred to as the Australian Labor Party (ALP). Australia is often described as a successful multicultural country. As part of the Asia-Pacific, and British colony, almost half of the population consists of first or second-generation migrants (49%). Statistically 69.8% of the population were born in Australia (and 6.4% of the population born in England and New Zealand) (ABS 2012).

It is important to consider the geographical landscape of Australia, and how this affects the delivery and provision of schooling. The country has a population of 23 million (fourteen times smaller than the United States population)—but a land size relatively comparable to the United States. Therefore, the distribution of Australia’s population immensely differs. The bulk of the population is clustered around major cities, and therefore a school’s location (whether it is rural, remote or urban) is very important to consider. Rural and remote schools are statistically more likely to serve lower socio-economic status cohorts of students, and struggle for resources, including experienced teachers (Doherty, Rissman, and Browning 2013, Gonski et al. 2011).

Secondary schooling in Australia is highly privatized—far more than other OECD countries. In 2016, 41% of students were enrolled in private secondary schools. This far outweighs the average OECD country, where 18% is the average proportion. Compare this to the US, where approximately 8% of students attend private schools (although, it is important to note that the term ‘public’ also includes charter schools in the US). In Canada, this...
percentage is even lower (approximately 6%), and lower again in countries such as New Zealand, Finland or Sweden (again, this is complicated in terms of how schools are labelled). Australia also maintains one of the highest percentages of private expenditure within the school sector. This effectively means that the schooling sectors rely far more on a “user-pays” system than the average OECD country. This is clearly problematic for those families with less capacity to pay. This was noted in the OECD’s Education at a Glance 2016 report. For the majority of OECD countries, when it comes to secondary schooling, 90% of expenditure comes from government funds. But this wasn’t the case for Australia, Chile and Columbia, which “rely on over one-fifth of private expenditure at this level” (OECD 2016, 212).

Australia is classified as a “high funding and low regulation” country (Teese 2007, Lamb 2007). In comparison to other OECD countries, private schools in Australia are held to limited levels of accountability in terms of how they spend their money. These high levels of privatization within secondary schools may be linked to the levels of segregation within secondary schools. Student cohorts within schools tend to be highly segregated as based on family socio-economic status, country of birth and first language spoken (see, Ho 2011, Windle 2015, Ho, Vincent, and Butler 2015, Rowe and Lubienski 2017, Rowe 2017, Watson and Ryan 2010). Private school enrolment is ’strongly patterned by socioeconomic status (SES). The average income and SES of students in private schools is higher than in public schools’ (Perry, Lubienski, and Ladwig 2016, 176). School segregation has a negative impact on achieving high equity and high quality outcomes (Benito, Alegre, and GonzaLez-Balletbo 2014).

Education system structure and responsibilities: centralized/decentralized

The structure of government is also important for understanding how schooling works in Australia, and furthermore, the challenges surrounding accountability and decentralization. Decentralization is an alternative term or phrase that denotes, or is coupled with, accountability practices and accountability reforms in Australia. Decentralization of schooling rests on the principle that decision-making powers are divested, as far as possible, within the site or locus of schooling (Whitty, Power, and Halpin 1998). The current model of decentralized schools within Australia is inconsistent for providing an enabling environment for actors to fulfil their responsibilities, but also for determining the success or effectiveness of decentralized schools. Decentralization must be coupled with autonomy in regards to decision-making around pedagogy and curriculum; strong support structures for schools and teachers; and, adequate and equitable school resourcing (Whitty, Power, and Halpin 1998, Malen and Rice 2004).

Australia’s education system is fundamentally centralized—in that schools are funded from a central body (the federal government and the state government), and key decisions around curriculum and resources are made from the central body (Savage 2016). However, decentralization of schools has remained the over-arching goal of successive governments. The state of Victoria was the earliest state in Australia to implement formalized legislation to decentralize schools (1998 Education (Self-Governing) School Act) (Parliament of Victoria 1998). The fundamental objective of the Act was to enable government schools to be ‘self-managing’ and operate autonomously from government sectors and agencies, similar to private schools (see, Caldwell and Hayward 1998, Crooks 1996, Hannan 1996, Seddon 1996). The majority of government (public) schools developed independent charters and elected independent school councils. Ideally, these councils would appoint business leaders in order to facilitate competitive engagement within the market and improve fiscal productivity. Approximately 90 per cent of the school budget was decentralized (Spaull 1999). Public schools were to ultimately blend into the market-place, be ‘competitive and corporate, enterprising and accountable’ (Hannan 1996, 61). Whilst this policy shift was first evident in the state government, it was later taken up at the federal level in the 2004 School Assistance Act (Australian Government 2004). The 2004 Act stipulates that schools maintain the authority to recruit their own staff, develop their own school charters, elect independent school
councils and operate and determine their own budget\(^2\). In 2014, the federal government legislated Independent Public Schools with the aim to make one-fourth of public schools in Australia autonomous and decentralized (Australian Government Department of Education and Training 2014). This legislation was enacted in partnership with the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) and the Council on Federal Financial Relations (see Figure 1).

There are differences of opinion in terms of the challenges for education in Australia. Politicians and policymakers regard the primary challenge as increasing standardized test results and global competitiveness. In the *Australian Education Act 2013*, the very first objective is ‘for Australia to be placed, by 2025, in the top 5 highest performing countries’ according to the OECD Programme of International Student Assessment (PISA) results (Australian Government 2015a, 3). Standardized tests such as PISA are principally utilized to inform and guide education reforms, and to reinforce modes of accountability for schools and teachers.

A secondary view is that Australia needs to reduce the relationship between socio-economic status and educational outcomes. This was principally argued within the Federal Government’s Review of Funding, colloquially referred to as Gonski and recently, Gonski 2.0 (Australian Government 2011). Research has indicated this relationship to be more significant in Australia in comparison to other OECD countries, such as Canada and Finland (Perry and McConney 2010, 2013). This is somewhat counteracted by the OECD PISA reports, which categorizes Australia as ‘high quality, high equity’ (OECD 2013c, a, b), however it is useful to note Gorur’s (2014) analysis and problematization of how this has been measured and claimed. Arguably, there is a considerable school-based affect for students in Australia, meaning that the school in which a student attends can significantly influence their educational outcomes. This is primarily due to the ‘clustering-effect’ of low socio-economic status students in particularly schools, as opposed to a more diverse and heterogenous mix of students (Lubienski, Crane, and Lubienski 2008, Waslander and Thrupp 1995, Perry and McConney 2010, 2013). Australian-based research indicates that schools that serve a larger cohort of lower socio-economic status students may retain less or more limited access to high-tiered academic curriculum in secondary schools, as tied to university access (Perry and Southwell 2014, Teese 1998, Perry, Lubienski, and Ladwig 2016). The Federal Review of Funding found a ‘significant gap between the highest and lowest performing students in Australia, relative to other OECD countries’ (Gonski et al. 2011, 22), estimated to be between three to three and a half years.

Another educational challenge for Australia is to reduce the gender gap, particularly in relation to girls and mathematics; and, boys and reading (Lamb et al. 2015, VAGO 2015, OECD 2015, 2013a). According to OECD PISA results, Australia retains gender-specific achievement gaps which are far more pronounced in comparison to other OECD countries (OECD 2015). This gender gap is also pronounced within the National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy results\(^3\). The Victorian Auditor General’s Report (VAGO) stipulates that boys’ writing performance is declining at a far faster rate than their female peers (VAGO 2015, 28). So too, there are gender-specific engagement gaps—understood as behavioural engagement, emotional engagement and cognitive engagement. Females report higher levels of connectedness to peers, school connectedness, motivation and morale, but also higher levels of anxiety in school. In addition, boys record far higher levels of suspension and disconnectedness from school (VAGO 2015, 30, 31).

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\(^2\) However, it is questionable to what extent that schools can determine their own budget, as school budgets are determined from several different externalized sources; and they are fluctuating and unreliable. School budgets are dependent upon the number of enrolments, with certain schools being far more sensitive and vulnerable to the market than others.

\(^3\) NAPLAN is a mandated annual test for all schools. It tests students in years three, five, seven and nine, in five domains including: reading; persuasive writing; spelling; grammar and punctuation; and numeracy.
5. Actors and Accountability

There are many actors seeking to address the education challenges, including teachers, schools, staff and families, in addition to a wide range of community advocacy groups (see, Rowe 2017). However, there are different perspectives in terms of how to respond to the education challenges. Research tends to be framed between two opposing arguments. Many scholars argue that the complicated funding arrangements in Australia, and the high levels of schooling privatization, has led to inequitable schooling outcomes, large gaps in student achievement, and overly complex funding models, which are lacking in transparency (Skourdoumbis 2014). On the other hand, scholars such as Hattie argue that the most important factor in the classroom is the teacher, and additional factors such as school funding levels, class sizes and the socio-economic status of the student cohort has little influence on education outcomes (Hattie 2013b, a, 2003). This has led to many recent reforms targeting classroom teacher quality and readiness (Australian Government 2015b, TEMAG 2014).

To meet these challenges, Australia seeks to maintain accountability of schools, teachers and parents via a top-down and bottom-up approach. Even though this is described as ‘top’ and ‘bottom’, the approach shares commonalities in relying on centralized modes of governance to maintain accountability. Australia’s approach to accountability tends to be market responsive or ‘market oriented’ (Bunar 2010), as opposed to a ‘capacity building’ approach to accountability, which is evident in Finland (Itkonen and Jahnukainen 2007). These approaches respond to educational challenges differently and develop particular frames of reference for constituting performance and under-performance. The market oriented approach to accountability of schools, teachers and students tends to rely on standardized tests to measure under-performance; constructs rankings and comparisons between schools, teachers and students; and imposes penalties or sanctions onto schools and teachers for under-performing, as measured by standardized tests (Besley and Peters 2006, Suspectsyna 2010, Itkonen and Jahnukainen 2007). A ‘capacity-building’ approach to accountability aims for collaboration, and as the name indicates, aims to foster and build capacity for schools, teachers and families to achieve set goals. A capacity building approach incorporates early intervention programs for students, who are identified as struggling; rigorous professional support for teachers; and eliminates structures that may harm capacity, such as streaming students or early tracking of students into pathways or streams (OECD 2012, Sahlberg 2011, Itkonen and Jahnukainen 2007).

A capacity building approach does not necessarily imply increased funding, rather it aims for a more effective distribution of funding, in order to raise capacity in particular schools (Itkonen and Jahnukainen 2007, Crow 2009). This is also important for thinking about the enabling environment which is necessary for actors, such as principals and classroom teachers, to fulfil their responsibilities. A capacity building approach works towards building resource-rich schools. In her research from the United States, Powers (2004) found that school performance is positively correlated with the level of resources within a school, including ‘qualified teachers, sufficient and up-to-date textbooks, and adequate, safe facilities’ (786). Itkonen and Jahnukainen (2007) refer to ‘resource-rich and ‘resource-poor’ schools, stating that ‘resources and school performance are positively correlated’ (7). Malen and Rice (2004) have found that ‘high-stakes accountability initiatives may deplete resources... [and] deplete or dilute the capacity of low-performing schools to improve’ (653).

In the following case study, I explore reward payments and penalties in Australia, and how these are managed and distributed. This funding arrangement endeavours to create an enabling or motivational environment for classroom teachers and school leaders to respond to the educational challenges. However, I will highlight how certain funding mechanisms may be largely counterproductive for driving educational improvements and achieving school autonomy.
6. Small Case study: Instruments of accountability - funding, reward payments and penalties

According to Section 51 and Section 96 of the Australian Constitution, the state government is responsible for the day-to-day governance of schools, including curriculum, testing, staffing and administration. This refers to public (or state) schools, although the state government also contributes funding to private schools. Over time, the federal government has increasingly become more involved in schooling, in terms of regulation and quality control. This has been referred to as federalism (Lingard 2000, Keating 2009). Due to vertical fiscal imbalance, the federal government generates greater revenue than the states/territories, and therefore can wield greater influence within education. To illustrate this in more detail, and the ‘subdivisions’ of centralized governance, I draw on a particular window of educational reform from 2008-2013.

This period of reform was referred to as the ‘Education Revolution’ (2008-2013), led by the federal centre-left government (Labor, Prime Minister Rudd/Gillard). This period of reform legislated the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority Act (Australian Government 2008), which was significant in that it introduced three major planks of accountability reform (Savage 2016). This Act established the Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority (hereby referred to as ACARA)\textsuperscript{ii}, responsible for the development of the mandated national curriculum (Australian Curriculum); in addition to the development and administration of standardized tests across Australian schooling (NAPLAN); and the publication of the standardized test results on a website called ‘My School’\textsuperscript{iii}. Savage (2016) describes the governance of ACARA as ‘unique’, because it ‘receives direction from (and is accountable to) the federal Australian Government and all state and territory education ministers via the Education Council’ (5, emphasis in original).

Many scholars argue that the centralized federal initiatives, including the mandated testing and national curriculum, have complicated the historical schooling arrangements between the levels of government (Lingard 2000, Keating 2009, Savage and O’Connor 2015). By utilizing numerous subdivisions of governance, the federal government administers a ‘top-down’ and ‘bottom-up’ audit culture around performance management. The following diagram demonstrates the subdivisions in more detail, and with attention to various levels of governance (see figure 1):
The Council of Australian Governments (hereby referred to as COAG) was established in 1992, prior to this window of reform. COAG is instrumental for understanding how accountability is implemented and driven in Australia. The Council was created to establish more meaningful engagement and collaboration between the states/territories and federal government in driving policy reform. The Council includes the Prime Minister, State Premiers and Territory Chief Ministers, and the President of the Australian Local Government Association. Several changes were initiated during the ‘Education Revolution’ to broaden the ability of COAG to drive accountability reforms⁴.

One of the principle ways that COAG, and the Standing Councils, endeavour to steer education reform and improve outcomes is via ‘reward payments’ for the states and territories, in regard to school funding. Representatives from each Department of Education (in each jurisdiction—the respective state/territory) are to
annually set ‘reform targets’ for improvements that are deemed ‘satisfactorily ambitious’ (Lingard and Sellar 2013). There are three primary areas as stipulated under the National Partnership Agreements: Literacy and Numeracy, Teacher Quality, and Low Socio-economic Status School Communities (COAG Reform Council 2011, 2012). Under the National Partnership Agreement on Literacy and Numeracy (LNNP), for example, each jurisdiction is required to identify a sample of schools to participate in the national partnership, and specify targets for improvement. The targets are to be negotiated by each jurisdiction, and representatives from the Department of Education. COAG is then responsible for auditing each jurisdiction and determining whether they have achieved their reform targets, utilizing NAPLAN results and the national minimum standard benchmark (Commonwealth of Australia 2008, COAG 2008). A substantial proportion of school funding is only available via the reward payments. For example, from 2008–09 to 2011–12 under the National Partnership Agreement on Literacy and Numeracy (LNNP), $150 million4 in funds is guaranteed to each jurisdiction (state/territory), whereas the larger proportion is obtainable via reward payments ($350 million). At times, the Department of Education in the respective jurisdiction only partially receives their annual school funding, as stipulated in the report:

The Australian Government made reported reward payments totalling $138.5 million to states in June 2011 (out of $175 million in available reward funding for the period), based on the COAG Reform Council’s assessment of the extent to which states achieved reform targets for 2010. (Commonwealth of Australia 2012, 20)

This leads to state jurisdictions, and therefore schools receiving lower amounts of funding based on standardized test results. The tensions surrounding this fiscal arrangement are effectively explored by Lingard and Sellar (2013), who identify ‘perverse effects’ of setting financial conditions such as these (634). Their research suggests that, by imposing penalties and sanctions, representatives from the Department of Education have responded by distorting and manipulating their data to acquire much-needed school funding. The way in which the reform targets are measured also differs, and Lingard and Sellar (2013) identify sampling issues—several states proffer a wide sample of students to gauge performance levels, whereas others nominate a very small sample, thereby increasing their chance of success (ranging from 4% of students to 22% of students). During other auditing periods, the NAPLAN results were available to the states and territories whilst they were establishing their reform targets, therefore invalidating the process (Commonwealth of Australia 2014b, c, a). It is also important to consider the effect on teachers. If NAPLAN results have the influence to affect chances of a promotion, or even their employment position, teachers are likely to ‘teach to the test’ and spend disproportionate amounts of time preparing students for a test, utilizing rote learning methods (Thompson and Cook 2014, Thompson and Harbaugh 2013).

Clearly these reform targets are occurring from a distance; first, from the centralized federal level; and second, from a centralized level at the state/territory education department. This is a case of ‘steering at a distance’, with pedagogical decisions surrounding curriculum and assessment, in addition to a school’s capacity to build resources, occurring from a distance. In this equation, data is ‘central to new modes of regulation, which accompany the steering at a distance of the competition state’ (Lingard 2011, 370). Essentially, these decisions—which have ramifications for students, teachers and families—are decontextualized and detached from the spaces in which formalized teaching and learning occurs, which is in the classroom, at the school-level. However, schools, teachers (and students) are held responsible for their performance via standardized, centralized initiatives (mandated tests that are designed and assessed outside of the classroom).

As it is evident on figure 1, there are numerous arms and subdivisions that support these centralized mechanisms. Whilst there are separate ‘arms’, each division is directed and responsible to COAG and the Standing Councils. The Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL) is designed to improve

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4 All currency is reported in Australian Dollars in this report ($AUD).
regulations around teacher quality and professional development. AITSL was first initiated in 2001 as the governance body for professional teachers, funded by the federal government. During the ‘Education Revolution’, the National Partnership Agreement on Rewards for Great Teachers was legislated in 2012, in partnership with ACARA, and the COAG Standing Councils. This established financial rewards for teachers who exceeded performance accreditation criteria and improved student outcomes, as measured by standardized tests. The arrangement works in a similar fashion to the reward payments for states/territories.

The reforms view classroom teachers as crucial to overcoming educational challenges in Australia. This point can clearly not be refuted. Certainly, research has consistently demonstrated that the classroom teacher is highly important for student learning, in addition to the socio-economic status of the student (OECD 2013c, b, Rutkowski, Rutkowski, and Plucker 2012, Connell 2009, Hayes et al. 2006, OECD 2005). However, there are different instruments and methodologies that may respond to this target. Australia’s current approach to accountability in education penalizes teachers (in addition to schools and students) for not achieving set benchmarks.

Setting performance targets is not a negative practice by itself, but setting performance targets based on standardized tests results, that are linked to sanctions or penalties, may result in negative outcomes when applied to schools, teachers and effectively, students. Ball (2003) has suggested this practice results in a culture of ‘performativity’ for classroom teachers. International research has demonstrated that accountability reforms, when structured in this particular way, has led to an increase in teacher turnover, a decline in teacher autonomy, job satisfaction and professional efficacy, and the capacity for teachers’ to be creative and innovative within their pedagogical practice (Day and Smethem 2009, Day 2002, Ball 2003, Hargreaves 2003, Thompson and Cook 2014). Promoting and supporting classroom teacher innovation is a necessary component for improving educational outcomes and economic productivity. It is further questionable whether the auditing process (which uses penalties and sanctions) has resulted in higher educational outcomes (OECD PISA results would indicate otherwise, particularly for Australia). This is expanded upon by Day and Smethem (2009):

Whilst such high stakes testing regimes may be accompanied by increased support for teachers and schools, it is disputed whether they have contributed to improvements in student achievements; and there are increasing concerns both about their negative effects upon teachers’ motivation, morale, wellbeing and effectiveness. (Day and Smethem 2009, 143)

Furthermore, when standardized test results are attached to sanctions and penalties, this heightens issues pertaining to educational equity. Research demonstrates that schools tend to respond by being more selective of their student intake (if they have the capacity to do so) (Windle 2015, Rowe 2017). When there is a higher level or practice of student selection, there is a higher level of segregation within student cohorts around race and ethnicity, religion, disability and family median levels of income (Gorard 2016, Rowe and Lubienski 2017, Roda and Wells 2013). This is concerning for matters of equity, and it also points to the perceived differences and quality gap between schools, for consumers. Ideally, there should be very little quality difference between schools (OECD 2003). As I will expand upon in the following section, an approach that is focused on capacity-building as opposed to penalties and sanctions, would be more constructive for fostering and supporting higher educational outcomes (Malen and Rice 2004).

**7. Policy recommendations**

Rather than work to improve accountability, it is recommended that decision-makers carefully consider the end-goals of accountability: to provide high-quality and high-equity education; and improve engagement, retention and student outcomes in education. To achieve these goals, the answer is not necessarily to increase the amount
of surveillance, evaluations and measurements on schools, teachers and students. The methodology behind increased accountability can be counter-productive for the end-goal. The instruments of accountability are creating far more centralized initiatives. This causes detrimental effects in two significant ways: distributional funding issues; and second, empowering schools and educators to be autonomous.

Effective distribution and utilization of funding: These centralized initiatives and bodies detract funds from classrooms, schools and necessary resources. This is a distributional problem. This was identified by the McKinsey Report (2007), ‘How the world’s best performing school systems come out on top’, and expanded upon by Michael Barber (see, Crow 2009). Countries such as the United States and Australia tie up their funding excessively in administration and bureaucracy, and ‘therefore less money is getting into the classrooms’ (Crow 2009, 16). For example, in the 2011-2012 financial year, the Australian Government contributed $12.175 million to the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting (ACARA) budget in order to manage NAPLAN testing (see, Senate Standing Committee 2014). ACARA are responsible for the test development, analysis and reporting of results. This cost does not include the other different regulation bodies, such as AITSL. This funding may be better served and utilized within schools, and spent within the classroom itself. Longitudinal research has consistently demonstrated the importance of educational funding for student outcomes. Increased ‘school funding alone may not guarantee improved outcomes, but our findings indicate that provision of adequate funding may be a necessary condition’ for student achievement (Jackson, Johnson, and Persico 2016, 214). Equitable, consistent and effective distribution of funding is paramount.

Empowering schools and educators to be autonomous: centralized initiatives weaken the abilities of schools and teachers to respond to their students, and draw on their professional expertise. Key pedagogical decisions around teaching and learning need to be allocated to the experts, as far as possible.

An approach to accountability which utilizes ‘capacity-building’, to build resources, and support teachers and principals within schools would be more effective than a market-oriented approach, which penalizes and sanctions schools and teachers deemed as lower performers (Itkonen and Jahnukainen 2007). There needs to be a greater focus on ensuring fair and equitable funding to schools, to minimize resource gaps and school-level gaps and differentiations.

Accountability measures—particularly when utilized to sanction and penalize—are not shown to result in higher student outcomes. Successful education systems are not necessarily focused on ‘accountability’ but rather focused on constructing and supporting quality, via rigorous recruitment of professional teachers and well-funded schools (Sahlberg 2011). Successful education systems maintain limited gaps and differences between schools (Gorard 2016, Perry and McConney 2013, Field, Kuczera, and Pont 2007).
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1 The top-down and bottom-up approach was recently emphasized in the Australian Government Productivity Commission Report, ‘National Education Evidence Base’ (2016). This is a useful reference point for understanding frames of top-down and bottom-up approaches to accountability.


3 In regards to NAPLAN, and the ‘My School’ website, each school is assessed in five domains (reading; persuasive writing; spelling; grammar and punctuation; numeracy). The website, as designed and administered by ACARA, utilizes colour-coded shading to indicate whether a school is achieving below, average or above 60 other statistically ‘like’ schools, according to their average NAPLAN results. Schools are categorized as ‘statistically similar’ as based on a measurement that is referred
to as the school ‘ICSEA’ value. The ICSEA is calculated by utilizing direct data (students’ family backgrounds) and indirect data (school-level factors). The student’s family background includes parental occupation, parental levels of school education and non-school education. The school-level factors include a school’s geographical location (i.e. remoteness) and the proportion of Indigenous students (see ACARA 2010). Utilizing value-added measurements aims to alleviate blunt ‘league table’ like comparisons of NAPLAN data, and enable fair comparisons between statistically similar schools (Rowe and Windle 2012, Gorur 2013). The Education Minister at the time celebrated ‘My School’ as a win for the people, exclaiming that the website enabled greater transparency of results; increased accountability for schools; and, if parents are unhappy about their results, they should pressure the Principal to improve the school’s results. Particular schools are more sensitive to declining results or less competitive results, according to NAPLAN, and are far more reliant on the website to increase their customer-base and thereby their funding (see, Rowe 2017).

In 2009, COAG established the Intergovernmental Agreement on Federal Financial Relations (IGAFFR), which led to the Council on Federal Financial Relations (referred to as a Standing Council, see Figure 1). This Council works in conjunction with the COAG Standing Council on Education and Early Childhood (SCSEEC).

The reward payment initiatives were developed from a similar premise, in which states and territories were subject to ‘financial conditions’. In the 2004 Schools Assistance Act (Australian Government 2004), it clearly outlines that states/territories must submit and agree to twenty provisions in order to receive their financial school funding.