

From: Michael Doyle

The Nonsense of “Attendance rate” in the Myschool Website

The biggest problem with the MySchool website? The most important item of information about a school’s performance is missing. How many children that take the test have attended throughout the year?

Yes, I know. There is a “Student attendance rate” shown. Of five primary schools in my postcode, MySchool show this rate as being 93% for one and 94% for the other four. Which means what? Absolutely nothing in connection with the Naplan tests. The glossary tells me that:-

“This is a measure of the number of days students attend school divided by the total number of school days available expressed as a percentage. The student attendance rate is collected by schools and supplied for an agreed comparative period during the 2009 school year. It includes the *total (aggregated) attendance across year levels 1 to 10* for the relevant school. It does not include pre-Year 1 attendance, except in government schools in Victoria.”

So ... the attendance rate is for the whole school (in fact for Victoria it even includes the Preps ... the five-year olds!). But the children taking the Naplan tests were only those in Year 3 and Year 5. This means that the attendance of those in Year 1, Year 2, and Year 4 might be very good whilst the Year 3’s or Year 5’s could be less than 90%. For a 200-day school year that would equate to every child in the class not being at school for four weeks of the school year. Now that’s very very unlikely. What is very likely though is what actually happens. Most children attend most of the school days. But several of them will be persistent absentees, missing perhaps the equivalent of 2 or 3 days of every school week. When that happens with 2 or 3 children in a class of 25 the impact is ... ? Well, it doesn’t matter how noble and conscientious the teacher, the Naplan result for the class is going to be horrendous.

The impact of an abysmal Naplan result (as shown on MySchool) for a school? Well, how do you feel as a grandparent living in Brisbane looking at your Victorian grandchildren’s school? How do you feel as a parent looking at the result? Indeed, how would you feel as the teacher of that class of 25?

But wait. It gets worse. In Victoria the so-called “Attendance rate” not only includes 5-year-old children, it includes children that are no longer at the school! This would be laughable if it were not so serious. The attendance rates of children that are no longer at a primary school and have now moved on to secondary school ... are shown as part of the current rates.

Why wouldn’t the MySchool website display accurate and simple details of the attendance of those children who have *actually* taken the tests? After all, the details are

readily available ... the teacher is required to record attendances of each individual child every day. Indeed, it would be even more useful if 'absence' (not attendance) rates were shown. And, since we're seeking to provide useful information ... why not show "half-day" absence rates and also "persistent" absence rates? If the UK Education system can do it for their website, why cannot Australia?

Asking the question "why?" can be inconvenient and embarrassing.

Why is the 'attendance rate' so uninformative? A cynical person might suggest that the Education Departments for the various States do not want to raise the issue of school absence rates. (Indeed in the case of Victoria that suspicion might be very strong.) After all, if there is a high level of absenteeism then this is likely to be a major factor in poor performance at Naplan tests. And teachers cannot be blamed for high levels of absenteeism. Responsibility for that lies at the feet of parents and ... Education Departments.

*"Timothy Winters has bloody feet
And he lives in a house on Suez Street,
He sleeps in a sack on the kitchen floor
And they say there aren't boys like him anymore."*

(from the poem "Timothy Winters" by Charles Causley)