

STOP league tables

IT'S POLITICS, stupid

THE My School website has one clear purpose — a perceived political advantage for the Rudd Government.

The site was rushed out at 1am on January 28 to coincide with the beginning of the school year, to gain maximum publicity in the media. The Gillard-Rudd team had decided that the media were on their side on this one and the launch would provide an ideal springboard for an election year.

The half-baked nature of the site is a sure sign that the deadlines for its launch were political in origin. Not only were there myriad errors — missing schools, wrong school locations, ludicrous comparisons of large metropolitan private schools with tiny rural state primaries — but the basis of school comparisons, the Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage (ICSEA), is dubious, the promised income levels for each did not appear and Rudd and Gillard are now saying that parent survey data needs to be added to future versions of the site.

The crudity of the new website is further evidence of its political purpose. Each school's page is dominated by NAPLAN test numbers. They are presented in a large font with coloured highlighting to focus attention on this section alone. The comparisons between "statistically similar" schools are also based solely on NAPLAN results.

A parent visiting the site basically gets a school name, a school location, a set of NAPLAN figures and some strange national comparisons. The message of the website is that a school's quality can be equated with the performance of its students on literacy and numeracy tests held over three days in May.

Predictably the media had a field day. *The Australian* presented a selection of government school versus private school reading and numeracy results from each state. The *Herald Sun*, which had made failed attempts under

FOI in the past to obtain school-by-school AIM test results, published an "official results" lift-out listing the NAPLAN test scores of every Victorian school.

It also compiled top five and

The Age took a more literary approach and, instead of running league tables, it gave two of its political heavyweights, Michelle Grattan and associate editor Shaun Carney, large spaces in its opinion

whatever they want.

The political strategy of the My School website is as cynical as anything implemented under Howard. It associates the Rudd Government with "solutions" to the needs and concerns of parents (voters) and disassociates it from any responsibility for creating the problems.

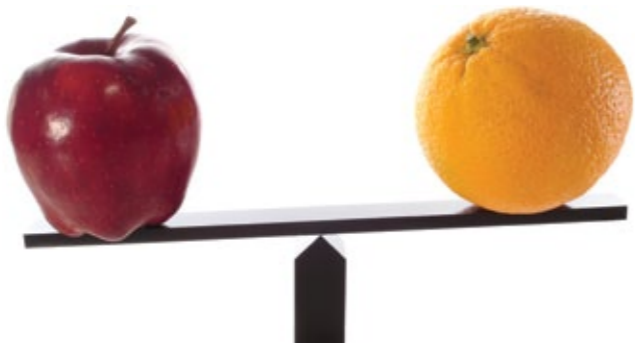
Julia Gillard told parents that if they were unhappy about My School results they should see the principal and teachers at their school. In other words, a school's test scores were not the product of its particular student population or of government policies on funding and support; they were the result of teachers and principals not doing their jobs properly.

Bob Ellis, the eminent writer and political commentator, saw things very differently. After taking the Minister to task for "shaming" and "humiliating" teachers, he continued:

"She hasn't understood how many lives of crime are prevented by a good teacher in a 'bad' neighbourhood and how this, too, is valuable, not just academic statistics on a website.

"She hasn't understood how good some teachers are at dealing with dyslexia and epilepsy, and low levels of autism, and with pupils whose families have suffered mightily in civil wars and police states, and that defining their schools and pupils as 'innumerate' and 'illiterate' and the teachers themselves as incompetent is wrong at its heart, and misleading at its heart, and deeply unfair." ♦

Dodgy comparisons, missing data, and a crashing website were all sure signs that the My School launch was about politics, not education. AEU research officer **John Graham** follows the fall out.



bottom five league tables for secondary and primary schools. Surprise, surprise: selective exam-entry government schools and wealthy private schools comprised the top five in secondary. The "named and shamed" bottom five were schools catering for Indigenous, low socio-economic and "at risk" students.

The Year 7 data used to make these judgements came from the results of students who had been in secondary schools for all of three months.

pages to fulminate against the AEU's opposition to the My School exercise.

Shaun Carney's piece read like a press release from Minister Gillard, while Michelle Grattan not only supported teaching to the test but invoked the principle of press freedom to justify the publication of naming and shaming league tables.

This was the same line run by Deputy Prime Minister Gillard, who assured the media that they will be "free" to publish



PRESS Watch Special

These tables will bite you on the bum, Julia

WHILE Australians enjoyed their summer holidays — and before the media deluge surrounding My School hit — shivering Brits were returning to school against a backdrop of their own league tables.

PressWatch was there, as it happened, and pulled itself away from snowball fights to look at the coverage. What we found might be instructive.

If it's any consolation, league tables don't get nearly as much attention as they used to. Many national papers no longer bother to print the results at all and tabloids like *The Sun* gave the story barely 100 words.

For Julia Gillard, the bad news is that there are no good news stories for the Government. The payback for her short-term gain will be a year-in, year-out pasting from the press.

These headlines were typical: "1 in 10 schools fails to meet minimum standards" (*The Independent*); "The pupils going backwards on 3Rs" (*Daily Mail*); "Thousands of pupils 'missing school at least one day a week'" (*The Times*).

And this wasn't just because the Labour government is on the nose.

The pattern is well-established: good results mean the tests are getting easier. Poor results mean the Government has failed to lift standards. And if neither appeals, there's always a story in the truancy rates.

As for accountability and school improvement, it's been hard to see any. The schools at the bottom are still those in struggling areas. And there were some very familiar faces among the "super prins" being hailed.

With fewer newspapers to fend off, Gillard and Rudd won't face quite the same barrage as English education ministers. And for another year or two they can keep blaming the last lot.

But in the long run, if they think there are any good headlines in league tables, they're crazy. ♦

What they said

Some political pundits might have hailed My School a success, but those with a deeper knowledge of education took a dim view of the Government website.

Trevor Cobbold, convenor, Save Our Schools

JULIA Gillard gave an absolute guarantee that schools would not be "named and shamed". Yet, this is precisely what My School does. Schools with the worst results are given a red flag. The red flag signifies danger, don't go there.

... Most often it is schools serving the most disadvantaged communities in Australia that are given red flags. These are the schools working in the most difficult of circumstances, yet their reward from the Rudd Government is to be pilloried in public. (more at www.soscanberra.com)

Jane Caro, for New Matilda

NO DOUBT the launch of the My School website will be the catalyst for renewed debate about the relative merits of public versus private schools and about the fairness of their funding. Thanks to the complete lack of transparency around our complex funding formulas, both sides will be able to make convincing arguments to support their cases and drag out the sets of figures that most suit them, ignoring any that don't. As a result, many parents will end up even more anxious and confused than they already are.

And, pardon my cynicism, but this confusion suits our politicians very well. It enables them to take the credit for successes and neatly side-step the blame for any failures. Meanwhile, real teachers in real schools teaching real students will have to struggle on amid a cacophony of self-serving, biased and often ignorant comment and finger-pointing. (more at tiny.cc/6uwY2)

Peter Garrigan, president Australian Council of State School Organisations

TEST results are subject to manipulation and rorting by schools to improve their ranking. Overseas studies show

that many schools artificially boost their results by selecting high-achieving students; denying entry to, or expelling, low-achieving students; suspending low-achieving students on test days; using special dispensations such as allowing more time for tests; and outright cheating.

Some of this is already happening in Australia.

Richard Teese, Melbourne University, writing in The Age

THE risk with the Government's information strategy ... appears two-edged. Schools that most need active parents may lose them — as parents will move school rather than try to improve a school — while the parents who most need to become involved will remain disconnected and passive consumers of the local product, and contribute little. Transparency, in short, may only serve to divide parents and split both cultural and professional resources across schools. (More at tiny.cc/wpRzR)

Justine Ferrari, education writer, The Australian

THE focus of the My School website is raw test scores that are compiled into a form of league table, precisely what the government and education authorities said they were not going to do.

Even the head of the Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority, Barry McGaw, said yesterday that by grouping schools with statistically similar schools, it essentially created individual league tables for each of the nation's 9,500-odd schools. (More at tiny.cc/xUDVV)

Angelo Gavrielatos, AEU federal president

IT IS a sad day for education in Australia. ♦