A Review of School Accountability in Australia

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Introduction

Monitoring of school performance is not a recent phenomenon. In England, the external inspection of schools began in 1839, conducted by a group called Her Majesty's Inspectors (HMI) to determine how to improve schools and how the money invested was spent. Inspections were infrequent and unsystematic, with no published principles or guidelines for schools to follow (Grubb, 2002).

In recent times there has been intense interest in most parts of the world to create systems for monitoring school performance. For example, the International Institute for Educational Planning (IIEP) has a large school supervision project that includes national diagnoses of existing systems of supervision and support, case studies on innovative experience, publication of monographs and discussion papers, organisation of seminars and policy-fora on improvement of supervision and support structures, and preparation of teaching-learning materials; a previous monograph by the author was part of this project (Gurr, 1999). School supervision, as described by the IIEP (1997), is concerned with the control and support of schools and teachers, the promotion of change, and interchange of information between schools and administration centres. Much of the discussion referred to supervisors as having an inspectorial role, focussed more upon the work of teachers, often poorly resourced, and with too many responsibilities. The IIEP noted trends in changes in school supervision: de-linking of support and control functions; more openness and transparency; a shift from teacher to school inspection; involvement in system evaluation; and, reinforcement of school-based supervision.

Whilst many countries continue to utilise external inspection as the main source of school supervision, increasingly countries are relying more on school self-review, or a combination of self-review and external inspection. For example, under the former English inspection model there was evidence that during the year of school inspection student performance could decrease (for a discussion of these issues see chapter 5 of Learmouth, 2000). England, whilst firmly not wanting to let go of school inspections, has developed a more streamlined system that relies considerably on school self-assessment and which 'will give authority, energy and trust to schools by placing self-evaluation at

the centre of the inspection process' (DfES/OfSTED, 2004: forward). There seems to be consensus that external inspection by itself is not sufficient.

In the USA and several other countries, there is a focus on what has been termed 'high-stakes accountability'. At an educational level this should be used to refer to schools responding to the needs of all children; student learning is what is at stake. In practice, this often means that the employment of principals and teachers (and system administrators) is conditional upon improving performance on system wide tests of student learning. The 'high stakes' idea becomes trivialised in what is a disempowering view of accountability. A more constructive way to view accountability is to consider it as comprising three aspects: contractual, moral and professional (Learmouth, 2000, pp. 116-119).

Contractual accountability is focussed on meeting the requirements of the system. A summary statement from a Victorian school verification report illustrates this:

> *Unknown Primary School is a very good school serving its community well. Located on two well maintained and stimulating sites, the school serves a diverse school community that has a high regard for the school. Learning outcomes are very good, higher than the state average and typically at or higher than that of like schools. The school is well placed to build upon this high level of performance. To facilitate this the school has identified two priority areas: Mathematics and Teaching and Learning. Both priorities will extend the learning experiences of students and help improve the learning outcomes.*

Moral accountability is concerned with meeting the needs of parents and students. The following are the guiding principles of a Victorian primary school:

> *The school has a committed and caring staff who work in partnership with students and parents to provide:*
>
> 1. *A stimulating, safe and happy school where children enjoy learning.*
> 2. *A comprehensive education for all children in all areas of the curriculum*
> 3. *An inclusive curriculum that promotes gender equity and equal opportunity.*

Most schools would argue that this is what they do well.

Professional accountability is concerned with meeting one's own expectations and those of colleagues. The following statement by John Fleming (the principal of Bellfield Primary School in Victoria) illustrates this idea of professional accountability:

> *We will add significantly to the learning of students so that they will, by the end of year 6, be better than the best schools in the state, both academically and socially. So that they can have the same opportunities as everyone else. We don't have a social deficit model, we believe that all students can learn, and we believe that if we get the curriculum right, our kids will be better than schools like the high-fee grammar schools. I am the curriculum leader, but we develop it as a staff and get in outside support. Our curriculum is school-based and we do it as a whole school team.*

This is perhaps the aspect of accountability that needs to be more evident in schools for it is through this that self-beliefs can be tested, challenged and altered, and from this behaviour changed leading to improved student outcomes. It is not unlike Elmore's idea of internal accountability (Elmore, 2003, 2005) which he defines as 'coherence and alignment among individuals' conceptions of what they are responsible for and how, collective expectations at the organizational level, and the processes by which people within the organization account for what they do' (Elmore. 2005, pp. 140-141). Elmore disputes the long-term worth of external accountability environments and suggests that for real and sustained school improvement, teachers and principals need to take more responsibility for the outcomes they influence – a heightened sense of internal locus of control over their professional responsibilities.

This paper describes current school supervision arrangements across Australia, with particular emphasis on the Victorian accountability system. The information has been gathered through a search in April 2005 of publicly available Education Department websites and through comparison with a review undertaken in late 2004 by a company associated with Professor Peter Cuttance (Radii, 2004). It is thus a paper that describes a point in time view of Australian school accountability. As one of the reviewers of this paper commented, at least one of the schools systems (the Northern Territory) has developed significantly since the data for this paper were collected. The paper draws upon previously published work by the author, particularly Gurr (1999, 2001, 2002, 2003) and Mok et al. (2003). Learmouth's accountability framework is used to distinguish between the different accountability systems in terms of the degree to which they promote more than just contractual accountability.

Australian Context

Australia has a Commonwealth Government that oversees six State and two Territory Governments. Education in Australia is a complex interplay between these different levels of government, and between government and non-government schools. Approximately two-thirds of schools in Australia are government schools and one-third non-government or independent schools and in the provision of means-tested living allowances for students aged 16 and over. The responsibility for the provision of government schooling constitutionally rests with the State and Territory governments, but increasingly there has been Commonwealth Government influence especially in terms of grants to both government and non-government schools. The non-government sector is dominated by a system of Catholic schools that serve approximately 20% of all school age children, with the remaining children attending various independent schools that include a range of religious (e.g. Anglican, Coptic Orthodox, Greek Orthodox, Islamic, Jewish, Lutheran and Seventh Day Adventist) and non-religious schools (e.g. Montessori and Steiner). In recent years, the proportion of students attending non-government schools has increased.

School Supervision in Australia

Until recently, school supervision in Australia was largely a centrally controlled inspection process with little opportunity for school input or self-review. For example, in Victoria, school supervision for the greater part of the last century was conducted through

an inspectorial program where teachers and schools were regularly assessed by a government appointed inspector. Promotion through the teaching service was largely based on seniority. Principals and teachers were allocated to schools rather than locally selected. Schools were required to submit annual reports, but given the limited control schools had of human, building and financial resources and the highly centralised curriculum, these were not as extensive as that now required, nor was there a focus on school planning and improvement. Indeed, schools had discretion in relation to both the format and content of these reports, making comparisons between schools difficult, and, as they were not evaluative documents, they had limited usefulness in terms of planning and accountability purposes. In the early nineties a new system of self-review and external verification was introduced, the latest version of which is described below.

Table 1 provides an overview of the state and territory accountability systems, describing the type of accountability, the timeframe of the review cycle, the focus of review and the audience for any reports produced. There is also a column that describes the type of accountability in terms of Learmouth's contractual, moral and professional categories. When referring to states and territories, the generic term 'state' will be used.

Table 1: Summary of State and Territory Accountability Systems

State or Territory	General Description	Cycle	Focus	Audience	Accountability Focus
Victoria Accountability requirements described here were introduced in 2005	Differentiated school self-review and independent external verification process.	One year *Self-Evaluation* review period followed by three year implementation of *School Strategic Plan* with annual reports of progress in the *Annual Implementation Plan* and the *Annual Report to the Community.*	Student achievement and school effectiveness with a focus on student learning; student pathways and transition; and, student engagement and wellbeing.	Government and school community. Public documents available on request. Introduced in 2005, the *Annual Report to the Community* is designed to improve public accessibility to school performance information.	Contractual and moral, with potential for professional.
Tasmania New accountability requirements being designed for implementation in 2006, with these likely to include	School self-review in association with senior education officer.	One year review period leading to *School Plan*, followed by three year implementation period with annual reports of progress.	Data are divided into school-level qualitative (e.g. surveys, interviews) and quantitative (e.g. student achievement, student surveys, school finance) data, best practice	Government and school community. Public documents available on request.	Contractual and moral.

reviews of clusters of schools			indicators (quality of teaching, leadership, assessment, special assistance, time and resource usage), and system level data (e.g. literacy and numeracy, early years diagnostic assessment, student attendance and suspension). Analysis related to targets set in school *Partnership Agreement.*		
South Australia New accountability requirements being designed for implementation in 2006.	School self-review.	*Site Learning Plans (or Current Site Plans)* establishes three year direction. Each year an *Annual Report* is produced which comments on achievement of the site plans, although the *Annual Report* is not linked strongly to the review process. Reporting on meeting system priorities is not part of the *Annual Report*	Student achievement (primary literacy/numeracy, year 12 certificate), student retention, destination and completion, parent opinion, enrolment and student attendance. Strategic learning directions link to system priorities.	Government and school community. Public documents available on request.	Contractual and moral.
Western Australia	School self-review in association with a senior education officer (District Director).	*School Plan* timeframe is flexible (five year examples mentioned), although schools are required to report annually in the *School Report* although the format is	Student achievement (e.g. literacy and numeracy tests, year 12 performance, student destination), student engagement (e.g. attendance, suspensions), optional student,	Government and school community. Public documents available on request.	Contractual and moral.

		flexible and varies across districts and schools.	parent and teacher surveys, and financial planning data.		
Northern Territory	At time of data collection no formal system in place, although a school accreditation system is mooted with the creation of a Quality Services Agency (see Ramsey, 2003 recommendation 44, p. 297) that will accredit both government and non-government schools.				
Queensland	School self-review in association with a senior education officer (Executive Director (Schools)). Review by exception can be undertaken due to changing school circumstances or uncertainty about school direction and performance.	Three year review and implementation cycle. *School Annual Report and Operational Plan* submitted to Department at the beginning of each year. Explicit link with system planning document, *Vision 2010.*	Student achievement (e.g. literacy and numeracy, completion, destination) and school effectiveness (e.g. enrolment, student, parent and staff opinion) explicitly linked to system planning document, *Vision 2010*.	Government and school community. Public documents available on request.	Contractual and moral
New South Wales A review of school supervision is being conducted in 2005, with there likely to be a three-year planning and school self-review in association with a senior education officer	Self-review annually, in association with a senior education officer (District Superintendent endorses targets and District Chief Education Officer can validate analysis of data).	Annual reports required with a template and several data sets provided by government. Within the template categories, schools have considerable choice as to which data are reported and how the data are analysed. Quality of reports varies greatly. There are no regular external reviews.	Student achievement (e.g. literacy and numeracy, year 12 results, destination), enrolment and attendance. Data is of limited usefulness for improvement as there is considerable school discretion as to what is reported and how data are analysed.	School community. Public documents available on request.	Contractual and moral.
Australian Capital Territory	School self-review and independent external verification process.	Three year review and implementation cycle leading to development of *School Plan*, with annual reports of	Student achievement and school effectiveness in the areas of learning and teaching, student environment,	Government and school community. Public documents available on request.	Contractual and moral, with potential for professional.

		progress (*School Board Annual Report*).	leadership and management, and community involvement.		

The most decentralised and mature example of school supervision in Australia is that of the State of Victoria (a full discussion of the early implementation of this is contained in Gurr, 1999, a & b) and it is this system that is discussed in most detail in this paper (www.sofweb.vic.edu.au/standards/account/fame.htm). In Victoria a differentiated school self-review and external verification process is used to supervise and improve school performance. As part of a suite of school improvement reforms called the *Blueprint* (www.sofweb.vic.edu.blueprint), schools are required to have a *School Strategic Plan* (a four-year planning document in which schools describe their own educational plans and priorities within government guidelines) and to report on school progress annually in the *Annual Implementation Plan* and the *Annual Report to the Community*. In the annual reports, schools are required to collect, analyse and report three types of data: data that determines the current standard of student achievement (both teacher assessed and externally assessed); data on factors that impact directly on student achievement (e.g. student attendance, staff opinion, time allocation to curriculum areas); and, data that measures aspects that may be considered preconditions to student learning (e.g. staff absences, enrolment, parent opinion). Data analysis is conducted across three areas: student learning; student pathways and transition; and, student engagement and wellbeing. Every four years schools are required to prepare a school self-evaluation that is a summary of the school performance over the past three years and reflection upon future directions (www.sofweb.vic.edu.au/standards/account/eval.htm). Depending on school performance (as assessed through annual reports and the school self-evaluation), one of three options is imposed by the central office. This differential review process includes:

1. **Negotiated Review** - For a school to be categorised for participation in a negotiated review it has to be performing significantly above expected levels, when compared to other schools in at least two data sets, and have no performance issues in any other data set.
2. **Continuous Improvement Review** - This group includes the majority of schools. These schools are regarded as having satisfactory performance but with scope for improvement. They are neither exemplary or in trouble. A school reviewer is appointed to act as a critical friend. The school reviewer reads the school self-assessment, and then, over the course of one working day, meets with members of the schools community (usually the principal, the school council president, one or more senior teachers, and a senior education office from the school region) to verify the accuracy of the school self-assessment and to ensure that the recommendations are appropriate and provide sufficient challenge. The school reviewer prepares a report of the meeting for the school and for the government.
3. **Diagnostic Review** – These schools have been determined to be performing significantly below expected levels (both in trends and compared to all other schools of the same type) in at least two main data sets (say, student learning outcomes and organisational health). These reviews are more intensive than other school reviews (a reviewer may be involved for two or more days in the school) and are designed to

identify those factors that may be impacting on the school's ability to improve student outcomes to expected levels.

Allocation of schools to the three categories is a two-stage process. The first stage uses information from key data sets from previous years to provide a 'first cut' of schools into the three categories by the central office. The second stage uses local knowledge of issues and challenges gathered by regional offices, and other relevant data sets to moderate the initial categorisation. In 2004, of the 660 schools reviewed, approximately 17% were in the negotiated review category, 75% in the continuous improvement review category and 8% in the diagnostic review category (Department of Education & Training, 2004).

The differential review process began in 2004. In 2005 there were considerable changes made to the conduct of continuous improvement reviews, with these now placing an emphasis on planning and change rather than audit of performance. Give the changes, it is too early to comment on the worth of the current review program (Gurr, 1999 provides analysis of the earlier review progress), although there appears to be far greater emphasis on moral and professional accountability. Contractual accountability is met increasingly by standard systemic procedures. At the beginning of each year, schools are given summary information of an extensive array of student performance, staff, student and parent opinion, and other school performance data for their school with comparison data provided for state and like-schools. These data are not only useful for schools, but also allow the central office to do an audit of performance to meet contractual accountability requirements.

Whilst most states require schools to report annually on performance, external reviews of performance vary from not at all (Northern Territory) to three years (eg. South Australia) or intermittently (e.g New South Wales).

Several states have a review process similar to the Victorian continuous performance review (Tasmania, South Australia, Western Australia, Queensland, Australian Capital Territory) Of those states that are similar, only the Australian Capital Territory has independent verification of school self-assessments, whilst the other states use a senior education officer to verify the school self-assessment.

Whilst no other state in Australia is using a differential review program like that of Victoria, South Australia, Queensland and New South Wales do have provision for more intensive reviews of underperforming schools. In the case of New South Wales, *Program* (in-depth analysis of an area at the request of a school or system) or *Management* (in-depth school review requested by the system in response to poor performance) reviews are available, with the review process tailored to school needs. In the case of Queensland, the process for selection is not as systematic or transparent as that of Victoria, and the review process is not as clearly articulated. South Australia is proposing to use desk-top audits on one third of school annually to identify underperforming schools for *Targetted Reviews*.

To support the review of school performance the states have constructed various information systems. Victoria has one of the most extensive and includes not only student

learning outcome data, but also parent opinion, student opinion, student demographics, organisational health (including staff opinion), and other data including student retention, destination and attendance. Comparison data for state averages and like-school averages (categorisation based upon measures of poverty and ethnicity) are provided for most data sets, with all data collated and presented to individual schools at the beginning of the school year in the *School Level Report* (www.sofweb.vic.edu.au/standards/account/spr.htm). Not all states provide these comparative data (South Australia is the exception) and some states that have these data use a sample of schools (e.g. the Australian Capital Territory aggregates data for a third of schools each year). All states have, or are developing, curriculum and standards frameworks to guide assessment of student learning outcomes across the compulsory years of school (generally from age 5 or 6 to age 15). At the post-compulsory level there are variety of systems for assuring the quality of the various programs (refer to a summary of these by the Queensland Board of Senior Secondary School Studies, 1999) and student performance on year 12 assessments forms a common comparison point as all students across Australia who complete these are given a percentile ranking called the ENTER score. Value-added data are either not available or unsophisticated (e.g. comparison of actual student cohort progress compared to that expected on the basis of a curriculum and standards framework).

Internationally recognised systems of school monitoring and quality assurance are also evident in some states. The two most common are the International Schools Council anISO9000. Both provide detailed and prescriptive self-assessment tools and the opportunity for external monitoring of progress. In some states, schools have been able to substitute these programs (e.g. South Australia) or use them in addition to (e.g. Victoria) the locally derived school supervision programs. The Australian Quality Council (www.aqc.org.au) is active in several states helping governments to implement quality programs in schools (Victoria has a program that has been running for several years, whilst South Australia began a program in 2001 and the ACT used the quality framework as a central feature of its previous school accountability framework). These programs have a dual focus of implementing quality review programs at both the school administration and classroom levels.

In addition to school monitoring all states have systems to monitor the performance of teachers and principals and to monitor the performance of the government school system. In Victoria, for example, teacher and principal performance is monitored through annual reviews conducted at the school level for teachers and at a regional level for principals. Monitoring of the school system is conducted through system wide testing of student learning in literacy and numeracy, public reporting of individual school performance (in a quasi-league table format), financial audits of all schools and of the government department responsible for education, independent reports on government department performance through the Auditor-General's Office, publication of department sponsored research, publication of an annual report and the maintenance of a comprehensive web-site (www.deet.vic.gov.au).

Non-government Schools in Australia

This paper has concentrated on government schools. Non-government schools do not have the same governmental requirements for school monitoring and quality assurance, although in many cases the school community (be that parents, a school board, or sponsoring body) will require extensive analysis of performance.

Non-government schools are generally required by the various state and territory governments to produce enough information to ensure that they are bona fide schools (e.g. curriculum plans, qualified staff, adequate buildings, etc), but are not required by government to produce performance related information on a systematic basis that is publicly reported (AEU, 2004; Auditor-General NSW, 2004; Grimshaw, 2002). This is a somewhat anomalous situation as all non-government schools in Australia receive government financial support (mainly from the Federal government) varying with the extent of advantage in the school community. Thus, whilst all schools receive public money, it is only government schools that are required to be publicly accountable for educational outcomes; there was an initiative by the federal government that would have required all schools to place on a billboard key school performance data (e.g. student literacy and numeracy performance, student attendance), but this has been deferred. Having said this, non-government schools do produce information on educational outcomes for a variety of purposes for different forums. The majority of non-government schools that have a secondary school component will provide parents and school boards with summary information on performance in Year 12 assessments. Non-government schools may also be required by the funding bodies of various programs to report on student performance.

There is pressure from both the Commonwealth and some of the state and territory governments for non-government schools to provide more information. In Victoria, a major review of the Education Act is being conducted with this is likely to mean that all schools, government and non-government will be required to produce reports on school performance. Non-government schools are already responding to this, with for example, the Catholic schools in Victoria planning for the introduction in 2006 of a school accountability framework that is likely to involve school self-assessment and independent verification, similar to the continuous improvement reviews used in Victorian government schools. This will provide consistency across the four dioceses and across the school types. Currently in Victoria, there are different review models used depending on the diocese and whether the school is a primary or secondary school. In the Melbourne Archdiocese, primary schools are reviewed every six years using a cooperative review and validation process involving self-evaluation, followed by observation and validation by an external panel that prepares a report for the school community and the Director of Catholic Education (Stevens, in print). For secondary schools there is no systemic school review process, with individual schools conducting their own review.

Discussion

Learmouth's view of accountability provides a useful framework to reflect upon school supervision in Australia. All but one of the states have systems in place that meet contractual accountability obligations, although New South Wales and Western Australia

have systems that are very limited in the quality of data generated, and in South Australia there is not strong linkage between the review process and contractual obligations. Of the remaining states, moral accountability is also evident. In New South Wales, South Australia and Queensland meeting the needs of the school community seems to have heightened emphasis. Only two states have the potential for schools to engage in professional accountability. Victoria has, and the Australian Capital Territory is developing a system that allows individuals in schools to reflect deeply on schooling and the expectations they have. In part these systems allow this because there is an external independent review component that can support and challenge schools. I have indicated that these systems have the potential for meeting professional accountability rather than that they are meeting it. The systems are not comprehensive (for example, neither includes reflection based upon classroom observations), and both are low-cost programs that limit the amount of discussion available – in both cases the review component for the majority of schools is limited to a one-day meeting with one independent reviewer. Whether professional accountability is encouraged in these systems depends in the main on how schools respond to the systemic accountability requirements – there are structures and tools that can facilitate the deep reflection and dialogue needed, but schools need to actively work to ensure this happens.

Cuttance's (Radii, 2005) international review of accountability systems identified several limitations of Australian systems: 'Overall, Australian school systems lag behind the developments in other countries, with implementation being up to five years behind leading-edge developments in internationally' (Radii. 2005: 4). It is worth considering that Cuttance's review did not include consideration of the Victorian system as the report was commissioned by the Victorian Department of Education and Training to inform the 2005 changes. Leading-edge developments identified by Cuttance include:

- Use of school self-evaluation with external independent assessment within a 3-5 year review cycle that incorporates annual reporting of progress at meeting strategic plans.
- Better provision of information to parents and community and greater involvement of all stakeholder groups.
- Provision of school performance data on-line.
- Reduction in accountability for separate programs as there is increasing acknowledgement of the complexity of schools and the difficulty in linking individual programs to student learning growth.
- Use of judgements about the effectiveness of teaching practice in individual classrooms to inform accountability systems.
- Increasing use of sophisticated measures of learning ('assessment for learning tools') and value-added analysis, with some countries focussing on learning growth targets for individual students.
- Raw achievement data used to set school level performance targets, especially for minimum standards of achievement.
- Increased use of student and parent surveys.
- Planning is seen as a core school practice with guidelines used rather than prescription in how school plans are presented.

- Student learning outcomes are the main focus, with affective domains also important in some systems. Typically there are required/core performance indicators that schools assess against.

Australian systems were noted as:

- Making greater use of 'review by exception' as opposed to focussing on quality improvement across all schools.
- Existing in 'an almost constate of flux' which 'in some systems leads to very weak accountability' (p. 4).
- Not using external independent assessment and reporting.
- Needing more effective self-assessment tools.

In terms of the leading-edge developments, by virtue of the use of independent verification, Victoria and the Australian Capital Territory are the most progressive states, with Queensland, South Australia and Tasmania following. The use of survey data is a feature of most state systems, as is the concern to provide parents and the community with useful school performance information. It seems that in the next few years every state will have established a new or updated accountability system that will approach the leading states in terms of school planning and self-assessment, but not in terms of independent verification. Non-government schools will likely come under similar arrangements in the future, either through government mandate (e.g. Victoria) or self-initiated policies and processes (e.g. Victorian Catholic schools). The areas that are strikingly absent from Australian systems are judgements on teaching practice in individual classrooms, and, the use of sophisticated measures of learning and value-added analysis. With all states not wanting to construct systems that might be construed as inspectorial, and with an aversion to expensive review processes, it is likely that no Australian state will include judgements on teaching practice in individual classrooms as part of an accountability/supervision process. With some states already providing schools with an extensive range of data, the use of sophisticated measures of learning and value-added analysis are likely to appear in Australian systems as these forms of data collection and analysis become more acceptable and easier to construct.

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