

In the early hours of last Thursday morning I found myself sifting through pages on the new Federal government's My School website. Like most internet research it wasn't a designed encounter – but I later discovered I was one of the lucky ones before the whole thing crashed. I quickly checked on my own children's school results and after satisfying myself that by continuing to enroll them in 2010 I would not endanger their future prospects I scrolled on.

And what I found was a remarkable social tool. I analysed results in three remote Aboriginal communities. Having taught some of the students whose results are now trapped on the world wide web – the fact that they were well below the national benchmarks was sadly – not a surprise. But at least now in blue and white we know that the majority of these kids can't read and write. We (meaning parents, teachers, community leaders, governments, voters and tax payers) are failing them. If we keep doing what we have done in the past we will continue to create building blocks for human misery. I was able to compare instantly two remote schools – one teaching via mainstream English, the other bi-lingual to see what the outcomes were. No warm fuzzy ideas of what's good for the students and their culture – but evidence of what is and what is not working.

And it would be simplistic to blame the model of schooling. We cannot simply take children from a dysfunctional home-life – give them six hours of excellent education five days a week and believe that things will turn around. Education begins in the home and is nurtured in a strong and caring community. Evidence shows that resources invested in early childhood can have an enormous positive outcome for children in later life.

For me the worry about the My School website is not the danger of the simplistic league table – it is the dangerous assumption that disadvantage must always equal poor educational outcomes. The thinking goes that if my school is in a lower socio economic area or has a high proportion of Indigenous students then it must be compared with similar schools. In this way we can target disadvantage instead of punishing poverty.

I created my own Toowoomba League Table today and sadly it wasn't pretty. Almost without exception the neighborhoods and suburbs in this region with lower median weekly incomes had lower results in the National Literacy and Numeracy tests. The dream of education is that it is a gift – an opportunity to make our way in life – a way out of poverty. Sadly the greatest predictor of educational outcomes is often the socioeconomic background of the student. And while we want to hold onto this dream we vote with our feet. Schools (be they Government, Catholic or Independent) are bursting at the seams in the 'better areas' and withering on the vine in the 'deprived areas'.

The move to publish results has great possibilities. Let's hope it doesn't merely document disasters and paper over failures. In the United States some prison companies plan their locations of new jails based on the 4th grade test scores of poorer schools. It needn't be like this.

As the school term ended for 2009 an educational highlight occurred for me. I farewelled a young student who had spent her second year in a local boarding school.

She proudly told me of how she had achieved a B in one of her subjects. She comes from a remote community in Northern Australia where 90% of Year 7 students are below the national minimum reading level. (I got that from the My School website!) It is truly an inspiring effort and a great tribute to the school and supporters of this young woman. My hope is that one day young students like her are not exceptions and can learn to read and write in their own neighborhoods.