
St Mary MacKillop College Michael Lee with senior students David Reyes, Phoebe Vassallo and Hima Pynadath. Picture by Keegan Carroll

Veil of secrecy lifted on ACT year 12 results for first time in five years

Find out how your school performed last year.

SARAH LANSDOWN

THE performance of Year 12 cohorts in Canberra schools can be revealed for the first time in five years after data measures once routinely made public were released through a freedom of information request.

The Board of Senior Secondary Studies stopped releasing data on schools' median ATARs in 2019 over concerns that it was promoting competition and rivalry between schools.

The board will review its processes after *The Canberra Times* used freedom of information laws to obtain the data points that were once freely available.

The Education Directorate's FOI decision maker said on balance the release of the information was in the public interest as it would contribute to positive and informed debate on important issues and enhance government accountability.

"Any negative effects that may be experienced by the 2024 cohort or current students at schools that may be identified as having a relatively lower median ATAR in 2024 are not expected to have a lasting impact on individuals or the schools concerned," the FOI officer said.

"This is because ATARs are used solely for the purpose of university entry, which is not relevant to all students within a school and is particular to a point in time."

There were no privacy issues in releasing the data and it would not significantly impact the business of non-government schools, the FOI officer said.

The median ATAR for all students in the ACT in 2024 was 77.45, while 79.2 per cent of the cohort received an ATAR of 65.

Education Minister Yvette Berry said she did not support the reintroduction of annual ATAR data by school, but she did support the Board's review.

"The changes made by the BSSS in 2019 were based on strong evidence and sound reasoning," she said.

"The focus shifted away from fostering unhealthy competition between schools and toward celebrating the achievements of each Year 12 cohort as a whole.

"This approach supports student wellbeing and encourages a more inclusive and supportive educational environment."

Ms Berry said there had not been any negative impacts as a result of the change.

Many principals have welcomed the reduced focus on the single datapoint of the ATAR that can be used to produce so-called "league tables".

But Centre for Independent Studies education director Glenn Fahey said transparency and competition could greatly benefit schools that are not meeting their potential.

"To date, there's very little evidence that education data in schooling, at least, is systematically misused in unfair ways. League tables have a place if they've got appropriate context." Mr Fahey said.

"The solution to an imperfect individual indicator of performance is to include a range of performance indicators that create a broader picture of what performance in the school system looks like."

Class of 2024

The ATAR - Australian Tertiary Admissions Rank - is a rank used by universities to select which year 12 leavers they admit to undergraduate courses. The highest possible ATAR is 99.95.

A person who receives an ATAR of below 65 will be able to gain entry to a limited selection of institutions and courses and may be able to boost their chances with adjustment points or alternative entry.

The school-by-school results show a diversity in cohorts.

Canberra Girls Grammar School had the highest median ATAR of 87.8. This does not include the students at the high-fee girls' school who completed the International Baccalaureate Diploma.

St Edmund's College had the lowest median ATAR of 66.6. The school had a cohort of 63 students who achieved the Year 12 certificate and 28 of these boys received an ATAR.

St Edmund's College Principal Tim Cleary said the small cohort skewed the school's results in 2024.

"Data is in the public domain in most jurisdictions, so it's not something that should be hidden, but it should be understood," he said.

"When you're just looking at the raw data, for example, for our school ... that wouldn't have been our finest hour."

He said it was important to note whether each student had been able to achieve their best and to consider their parents' background and whether they had achieved their goals, such as studying a trade.

"Wouldn't it be good if there was an overlay of social understanding of where people have come from and what the value add has been?"

YEAR 12 RESULTS BY SCHOOL 2024

TOP LEVEL RESULTS FOR EVERY ACT SCHOOL THAT HAD A YEAR 12 COHORT COMPLETE THE BSSS SENIOR SECONDARY CERTIFICATE

SCHOOL	NUMBER CERTIFICATED	NUMBER TES	MEDIAN ATAR	PERCENTAGE OVER 65
Burgmann Anglican School	135	127	80.95	87.4%
Brindabella Christian College	66	61	74.45	67.2%
Canberra College	499	264	76.15	80.7%
Canberra Girls Grammar School	103	99	87.80	92.9%
Cit Pathways College	61	17	82.35	100%
Melba Copland Secondary School	72	27	81.05	96.3%
Daramalan College	221	174	80.65	83.9%
Dickson College	346	213	84.15	85%
St Edmund's College	63	28	66.60	57.1%
Erindale College	301	91	68.05	56%
Galilee School	7	Na		
Gungahlin College	524	218	67.50	55%
Hawker College	299	149	80.40	83.9%
UC SSC Lake Ginninderra	322	161	79.35	87.6%
Marist College	208	166	79.35	81.9%
Merici College	79	49	79.40	93.9%
St Mary MacKillop College	282	163	78.15	81.6%
Narrabundah College	477	406	82.00	82%
Orana Steiner School	21	18	80.90	77.8%
Radford College	189	176	84.00	87.5%
St Francis Xavier College	137	86	78.35	80.2%
St John Paul II College	96	71	72.85	74.6%
St Clare's College	139	107	70.10	66.4%
Trinity Christian School	57	53	80.70	83%
Lake Tuggeranong College	287	100	71.45	63%

'Wouldn't it be good if there was an overlay of social understanding of where people have come from and what the value add has been?'

St Edmund's College principal Tim Cleary

Merici College's deputy principal of teaching and learning, Renee Taylor, said she was not in favour of producing the list of year 12 data.

"It did make parents judge schools on just pure ATAR results. And as we know that's only one measure in which actually makes up how well a school is performing."

The all-girls Catholic school had a median ATAR of 79.4 for the students who chose the BSSS pathway, however Ms Taylor said this was boosted to 80.2 when combined with their 10 students who completed the International Baccalaureate Diploma.

Mrs Taylor said her school celebrated all students through its "destinations board" which displayed a picture of each student and their next step after school.

She said schools were less competitive with each other since the data stopped being published.

"Rather than focusing on the magical number at the end of the year, where we're focusing far more as a holistic education of our children, and we're working more together as a collaborative system."

St Mary MacKillop College principal Michael Lee said on balance he was not in favour of the school-based data being published.

"Making the data available is one thing, and what communities and ... some media choose to do with it is another thing," Mr Lee said.

"There's some really heroic stories around an ATAR of 60 that the media is not particularly interested in, but the school community wishes to celebrate.

"I'm not interested in secrets or cover-ups. But I am interested in reputation and a much wider package than simply an ATAR."

Mr Lee said his school was proud of its class of 2024 - of which six students received an ATAR over 99 - but was equally proud of its investment in its trade training centre and emphasis on creating well-rounded students.

ACT Principal's Association co-chair and principal of Canberra College Simon Vaughan said parents made decisions about schooling based on where they think their children would be happy, rather than ATAR data.

"It depends on how [the data is] presented and how it's taken," he said.

"Essentially, there is a top and there is a bottom, and if you feel like your college is at the bottom of the league table, well it must affect people, the staff and the students.

"I don't think that there is as significant a gap between top and bottom as people imagine. And I think that what you would see is that any student at any college can get a very good ATAR."

He said students were concerned about many things as they enter young adulthood.

"There's a lot of things that concern the students. I'm not able to really accurately say to you, though, whether or not their wellbeing is impacted by the publication of these things, but I think there's maybe a bit of a dangerous attachment to numbers."

Measures of success

Education Directorate executive group manager of system policy and reform Nicole Moore said public colleges tended to attract students from public and private high schools thanks to the wide variety of subjects and career pathways on offer.

An Education Directorate destinations survey found 93 per cent of year 12 leavers from 2024 entered employment or further study.

"What we're looking at is, what are the outcomes we're achieving for our young people, and how is our college and education system preparing them for that?" Mrs Moore said.

"So less about are they getting a particular ATAR score, for example, but are they actually moving on to the kinds of pathways that they're aspiring to when they're in college?"

ACT Council of Parents & Citizens Associations executive officer Veronica Elliott said there should be a more inclusive view of success.

"Comparing the median ATAR results for Colleges and Schools only reflects a portion of the student body for an individual cohort and does not capture the full value of a school's contribution to student learning," she said.

"All forms of student success matter. Every pathway completed is an achievement and deserves recognition."

Mr Fahey said a high degree of competition had been found to improve the overall performance of similar schools.

"Having that gentle accountability is the opportunity for them to lift... they're able to compare with schools like theirs."

He said about one in five Australian parents used the MySchool website when choosing schools, but that parents should carefully consider the academic achievement of schools.

"There can be significant differences in the performance of individual schools. Those can be really meaningful and can change the course of a child's life."

We all have a stake in schooling. Give us the data we need to be informed

SARAH LANSDOWN
ANALYSIS

FOR the past five years, the Canberra community has been in the dark about how year 12 students performed in their last year of school.

We had basic statistics about the number of students who completed a senior secondary certificate and the number of these who went on to get an ATAR to help them enter university.

We know that 88 per cent of the class of 2024 had an ATAR of 60 or above and 80 per cent of schools had students who achieved an ATAR of 95 or above.

Beyond that, it was up to each school to decide what, if any, information to share about their school.

This opens the door for schools to be selective about which statistics to share.

In the worst case, schools can be misleading about how their results are presented.

For example, several years ago Brindabella Christian College had claims about their ATAR results printed on the side of buses claiming 50 per cent of its cohort received an ATAR of 99.

While this may have been a simple typo, there was no way for the public to verify these claims as the Board of Senior Secondary Studies had chosen not to release any school-by-school data from 2019 onwards.

The grounds for this decision were largely based on student welfare and not wanting to create unhealthy competition.

The fears around these reasons are overstated. Students have many other things on their minds - the median ATAR of their class surely doesn't rank as highly as what their futures will look like. They look at their ATAR, get into university by one way or another, and then move on with their lives.

A level of competition can help institutions strive to be their best and direct resources where they are most needed.

The freedom of information officer decided to release this data to us because it was in the public interest.

There are several reasons why we have chosen to seek and publish this data.

A large amount of taxpayer money is invested in the education system - both private and public schools - and so there should be some accountability measures to ensure this is spent wisely.

A school stating that they have a certain number of students over 99 doesn't necessarily give an accurate picture of how the cohort overall performed. The median figure shows how the student in the middle of the pack performed and reduces the impact of outliers.

Most people would agree that the ATAR is not the only way to measure success as it is a rank for the single purpose of university entrance.

But the answer to imperfect data isn't less transparency, it's actually releasing more data to build a holistic picture of a school.

For instance, how did students who did a school-based apprenticeship perform? How many entered further training? How many got a job?

School-based data on these measures could be combined with other data points - such as the school's level of socioeducational advantage, student attendance rates and funding per student - to provide a more rounded picture of how each school is serving its students.

It's very unlikely that parents will take one year's ATAR median and make a decision of where to send their child.

But combining academic performance with other factors - such as size, values, facilities, program offering and location - gives parents a fulsome picture of what a school can offer for their child.

The BSSS should take this all into account in reviewing how year 12 data will be handled at the end of this year.