

# The Effective Use of Student Management Systems for Assessment and Reporting

An investigation into how schools are using their student management  
system for assessment and reporting.

Primary Principals' Sabbatical Leave Scheme.

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## Acknowledgement

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for supporting me in the undertaking of this study and to the school  
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At Greenacres School, we have been using our student management system for all aspects of assessment data storage, analysis and reporting for the last five years and I have taken on the roles of curriculum leadership, training and troubleshooter in this area.

My proposal was to investigate how schools use their student management system for assessment and reporting and then report on the most effective practices for schools to enable them to source, from their student management system, accurate, useful and reliable data that can be used to improve teaching programmes and student learning.

At the initial stage of my investigation, I contacted the major suppliers of student management systems to primary schools to establish what their system was capable of providing to the school.

Once the initial stage was completed I surveyed principals of over thirty schools to establish which student management system they use (if any), what they use their student management system for, how effectively they feel it is used and how it is managed within the school. I also visited principals of schools where student management system providers felt that their student management system was being used effectively. I contacted the Education Review Office for their opinions on the use of student management system in schools but their spokesperson was unable to give any response as there had been no official investigation completed in this area so therefore there was no reliable data available.

## Findings

### *Student Management System Availability*

Currently the following SMS are available for primary schools

Windows and Mac platform

- eTap
- SchoolMaster
- Assembly

Windows platform only

- Musac
- PC School
- Synergetic

All that follows is based on investigation into Assembly, eTap, Musac and SchoolMaster, as PC School and Synergetic are used by only a very small group of schools (none in my sample group).

It should be noted that SchoolMaster, while a very popular SMS, is being slowly phased out by the owners who are developing Assembly as a replacement.

When meeting with personnel from the four main SMS vendors I found that eTap, Musac and SchoolMaster are all able to accept data and present it in reports that are clear and useful to school management and any other interested persons.

The way in which data is entered and retrieved varies considerably from SMS to SMS, however the end result from each is similar. All SMS appear to be intuitive, i.e., once a user has mastered basic navigation, it is relatively easy to apply this knowledge and figure out how to complete new and different tasks. Users of Musac and SchoolMaster are able to create reports using any of the data that has been entered; Assembly and eTap have a large number of “set” reports for the user to use - if the user wants a different report this can be created by the programmers.

Assembly, being a very new SMS, is currently still under development and will ultimately replace SchoolMaster. While the administration side of Assembly is fully functional, the assessment side currently can only accept data from standardised tests, however I was shown the direction that

development is taking and, in the near future, Assembly should be as effective as the other major SMS in producing quality assessment data reports.

## Survey

As earlier mentioned, I surveyed principals of over thirty schools with the following questions

1. Which student management system do you use?
2. Does your school use your SMS for assessment?
3. Do your teachers find entering assessment data into your SMS easy?
4. Do you and your teachers find it easy to access data in your SMS?
5. Can you and your management team get aggregated assessment information in a useful format from your SMS?
6. Do you have a person in your school, in a specified role with responsibility for maintaining and developing the assessment area of your SMS? (This could also include troubleshooting and helping staff who are having difficulty with data entry/retrieval etc.)
7. Does this person have any of the following
  - Specific release time to work with SMS and/or teachers regarding assessment data
  - Fixed term or permanent salary units
8. Do you have any provision for replacement of this person if he/she leaves your school?
9. Have your teaching staff had training in the use of the assessment side of your SMS
10. Do you have any provision for ongoing training in the use of the assessment area of your SMS for staff?

Responses were

1. Which student management system do you use?

Assembly	9.7%
eTap	19.4%
Musac	51.6%
PC School	0.0%
SchoolMaster	19.4%
Synergetic	0.0%

2. Does your school use your SMS for assessment?

All assessment	35.7%
Some overall schoolwide assessment	46.4%
Some teachers use it	3.6%
Not at all	14.3%

## Comments

We hope to but need further development

3. Do your teachers find entering assessment data into your SMS easy?

Yes 84.0%

No 16.0%

#### Comments

With a lot of guidance from me at the start - we have guide sheets we have created to make the process easier.

They don't have much luck accessing it after they have entered it and in the past the Principal has entered it for them.

After the initial training we gave them they found it easy.

Issues with frequency of use means less confidence in using. A bit "clunky" - ie not intuitive, need to be focused on task and able to follow instructions which are sometimes a bit complicated.

Columns complex and too small. Scrolling is an issue.

Takes practice and they need to make sure it is all on before we roll over at year end! E-asttle and PAT Maths is put on Musac although the data is better analysed on the respective websites.

4. Do you and your teachers find it easy to access assessment data in your SMS?

Yes 80.0%

No 20.0%

#### Comments

They find the information hard to extract from the database.

Not all teachers use all the features of our SMS yet. We are providing ongoing training.

Staff changeover. Remembering how to use from one "event" to the next. Reliance of some staff on office to provide lists - IT resistance / unfamiliarity.

Not always. Sometimes putting the formulas in for where a child should be at a certain age is confusing.

Again, it takes practice.

Although often you have to remind yourself of how to do some things.

5. Can you and your management team get aggregated assessment in a useful format from your SMS?

Yes	60.0%
No	8.0%
Sometimes	32.0%

#### Comments

With some assistance.

Not at present but largely because we have not made the move to having all staff use it as a matter of course or school policy.

For most assessments - some is better in original form.

Usually, but the shortfall is not the system - it is how we have set it up.

6. Do you have a person in your school in a designated role with responsibility for maintaining and developing the assessment area of your SMS? (This could also include troubleshooting and helping staff who are having difficulty with data entry/retrieval.)

Principal	36.0%
Deputy/Assistant Principal	36.0%
Senior Teacher	20.0%
Teacher	24.0%
Nobody	8.0%

#### Comments

Teacher/Office Administrator share role.

ICT coordinator.

DP is now Principal and will need to upskill new DP.

School Secretary and Management Team but in discussion with teachers.

The ICT team have had training and then train us.

The Principal on an ad hoc basis.

7. Does this person have any of the following

Specific release time to work with SMS and/or teachers regarding assessment data	31.3%
Fixed term or permanent salary units	68.8%

#### Comments

The Deputy Principal does not have a class.

...and release - but not always accessible when needed.

Release if necessary but system created to be as user friendly as possible.

Our greatest challenge, or rather the ICT team's, greatest challenge is that we have to design everything we want to use for assessment. It is another of my tasks.

8. Do you have any provision for replacement of this person if he/she leaves your school?

Yes	56.5%
No	43.5%

#### Comments

This is currently under discussion.

Team for sustainability.

I will train a teacher to do this role although my DP and AP have some knowledge.

9. Have your teaching staff members had training in the use of the assessment side of your SMS?

All teaching staff	60.0%
Some teaching staff	24.0%
Management team only	8.0%
Some members of management team	12.0%
Nobody	4.0%

#### Comments

Part-time teachers - no.

Leadership and ICT teams.

We have had Musac in taking sessions with staff on loading and getting info off the system.

From Musac and myself.

Some of it is on the job training on a need to know basis

10. Do you have any provision for ongoing training in the use of the assessment area of your SMS for staff?

Yes	72.0%
No	20.0%
For new staff only	2.0%

#### Comments



Not specifically planned but when needed we bring training in and all pitch in to learn and teach each other.

On an 'as needed' basis.

We are currently in 5 different PD contracts and no money in the budget for anything else.

We provide it as and when needed.

Any training is done as and when needed. Generally it is carried out informally or one on one with a colleague.

We have given up and have developed our own spreadsheets. The SMS was too difficult, unreliable and confusing.

Before teachers need to use it for school tasks we have a "reminder" session.

Budget line.

Sadly, this is costly, and the provider needs to travel to our city.

We have a team who is lead by the teacher with responsibility. The team then work with their group of teachers.

## *Interviews with Principals*

I interviewed principals of randomly chosen schools as well as schools where the SMS is perceived, by SMS vendors, to be effectively used. In some schools I also spoke to the staff member responsible for the maintenance of the SMS.

In schools where the SMS is effectively used, and teachers and management are happy with the SMS, the following were common threads to all

- The SMS had been carefully set up (even if this had initially been by trial and error and involved many changes and re-entry of data!).
- The principal is involved in the process, is fully supportive of, understands and uses the SMS.
- There is somebody (or a team), within the school, who has become “the expert” and is available to support both teachers and management at all times (including phone calls at night when teachers are trying to enter/retrieve data!). This person may be the principal, however, it may also be any other staff member.
- There is somebody within the school who “maintains” the SMS, setting up assessment schedules etc.
- There has been a considerable amount of staff training - both formal and informal - the initial 10 hours training that all schools were allocated by the MoE a few years ago was only the beginning...
- A very clear schoolwide assessment programme that all teaching staff can, and do, follow.
- All teaching staff (both full-time and part-time) are expected to use the SMS to record all assessment data and to retrieve assessment data to use for enhancing their teaching programmes.

## Conclusions

The effective use of a student management system can make it considerably easier for both school management and teachers to retrieve and analyze assessment data in ways that can be used to enhance teaching programmes and improve student learning as well as provide reports for BoT, Parents, ERO etc.

All of the student management systems currently available to primary schools are capable of the above.

For any student management system to work well in a school there must be the following

- Careful initial setup.
- Principal must be supportive of, understand and use the system
- Somebody within the school (or a team) must take responsibility for the system and be available (almost 24 hours!) to quickly solve problems for other staff members as well as set up assessment schedules etc.
- There needs to be a clear assessment programme that all teaching staff are expected to follow.
- All teaching staff members must be fully trained in the use of the school's SMS. The amount of training needed will vary from one staff member to another. Training may vary according to need, from being a full staff workshop on a specific aspect to one on one.
- All staff members must be expected to use the system independently
- The school needs to make provision for replacement of the "expert" if or when he/she leaves the school.