



Submission to the

Inquiry into the Administration and Reporting of NAPLAN Testing

by

The State School Teachers' Union of Western Australia (Inc.)

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ABSTRACT

This submission is not meant to provide a rigorous “analytical proof”; not does it purport to possess all of the answers in regards to the problematic aspects of the NAPLAN regime and the publication of its related data. Instead, its focus is on the negative and undesirable unintended consequences of implementing a “census testing and ranking” regime, such as NAPLAN, arguing that such a regime should be abolished in favour of a regime that is based upon sampling and key indicators in order to gauge the effectiveness of providing good quality education in an equitable manner to our young. Indeed, by implication, it proposes that the best way of safeguarding against the misuse of a “census and ranking” NAPLAN data is not to collect it in the way in which it is being done at all so as to avoid misleading the public and, at the same time, doing injustice to – as well as hampering - schools and their professional staff, especially public ones, in their efforts to provide good quality, comprehensive and equitable education for all of their students. In so doing, it proposes some well tested alternatives, making also a number of recommendations as a way to redressing the current problematic effects of the NAPLAN regime.

SUMMARY OF RECOMENDATIONS

[1] That the NAPLAN regime be replaced with a regime of “sampling and key indicators” based on a comprehensive set of information about the substantive and real circumstances of schools and their communities.

In the event that the NAPLAN “testing and ranking” regime were to be retained:

[2] That a transparent, clear and consistent set of guidelines for the NAPLAN testing period be developed to ensure an ‘even playing field’ in this aspect of the NAPLAN.

[3] That Federal and State /Territory Governments work to establish processes and/ or legislation to prevent the harvesting of NAPLAN data for the purpose of creating league tables.

[4] That protections remain in place to ensure that the identification of the performance of individual students is not ‘accessible to the world’.

[5] That Federal and State/Territory governments commit to a guarantee that Australian school students be exposed to a broad curriculum offering. This undertaking is to be enshrined in the basic principles underpinning the implementation of the Australian Curriculum.

[6] That Federal and State/Territory governments commit to enshrine in legislation a guarantee that schools’ curricula provision be monitored so as to ensure that any attempts or unintended effects narrowing the curriculum offering be countered and suitably and appropriately redressed.

[7] That the Federal Government refrains from publishing misleading data on MySchool website.

[8] That the Federal government commits to a funding regime for schools that supports the public responsibility of providing good quality and equitable education for all.

Background

The State School Teachers' Union of Western Australia (Inc) (henceforth the "SSTUWA") has been in existence since 1898. It has a proud history of engagement in both professional and industrial matters, seeking to improve conditions for its members, as well as the students who attend public schools and TAFE colleges.

In addition, the SSTUWA and its members have an affiliation and membership with other teachers and lecturers in public education facilities across the nation through the Federal Australian Education Union. Through this body we contribute to national and international research on educational policy matters and contribute the development of national directions in education.

The Union represents about fifteen thousand teachers, administrators, school psychologists, district directors, swimming teachers, education officers and school development officers in the government schools sector and lecturers in the TAFEWA sector.

The SSTUWA welcomes this opportunity to submit to the Working Party its collective views representing thousands of teachers and school administrator working within the public school system in Western Australia. Our members, as teaching practitioners who are entrusted with ensuring the educational progress of some two-thirds of Western Australian children, have a direct personal stake in and have substantively working towards supporting "systemic" reforms aimed at fostering, facilitating and nurturing the students' learning environment and conditions in an equitable manner; as well as in ensuring that their professional integrity is not unduly compromised. Indeed, the SSTUWA has had an ongoing role in ensuring such conditions are met. To these ends, it represents its members in a range of fora dealing with policy development and review including curriculum development, reporting, school accountability, performance management, management of new initiatives e.g. student management and career path development.

Introduction

Hon. Members of the Senate Inquiry, the SSTUWA is mindful of the stated Terms of Reference set by the Senate in its endeavour to enquire into the effects of the NAPLAN assessment and reporting regime. These are as follows:

- (a) the conflicting claims made by the Government, educational experts and peak bodies in relation to the publication of the National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) testing;*
- (b) the implementation of possible safeguards and protocols around the public presentation of the testing and reporting data;*
- (c) the impact of the NAPLAN assessment and reporting regime on:*
 - (i) the educational experience and outcomes for Australian students,*
 - (ii) the scope, innovation and quality of teaching practice,*

(iii) the quality and value of information about student progress provided to parents and principals, and

(iv) the quality and value of information about individual schools to parents, principals and the general community; and

(d) international approaches to the publication of comparative reporting of the results, i.e. 'league tables'; and

e) other related matters.

As stated above, the SSTUWA is an integral part of the Australian Education Union (AEU). As such, the Honourable Members of the inquiry would be aware that the AEU has also lodged a detailed submission specifically addressing each of the Terms of Reference listed above. The SSTUWA fully supports that submission. In this context, the purpose of this paper is not to rehearse or traverse the same issues that have already been dealt with in the AEU submissions in the same way.

Instead, its purpose is to focus on some of the substantive effects that are already detectable at the school level in Western Australia that may be indicative of unintended – and we maintain undesirable – consequences attributable that the implementation of the NAPLAN. In essence this submission argues that far from achieving the stated aims canvassed by the Government, the implementing of the NAPLAN testing combined with the publication of the results in the way in which it is been done is responsible for:

- undermining the breath of our students' educational experience;
- failing to redress the inequities at the root of educationally disadvantaged students;
- undermining "transparent and accountable" ongoing school improvements;
- unfairly stigmatising schools and its teaching staff on the grounds of misleading information;
- fostering and abetting the development of dubious and expedient practises at the school level in a bid to protect theirs and their own staff and students' reputations within a meaningless "competitive" school funding model.

Term of Reference 1:

(a) the conflicting claims made by the Government, educational experts and peak bodies in relation to the publication of the National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) testing

The SSTUWA submits that the premises upon which the implementation of the "testing and ranking" regime called NAPLAN, both in terms of its rationale and justification, are flawed.

The proposal that this is simply a “*transparency agenda*”, or, purportedly, “*a right and entitlement of the community to know the truth and thus be able to make informed choices about education services*” is, on one level, misleading and, on another level, downright dangerous, as it undermines the ultimate ambition of this fine country of ours to give everyone a fair chance; that is, equity in education.

The SSTUWA would submit that the ‘mantra’ of choice is not only disingenuous on a number of fronts but is also dangerous.

For instance, given the extremely sparse density of the population in Western Australia, it is disingenuous because:

- (a) In many communities distance and / or size of community make it unfeasible to establish alternative education institutions; and
- (b) In many communities economic circumstances negate the possibility of seeking alternative education services even if available.

In other words, what is then the benefit of publicising that the students at a particular school in a remote or isolated location have not scored well on the well-established dubious and limited NAPLAN testing parameters and, consequently, their school has been ranked poorly?

It is dangerous because:

- (a) It promotes actively the proposition that some educational services are less than the best;
- (b) It excuses federal and state/ territory governments from committing to and taking responsibility for providing a good and equitable education system;
- (c) It promotes the residualisation of education institutions and undermines the capacity of schools to operate positively and constructively as agents of socialisation – i.e. two-tiered education system;
- (d) It fails to promote and support the local community involvement in their school;
- (e) It turns education into another commodity, abetting the consequential expansion of alternative institutions and competition for student numbers which negatively impact on delivery of good and equitable education and increase education costs to the community as well as inequality in educational opportunities in the community as a whole.

The SSTUWA submits that the Australian and State/Territory governments must, in the first instance, be committed to the provision of quality education to the community and through the public education system so as to ensure the preservation of equity for all. In a paper titled: “*Why Ranking Schools Would Do More Harm Than Good*”, Mr. Bob Harris, from Education International and TUAC (OECD), September 2007, deals with the PISA – Program of International Student Assessment – and the desirability of an assessment process being based upon “sampling and indicators” rather than “census testing and ranking” likewise NAPLAN; without however overlooking some of the limitations of the PISA.

It is worth quoting him at length:

“...*Evaluation, accountability and indicators*”

Two premises

- Every teacher – and parent – knows that evaluation is part of the process of education.
- Accountability is normal and necessary in public services

Issues arise when evaluation of systems, schools and/or teachers is combined conceptually with accountability. The political debate over performance testing arises out of this conceptual combination, not to say conceptual confusion.

The debate in many countries is often based on loose assumptions. An example is the assumption that census testing will provide more valuable information about system performance than indicators. There is no evidence to support this assumption.

Testing and Ranking

Across the OECD politicians are under pressure to come up with answers to the universal aspiration to improve quality in education. Testing and ranking is all too often their response.

That response is stimulated by the widespread notion that efficiency in public services can be enhanced by applying the practices of business enterprises. Among those practices is the widespread use of what is known in the jargon as “metrics”, i.e. measuring outputs in relation to inputs, “cost-effectiveness” if you like.

Measurement is in fashion. But what does measurement mean in education?

We should also mention **PISA** – The Program of International Student Assessment. PISA is a program for comparing national performance, using as an indicator the results of tests from a random sample of 15 year-olds in each country on literacy, numeracy, scientific awareness, and capacity to solve problems. ACER is a key player in developing and implementing PISA. 67 countries participated in 2006, with the results to be released this December. PISA results attract front page attention in many countries. Beyond the headlines about whether Japan has fallen behind Korea, etc., we think PISA has helped to provide some useful data showing that good education policies, as in Finland, can achieve both quality and equity. PISA data has also been useful in addressing issues of migrant education in Denmark and Germany, for example. It must be underlined that PISA is based on sampling and on indicators – not on census testing... ”.

Recommendation

[1] That the NAPLAN regime be replaced with a regime of “sampling and key indicators” based on a comprehensive set of information about the substantive and real circumstances of schools and their communities.

Term of Reference 2: (b) the implementation of possible safeguards and protocols around the public presentation of the testing and reporting data;

It would be fair to say that NAPLAN has become what is characterised as a ‘high stakes test’. As a ‘high stakes test’, the detrimental ramifications for the schooling system – that is, individual schools/ colleges, school communities, students and teachers/ administrators - can be enormous, depending upon the way in which the application of the results of any one set of NAPLAN data is done.

Factors contributing to the characterisation of NAPLAN as a ‘high stakes test’ include:

- (1) Availability of this data to create league tables within states and between states;
- (2) The intensity of media focus on NAPLAN results;
- (3) Judgements about the worth of schools from NAPLAN test results;
- (4) Impressions being presented to communities that NAPLAN test results are the most significant measure of a schools success;
- (5) Use of data as a mechanism for establishing accountability, setting targets and judging achievements of states/ territories, schools and individual administrators/teachers;
- (6) Use of the data for delivering resources including funding from federal and state sources;
- (7) Development of commercial, system and local materials which encourage and bed in establish ‘teaching to the test’ practices;
- (8) Increasing focus on NAPLAN as a determiner for school planning and establishment of priorities;
- (9) NAPLAN as a key feature of performance management, appointment processes including promotion and job security.
- (10) The pressure of such data on the extent of curriculum breadth and depth
- (11) Development of practices which see ‘practice to the test
- (12) This is demonstrated by the practices we see evolving around the use of this test and the data created from the test results. We see this as a consequence of activities as federal, state and local level.

As a consequence of NAPLAN taking on the mantle of a ‘high stakes test’ regime in Australia, in the event that “testing and ranking” is not abolished, it behoves us to ensure that the processes for managing the testing are consistent, clear and transparent.

Already we have seen reported numerous incidents from overseas where testing regimes have taken on a ‘high stakes’ characterisation and schools, systems and individuals have found themselves pressured to give their cohort an advantage. Practicing the test prior to the test day, verbal and other cues to direct students to the correct answer, extending the test time ... and so on. In the wash up of the 2010 NAPLAN testing we saw reported in a number of states/territories some practices which reportedly corrupted the testing parameters. Importantly, this effect ought not to be seen as an “aberration” of an otherwise alleged “unproblematic” testing and ranking regime, but an intrinsic effect of such a regime, as it has been demonstrated in other submissions, including the AEU’s, in relation to the United States and other overseas countries.

To exemplify, anonymously, for the information of the Hon. Members of the Inquiry, we reproduce below some of the typical comments provided to us by our teachers and administrators members.

“...Pressure to perform well for ranking on the League Table presents the temptation to not follow the guidelines for administering the test. Without naming schools or individuals, I am already aware of deviations from the testing protocol. These infringements being; administering the NAPLAN test on different days and at different times to the test schedule. I did not think it appropriate to administer two tests on ONE day to one class, while another class split the same tests over TWO days. I am aware of another teacher who administered the NAPLAN Mathematics-test orally, presenting each question one at a time to the class, thereby advantaging this class with pacing the test so that all children finished in the allotted time. (Not to mention the added advantage of having the questions read aloud.) Failure to administer the test appropriately invalidates the results...”.

Teacher:

“...Preparation for the NAPLAN test has already become the primary focus of the timetable for all of Term One. The pressure to familiarize the Year 3 students with the test format is driving the curriculum. End of year assessment was also driven by the NAPLAN scores. Even though children were tested in May, I was cautioned strongly to not deviate from the results when giving my end of year assessment. This was very confronting as many children had moved well beyond their NAPLAN score. Failing to demonstrate a consistency between NAPLAN and school assessment, would bring to play the dreaded school auditing process which has been described to me as a “blame and shame” process...”.

Teacher:

“... The NAPLAN test is a stressful experience for Year 3 students because it is a new experience for them. I question how useful the information really is when the NAPLAN Maths test (2009) had 16 questions out of 35, testing the Year 2 and Year 3 program. This information is from, “Best Performance Pty Ltd”. I am yet to understand whether correctly answering 16 questions (which are age/grade appropriate questions) results in a good test score. What it does mean is that more than 50% of the test is above grade level and therefore sets the children up for failure. I wonder whether the NAPLAN test, per se, has much value at all...”.

Teacher:

“.. I am aware of teachers succumbing to stress illnesses caused by the pressure to prepare children for NAPLAN. One teacher felt that she had been publically shamed in front of her peers, when the Principal highlighted children who had failed to achieve the benchmark, and then connected each child to their respective Year 2 teacher. All the highlighted children had been in her Year 2 class the previous year. Even though she was aware that all these children were following IEP- Independent Education Programs - and were SAER – Students At Educational Risk (such as migrants or students with disabilities) - this was not common knowledge. The inference was that she had failed in Year 2 to adequately prepare these

children for the Year 3 NAPLAN test. She broke down in tears following this Staff Meeting...”.

Teacher:

“...The pressure to teach to the test is overwhelming. It is not a future concern. It is here now. The “blame and shame” mentality exists without the League tables. Teachers are fearful of being blamed for the test results, as in the example above. Same year groups are compared to the detriment of certain teachers who may draw the “short straw” for Students’ At Risk. (SAER) In other words, if you have more At Risk students in your Year 3 group, your results will be skewed down. Incorrect conclusions are being made about your professional ability according to whether your class performs as well as another colleague with the same year group. Programs and curricula are being driven by the results. All of our planning is linked to the NAPLAN test. We MUST show how we are addressing the weakness identified in the previous year’s test regardless of whether the present cohort of children is weak in the same areas...”.

As reported above, there are no doubt recurring themes in the above comments – i.e.: narrowing and skewing of the curriculum; pressure to “cheat”; unfair professional repercussions; disregard of students’ disadvantaged personal circumstances - which support the numerous detailed submissions put to the Inquiry, including the one by the AEU.

The harvesting of the NAPLAN data for the purpose of creating league tables is not in the best interests of schools, school communities, students and staff. Whilst recognising the importance of literacy and numeracy, the use of NAPLAN data in this way is not only not useful, but also undermines the very quality and equity of education that, in a misguided manner, it purports to uphold or protect.

Recommendations:

In the event that the NAPLAN “testing and ranking” regime were to be retained:

[2] That a transparent, clear and consistent set of guidelines for the NAPLAN testing period be developed to ensure an ‘even playing field’ in this aspect of the NAPLAN.

[3] That Federal and State /Territory Governments work to establish processes and/ or legislation to prevent the harvesting of NAPLAN data for the purpose of creating league tables.

[4] That protections remain in place to ensure that the identification of the performance of individual students is not ‘accessible to the world’.

Term of Reference 3:

(C) the impact of the NAPLAN assessment and reporting regime on:

- (i) the educational experience and outcomes for Australian students;**
 - (ii) the scope, innovation and quality of teaching practice;**
 - (iii) the quality and value of information about student progress provided to parents and principals; and**
 - (iv) the quality and value of information about individual schools to parents, principals and the general community.**
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The SSTUWA and its members are concerned that the preoccupation with literacy and numeracy is and will continue to put at risk and undermine the provision of a broad and rich curriculum in schools and across the nation.

Already anecdotally we have reports going to this very concern:

- (a) A report of reduction in hours for LOTE (Languages Other Than English) and an increase in LOTE class sizes in order to put more time into literacy and numeracy and arrange for smaller class sizes for literacy and numeracy learning;
- (b) Participation in “preparatory” programs in the thirteen weeks leading up to NAPLAN and the putting aside of the normal school program;
- (c) Replacement of specialist programs such as art and music for extended time on literacy and numeracy;
- (d) Removal of ESL (English as Second Language) students from the school’s LOTE program to undertake intensive literacy and numeracy lessons;
- (e) Cancellation of excursions, camps and other such activities pre the NAPLAN testing;
- (f) Evidence of a more ‘constrained’ approach to learning and student work to fit with the paper and pencil approach of the NAPLAN tests; and
- (g) Cancellation of support programs for weeks leading up to the NAPLAN tests whilst classes are ‘immersed/ drowned’ in literacy and numeracy activities.

Again, we only have to look overseas to countries where ‘high stakes testing’ regimes such as NAPLAN exist to find untested subjects removed from the curriculum, students unable to progress to the next year until a pass is achieved, extensive teaching to the test programs and consequent domination of the school year by testing or preparing for testing,

Teachers and administrators are fearful of the undermining of the profession and its capacity to make professional judgments with regard to the performance of students.

This is currently being evidenced in ways such as:

- (a) The misguided weight being placed on the NAPLAN tests as the ‘real/ true’ measure of a schools’ performance and merit;
- (b) The misguided weight being placed on the NAPLAN test results of individual students as the ‘real/ true’ measure of performance to the extent that teachers are pressured to change their considered and specific professional judgment to align with NAPLAN;
- (c) The explosion of practice lessons, either commercial or system developed, with strong expectation that such practice lessons will become the work of the class for some 12 to 13 weeks preceding the testing – about 25% of the school year;
- (d) The contradictions for the profession between the expectations to respond to the needs of students and craft individual programs and the notion of preparation for ‘one size fits all’ assessment;
- (e) The undermining of community confidence in the professional judgment of teachers and administrators.

Further, as eloquently reported in the AEU submission:

“...With respect to ‘Like School’ models, Trevor Cobbold of “Save Our Schools” has identified the following flaws in such methodology:

- *As partial league tables they incur the same problems as full league tables. They provide incentives for schools to rig their results, discourage collaboration between schools and lead to the pillorying of the lowest ranked schools in each like-school group.*
- *Like-school comparisons fail to compare like with like. For example, performance disparities between schools in one group may reflect differences in ethnic composition, rather than differences in school practices.*
- *There are flaws in the measures of SES used to determine like-school groups which may create misleading comparisons. For example, some schools may be classified in a low SES group because there is a large pensioner population in their area, even though families with school-age children may be well-off.*
- *Using individual family data is just as problematic as around 40% of families, largely in the lower SES categories, do not state their income or occupation on school enrolment forms. As a result, some schools with a high proportion of low SES families may be incorrectly classified to high SES school groups...”.*

Without belabouring the point, it is clear that the nature of the information provided to the community about their local school is, indeed, misleading. In this context, the SSTUWA argues that it is unconscionable for a government to provide misleading information to the community which it is supposed to be representing which, additionally, has a direct negative effect upon the less advantaged schools, their communities and their staff.

Recommendations:

- [5] *That Federal and State/Territory governments commit to a guarantee that Australian school students be exposed to a broad curriculum offering. This undertaking is to be enshrined in the basic principles underpinning the implementation of the Australian Curriculum.*
- [6] *That Federal and State/Territory governments commit to enshrine in legislation a guarantee that schools' curricula provision be monitored so as to ensure that any attempts or unintended effects narrowing the curriculum offering be countered and suitably and appropriately redressed.*
- [7] *That the Federal Government refrains from publishing misleading data on MySchool website.*

Term of Reference 4: *to* (d) international approaches to the publication of comparative reporting of the results, i.e. 'league tables'; and

Insofar as England has implemented a "census testing and ranking" not very dissimilar to the NAPLAN, albeit with some variations in it being divided into four "Key-Stages; the problematic effects that have been reported above through the experience of our members in Western Australia are similar.

As Bob Harris, form Educational International reports:

“...The key problem with school performance tables and national targets, as seen by NUT:

- *teachers are constrained to teach to the tests which contribute to the league tables of each school's performance;*
- *the rest of the curriculum suffers because of teaching to the test;*
- *schools are unfairly identified as failing even though they may have had good OFSTED inspection results;*
- *national targets create enormous strains in the system and even Government finds that it has shot itself in the foot since it has not been able to achieve the ambitious national targets it set itself 10 years ago (leading to the resignation of a Secretary of State, Estelle Morris when the targets were not achieved in 2002);*

- *school performance tables means that enormous resources are pumped into supporting children who may achieve a benchmark level 4 or 5 at the expense of those who need extra support but who can't make level 4 or 5. This particular issue is relevant for 11 year olds at Key Stage 2 where enormous amounts of resourcing are focused on moving youngsters over the level 4 borderline;*
- *school performance tables confuse public forms of accountability for schools and lead to conflicting messages between evaluations of the quality of teaching and learning by OFSTED and the raw data yielded by narrow tests.*

In short, the impact of National Curriculum tests, performance tables and national targets has narrowed considerably the National Curriculum, undermined the achievements of the Government's own National Literacy and Numeracy Strategies, and penalised particularly low achieving youngsters where support has been withdrawn from them in favour of youngsters on the borderlines of National Curriculum levels in Mathematics and English... (ibid) (our emphasis).

In the United States the situation is even direr, whereby the *New York Times*, in an article on the 15 February 2010, titled *US School Cheating Scandal Sends Warning on My School*, reported as follows:

"...One of the largest school cheating scandals ever in the US is under investigation in the state of Georgia... one in five of Georgia's public elementary and middle schools are under investigation for changing student answers on the tests.

The main focus of the investigation is Atlanta, where 70% of all elementary and middle schools face investigation. At one school, for example, averages of 27 of 70 answers on each fourth-grader's math test were changed from wrong to right in one classroom. At another an average of 26 of 70 answers on the fifth-grade math test were erased and corrected.

More than half the classes at 27 schools were flagged, and at four Atlanta schools more than 80 percent of the classes were flagged.

Experts said it could become one of the largest cheating scandals in the era of widespread standardized testing in the US. Gregory Cizek, Professor of Educational Measurement and Evaluation at the University of North Carolina, told the Atlanta Journal Constitution_ (11 February) that the extent of the suspicious answer changes is stunning. He has studied cheating for more than a decade, but said he didn't know of another state that has detected so many potential problems. He told the New York Times (11 February): "This is the biggest erasure problem I've ever seen".

It is the second time in two years that cheating has been exposed in Georgia's state tests. In 2009, four schools were found to have extensively changed student answer sheets. Court records show that in one case, the school principal and assistant principal had systematically erased and changed student answers to ensure that the school met the "annual yearly progress" benchmark of the Federal government's No Child Left Behind Act. (Atlanta Journal-Constitution , 12 February).

The scandal is the latest in a series of cheating scandals across the United States since the No Child Left Behind legislation came into force. If schools fail to meet the federal

benchmarks of the No Child Left Behind Act, they are placed in a “needs improvement” category and must offer extra tutoring and allow parents to transfer their children to higher performing schools...”(our emphasis).

Both the US and England publishing of the national performance testing data, according to Harris back in 2007 (*supra*), ought to be understood in its effects. He says:

“...Lessons to be drawn

There are several common features of experiments with national performance testing in other countries:

- *In general, performance testing with publishing of school results has been introduced in stages; there are strong grounds for believing that a stage by stage process is underway in Australia.*
- *There has been confusion between established systems for evaluation and assessment and new regimes of performance testing.*
- *The process for arriving at performance testing and ranking of schools into league tables has been driven by political agendas, with an eye more to media impact than to the educational interests of children and young people.*
- *Performance testing of all students at given age levels is highly disruptive, distorts the teaching of a broad curriculum, and adversely influences resource allocation and equitable school admission policies.*
- *There is little or no empirical evidence that performance testing of all pupils actually does anything to improve educational quality, while there are strong indications that such experiments have an adverse impact in terms of equity.*

Quality, equity and evaluation – getting it right

Performance testing comes out of the ‘back-to-basics’ movement. Yet education, more than ever, must be broadly based. One of the criticisms of PISA is that it is very limited – does not cover geography or history, for example. The same criticism applies to nation-wide performance tests. Simplistic reporting of testing and ranking is an unsatisfactory substitute for serious community-wide debate about education, including what parents expect of their schools. Achieving the goals of quality and equity in education for all Australian children and young people will take hard work, widespread consultation, partnership between educators and their communities, agreements on effective instruments for monitoring and accountability, and resources. Short cuts will be self-defeating and counter-productive. (our emphasis).

Some relevant recurrent themes arising out of the experience of teachers and administrators in Western Australia are appropriate to be cited here, in an anonymous manner.

In an e-mail to the President of the Union, on the 12 May 2010, a teacher stated:

“...I heard this morning on the radio that there was going to be an investigation into NAPLAN inconsistencies.

I have a contact at a primary school in Perth who opened the tests before the examination dates. They were told by their Principal that the tests were to be marked in house before sending them away. The teachers opened the tests and developed a marking key.

That’s about the extent of it...”

Another teacher stated as follows:

“...I am aware of bad practice resulting from the fear of results being used in the public arena.

- *suggestions to give lessons, the same as for the exemplars*
- *awareness of what to have on display in testing rooms*
- *giving children old test papers*
- *teaching to old papers*
- *results displayed for teachers to have as ‘targets’*
- *suggestions that A B C grading should meet a bell curve*

Big alarm bells are ringing for me. Much time is being wasted on teaching to tests. Getting on with teaching in context and with meaning is becoming a thing of the past. Much of the joy of learning is more difficult to engender amidst NAPLAN threats...”.

In our submission, the above experiences and effects appear to suggest that current government’s efforts to attempt to ensure that the NAPLAN data is not “misused” through the establishment of the Inquiry is of limited value. This is because the reliability of the data itself is extremely problematic and uncertain and, therefore, of dubitable value.

Term of Reference 5: e) other related matters.

According to OECD Education sources, Australia’s school system is ranked within the top ten (10) in the world; together with Belgium, Canada, Finland, Hong Kong, Japan, Netherlands, New Zealand, Singapore, South Korea. Relevantly, Finland’s school system appears to top the list consistently and has done so for some years.

In an article published in the *Financial Review*, titled “*Better to focus on teachers, not tests*”, Tony Walker, a former teacher and now the international editor, describes the Finnish education system as follows:

“...Finally, there is the example of Finland, which consistently ranks at the top of the list of OECD countries in numeracy and literacy.

A 2007 study by McKinsey found that Finland, where students do not start school until seven and then for only four or five hours a day initially, ranks top in the world in mathematics, science reading and problem solving when students get to 15.

What distinguishes Finland is the emphasis placed on teacher preparation and training, which is rigorous and ongoing. Prospective teachers are obliged to undergo multiple layers of testing and assessment before they even arrive in the classroom. Those unsuited to the profession are winnowed out.

What also separates Finland from other countries are resources allocated to special education, 30 per cent of all students getting remedial help. “By intervening quickly at the level of individual students, Finland prevents earlier failure compounding into long-term failure, and thus has found a way to maintain strong and consistent equitable outcomes in schools,” McKinsey reports.

By all accounts the above description indicates that in order to “*...maintain strong and consistent equitable outcomes in schools...*”, it is necessary to heavily invest resources in:

- i) good and continuous teacher training and professional development;
- ii) providing early remedial help for students who are assessed to be at educational risk.

Importantly, Finland does not have a “census testing and ranking regime” parallel to NAPLAN; which means that the assessment of students’ capabilities is entrusted to the classroom teacher.

By contrast, for instance, in Australia it is the public school system that has the social responsibility to provide an education to the less advantaged; the migrants and non-English background students; the disabled; as the private school system is able to refuse enrolment to this students. However, as the AEU has argued in numerous submissions to the Federal government, the funding of public school by the federal government is disgraceful. In one paper, the AEU argues as follows:

*“... Over **two thirds** of Australia's children attend public schools but they receive only around **one third of the** Federal Government's recurrent spending on schools. The fact is the Federal Government spends \$1,051 per public school student compared to \$4,515 per private school student. (Source: Productivity Commission Report)...”.*

Recommendations:

[8] That the Federal government commits to a funding regime for schools that supports the public responsibility of providing good quality and equitable education for all.