



A response from Lutheran Education Australia to the Senate Standing References Committee on Education, Employment and Workplace Relations:

## **Inquiry into the administration and reporting of NAPLAN testing**

**Friday 25 June 2010**

**Lutheran Education Australia**

197 Archer Street, North Adelaide SA 5006. Tel 61 8 8267 7318 Fax 61 8 8267 7320  
6/17 Napier Close, Deakin ACT 2600. Tel 61 2 6232 5373 Fax 61 2 6281 0286

## **Introduction**

The Lutheran Church of Australia (LCA) through Lutheran Education Australia (LEA) operates 85 schools, and 42 early childhood centres, educating some 40,000 students and employing in excess of 3000 teachers. It manages its schools systemically through state-based systems. There have been Lutheran schools in Australia since 1839, and they have been important educational agencies in many Australian communities over a long period of time.

LEA represents Lutheran schools and systems nationally and is recognised by the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR) as a national interest group in its own right.

LEA believes that accountability and transparency for all Australian educational systems, schools and students is a reasonable principle. As such, LEA is supportive of the National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN). However, we have concerns with some aspects of NAPLAN as it currently exists.

The collection of accurate data nationally is valuable if the data can be used as one part of a formative process both by the government and at the school level. It is reasonable for governments to use accurate data as they create a ‘report to the nation’ about educational standards; and the data that emanates from NAPLAN is useful for teachers and principals when placed into the context of the school at the local level and used for advancing student learning.

The NAPLAN data should not be the sole means used to compare schools, nor should the data be used in a way that is detrimental to the educational growth of student learning. There needs to be safeguards to ensure that the data is used appropriately.

## **Response to the Terms of Reference**

- a) 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.
  - LEA believes that schools and systems must be accountable and transparent in all operational and educational areas. We support the gathering and availability of accurate, factual and comprehensive qualitative and quantitative information that enables schools to help students improve their educational outcomes.
  - The publication of NAPLAN results in its existing form does not account for local conditions and factors that influence the learning progress of students. LEA encourages the development of a more sophisticated and fairer system that aims to enhance student learning outcomes and improve pedagogy to create a world class national schooling system.
  - The use of the *MySchool* website to publish data on individual schools, and to provide school comparisons across the nation has not been helpful in explaining to stakeholders at a local level, how their school has performed in comparison with geographically similar schools.
  - The publication of data on literacy and numeracy is supported by LEA. The data needs to be set in a context that encourages principals and teachers to use this information, in conjunction with other evidence, for developing programs that enhance the growth of students. We believe that the purpose of the *MySchool* website was distorted as a result of the lack of early and accurate communication to schools and the wider community.

- b) Implementation of possible safeguards and protocols around the public presentation of the testing and reporting data.
- The current round of NAPLAN testing has built a climate based on mistrust and scepticism. However, LEA does not believe that existing safeguards and protocols around the public presentation of the testing and reporting data have been adequately developed. We also believe that there is need for formalising the handling of issues as they arise.
  - LEA believes that the establishment of an independent group of experts should be seen as a priority by the Ministerial Council for Education, Early Childhood Development and Youth Affairs (MCEECDYA). The group should oversee NAPLAN and any future testing regimes, and at the same time manage the reporting protocols e.g. *MySchool* on behalf of ACARA.
  - The group of experts should have the power to investigate any report of issues that may arise from time to time. It is our belief that reported and substantiated breaches of security should be made public by ACARA after a full investigation.

**Recommendation 1:**

- Lutheran Education Australia believes that principles to govern the detail that can be published on the *MySchool* website must be clearly articulated. This move to broader transparency would help to allay fears across our school communities.

**Recommendation 2:**

- Lutheran Education Australia recommends the formation of a group of experts to oversee both assessment and reporting practices and protocols. This standing committee would be directly responsible to ACARA and report to the public on a regular basis.

- c) Impact of the NAPLAN assessment and reporting regime on:
- I. educational experience and outcomes for Australian students.
- In 2010, the current assessment regime caused anxiety among some students. This was particularly evident in Year 3 and the experience was not one that promoted the positive values that can be gained by appropriate and meaningful testing practices.
  - The exclusive, ‘one size fits all’ NAPLAN testing regime is not helpful for students with learning disabilities. For these students and their families, it is clear that the current model heightens anxiety for all concerned.
  - Lutheran schools are recognised for the support that is given to students who have special needs. It is of concern to schools in smaller communities that the publication of NAPLAN results in their current ‘crude’ form brings into question the quality of the education across the entire school. We would support assessment and reporting for all students based upon models that are fair, equitable and display best world practice.
  - LEA would urge ACARA to consider making available to schools a range of age-appropriate tests for use at the school level. It is acknowledged that some high

quality assessment tools already exist and would be very suitable for use under these circumstances.

- II. scope, innovation and quality of teaching practice.
- Teachers are using the NAPLAN results as one part of the information required to understand the learning needs of students. There is concern that as an assessment tool, only NAPLAN results are made available on the *MySchool* website. This is presenting a misleading image of student outcomes.
  - LEA believes that a system to allow schools and teachers to analyse and act upon a wide range of sample test data is required. Funding for resources and professional development should be made available to support the proper implementation of such a system.
  - Some teachers express concern about teaching in the year levels currently tested i.e. Years 3,5,7,9. The perception that any lowering of NAPLAN results in a single year will be directly aligned to their performance within the classroom is uppermost in their minds. This further strengthens the argument for the development of a more comprehensive assessment program that may be used across various year levels, as determined at the local school.

**Recommendation 3:**

- Lutheran Education Australia supports a comprehensive assessment program that is based on a suite of assessment tools for use at the school level. Students with language backgrounds other than English, Indigenous students, and students with disabilities should be included where appropriate.

- III. the quality and value of information about student progress provided to parents and principals.
- The current reports on student progress are well received by parents. Lutheran schools report that parents often use this information on their child's progress in literacy and numeracy as an entrée into discussions at parent/teacher interviews.
  - In some jurisdictions, a more expansive breakdown of each school's data is provided to principals. This is reported as being helpful; however, the availability of such a service varies widely from state to state. LEA believes that it would be useful for ACARA to provide for a universal approach in dealing with NAPLAN data after it has been distributed to system authorities and schools.
- IV. the quality and value of information about individual schools to parents, principals and the general community.
- It is evident that in 2010, the media 'hype' was a cause of concern for school principals and school communities. The use and misuse of the crude data was not particularly helpful in achieving the aim of providing stakeholders with accurate and meaningful information.
  - Parents have used the published NAPLAN results in a variety of ways. On one edge of the continuum, the *MySchool* website has provided parents with a tool to confirm their thoughts about the school their child currently attends.
  - In country and regional communities, comparisons of NAPLAN results have had a far greater impact on school enrolment patterns. In many cases, the ethos and local conditions that apply to the school have been lost in the process of comparison.

LEA would support a transparent reporting platform that allows for these characteristics to be clearly displayed.

- The impact on smaller schools in country and regional areas has not been helpful, and the random publication of tables has had a detrimental impact on student enrolment in some schools.

d) International approaches to the publication of comparative reporting of the results, i.e. 'leagues tables'.

- Leagues tables are inevitable unless a firm plan of action is taken by the Government. School principals and teachers believe that they have not been supported as crude comparative tables have appeared in the local and national press.
- LEA believes that a perception regarding NAPLAN as the 'sole' indicator of school performance exists in the wider community. A reporting platform that opens up all areas of school and individual student performance is required and we urge greater communication on this matter by governments and ACARA.

LEA acknowledges the steps currently being taken to stop the ability of external groups to 'scrape' data from ACARA sanctioned websites.

e) Other related matters.

- There is growing concern that schools will be forced to teach 'to' NAPLAN tests, at the expense of a curriculum that is based on the diversity needed to extend student learning in an exciting and meaningful way. A number of resources that have the potential to change the direction of the learning programs in a detrimental way are already on the market and LEA urges ACARA to closely monitor the production and distribution of these products.
- The notion of producing a 'value added' score that tracks the growth of a student's learning over time is fraught with danger unless embedded in the context of that student in their local school setting. Other variables, such as external factors that may have impacted on the life of the student, must be given due consideration.
- The question of NAPLAN testing aligning with the Australian Curriculum is of concern to teachers. There is no clear indication that this will happen and LEA believes that ACARA must clarify their intentions as soon as possible.
- Lutheran schools with significant Indigenous student populations have found the current NAPLAN testing program to be disheartening, and in some cases irrelevant. We acknowledge the superb work being carried out by our teachers in difficult circumstances. LEA would urge the government through ACARA to investigate ways in which a national approach to assessment and reporting could be established and used to grow the learning outcomes for Indigenous students across Australia.
- Research indicates that none of the top performing OECD countries (Finland, Japan, the Netherlands, Korea and Chinese Taipei) have a rigid form of national assessment, and certainly none that compares to the NAPLAN program that currently exists in Australia (Dowling, 2008). Thus LEA is opposed to any proposal that seeks to bring the current assessment and reporting regime into every year level on an annual basis.

We believe that like most of the top OECD countries, 'sample testing' based upon a recognised set of assessment tools (including NAPLAN) that allows for all students to be assessed appropriately, is of value as we seek to improve student outcomes in a

national schooling system that is recognised as using world class educational assessment processes.

**Recommendation 4**

- Lutheran Education Australia recommends that the present NAPLAN testing regime be reduced to minimise negative impacts on student learning, and consideration be given to sample testing in accordance with world best practice.

**Summary of recommendations:**

**Recommendation 1:**

Lutheran Education Australia believes that principles to govern the detail that can be published on the *MySchool* website must be clearly articulated. This move to broader transparency would help to allay fears across our school communities.

**Recommendation 2:**

Lutheran Education Australia recommends the formation of a group of experts to oversee both assessment and reporting practices and protocols. This standing committee would be directly responsible to ACARA and report to the public on a regular basis.

**Recommendation 3:**

Lutheran Education Australia supports a comprehensive assessment program that is based on a suite of assessment tools for use at the school level. Students with language backgrounds other than English, Indigenous students, and students with disabilities should be included where appropriate.

**Recommendation 4**

Lutheran Education Australia recommends that the present NAPLAN testing regime be reduced to minimise negative impacts on student learning, and consideration be given to sample testing in accordance with world best practice.

We look forward to speaking to this submission should the occasion arise.

**Dr Adrienne Jericho**  
**Executive Officer**  
**Lutheran Education Australia**  
**25 June 2010**

**References**

Dowling, A. (2008). 'Policy Analysis and Program Evaluation: output measurement in education.'  
*Australian Council for Educational Research.* <http://research.acer.edu.au/policy.analysis.misc/2>