

From:  
Mr Vincent King

I have been a principal for the past 17 years and have concerns over the directions that NAPLAN testing has taken education. When it was suggested that the tests not be done this year one of my Assistant Principals asked how we could do our forward planning without this information, a teacher expressed concern about the loss of this assessment data, and two parents complained about how they would know where their children are at.

How have we got to the situation where some school executive are not confident in the school's ability to determine that perhaps reading comprehension might be a problem area for our school .. without the use of NAPLAN data?

Where some teachers no longer trust their own ability to assess their students' needs .. without the use of NAPLAN data?

Where some parents no longer trust the information they are receiving from their child's teachers ... unless verified by NAPLAN data?

Either this situation is a nonsense or we have a serious problem. My own view is that it is a bit of both.

Schools and teachers are able, without the use of NAPLAN data, to assess the needs of their students, set priorities and plan accordingly. They are continually looking for better ways to do this and this should always be the case, but the increasing reliance (or perception of reliance) on NAPLAN data serves to deprofessionalise the service. It is useful information as a diagnostic tool, and is supported by the SMART analysis software.

School reports, however, often do not give information in a way that can be easily understood by parents. They are also often viewed as unreliable by some parents. This has been an area for development in schools and should continue to be so that parents' trust in their children's reports is maintained or increased.

While there are concerns about the narrowing of the curriculum as a result of national testing, there are also concerns about the overcrowded curriculum. Many argue the curriculum needs to be less crowded. The argument is about what's included and what's dropped. Within this debate, the focus on literacy and numeracy within schools is an appropriate one, but literacy and numeracy are increasingly defined by what's tested in NAPLAN. This is reductive in a damaging way.

When I look at my own role within this I am concerned that I too have brought us to this situation. I have been a supporter of Basic Skills Testing in NSW because in my view the advantages have outweighed the disadvantages. My schools have celebrated improved performances and bemoaned non-improvement. I have sent the message that BST and now NAPLAN results are very important. They are useful but not to this degree. Our school will now be working hard to ensure that our assessment practices and reporting practices are improved so that NAPLAN testing supports rather than supplants what we do, that they assess an appropriate view of literacy and numeracy rather than the limited one of NAPLAN.

Government and department approaches need to support this development but is hampered by the continued attention of the community encouraged by the MySchool website.

I would suggest that steps be taken to ensure that the public has access to information but in such a way that NAPLAN data is viewed appropriately. It follows that the publication of league tables is not permitted.