

Terms of Reference

On 13 May 2010, the Senate referred the following matters to the Senate Standing References Committee on Education, Employment and Workplace Relations for inquiry and report by 13 August 2010:

(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;

Staff at Stanwell Park Public School are very concerned that the conflicting claims being made by these bodies are being inaccurately reported to the general population by the media. The NAPLAN testing should not be used as the be-all and end-all of bureaucratic decision-making, particularly in the funding of schools directly based on results. Some of the reasons for this include:

- **The narrow focus of NAPLAN testing in Literacy and Numeracy. The tests have an inherent inability to assess higher order thinking, creativity and school-based extra curricular activities which combine to give an overall picture of a school.**
- **The possible narrowing of the curriculum by some schools who concentrate on teaching to the test items so as to “achieve” better results for the media to report. This has had severe impacts on schools in education systems in the U.K. and U.S.A.**
- **The damage done to the diagnostic value of the NAPLAN tests when students are “coached” in the test. Unfortunately this is a growing issue, particularly in schools in low SES areas and areas where external tutoring is a major business for students to achieve “better” results in these areas.**
- **The primary issue however, is the damage done to schools and their communities by the media’s sensationist name and shame policy of publishing league tables. This can have a very negative effect on schools as the lower achieving schools are publicly shamed instead of being supported (which is what the tests are supposed to achieve). At the other end of the scale, schools who perform well are “congratulated” for their performance, even though the data is incorrectly used by the media and not well understood by the general population. Last year our local Regional newspaper published a table of best and worst achieving schools for all to see. Unfortunately, the data they chose to use was the Socio-economic scale or ICSEA value. This was not explained by the media and parents assumed this was a ranking of schools in our local area – incorrectly.**

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

The paramount issue is that the media should be banned from the publication of any “league” or comparison tables from the data provided by the MySchool website. This would need to take the form of legislation to ensure media outlets cannot shame or glorify schools using this incorrect data. The data provided by the NAPLAN testing is well-used by schools as an assessment and planning tool and should be maintained as such. The rich data supplied to schools enables an in-depth study of areas of the school that need to be addressed to help individuals and groups improve. Unfortunately this is again limited in the context of the NAPLAN tests. Other rich data needs to be provided to give an overall picture of the school and its students’ achievements. For example this could (and should) include funding levels, socioeconomic background, NESB, results from all curriculum areas, examples of school-based excellence such as sport, band, music, choir and peer support programs.

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

(i) the educational experience and outcomes for Australian students,
The impact of this high stakes testing will be to narrow the curriculum. Schools will be unwillingly forced to concentrate on literacy and numeracy in the format of the tests to ensure reputations and avoid being shamed. This has already happened overseas with well-documented examples in U.K. and USA.

(ii) the scope, innovation and quality of teaching practice,
The reaction to innovation and quality teaching practice will be to stifle creativity and risk-taking. Teachers will be forced to focus on assessment strategies as the be-all and end-all

of their teaching with corresponding negative affect on the students.

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

NAPLAN testing, while important to schools in the provision of rich data, is only one source of student data. The NAPLAN test data is generated on one day whereas richer data is provided by the class teacher's assessment records spanning the full year. Unfortunately, the current practice of systemic usage of this test data to fund schools and supply resources in the shape of support staff in particular is inequitable.

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

The MySchool website unfortunately only shows a very limited snapshot of any school. The many programs in other Key Learning Areas and student welfare contribute significantly to the school's atmosphere and overall worth. This is not being accurately portrayed and reported upon in the media or on the MySchool website, giving an unbalanced view of schools.

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

The impact on schooling systems in U.K. and U.S.A. where this style of systemic measurement has been in force is widely documented. The result is a consistent decline in standards of education mainly due to a narrowing of their curriculum.

e) other related matters.

Significant discussions are required to alleviate the negative impact this debate is having on schools, principals and teaching staff. Our fundamental purpose is to be providing the best possible education for every students according to their needs. Teaching staff do a fantastic job on a daily basis catering to the individual requirements of their students. The constant negative media reports based around this debate are putting significant pressure on teaching staff and principals. Let us get back to what we do best, focus on providing this valuable service, in a climate of support from Govt systems, media and parents.

The Staff of Stanwell Park Public School