



English Teachers Association NSW

submission to the Senate inquiry into the

Administration and Reporting of NAPLAN Testing

The English Teachers' Association is a voluntary group of professionals with a membership of 1,600 individual English teachers and 300 English faculties in New South Wales. We welcome the opportunity to for this consultation and have conferred online with members across the state to compile the submission below.

Members have found that NAPLAN testing can be useful as a diagnostic tool and as such, the usual confidential arrangements should pertain to the results. Individual students' results should remain for school use only and, as an extension, the results of the cohort should also remain so. Publication of these statistics in the media or on a government website may provide some information about the school but the risk of giving a false impression about schools outweighs this value particularly when the responses of small numbers of students can skew the results considerably. For education to take place most effectively, students need to be proud of their school and feel part of an institution that can lead them with assurance into their future. Undermine this by simplified comparisons and a student's ensuing sense of insecurity puts into jeopardy constructive learning that may follow the test's helpful identification of learning difficulties.

Members overwhelmingly agree that the impact of the NAPLAN assessment and reporting regime has a detrimental effect on the educational experience and outcomes of their students. They report that up until the forming of the *MySchool* site English and literacy were viewed as vehicles for thinking, active engagement and overall development of students. The basic skills tests were noted and the literacy skills taken into consideration, however, the development of the whole child was the driving purpose. The skills were simply tools through which students were able to engage in more significant activities. Furthermore, the placement of the test, halfway through term 2, means that in many schools, an inordinate amount of time is spent preparing for the test up until it is held, time which is misspent as it could be used to extend and enrich student experiences in the classroom. What have suffered are the broader, richer and higher order educational practices that encourage exploration of ideas, creative approaches to problem solving, collaborative projects, critical thinking and reflection.

Because of this policy of publication of test results, the emphasis in learning is now shifting with the basic skills in danger of becoming the ends rather than the means. This devolution is reflected in the international (PISA) tests in 2006 where "Australia's rank dropped ... primarily because of a decline in performances at the highest level". Professor Barry McGaw proposes that "a reasonable suspicion would be that constant attention to basic skills, plus somewhat erroneous assertions in many public comments that "Australia's problem lies among its low performers" or "in its long tail" have created too much focus on minimum performance requirements and insufficient attention to the highest performers. (McGaw, p.5).

The publication of test results has not had a beneficial effect on the scope, innovation and quality of teaching practice. Members claim that on the contrary, it has negatively impacted on the teaching practice in many schools in that

it appears to have galvanised teachers, parents and students to regress to the outdated and pedagogically dubious practice of "teaching to the test".

Some schools are clearly teaching the test to their students. This is unfair to those schools that work to keep the data in their school valid.

One teacher commented

The pressure to gain a “dark green” result (in comparison to other “similar” schools) has forced me to create a table of Literacy Skills I need my Stage 4 teachers to cover during the two years. It includes Text types, variety of texts, focused punctuation and spelling as well as metalanguage grammatical knowledge...[with considerable] pressure to “tick all the boxes”.

Members expressed the view that the publication of Literacy test results on *MySchool* distorts education by effectively rewarding schools who drill their students in the necessary literacy (reading, writing, punctuation & spelling) skills. Their focus on the test further decreases any valid comparisons through *MySchool*.

They also noted that the quality and the value of information about student progress provided to parents and principals are not in the best interests of the key stakeholders - parents, children or teachers - who, under this system, are to make judgements about literacy on the basis of one test on one day. They say that there are many factors affecting the results such as health, nerves or other local pressures that are not taken into account. In any case schools' Annual Reports show all the information (and more) divulged on the Myschool website. These are freely available and a much more reliable source of data on schools' performances based on much more than one test on two subjects for two year groups as the information is placed in context and with relevant and correct interpretations of data.

Members commented that the methodology of comparing their school with other “similar schools” is not transparent and, as one said,

It is in no way clear to either myself nor any of my students and their parents. It is a complete mystery how these comparable schools were chosen and they make any data superfluous.

They also criticise the oversimplification of information into grades of colour (pink-red or light-dark green) which they claim brings into question the relevance of the data.

They also note an unfortunate effect of the website is the removal of students from the school they are currently attending to a more 'successful' school which has a detrimental effect on both schools and also on the children. Ironically what is happening is that the 'successful' schools are becoming overcrowded which leads to class sizes which are too large and this impacts negatively on student outcomes as is well documented and thus has the opposite effect to what is expected by these aspirational parents. This website influences parental insecurities about the future of their children in a most regrettable way.

The views of members are consistent with recent international studies around the publication of comparative reporting of the results of basic skills tests. Diane Ravitch's recently published book, *The Death and Life of the Great American School System*, (2010) documents the narrowing of the curriculum as an unintended consequence of accountability measures, particularly standardised testing during the Bush Administration. A widely-experienced teacher, academic and educational bureaucrat, Ravitch was originally an advocate of these reforms but after reviewing the last decade of data has come to the conclusion that “...the policies we are following today are unlikely to improve our schools...[and are] likely to make the schools less effective.”

She is particularly disturbed about the fact that the information gathered from these tests is not used for the diagnostic purposes originally intended but becomes a measure of success or failure, in the eyes of the public, without having any authentic scientific validity. Ravitch notes that psychometricians are very aware that the test scores may vary in unexpected ways and should not be used by 'elected officials' to make 'consequential judgments'. Ravitch,

pp150-161 details the potential errors and unreliability of the data, reported so publicly, gathered from a single score on a single day. She warns of the tendency for schools and states 'cheating', by 'gaming the system' and confounding the results. Her concerns have been borne out by recent events in our own country.

The English Teachers' Association NSW strongly believes that in publishing the results of the NAPLAN tests on the *MySchool* web site the government is raising the stakes of these tests to a level that is detrimental to students' learning and development. Educational reform should place the emphasis on curriculum, culture and community, not on anxious competition.

References:

McGaw, B, (2007): *International benchmarking of Australian schools*. Presentation at Curriculum futures, VCAA Curriculum Branch Conference Day, December 10 Melbourne.
<http://www.sisr.net/apo/mcgaw.pdf>

Ravitch, D (2010): *The Death and Life of the Great American School System: How Testing and Choice Are Undermining Education*, Basic Books, New York