

Submission to the Inquiry into the administration and reporting of NAPLAN testing

As a High School English and History teacher with sixteen years of experience, it is crucial to first recognise that when considering the administration and reporting of NAPLAN testing, the Literacy component of the NAPLAN test itself is fundamentally flawed. As a predominantly multiple-choice examination, students are not being given the scope to truly demonstrate what they have learned. Instead, they are confronted by often obtuse and overly complex questions with a set of four responses that are deliberately designed to confuse with their close proximity to one another. Students are often required to select between the correct answer and the discriminator, an answer that is almost correct. It is even possible that none of the responses are actually correct and students are required to select the "most correct" answer. As a consequence, pupils often make errors that do not reflect their actual knowledge or skills.

When faced with the writing sections, students are again confronted by the artificiality of exam practise. In the classroom our focus is on process, where students are encouraged and taught to draft and edit their work to produce an end product. For some students this will be twice, for others it may be five, it does not matter. In NAPLAN, they will be assessed on a first draft under test and time pressure, a circumstance that they encounter in no other aspect of their schooling except exams and will certainly not encounter in the workplace. Again, pupils will often make errors that do not reflect their actual knowledge or skill.

This compounds NAPLAN's greatest weakness, pressure. Students in Years 7 and 9, aged 13 and 15, not to mention Primary School students, are now in a situation where enormous pressure is being placed upon them by teachers, parents and caregivers to "succeed" in an examination which was designed to be diagnostic. Their results, once the domain of education professionals, are now fodder for tabloid journalism and the Internet. Subsequently, there is an increasing focus in preparing students for NAPLAN. Whilst it is argued that NAPLAN is derived from relevant syllabi, my previous criticism of the exam's nature means that students are being drilled in the techniques necessary to do well in NAPLAN, techniques that do not apply in other educational mediums. NAPLAN is no longer about students; it is about adult anxiety, which is then transferred to our young people. They don't know why they need to do well, but they are certainly aware that they need to. This also drives a burgeoning private industry in NAPLAN preparation, from study guides to coaching colleges, which profit from this anxiety. This is not what education should be about.

Having earlier mentioned and questioned NAPLAN's intended purpose as a diagnostic tool, I would call this purpose into question for another reason. NAPLAN results rarely, if ever, reveal anything to the student's teachers and parents that they do not already know. Teachers work with their students on a daily basis, formally assessing student progress but more importantly, informally assessing it. I am aware by the end of Term One, often earlier, what my students are capable of and what areas they require assistance with. That is my job. The enormous amounts of money from a limited pool of resources from the educational purse would be far better spent addressing the needs of students and teachers on a daily basis. I acknowledge here the desperate requirement to address the needs of many Indigenous students who have real and immediate literacy and numeracy issues. NAPLAN does nothing more than tell us what we already know here also and it does nothing to assist.

Finally, the arguments for the use of NAPLAN results to assess schools through the MySchools Website and other unscrupulous sources are built on a flawed basis; that the Education System is a level playing field. The inequitable funding divide between private and public schools, the advent of Selective High Schools and the location of schools in areas of social and economic disadvantage mean that NAPLAN results simply reflect these powerful and known factors. Rather than addressing these issues, particularly the chronic under-funding of public schools in the past forty years by both State and Federal Governments, it suits a political purpose to foster the notion that there is a crisis in education that Governments are working to fix. In fact, Australia ranks in the top five OECD nations for Literacy and Numeracy despite ranking far lower for recurrent funding. Significantly, the country that routinely tops these lists, Finland, has no external examinations of any kind. That being said, Australia's strong results are due to the hard work of teachers despite the numerous hurdles placed in their path as mentioned above. Teachers are not troubled by data, if anything we are drowning in it. What we are concerned about is the deliberate misuse of data to denigrate schools, teachers and most importantly, students.

It is time to address under-funding in Education in real and long term ways rather than short term, political ones. The reporting of NAPLAN results is overly simplistic and derived from a flawed examination process. To suggest that MySchools is about parental choice is at best misguided and at worst, a distortion of the truth. At a time when Countries like Scotland, England and the US are re-evaluating or in fact removing this outmoded and failed model, Australia looks to follow rather than lead.