

**(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;**

The Government has based its comparison of schools in the MySchool website on the average cohort scores of NAPLAN tests for each school. This data has been exploited by media companies to publish school league tables. Both comparisons assume NAPLAN is a valid measure to compare school performance. NAPLAN tests assess a decontextualised subset of literacy and numeracy skills. They do not assess higher-order literacy skills such as the ability of students to construct authentic texts, engage in critical inquiry or participate in everyday communication. Nor do they assess the broader school curriculum.

The high stakes nature of the NAPLAN test is due to the media's creation of league tables based on data collected from the MySchool website. This is evidenced by reports of schools pressuring families to withdraw lower ability students from the NAPLAN test, and claims of cheating (Barrett and Minus, 2010). This can only harm the diagnostic value of NAPLAN tests and reduce the educational opportunities of students who are most in need of diagnosis.

The public comparison of schools based on standardised tests results is a policy lever aimed at increasing the explicit instruction of literacy and numeracy skills (Volante online, 2008; Zanderigo, 2010; Gillard 2010). While basic literacy and numeracy skills may be effectively taught through explicit or direct instruction, they also need to be taught within a 'real-life' or authentic contexts. Unfortunately, the media scrutiny around school comparisons based on standardised tests has resulted in a narrowing of the curriculum. This curriculum focused on test scores lacks the contextualised learning needed to ensure students can apply literacy skills to a range of contexts, and are motivated to develop literacy and numeracy skills. As well, key activities that motivate a range of students to participate in school learning are diminished or cancelled, such as sport, drama and art.

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

When NAPLAN was first introduced the NSW government refused to share the test data with the Commonwealth Government to protect schools and students from league tables (McDougall, 2007). At the same time, the Education Act in NSW prohibited the publication of school league tables based on standardised tests. This protection was removed in 2009 (Patty, 2009) to allow NAPLAN data to be used to compare schools on the MySchool website.

The 2008 *Principles and Protocols for the Collection and National Reporting of MCEETYA Key Performance Measures for Schooling in Australia* recognised restrictions on the use of student test data on the basis of protecting the community from harm. One type of harm it sought to avoid was the damaging of the reputation of an institution or a group of people through stereotyping or misleading information. The policy also noted that because of the risk of harm associated with publication of student test data, there is not an absolute right of publication. The 2008 policy also recognised state legislation and procedures established to stop the publication of league tables.

MCEECDYA's 2009 *Principles and protocols for reporting on schooling in Australia* contains no reference to the harm caused by the publication of student performance data but does mention the misuse of test data. It also states that governments "will put in place strategies to manage the risk that third parties may seek to produce such (simplistic league) tables or rankings." To date, no government has put into place any effective policy to mitigate the risk of third parties publishing league tables.

To end the damage caused by high stakes standardised testing, governments need to

implement protocols that:

- Recognise the harm to student's and school's reputations from the publication of simplistic league tables;
- Recognise the diminishing of curriculum, teaching methods and literacy outcomes caused by high-stakes standardised testing;
- Mandate clear requirements to prohibit third parties from publishing school league tables.

**(c) the impact of the NAPLAN assessment and reporting regime on:  
(i) the educational experience and outcomes for Australian students,**

Because schools and teachers are publically scrutinised by their school's average NAPLAN scores, preparation for the NAPLAN tests becomes the focus of the school's curriculum. Those parts of the curriculum that are not evaluated by NAPLAN are sacrificed in the competition that has been created between schools. This narrowing of the curriculum leads to a reduction of time spent on authentic activities such as discussion, debate, creating texts, sport and music – the very things that motivate students to develop their literacy skills.

Instead, the curriculum focuses on the literacy and numeracy skills assessed by NAPLAN. This 'teaching-to-the-test' is a behavioural approach to instruction. It is the methodology the Federal Government is seeking to promote in schools (Gillard 2010). While explicit instruction may be an effective way to teach basic literacy and numeracy skills, it lacks the context required to ensure these skills can be applied in a range of situations.

**(ii) the scope, innovation and quality of teaching practice,**

The rewarding and punishing of schools through media scrutiny transforms the motivation to learn within the classroom. Teachers pressure their students to engage in the drilling of literacy and numeracy skills so that the students score highly on NAPLAN tests. Research (Condry and Chambers 1978; Lepper 1988) indicates that this type of extrinsic motivation may harm learning outcomes in the long-term. Education that relies on extrinsic motivation through rewards and punishments militates against the development of complex understanding in students. Instead, students should develop an intrinsic motivation to learn literacy and numeracy skills to ensure the highest possible learning outcomes. This can only be achieved through a curriculum that values authentic learning activities and real-life problem solving.

Research (Newmann, Bryk, and Nagaoka, 2001) suggests that the narrowing of the curriculum associated with league tables and standardised testing may diminish basic literacy and numeracy skills development. It found that authentic tasks which are not assessed by standardised tests achieve greater development of basic literacy skills as measured by the standardised tests when used in the classroom. This research is supported in the Australian context (Ladwig, Smith, Gore, Amosa and Griffiths, 2007). In other words, the best curriculum to develop basic literacy and numeracy skills is one that values contextualised learning. It requires students to engage with and create authentic texts. The narrow curriculum valued by high stakes standardised testing reduces basic literacy and numeracy skills development.

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

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

The cohort average scores for each school published on the MySchool site do not provide meaningful information to parents about the learning performance of students in a school. The average scores do not show the spread of student achievements and create a false impression of the precision of NAPLAN testing data.

The average scores should be replaced with graphs of the spread of student achievements in a school against the NAPLAN standards. These could be used to measure the progress of a student cohort over each year they are assessed by the NAPLAN tests.

The Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage does not take into account the background of students attending a school, whether students have special learning needs, whether students come from non-English speaking backgrounds, whether the school is selective and the financial resources of the school. These factors need to be integrated into the index to allow parents to make valid evaluations of student performance in a school.

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

Julia Gillard (2010) has claimed that it is impossible to use legislation to protect children from league tables. International experience does not support this claim. In 2001 the Welsh government scrapped the publication of school performance data that was the basis of league tables. Similar policy exists in Scotland and Northern Ireland. This could be achieved in Australia if school average scores were replaced on the MySchool website with graphs of student performance which demonstrate the full span of student achievement.

**e) other related matters.**

Based on analysis reported in *The Australian* (2010), the league tables that they have published correlate with a student's socioeconomic advantage. If this is the case, then the current use of the MySchool website to create league tables breaks one of the core principles underlying the NSW Department of Education and Training's assessment policy. It states "ensure equal opportunity for success regardless of students' age, gender, physical or other disability, culture, background language, socio-economic status or geographic location." League tables relegate lower socioeconomic students to failure by the very admission of *The Australian*.

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