

To whom it may concern:

I graduated as a primary teacher in 1981 and have spent a good deal of the past nearly three decades involved in teaching from Years Two to Seven and Adult Literacy. As one who has experienced the state (Queensland) and then national testing regimes as both a parent and a teacher, I must register my dismay at how the situation has spiralled out of control in the last year since the introduction of the “One School” site and the media’s great delight in identifying and highlighting any perceived triumphs and weak spots.

While I can see the ideals behind the notion of state or nation-wide testing, for many years the situation in Queensland especially was quite farcical. The children were set tests which did not have any relationship to the actual curriculum we were given (especially in the years when new drafts and re-drafts of each syllabus came whizzing through like a revolving door), and it was largely a matter of guessing what might be on the tests and trying to revise or teach whatever content the children could be asked. As I told myself as a parent, and then other parents as a teacher; it was a “point in time” test to compare students across the state and it was information which was perhaps valid to the school and the parent. When the NAPLAN tests first came in, it was also perhaps valid to see how our children compared to others around the country, always bearing in mind that Queensland children were on average at least six months younger than their interstate counterparts. However, then came the inevitable media blitz on comparison between the states – ‘winners’ and ‘losers’ and the recriminations that followed.

Since the introduction of the “One School” website, however, the situation has worsened considerably. When a school’s reputation and good name depends on the interpretation of a set of numbers, the onus is definitely on the class teacher to have the children perform very well. I can imagine that in private schools, teachers could feel a good deal of pressure because of this. Personally, I have had no unrealistic expectations placed on me as a teacher by any of our very supportive administration team; the pressure has come from the expectations of the media and the fear of how any fall in performance will play out in headlines. Last year, our Year 7 cohort was, unfortunately, one of the few in which every student achieved the minimum performance standard. This resulted in headlines in our local paper about how wonderfully our school had done in comparison to others in the town. I say “unfortunately”, because last year’s cohort was unusual in that it had very few learning support students. This year’s cohort is a more normal “bell curve” with a large group of learning support students, many of whom are new to the school in the last year, and nothing short of a miracle is going to make them achieve the same impossible “100%” target. My year has been haunted by the prospect of the possible headlines we will see when the results are published if the local paper decides to take a sensationalist view, and the crushing effect this could have on our students if they read headlines about themselves such as “Standards Fall At Emerald State”.

So much time is spent in the first part of the year preparing for the test that could be more reasonably used in actually developing the units of work we should be teaching. Last year’s mandated test rehearsals, where we had to give our class each of the previous year’s tests as a “run through”, took many, many hours which could have been devoted to teaching. While a “run through” is sensible, there is very little validity in giving a class a test if it is not marked and gone through question by question to discuss strategies and answers – this again takes hours out of teaching time. English and Maths take up the bulk of teaching time, often at the

expense of other subjects. Many students become extremely stressed in the leadup to the test days, even though we have tried to keep the class on an even keel and to emphasise that as long as they try their hardest; that is all we ask.

While I feel I am one of the fortunate teachers whose admin has not made me feel pressured to make my class “perform”, I can only too easily understand the enormous strain some of my professional colleagues in other schools must have been under. We have all heard the media reports of teachers “cheating” on behalf of their students – what a sad indictment of the system that it should come to this. When the test results were only for viewing by parents and the school community, they had some possible validity as a benchmark enabling us to gauge how our children were performing compared to past cohorts. Now that they are available online for media dissection and analysis, they appear to be fair game for all. What appears to be forgotten is that these are the results of children, some of them very young. To have their results and achievements used as political ammunition is both unfair and inaccurate. To have them held up in the media is completely immoral and may do lasting damage.

Let me stress that I am not against the NAPLAN tests as such. Once we have a national curriculum implemented, they will provide a useful source of data and enable us as teachers to see how well we are teaching it. However, I believe that the data should only be available to parents of the school community and those considering enrolling their child in a school. If they are interested enough, the principal could show them the school’s data as part of the pre-enrolment interview. It does not need to be available on the internet; surely there is so much more to selecting the right school for your children than going straight for whichever one has “come top” in its League Table field? As a parent and a teacher of nearly thirty years’ experience, I know that community, tradition, friendliness, care, respect and discipline all contribute far more to a happy and productive school career than straight academic achievement alone. Unfortunately, they are not quantifiable. Please let some sanity return to education and let it be about our children, not about the data.

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