

From:
Mr David Bonser

Thank you for letting me contribute to this very important inquiry.

Let me preface these comments by stating my context. I am teacher of 20 years experience working in state schools with 2 children also being taught in state schools in Queensland. The school where I teach, and my children have attended, is in one of the lowest socio-economic areas in Australia, Bundaberg. Our school is relatively well off for this area as we come from a middle to lower middle class area although this demographic is steadily moving more toward lower middle class. We are a great school. Our parents and students both rate us very highly (over 90% in opinion surveys each year) staff morale is high and district education officials laud our programs and performance as best practise consistently. Everyone who visits the school from relief teachers to parents to workman all comment on the great feel the school has and I wouldn't send my kids anywhere else but we are only an average NAPLAN performer.

NAPLAN testing has, in a very short space of time, dominated the education landscape and is seen by many as the one and only measure of what makes a good school. Over the last two years pressure from above has forced our school to focus more and more on improving test results. This year we have spent 15 weeks or just under 40% of the year focused on NAPLAN but even when the test is over and you think you can breathe again more focus on NAPLAN returns with individual student plans to lift NAPLAN scores, plans for indigenous students to lift NAPLAN scores and a focus on the use of data for school improvement (by the way data is code for NAPLAN). Some schools are practising for NAPLAN 2001 now. Data has become the most overused word in educational jargon. It has become the new education buzzword.

In my opinion we have two of the best administrators I have every worked with but they aren't immuned to the pressure being placed on them by their supervisors who are being pressured by senior bureaucrats to be a part of the general lift in test scores in Queensland. If the importance placed on NAPLAN continues to escalate it will eventually cause rifts between staff, administrators, students and parents.

Are NAPLAN tests OK?

In general I have no qualms with the idea of national testing that diagnoses strengths and weaknesses of individual students, school s or even systems. The tests themselves are generally well compiled but the fact that a large majority of the tests (except writing) are in multiple choice form which means you have a good degree of error to start with and until 2011 we have had no national curriculum so I'm not sure what state's content they use for testing. We are consistently told that we should analyse the data and use that to inform our planning which sounds reasonable but what if little Johnny guessed most questions and so did half his mates? We might assume we know what Johnny's problem or the school problems are based on the answer that they guessed but this could be a flawed assumption unless you actually sit down with them and get them to explain and NAPLAN can't test this. They may have had no logical reason for choosing their answers at all. It also takes approximately 5-6 months to get the results so the data for individual students can be quite outdated by the time you get it.

Should NAPLAN results be published?

NO, NO, NO, NO. This is an absolutely terrible idea. Julia Gillard and her supporters say it will provide choice, competition and accountability. The following arguments should debunk that myth.

Publishing NAPLAN results holds schools and teachers accountable to parents. Teachers and school are already accountable. Trust me, if we are doing a bad job we soon hear about it from parents and we definitely hear about it from students. There is a theory in government that if you put pressure on teachers and schools they'll actually starting working hard. I have news for people who espouse this theory. Teachers already work hard and are doing the best they can for kids already. Trying to shame them or embarrass them into improvement won't work. You don't have large numbers of "slacker teachers" filling our schools purposely disadvantaging our nation's children and if you think you should just sack them all like in New York then you'll get the same result as New York. We don't want to go there.

Publishing NAPLAN results will encourage healthy competition.

One of the great things about my profession is the collegiality. At my school teachers share activities, planning and ideas. We also share with other schools and they share with us. It's what helps us improve. If schools were in competition they would no longer share. We would closely guard our best practise ideas and activities and we all are worse off. Just remember, when you have a competition and you have winners you must also have losers. What teachers, principals or children want to be at a so called "losing school"? Those that could, would move on but those poor performing students have to go somewhere and may then create another losing school down the road.

Publishing NAPLAN results on MY School will provide choice for parents?

It will provide choice if you are a wealthy parent, living in a metropolitan area and you have a child doing well enough already to pass entrance exams. If you are poor, live in regional or remote areas, have a learning or behaviour problem or have religious or other reasons then you have little or no choice where to send your child. Governments should be trying to help make every school great but the problem with that is they know they may have to spend large amounts of money in some schools to give those kids the leg up they need to escape the poverty or poor culture of their home or area. They are looking for the easy way out which is to blame schools and teachers and getting parents to do the same.

If the government and parents think they can solve their child's school problems by moving them to a new school they are sadly mistaken. I have seen it so many times as an educator and only in rare occasions does a child change markedly. The same problems reappear even though it may take a few weeks or months. Imagine the ridiculous scenario where school A out performs school B in 2010 so a whole heap of parents move their children to School A and in 2011 School B does better School A does worse because of the migration so they all move back or a more likely outcome is school B will continually perform worse because school A takes the best and brightest that School B has to give but rejects the worst so school B can't improve no matter how hard they try because the best and brightest keep going down the road to School A because there's a perception that it's a better school.

What will this overemphasis of NAPLAN create?

We are already seeing the beginning of the negative impacts on the overemphasis of NAPLAN data when making decisions.

- 1) Curriculum is being narrowed. Maths and English are extremely important but will become the whole curriculum and other valuable programs in schools will be cast aside as they get no kudos for principals and school communities.
- 2) Schools (especially those with the most to lose ie private schools) will find ways of improving their data (telling kids to stay home, excluding kids from tests, asking kids to try another school or just blatantly cheating etc) while other honest and righteous schools won't cheat (like my school)
- 3) Undue and unrealistic pressure on staff to reach targets. Kids aren't cars, you can't guarantee results.
- 4) Funding cuts to those schools who fail to improve when they are the ones that really need it, principals losing jobs if targets aren't met at Partnership schools. This is ridiculous and counterproductive. How are you going to fill that job if you sack the principal for underperforming? Who'll want to go there next?
- 5) Poor decisions by parents as they may make a decision to send their child to a school based on one test without even walking into a school and having a look.
- 6) We risk ending up like UK and US who consistently rate well below us in international education standings. Why would we want to copy them?
- 7) Staffing schools in low socio economic areas will be even harder and with a record number of teachers set to retire in the next 5-10 years where will the staff come from?
- 8) Staff retention-this model of education will drive talented staff to other fields and out of the profession and we already have major challenges retaining young teachers-high percentages fail to make it past their first few years of service.

What should we do with NAPLAN data?

Let's use NAPLAN data appropriately. I suggest we:

- a) Use it as a diagnostic tool to inform parents and teachers on students strengths and weaknesses
- b) Use it as a tool to see where schools can do better and target resources
- c) Evaluate how new curriculum or other changes areas impacting on student learning
- d) Demand the government use it to fund education appropriately. Wealthy private schools don't need help. It is the schools in poverty stricken areas with kids who never asked to be there who need extra teachers, extra resources, whatever it takes to give them a chance to succeed. It is outrageous that wealthy private schools get more federal government money per student than public schools. It is outrageous that Australia lags behind OECD countries on education spending.

We should not use it to:

- a) Rate teacher performance or blame teachers
- b) Blame school communities or parents
- c) Rank schools to find winners and losers in a totally unfair competition
- d) Withhold funding for underperforming states or schools

Summary

I believe we are in a delicate situation here much like standing at the edge of the precipice. If we go much further down the path we are travelling with

the focus on NAPLAN test results becoming the main driver in schools we may well pay a heavy price and a price they we may pay for a long time. I truly hope this inquiry makes the minister take notice of education, not economic, research when making important decisions about the use of NAPLAN data and she reads the evidence of what has happened in the US and UK systems or she may well be remembered in history as the decision maker that failed a generation of Australian children and educators.