

The Australian Council for Educational Leaders Response to the NAPLAN Testing Program



**Australian Council for
Educational Leaders**

Contact: Jenny Lewis CEO

Author: David Smith

Ph: 02 4732 1211

Fax: 02 4732 1711

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1. About this response

This response has been prepared based on responses from the membership of ACEL. Although ACEL has a wide membership base ranging across institutes of Higher Education, schools of the state, catholic and independent school systems and other interest groups involved with education, in excess of 95% of all responses came from either school principals, or school principals and their executive leadership team. A number of school leaders also collected responses from staff as part of their contribution.

2. About ACEL

As Australia's peak professional organisation the Australian Council for Educational Leadership (ACEL) is a forward thinking, relevant and responsive agent of change and innovation. ACEL is a not-for-profit company and a 21st Century learning organisation this is continuously improving its practices to harness national and global opportunities. As the premier provider of resources and experiences for educational leaders, ACEL seeks to make these goods and services affordable and available to all 6500 members; and necessary and attractive to interested colleagues.

ACEL actively supports the development of leadership capabilities across Australia through its national and Branch initiated professional learning activities, international conferences, publications, online programs, and other partnership initiatives in leadership development, Access to these leadership-focused opportunities inspires and motivates; delivering to education systems and schools, leaders who are proficient, talented and well read in their field of expertise.

ACEL's highly regarded reputation makes it an ideal and attractive partner both locally and internationally, and is sought after by other organisations seeking to value-add and optimise their products, events and activities. Through the benefits of collaboration, these partnerships create significant efficiencies and generate opportunities for the greater good of education including the sustainability of effective educational leadership in the 21st Century.

3. Acceptance of NAPLAN

It is well accepted that NAPLAN is a broad based national program collecting information to serve three levels of needs – the system itself, schools, and parents and their children.

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It may be that the system is satisfied with the data they receive, that it is statistically valid and over time will show how student learning in the basic skill areas in Literacy and Numeracy has improved, and to what degree.

At the school level, the general concept of national testing, or probably more accurately the concept of collecting quality data to improve student learning, is widely accepted as a 'good thing' and is welcomed. The idea of being able to access information about student performance, and relate this information to performances of other students across a wide spectrum of schools of similar ages and settings, is seen as potentially very helpful. The identifying of relative strengths and/or weaknesses in relation to other student cohorts is seen as providing a critical external stimulus to at least review internal results through another, much broader lens. However, the inclusion of the publication of school results in its current form on the MySchool website is seen as de-railing and de-valuing the real potential of the material to help schools move forward in a constructive and educationally defensible way. It is not the fact of making school data public at issue, but more the way in which it is done at present and the misrepresentation of what it means.

The unsettling influence of the many unintended outcomes of the MySchool website has been further exacerbated by information about issues with experiences of national testing programs in countries such as the United Kingdom, Finland and Singapore. There have been an increasing number of articles in which educators have expressed reservations as to whether national testing programs can provide the sort of quality information expected, and that in fact the programs may have contributed to reducing the quality of teaching in schools rather than improved it. Given the many issues raised by school leaders that need addressing, and global information about national testing programs failing to deliver what was intended, the confidence in the capacity of our own system to address the issues well enough is being at least questioned – will the effort and costs involved in delivering a national program be worth it? Are there more effective ways to improve learning across a large cohort of students and be able to demonstrate it objectively?

At a parent level and from a school leader's perspective, it was felt that parents were generally confused by the information they were given and what they read/heard about through the different forms of mass media. The NAPLAN material needs to focus more on putting the 'snapshot' results into the broader quality school context for parents if parents are to be well-informed participants in the process. Many school leaders felt they were on the 'back foot' defending the process in their communities rather than on the 'front foot' extolling the value and the place of this data within the context of other key information gathered about the performance of their school.

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Thus in summary, the concept of national testing is accepted; but there is a lack of confidence that the current program will deliver what it set out to achieve effectively enough.

As it has been mainly school principals and those from school leadership teams who have contributed to this document, the key issues that are listed below are clearly from a schools perspective.

4. Key issues to be addressed

Comparative data issues

It was clear from responses that most schools have major concerns re the accuracy of the MySchool groupings of data and expressed strong views about the need for an urgent review of its impact. Even if the system believes the data is still statistically acceptable, the 'high stakes' nature as to how the results are used means that schools want a more realistic grouping of schools to ensure more valid interpretations of the information can take place. They value access to comparative data, but need the school groupings to undergo serious review to be of real use to them.

The issue of the media using the information to create its own league tables needs to be addressed as a high priority, as most respondents saw the distortion of information as very damaging to their efforts both to improve student learning in their own setting and also to address public perceptions about their school.

A number of suggestions included:

- that future NAPLAN material provided to parents puts and emphasizes the importance of placing the NAPLAN literacy and numeracy data into a whole school context in that it needs to be viewed as a 'snapshot' in time and viewed alongside:
 - other school data that shows progress in Literacy and Numeracy already being made,
 - parent and student satisfaction surveys
 - the range of programs the students are engaged in
 - other targeted programs in place to support students with special needs
- that value added rather than raw scores be considered as a better measure of school performance

'Fairness' of implementation issues

An over-riding concern of the responses from school leaders revolved around issues of 'fairness'. Given that the results have become 'high stakes' to many schools

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because of the judgements being made, there was a strong sense if that is to be the case, then at least make the information both valid and reliable.

There were many examples given of 'unfair' school practices, seen to be driven in the main by the 'high stakes' nature of the data, not only from the media influence but also from departmental officers. Although many of the examples given in the responses can be seen as hearsay and not necessarily completely tested as accurate, the perceptions are there among school staff. Some of these perceptions included:

- The supervision of the assessments:
 - in some schools, senior staff supervised the assessment and in others the regular classroom teacher did
 - in some schools, the tests were delivered in a relatively normal setting, others used more formal examination procedures
 - in some schools it was seen as OK to provide some interpretation to questions, others did not
 - in some schools, students were in home classrooms with potentially helpful information displayed in the room while others consciously either used different rooms and/or covered critical information
 - in some schools, there was no additional staff available to have alternative supervisory arrangements, therefore the classroom teacher would have to supervise

Suggestion(s):

To have the school principal actually sign off accepting responsibility for all practices administering the assessment, and that in the event of practices outside the guidelines occurring, the principal to be formally held accountable.

- Access to the test materials varied from:
 - in some schools, packages of the test material were left unsecured, other schools locked away and formally opened
 - in some schools, students were given the title, for example of the narrative, to practise the day before and most others no access at all
 - in some schools, the timeline of administering the test was varied and therefore potential access to the test questions prior to its administration was possible
 - in many schools, there were catch-up classes for students absent, which compromises prior knowledge security
 - the use of two stage flip books, where there was a break in the administration of each section, was seen as both a potential breach of access to forward information as well as to potentially the opportunity to re-

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enter the assessment booklet and change answers after discussions over the break

- Relative age differences/year level placement between the states:
 - For example, a Year 6 student from Victoria was placed in a Year 7 school in WA to be with her peer group; but in Victoria, this student would not sit the Year 7 NAPLAN test for another year
- Funding for poor performing schools:
 - This is premised on the whole school needing to perform poorly to attract funding – it would be fairer if individual students who perform poorly, for whatever reasons, attracted the funding to get the support needed to improve

Suggestion(s):

That guidelines emphasizing the importance of the security of the NAPLAN material be made clear; that all students must sit the assessments on the same day and time, with no catch-ups unless special conditions met - not simply 'fill'; that age ranges of students to be looked at when making comparisons of results.

- The nature of the group of students, such as:
 - in small schools, an absence or poor result of say two students skews the whole school results
 - in single gender schools, where for example girls perform better generally in basic literacy and therefore appear as a better school
 - the number and mix of students with special needs, such as ESL, dyslexic, ... that were not eligible for exemptions skewed overall school results

Suggestion(s)

That there is a need to review the exemptions criteria and at least consider special cases, perhaps even the inclusion of a 'to note' notation against the results; and to provide more details publicly about each school's cohort to build a more accurate picture of the administration of the assessment, such as the inclusion, including gender breakdown, of:

- how many students sat the assessment
- how many students were given exemptions
- how many students were absent
- how many students did catch-ups

It is believed that this additional data helps make factors that might affect the results more transparent to the reader.

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Curriculum issues

There were a number of detailed curriculum issues raised, but the over-riding concern from school leaders was the time delay between the administering of the assessment and getting the results. There appears to be an inordinate delay in the process (four months), which seriously impacts on teachers in particular intending to use the results for diagnostic purposes. The time gap means most students have moved on and therefore the validity of the information would need to be revalidated before taking further action. To be useful as a diagnostic tool there needs to be minimal time between the assessment activity and the analysis.

Schools are using the information to identify issues for them for broad planning purposes and setting priority areas for the following year.

Other curriculum concerns raised included:

- The change of genre from a narrative to exposition writing in the writing section as it:
 - reduces the value of existing data intended to track student growth and development in at least a particular genre
 - changes targets already set by schools

To Note: It is understood that literacy skills can be tested through a range of genre and this is not the concern expressed – it was specifically where schools had identified weaknesses in student narrative writing and had decided to measure its focus on improvement based on the consistency of the externally provided NAPLAN data.

- The 'high stakes' focus on essentially basic skills inevitably narrows the curriculum – refer to the UK and the experiences of other countries who have over more recent times incorporated national testing over several grade areas as part of a student learning improvement process – and as distinct from end of stages schooling assessments.
- There is an inherent imbalance in the way in which literacy and numeracy are assessed in that the Literacy assessment assesses four strands, whereas in the Numeracy area, only one strand is assessed out of five strands.
- Due to the choice of timing available in, for example, introducing mathematics concepts, it would be helpful to schools to know what areas were to be covered in the assessment. Although this might lead to some accusations of teaching to the test, the over-riding factor is a fairness issue for students in that they have at least been introduced to a concept that is being assessed in time for the assessment rather than a week or so later.
- The test format in some instances is unfamiliar to the students, and therefore not necessarily testing accurate student understanding.

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- The process of NAPLAN identifying the important concepts to be assessed may help many schools overcome the crowded curriculum syndrome and provide a better focus. Not knowing what is valued most places many teachers, and therefore their students, in an unnecessarily stressful situation.
- That it would be helpful for answer sheets to be made available to the schools after the assessments have been completed to assist with more timely follow-up
- By their nature, the test questions tend to be narrow and cannot address deep learning and conceptual thinking as easily. The ability to measure problem solving skills and creativity are also compromised

Administering issues

There were a wide range of issues raised about the actual administration of the NAPLAN assessment which many respondents thought could be refined and improved upon significantly. A listing of the issues raised included that:

- the entering of data for many schools was an onerous, a task further exacerbated by losing data unexpectedly and having to use a 'save' system that was not user friendly
- the inclusion of composite classes added to the complexity of processing records
- there were too many unexplained errors in the data which schools had to laboriously go through and correct
- one school quoted an error that has been notified several times but continues to appear in their profile, which affects interpretations of the data provided
- there were insufficient numbers of teacher booklets in many instances where multiple classes were involved
- the capacity of schools to provide a consistent level of supervision to administer the assessments varied significantly
- re-scheduling catch-up classes and subsequent supervision was problematical for many schools
- determining exemptions varied between schools and requests to refine and improve that process
- the need for random audits to verify school practices, and ultimately increase the public validity of the assessments
- the selection of dates relative to preparation needs across different systems caused some issues

Reports issues

Although the reports in their current form were seen as generally clear, there were suggestions that there are more user-friendly forms of report analyzing software

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available that some schools are using that increases the usefulness of the data. It was suggested that the NAPLAN team could investigate the possibility of making the information available in a form that schools can integrate better with other reporting systems.

Unintended outcomes

Responses also indicated that there were other unintended consequences that are impacting on the work of schools, and these include:

- devaluing of many existing effective teaching / learning / assessment processes already in place in schools
- neighbouring school relationships being impacted on by perceived unfair practices in the administering of the assessments
- increased stress on principals in instances where they are having to work with a community confused by the information being distributed without a meaningful context; and to work with Departmental officers to address issues that may be out of context
- the demotivating impact on schools who have done much to value add but overall results may still look poor in a one year snapshot
- increased teacher stress through the pressure for their students to perform well on a 'snapshot' assessment – from parents, from school administrators and from Departmental officers; and other key information available re student and school performance being less regarded in the process
- the confusing messages to parents, such as the information that they will be in a better position to make choices about their child's school because they see which ones have performed better than their existing school; but for most parents, choice of school is not really a reality for a number of reasons – special zoning agreements, distance, cost, ...

5. In conclusion

The many issues raised by school leader members of the ACEL through this response process have been provided within a spirit of wanting the NAPLAN assessment program to be successful and provide the quality individual and comparative data to help drive school improvement. This is evidenced by the listing and discussion of the many issues school leaders have seen as needing to be addressed to make improvements. In its current form, exacerbated by the errors and misuse of information through the MySchool website, there is a sense that what we have is not good enough yet for schools to feel confident with the value of the data. The time lag between administering the assessments and receiving the results diminishes its value as a diagnostic tool, especially for class teachers. Perhaps the system is getting the broad information it needs to monitor student improvement, but there are too many reliability and validity issues for schools to see the comparative data process as fair and

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accurate. As 'high stakes' data, it needs many of the inherent issues listed above to be addressed to gain the full support of school leaders.