

Submission to the Senate Inquiry

Teaching and Learning – maximising our investment in Australian Schools

Submission from David Hornsby

Thank-you for the opportunity to send a submission to this inquiry. Unfortunately, I heard about the inquiry only yesterday – but you might appreciate a short submission!

I have dedicated my working life to education – firstly as a primary teacher, then as an education department consultant working in both primary and secondary schools and then as a principal. For many years, I also lectured in teacher education courses at RMIT University and La Trobe University. Now I'm an independent education consultant working with teachers in every school system.

This inquiry is addressing the issue of investment in our school system. Since submissions are due tomorrow (26 October) I'm limiting my comments to the one investment issue: 'How NAPLAN funding could be better used'.

My overall contention – **We don't necessarily need extra funds in the education budget; we just need those funds spent more wisely.**

At the moment, the government is wasting many millions of dollars on a national testing program that does not, and can not, do what the government intends. Their intentions are fine, but they have adopted a failed US model which can not deliver.

Daily, I see the most dreadful, shameful inequity in our schools. One day, I might be working in a school that looks more like a mansion in the botanical garden setting; a school with all the equipment that money can buy; a school that can afford to pay the principal \$500,000 a year (more than the PM and more than the Governor-General). The next day, I might be working in a small Catholic primary school or a government school that has inadequate equipment in classrooms, pot-holes in the asphalt, broken cyclone wire fences, spoutings falling off. There has been a lot of commentary about these extremes (eg. Gonski report; Prof Richard Teese, University of Melbourne; daily press). This inequity, this huge variation in the opportunities our children have, is a disgrace in our relatively wealthy country.

This inequity is growing, despite the two broad goals of the Melbourne Declaration (Dec 2008) which Ministers of Education signed:

1. Australian schooling promotes equity and excellence
2. All young Australians become successful learners, confident and creative individuals, and active and informed citizens.

With party-politics clouding current funding arrangements, and the obscene amount of money being spent on a damaging national testing program, there is no chance of realising the goals of the Melbourne Declaration. Indeed, the current policies promote inequity and make it less likely that we will help learners be confident and creative – qualities considered important enough to be included in the terms of the Senate Inquiry.

NAPLAN is not an investment in education

The references listed below, and the attachments and links included, provide powerful evidence that the NAPLAN testing regime results in greater inequity, narrowed curriculum and dampened creativity.

The evidence is strong. Removing NAPLAN in its current form will do more to maximise our investment in education than any other single factor.

Governments spend a lot of money on education and there should indeed be a consideration of ways in which to maximise that investment. However, NAPLAN is not the answer, and it works against the Ministers' own goals as expressed in the Melbourne Declaration.

What does NAPLAN do? It provides *population* data and gives us information about how male students compare with female students, how urban students compare with students living in remote areas, how indigenous students compare with other groups, and so on – but this population data can be obtained by testing a sample of students every three years. What a massive saving of taxpayers' funds! What a wonderful opportunity to redirect the wasted funds to more productive endeavours.

Summary of some of the problems associated with NAPLAN

1. **The tests themselves are invalid and unreliable.** The government doesn't release the technical reports. Why? Prof Margaret Wu obtained one through FOI. The standard errors of measurement are huge. A 40-item test cannot assess a year's growth, let alone two years of learning from Year 3 to Year 5, Year 5 to Year 7, etc. It has been clearly demonstrated that the NAPLAN data are seriously misrepresenting students, teachers and schools.

Papers 1 & 2, Set 1 of the “Say No to NAPLAN” Papers provided, clearly show the magnitude of the problem. Please read Papers 1 & 2.

2.

The tests are not diagnostic. Even if they were, getting the results several months later is too late. The data can not inform teaching or improve learning. Would we test people for hepatitis but not provide the results for 5 months?

3.

There is a strong link between poverty and home background, and educational outcomes. NAPLAN results are highly positively correlated with postcode.

There are countless studies demonstrating the link between poverty and educational outcomes. I list only three:

van der Berg, S (2008) *Poverty and Education*, The International Institute for Educational Planning, UNESCO.

Berliner, D (2012) *Effects of Inequality and Poverty vs. Teachers and Schooling on America's Youth*. Available at:
<http://www.tcrecord.org/Content.asp?ContentId=16889>

Hilferty, F & Redmond, G (2009) *The Implications of Poverty on Children's Readiness to Learn*, Australian Research Alliance for Children & Youth, and NAB. Available at:
http://www.aracy.org.au/cmsdocuments/REP_the_implications_of_poverty_on_childrens_readiness_to_learn_2009.pdf

4.

It is disingenuous of the government to argue that NAPLAN results can lead to schools getting more funding. The myth is exposed by principals who have gone on the record to say they have never received one cent extra in funding as a result of test scores.

See: www.theage.com.au/national/education/principal-hits-out-at-useless-testing-20121014-2710c.html

5.

NAPLAN is placing an unhealthy emphasis on literacy and numeracy at the expense of other important curriculum areas such as science, social education and the arts. Many schools feel so pressured that they practice NAPLAN-style tests for the first few months of the year. After the tests in May, we start to see science again, and drama, and history.

See Papers 7 & 8, Set 1 of the “Say No to NAPLAN” Papers provided.
See: www.literacyeducators.com.au/images/pdf/naplan-cancer.pdf

6.

The design of the tests advantages shallow thinkers who are prepared to race through multiple-choice items with little thought. Deep thinkers see that there are sometimes other alternatives that can be correct. Indeed, “most tests punish the thinking test-taker – to the point that some teachers advise their students, in effect, to dumb themselves down so they can do better on the test.”
(www.alfiekohn.org)

Standardised tests, such as those in NAPLAN, have too many problems. They can’t all be listed in this sort submission. However, here are some summarised facts about standardised tests:

- they measure memorisation and test-taking skills
- they ignore the characteristics of good learners
- they can’t measure initiative, creativity, imagination, conceptual thinking, ethical reflection, judgment, commitment (they only measure and count isolated skills, specific facts, and the least interesting and least significant aspects of learning)
- they measure how quickly students can do things rather than deep thinking and understanding
- the multiple-choice test items require a single correct answer and do not engage students in interpretation and evaluation
- they measure isolated, low-level performance, but society requires effective cooperation, assimilation of other people’s ideas into your own, and group performance.

The list goes on and on. Some excellent references:

Au, W & Bollow Tempel, M (eds) (2012) *Pencils Down: Rethinking high-stakes testing and accountability in public schools*. Rethinking Schools Ltd., Wisconsin.

Darling-Hammond, L (2010) *The Flat World and Education*, Teachers College Press, NY.

Harris, P et.al. (2011) *The Myths of Standardized Tests*, Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc. Maryland.

Kohn, A www.alfiekohn.org

7.

Teachers “teach to the test” because the NAPLAN results are used inappropriately, turning the tests into high-stakes tests. As a result, the curriculum is narrowed to match the test. The high-stakes national testing contributes to the pressures which keep our educational system limping along in “Encyclopaedia Britannica” form, despite the fact that we’re living in a “Wikipedia world”. (David Loader, former principal of MLC, and Simon Whatmore, director of strategy and policy at Harvester Consulting, The Age,

15-10-2012.)

Ref: Paper 3, Set 1 of the “Say No to NAPLAN” Papers attached.

We have imported a failed model from the USA, a country which is way down in international comparisons (see the Program for International Student Assessment).

Why did we not look to Finland for a more successful model? See: Pasi Sahlberg (2012) *Finnish Lessons: what can the world learn from educational change in Finland?*

Sahlberg points out that “none of the current high performing education systems in the OECD had achieved their place using the policies Australia currently has in place.”

Research (including the research reported by Mills in the *Australian Journal of Language and Literacy*, Vol. 3, No. 3, 2008) demonstrates that **large-scale assessments will not raise literacy standards**. “Rather, externally imposed assessments are tied to a range of adverse outcomes for the lives of those most at stake in the multifaceted process of teaching and learning.”

Assessment needs to inform teaching and improve learning; NAPLAN does neither.

We have to stop focusing on what is easiest to quantify and what is easiest to score with a computer. We have to start focusing on what really matters: quality teaching and equal educational opportunity regardless of socio-economic and family background.

The government won't reveal how much NAPLAN costs taxpayers, but the most conservative estimate is \$100 million per year. Given the huge problems with NAPLAN, this is an outrageous waste of taxpayers' money. The money should be used to improve the quality of teaching. ie. we need to invest in teachers. Invest, don't test!

Finally, I would happily accept an invitation to speak at the Senate Inquiry if an opportunity arose.

Thank-you

David Hornsby

(Attachments listed below)

ATTACHMENTS (sent with email)

1. "Say No to NAPLAN" Papers, Set 1
2. "Say No to NAPLAN" Papers, Set 2
3. Letter of Support from over 140 Australian Academics
4. Mills, K (2008) 'Will large-scale assessments raise literacy standards in Australian Schools?' in *Australian Journal of Language and Literacy*, Vol 3, No 3, 211-225.