

Committee Secretary,
Senate Education, Employment and Workplace Relations Committee,
PO Box 6100,
Parliament House,
Canberra,
ACT, 2600
Sunday June 20th, 2010.

Dear Sir,

I write on behalf of the Junee Teachers Association to express some concerns relating to the administration and reporting of NAPLAN testing and how it affects three of the schools within our Association area.

It cannot be denied that the NAPLAN test in itself is a useful diagnostic device when used alongside school based programs and information relating to student achievement and progress. The test is in itself, however, a very narrow analytical tool – it does not measure things that most teachers would deem to be incredibly important, such as higher order thinking and processing skills, creative ability beyond a simple and predictable narrative in the writing section, as well as the range of extra curricular activities that contribute to forming the well educated student.

However, that the NAPLAN test, and with it the MySchool website, has been presented by the media as the ultimate “transparent” test of a school’s performance can only be cause for alarm in schools. The potential for a narrowed, test-oriented curriculum is clear to any informed observer, particularly those with an eye on educational events in Britain and the US. The current situation in our local schools, where students are being ‘drilled’ for weeks leading up to the test, is only the first sign of an unhealthy and educationally suspect narrowing of the curriculum. The practice of intensively preparing for a test that is meant to be a “snapshot” of a student’s performance at a given point in time also calls into question the diagnostic value of that test.

At a local level there has been a great deal of detrimental debate in the community about the results of the schools in our area based on the MySchools website. The public schools in particular have weathered a series of snide and ill-informed criticisms as a result of the statistical portrayal of school performance. There is the perception in the community that the schools can be “rated” on test performance. That said, there is also great amusement generated from the ridiculous list of so-called “like schools” to the Junee public schools. Clearly, there needs to be legislation in place nationally to prevent the publication of the poisonous league tables that were printed in several newspapers after the 2009 tests. They were simplistic, divisive and contributed nothing to reasoned educational debate in New South Wales or Australia. If the Minister for Education is determined to keep the MySchools website running then it needs to have a far greater depth of information to allow a full impression of a school to be formed. Simply listing results and basing socioeconomic assumptions on postcodes is not good enough. As well it would be beneficial to statistically “mask” the identity of individual schools, a point particularly relevant in small rural communities in which the loss of 2 or 3 students can have dramatic effects on the staffing, resourcing and programming of schools. This is currently the experience of Junee High, where the loss of students to schools that are seen as “better” in Wagga Wagga has led to a significant narrowing of curriculum offerings, particularly in the senior school. This can only have long term dire consequences for the school and,

in turn, for the town.

As you can see, we are very concerned about the way that the tests have been used (and abused) to this point in time, and about the way that they have been used to compare three very different schools as if they were identical. We would like to avoid the industrial situation that arose this year, as the level of division, angst and anxiety that this caused to students, parents and teachers was unbearable. Instead we would like to see a balanced, informed and genuine discussion by the Federal Minister for Education with all stakeholders to ensure that the test is used for its rightful purpose and that the website will truly reflect the nature and personality of an individual school. As Einstein once noted: "Not everything that can be counted counts; and not everything that counts can be counted."

Yours sincerely,

Christopher Payne
Vice President, June Teachers Association.