



Education and Training

Dr Shona Batge
The Committee Secretary
Senate Standing Committee on Education, Employment and Workplace Relations
PO.Box 6100
Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600
AUSTRALIA

Email: wr.sen@aph.gov.au

Dear Dr Batge

Thank you for the opportunity to provide a submission to the Senate Inquiry into the Administration and Reporting of NAPLAN Testing. This submission responds to a range of the matters raised by the Terms of Reference of the inquiry with regard to the ACT public school sector.

A measure of performance

The ACT Government is strongly supportive of the National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) and the reporting of results through the *My School* website. ACT involvement in the development and ongoing delivery of these nationally significant projects has been constructive and focused on improving student outcomes.

The ACT Government broadly agrees with the Australian Government on what developments are necessary for Australians to be able to compete in an increasingly complex knowledge economy as reflected in the nationally agreed 2008 *Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians*.

Performance reporting is a critical requirement embedded into the Council of Australian Government's (COAG) national agreements and partnerships. As noted in the recently released Grattan Report: *Measuring What Matters: Student Progress*, the national themes of school choice, school accountability and school improvement share three overarching performance reporting principles:

1. high quality accountability to students, parents, carers and the community;
2. tracking the achievement of the COAG targets; and
3. providing evidence to support future policy reforms and system improvements including the aim of better directed resources.

The Grattan Report further contextualises the pivotal role that NAPLAN plays in performance reporting; it notes COAG's policy intent, that nationally uniform (standardised) test results inform progress against key performance measures relating to student achievement and school performance:

The NAPLAN assessments are intended to provide schools and policy makers with a data-rich source of information about the performance of Australian schools and their students. Literacy and numeracy skills are significant features of school curricula at all year levels, rendering the assessment of these skills the ideal media for measuring school performance.

Accountability and Transparency

NAPLAN is well placed to be an ideal mechanism for reporting on achievement and performance. While the reporting through *My School* has sparked significant tension and debate in the community, the ACT Government considers that *My School* will continue to develop and support the forward progress of NAPLAN and its establishment as a respected vehicle of national comparative reporting. It is critical that through the *My School* debate the positive elements of the accountability and transparency agenda are considered.

In the context of increased accountability and transparency, the reporting of school performance information is critical, and contributes to the achievement of improved performance.

The public debate which surrounded the *My School* website launch and this year's NAPLAN tests (11-13 May 2010) indicated that NAPLAN testing is held in high esteem by many stakeholders. Parent councils expressed an objective understanding of the complex issues relating to assessment (NAPLAN) and reporting (*My School*).

Giving schools greater exposure to public scrutiny is a challenge, for some educators and some schools more than others. Maintaining public confidence in the high quality of educational services is paramount, as is the partnership with members of the educational profession who deliver those services.

The importance of public performance information being fit for purpose therefore remains vital. The ACT Government has consistently opposed any form of simplistic league tables. Simplistic league tables in other countries have caused immeasurable confusion and do little to raise the community's confidence in overall educational outcomes.

As the Chief Executive of the Department of Education and Training in the ACT, I am committed to accountability and transparency in reporting. In that respect I believe the principles and protocols for reporting on schooling in Australia are predicated on fair and reasonable assumptions. I am also confident that recent moves towards establishing improved federal (state and territory) data sharing frameworks will ensure that COAG (and therefore ACARA) is provided with school performance data that is quality assured, being: context specific, relevant, timely, accurate, easily interpreted and accessible.

Evidence - the enabling factor

Healthy scepticism and public debate regarding NAPLAN and *My School* is important. More important is the recognition that principals, teachers, parents and governments all have the

same goal in mind: a better education for every child. This shared vision will support the further development of the *My School* website as an invaluable national resource. The *My School* website is a new technology in education and policy terms, and its impact will be seen more over the coming years than in the last 12 months.

The accountability and transparency agenda has changed the context within which we all operate. The new context is evidence-based. More information is becoming available about what it takes to make a great school, and a great system of schools. We are beginning to know what works, what doesn't, and what needs to change. The same research literature is telling our educational professionals what they should do more of, and what they should do less of.

The *Teaching And Learning International Survey* (TALIS) conducted in 2008, is of significant interest to Australian educational researchers and administrators. The first results from TALIS have been released in a thematic report titled: *Creating Effective Teaching and Learning Environments*. This report provides a broad description of the learning and teaching environments that support quality teaching and effective school governance. In summary, the results from TALIS indicate that we can create effective teaching and learning environments, give relevance to our data, when we focus our attention towards:

- 1) The Professional Development of Teachers: by
 - better supporting teacher involvement and participation
 - delivering targeted professional learning opportunities
 - addressing genuine school and teacher needs.
- 2) Teaching Practices, Teachers' Beliefs and Attitudes: by
 - promoting active learning through curriculum design
 - personalising learning with a student focus
 - encouraging teacher collaboration and teaming.
- 3) School Evaluation, Teacher Appraisal and Feedback and the Impact on Schools and Teachers: by
 - giving feedback through appraisal
 - recognise good teaching and rewarding it
 - creating school improvement incentives.
- 4) Leading to Learn: School Leadership and Management Styles: by
 - raising the profile of principals who demonstrate instructional leadership styles
 - promoting classroom innovation through collaboration.

The context of change

Principal Autonomy

Reports such as the Grattan Report have highlighted systemic challenges that require changes to our current models of schooling. It is also clear that effective school teachers are at their best when supported by effective school leaders. In order to create knowledge-rich, evidence-based educational networks, and learning environments that encourage strong professional communities, principals will need greater autonomy and flexibility. Principals must have the power to create high performing teaching teams that are recognised and rewarded for being evidence-based, self-reflecting, rigorous and innovative.

The ACT Government has recently conducted, through The Allen Consulting Group, a comprehensive *Review of School Based Management in the ACT*. School Based Management (SBM) has been a feature of ACT public schools since 1976 and:

...Is premised on the notion that those at the fore of school operations are best placed to make decisions that support the needs of students and of the local community. It grants authority to principals, teachers, parents and community members who possess intimate knowledge of schools' needs and operational contexts. SBM allows schools to allocate and re-distribute financial resources, with schools held accountable for the decisions they make. The ultimate objective of school decision-making is to contribute to improved performance and better outcomes for students. Schools are expected to make use of the flexibilities under SBM to further that objective.

The review delivered 18 recommendations covering four themes: autonomy, building system capacity, schools governance and resourcing mechanisms. The theme of autonomy was the most significant as it recommended a move towards greater school autonomy, but also emphasised that this should be accompanied by greater accountability and an obligation to build capacity across the system.

In the context of this Inquiry and the use of assessment data (i.e. NAPLAN) to provide evidence of student and school performance, it is clear that a principal's capacity to manage, analyse and communicate from an evidence-base is a crucial skill set. As noted in the Department's response to the review, the school's high performing status will rely upon the principal's ability to communicate superior outcomes.

Where a school demonstrates sustained high performance, principals [should] be given the opportunity to opt in to gain autonomy over an increasing range of areas of expenditure (capital spending and staffing) based on their judgment of what would best contribute to school outcomes. Such flexibility should be accompanied by an obligation to contribute actively to building system capacity in other schools and would be subject to continued strong performance (assessed as part of performance management of principals). Appointment of a new principal would trigger a review of the extent of devolved decision making afforded to the school in question.

In an educational environment that now requires a high level of accountability and transparency there is a raised need for building evidence-based leadership capacity. The ACT Department of Education and Training has been addressing this need through a collaborative research arrangement with the University of Canberra. Amongst a diverse range of research activities, mainly based upon sharing NAPLAN and other ACT public school assessment data, is a Masters level unit entitled: *Evidence-based Educational Leadership*.

The module was originally created specifically for ACT principals but has since been developed into a compulsory unit in the Masters of Education program. The purpose of the unit is to introduce educational leaders to:

- the importance of using evidence to inform decision-making in educational leadership
- the ways in which evidence can be used to inform executive decision-making
- the skills of collecting, analysing and presenting data for strategic purposes and

- the conceptual knowledge about what types of evidence should be sought to inform policy decisions and planning processes.

Upon successful completion of the unit, educational leaders should be able to:

- locate, identify, collate, analyse, manipulate, evaluate, interpret and present information and numerical data
- express ideas and present information in a structured and persuasive manner
- use appropriate information technology to collect and analyse data
- identify and analyse policy issues within their field of practice
- take responsibility for collecting and analysing data to inform executive decision-making and
- be independent self-directed learners and communicate strategically.

The need for the high degree of data literacy required of principals in this information rich world has been highlighted through recent research which illustrates the benefits of data-based decision-making within schools. Provided with a capacity to analyse data, schools can accurately direct resources, gauge the impact of various school programs, and take steps to improve effectiveness.

Teacher Quality

Teacher quality is a key ingredient in school performance. The ACT has accepted the challenge of raising teacher quality through a national partnership and allocated funding in its 2010-11 Budget for the establishment of a Teacher Quality Institute. The initiative will establish processes to register all ACT teachers, accredit pre-service education programs for local teacher training institutions and certify teacher skills and knowledge against the nationally agreed teacher standards, coordinated by the Australian Institute of Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL).

The ACT's Teacher Quality Institute brings the ACT in line with other states and the Northern Territory which all have teacher registration bodies. Nationally reformed principles and practices will promote mobility of the teaching workforce and will increase public confidence in the professionalism of teachers. Still in draft form, the *National Professional Standards for Teachers* make repeated reference to teachers at all levels of expertise gathering and analysing student performance data.

Professional Learning – Evidence-based Practice

Without the requisite skills to analyse student performance data teachers find it difficult to associate the relevance of standardised assessment information with curriculum design and delivery. It is therefore necessary to assist in raising the evidence-based capacity of the teaching workforce. The introduction of national testing has raised the awareness of this issue and validated a new context for professional learning.

Results from the ACT's Satisfaction Surveys showed that between 2005 and 2008 (when NAPLAN was launched) teachers across both primary and secondary sectors increased their application of system testing by 20 percent. However, throughout that same period the ACT's annual school review process was revealing that with this raised usage came teacher confusion. Consequently, using the Australian Government's Quality Teaching Funds, the

ACT Department of Education and Training developed a modular training package to address teacher capacity and the application of evidence-based practices.

In developing the Professional Learning package, a thorough review of literature on evidence-based practice in schools and classrooms was undertaken. The review was also informed by two internally produced documents that were intended to inform knowledge and promote discussion regarding evidence-based practices. The collected wisdom suggests that the teacher, as a reflective practitioner, uses all available classroom evidence to raise the quality of student engagement, and through professional interaction, contributes to the formation of a knowledge creating school.

Embedding evidence-based principles and practice in the culture of schools and systems is a gradual process, an educational journey towards greater effectiveness and greater accountability. Most importantly, evidence-based practice is a powerful means of improving the learning of all students.

Following the research, discussion and professional learning activities, it was noted there were recurring characteristics of excellent teaching in relation to the evidence-based practices. Such teachers and teaching:

- recognises prior knowledge: *“they use frequent formative assessments to map progress and to build new learning”*
- fosters deep knowledge and connectedness through the: *“use of assessment strategies that call for evidence of deep understanding, not superficial recall”*
- helps students to unpack their thinking: *“they use self and peer assessments that help students understand their own and others’ learning”*
- challenges learners to take a step into the unknown: *“they use demanding assessment tasks, some of which culminate in products or performances. These may be multi-faceted projects requiring group collaborations”*
- explicitly sets expectations and gives useful feedback: *“they use a range of assessment strategies so that students with different learning styles have the opportunity to demonstrate what they know and can do.”*
- recognises individual differences: *“they use evidence of student achievement of curriculum goals, and do not privilege particular forms or modes of assessment. They use an array of strategies to assess what students know and can do”*
- acknowledges socio-cultural differences: *“they help students achieve outcomes that will give them power over their future lives. They encourage students to critically examine their own beliefs and assumptions”*
- creates collaborate learning environments: *“they accept the challenge of assessing group work. They explore ways of doing-so that are valid and fair and share these with their colleagues.”*

The timing of this professional learning initiative coincided with the introduction of NAPLAN. Importantly, the ACT at this time had negotiated a NAPLAN service agreement with the NSW Department of Education and Training that included the provision of a

sophisticated tool for data analysis in the form of the *School Measurement, Assessment and Reporting Toolkit* (SMART).

The introduction of this data analysis tool empowers school principals and teachers to use value-added measures to improve instruction and school programs. The SMART software program provides diagnostic information on NAPLAN, and is an example of how digital technology can assist in effectively using data to better understand the performance of individual students, groups of students, schools and the system as a whole. The SMART package provides teachers with the power to identify areas for improvement as well as strengths in student performance.

SMART is intended to be used by schools to analyse NAPLAN results in-depth. The data and analysis functionality of SMART includes the capacity to:

- create custom groups of students which could be used to analyse the results of students who have been subject to a specific intervention
- analyse groups of student across the achievement bands which can provide evidence of improved student learning outcomes and effective pedagogy
- collate information on the achievement of students on individual items which details patterns of responses
- filter information on the performance of the school or for various groups of students by literacy/numeracy, by subject and by sub-strands through Item Analysis
- schools can identify particular skills that students are demonstrating they need additional support in and develop appropriately targeted intervention strategies
- access a wide variety of Teaching Strategies which provide practical assistance for informing teaching programs and improving targeted student learning outcomes
- specific teaching strategies are provided as well as teaching sheets and in some cases worksheets for students that teachers can print to use in class
- the teaching strategies provide practical assistance for teachers. These teaching strategies are linked to skills assessed in NAPLAN tests and are available for literacy and numeracy
- schools can access information concerning the achievement of students on individual items across the school or by groups of students. It details patterns of student responses and in the case of numeracy, additional information is provided detailing the reason why students chose particular options. This is particularly powerful for providing evidence of improved student learning outcomes and effective pedagogy.

A continuously improving system

A standing objective of national and local governments is to systematically improve public sector governance structures and processes. At the heart of good governance is intelligent decision-making informed by a robust and defensible evidence-base. With a solid evidence-base, continuous improvement can be established as the driver behind the delivery of high quality services and achieving excellent outcomes.

The ACT has recently re-defined the context of school improvement, impacting on departmental structures, regional definitions and school practices. Improving our public schools will help achieve the vision of the Department's *Strategic Plan 2010-2013 – Everyone Matters*: to ensure that all young people in the ACT learn, thrive and are equipped with the skills to lead fulfilling, productive and responsible lives.

On the basis that there is room for all schools to improve, the Department released a directions paper *School Improvement in ACT Public Schools - Directions 2010-2013* identifying specific areas for attention and action; stating that:

From 2010, the Department will implement an integrated and comprehensive approach to school improvement based on the principle that the core work of all school leaders is to improve student learning outcomes. This approach will build upon the current work in schools to improve teacher quality, develop leadership capacity, introduce more consistency in curriculum provision and use data to monitor and report on school performance.

The Department is committed to developing a more systematic and targeted approach to school improvement by:

- *organising our schools into four networks, each led by a school network leader*
- *enhancing the accountability of principals and school network leaders*
- *increasing the availability and use of data to inform school improvement practices and monitor progress*
- *providing support for our principals to ensure they are highly effective instructional leaders*
- *building the capacity of our teachers, particularly in literacy and numeracy teaching.*

Conclusion

The recent decision of Fair Work Australia ([2010] FWA 3454 - 29 April 2010 - Deegan C) made it clear that the administration and conduct of NAPLAN is a professional undertaking. Equally, it is an embedded component of the ACT's commitment to partnerships under the National Education Agreement.

NAPLAN results are used to inform decision-making in many ways: at the inter-government level they form the basis of our financial arrangements; across my own jurisdiction they inform program evaluations and resource allocations; and at the school level they deliver to teachers and parents the information needed to help students learn.

Given these significant functions, NAPLAN results have an elevated status across a broad range of performance related initiatives and agreements. As a measuring stick, NAPLAN performance information is critical to the achievement of local and national initiatives aimed to improve principals' leadership capacity, teacher quality and school performance.

Thank you again for the opportunity to contribute to the Senate Inquiry. NAPLAN data is a rich resource and evidence-base which contributes to the achievement of our national goals for education.

The ACT Government and the Department of Education and Training look forward to the findings of the Inquiry, recognising the importance of this subject as it relates to our Territory - where we intend that all people reach their potential, make a contribution and share the benefits of our community.

Yours sincerely

Dr Jim Watterston
Chief Executive

27 July 2010