

# Public Schools Principals Forum

*Primary Education –  
A Celebration of Childhood*



A submission on behalf of the Public Schools Principals Forum to The Senate Inquiry into the administration and reporting of NAPLAN testing

1. The conflicting claims made by the Government, educational experts and

**peak bodies in relation to the *publication of the National Assessment Program - Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) testing;***

To take four simple tests (three on literacy and one on numeracy, lasting approximately 45 minutes each) and then to somehow massage the results from these diagnostic “snapshots of student performance” so that they relate the complexity and uniqueness of schools, and then to reduce this to a single number or colour, is a statistical hocus-pocus that is an anathema to all thinking educators.

Schools are more than a one day test (with the reduction of the test results to a single number) and the very idea that a valid “judgement” can be made about the quality of schooling on this basis is ludicrous.

The publication of simplistic data, or data that is unqualified, is extraordinarily misleading and does not begin to define the unique context of individual schools. School community contexts are not clearly defined. For example, the percentage of students from Non English Speaking backgrounds is not included under *School Facts* on the website - a community context which should be acknowledged as having a significant impact on student learning.

The nature of classes in schools is also not defined. One would think that the impact of the placement of an OC class (for Gifted and Talented students) might be recognised as impacting the schools’ results. Similarly there is no recognition of schools catering for intellectually disabled students, sometimes entire specialist classes, who are forced to sit for a test they cannot do and whose results are “counted” in the overall school performance.

When “thrown into the mix”, the two variables mentioned above have a major impact on “school performance”. To fail to acknowledge and to explain these variables has led to politicians labelling schools as underperforming. This is a ludicrous notion when the opposite is in fact true. Schools with large numbers of students of Non English Speaking Background (NESB) are very often providing their students educational programs that are of the highest quality.

This truth is hidden by the fact that the published data also fails to recognise “value

adding” i.e. growth in student learning over time.

Teachers understand that the assessment of students’ learning is complex and ongoing. Teachers assess and review student learning EVERY DAY. Teachers also understand the dynamic nature of student performance and progress and that students’ NAPLAN results are but one fraction of a myriad of assessment data, cumulative and quantitative.

The publication of NAPLAN results is distorting the relevance of the tests and educators are concerned that the elevated importance of the tests is not warranted.

There is a failure to recognise how the NAPLAN data is validly used by schools to inform teaching practice. Analysis of test items and its relationship to the school syllabus is evaluated to determine areas of strength and weakness in students learning. This use is far from the perception of the value of the tests as a means of judging school performance.

The tests were designed to give parents additional information about their child’s progress at school, and a comprehensive picture of the child’s results on the NAPLAN tests are given to parents, Similarly, schools receive comprehensive data about individual and group performance for analysis. Using the NAPLAN data to judge school performance is therefore using this data for a purpose for which it was never intended. The reduction of this information into a single number is not in keeping with the stated purpose of the tests.

The *My School* website is already having many private schools reduce the curriculum, appoint “NAPLAN teachers”, prevent students less capable from sitting the test and even refusing to enrol students less able. One school principal reports that students from the local Catholic school have enrolled in his local public school because of the “pressure” placed on them to perform on NAPLAN. One student was told that her whole future depended on how she went in NAPLAN – she was ten years old!

Supportive parents want to send sick children to school on the day of testing

because they know they are “strong” students and they don’t want to let the school down.

As a result of the NAPLAN results being published in its current simplistic form on the *My School* website and the ensuing league tables that have been created, principals have been reporting that some families are seeking to enrol their children in schools that appear to be scoring well. This is detrimental to student learning, teachers and school communities. There appears to be a lack of understanding by parents of the NSW enrolment policy in public schools. The Government is trying to encourage the idea that there is choice, when this is not the reality.

**2. The implementation of possible safeguards and protocols around the public presentation of the testing and reporting data;**

School data should be reported in a way that reflects the range of student achievement in the school rather than being reduced to a single number. This might be done in a graph form. This would be in keeping with the range of information that is provided to parents about their child's results on the test. We strongly support the proposal of the Australian Education Union re the public presentation of data.

We are concerned about the validity of *like schools*. The determining of *like schools* on the basis of their ICSEA value does not provide valid comparisons. For example, how alike are Canley Vale Public School – situated in the Sydney suburbs with a school population of 826 students, 98% of whom are NESB and Pallamallawa Public School – situated 32km east of Moree with a school population of 30 students, 33% of whom are indigenous? Yet these two schools are listed as *like schools*.

How useful is it for parents to compare their local school in NSW with one in Western Australia or Queensland? How valid is it for a high school which “selects” its students in to be compared with local comprehensive high schools?

Some testing cohorts are statistically so small as to be invalid. For example in the schools above approximately 120 students would have sat the tests in each of Years 3 and 5 at Canley Vale Public School. In Pallamallawa it would be approximately 4 students.

Of similar concern is the colour coding of the published results. This leads to simplistic judgements being made about the work of the school. Even the colours chosen (green for substantially above the average and red for substantially below the average) are a poor choice – red in particular carrying a cultural indication of being “wrong” at school.

Technical safeguards must be provided. There are ways of providing NAPLAN information to the key stakeholders (i.e. the parents and school community) in such a way that this information cannot be used for the creation of league tables. We suggest that the published data be protected by an agreement. As with many websites the *My School* site should be protected by the addition of a usage

agreement i.e. that the information not be used for the creation of league tables. The agreement could be supported by fines and action taken against those breaching the usage agreement.

- 3. The impact of the NAPLAN assessment and reporting regime on :**
  - a) the educational experience and outcomes for Australian students,**

Coaching for NAPLAN is rife. Coaching colleges are flourishing with the promise of improved results on the NAPLAN tests. The tests have become an end in themselves. This is contrary to the purpose of the tests in providing parents with **additional** information about their child's learning,

Students are placed under pressure to perform on the day. This cannot be a good "educational experience" for them. Within school coaching is also prevalent as the stakes for "good" NAPLAN results gains importance. Year 3 students report memorising work they have previously written and polished for the writing tasks.

Consultants are teaching teachers how to get a "better" result by swapping word X for word Y. Senior bureaucrats of the DET often lecture principals on the importance of having students learning to answer certain aspects of the NAPLAN tests (e.g. in the writing test students merely have to remember to insert paragraphs) so that schools can lift their results by one or two percent.

Facetiously we suggest that if the tests are to be used to evaluate school performance, then there is a need to introduce a far wider scope in testing and for formative assessment to be included. For example, in the current HSC, 50% of assessment is through school based assessment tasks. It is unlikely educational departments across Australia would accept this proposal as the cost would be prohibitive. They prefer to use the relatively inexpensively gathered (teacher administered) and simplistic NAPLAN data to make sweeping statements about schools.

Many parents report students are burdened with homework in preparation for the NAPLAN tests and some schools are even hiring "NAPLAN teachers" to prepare students for tests.

### 3. b) The scope, innovation and quality of teaching practice,

NAPLAN no longer represents a snapshot of student performance on a single day but is now touted as a “comprehensive overview of a student and their school’s achievement”. In that case, should NAPLAN be extended to encompass a larger picture of performance across skill bands and other Key Learning Areas? If it is being used like a HSC, then perhaps it should be made like a HSC. At present NAPLAN represents a cheap and blunt tool for comparing schools.

As schools are judged on success in Literacy and Numeracy results only, the impact on the curriculum will be noticeable. Subjects which are not tested and therefore are not “indicators” of a school’s achievements, are in danger of being devalued and downgraded or even not taught at all. Do we want our children to attend primary schools where the sciences and the creative arts are given scant regard? Do we wish to repeat the English experience?

*In all but those schools principled enough to resist the pressure upon them, the primary school curriculum has become a dry husk. The teaching programme focuses on what is to be tested and on practising for the tests, because the future of the school (not that of your son or daughter) is dependent upon the result.”*

*The Sunday Times April 26, 2009*

**Dr Ken Boston** former Chief Executive of the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority UK; former Director-General of NSW Department of Education and Training.

Innovative teaching practice is being sacrificed for the purpose of succeeding on a multiple choice test. Look at the explosion of NAPLAN practice materials at the local newsagent!

### **3. c) The quality and value of information about student progress provided to parents and principals,**

The information provided to parents is not always well understood. Interpretation of the information usually requires explanation by teachers so that parents can grasp the diagnostic nature of the information provided and its relevance to the school curriculum. Such “pressure” now exists to succeed on the NAPLAN tests that many students are noticeably stressed by the experience. If the student has an ‘off day’ then the school must intervene to ensure parents understand that the test result is not a true reflection of their child’s learning. Similarly, on a multiple choice test it is possible for a student to “guess” well and so achieve an invalid result.

The information provided to schools is useful when considered in concert with all the other assessment data on student progress gathered by teachers. However, delays in receiving the results often make its use less valuable. Results must be delivered in a timely fashion.

The validity of the information is questionable. High stakes testing has created a climate where cheating is appealing. This then affects the quality of the information provided. Teachers testing their own students may see poor performance as a reflection on their teaching, so give prompts or change answers.

Not all schools follow the suggested protocols to the same degree e.g. It is suggested that information displays be removed from classroom walls. Not all schools do this. Similarly, the security of test materials is not guaranteed. In one case, a student who transferred into a local primary school said when presented with the test materials on the scheduled date; “I’ve already done this.”

If government wants to ensure that the test is being delivered according to the guidelines and minimise the risk of cheating they will need to appoint an independent officer to each school to oversee the test materials, implementation and return of booklets.

### **3. d) The quality and value of information about individual schools to parents, principals and the general community;**

All schools of less than 160 students should be removed from the *My School* website. Small cohorts create statistically meaningless comparisons. (Refer to the example of Pallamallawa and Canley Vale schools in 2)

Results vary enormously even in schools with 200 students, depending on the cohort. Parents find this confusing. For example, one particular cohort may contain a number of students with diagnosed disabilities and this is reflected in the results for that year – a school may be a “good” school one year and an “underperforming” school the next.

Growth MUST be reported (but this still has its issues re ceiling effect). A bright student who successfully answers all questions correctly in the Year 3 tests but then who incorrectly answers some questions on the Year 5 test will have negative growth recorded. But this statistic does not mean that their learning has not progressed or indeed gone “backwards”.

Students who don't sit the test (because they are exempt) should be automatically regarded as Band 1.

Schools that have 100% of students sit NAPLAN should be acknowledged. This then counters schools that encourage low performers to stay away from school on test day. This is believed to be a fairly widespread practice.

If comparisons between schools are to be made NAPLAN results could be “adjusted” to account for NESB, small cohorts, isolated communities, indigenous students, schools with OC or other specialist classes.

Schools for Specific Purposes whose students so not sit the NAPLAN tests still need support through the National Partnerships program. These schools for students with significant diagnosed disabilities are exempt from the test and therefore receive no “score”. This then excludes them from access to the National Partnerships program and the opportunities for school improvement provided

through the program.

The Partnership focuses on three areas:

- High quality teaching
- Strong leadership
- Effective use of student performance information

To achieve sustained improvement individual students who are experiencing difficulty in reading or numeracy will have access to specific intervention programs. Teachers will access professional learning focused on accelerating whole class improvement.

Why should the teachers in these schools be denied access to the opportunities for professional development provided through this program?

**4. International approaches to the publication of comparative reporting of the results, i.e. "league tables";**

Countries which do well in OECD educational rankings e.g. Finland do not have regimes of comparative reporting.

We have already seen the denigration of schools through the publication of league tables in the media – a reflection of longstanding evidence from countries such as the USA and the UK.

*Why wait to suffer the experience of England with distorted priorities in pedagogy (teaching and learning) and strip mining in the curriculum of the arts, creativity and innovation?"*

*[www.educationaltransformations.com.au](http://www.educationaltransformations.com.au)*

**Professor Brian Caldwell** international education consultant and former Dean of Education at the University of Melbourne.

## **5. Other related matters.**

Why do we have National testing before we have a National curriculum?

What you test becomes the defacto curriculum and drives teaching. This is not good enough for the children of Australia as they prepared for a global future.

### **Contact details for the Public Schools Principals Forum**

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