

Submission to the NAPLAN Enquiry 6/6/10

Personal Submission:

I work as an Assistant Principal in a small R -12 Aboriginal school in a metropolitan area. I am an English and ESL teacher, as well as a Maths teacher.

Context for my comments: Complexity of school setting

1. Our students are classified as English as a Second Language students as they all speak and use Aboriginal English as their first dialect, and some speak and use other Aboriginal languages as well. However, some feel sensitive about being identified as not using “correct English”, so we tend to talk about informal and formal English.
2. We are a “Category 1” school on the Index of Disadvantage; ie our students are among the most severely disadvantaged in South Australia.
3. We get funding for these students as part of the ESL structures in DECS (SA Dept of Education and Children’s Services), so can give them some support to improve their Standard English. It is not a substantial amount.
4. We get APAS funding for our Aboriginal students below benchmark in the NAPLAN tests. This means in each year, the students coming in to Years 4, 6, 8 and 10 get a bit of extra funding.
5. The school is situated in a low socio-economic area of Adelaide. I have also worked in other local high schools in this area as an English teacher, and they experience similar issues. Many of the students in those schools also speak a non-standard dialect of English, a non-academic, “working-class” type of English. These students do not attract funding for their language needs, unless they have a learning disability.
6. Many of the local parents, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, have significant issues affecting their ability to provide a stable and safe home for their children. School is often the only safe, nurturing place our students experience. The children frequently have learning disabilities and extreme behaviours due to their parents’ substance abuse, domestic violence, etc.
7. Students with a learning disability which is quite pronounced (D level) receive funding for around 4 hours a week extra in-class support. This is divided between all their classes, some 26 hours of lessons in total. Frequently, there are not enough SSOs in the school to provide this support, so these students miss out at times.
8. Students with a less pronounced disability receive an A level of support, which means that if there is an SSO in the room, that student can also access their support when they are not supporting the most needy students.
9. Students who are dyslexic or who have ADHD do not receive funding as these are not eligible disabilities. However, they significantly affect the students’ chances of success.
10. Students who are bordering on illiteracy with no identified, assessed or eligible cause have to try to cope in mainstream classes with such support as their teacher can provide.
11. Every teacher is expected to cater for all the needs of all the students, from gifted through to Special Education, with approx one 55 minute free lesson to prepare for every ability level in each class for a week.
12. In secondary schools, specialist subject teachers usually have no literacy training, even if they are English teachers. Most secondary English teachers’ undergraduate programs assume that all secondary students can read and write to Year 7 level by the time they start High School.
13. In fact, many Year 7 students in this area arrive at High School with literacy levels at least 2-3 years behind the benchmarks.

Background to my recommendations about NAPLAN:

1. In theory, it's fine to have a standardised test across Australia for Literacy and Numeracy, as long as you are prepared to accept that it will demonstrate some fairly predictable outcomes.
2. Essentially, the most disadvantaged students are the most disadvantaged by doing the tests, and the least disadvantaged will do the best.
3. Logic suggests that the disadvantaged schools need much more strategic and coordinated support than they have been receiving.
4. (The NAPLAN results for my (Aboriginal) school are pretty similar to those of our local non-Aboriginal high schools, which suggests to me that Aboriginality isn't the cause of our results.)
5. (Thankfully the Universities are trying to get around the limiting element of literacy by having Portfolio entry into our local University, so our students have a hope of getting into Uni and still having support.)
6. In practice, the tests are unwieldy, and take up an unjustified amount of cost and time for the usefulness of the results obtained.

My recommendations on NAPLAN:

1. You have demonstrated that the Literacy and Numeracy levels of students in disadvantaged areas have been generally low, even critical.
2. Use the data to fund improvement, and maybe have these tests every five to ten years to maintain improvement. The SILA program in response to the NAPLAN tests has been implemented and is effectively improving literacy practices in schools.
3. Improve the accountability of schools for their Literacy and Numeracy on a state-wide basis. Train more Principals to take action about Literacy and Numeracy.
4. The schools in their clusters can now work with this data, to fund Training and Development in effective Literacy and Numeracy teaching for teachers, to immediately improve literacy and numeracy outcomes.
5. With the money saved from not running the tests annually, train more Literacy Coaches using the test money on the off-years.
6. Demand that teachers all do the training, and demand that their Performance Management in schools is rigorous and ensures that teachers have to present and justify their literacy and numeracy programs.
7. Build infra-structure. Maintain poorer schools. Buy these schools more books and computers.
8. Don't set up humiliating League Tables. The disadvantaged schools are under-funded for what you are expecting them to do.
9. Let the rich private schools fend for themselves a bit more. Look after Public Education better. Don't run our schools' resources down.

How 2010 NAPLAN test affected me and my students:

1. Year 9 students should not be spending one whole term writing Narratives, just to make it easy to fit in with what the Year 3, 5, and 7 students are doing (essentially, to make it easy and consistent for your markers). This is not appropriate in secondary, where they need to learn and master higher-level genres.
2. We in schools have only two choices: teaching to the test or not teaching to the test.
3. If we don't teach to the test, we disadvantage the students, because it's an unfamiliar literate task and setting, and it's very stressful and intimidating for them.
4. But if we do teach to the test, it mucks up our programming. Assuming we spend one lesson a week (1/4 of the time) preparing for NAPLAN, we only have 3 lessons a week to cover other topics. In English, we obviously can't look at Essay writing or factual writing such as Information Report writing until after the lower-level genre of narrative is tested, ie after Wk 4, Term 2.

5. In Maths, we feel we have to provide a smattering of everything in the first term, and nothing much in depth, as the NAPLAN test will test all areas. Often, the students' number skills have been forgotten over the Christmas holidays, so Term 1 is mostly based on Number and a bit of Geometry, to get up to speed. Once NAPLAN is over, halfway through Term 2, we only have 2 ½ terms to teach all the other things we need to cover. Leaving a big push on Algebra and Coordinate Geometry until the middle of Term 2 really mucks things up, as the kids are not fresh after the tests.
6. I don't think the people who want to find out some results from a couple of standardised tests realise how much the national tests are impacting on, and adversely affecting, the planning, programming, assessment, reporting and reviewing cycles that schools must undertake for all classes of students at all levels in English and Maths. As an English and a Maths teacher, I am more than happy for you to come in and do a review of my practice and my students' outcomes, but please do not take up so much of our valuable time. Surely you can find these things out without having to disrupt education for 3 ½ months every year across Australia.
7. We already do tests and assessments such as Waddington's, Torch, Westwood, ESL Scaling, SACSA Standards and so on. Would you like us to send you our results? They are all on EDSAS, our DECS database.
8. If you want to have national testing that demands our attention for 3 ½ months every year, please put it into the National Curriculum. Then it will be a legitimate and integral part of our planning, programming, assessing, reporting and reviewing, and not something extra that we are obliged to do for an external body. That would mean 1/12th of the National Curriculum in English and Maths could be called "National Standardised Testing". I encourage you to contact the curriculum bodies developing the National Curriculum, experts on the teaching of English and Maths, and put this idea to them.
9. There must be better ways of finding out what you want to know.

Personal Submission
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South Australia