



Australian Primary
Principals Association

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Senate Education, Employment and Workplace Relations Committee Inquiry into the administration and reporting of NAPLAN testing

Submission from the Australian Primary Principals Association

The Australian Primary Principals Association (APPA) welcomes the opportunity to provide a response to the Australian Senate *Inquiry into the administration and reporting of NAPLAN testing*. The inquiry addresses important issues that are central to the long-term improvement of Australian education.

The Australian Primary Principals Association (APPA) represents 7,200 Government, Catholic and Independent principals. It supports the adoption of high academic standards, the routine collection of evidence regarding the performance of students in key areas of the primary curriculum, and the responsible release of information about the resources available to schools and the performance of their students. APPA supports the principle of transparency embodied in the national transparency agenda and the value of the widespread availability of high quality information about schools.

APPA supports the use of the National Assessment Program—Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN). The Association believes that the results arising from the testing program provide schools with valuable standardized information about the performance of students. APPA has always maintained that primary schools should aim to ensure that every child achieves high literacy and numeracy standards. APPA also supports in principle the establishment of means for providing public access to a range of quality information about schools, including NAPLAN data, but has reservations about the *My School* website in its current form as a means of achieving this result.

The Association's support for these initiatives, while it has been consistent, is also conditional. It depends on the administration and management of the testing and reporting program to ensure that positive outcomes are achieved while possible problems are avoided. Any testing program must be justified in the end by its contribution to (or at least the absence of a negative effect on) the core purposes of education. It is important to have good quality, independent data about the performance of schools and students. It is even more important that every student gains the benefit of a high quality education, and that schools focus on higher order skills and deep understanding of important areas of human experience so that every child gains the educational foundation on which a satisfying life is built. A program of testing and reporting should contribute to these goals. It should not distract attention from them, or make them harder to achieve.

Large-scale high stakes assessment and reporting programs like NAPLAN and national reporting of its results can have unintended negative consequences which reduce the effectiveness of schools and school systems in achieving their core purposes. These dangers are not a reason to avoid testing and reporting. They are, however, a reason to be cautious in implementation and administration of testing and reporting, and to establish effective safeguards and protocols to ensure that testing and reporting programs deliver benefits and avoid pitfalls.

The negative consequence of large-scale high stakes testing can arise from:

- the narrowing of curriculum to focus on the content of tests at the expense of broader learning in other areas;
- a focus on what is tested at the expense of higher order skills and deep understanding which are central to educational outcomes, but more difficult to assess in whole cohort assessments;
- the use of valuable instructional time in coaching and test preparation;
- variations in the application of rules about which students sit the tests, affecting the comparability of results from different schools or jurisdictions;
- the growth of a testing industry which is driven by commercial imperatives rather than educational outcomes; and
- the implicit encouragement of 'gaming' (or in some cases cheating) by schools to improve performance.

These negative consequences can arise from the testing program and its administration. In addition, when test results are the subject of public reporting, further problems can arise. Negative consequences of public reporting can include:

- the creation of 'league tables' of school performance which ignore the circumstances of particular schools, and in particular the existence of factors which are out of the school's control;
- the publication of results in the absence of critical explanatory input data such as a school's income and resource base;
- the provision of data which facilitate ill-informed comparisons or judgments;
- a negative public focus on those schools which find it most difficult to achieve improvement, making their task even harder;
- the encouragement of competition between schools for students based on published results;
- the use of statistically flawed models of 'like schools' for comparison purposes, leading to false comparisons which disadvantage some schools; and
- the use of '**black box**' methods for statistically scaling scores which disempower schools and school principals.

These problems may be exacerbated when policy responses and public funding at the school and system level depend to some extent on the outcomes of testing programs. The kinds of initiatives that can negatively impact on schools and school systems include:

- the attachment of reward funding to schools or school systems based on test results; and
- the sanctioning of low performance leading to negative impacts on the quality of teaching.

This is a long list of potential negatives. It makes clear how important is the establishment and maintenance of safeguards to ensure that the conduct of testing, the release of information about students and schools and the public policy response to the results have a beneficial impact on primary education and nullify the potential negative effects. This is the heart of the submission to this Inquiry from the Australian Primary Principals Association. Our approach in this submission is to identify key issues and difficulties with the current arrangements and propose safeguards to avoid these problems and to ensure that the data that comes out of national testing serves the core purposes of education.

KEY ISSUES AND RESPONSES

1. **NAPLAN is treated as if it were the only, or the most important element of data about schools. This distorts parent and community judgments about schools.**

One difficulty with high stakes testing is that its undoubted value can be exaggerated in the public mind, and by some politicians and commentators. In the case of NAPLAN, the attachment of substantial reward money related to results and the publication of results on the *My School* website have made the testing program the focus of extreme levels of public and political attention. This has tended to distort judgments about schools by encouraging the use of NAPLAN data as if it were all that were needed to make such judgments.

NAPLAN provides useful data regarding student achievement in those areas of literacy and numeracy that are most amenable to whole cohort testing. APPA regards this as valuable, but does not see it as a complete statement about student or school achievement, or even as a large part of the overall picture. The history of whole cohort testing in Australia supports this view: when states and territories ran whole cohort testing the data was seen as useful but was never treated as the critical item of information about schools. During that decade or so, testing was simply one part of the landscape of schooling. It is only since testing data was made a factor in government financial decisions, and the *My School* website focused attention on the results, that a narrowing and distortion in valuation has occurred.

Schools engage in a wide range of other assessment procedures, all of which produce information about student achievement. This information covers other aspects of literacy and numeracy beyond those able to be easily assessed in a large-scale test; information about achievement in other subject areas that are also important to students and parents; and information about student attitudes, work habits, strengths and weaknesses. This information is also valuable in developing a complete picture of how well a school is serving its population and its community. The risk is that this information will be largely ignored by parents who will see the NAPLAN data as more reliable because it is independent and guaranteed by government.

Parents making judgments about schools also need access to information of other kinds. Schools have extra-curricular programs that form an important part of the total offering. They operate wellbeing programs designed to assist students in social development and engagement. Schools undertake community engagement activities. They develop plans for improvement and monitor and report their progress in a range of ways. All of these areas form part of the database that a parent or community member might need in order to make an informed judgment about how well a school is performing.

In the public debate, however, school performance is often judged almost solely by NAPLAN results. Newspapers produce tables of the best and worst performing schools. Local communities hear stories of disaster or triumph based solely on NAPLAN results for a single year. Politicians and public figures make pronouncements on the meaning of the data. The *My School* website privileges NAPLAN data as if this were a complete picture of a school's achievements. Parents, as a result, are likely to treat the NAPLAN data as a good surrogate for a rich picture of a school's practice and achievements. This difficulty is exacerbated when governments and system officials act as if NAPLAN is a sufficiently accurate indicator of a school's performance to provide a basis for important personnel and policy decisions.

It is essential to put in place a broader mechanism for making judgments about schools. Judgments about the performance of a school or an education system should be based on multiple sources of reliable evidence about all of the academic and social-emotional goals of schooling. Basing such judgments on a single indicator, as is often done either explicitly or implicitly, is both inadequate and potentially damaging.

The solution is not to develop more quantitative indicators, but to put in place appropriate professional appraisal mechanisms. Each school and each school system or sector should establish means by which rich, rounded and comprehensive information about a school and its achievements, including an honest appraisal of its weaknesses, can be collected and provided to parents and the community.

As users enter the section of the *My School* website concerning a particular school, the first page should include contextual and explanatory information about the school, with the NAPLAN data appearing as a linked page along with other such pages providing additional information about the school.

2. There may be a tension between diagnostic and accountability purposes for NAPLAN.

Large-scale whole-cohort testing is appropriate as a means of generating system-wide (or national) data that is comparable over time. There is value in a clear accountability tool at national, system, sector and school level. Such testing can also generate diagnostic data for use in classrooms and schools as a way of focusing the work of teachers. A difficulty can arise when these purposes, and others, are confused or where the testing program is driven by one to the detriment of the other.

The risk in the case of NAPLAN is that the focus on the tests and the results may lead to an assumption that it provides an adequate basis on its own for diagnosis of student learning, strengths and weaknesses. It is a form of testing which is ideally suited to accountability and also provides useful diagnostic data. It is not in itself a complete diagnostic tool.

NAPLAN does have diagnostic value at the school level, especially on a longitudinal basis when it is subject to close local analysis to take account of changes over time that illustrate trends in student learning. Its diagnostic value also lies in providing professional information to teachers and school leaders about the effectiveness of their practice, and focusing on areas where professional learning might be beneficial.

For the full range of diagnostic purposes, a teacher needs to know not only how a child performs on one test on one day, but how the child performs on the full range of a subject over time, under different circumstance and performing varying tasks. For parents, whether they understand this or not, the diagnostic data arising from multiple assessments and activities is a richer and more complete indication of student progress than a single whole-cohort test. This is particularly the case given the time lag between the conduct of NAPLAN tests and the availability of data to schools: the lag means that NAPLAN diagnostic data is always to some extent a look backwards.

This does not reduce the value of the NAPLAN data for accountability purposes on the larger scale. If the education system is, however, principally concerned with ensuring that all children gain foundational skills and knowledge, that their progress in achieving this are effectively diagnosed and that weaknesses are properly addressed, then a much wider range of assessment and data collection should also be supported.

For more detailed and thorough diagnostic purposes at the level of the school and the classroom, the kinds of assistance that would be most useful include:

- good quality classroom assessment material linked to the Australian Curriculum;
- rich assessment tasks which allow children to demonstrate achievement on complex, real-world tasks;
- support for teacher moderation and sharing of good practice;
- professional development support for teachers in enhancing their capacity to develop and use high quality assessment instruments and in the interpretation of assessment data.

While NAPLAN assessments absorb most of the available resourcing and are the focus of all of the public attention and debate, there is a potential for other areas, especially those related to the collection and use of rich diagnostic data, to be under-resourced. It would be valuable to ensure that, in addition to support for NAPLAN, there were effective mechanisms in place to support these broader diagnostic initiatives.

A further, related risk associated with NAPLAN concerns the range of other purposes to which the data could be put. There has been public speculation about the use of NAPLAN results to support the establishment of performance pay, or to justify measures including closure against schools that are perceived to be failing. APPA does not expect these approaches to be adopted but cautions that if they were, the considerable levels of professional support for NAPLAN would quickly evaporate.

APPA urges MCEECDYA to accompany NAPLAN support with a well-resourced program to support the enhancement of diagnostic capacity in schools, including assessment material linked to the Australian Curriculum, rich assessment tasks, support for teacher moderation and professional development support for teachers in using and interpreting high quality assessment instruments.

3. There is a lack of recognition of the range and complexity of factors that affect school performance.

Each school is in important ways unique. This is not to suggest that they cannot be compared. Parents often compare schools when they are deciding where to send their children. Communities make judgments about schools, sometimes on limited information. APPA recognises these imperatives and believes that the community members should have access to good quality information about schools to enable informed judgments and comparisons.

Schools are, however, different from each other and their performance of their core educational roles is affected by a wide range of factors that are complex both in themselves and in their interactions with each other. Each school is part of a community, and communities differ from each other in, for example, their infrastructure and their demographics. Schools differ by geographic location, affecting their access to support and resources. They differ in size, which can dramatically affect their capacity to resource curriculum breadth and specialisation. Their level of financial, infrastructure and personnel resourcing varies widely, affecting what they can bring to the task.

For this reason, the process of making a judgment on a school is not a simple matter. It is certainly more complex than identifying the school's position on a list of NAPLAN scores: it is unlikely that a judgment on a school can ever be adequately made on the basis of a list of numbers. There is a widespread recognition that, for example, the characteristics of a school's student population will significantly affect its capacity to generate literacy and numeracy outcomes.

On the *My School* website, an attempt is made to contextualise the NAPLAN numbers by the grouping of 'like schools'. It is APPA's view that this effort, based on the ICSEA scale, has failed. The evidence from the 2010 process is that ICSEA, which is based on census collector district data, does not produce results that are fine-tuned enough to yield an accurate score for all schools. The reliance on ICSEA as the single discriminator of school characteristics misrepresents differences in the intake for schools that are supposedly alike. It also ignores all of the other factors that affect a school's performance and capacity, and which are not captured in the ICSEA data.

The attempt to provide a simple tool to generate comparisons between schools is doomed to fail. School comparisons are essential, but if they are to be meaningful they should be based on recognition of the extraordinary range of factors which produce school difference, and the range of elements which contribute to producing a high quality school.

An alternative is to enable comparisons between schools based on a wide variety of criteria. It would be possible, for example, to compare the performance of small rural schools, or suburban primary schools, or schools with a high proportion of children from language backgrounds other than English. There would be no attempt to suggest, as is done with the 'like schools' idea, that these comparisons were other than useful means of analysing performance and looking for key factors. There would be no sense that the comparison would involve a ranking or a judgment that a school was satisfactory or unsatisfactory. The opportunity would be created to encourage thoughtful analysis on a number of parameters that might assist in identifying those factors that contribute to better performance in some schools. Schools could, for example, compare themselves with schools by factors such as location (remote, rural, urban), student numbers and demography, staffing numbers, resourcing, infrastructure and a range of other factors. As Dr Ken Boston, recently head of the English Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA) and previously Director-General of Education in New South Wales, says, using a comparison model of this kind would lead to 'the uniqueness of each school being reflected in the fact that it can be included in a number of like groups'.¹

APPA notes that the MCEECDYA meeting of 10 June 2010 endorsed proposals from ACARA which would go some way to addressing the issues raised in this section of the submission. APPA supports changes to make the ICSEA data more sophisticated (though it remains unconvinced about the value of the ICSEA approach to identifying like schools). APPA also supports greater flexibility for schools in searching *My School* for like schools, the addition of a school commentary on NAPLAN data and improved data about student absences and exclusions from NAPLAN testing.

The *My School* website should reflect the variety of circumstances and factors that affect schools. To facilitate this outcome, the 'like schools' concept should be abandoned. The website should be substantially redeveloped as a tool for inquiry rather than as a notice board on which to post school NAPLAN results. Principals, teachers, parents and community members should be able to use the website to compare school performance on a range of measures (including size, geographic location, level of resourcing, staffing, demographics and infrastructure) with a full understanding of the factors which affect that performance. The site should also include the range of kinds of information and data that will enable users to make an informed judgment about the effectiveness and characteristics of the school.

4. The over-valuation of NAPLAN results has negative effects on schools and students.

The NAPLAN assessments are high stakes assessments for schools. The results shape public perceptions of schools and can influence funding and resourcing decisions. Because of the perceived importance of NAPLAN results, schools are under pressure to change their practice and behaviour to improve scores. These changes have had the effect of weakening, rather than strengthening the capacity of some schools to deliver high quality educational outcomes.

¹ Boston (2009), pp 15-16

APPA's membership response to the testing program and the use of the *My School* website to disseminate results indicates the scale and range of these problems. Schools report that they are narrowing their curriculum to accommodate an increased focus on the areas covered by NAPLAN. This mirrors the experience in the United States where according to Diane Ravitch:

As teachers spent more time preparing students to take standardized tests, the curriculum was narrowed: Such subjects as science, social studies, and the arts were pushed aside to make time for test preparation.²

Boston makes a similar point about the position in England, where, he argues, 'the government's use of the key stage tests has seriously damaged the breadth and quality of primary education'.³ Some Australian schools reported that they are now spending a significant amount of time practising for the tests and also allocating homework for their students to undertake further practice. This has consumed valuable time that should have been spent on other important areas of literacy and numeracy and on the broader primary curriculum. Boston notes that in England:

Most schools prepare pupils extensively before they undertake the tests. A survey conducted by QCA in 2007 showed that 68 per cent of primary schools employed additional staff to prepare students for key stage 2 tests, 78 per cent set additional homework, more than 80 per cent had revision classes and used practice tests they had purchased commercially.⁴

It is also clear that the testing program has produced a focus in schools on ways to improve the results without a clear regard for the educational value of the methods used. In some cases, there is evidence of 'shallow' teaching aimed at improving test results. Some schools allocated most of their resources to those students who are just below the national benchmarks in order to improve results. This resulted in other high needs students who were well below the benchmark not receiving as much attention for the first five months of the year until the completion of the NAPLAN tests.

APPA is also concerned that there is a likely effect on innovation in schools. The high stakes nature of the testing program and the public focus on results could lead to an avoidance of innovation, which requires a climate of risk-taking and support for change. Masters notes that research evidence is now clear about what constitutes good teaching practice in the core areas of the curriculum, including literacy and numeracy. He argues 'there is clear research support for particular approaches to the teaching of these subjects, and ...evidence-based teaching strategies should be at the core of attempts to enhance primary teaching expertise'.⁵ If, however, what is known to be good teaching fails, for reasons beyond the control of teachers, to produce improved NAPLAN results, the likelihood is that there will be an impetus to adopt practices which are perceived as likely to achieve that improvement regardless of the broader research evidence, and to focus on test results rather than on deep learning and higher order skills.

² Ravitch (2010)

³ Boston (2009), op cit

⁴ Boston (2009), p 5

⁵ Masters (2009), p 74

Parents and students have also been affected. Schools report that some parents have become very anxious and have had their children spend a great deal of time at home practising for the test. There have also been reports that students have become upset or stressed, ended in tears or gave up and went home during the tests. While some degree of anxiety inevitably accompanies high stakes assessment, it is likely that the extreme focus on NAPLAN results and the pressure to perform exacerbate student stress.

APPA wishes to emphasise that these difficulties are not a direct function of the implementation of national testing. We support the NAPLAN program, but we argue that the significance of the results of whole cohort testing should be kept in perspective, and should be regarded as an important item of data about school performance, but by no means the whole picture. It is not NAPLAN that is the problem, but the over-valuation of results and the inappropriate public focus on those results to the exclusion of other important information.

The unintended negative effects on schools, parents and students should be closely monitored. APPA proposes that a small independent body should be established to monitor the impact of NAPLAN and *My School* with a view to mitigating any perverse consequences. The Ministerial Council (MCEECDYA) should appoint this body to report to it on an annual basis. The group should be completely independent and should be funded appropriately to enable it to report thoroughly and accurately.

5. There are no independent mechanisms to ensure the transparency and monitor the accuracy of NAPLAN results and the interpretation of those results.

There are weaknesses in the absence of mechanisms in the system to ensure public confidence in the reliability of NAPLAN data and processes. APPA does not claim that there are widespread failings in the calculation and reporting of NAPLAN results. The credibility of the system would, however, be improved if two present weaknesses were addressed.

The first concerns the transparency and openness to scrutiny of the NAPLAN process. MCEECDYA has adopted appropriate protocols to protect the privacy and rights of students participating in NAPLAN assessments. The protocols surrounding NAPLAN are, however, unduly restrictive as they deny ready access to researchers and policy analysts to information regarding the development of the tests, their properties, and other aspects of the information contained on the website. It should be possible for any qualified researcher to be given ready access to the de-identified data to replicate findings reported by ACARA, undertake new analyses, and use the NAPLAN database as a powerful research tool. This kind of use should be actively encouraged.

The second aspect requiring attention concerns potential mistakes in results or the interpretation of those results. Schools should have the capacity to challenge inferences drawn from NAPLAN results about their performance that they believe to be misleading and damaging to their reputation. Where newspapers, for example, generate 'league tables' from the NAPLAN data without taking account of factors affecting or contributing to the results, or relevant in their interpretation, schools involved should have a right to be heard.

It was clear from the initial response to the release of the 2009 NAPLAN results on the *My School* website that governments were unable or unwilling to intervene when the media published grossly simplistic results or even misinterpreted the results pertaining to individual schools. Once stories have appeared in the media it is almost impossible to have them retracted. Schools have little comeback and must bear the reputational consequences. It is unreasonable to expect each school to deal with such events.

APPA notes and supports the decision of the 10 June, 2010 meeting of MCEECDYA to endorse proposals from ACARA to investigate a mechanism by which users of *My School* would be required to indicate their agreement to terms and conditions controlling the use of data from the website; and to find ways of preventing users from engaging in the automatic 'scraping' of data from the site.

MCEECDYA should amend the guidelines and protocols governing access to NAPLAN data and procedures to ensure that qualified researchers have ready access to the de-identified data to replicate findings reported by ACARA, undertake new analyses, and use the NAPLAN database as a powerful research tool. MCEECDYA should actively encourage this use of the data.

MCEECDYA should establish an independent ombudsman with the capacity to quickly follow up complaints from schools concerning NAPLAN results or their interpretation. In order to guide public use of the NAPLAN data, the *My School* website should incorporate an 'Acceptable use' page stating the purpose and appropriate use of NAPLAN data and requiring user agreement prior to gaining access to the site.

6. There are no clear guidelines governing the use of rewards and sanctions or determining appropriate means of improving NAPLAN results.

NAPLAN results have become a key element of resourcing decisions at all levels of education, and there is evidence that this has produced inappropriate and in some cases unethical behaviour.

Governments are allocating reward funding totalling \$350million to states and territories that achieve performance targets. This is leading to pressure on schools from education systems to improve NAPLAN results at all costs. In some systems principals report that line managers are transmitting this pressure in ways that are threatening and unprofessional. Because schools with 'good' NAPLAN results gain such a reputational advantage, a climate is emerging where, in the absence of clear guidelines that can be monitored, unethical practices are being adopted in order to inflate the school's NAPLAN results.

In some cases schools attempt to 'game' the system. One school recognised that the students would only lose two points if they ignored the stimulus picture in the writing task. Students practised a piece of writing which they were encouraged to replicate in the test so they could maximise their scores.

There have been media reports that some schools have encouraged parents to keep their children at home on test day if the school judged that the student may not have performed well in the tests, demonstrating the tension between full participation in the process and achieving the benefits of improved performance according to the NAPLAN results, including financial benefits. A small number of teachers have provided assistance to students while sitting the tests to improve their test results. Media reports suggest that there may have been cheating in a small number of cases.

In part, this arises because of pressures perceived by schools. The pressure applied to schools in some cases by line managers has led principals to report feeling threatened that their jobs could be on the line if the school's results did not improve. As Diane Ravitch indicates, speaking of the effects of large-scale testing in the United States, 'What once was an effort to improve the quality of education turned into an accounting strategy: Measure, then punish or reward'.⁶ APPA is determined that this outcome will be avoided in Australia.

These problems arise because of the importance attributed to NAPLAN results, and the absence of clear, public guidelines regarding school and system strategies and behaviour. It is APPA's view that the use of NAPLAN to drive public policy and resourcing decisions, and the consequent negative effects on behaviour, constitute an example of Campbell's Law: 'The more any quantitative social indicator is used for social decision-making, the more subject it will be to corruption pressures and the more apt it will be to distort and corrupt the social processes it is intended to monitor.'⁷ Campbell argues that 'achievement tests may well be valuable indicators of general school achievement under conditions of normal teaching aimed at general competence. But when test scores become the goal of the teaching process, they both lose their value as indicators of educational status and distort the educational process in undesirable ways.' While it might not be possible to eliminate this effect, it should be possible to ameliorate it through effective safeguards and protocols.

MCEECDYA should issue guidelines that clearly specify what states, systems, sectors and schools may or may not do to enhance their NAPLAN results. These guidelines should aim at guaranteeing that all participants act ethically and in the best educational interests of children. They should include the expectation that preparation for testing should not affect the school's commitment to a broad and balanced curriculum.

⁶ Ravitch (2010), p 16

⁷ Campbell (1976)

CONCLUSION

The Australian Primary Principals Association reiterates its support for NAPLAN testing and the effective dissemination and use of the results of that testing. It is critical, however, that the tests be kept in proper perspective. They provide a valuable set of data for both accountability and diagnostic purposes, but they are not the centrepiece of Australian education.

This submission focuses on the kinds of protocols, initiatives and safeguards that are needed to ensure that NAPLAN plays an appropriate role but does not interfere with or distract attention from all the other processes and activities designed to guarantee that young Australians gain access to a high quality education, and that all of them benefit from the experience. At present the extreme public focus on NAPLAN results, and the use of the *My School* website to heighten this focus, have the potential to put other critical elements of Australian education at risk.

The proposals in this submission are designed to ensure that we gain the maximum benefit from NAPLAN, while continuing to foster and support all the other key elements of a high quality education.

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