

NAPLAN INQUIRY, JUNE 2010

AUSTRALIAN PARLIAMENT

I have just become aware of this inquiry, and as we were concerned enough about NAPLAN, that we withdraw my daughter, I feel that we should explain our concerns.

1. The conflicting claims made by the Government, educational experts & peak bodies in relation to the publication of the NAPLAN testing;

I feel that education has become a political trading chip. Education is too important to be driven by popular opinion, especially when this opinion is informed by a media intent on selling papers.

Parents in general want the best for their children, however often what they perceived as best is often based on their experience as a child or what the media is telling them. This often is not based on evidence based research about life long outcomes.

As all professions, the teaching profession undergoes continuing challenges to existing practices to seek improvements. It is the “experts”, academics & the peak support bodies that often acquire this up to date & new evidence. It is then through professional development programmes that this knowledge is then shared to all within the profession & the wider community.

Governments are elected to lead & manage the country. This often requires tough decisions that should reflect the current expert & unbiased advice. In the recent NAPLAN dispute, it would be hard to imagine that the Minister was reflecting on current evidence about NAPLAN, when she was not able, until the final days, to meet the peak Union representing teachers. There seems to be a large number of experts that have concerns about the testing, but the Government looked as if it was unwilling to listen & respond accordingly to these concerns.

2. Implementation of possible safeguards & protocols around the public presentation of the testing & reporting data;

NAPLAN was designed to give teachers, parents & students information about the student. To use this information, out of context, to compare student-to student & school-to-school reduces education to a mere number & a competition.

Competition at this level delivers pressure, lack of creativity & destruction of much self esteem of students & teachers. To compare, diminishes one's own achievements.

The information gathered by NAPLAN, should remain with whom it was intended for- the parents/guardians of the students & their teachers.

I live in NSW & was disgusted by that state Government to its handling of the “league” tables printed in the Sydney papers in March 2010. On the weeks leading up to it we had the Minister of Ed. claiming how tough they would be on the papers, but when they were printed, there was a photo of the Premier, reading with great interest the tables. To my knowledge there have been no repercussions for the papers, except sales & money. It is sad to think that the media has greater influence over ministerial decisions than my child's future or expert advice.

3. The impact of NAPLAN assessment & reporting regime on:

1. the educational experience & outcomes for Australian students,

Education is a lifelong journey. However the type of school education that you receive has a large influence on which pathway you can follow after school & the type of learning opportunities' you continue to experience. Literacy & Numeracy are a significant part of this foundation & the appropriate minimum levels should be achieved by all. Apart from this minimum level, all students should then be guided to do their best & to achieve their academic outcome.

To achieve a broad & extensive skill set that will be required to face the challenges of the 21st century, literacy & numeracy skills need to be coupled with other experiences & skills if a child is going to receive a broad & extensive education. To engage student in all aspects of the curriculum, teachers must be allowed some creative freedom & "air" within the class room. Narrowing the education experience, or any perceived narrowing, to Literacy & Numeracy will disengage students & teachers & achieve poorer learning & thinking outcomes for many.

For some parents, the NAPLAN mark given to their child will be another source of criticism. This may be from the parents (my kid is "dumb") or others.

It was to my dismay, to find after speaking to some friends in Sydney in the March 2010 School holidays, that they were planning to send their children off to NAPLAN skills day. This was promoted at their public school in Drummoyne. This adds to the afterschool coaching & tutoring available. Already there are crib books for sale targeting improvement in NAPLAN. This is not uniformly available to all Australian students as there is a cost, location & time restraints faced by some parents & students.

2 .the scope, innovation & quality of teaching practice.

As a parent I would be concerned that teachers would be pressured to teach to the test as a way to improve their school ranking. This would not be an enjoyable experience & could hasten more teachers to exist the system.

If competition & comparing of students/schools through NAPLAN is allowed form the bases of how our schools are judged, then the teaching of creativity & problem solving skills will be threatened. Teachers would have no option but to play it safe & prepare for the test. There are stories of this already happening, especially to newly graduated teachers being encourage to spend their classroom time preparing for NAPLAN.

3. the value & quality of information about students progress provided to parents & principals;

I do not wish to compare my children's learning outcomes to anyone. I wish for them to achieve their best & to try their hardest. I value most the interviews & informal talks that I have with my children's teachers. I acknowledge the small amount of information that NAPLAN gives to me, but as it is based on 1 days

exam in 2 subjects I don't give it a lot of weight.

I don't want my children's result to be used in a ranking that compares & "sells" the school to others.

Our school is a great school, drawing from a rural & low economic area. It is often degraded by others in the community because of the type of student we have. However what the school & parents achieve at this school is often amazing & sadly overlooked. The value added to our kids is often about the state average, but because our kids best is not as high as schools in other zones, we are labelled as poor achievers.

When a Selective school tops the state, there is congratulation all round. However I wonder how much value added was achieved by these schools. When you start with bright kids the school should be topping the state.

4. the quality & value of information about individual schools to parents, principals & the general community;

To reduce any school to a number & then allow it to be rank, does not do justice to the many unmeasurable experiences & events in any school. These may be positive or negative.

These simplified numbers are being misused already. In Burwood, Sydney, real Estate agents are quoting these numbers to sell houses; parents are using them to justify their exit of the public school system & to choose schools.

All schools need an environment to allow all their students to thrive & to achieve the students best. To allow comparing, naming & the consequent shaming of schools will not achieve this. The evidence of which schools are struggling, is already available & the solution is not more exposure of these shortcomings, but to address the fundamentals of poor resources, class sizes, teacher training & support. Until the inequalities of these are addressed then there will be students getting a poorer education experience.

4. International approaches to the publication of comparative reporting of the results.

I would support a critical analysis of what has happened in the UK & USA. I would encourage to take notice of the educational outcomes of students, teachers & critics of these systems. It seems that the educational experts do not like what is happening while business that are able to make money & the free marketeers like it.

I would also encourage you to look beyond the UK & USA to Finland & Sweden,

Thank you
Anthea Nicholls