

Submission to NAPLAN Enquiry

Conflicting claims were made by each of the “stakeholders” in relation to the publication of NAPLAN testing data on the MySchool website and to the subsequent publication of “league tables” by sections of the press.

Parent bodies, whilst acknowledging the limitations of league tables, maintained the right of parents to be able to access testing data and to be able to make comparisons between schools – in some cases basing their choice of school on the league tables produced by the press.

The federal and NSW state governments, whilst maintaining a position of opposition to the publication of “simplistic” league tables, took no action to prevent them or to enforce existing legislation against them (in the case of NSW) because that would be “limiting parents’ right to free and unedited data” and it would be “restricting the freedom of the press”.

Educational experts, particularly people working in the field, predicted that including NAPLAN test results in the MySchool website would inevitably lead to the publication of league tables and that that would be damaging for many schools and students.

Both the MySchool website, and the league tables produced from it, were deeply flawed and didn’t provide accurate or worthwhile information to parents or the public. NAPLAN tests are a diagnostic tool designed to allow schools to identify specific areas of weakness in the literacy and/or numeracy skills of individual students and to subsequently develop remedial programming and teaching strategies to bring about improvement. That is what they are for and that is what schools have been doing with the results and, in that context, they are an invaluable resource.

They are, however, only a very small measure of the progress and achievements of a school and cannot be used as a means to compare schools. They tell us nothing of the many, many extra-curricular, social, welfare, sporting, community and overall academic achievements of a school; yet, parents have been encouraged to use them as a means of comparing schools and making important decisions about where to send their children. Further, the “like schools” comparisons on the MySchool website are laughable. Parents are asked to compare, for example, the results of year 7 high school students in a large metropolitan centre with those of primary school students in an inter-state, rural area; or, the results of students in a “working class” comprehensive, co-ed high school to those of an “elite”, expensive, extremely well-funded and single-sex private school. In other words, parents are being ill-advised and misinformed.

Overseas experience tells us that league tables lead to a climate of trepidation, incrimination and blame in schools, and a narrowing of the curriculum to ensure an additional emphasis on those specific areas tested (at the expense of a genuinely comprehensive curriculum). We were warned against going down this path by Ken Boston, previously Director-General of education in NSW and more recently a director of

assessment programs in the UK education system, who spoke of the degeneration of that system as a consequence of league tables. Other examples of the damage league tables inflict on quality education processes are found in: teachers in western Victoria being “advised” to spend “more of their time” preparing students for the tests in the weeks prior to NAPLAN; and, the recent growth in coaching colleges offering preparation courses for students so that they “do better” in the NAPLAN tests. Again, the tests are designed to be a diagnostic tool and any preparation for them is counter-productive because it will disguise gaps in a student’s literacy and numeracy skills that may then not be identified and corrected. Yet, a school’s position on a league table will be so important to the public’s perception of that school, and subsequent enrolments, that the administration and teaching staff will not be able to resist the pressure to do all that they can to improve it.

Finally, the mechanism already exists to prevent the press from taking NAPLAN results and producing league tables. In NSW, legislation allows for a \$55,000 fine for any print media guilty of doing so; yet, the NSW Minister for Education elected not to enforce it and justified her decision by pointing to the right of the press to publish without restriction. The real reason, of course, is that the legislation came about because of a coalition of the Liberals, Greens and some Independents. At the federal level, government copyright over information contained in the MySchool website was enforced to prevent a private organisation profiting from using the data to produce a book comparing all schools in Australia; so, this sanction can obviously also be applied to the press.

NAPLAN testing data is generally considered by teachers to be a valuable tool which can inform their programming and teaching and help deliver better quality educational outcomes for their students. It becomes destructive however, and threatens the quality and breadth of our education systems, when it is misused and misconstrued for political purposes.

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