

Inquiry into the Administration and Reporting of NAPLAN Testing

Personal submission from

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NAPLAN is all about Politics and Power and not much about Kids and Curriculum.

NAPLAN seems to be developing into something much more that it was meant to be.....as you can see by your involvement in this Parliamentary Inquiry!

Let's not throw the baby out with the bathwater - NAPLAN is not all bad:

NAPLAN has become much more than it was intended to be. It was designed to provide a snapshot of student achievement in Literacy and Numeracy skills, to be used in conjunction with other assessment and accountability tools to monitor the performance of the school system. NAPLAN is becoming the focus of the school's curriculum, possibly at the expense of other teaching that schools need to do well.

The Committee of Inquiry should spend a session completing the NAPLAN tests, under test conditions, so it knows what the students, teachers and schools are dealing with and establishes a sense of the learning content addressed by NAPLAN.

Though narrow in substance and values, NAPLAN is appropriate for the purpose it was designed for – to collect 'snapshot' information about student performance in Literacy and Numeracy in Australian schools. The questions are well constructed, with both easy and challenging questions – so every student should find something s/he can do. The test materials are clear, attractive and appealing. The data schools receive at the conclusion of NAPLAN is interesting and useful for identifying whole school areas for improvement and monitoring student progress over time, in the key areas of Literacy and Numeracy. Nothing else.

Making a silk purse from a sow's ear:

NAPLAN can only be 'snapshot,' to be used in conjunction with other assessment and accountability tools to evaluate student and school performance. Unfortunately, NAPLAN has suddenly become more important than it should be.

NAPLAN assesses that part of the school curriculum which is easily assessable: the trite, the mundane, observable and easily assessed. The significant work schools do to develop the whole person is troublesome to assess and present as data – so we just don't do it. We ignore what is perhaps the most important function of a school system: transmission of a culture, induction of young people into a social milieu and the development of an individual as a whole person who participates productively in society. NAPLAN can't measure that important learning and teaching in schools, but other statistics might: youth suicide, crime, violence, road statistics.....

The schools which might be working the hardest, with the most challenging students and with the least 'social and economic capital' might be effective and doing the most good for students, but this would not be revealed in a test that measures easily measurable data.

For example, some schools provide breakfast to get students to come to school; they work hard to tailor programs to develop self-esteem, personal and social skills, anger management. These schools work hard with families and community services to develop the whole student. How does NAPLAN assess the work of these schools? It doesn't. It is difficult to measure and assess activities that develop the whole person, morale and self-esteem.

NAPLAN caters to the middle ground, academic values – one size fits all. We all should learn to read, write and calculate – but like everything else, we don't do it at the same pace. NAPLAN results are not necessarily a reflection or indication of the diverse social, economic, cultural and educational school settings in Australia.

Comparing apples with pears:

How can a high profile well funded school, supported by professional, articulate families who invest time and money in their children's education be compared to a school from a socially and economically disadvantaged community, where the students are lucky enough to get the books and technology they need?

Factors, such as mobility of students can affect the 'whole school picture'. For example, one school I taught in, at least half the students who sat the test in Year 3 were not at that school for the Year 5 test. This can skew data when compared over time, yet the media publicises the school data as it was 'gospel.' The community needs to understand the limitations of NAPLAN.

Schools with the most difficult and challenging students and circumstances should not be publicly compared under NAPLAN. NAPLAN measures reading, writing and 'rithmetic. Somehow, the media has extended performance in Literacy and Numeracy to 'name and shame' whole school performance. It links achievement in a limited set of skills to whole school achievement. There is much more to the whole school curriculum than just reading, writing and maths. Under NAPLAN, the richness of the school culture is becoming invisible to the Australian population.

Making a mountain out of a molehill:

NAPLAN, based on data of a limited sample of what a school does, is setting the agenda for our educational debates. The 'league tables' approach, which compares schools, is destructive. We need to assess, with integrity, intelligence and insight, how schools are performing. Despite efforts to account for the socio economic factors that might affect school performance on NAPLAN, publishing the 'league tables' approach is simplistic. Literacy plus numeracy data is not necessarily the sum of the whole school.

Schools in low socio-economic environments **should** have high expectations of teachers and students, that they will be successful in teaching literacy and numeracy. The populations in some schools have different starting points and different needs to address in achieving set standards. Public comparison of schools based on NAPLAN data does not make this explicit to an uninformed community which sees the 'ten lowest performing schools' and 'ten best performing schools' in the media. *(As an aside, I worked at a school which achieved high NAPLAN rankings – due to the abandonment of regular curriculum for NAPLAN practice in Terms 1 and 2. It is the only school I worked at (in a 38 year career) that I would not send my own children to. The focus was so much on doing well in NAPLAN that the school didn't "notice" the bullying, the lack of student safety, student disengagement and the lack of social cohesion or positive relationships within the school. Maybe if we'd measured those important school factors, the areas of personal and social development would have the attention they deserve.)*

Regardless of how well everyone is performing, there will always be some schools at the top and some schools at the bottom. The media will 'name and shame' the lowest performing schools – which might be those schools which are working the hardest, under the most difficult circumstances to educate students who might not want to be educated. When our education system is about the numbers and data (product and output) and not about students, teachers and school communities, schools lose their human faces.

A little learning is a dangerous thing:

Unfortunately, because of its nature, NAPLAN is a 'one size fits all' solution. Firstly, it has to be easy to prepare and administer to hundreds and thousands of students. Secondly, the data has to be easy to collect, manage and manipulate electronically. The result is that we assess only that which is easy to assess (one answer is right) and ignore the really important things that schools do – educate our students in areas such as values, personal development, self esteem, group work, developing relationships, empathy for others, creativity and problem solving.

NAPLAN measures a small, but important portion of school activity. Schools do much more than teach students Literacy and Numeracy. Though there are people who would argue that Literacy and Numeracy skills are all that our education system has to teach, it would be a very poor system that did not develop students to participate effectively in our challenging and changing society by developing productive attitudes, values and broader skills.

Schools, along with families, are socialising forces which induct young people into our culture. Speaking, listening, reading, writing, and maths are basic requirements for participation in our society and culture. So are oral communication, social and personal skills, developing a personal value system to participate in society, real life problem solving, creativity, critical questioning, analysing, getting along with others, conflict resolution, organisational skills, emotional and social intelligence.....but we can't measure these important skills schools develop in students, so we'll just ignore them. Reading, Writing and Maths are easier to measure– we can convert what students have learnt to numbers and data; we can create fancy graphs and tables, manipulate and manage the data easily and make some simple judgements about how a school is performing.

Judging a school by its NAPLAN results is akin to a doctor making a full diagnosis of a patient based on an observation of single boil.

Let's Separate the Sheep From the Goats:

NAPLAN measures one student's performance, on a particular day, in particular learning areas. By its nature, NAPLAN can only measure a sample of the curriculum using one learning style. To extrapolate that data to a 'whole school performance' (as is the un-informed media response) is inappropriate. For example, the Victorian Essential Learning Standards (VELS) contain a range of expectations for student learning. Of course, Literacy and Numeracy are key elements, but these are part of a range of skills and knowledge schools teach, and not all of them are easily measurable by NAPLAN, or similar tests.

Let's call a spade a spade:

NAPLAN has moved from providing snapshot judgements about specific learning tasks (Literacy and Numeracy) in schools, to judgements about the whole school. NAPLAN is an interesting and useful tool, and its results are a 'snapshot' of literacy and numeracy achievement at a particular time. NAPLAN is not the whole picture of a total school environment. The media, and 'league tables' / "MySchool" is elevating NAPLAN to something much more than it was ever intended to be.

Things are not Always What They Seem:

The focus on NAPLAN is making other equally significant aspects of school life invisible: personal, ethical, moral and social education. Schools educate the 'whole' child according to his /her needs and stage of development. NAPLAN is not consistent with this philosophy. Inclusive schools accommodate a range of students' needs: Non English Speaking students, students with impairments and special needs, students who are school averse, students with mental health issues. NAPLAN caters to a narrow set of middle class values which are not necessarily representative of all schools.

Knowledge is Power:

We need to know about schools which have large numbers of students who are struggling in Literacy and Numeracy. This might not mean that the school is failing these students or even 'underperforming.' Non-English speaking students, students who learn more slowly, students with social and emotional issues and students who do not come to schools equipped with the 'capital' to benefit immediately from what schools offer affect NAPLAN data. Smaller schools' data can be skewed dramatically by just a few students' performances.

We will be a poorer community if the only focus for a school community was achieving good results in NAPLAN. Unfortunately, there is a danger that school curriculum will be driven by what is on the NAPLAN test. A whole range of valuable teaching and learning in schools might become 'invisible' because it is not on the NAPLAN test.

THINGS WHICH THE COMMITTEE OF INQUIRY SHOULD KNOW ABOUT NAPLAN IN SCHOOLS:

Avert the danger of the NAPLAN Tests becoming the de facto curriculum.

The NAPLAN test represents a limited range of learning. Under stress of being 'outed' in the media for 'underperformance', schools are pressured to "teach to the test," narrowing the curriculum and significantly reducing educational opportunities for students.

Know NAPLAN's Limitations:

This assessment tool is not consistent with the teaching and learning styles advocated by school curricula. By its very nature, NAPLAN addresses a limited range of learning styles – not necessarily those advocated in the curriculum schools are delivering. For example, students learn by group work, collaboration, problem solving, creative and hands on activities. These learning experiences are expectations set in the curriculum VELS (Victorian Essential Learning Standards) and PoLT (Principles of Learning and Teaching). When confronted with the NAPLAN tests, students work alone in an independent, isolated activity with one 'right' answer. Year 3 students in particular would find the NAPLAN format foreign, as the school experience in Year Prep – 3 is 'hands on' with manipulative materials, creative activities, group problem solving, investigating.

Will we teach the curriculum or will the NAPLAN test be our curriculum?

Schools 'coach' students to do well on NAPLAN tests. There is nothing wrong with this. It is a good idea to prepare students for a range of learning activities. However, some schools take this to extremes: forests of photocopied paper are distributed to students to practise the NAPLAN tests. I have taught in a school which, from Term 1, adopts a regime of preparing students for NAPLAN tests, at the expense of other curriculum areas. NAPLAN is generating its own industry: bookshops sell booklets to help students do well in NAPLAN, websites offer practise tests. NAPLAN is a small piece of a major educational puzzle – it is not the basis of our entire education system. We need to keep NAPLAN in that context.

The NAPLAN Bottom Line: Who's the Boss?

Schools have to cater to a broad range of community and socio cultural values, which are not necessarily addressed by the NAPLAN tests. I doubt whether people would have issues with tracking, monitoring and accountability of student, school and system performance. The danger is taking one fragment of the whole picture and using it in un-informed and unwarranted ways to make judgements about the performance of whole school. NAPLAN has to be the servant of the Education system – not its master.

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Victoria