

Dear Senate Committee,

I am a teacher from a public primary school in NSW, writing this submission after discussions with other members of staff from my school. These teachers have a wealth of experience and expertise.

We have all been concerned about the ways in which NAPLAN data has recently been used in a manner detrimental to students, teachers and schools as part of their wider community.

Many teachers do not deny that NAPLAN has its benefits as a teaching tool. It enables teachers to receive results from an unbiased, objective third party as a reference point and thus to inform further teaching of their students. Teachers have been impressed in the past with the quality of the results data provided to schools. This has been detailed and informative.

Other teachers do not regard NAPLAN testing as beneficial. They believe that Year 3 is too early to be putting pressures for academic success on students, and that a formal examination situation is not suitable for these young students.

We have some other concerns about the testing process. The NAPLAN test is a single test, and does not take individual circumstances into account. It is also too early in the year to be testing students at a Year 3 and Year 5 level (they have only just begun these grades). The marking criteria for writing has caused some confusion too; not understanding how the creativity and originality of a student's writing is marked against spelling, punctuation, grammar and structure.

We have been shocked and saddened at the manner in which NAPLAN data is being used on the My Schools website and in the publication of comparative 'league' tables. This is an extremely narrow and restrictive way to look at the holistic teaching that public schools, in particular, provide. These tables only compare schools on one criteria. They do not take into account other academic results, achievements of the school in other areas, the school's social development programs, nor achievement in the other Key Learning Areas – PDHPE, Creative Arts, Science and HSIE. The measures of 'success' of individual schools must surely include these aspects of education as well.

The data was originally meant to report to an individual student's parents and teachers about their achievement and progress. These tests were not created for the purpose of comparing schools or making generalisations about them.

This comparison of schools is misleading because it does not take into account the natural differences between schools. Some schools have high numbers of disadvantaged students; such as students with learning difficulties, those from a low socio-economic background and other students with special needs. It is simply not fair to compare the achievements of these students and schools on a sole measure, without considering where they have come from.

I can see that the ICSEA grouping on the My Schools website is an attempt to address some of these concerns, but it is far too narrow in its scope and extremely confusing as to how these numbers have been decided. 'Like' schools actually seem to be widely disparate, in terms of their socio-economic areas, size and student background.

The publication of league tables is extremely damaging to school communities, and thus communities as a whole. Obviously, being ranked near the bottom of a comparative table

would be demoralising for students at an ‘underperforming’ school. As educators we should be inspiring students and holding high expectations for them, not labelling them as ‘failing’ from a young age. This can also lead to feelings of helplessness in the community, or even blame placed upon the school, when there may be reasons and particular circumstances to explain why these results were obtained. The fact also remains that in a comparative table, someone has to be at the bottom – even if schools improved their results and had their students achieving at a higher level, someone has to be at the bottom of the table.

There is concern about the pressure that these tests, and these public ranking systems, puts on teachers. Many may feel the pressure to cheat, even by giving help to students in their class. Our main concern though, is that through testing only English and Maths, teachers will focus only on English and Maths. The benefit of our education system is that students receive learning in a wide range of subjects and have a range of experiences. Teachers will soon be lessening or abandoning their teaching in other Key Learning Areas and stopping activities such as cultural performances, choirs and sporting teams so that they can concentrate on teaching to NAPLAN test content. This can only be harmful for the students of Australia.

The use of these comparative tables has been very confusing for parents. Many do not have the expertise or knowledge to know how to read such tables correctly.

We urge this Committee to ensure that NAPLAN remains as it was designed to be – a tool for teachers and parents. We are completely opposed to the use of league tables and ask that measures are put in place to protect our students.