



A response from the Independent Education Union of Australia to the Senate Standing References Committee on Education, Employment and Workplace Relations:

Inquiry into the administration and reporting of NAPLAN testing

Friday 25 June 2010

INTRODUCTION

1. The Independent Education Union of Australia (IEUA) is the federally registered union that represents teachers and support staff in non-government education institutions including early childhood centres, schools and post secondary training institutions, across all the states and territories of Australia. The union currently has a membership of over 66,000.
2. The IEUA has always taken an active role in the various debates and government funded projects and forums concerned with issues of assessment and reporting, in particular development of mechanisms to support improved teaching and learning strategies for school classrooms based on sound student assessment measures.
3. The Independent Education Union of Australia believes that assessment and reporting policies and practices must be developed by education authorities in collaboration with the teaching profession to ensure that such practices are valid, reliable, fair, equitable, and motivate students to further develop their learning.
4. The current environment in which national assessment and reporting changes are occurring is characterised by a number of major aspects that require acknowledgement, dialogue and improvement.
5. Through its State Branches, the Union has been actively involved in the professional dialogue and development of curriculum assessment and reporting provisions in the respective jurisdictions, including participation on jurisdictional 'boards of study' and member engagement on curriculum committees.
6. The IEUA notes that it is timely to establish a review of the NAPLAN testing and reporting arrangements but expresses its bewilderment at the restrictively short timeframe provided by the Senate Committee for school education participants to make considered responses.

NAPLAN

7. The IEUA notes that the ACARA NAPLAN website (<http://www.naplan.edu.au/faqs/faq.html>) states that the purposes ('uses') of the tests are:
 - Students and parents may use individual results to discuss achievements and progress with teachers.
 - Teachers use results to help them better identify students who require greater challenges or additional support.
 - Schools use results to identify strengths and weaknesses in teaching programs and to set goals in literacy and numeracy.
 - School systems use results to review programs and support offered to schools.

8. The IEUA supports the principle that parents should have access to timely, meaningful information about their children's progress and are entitled to comprehensive and accessible reports.

9. The IEUA believes that the primary purpose of assessment and reporting is to provide meaningful information so as to improve student learning. The reporting process must be an integral part of the teaching and learning process. The reporting process should enhance students' own capacities to reflect on their learning, their successes and areas for further learning.

10. Consequently, schools and systems (including governments) must allocate sufficient resources for professional development to enhance teachers' skills and knowledge as part of the review of student results.

11. The IEUA therefore supports 'in principle' the purposes for the NAPLAN testing regime as outlined and the Union's response to the Inquiry reflects its desire to see these purposes appropriately fulfilled.

2010 NAPLAN

12. Given the highly agitated environment in which the NAPLAN tests were conducted in 2010 the IEUA believes that the Senate Inquiry will reflect a

particular perspective of the testing regime that could be unique to the 2010 experience.

13. Further, the IEUA notes that the 2010 NAPLAN tests were the first to be conducted against the background of the ACARA MySchool website that had been launched in January 2010.
14. The 2009 and 2008 NAPLAN results formed a central element of the MySchool website construction and appearance and it is clear that media activity, parent commentary and school (system) instructions have influenced the manner in which schools, teachers and students prepared for and undertook the 2010 NAPLAN tests.
15. Accordingly the IEUA has commissioned research conducted by the University of Technology Sydney, conducted by adjunct Professor James A Athanasou & Associate Professor of Education Geoffrey Riordan in relation to the NAPLAN testing in 2010 and the MySchool website.
16. The project involved a survey the opinions of independent (that is, non-government) school principals and teachers on the NAPLAN and the use of the data from that assessment in the Federal Government's MySchool website. The survey was conducted across all non-government schools in the Australian Capital Territory, New South Wales, Northern Territory, Queensland and Victoria.
17. In the on-line survey school principals and teachers provided input on:
 - the amount of ordinary class time that was used in preparation for the NAPLAN;
 - the extent to which the work completed (syllabus or teaching program) in classes is close to what teachers would have expected to complete or whether it has been affected by NAPLAN;
 - whether NAPLAN test results have been a useful diagnostic tool for teachers;
 - the nature of the improvement that should be made to NAPLAN;

- whether the publication of NAPLAN data on the website placed additional pressure on teachers, the students and the school;
- whether the current use of NAPLAN data is misleading as a school result representation for their school;
- whether there other factors or measurements that should be added to improve the usefulness, value or validity of the MySchool site; and
- a description of the impact (positive and negative) of MySchool on (a) the school and (b) parents at the school.

SURVEY RESULTS

Ordinary class time used in preparation for NAPLAN

18. There is considerable variation across schools in the time allocated in preparation for the national testing. Around 2-3 days are allocated in primary school with up to 1 day in high school.

Median hours of ordinary class time used in preparation for NAPLAN tests

	Principals	Teachers
Year 3	10	15
Year 5	10	15
Year 7	3	5.5
Year 9	2	6

19. The range of hours of class time according to principals (by and large less than the hours reported by teachers) varied from 1 up to 100 hours in primary schools and in high schools from as little as 0.1 hours but up to as much as 75 hours. These substantial variations require further investigation and consideration.

The extent to which the work completed (syllabus or teaching program) is in line with expectations

20. Respondents were asked to reflect on the amount of ‘programmed’ work that had been completed by the time of the NAPLAN tests to assess the degree to which ‘preparation’ for the tests had interrupted classwork.

21. Around half of all principals considered that the extent to which the syllabus or teaching program had been completed at this stage of the school year was in line

with expectations in primary school and this is more than the proportion of teachers.

22. For high schools some two-thirds to three-quarters of all principals said that the work completed was in line with expectations but teachers reported substantially lower proportions.

The work completed is in line with expectations

Class	Principals	Teachers
Year 3	50%	31%
Year 5	52%	26%
Year 7	64%	33%
Year 9	76%	40%

Note: Percentages rounded

Whether NAPLAN test results have been a useful diagnostic tool for teachers

23. The responses of teachers showed that they have not yet considered the NAPLAN test results to be a useful diagnostic tool for everyone. Only around half of all teachers said that the test results had been useful.

NAPLAN test results as a useful diagnostic tool for teachers

Class	Teachers
Year 3	47%
Year 5	49%
Year 7	55%
Year 9	58%

Improvements to NAPLAN

24. Both principals and teachers provided a wide range of reactions to the NAPLAN program. For instance there were concerns about the reading standard required for the numeracy tests. The comments also encompassed the timing of the NAPLAN assessment program in the school year and the speed of feedback. Both teachers and principals referred to issues of administration and security.

The impact of the publication of NAPLAN data on the website

25. The overwhelming conclusion is that every aspect of teaching and learning has felt the impact of the publication of the NAPLAN data

Agreement that there has been additional pressure from the publication of
 NAPLAN data

Impact	Principals	Teachers
Pressure on teachers	87%	89%
Pressure on students	66%	74%
Pressure on the school	86%	91%

Note: Percentages rounded

26. Both principals (86%) and teachers (90%) agreed that the current data were not representative of the school and were misleading. The extent to which this is a valid interpretation is not at issue. The fact is that most of the professional staff in schools has a perception that results are not representative.

Reactions to the publication of NAPLAN data on the website and the additional pressures it creates

27. There was an evident concern about the accuracy and fairness of comparisons.
28. Some responses from teachers and principals show evidence of difficulty in coming to grips with the technical or statistical details of the results, as well as there being some fundamental misconceptions with educational assessment principles or the background and development of the NAPLAN testing program.

The current use of NAPLAN data as a representation of the school

29. Respondents raised the issue that the NAPLAN data do not describe accurately all that is done within a school curriculum and program. The results also reflect the nature of the cohort which can vary in ability from year to year. There was some indication that the results were an accurate indicator of the literacy and numeracy achievement but this appeared to relate mainly to high achieving schools.

Other factors or measurements that should be added to improve the usefulness of MySchool

30. Principals made a number of recommendations relating to other factors or measurement that should be added to improve the usefulness of MySchool. These related to clearer descriptions of the school population, the funding received and

the value added. Questions were also raised about the value of comparisons based only on the mean or average.

31. Teachers also expressed the need to include information about the diversity and make-up of a school's population. A number of comments confirmed the desire to see measures of academic growth included.

The positive and negative impact of MySchool

32. Although some principals mentioned that the publication of results on MySchool had no impact others stressed some negative aspects. The results placed undue pressure on students and teachers. Negative results meant that explanations had to be provided to concerned parents. On the other hand positive results led to increased enrolment enquiries. There is evidence that enrolments have already been affected. There was also a concern that positive results will be ephemeral as the ability of the cohorts in a year changes over time.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Clarification of purpose

33. The NAPLAN tests were originally touted as 'diagnostic tools' (see ACARA FAQ 'purposes') however recent commentary by ACARA senior personnel suggest that the tests are a summative assessment of the learning for the year level cohort.
34. Further, it is proposed that the tests will, at some point, line up with the Australian Curriculum. Given the gestation of this curriculum and emerging considerable timeframe for implementation, it is unclear what the underpinning basis of the NAPLAN testing regime currently is or is intended to be. This has implications for the 'timing' of the exams in respect of the learning time that the particular cohort has had with respect to the level.

35. *After consultation with the education community in relation to needs with respect to the tests, the explicit nature of the purpose of the tests must be made clear and the tests constructed accordingly.*

Timing

36. If the NAPLAN tests are intended to be used by teacher to “help them better identify students who require greater challenges or additional support” it is clear that the current timing of both ‘taking’ the tests in May of the school year and then receipt of results quite late in the school year means that too little time is available for that classroom teacher to respond to the diagnostic results.

37. Consequently it would seem sensible to conduct a ‘diagnostic test’ as early as possible in the school year and improve the turn-around of results so that more time is available to respond in the classroom.

38. Acknowledgement of the tests as diagnostic tools however has implications for the purposes of the tests in relation to reporting. Particularly, that the data reported on MySchool should better reflect achievement of benchmarks and consequently presentation of bands of achievement should be the central element on the website and not mean scores.

39. If on the other hand the tests are intended to be summative it makes little sense to assess students in May of the school on the basis of intended capacity for that year’s benchmark expectations. Such a test would be better administered at the end of the school year. This of course brings with it the concordant issue of ‘managing’ the time committed to the preparation for these tests over the entire school year.

40. *Once the purpose of the tests is clear, determination needs to be made as to the best time of the school year in which to conduct the tests to provide for the maximum utility of the tests and the reporting thereof.*

Expert review of test items

41. Many principals and teachers have raised concerns about the appropriateness of test items, the level of literacy skills required to complete the numeracy tests (which may be out of kilter with the literacy benchmark for the same cohort), the appropriateness of items for not only special needs students but those struggling in their cohort.

42. An expert committee be established to review the current tests, to consult with classroom teachers and principals about current concerns and provide a firm recommendations to the test writers.

Improved security of testing regime

43. Principals and teachers confirm concerns highlighted in the media about the security and protocols surrounding the conduct of the tests especially given the ‘high stakes’ atmosphere in which they are conducted, their public reporting on the MySchool website and the funding that arises for schools under the National Partnership agreements.

44. A review of current arrangements for the conduct of other major external exams that occur in Australian schools be undertaken and that recommendations be developed to ensure the ongoing integrity of the NAPLAN regime.

Appropriate representation of data on MySchool

45. Principals and teachers were concerned about the representation of ‘school results’ by a single ‘mean’ score for each NAPLAN test. The mean hides as much detail as it discloses. Further, a number of respondents reflected that the ‘breadth’ of outcomes of the school would provide a better representation of school achievement.

46. The development of alternative models for the representation of NAPLAN data on the MySchool be undertaken by ACARA including graphical representation of the range of the individual school’s scores for each NAPLAN tests, overlaid with data in relation to other schools.

Provision for special needs students

47. Principals and teachers generally agreed that the current tests do not provide for students with special needs and the ad hoc approach in some schools to encourage some students to ‘not attend’ on the test days is not an appropriate response.

48. The establishment of a working party with classroom teacher, with expertise in supporting students with special needs, be established to provide advice in relation to the current and future NAPLAN test items.

Small Schools/Cohorts

49. A number of respondents reflected on the major variations that can occur on reported data in relation to a school’s apparent performance when there are small cohorts of students reported on. The MySchool website publishes errors, albeit in a quite hidden manner currently, that indicate significant potential differences in school performance measurement. Additionally the achievement of a single student with learning difficulties in a small cohort can have major implications when results are reported as mean scores. Appendix A provides an example of concerns from one such school.

50. Small student cohorts of less than 15 students should not be reported on by mean score measures.

APPENDIX A

For IEUA submission on NAPLAN testing.
From Korowal School, Hazelbrook NSW.

The effect of NAPLAN testing/ My School reporting on small schools.

Korowal School has no objection to NAPLAN testing per se, provided that parents who object to the testing process are able to withdraw their children. It is a test that provides limited but potentially useful information for teachers, parents and students about the achievements of individual students on a particular day measured against a national average.

Our objection is to the use of NAPLAN scores on the *My School* website as a means of comparing schools. The test was not designed for this purpose and cannot be used fairly for the purpose. The use of results from small schools is particularly inaccurate and potentially damaging to their reputation and financial survival.

Korowal's 2008/9 results were compared to a national average on the basis of a sample size so small as to be statistically insignificant. From our 2009 year 3 class only six students sat for the test. From our year 5 class there were eight students.

According to the *My School* website page on "indicative standard errors" the error rate for these scores is around 35 points. This rate has a statistically significant effect on the way results appear when presented in the red, green or white boxes on the screen. (In our case, if the error points are added back a colour can change from red to white or white to green). Potential families investigating schools are unlikely to look beyond this simple "traffic light" calibration.

ACARA and MYCEEDYA have decided that results from groups of less than 5 students should be excluded from comparison on the basis of their small size. In our view the error rate for groups of less than 20 students is unfairly and misleadingly high and these results should be excluded.

The *My School* website concedes that its comparisons are "*more accurate when the number of students tested is large and when the students perform at a similar level*". In other words, groups that are large and monolithic do better than groups that are small and varied. Our school is doubly disadvantaged by being small and also by integrating talented and special needs students in the same group. We have a well-deserved reputation for the inclusion of students with special needs and learning difficulties. It is unfair that this very positive aspect of education at Korowal should be used to harm our school's reputation.

In our view the use of students' test results from 2008 and 2009 to rank their schools breaches an implied trust. We offered the test in the honest belief that only teachers and parents would see the results. On this basis we encouraged students with special needs and learning difficulties to sit the test.

The misleading use of our NAPLAN test results has caused us measurable damage. Two families due to enrol at the start of this year withdrew because of the apparent problems with our NAPLAN scores (on the basis of a simplistic red/ green calibration on the website). At that time we did not have students on the waiting list to replace those vacancies. We do not know how many families have since rejected the school on the same basis.

Schools such as Korowal that have chosen to remain small face many challenges that larger schools do not. They often operate on the edge of viability and are sustained by dedicated groups of teachers and parents who are committed to a small school environment.

