

I would like to express my grave concern about the systematic misuse of data from the current NAPLAN testing regime. This concern stems from my experience as a teacher in England for two years and in Western Sydney for the previous six years.

My main concern is with the publication of data from a single diagnostic test in forums that purport to measure the performance of competing schools.

This approach seems to have been adopted from the English and American education systems, which is ludicrous, given that Australian children have been outperforming their English and American counterparts for years. If anything, we should be studying why our Scandinavian counterparts appear to be getting better results.

For years now, my colleagues and I have found the NAPLAN test to be a useful diagnostic tool. We analyse the results of the test and use them to tailor our teaching programs so that they focus upon those areas in which the children at our school need further explicit teaching. At the same time, the test results tell us in which areas the children are competent and, hence, do not require further tuition.

Unfortunately, the NAPLAN test is frequently used by people who are ill-qualified to analyse the data for inappropriate reasons. I believe that a study should be undertaken to explore the statistical validity (or invalidity) of using NAPLAN to compare school performance. Most schools do not have enough children, i.e. the necessary sample size, required to make comparisons about the performance of a school from one year to the next, let alone between different schools. It only takes a few students, getting one or two extra questions correct or wrong (even if they were guesses) to make a large difference in the distribution of students across the assessment bands. This is especially so in a school like ours which usually has around forty children sitting the test in each grade. A handful of children moving up or down one skill band represents a large shift in the percentage figure for students in each of the skill bands. And that is before we allow for fluctuations in the competency levels from one year's cohort to the next!

If it is found that there are serious issues with the statistical validity of using NAPLAN data for comparing schools, then surely the Government has further reason to protect our children and their families from people who would use the data for their own (usually financial) benefit.

Furthermore, steps need to be taken to protect school communities from being unnecessarily embarrassed by league tables. In the last year, our Western Sydney community has already been done a disservice by one local paper's uncritical reporting of the NAPLAN test results. In its article, The Western Weekender argued that one school "triumphed" but failed to mention that the school was a selective school and did not note that the school had the luxury of picking and choosing which students it accepted.

The same article argued that another local school (that I will not name because I do not want to embarrass them further) was one of the worst in the state. It did so on the basis of raw test scores without considering the challenges faced by children, families and teachers in that community. It also neglected to consider the value that had been added to the children throughout the years of their schooling - surely the most important indicator of a school's performance. Ironically, our school was named as one of the best performing schools in the district - a decision that was made without visiting our school, observing our pastoral, sporting, creative and performing arts and other extra-curricular programs.

Importantly, our school's P and C Association were most upset when they were made aware of the above. Moreover, they were outraged when they saw the serious inconsistencies in the circumstances of schools considered to be "like schools" in the My School website.

Finally, I think that it is important to note the effect that a system of league tables has had on equity in England. During my two years of teaching in a school in South-East London,

it became apparent that the league tables system entrenches inequality and encourages the formation of pockets of privilege and disadvantage. I watched as upwardly-mobile families who valued education used their wealth to move into areas where the schools were deemed to be better (by virtue of their test results rather than their "value added"). Conversely, I saw firsthand the way that schools would deny entry to families that were deemed to be challenging, as certain local schools claimed to be full and told these (usually poorer) families with their health, employment and learning difficulties to go elsewhere.

I am very proud of the information that our school shares with parents through student reports, formal parent-teacher interviews, informal parent-teacher conversations in the playground, over the phone, at P and C nights and at presentation assemblies. In each of these forums we communicate with parents the direction in which their individual children, and the school as a whole, are going across a wide variety of indicators. These indicators are much more important and much broader than the NAPLAN test. They include ALL key learning areas as well as extra-curricular and pastoral activities.

Most importantly, they take into consideration the point at which children began their educational journey, the level of their improvement and the challenges that they face. The NAPLAN testing regime, while useful as a diagnostic tool, is a very poor indicator of these important factors. As a result it is very important that steps are taken by the Government to make sure that steps are taken to prevent the use of the NAPLAN assessment as a tool to compare and inappropriately embarrass schools and their communities - most especially, in the form of "league tables".