

Dear Senate Committee

Please accept my submission for the Senate Inquiry into NAPLAN. I will not identify myself or my school in this submission, however I am a senior executive member at a remote rural school with a high Indigenous population, and have worked at the school for 13.5 years and with DET for 16 years in total.

My submission will address matter “a” referred to the committee from the perspective of my school and indirectly from the perspective of all small, rural, remote, Indigenous schools.

I have very serious concerns about the use of NAPLAN data to publicly rank schools, as I believe it has a highly negative impact on our students and long term on our school and community in general. My concerns are as follows:

1. *Statistical validity of collating NAPLAN results with very small cohorts* - and the aggregation of the results to ‘measure’ a school’s performance. In small cohorts, the presence of as few as one highly literate student (or one student with very poor literacy) can skew overall results very significantly. To compare the performance of schools with such small cohorts by the methods proposed on MySchools is highly invalid.
2. *The mobility of Indigenous students* – Indigenous students at our school are in many cases very mobile – ie they move towns and schools regularly, for a wide variety of reasons. For example of our Year 9 cohort who sat NAPLAN in 2010, only 1 student out of 13 had been continuously enrolled in our school since the Year 7 NAPLAN test. Some had attended more than 4 schools in this period. To rank the performance of our school with such highly mobile populations again is invalid.
3. *Students with Disabilities impact on results* – our school has a higher than average proportion of students with diagnosed learning disabilities. Yet these students are included in our schools results along with mainstream students. In 2009, 3 of our 9 students who sat NAPLAN in Year 9 had diagnosed intellectual disabilities. This obviously will reduce the overall performance of our school.
4. *Judgement of Secondary school performance based on NAPLAN results* – Year 7 students sit NAPLAN in May of their first year of High School. By that point they have had up to 7 years of Primary + 1-2 years of pre-school, plus various life experiences including additional coaching and literacy-friendly home environments for the lucky ones. To somehow rate the performance of a High school based on Year 7 NAPLAN data is ludicrous. Between Years 7 and 9 Secondary school students can have up to 30 different teachers – many more if they move schools or are at a school with high staff turnover. Many students have private coaching, many do not. To rate the performance of Secondary schools based on Year 9 NAPLAN is only marginally less invalid than basing on Year 7. In addition, NAPLAN is not based on any aspect of mandated Secondary curriculum.
5. *Inconsistency in NAPLAN testing procedures between schools* – There is enormous scope for schools to use methods which may enhance student results- for example additional ‘support and supervision’ for individual students, displaying helpful materials on classroom walls, additional time, informal verbal cues given by teachers, et al. This was not an issue when the tests were not high stakes and were to be used for their original diagnostic purpose. Now that schools are to be publicly rated based on these tests – there will be intense pressure on

- many schools to give their students every 'advantage' they can. For those who argue this is not an issue – would they suggest that we allow schools to internally supervise the HSC?
6. *Exclusion of potentially poorly performing students* – a simple way to improve a school's NAPLAN data is to simply exclude or discourage from doing the test those students who the school knows will cause the overall results to be lower. Ironically these are the students who the test was originally designed to assist.
  7. *Greater 'selectivity' of public schools* – I can guarantee from experience that many public schools are becoming increasingly selective in their enrolments – and not wishing to enrol those students who have behavioural, attendance, or learning problems. The higher stakes of NAPLAN will undoubtedly encourage this more. Another irony – that the obsessive use of data to “close the gap” for Indigenous students will actually widen the gap as schools all scramble to improve their own data, and the most at-risk students will increasingly be excluded altogether.
  8. *Self-fulfilling prophecies* – It would be very poor educational practice to announce the name of your school's poorest performing students in literacy and numeracy at your school assembly. This would no doubt shatter the fragile confidence of these students and cause unnecessary humiliation – and you can guarantee they will slide further backwards from that point on. Likewise to publicly humiliate the students of any particular school. When our students read that they are in the bottom 5% of the state, or even that they are getting “all red” on the MySchools website – it destroys the confidence of the students, the confidence of the community in the school, and makes teachers' jobs harder.
  9. *NAPLAN's inherent unfairness to remote Indigenous students* – Many of our students speak and write in varying forms of Aboriginal English. The language and writing conventions that some of our students use are not conducive to strong NAPLAN performance. The obsession with ranking schools based on NAPLAN is in my opinion sentencing schools with high Indigenous populations to forever being considered at the bottom of the pile. Once again the self-fulfilling prophecy.
  10. *The 'Like schools' comparisons* – What if every school improves its NAPLAN results? On the next MySchools update – it will still show that some underperform and some perform above. Schools could conceivably improve their results but still stay 'in the red'. I am sure various other submissions have dealt with the whole “like schools” situation.

Overall the use of the NAPLAN data for the purposes intended in the MySchools website and by current educational policy is in my opinion both statistically invalid and highly damaging to those schools which are already doing the heavy lifting of the public system.

It is marketed under the banner of school accountability – but in reality – it makes no more sense than to label a doctor as underperforming because he is unlucky or dedicated enough to work in an area with high rates of illness, because his “data” is worse than others.

NAPLAN data certainly identifies the schools which are servicing the neediest school communities – these schools need the complete support and respect of government, not public humiliation.

NAPLAN is a very useful diagnostic tool for gaining an approximate snapshot of some aspects of a student's literacy and numeracy – nothing more, nothing less.

The school I work in faces enormous challenges on a daily basis, however the efforts of our staff have led to enormous improvements in many areas in recent times, to use simplistic, inaccurate, invalid methods to rate our school is damaging and undermines the hard work we do at the local level.