Introduction

Independent Schools Queensland (ISQ) is the peak state body representing the independent schools sector. It represents a sector with 200 schools and around 108,000 students, accounting for 15 per cent of Queensland school enrolments.

Independent schools are a diverse group of non-government schools serving a range of different communities. Many independent schools provide a religious or values-based education. Others promote a particular educational philosophy or interpretation of mainstream education. Independent schools include:

Schools affiliated with larger and smaller Christian denominations for example, Anglican, Catholic, Lutheran, Uniting Church, Seventh Day Adventist and Presbyterian schools
Non-denominational Christian schools
Islamic schools
Jewish schools
Montessori schools
Rudolf Steiner schools
Schools constituted under specific Acts of Parliament, such as the grammar schools
Community schools
Indigenous community schools
Schools that specialise in meeting the needs of students with disabilities
Schools that cater for students at severe educational risk due to a range of social/emotional/behavioural and other risk factors.

Independent schools are not-for-profit institutions founded by religious or other groups in the community and are accredited by the Non-State Schools Accreditation Board. Most independent schools are set up and governed independently on an individual school basis. However, some independent schools with common aims and educational philosophies are governed and administered as systems, for example the Lutheran systems.

Response

Independent Schools Queensland welcomes the opportunity to provide a response to the Senate Inquiry. For more information on the points raised in this response please refer to the attached Discussion Paper, which was written for a recent Think Tank focusing on NAPLAN conducted by Independent Schools Queensland.

Term of Reference 1

The conflicting claims made by the Government, educational experts and peak bodies in relation to the publication of NAPLAN testing.

The intention of national full-cohort testing is improved student achievement. Independent Schools Queensland supports this intention. However, Independent Schools Queensland questions the current use and publication of NAPLAN data and suggests that it is unlikely to achieve the desired intentions. A single score cannot be a comprehensive indicator of overall school or student performance. Judgments about the performance of

systems and schools should be based on multiple sources of reliable evidence. The data also needs to be presented in a manner that can be easily understood and then interpreted meaningfully and accurately by all key stakeholders.

Term of Reference 2
The implementation of possible safeguards and protocols around the public presentation of the testing and reporting data.

Independent Schools Queensland welcomes the implementation of safeguards and protocols around the public presentation of the NAPLAN data and makes the following points:

The current use of the My School needs to be reviewed because it does not provide a solution for meaningfully comparing schools as was its original intention. The reliance on the ICSEA score for determining statistically like schools does not take into account the complex variables that contribute to school and student performance. In addition, there are many examples of unusual comparisons being drawn between schools.
The focus of NAPLAN data should be on school improvement not comparisons between schools.
Rigorous safeguards must be in place to prevent the creation of 'League Tables'.

Term of Reference 3
The impact of the NAPLAN assessment and reporting regime on: the educational experience and outcomes for Australian students; the scope, innovation and quality of teaching practice; the quality and value of information about student progress provided to parents and principals and the quality and value of information about individual schools to parents, principals and the general community.

Independent Schools Queensland supports the notion of external accountability through a national assessment program. Concerns exist however, in terms of current practices and their potential for negative impact on overall student achievement.
According to Elmore (2004) one of the major problems for underperforming schools is that they lack internal accountability. In other words they lack agreement and coherence about expectations for student learning, and they lack the means to influence instructional practice in classrooms in ways that result in student learning. Typically, external performance based accountability doesn't address the issue of how to achieve change in classroom practice. The information received doesn't provide teachers with 'next steps' to guide instruction. There needs to be a balance of both external and internal accountability for improved student outcomes.
There is a need to stay away from policies which focus on quick fixes with little attention paid to long term trends and the types of long term initiatives necessary for sustained improvement. Policies of name, shame and blame ensure that a) there is a quick gain as schools learn how to 'game' the test, b) that the curriculum is altered downwards to ensure that there is reasonable success for more students, c) it introduces procedures to remove students who may bring scores downwards (for example, 'accommodating' special education students out of the test room, not enrolling students who may detract

from mean scores or asking students not attend on the day of the test) Hattie (2005). This is not a policy worth pursuing.
There have been questions raised about the formal testing of Year 3 students in May (Caldwell, 2010). Finland, which regularly tops the OECD countries in international testing, has no mandatory system of national tests, although schools can voluntarily draw on a battery of nationally-developed tests.
David Pearson warned in 2005, "Never send a test out to do a curriculum's job." When the primary purpose of education becomes scoring high on tests, it is easy for the test and test preparation to become the default curriculum (Harvey and Goudvis, 2007). This highlights the importance of a quality curriculum and support materials so that NAPLAN doesn't become the default curriculum for our schools.

Term of Reference 4
International approaches to the publication of comparative reporting of the results ie 'league tables'.

Typically countries are moving away from the use of 'league tables' due to mounting evidence that the practice does not work to improve education standards. Northern Ireland, have scrapped league tables, and energetic discussions have occurred in England on the utility of publishing raw data which is not a comprehensive indicator of overall school or student performance. While information gained from national testing may provide schools with some basic statistics, comparative tables are essentially deceptive.

Discussion Paper

The NAPLAN: Perspectives and Possibilities Think Tank, conducted by Independent Schools Queensland, was designed to create a forum for discussion, within the education arena, to constructively contribute to further discussions with policy makers so that the positive intentions of assessment are achievable, and the negative effects of full-cohort testing minimised.

The drive to raise student achievement has been the keystone of recent education policy in Australia. In a similar trend as that viewed elsewhere (USA and UK), testing has grown in prominence and has been viewed as a means to raise educational standards and call teachers and schools to account (Alexander 2010). In this way testing has become high stakes not just for students and teachers, but also for politicians as they endeavour to show the effectiveness of their policies and reforms. An inherent and serious risk is that discussions about what constitutes quality education can easily move from the education arena, to the more politically charged environment of electioneering (Alexander, 2010). The issue is not whether children should be assessed (they should), or whether schools should be accountable (they should) but how and in relation to what (Alexander, 2010). These are important considerations to ensure that the intention of improved learning outcomes and provision of valid and

reliable data can be achieved. There is mounting evidence from other countries that when accountability for educational outcomes is measured simply by results in national full-cohort tests, the negative effects on teaching and student learning outweigh the positive intentions. Significantly the data provided by such tests is also drawn into question, particularly in regard to their effectiveness for policymakers (QSA, 2009).

Focus Areas

Three focus areas were identified for discussion during the NAPLAN: Possibilities and Perspectives Think Tank. These were: issues around reporting; item construction; and the performance of students in the higher achievement bands. Information from the Think Tank, relevant to this inquiry, is included below.

Reporting

Perspectives for consideration:

The intention of national full-cohort testing is improved student achievement. It is recognised that a key to transformation is the effective use of data to guide instruction (Fullan, Hill and Crévola, 2006). However, for the data to be used in a meaningful way, it needs to go beyond rudimentary and surface level data and that data needs to be presented in a manner that can be easily understood by all key stakeholders.

In 2005, John Hattie made the claim that schools are awash with data. Five years later, the same claim can be made. In fact it may be fair to say that schools are drowning in data. The problem, Hattie maintains is in knowing what to do with the data and the time it takes to read and digest it. Uppermost in our minds should be the interpretations that are made about data. Are the interpretations valid? Are we testing what we think we are testing? What is the quality of the data?

Furthermore, in a study conducted by Robyn Pierce and Helen Chick from the University of Melbourne, The statistical literacy needed to interpret school assessment data (Google docs), it was concluded that 'relatively complex and critical thinking is required' to make sense of NAPLAN data. The user needs to be 'fluent' in reading the technical aspects of the data as it is presented. Pierce and Chick suggest, if not already understood, this could be taught in a simple hands-on professional development session. However, the all important 'reading beyond the data' skills are more complex. This requires a capacity to question the data and to be aware of sampling issues,
and the kinds of relational thinking that makes it possible to keep track of how one variable may affect another in a variety of circumstances. These skills they suggest are more difficult to develop. The question then arises as to how this effects teachers' motivation and capacity to make use of the data. What about parents? Do they understand the data that is provided to them?

Margaret Wu, from the Assessment Research Centre, Graduate School of Education, University of Melbourne, has also written a paper about the NAPLAN tests. She concludes that the Australian federal government's education transparency agenda should begin with providing the layperson with clear guidelines for interpreting the National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) results. In particular, the accuracies and limitations of NAPLAN results should be made clear in plain language, so that all stakeholders can make use of NAPLAN results in an informative way.

The full paper is available at

In another paper, Margaret Wu (2010) advises that teachers and parents should be aware that a student's NAPLAN score on a test could fluctuate by about ±12%. Consequently, any use of an individual student's NAPLAN result should take this uncertainty into account. She warns practitioners to remember that NAPLAN results are based on just one single test of limited test length. A sample of 40 questions is not sufficient to establish, with confidence, the exact proficiency of a student in all areas tested.
Currently, NAPLAN results are reported in a variety of formats:
for individual students – parents or carers receive a report on their child's results in September;
for schools – schools receive their data in September and school NAPLAN data is published on the My School website; and
for jurisdictions and for the nation as a whole – the NAPLAN Summary Report is published in September and the full National Report in December.

Arguably the most contentious format of NAPLAN reporting is via the My School website. Professor Barry McGaw, chairman of the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority, when writing for The Age, January 28, 2010 concluded: 'The My School website provides the public and the profession with better information than has been available before and information that can be used productively to improve Australia's schools.' Lorna Earle (2005) however, highlighted the difference between data information and data knowledge. She suggests that information becomes knowledge when it is shaped, organised and embedded in a context that gives it meaning and connectedness. The question arises therefore, are parents more knowledgeable now about their child's progress and achievement? Is the data on the My School website presented within a context so that it is connected and meaningful?

It is claimed that My School provides a solution for meaningfully comparing schools. But is this the case in reality? There are many examples of unusual comparisons being drawn. One example taken from The Australian, January 29, 2010 is: 'DARGO Primary School is less a school than an abandoned building. Last year it had one student. This year it has none. Yet according to My School, it is statistically similar to privately operated Camberwell Grammar, with 1 255 enrolments in Melbourne's inner east'.

According to Elmore (2004) one of the major problems for underperforming schools is that they lack internal accountability. In other words they lack agreement and coherence about expectations for student learning, and they lack the means to influence instructional practice in classrooms in ways that result in student learning. Typically, external performance based accountability doesn't address the issue of how to achieve change in classroom practice. The information received doesn't provide teachers with 'next steps' to guide instruction. There needs to be a balance of both external and internal accountability for improved student outcomes. What
is the nature of evidence that schools should be collecting? How is the balance achieved?

Possibilities for consideration:

The House of Commons' Select Committee on Children, Schools and Families Third Report to The United Kingdom Parliament in May 2008 made a number of recommendations for improving the national assessment regime. These are summarised below:
to avoid negative consequences of using assessment results for accountability purposes use both sample test results and the results of teacher assessment
the purpose of national monitoring of the education system is best served by sample testing to measure standards over time
in the interests of public confidence such sample testing should be carried out by a body at arm's length from the government
teacher assessment should form a significant part of a national assessment regime
assessment for learning should be supported by enhanced professional development for teachers.

There is a need to stay away from policies which focus on quick fixes with little attention paid to long term trends and the types of long term initiatives necessary for sustained improvement. Policies of name, shame and blame ensure that a) there is a quick gain as schools learn how to 'game' the test, b) that the curriculum is altered downwards to ensure that there is reasonable success for more students, c) it introduces procedures to remove students who may bring scores downwards (for example, 'accommodating' special education students out of the test room, not enrolling students who may detract from mean scores or asking students to not attend on the day of the test) Hattie (2005). This is not a policy worth pursuing.

There have been questions raised about the formal testing of Year 3 students in May (Caldwell, 2010). Perhaps NAPLAN should begin in Year 5 with school based assessments conducted prior to that time to monitor progression. Finland, which regularly tops the OECD countries in international testing, has no mandatory system of national tests, although schools can voluntarily draw on a battery of nationally-developed tests.
Item Construction
Perspectives for consideration:

Lee Willett and Allan Gardiner (2009) assert that the proofreading format used in the NAPLAN to test spelling does not accurately reflect student capability. In fact they suggest that the data may be seriously misleading. During session 2 of the Think Tank, Lee Willett and Allan Gardiner presented the findings from their study which explores the testing of spelling in NAPLAN.

It is often assumed that if children have reading difficulties, their wrong answers stem from difficulty reading the passages. However, this is not always the case. Sometimes, reading the questions, a much less familiar task, can prove to be the greatest reading challenge for the students. This is because questions such as "How was the central problem resolved?" or "Which statement is NOT true about the narrator?" are not the types of questions children are asking themselves and each other about the books they read (Calkins, 2000).
Typically in the reading tests there is an emphasis on lower-order comprehension

knowledge and strategies. Predominately, the questions ask students to locate a piece of information. The difficulty of these questions often comes from the difficulty of tracking through the text rather than a failure to apply any comprehension knowledge or strategy. Hence, the test becomes more a test of perseverance than ability. The disastrous impact of presenting a deficient model of comprehension is described in work by such notables as Catherine Snow, David Pearson and
Michael Pressley. The result in the US has been a generation of students with poor comprehension skills and high-school students who are unable to read their texts. This has meant a renewed focus on the teaching of comprehension, particularly higher-order comprehension, requiring expensive programs of professional development.

David Pearson warned in 2005, "Never send a test out to do a curriculum's job." When the primary purpose of education becomes scoring high on tests, it is easy for the test and test preparation to become the default curriculum (Harvey and Goudvis, 2007). This highlights the importance of a quality curriculum and support materials so that NAPLAN doesn't become the default curriculum for our schools. It is vital that we monitor the development of the Australian Curriculum and that we are prepared to contribute constructively to the consultation process established by ACARA.

Readability of the test items is an issue in all of the Year 3 literacy papers. It is frequently in excess of the age group for which they are intended. This is also a problem in the numeracy papers. The table below compiled by QSA shows examples from the 2008 tests.

Possibilities for consideration:
A dictation task for spelling is included in NAPLAN. A well-constructed dictation task provides more authentic information about students' orthographic knowledge (Willet and Gardner, 2009).
NAPLAN should not replace quality teacher assessment in school.
Teachers are supported to translate the information from collected data into focused instruction that responds to individual students' needs.
Summary
It is important to consider the goals of education and what skills students will need to be successful in the 21st Century. Being literate and numerate is important but so is learning to learn in order to become an independent thinker and learner. 'It is about problem solving, team-work, knowledge of the world, adaptability, and comfort in a global system of technologies, conflict and complexity. It is about the joy of learning and the pleasure and productivity of using one's learning in all facets of work and life pursuits' (Fullan, Hill & Crévola, 2006, p. 3).
Accountability is important for the education sector but this should not be an exercise in accounting. The difference being that accounting is about gathering, organising and reporting information that describes performance. Accountability on the other hand, is the conversation about what the information means and how it fits with everything else that we know, and about how to use it to make positive changes (Earle, 2005). In this instance it also about striking a balance between external and internal accountability.
A final word of warning from Andy Hargreaves (2009): 'Students are diverse.

Organizations are diverse. Change is diverse. None respond well to standardized strategies of improvement'.

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