

I accept the invitation to provide an individual submission to the Senate Inquiry – NAPLAN.

I support the concept of NAPLAN as a limited diagnostic tool and, as from this year, as an indicator of aspects of literacy and numeracy growth for individual students.

I do not support the use of NAPLAN data in any way as a measure of school or cohort performance or of comparative performance between schools. I cite the following reasons in support.

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

The claims: The ACARA MySchool website homepage states that ACARA "... is responsible...for publishing nationally comparable data on Australian Schools."

The issues: The NAPLAN data used by ACARA does not provide for valid comparisons given the range of variables between schools and the narrow scope of the data. Publishing this "comparable data" in a list of sixty "statistically similar schools" creates a simplistic league table, a concept widely criticized across the education spectrum.

The evidence: The Year 7 and Year 9 NAPLAN data of Ballina High School NSW, a school with a minimal number of LBOTE students, is compared to, among its "statistically similar schools", Bankstown Girls High School which has 96% of its students from language backgrounds other than English.

The Year 7 NAPLAN data of Ballina High School with 560 students across Years 7 – 12 is compared to, among its "statistically similar schools", Allanson Primary School (WA), a K-7 school of 100 students.

The Year 7 NAPLAN data of Ballina High School with 13% Indigenous students is compared to, among its "statistically similar schools", Hume Anglican Grammar (Vic) with no Indigenous students.

The publication of the Year 7 and Year 7 NAPLAN data of Ballina High School and sixty "statistically similar school" is a simplistic league table with the perception of 'better or worse' performance highlighted by colour.

A solution: The NAPLAN data of schools (NSW DET schools at least) is published in Annual School Reports providing comparisons with NSW state data. This being the case, the need for publishing NAPLAN data by ACARA which invites erroneous comparisons should be discontinued. If publication of data for individual schools is to continue however, the ACARA site data of the sixty "statistically similar schools" which does not provide for valid or useful comparisons but which creates a simplistic league table should be discontinued.

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

The issues: NAPLAN data can be misrepresented as a measure of performance of a cohort of students instead of being represented as the data from limited diagnostic tests, implemented at a point in time and with varying adherence to the protocols, from which a mean score can be calculated which informs little in terms of diagnosis.

A solution: Implement protocols that prevent the publication of league tables based on NAPLAN data.

The impact of the NAPLAN assessment and reporting regime on (iv) the quality and value of information about individual schools to parents, principals and the general community.

The claim: The ACARA MySchool website homepage states that “The MySchool website provides detailed information about almost 10 000 schools in Australia. It uses a new index of student and school characteristics , developed specifically for the purpose of identifying schools serving similar student populations. This enables schools’ results on national tests to be understood in a fair and meaningful way, and enables schools seeking to improve their performance to learn from other schools with statistically similar populations.”

The Issues: The claim that the “...index of student and school characteristics.... enables schools’ results on national tests to be understood in a fair and meaningful way” is demonstrably false. By implication this also renders the next claim false.

This issue arises because of the invalidity of the “index” and the use of the tests for this purpose, a use for which they were not designed. NAPLAN original designation was as a diagnostic tool and it has use in that regard.

The evidence: Given the variables between the “statistically similar schools”, as indicated by the evidence already provided and further indicated by such evidence as: 50% of the “statistically similar schools” to Ballina High School have enrolments K – 7, while Ballina High School enrolments are Year 7 – 12, any claim that “this enables schools’ results on national tests to be understood in a fair and meaningful way” is not true.

A solution: Maintain as the sole purpose of NAPLAN, its original purpose as a diagnostic tool and not one as a measure of relative performance, a clear implication of the crude league table that is the report on the “statistically similar schools.”

Phil Steer (principal, Ballina High School, NSW