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WESTERN AUSTRALIA
Achieving International Excellence

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Committee Secretary
Senate Education, Employment and Workplace Relations Committee
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Parliament House
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Re: Inquiry into the administration and reporting of NAPLAN testing

First, I apologise that I have not submitted this response earlier. I have been travelling to meetings, conferences, workshops, and to other commitments since the 22nd of April, and besides being committed to these, I have not had constant connection to the internet and my email. I noticed the invitation some time after it was sent to me.

This is a brief response to the above inquiry. It is based on my experience in a number of roles in the work of educational assessment, including teaching courses in the field. A number of people who have taken these courses were involved in educational assessment at the state level, and are now involved in the work of NAPLAN. More recently, I also wrote a report for the Minister of Education for Western Australia which touched on the role of NAPLAN in relation to the educational curriculum in Western Australia.

It goes without saying that I believe education is central to Australians, from both an individual and a community perspective.

NAPLAN can be an important part in enhancing the quality of education in Australia. It can provide a frame of reference of assessment that is common to all schools and teachers. This common frame of reference is especially important for schools that are not in the main city of each state. However, because it can provide them with a common national frame of reference of assessment, it can also be important for these schools.

The benefits that can arise from NAPLAN are based on the assumption that the quality, administration, analysis and reporting of the assessments is of the highest quality. If it is not of the highest quality, then unfortunately the assessments can not only be of little use, but can even be counterproductive. Because Australia has substantial skills and resources in educational assessment, there is no reason that NAPLAN should be of anything but highest quality.

With an excellent quality of educational assessments, very important benefits arise from high quality feedback that can be given to school principals and teachers. There is

considerable evidence that principals and teachers are eager to see the results of their students, and to understand the implications of these results for their planning. I believe that the publishing of the results on the MY School Website, though of high profile, is a relatively minor part of the potential benefits of NAPLAN.

The quality of educational assessments has to be such that the assessments do not narrow the curriculum, a legitimate concern of educators. A curriculum is narrowed if the studies of the students are overly focused on a very small subset of items that can be asked – in short, if teachers are forced to teach to a specific test or type of test.

The way that the curriculum will not be narrowed is to understand that not every student in a particular year needs to sit a test in which every student responds to exactly the same items. The technology exists in test construction, administration, analysis and interpretation that the results of students and of schools can be placed on the same metric even if all students in the same year do not respond to exactly the same items. This is the same technology that currently permits the results of students from different grades, who do not respond to exactly the same items, to be placed on the same scale.

It is most important, indeed central, that in constructing a series of tests to be administered in a particular year level, the wider curriculum is sampled. Sampling ensures that teachers teach the whole curriculum to their students. The sampling is possible if it is not required that every student in the same grade sits for the same items.

Thus, in supporting the NAPLAN program, I am expecting that first the tests, the marking, administration and feedback will be of the highest order, and (b) that very quickly a sampling approach will be taken in producing pools and banks of items from which different, but commensurate, tests are constructed for each year level. A byproduct of this approach is that technology, such as computer adaptive testing, can be brought into the administration of NAPLAN relatively soon. In the long term, this technology may even permit students to sit for their assessments on different but commensurate items at different times.

I trust that this contribution will be of some help. Thank you for the opportunity to make this submission.

I apologise for any infelicities in the submission, but I have not had a chance to print it out and check a hard copy, which is what I usually do for a document such as this.

Yours sincerely

David Andrich