

From:
Mr Adam Fitzgerald

This is my tenth year teaching in South Australian schools. I have recently completed a Masters of Education (Teacher/ Librarianship) and work in a Category 2 Index of Disadvantage Reception to Year 12 school as a secondary teacher and Teacher/Librarian. Over my ten years teaching I have taught in seven different schools (on contract and as a permanent teacher), ranging from a school in a remote mining town in the South Australia's north, an Aboriginal school and other secondary school's in low-socioeconomic disadvantaged in the northern suburbs of Adelaide. For a short while I also taught briefly as Temporary Relief Teacher in other public schools in a few of the more "elite" Adelaide public high schools. Whilst each school has presented different challenges, I have always maintained my professional integrity by doing my best in providing learning opportunities for all the students at these schools.

On a daily basis whilst teaching at these schools, I have witnessed the issues and disruptions that affect the learning that occurs in educational disadvantaged schools (fights, bullying, poor attendance, domestic violence at home, students with special needs such as Autism spectrum disorders, new non-English speaking arrivals and behaviour problems in class just to name a few). Despite every teacher's best efforts to deal with these issues, these disruptions continue to affect the ability for schools to teach and students to learn. My current school is often referred to as "hard to staff" because of the difficulties found in recruiting and retaining teachers. I am personally committed to this school because it one of the schools that I attended as a student. Unfortunately, however, the ranking of schools such as mine as "poor performing" will not improve the results in these schools but make recruitment and retainment near impossible. Enthusiastic and quality teachers will not be attracted to poorly ranked schools as it could ruin their professional reputation and desire to teach.

The behaviour and level of performance of each student can vary enormously from class to class, school to school and region to region. Having taught in a range of classes, often the same material, what was a good lesson producing fantastic educational results in one class context was a dismal failure in another. Not because of the poor performance of the teacher or the school but because of the nature of the students in the class (and the backgrounds of which they come). From my experience in different schools, it would be impossible to rank or compare each of the schools in which I have worked, as it would be for all schools across Australia. Each school has its own unique way of delivering education according to the nature of the school community in which it exists. Each school also has a great difference in the funds they have to purchase resources to educate students (some public schools in Adelaide for example can charge in excess of \$500 per year in fees, whereas the student fees at our school are just under \$200 of which much is not collected). Factors such as the skills and aptitudes of the students and the cultural and family backgrounds of which each of the students has come all contribute to the "results" of each school. Ranking schools based on one test (such as NAPLAN) is extremely simplistic and certainly does not represent all educational outcomes produced by schools. Publishing these results does not just "name and shame" these public schools but punish schools for circumstances that are often beyond their control.

The NAPLAN tests do nothing but measure the limited scope of the literacy and numeracy abilities of students on a specific day and place. The test does nothing to address the educational inequalities faced by students every other day of the year whilst at school and in their families. Before the last NAPLAN test (2010) our Assistant Principal told teachers to ignore the test guidelines by removing posters in their classrooms from which students might be able refer during the test. This guideline in conducting the NAPLAN test may be designed to make the test seem fair and equitable across Australia on that day but ignores the other inequalities faced by the schools and students every other day of the year. Even during the NAPLAN test this year for example, students in my class were disrupted at the beginning of the test by building construction noise outside the classroom. I have seen similar situations occur in other schools during the NAPLAN tests and I am sure this is a common example of the inequalities faced by students doing tests across Australia.

From my experience many parents (particularly those in lower socio-economic areas) do not choose the schools to which they send their children. Parents choose their local public school and hope that the State and Federal Government has resourced these schools as well as can be expected. Students in these areas do not choose their schools, the local government school is suppose to provide and education for these students.

Whilst internally teachers and schools would be continually accessing the results of a poor performing class, these results should remain restricted to the qualified educational experts. Doctors do not need to publish the health results of their patients, schools should not need to publish the personal results of their students. Teachers and schools need to be given the respect and trust in our professional integrity. The NAPLAN tests can be one many useful diagnostic tools to measure the performance of schools, teachers and students. This year, for example, I conducted the Year 7 NAPLAN tests with my Year 8 class as part of our schools ongoing school improvement review, the results of which will no doubt be useful when they arrive. However, the production of any form of ranking system amongst schools reduces education in Australia to a commodity: a commodity that many communities can not afford. The "transparency" of internal education results is a cost to those school communities that can do nothing about their results. If there is to be public records of school results (such as on the My School website) they need reflect all the facts associated with producing results in schools, including each school's funding arrangements.