

Submission to:

The Senate Standing Committee on Education, Employment and Workplace Relations

Concerning: ***The Effectiveness of the National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy***

Dear Senators,

In response to the stated items listed in the term of reference, I should like to make the following comments:

(a) *Achieving stated objectives*

NAPLAN has always been a political tool to illustrate the effectiveness of political decision-making about standards of education in Australia. Its relevance to education has been questioned by the general public and professional educators since its inception. Its imposition upon the already taxed school administrators and teachers had, and continues to have, a nuisance effect but, as usual, school authorities were forced to adopt the plan because of its far-reaching financial consequences for those who refused to comply. The application of NAPLAN testing was very obviously a commercial imperative because, at no time was the invention of a suitable tool to perform the stated objectives ever placed in the hands of those who could have professionally created such a scheme. The only person or corporation who has benefited from the enormously costly impost on educational institutions has been the Murdoch Press and its associated beneficiaries. I am sorry to have to bring this matter to your attention but both the Government and the Opposition Parties are guilty of suppression of any professional opposition to the whole charade. The related effect upon the establishment of the “My School” website has been to create a most unhealthy competition amongst schools, both public and private, and a jealousy amongst teachers and parents who have not understood the false communication provided by this heinous means of spreading false propaganda. This has been confusing particularly to new parents who have been fed the story that the “My School” website will provide them with a comparative view of available schools for their children to attend. I have been personally involved with a number of families seeking help in this regard. I have also had to provide counselling to parents who have been sadly disappointed with schools where they have enrolled their children after studying these forms of indoctrination.

NAPLAN has missed the point, was never a valid form of assessment and should be abandoned immediately.

(b) Unintended consequences

Apart from the most obvious consequence of leading parents up the garden path by encouraging them to believe that this national form of testing was a professional device for vetting schools and classifying students, even innocent children have been isolated from the truth about their need to “pass” the NAPLAN test. By wilful prevention of information about the rights of children and parents to opt in or opt out of the completion of these invalid tests, NAPLAN has created some aura of respectability amongst children (and, unfortunately, teachers) such that they honestly believe that their own individual results will be part of their personal educational CV. My own grandson (8 years old) recently came home skiting how he had finished the test well before the end of time. He really was allowed to believe that this was some crown of glory that he was able to hold over the heads of most of the other pupils in his Year Three class. He had become quite tense in the period leading up to the tests, a condition that could have resulted in his becoming quite sick. Later, he went on to tell me that the tests weren’t really as important to his educational career as it was to the approval rating of his teacher. And all this from an 8 year old, burning with the desire to learn anything and everything he can from his general exposure to relationships, environments, opportunities for discovery, exploration of his world!! And all these learning experiences meanwhile had to be thwarted in his “preparation for NAPLAN” weeks before the BIG TEST. What a travesty!!!

Whilst the Government is trying to sell the Gonski Reforms to some uncooperative state premiers and shying away from the politically unpalatable reduction in some tertiary funding promises to help pay for these more equitable funding rearrangements, nobody in the Government or the Opposition has even broached the subject of the huge waste of money on this ridiculous NAPLAN testing regime. NAPLAN is costing the taxpayer millions of dollars in printing matter alone, in administration costs and in marking tests. Add to this the national expenditure that parents have been involved in with their purchase of tutoring books and digital devices to aid students in their needless preparation for these tests. In one visit to two booksellers about six weeks before the most recent testing time, I examined several books, each costing more than \$23, designed to help prepare students for their tests. In one Year Three book covering Mathematics, I found questions and answers about mathematical concepts which should never have been countenanced in a Year Three classroom. I copied out one question to show to a friend of mine who had been a mathematics specialist in secondary education for about 44 years. I asked him to identify the year of work that this concept would have been included for study and he immediately informed me that it would have been found in Year 10 Geometry. He was simply amazed when I told him it was taken from a Year Three set of NAPLAN sample questions. The creator of these supposedly “VALID” tests had absolutely no practical knowledge of graded content of a Mathematics curriculum. I pity the poor parents who would have paid \$23.95 for that practice book only to find out that they probably couldn’t have explained what was required for their little darling in Year Three. They most likely would never have known of the concept themselves. What a waste of public and private money!!!
NAPLAN MUST GO!!!

(C) NAPLAN's impact on teaching and student learning practices

The first consequence of the national imposition of this innocuous extravagance, for the betterment of Mr Murdoch's coffers, would be the tremendous waste of teaching and learning time in classrooms all around Australia for about a month or more prior to the imposition of the NAPLAN tests in Years 3, 5, 7 and 9. Each of these years is of substantial importance to the process through primary and then secondary schooling. Year 3 is a crucial year in its elevation from "baby" classes and its preparation for middle schooling. Year 7 is of particular importance to the new High school curriculum because it is now becoming the point of entry to secondary learning. Year 9 is a preparation year for a possible trend to either elementary tertiary studies or to a path into applied studies. To waste months of teaching in these year levels is an abominable practice, holding the learning process up to accommodate forced skill and content emphasis and repeated rote learning.

Teachers are coerced into following sheepishly the established prescribed procedures to equip their pupils with the adjustments necessary for "testing sensitivity". Opportunities for real learning must be set aside for tutoring practice. As a consequence of this temporary interruption for a substantial period in the first semester and the changes in pedagogic action, children are finding it somewhat strange to adjust back to the "normal" classroom after this intense period of swatting. This creates further anxiety for both the teachers and certainly for their pupils. Investigative learning has been set aside for almost an atmosphere of drill and children find it hard to re-gain their productive and enjoyable learning processes.

(d) The impact ... of publishing NAPLAN results on the "MySchool website

For the "best" schools (and this means approximately 96% of the top 50 secondary schools in Queensland that are NOT public schools, according to the Courier Mails publication of results last year), the effect upon school administrators is such that they can hardly fit into their hats. What a plum advertisement for enrolling at this or that private school and what an increase in income must that mean!!! Principals are encouraged to stick to the "PLAN" because they fear that parents will continue to shop with their feet off to the private system, whether they can afford it or not. The publication of NAPLAN results in the MySchool website (no matter how these results may have been manipulated...see Courier Mail report of 16 May, 2013, page 14) can be used again and again as the best advertisement for the "best" schools. It doesn't matter how much poorer students are encouraged to stay away when tests are on. It doesn't matter if teachers somehow assist their pupils to change answers to enhance results. It doesn't matter if security with test instruments is a little slack – just as long as the overall result is brilliant.

And, if unknowing parents find out that their local school hasn't fared quite as well as the "you beaut" down the road, they might be guilty of putting further pressure on either their own children (or the teachers of their child's school) to "do better" in future; with the threat that, if an appreciable improvement cannot be demonstrated, another change in schools will result.

(e) Potential Improvements to the program to improve student learning and assessment

The most cost-effective improvement to this innocuous system would be the complete abandonment of NAPLAN. The enormous financial saving to the taxpayer and to the poor parents, who have been wasting millions of dollars on tutoring instruments, would provide the Government with the wherewithal to fund professional development of teachers and resource enrichment to allow pupils to return to productive learning.

Senators must ask themselves why it is that the earlier PISA results (provided only every 5 years and obtained by only 15 year old students – not babies) displayed that Australia was by no means the weakest nation in the education universe. Why is it that a nation like Finland, allowing its pupils fewer years to complete their formal education than we avail to our kids, is able to top the international stakes in educational prowess?

Certainly there is a place for assessment in the formal learning process. But NAPLAN certainly doesn't fit into the category of helpful assessment either for the teacher or the pupil. Good teachers are observing their pupils every day. If they find it necessary to ask their children to undertake a diagnostic test to help identify points of weakness or difficulty in the individual child, they certainly can't wait for five months or more to obtain a result, as would be the case with the NAPLAN testing process. Even in the bad old days of public exams, high school students didn't have to wait five months before they found out whether they had "passed" or not.

If it is necessary to quantify the levels of ability of our nation's kids and to obtain an evaluation of the quality of teaching in our schools, why wasn't the teaching profession of this land consulted and given the task of setting up a formal plan to ensure teaching and learning was of the highest standard?

Why was it necessary to out-source this vital role of school evaluation to a foreign commercial firm? Is this the same story of how the Queensland Government out-sourced the effective system for the payment of its health workers? What a mess!!!!

Is the Senate going to allow this vile wastage of public and private funds to continue with the knowledge that the benefits to classroom learning will be as effective as the debacle in the Queensland Health Payroll system?

If the Government of the day finds it politically correct to analyse the effectiveness of its schooling system, then why not use the brain-power and the professional expertise of our own teaching profession, with its long-standing association with the world's best educators, to establish what is good and what needs improvement? Remember that "If it ain't broke, why fix it?" If the result of a timely examination of child-centred learning indicates some need for reform, the Government of the day should understand its obligation to provide the expertise and the resources to make necessary adjustment for the benefit of its pupils and certainly not for the political point-scoring of political parties.

(f) International Best Practice

To ensure international best practice for assessing any function of government, there must be willingness for public exposure and consultation with the world's best authorities, working in conjunction with the nation's best practitioners.

This obviously was not done in the setting up of NAPLAN.

Furthermore, if any examination of a system is carried out with the object of reform where necessary, it should never be the case that the professional operatives are coerced into complying with set directives with no opportunities for objection or criticism.

Can the Senators obtain the real reason for a complete embargo on any form of national or international discussion, let alone the exposure of inadequacies in this NAPLAN system?

Why has it been necessary to quash any professional papers or discussion from national and international experts if these might have even hinted at the questionable validity of NAPLAN?

Why was the agenda of the 2012 National Conference of Principals never publicly reported in the press or any form of media?

Why has it been necessary for principals in schools to be instructed not to inform parents and pupils of their rights to ignore NAPLAN if they chose to do so?

Why are Parents and Citizens' Associations not permitted to discuss any form of criticism of NAPLAN?

Why has this innocuous system led to an unprofessional competition amongst schools, principals and staff teachers?

And finally, why can't the Government declare the cost of this ridiculous impost on schools and learning?

Honourable Senators,

If you cannot provide public answers to the questions I have asked, if you have any sympathy for our over-worked teachers in classrooms all around Australia and if you are to obtain a return to productive learning for the up-and-coming citizens and voters of tomorrow, I beg you to take immediate steps to terminate NAPLAN and return to an era of restored sanity in our teaching methods and our classroom environments.

Yours in good faith,

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