

Submission to the Inquiry into the administration and reporting of NAPLAN testing

In making this submission I draw the Committee's attention to the fact that I am a retired teacher with approx. 40 years' experience, much of that in public schools in SA. I am not currently connected to any political or teacher organisation. The opinions expressed here are my own.

I have been moved to make this submission as a result of observation of the consternation caused by the publication of the MySchool website and the latest round of NAPLAN testing.

In preparing this submission I have consulted:

- 2008 and 2009 NAPLAN tests
- AEU web pages
- Prof. Margaret Wu's work on interpreting NAPLAN
- Other academic works on the use of similar tests in USA and UK
- All available online newspaper reports of 2010 NAPLAN testing
- All available online comments by the public, mainly parents, on 2010 testing.
- MySchool website

What is blatantly obvious to me from observation of the earlier tests is that they are NOT a measure of the progress made by a student in the year in question. They are rather a measure of what the child has learnt in his lifetime to the date in question. Blame or glory can be attributed to the family, other members of the social environment, the school and teachers for earlier years, etc. They cannot be attributed to the teacher and the school for the couple of months only of the year in question.

This point is supported by Prof. Wu:

Another reason for calling for caution in linking student performance to school performance is that students' knowledge and skills are cumulative, acquired over the years of students' school life from Year 1, if not earlier. A teacher would typically have taught a student for three months when the NAPLAN tests take place. What a student can do in numeracy, for example, is the knowledge the student acquired over past years of schooling, with some additional knowledge in the three months prior to the NAPLAN test. To attribute students' test scores entirely to the current teacher's performance may not be justified. In relation to Year 7 and Year 9 NAPLAN tests, it is conceivable that some students did not have a solid foundation in primary years and their low scores were not the result of poor teaching by their current teacher or the poor performance of their current school.

<http://www.appa.asn.au/images/news/naplanforlayperson20091022.pdf>

To a person currently outside the existing school system, the 2008 and 2009 tests appear to have been conducted with minimal problem. Not so 2010. What changed? The publication of 2009 results on the MySchool website and the threat of the use of

NAPLAN results in evaluating teachers and schools to determine both financial rewards and academic standing. **The tests have suddenly become excessively important.**

A thorough reading of the public press and associated public comments Australia-wide shows that the tests and the potential publication of their results have created excessive stress for both parents and teachers. Parents have reported physical effects on their children, confusion about whether intellectually challenged children should or should not be sitting the tests, other parents threatening physical punishment for poor results, their own confusion about the tests. The number and variety of these comments is daunting. A few teachers appear to have cheated, surely an indication of the stress the tests have put them under. Other comments show the possibility of teachers cheating is seen by some parents as an abrogation of duty by teachers, thus doing nothing to enhance the status of teachers in the community. What is clear through virtually all comments is that what the tests are testing is misunderstood and that the test results are viewed as important because of their potential publication.

Only today (7/6/2010) Professor Raewyn Connell has added her voice to the growing chorus and “has blamed the My School website for a shift in resources towards the marketing and branding of taxpayer-funded schools”, stating that the Federal Government has created a “powerfully negative” regime.

It should also be noted that the premise used to assign schools to like groups is flawed in that it uses census data which may well not be applicable to any given school.

While this is brief I consider it highlights difficulties which make the use of a MySchool website untenable. Students need testing, in particular to determine those who may need assistance, but it should not be a one-off test and neither should the results be available to people other than the student, the parents and educational authorities.