

Terms of Reference

On 13 May 2010, the Senate referred the following matters to the Senate Standing References Committee on Education, Employment and Workplace Relations for inquiry and report by 13 August 2010:

the conflicting claims made by the Government, educational experts and peak bodies in relation to the publication of the National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) testing;

We have seen the effects of publishing such data on students, schools and entire communities. Results have been published in the Telegraph, the Herald and the Mercury among others. The publication of this data serves no purpose other than to sell newspapers. It demoralises schools which have students with a significant number of new comers with little English, LBOTE students, Aboriginal students and schools which are under-resourced are compared with rich schools with multiple cricket fields, swimming pools and the best resources money can buy.

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

In the current climate of the internet and governments refusing to exercise current legislation it is difficult to see how safeguards can be implemented. The only option would be to graph results rather than publishing numbers which identify schools. The current thinking by the proponents of publishing test scores is based on the failed New York model which is driven by a market ideology. The reality is education is not a commodity to be traded, education is not competitive because not everyone starts at the same point. Education is about opening the minds of young people which although they may have different starting points, they will eventually reach the finish line and become contributors to society.

(c) the impact of the NAPLAN assessment and reporting regime on:

(i) the educational experience and outcomes for Australian students,

The only credible claims are those made by people who have experienced the effects of publication of the equivalent of our National Assessment Program, England. The education system in England has produced students which are unemployable; they have been taught to the test all of their schooling life that they have lost the ability to think for themselves. They lack the problem solving skills, which are not tested by NAPLAN, needed to be productive members of the community. Ken Boston, former Director General of Education in NSW, who was in charge of running the English testing regime is now against mass testing, having seen its long term effects.

(ii) the scope, innovation and quality of teaching practice,

Having to produce good results in order to avoid being named and shamed is enough of an incentive to teach to the test. This would leave very little time to spend on creative endeavours or time consuming practices such as innovation. The scope of teaching programs could become focused on teaching to the test. The quality of teaching could seriously decline as teachers fight to protect their students from the stigma attached to being listed at the bottom. As well as learning English and Mathematics, students are learning to be good global citizens and broad thinkers able to analyse works of arts and

make observations about a wide range of issues. Students also participate in various school sponsored activities such as debating, sports competitions and participating in various World Days such as World Refugee Day. All of these activities which help to produce global citizens of the future will be abandoned because there won't be any time to take part in such activities.

The implications of a mass testing agenda are wide ranging and frightening and the New York model which eventuated in people who are not qualified teachers going through a quick training program and teaching the most disadvantaged of students is proof of the failure of such ideology. The English example is one we must learn from. Further proof of the danger of measuring educational achievement by a single test has led the Scottish to abandon mass testing as soon as they gained some autonomy from Great Britain.

(iii) the quality and value of information about student progress provided to parents and principals, and

The information that parents receive from communicating with their child's school and teachers far outweighs any information provided by a single test score. Teachers inform parents about the individual needs of the child, their strengths and weaknesses, their learning style, what they need to do to improve, additional resources that could benefit the child among other information unique to that student. This can never be delivered by one test result.

(iv) the quality and value of information about individual schools to parents, principals and the general community; and

Parents can attend Open Days, speak to the Principal to gain information, access the websites of various schools or speak to other parents whose children may go to a particular school. The reasons for choosing a particular school are varied but parents ultimately decide on a school that they feel would meet the needs of their child and help them develop into a productive member of society. Test results are not necessarily an indication that a particular student would benefit most by being at that school and parents know that.

Most schools have good links with their communities through various collaborative programmes such as Work Experience. These links provide a full picture of what a particular school is achieving for its students; like the English experience has highlighted good test scores don't necessarily lead to more learned individual. Students must learn to think for themselves in order to become lifelong learners who will continue to develop as human beings and contributors to society.

The risk of 'league tables' would be that parents and communities could become reliant on a school's position on the ladder to make a judgement about how a school is helping students learn and develop and that assessment could be completely mistaken.

international approaches to the publication of comparative reporting of the results, i.e. 'league tables'; and

Evidence from overseas paints a gloomy picture as is the case in England. The experience of Ontario is also similar. The results don't help the students in any way, don't inform the parents in a meaningful way and stigmatise particular groups who need more resources and better paid teachers. In fact, educational outcomes are best in countries which don't have mass testing and which pay their teachers salaries commensurate with other professions.

e) other related matters.

The inevitable outcome of mass testing and publishing of test results would be the narrowing of the curriculum. Teachers will teach to the test. No one wants to come last. Another possibility would be that certain students would be made not to sit the test which would make the results unreliable anyway.

We must learn from the experiences of other countries and not make the same mistakes that they have made. We know the effects of mass testing and 'league tables', we don't need to examine whether they are good for education. The long term effects would be disastrous for the future of our country. Education is the key component of any developed and civilised nation, it is not to be toyed with to test out failed practices.