

SUBMISSION TO SENATE INQUIRY INTO THE ADMINISTRATION AND REPORTING OF NAPLAN TESTING

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As a teacher who was teaching at the then Mt Druitt High School in 1996/7 when the “Class We Failed” completed their high school education at HSC level, I have direct experience of the trauma and damage that can occur to a whole school community when state-wide or nation-wide testing results are made available to the media. In that year, the class photograph was splashed across the front page of the Sydney Daily Telegraph in a cruel and inhumane ‘name and shame’ exercise. Nothing was achieved by this exercise that could in any way be construed as positive. Students were publicly shamed for their so-called failure and teachers held to ridicule. The whole Mt Druitt community, already tainted with the title of ‘housing commission’, low socio-economic status and under-achievement was held up as a failing community.

The reporting of the results in no way reflected the difficulties this community faced in terms of dysfunctional households, single parent households, low incomes, the high number of learning disabilities and the high number of students with English as their second language. Nor did it reflect the high proportion of indigenous students with the high levels of learning difficulties that they face. Finally, it did not reflect the ‘drain-off’ of talented students to neighbouring selective schools and the newly created St Marys Senior High School. Instead, compared to other schools in the state we were branded as failures. This simply reinforced the insecurities and sense of inferiority that students in Mt Druitt already felt. This stigma remains and any public publishing of league tables will continue to reinforce that felt stigma and so the cycle will continue.

Therefore, I object strongly to any attempt to rank and publish league tables that compare Mt Druitt Campus and Chifley College with schools who have students of more privileged backgrounds. While the “My School” website aims to compare ‘like schools’, the fact is that the media has no sensitivity in this regard and compiles league tables that compare the elite with the most disadvantaged students.

I would like to summarise my objections as the following:

Naplan is merely a diagnostic test designed to measure a student’s literacy and numeracy skills at one point in time. It was never meant to be a measure of a student’s or a school’s total worth for a whole year.

‘High stakes’ testing such as Naplan, when it leads to league tables has resulted in widespread teaching to the test across the state. Weeks and months are devoted in many schools, from the elite private and selective schools to the disadvantaged schools, to teaching mere literacy and numeracy and test skills. This has the result of diminishing the comprehensive nature of a whole school curriculum. Studies in the UK have shown that, in the words of Dr Ken Boston, ex Director-General of the NSW Department of Education and Training and Chief Executive of the UK Qualifications and Curriculum Authority, UK primary curriculum has become a “dry husk” as teachers concentrate on preparing for tests. He said in an article in the London Times,

That is because the government’s approach to the key stage tests has sucked the oxygen

from the classrooms of primary schools. It is not the tests themselves so much as the high stakes attached to them.

Already, in NSW we can see the 'Naplan Industry' taking off. There are commercial coaching schools, websites, textbooks and even Naplan camps run to coach and hot-house students in this narrow area of learning. This is not education for a thinking democratic nation.

Two disturbing features have already been reported in NSW schools. The first is the withdrawing of low achieving students from the tests or even the school on the day of testing. Secondly, some schools have already been suspected of cheating by opening the tests beforehand. This would not happen if it was just a diagnostic test for the benefit of teachers in a particular school and parents in a particular school.

Another disturbing trend is the movement of children seen already from one school to another because of Naplan results. This will lead to the complete demise of some schools or their relegation to second class institutions in a particular region. This trend has been observed for a long time since the expansion of selective schools in NSW and the opening of 'choice' to the parents. My experience over 30 years of teaching is that many parents operate on whims and not informed information when making these decisions. It is no way to plan the future of a school or a system. Parents have a right to information, but the quality of the information here as a guide to comparing schools from region to region, state to state and across the nation is very suspect. I repeat what I said above, Naplan is a diagnostic test, only.

Following on from this, the point must be made that the poor have little choice in this area. A low-achieving school in Sydney or Melbourne's western suburbs is no different from a neighbouring one down the road, and parents with low incomes cannot afford any other options.

The ICSEA Index is floored in the way it has been put together. One can only wonder at how Alice Springs School of the Air was listed alongside Blacktown boys High School in Western Sydney or Arthur's Creek with Geelong Grammar. This is errant nonsense. Staffing is becoming more difficult in disadvantaged schools. It is already difficult but when a school is publicly listed as being in the lowest 20% or 10% of a nation's Naplan scores, who wants to teach there? These schools will increasingly be staffed more and more by inexperienced and overseas-trained teachers who are the least qualified to teach students with learning difficulties and who come from a non-learning culture. If we have a teacher shortage, as has been predicted, the situation will become critical in disadvantaged schools.

Julia Gillard, nor the new Minister for Education does not need League Tables published in the newspapers to see where needs exist in schools. That information is available without league tables and, in effect the place on a league table is highly correlated with socio-economic status. Many teachers simply suspect that this has all been a populist political move under the banner of "choice".

An overwhelming number of schools, both government and independent have made strong objection to the creation of league tables but the voice of Australian professional educators seems to be ignored. Australia is ranked in the international league tables of literacy and numeracy way above the UK and the USA but it seems these are the systems we want to emulate. How can this make sense?

Dianne Pyne