



ASSOCIATION
OF HEADS OF
INDEPENDENT
SCHOOLS OF
AUSTRALIA

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Committee Secretary
Senate Education, Employment and Workplace Relations Committee
PO Box 6100
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600
Australia
Emailed to: eewr.sen@aph.gov.au

Dear Committee Secretary

Inquiry into the administration and reporting of NAPLAN testing

AHISA is grateful for the invitation to submit to the Senate inquiry.

About AHISA

The membership of AHISA Ltd comprises principals of 350 independent schools with a collective enrolment of almost 350,000 students and a workforce of over 30,000 teachers.

The primary object of AHISA is to optimise the opportunity for the education and welfare of Australia's young people through the maintenance of collegiality and high standards of professional practice and conduct amongst its members.

NAPLAN as a diagnostic tool

There is broad agreement among AHISA's diverse membership that NAPLAN testing provides schools with useful diagnostic data about student achievement and can help in the development of targeted programs for the professional development of teachers and school improvement. While school-based assessment programs also deliver this information – and far more speedily and therefore more usefully – NAPLAN data has unique value in that it provides state/territory and national data that allows principals a broad brush comparative benchmarking of student achievement.

Members report that their schools make full use of NAPLAN data as part of the suite of assessment tools used by staff, and have invested substantial staff hours in mastering software packages developed by government agencies or their state/territory association of independent schools to maximise usefulness of the data.

While there is substantial support for NAPLAN testing for the purposes of measuring student achievement, there is little support for the use of NAPLAN data as a measure of school performance.

Schooling is a complex activity. The use of NAPLAN data as a proxy for the holistic success of a school and comparative reporting of this data are inadequate measures of school performance.

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Such reporting can be misleading and, as an overt intrusion into the relational space between schools and parents, can undermine the partnership between home and school that helps students achieve to the best of their ability.

AHISA acknowledges that schools must be accountable to their students, students' parents or care givers and to the wider community for the quality of the educational experience they offer each and every child. Reporting to governments is an important aspect of school accountability, and transparency of school operations is one measure schools use to demonstrate that they are meeting the public goals for schooling.

It is AHISA's view that accountability is most effective when it is based first and foremost on a relationship of integrity between schools and the students and families they serve.

High stakes testing

The use of NAPLAN test results for the purposes of comparative measurement of school performance and distribution of some federal grants to the states and territories and to identified 'disadvantaged' schools has served to morph NAPLAN diagnostic tests into 'high stakes' tests, where money and/or reputation rides on their outcome. Media reporting and exploitation of the data through the creation of 'league tables' have exacerbated this misuse of NAPLAN.

Incidents of 'cheating' or improper conduct by teachers and/or schools of the testing, as reported in the media, and the instances of perverse effects resulting from the 2010 NAPLAN tests as documented by the Australian Primary Principals Association,¹ are symptoms of the high stakes nature of the NAPLAN tests and indicate that measures are required if the usefulness of the data for even broad brush comparisons by principals is to be retained.

AHISA, in conjunction with other principals' associations, has already consulted the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) on the possibility of producing resources to guide schools in the conduct of the tests and in their interactions with parents and on the means to monitor implementation of the tests. AHISA would seek to be involved in continued consultation over this proposal.

Comparative reporting and league tables

Comparisons of schools using NAPLAN data as published on ACARA's *My School* website are not a reasonable use of the data. Both the fact of publication and comments by public officials in the lead up to the launch of the data on *My School* in January 2010 served, however, to legitimise the use of the data in this way and therefore it unnecessarily complicated any explanation of the educational import of the data to parents. This, and lack of protest by public officials over some 'league tables' produced from the data and published by the media, left schools, principals, teachers and students exposed and vulnerable to misleading claims about their performance.

¹ 'The reporting and use of NAPLAN', 11 June 2010.

Because NAPLAN data is not an appropriate proxy of school performance, comparisons based on the data and the 'league tables' derived from these add little value to school communities or the decisions parents make about schools. Public reporting is richer and more informative when data can be read in the context of each school community.

Independent schools already produce annual performance reports as a condition of their federal funding under the *Schools Assistance Act 2008*. It is AHISA's view that reporting on *My School* should therefore be minimal and the public referred to annual school performance reporting on school websites.

The purpose of education

The elevation of NAPLAN tests to 'high stakes' testing runs the risk of narrowing public perception of what constitutes a 'good' school and, of even more concern, a 'good' education.

If governments are to promote the notion that a 'good' school is determined by ranking it against other schools according to student NAPLAN results there is a danger that schools will narrow their educational focus. There is a further danger that the wider community will come to expect schools to do less, when to meet the needs of 21st century students there is a clear demand that schools do more and do differently.

In the United Kingdom, a narrowing of the curriculum to focus on literacy and numeracy achievement and the pressure for schools to 'perform' in standardised tests have been found counter-productive to both education delivery and student achievement.

Professor Robin Alexander of Cambridge University, director of the Cambridge Primary Review – a major review of primary schooling in England – visited Australia this year. In his lectures² he outlined a number of poor educational outcomes identified by the Review as resulting from England's curriculum reform, the focus on literacy and numeracy and high stakes testing, including³:

- The supplanting of long-term educational goals by short-term targets of attainment
- The loss of the principle [and statutory requirement] of children's entitlement to a broad, balanced and rich curriculum, and the marginalisation, in particular, of the arts, the humanities and science
- The test-induced regression to a valuing of memorisation and recall over understanding and enquiry, and to a pedagogy which rates transmission more important than the pursuit of knowledge in its wider sense

² Professor Alexander's lecture 'Reform, retrench or recycle? A curriculum cautionary tale' was delivered at the National Curriculum Symposium at The University of Melbourne on 25 February 2010; 'The perils of policy: Success, amnesia and collateral damage in systemic educational reform' – the Miegunyah Distinguished Fellowship Lecture – was delivered at The University of Melbourne on 10 March 2010. AHISA is grateful to The University of Melbourne for permission to publish the full text of both addresses in the online section of AHISA's biannual journal, *Independence* (found at www.ahisa.edu.au). AHISA seeks to foster debate on key education issues through *Independence*.

³ This list is found on page 6 of Professor Alexander's paper, 'Reform, retrench or recycle? A curriculum cautionary tale'.

- The dislocation and politicisation of both the whole curriculum and two major elements within it – English and mathematics – by the national literacy and numeracy strategies and the accompanying rhetoric of ‘standards’
- The use of a narrow spectrum of the curriculum [literacy and numeracy] as a proxy for the quality of the whole, and the loss of breadth and balance across and within subjects as a result of the pressures of testing, especially at the upper end of the primary school
- Excessive central government prescription and micro-management, and the resulting loss of professional flexibility, creativity and autonomy
- The historic split between ‘the basics’ and the rest of the curriculum, in which differential time allocations legitimately set in pursuit of curriculum priorities are compounded by unacceptable differences in the quality of provision
- The continuing and demonstrably mistaken assumption that high standards in ‘the basics’ can be achieved only by marginalising the rest of the curriculum.

AHISA believes ACARA must be tasked with not only implementing curriculum, assessment and reporting change but monitoring the effects of such change. In the interests of quality educational provision to all Australian students, AHISA would seek to engage in consultations to this end.

Accountability and autonomy

Active government support for diversity in schooling options and freedom of families to choose among these options creates a strong form of indirect accountability on schools.

If schools are to offer rich learning experiences in an environment conducive to high levels of student and teacher achievement, principals must have the autonomy to positively shape and lead the educational, pastoral, community, financial, spiritual, cultural and managerial practices of their school.

Recent international research on successful schools has demonstrated that the principal is critically linked to a school’s success and that the personal qualities, attributes and attitudes of the principal are very much a part of how that success is generated.

Government accountability regimes should allow for diversity in education delivery and autonomy of principals and schools to pursue the best educational options for their communities.

Yours sincerely

Simon Murray
AHISA National Chair