

SUBMISSION TO THE
Senate inquiry into the administration and reporting
of
NAPLAN testing
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1. Preamble:

The Australian Parents Council (referred to throughout this submission as APC) is the national federation of organisations representing the parents of students attending non-governments schools in Australia.

Note: In this submission, the word 'parent' includes carers and legal guardians.

We therefore welcome the opportunity to contribute to the Senate inquiry into the administration and reporting of NAPLAN testing

The four key goals of APC are **Choice, Quality, Equity and Parental Voice in education** and this submission is underpinned by the following key principles:

- Parents are the primary educators of their children;
- All students have a right to access and receive a quality education to enable them to attain their potential;
- Effective partnerships are central to the success of schooling outcomes and;
- Active and empowered parent groups and parents can, and do, make a significant difference.

This Inquiry

This inquiry focuses on the administration and reporting of NAPLAN program testing, a focus necessitated mainly because the results from NAPLAN testing in literacy and numeracy are now being directly linked with the concept of 'best performing schools' through the *My School* site.

NAPLAN 2009

My School, launched in January 2010, published the 2009 NAPLAN results in literacy and numeracy along with some statistical information about school attributes, and used this information to compare and contrast school performance across Australia.

In announcing the decision in April 2009 which enabled the publication of comparable information about each school's performance and context via a national website, MCEETYA said it would, 'enable a comparison of each school with other schools serving similar student populations around the nation and with the best performing school in each cohort of like schools'.

This provoked heated controversy and legitimate concern that publication of the results of this snapshot of data (limited to literacy and numeracy as a measure of the outcomes of student learning) has the potential to harm students, teachers and schools and to narrow the curriculum. The inevitable result is a shift in focus towards a comparative ranking of schools.

NAPLAN 2010

The controversy has been exacerbated by the furore surrounding the lead up to and the administration of the 2010 NAPLAN program and the reward funding initiated by the Commonwealth.

The indications are that NAPLAN results are a two edged sword, being open to misuse and with the potential to damage the educative processes.

Evidence of higher school scores from the 2010 results have inevitably raised questions of participation rates and school practices. Recent reports of cheating, exclusion from testing, a drop in participation rates, excessive practising for the tests, stress for teachers, students and parents are all cause for alarm.

With the introduction of this sort of competitive environment and reward funding, NAPLAN has become a high stakes program for the state bureaucracies which own and run two thirds of Australia's schools.

There is evidence of a need for agreed, strict protocols surrounding the acquisition and publication of national testing data.

Effects of *My School*

The perception is that *My School* will narrow the purposes of assessment and reporting to a limited perception of the aims of schooling. It has already changed the environment in which school assessment and reporting is performed. It invites judgments about the comparative worth of schools and so about the teachers who work in them. It purports to identify factors that explain school difference but does not yet do so and perhaps never will.

The website contains no adequate disclaimer of the limitations of the data. The parent community could be left vulnerable to simplistic political arguments of the kind commonly heard when league tables or funding are publicly debated: that schools should be ranked by test results and funding determined accordingly. It is questionable whether parents gain any particularly useful information from this outcome given the real world constraints of geography, accessibility and family interests.

It may be that the site should contain a specific place for parents accompanied by an adequate description of its purpose and an explanation about the limitations of the information presented.

APC Position on Assessment and Reporting

APC acknowledges that parents want and are entitled to continuing quality information regarding their children's school education delivered through a variety of reporting mechanisms. They value statistical information about schools such as the number of pupils per teacher, the average class size, teacher qualifications, facilities and resources, support for struggling or gifted students, the approach to discipline and information about the handling of issues or complaints.

The collection of data from standardised testing regimes and its publication to parents provides a guide to their child's comparative progress in these standardised tests. This informs one aspect of a parent's overall responsibility as primary educator in respect of guiding their children's future.

APC believes however that:

- Any form of assessment should be integral to the whole curriculum and designed to inform, support and improve learning. The principal purpose of collecting and reporting assessment information is to benefit students and support their learning. Forms of assessment should grow from the curriculum otherwise there is a significant danger that assessment practices will distort and drive the curriculum itself. There is a growing body of evidence that this is already happening in other countries where testing and reporting practices similar to NAPLAN have been implemented.
- The primary use of data from standardised testing regimes should be for diagnostic and student/school improvement purposes.
- The reporting of student and school achievement must be designed to aid all students to achieve the best possible personal, social and academic outcomes from their schooling with a key element of school performance being its capacity to add value to the schooling experiences and outcomes of all students;
- The assessment and reporting of school performance must be driven by data that respect the sensitive interactions between home, school and the community and which impact upon the schooling outcomes of students.
- Parents, schooling authorities and governments are key stakeholders in the assessment and reporting of school performance.

Parent Priorities

The priorities of parents in respect of school reporting are different from those of governments. Governments want to ensure that government funding for schooling is used appropriately and effectively and achieves measurable outcomes desired by government/s of the day.

Parent priorities for their children's schooling outcomes give the highest importance to

people related factors rather than to measures of academic performance.

Top priorities for parents include:

- the happiness and safety of students;
- the general direction of the school;
- the quality of the teaching staff;
- behaviour management processes and practices;
- that the school is clear about its objectives and operates consistently in ways that reflect its stated mission;
- the encouragement by the school and its teachers of a culture of partnership with parents.

Funding Concerns for the future

The APC is concerned that the tendency of the Commonwealth's recent funding initiatives promotes a funding culture of reward or punishment for school results. This can dispose state governments, responsible for receiving and allocating reward funding, to behave less than ethically in pursuit of funding.

Moving the focus of schooling funding away from securing the optimal development of each and every student to a system of reward for results achieved, skews the purpose and diversity of government and non-government schooling in the Australian context, where up to now, every student has been considered entitled to funding for quality schooling based on need, supplemented by funding for additional need where required and attached however tenuously to the average per capita cost of school education across the nation supplemented annually for increased education costs.

APC is also concerned that the federal government might continue these initiatives through to a future model for funding schools under a single education funding agreement which funnels all funding through the states, leaving the non-government schooling sector, which educates one third of Australia's school children, reliant on state governments which compete against them for students.

In any funding model, APC asserts that the student not the school, must be the focus for the allocation of government funds for schooling based on the right of every child to share equitably in the public expenditure on education.

State and Federal Governments are responsible for ensuring that all citizens, all children, have access to public funds for education, irrespective of the school chosen by parents.

Funding allocations must take into account the general educational needs of every child, and in addition the particular disadvantages arising from disabilities and other factors.

Recommendations

APC recommends that:

- Strict protocols be drawn up for the ethical use of performance indicator information the first of which should be to address the imperative to balance the right to information against the potential harm that limited competitive information can cause to students, teachers and schools.
- Reporting via *MySchool* must ensure that comparisons are fair in all their aspects and that the many factors that militate against fair comparisons are addressed.
- Information which explains the limitations of the data published and which provides guidelines for use must be available on the website to put the information in perspective.
- A special *My School* entry site for parents be developed, which provides an introduction to the uses and utility of the published information in the context of the broad purposes of schooling.
- The national parent groups should be included in ongoing processes to provide advice on the use of student performance data and other indicators of school effectiveness. It is not sufficient for parents to be the recipients of enforced policies of government, particularly if these may damage their children's schooling.
- Funding for schooling be focused on the student, not the school, and enable fair and equitable outcomes for all children based on the right and entitlement of every child to share in government funds available for schooling.

APC wants to see the priorities of parents for their children's schooling reflected in the results of this inquiry and in any agreed protocols which may arise from the setting up of the Minister's committee of inquiry.

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