

Submission to the Senate enquiry on NAPLaN

I am the Coordinator of English and Literacy at Nuriootpa High School, a secondary school in the Barossa Valley. We have approximately 900 students. I would like to make a submission to the enquiry on two levels, firstly, as a parent and secondly as a coordinator of literacy.

I have two daughters who attended Lyndoch Primary School. The school seemingly has a good record when NAPLaN data is viewed. However, both my daughters hated their time at Lyndoch Primary School. The school had very limited programmes in any area of the arts, sports, agriculture or technology. They had massive programmes in literacy and numeracy, which included some 12 practice runs at the NAPLaN test in the final year of both girls' attendance (Year 7 for the elder daughter and Year 5 for the younger). However, at the same time, neither of my daughters received any extension work in either literacy or numeracy. The teacher freely admitted that by the time my elder daughter was in year 7 that he didn't know how to teach to the level that she required to be taught at. But still she was forced, daily, into hours of literacy and numeracy, doing work that she had coped with easily two years previously. Yes, there are obvious teaching flaws here, but the reason the school so neglected to run a broad, interesting curriculum was so that their NAPLaN results would be good. And their NAPLaN results were quite good. But both my daughters hated school because the whole focus was to improve the NAPLaN results. We moved my younger daughter to Gawler East Primary School at the beginning of 2009 (year 6 for her). She has encountered a very broad curriculum. She has participated in many activities that were denied to her at Lyndoch. She enjoys school and we have seen a significant improvement in her literacy and numeracy skills. We have also seen an improvement in her social skills, her personal confidence, her understanding of the world and herself. She enjoys school. Prior to this year's NAPLaN she did no practice tests at Gawler East primary school, so whatever the results she gets we feel they will be an accurate reflection on her skills (in the limited range of areas that are tested) for that time. We applaud Gawler East Primary School for not succumbing to the pressures that are routinely applied to schools in regards to NAPLaN results. Our only disappointment was that we didn't move our children earlier. Our experience as parents is that schools that teach to the NAPLaN fail their students in many ways. To have students hate school is terrible no matter what the reason. But to have them hate school because the curriculum is so narrow and boring is criminal.

In my role as Coordinator of Literacy at Nuriootpa High School I have been able to see the pressure put on schools to perform in NAPLaN tests. To me this is ridiculous. The NAPLaN tests should be used to reveal areas that individual students can improve in, and it should be used to help assess whole school programmes. We have actually found the data from the tests very useful, and we have used it effectively. The problem arises when the information is published, with a colour coding, dependent on the ICSEA data. The ICSEA data is grossly inaccurate. Unfortunately, because of the nature of assessing 'school likeness' the effectiveness of programmes and teaching is unclear. I'm not sure if the members sitting on the committee are aware of how the actual index of disadvantage is worked out, but it is worth looking at. Essentially the disadvantage is worked out through a community census, not through the actual clientele of the schools. It means that the data is often very inaccurate. It also means that private schools in the same area as public schools will receive the same ICSEA. This is, again, ridiculous. It is also prejudicial against public schools. How many members of parliament send/sent their children to public schools, or indeed attended public schools themselves? I'm not sure of the answer there, but I'm afraid that public school graduates and their publicly schooled families are significantly under-represented in our parliament. The result is that we can have a deceptive, misleading attack on public schooling, and no one in parliament seems to concern themselves with it. Someone in parliament should be defending public education but right now we seem to have consistent attacks on the system and the ICSEA is yet another deception that hurts the public school profile.

The government wants us to deal with data, yet the data that they are basing the school achievement levels on is, in itself, lightweight, inaccurate and certainly not of the detail and exactness that we should expect. So what does this mean to education? Firstly, the gross inaccuracy of the ICSEA means that schools that may be performing very well with the clientele that they have, will appear to be performing badly, and vice-versa. This means that effective programmes may be stopped and ineffective programmes may not even be questioned. It means that schools 'in the red' are targeted by state education departments, even though those schools may be achieving very well. It also means that schools that actually appear to be achieving well, are possibly not. Secondly, the 'competitive' nature of the NAPLaN as it presently stands also means that

schools are teaching to the tests. Teaching to the tests has terrible educational ramifications (some of which were highlighted in my concerns about my own children). Making the NAPLaN data a competition, through the colour coding, also means that some schools will be tempted to cheat.

NAPLaN data does make a difference. At the moment, as a direct result of inaccurate, deceptive baseline data, the difference is a negative one. Get rid of the colour coding, get rid of the ICSEA, that so misleads everyone and look at value adding material. Then we can actually start to use the data in a beneficial way. At present the myschool website is lightweight, inaccurate and worst of all it encourages schools to teach to it. The ramifications of that are awful.

Yours truly,
Tim Cowgill