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Committee Secretary
Senate Education, Employment and Workplace Relations Committees
PO Box 6100
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Dear Secretary

**SENATE INQUIRY: THE EFFECTIVENESS OF THE NATIONAL ASSESSMENT PROGRAM
LITERACY AND NUMERACY (NAPLAN)**

Introduction

The Australian Primary Principals Association (APPA) is grateful for the opportunity to provide this submission. APPA has been a constructive critic of the National Assessment Program Literacy and Numeracy since its inception. Our position papers and other public documents have highlighted concerns and suggested improvements.

These documents include:

June 2008	Current educational issues at the national level
April 2009	Assessment, Accountability and Transparency
May 2009	The publication of nationally comparable school performance information
March 2010	Overarching Principles Governing the Reporting and Use of NAPLAN
June 2010	Submission from the Australian Primary Principals Association to the Senate Education, Employment and Workplace Relations Committee Inquiry into the administration and reporting of NAPLAN testing
September 2010	Feedback on 2010 NAPLAN Tests
September 2012	The Damage to Student Wellbeing Caused by High Stakes Testing

APPA embraces accountability and does not resile from the roles and responsibilities placed upon schools and principals to ensure full transparency of assessment and reporting. However, we believe there is a growing body of evidence that indicates improvements to NAPLAN are vital if it is to achieve its objectives while simultaneously ensuring there are no negative impacts of the testing on student wellbeing. There is also a growing conviction among primary school principals that lowering the high stakes nature of its reporting, and preventing the use of the data in ways for which it is not fit, are now necessary.

Our submission is based in large part on an independently conducted survey which resulted in the CANVASS Report *Primary Principals: Perspectives on NAPLAN Testing & Assessment*. This survey is provided as an attachment to this submission. Besides presenting data from the survey this submission includes comments from responding principals to illustrate key points.

This submission will specifically address the terms of reference.

The effectiveness of the National Assessment Program Literacy And Numeracy (NAPLAN). With specific reference to:

(a) Whether the evidence suggests that NAPLAN is achieving its stated purpose;

ACARA states:

"NAPLAN is the measure through which governments, education authorities, schools, teachers and parents can determine whether or not young Australians have the literacy and numeracy skills that provide the critical foundation for other learning and for their productive and rewarding participation in the community.

"The tests provide parents and schools with an understanding of how individual students are performing at the time of the tests. They also provide schools, states and territories with information about how education programs are working and which areas need to be prioritised for improvement.

"NAPLAN tests are one aspect of each school's assessment and reporting process, and do not replace the extensive, ongoing assessments made by teachers about each student's performance."

APPA believes the capacity of NAPLAN to achieve these purposes was always problematic and has been further compromised over the period since its introduction six years ago.

For instance, the long time between test completion and access to results has always made it impossible for teachers to use NAPLAN data effectively to adjust education programs to improve the learning of those students tested. Primary school principals have always been concerned, and are supported by an increasing body of evidence, that the narrow band of literacy and numeracy tested by NAPLAN is not a sufficient predictor of 'whether or not young Australians have the literacy and numeracy skills that provide the critical foundation for other learning and for their productive and rewarding participation in

the community.' Placing too great an emphasis on those data may, in fact, give governments, education authorities, schools, teachers and parents erroneous views on the achievements of students.

The purposes for which NAPLAN data are now used compromise the achievement of its stated objectives because they serve to make NAPLAN high stakes. For example, the use of NAPLAN results to compare schools and prepare 'league tables' clearly has the potential to privilege those tested elements above others in a school's curriculum programs. Likewise, the use of class data to compare teachers clearly causes individual teachers to consider the inclusion of more test preparation in classroom programs than might otherwise occur.

The CANVASS survey provides evidence that both these unintended consequences have occurred. This evidence will be highlighted in the section of this submission addressing the effects of NAPLAN on teaching and learning.

The use of only NAPLAN data to determine the Schooling Resource Standard privileges that data to an extraordinary degree. This use of NAPLAN is not mentioned in its stated objectives. APPA believes if the current reality of NAPLAN's use is not substantially revised then a redefining of its objectives is necessary.

(b) Unintended consequences of NAPLAN's introduction;

APPA believes a serious unintended consequence of NAPLAN is the effect the testing program has on student wellbeing. There is evidence that teacher and parent stress is also caused by NAPLAN. The CANVASS survey found sixty-six percent of respondents said NAPLAN testing has a negative impact on the wellbeing of students. Fifty-nine percent said the impact was somewhat negative, while the other seven percent said the impact was very negative.

When the survey probed for specific behaviours and impacts relating to wellbeing there was a clear pattern of approximately fifty percent of respondents sometimes seeing students stressed, expressing fear of failure, being sick around the time of the tests or withdrawing from the tests. However, high levels of stress and fear of failure are considerably more prevalent than sickness or withdrawal from the tests. Twenty-five percent say students often or very often show signs of stress and around one third report students often or very often express fear of failure. Less than ten per cent of respondents say physical sickness or withdrawal of students happens often or very often.

Student wellbeing appears to suffer most in Catholic and remote area schools. Almost twenty percent of principals at remote schools say NAPLAN testing has a very negative effect on the wellbeing of their students. Sixty-nine percent of Catholic sector schools say it has a somewhat negative impact on student wellbeing, ten percent higher than the average.

The CANVASS survey did not specifically ask about the effect of NAPLAN testing on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. However, principals in remote schools that are attended by a larger proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, report students feel the impacts more. Student stress is reported often or very often in remote schools by thirty-seven percent of principals compared to an average of twenty-five percent. Forty-four percent of principals at remote schools say fear of failure is

expressed often or very often by the students compared to an average thirty-five percent. There are higher levels of withdrawal and physical sickness among children in remote schools. APPA believes these data show Indigenous students may suffer more negative wellbeing impacts from NAPLAN testing than other students.

Respondents were divided on the issue of whether NAPLAN impacts more on Year 3 students or Year 5 students. Forty-eight percent of respondents say the impact of NAPLAN testing on the wellbeing of students is more pronounced on Year 3 students than Year 5 students.

A further thirty-eight percent say there is no difference in the impact of NAPLAN testing on the wellbeing of Year 3 as compared to Year 5 students, while fourteen percent say Year 5 students feel the impact of NAPLAN more than Year 3.

APPA believes that the level of student stress, anxiety and illness reported by primary school principals is unacceptable.

Another unintended consequence of NAPLAN is the cost borne by schools in administering the tests. Forty-seven percent of principals say that NAPLAN has had an impact on the school budget, with greater numbers at Independent schools and in Victorian schools (fifty-seven percent in each case).

However, when asked about specific expenditure items, fewer principals reported allocating additional funds as a result of NAPLAN. Twenty-nine percent of principals say they have allocated funding for preparation materials and thirty-three percent for teacher professional development for NAPLAN. It appears from these differing results that respondents may not be completely clear on the financial impact that NAPLAN testing is having on their school.

The Victorian results do not show expenditure greater than the average in relation to specific items. In contrast, more principals in Queensland report expenditure on preparation materials (forty-seven percent) and teacher professional development (forty-four percent). In a continuation of this pattern, thirty-four percent of Queensland principals have allocated funding for additional teacher hours surrounding NAPLAN, almost double the national average.

The findings are very similar for expenditure relating to funds for additional supervision and administration during NAPLAN periods, although there is considerable variance between different states.

When asked about other areas of expenditure concerning NAPLAN, ninety-five percent of respondents said there were no further expenses relating to NAPLAN. The five percent who nominated additional expenses identified the following:

- Student Support Officer time
- Funding to pay for the test papers
- Funding to analyse NAPLAN data
- Breakfast or food for students on NAPLAN days
- Funding for families to travel to sit NAPLAN tests.

Significantly, principals also pointed to the impact of the school's NAPLAN results on government funding received by that school.

These findings disturb APPA because these funds are being diverted from other curriculum areas.

The third unintended consequence that causes concern for APPA is the growth of publication and tutoring industries around NAPLAN. While these industries do not impact directly on schools they serve to make NAPLAN more visible to parents and the general public, and subject students to often expensive tutoring that would be more wisely deployed on enrichment or remediation activities.

(c) NAPLAN's impact on teaching and learning practices;

The CANVASS survey asked a number of questions about the impact of NAPLAN testing on curriculum and pedagogy. Eighty-one percent of the principal respondents believe that NAPLAN is having an impact on their school's Year 3 & 5 curricula. Fifty-two percent say it's having a slightly or significantly negative impact.

Looking at specific impacts on the curriculum, in the lead up to NAPLAN testing each year forty-four percent say their schools spend more time teaching literacy and numeracy each week to Years 3 and 5. Twenty-nine percent spend an additional one to three hours a week. Fifteen percent spend more than three additional hours per week.

The results show that Independent schools report less change to their curricula, while remote area schools seem to have more change to their curricula, and are impacted to a greater extent in the run-up to the NAPLAN testing period.

'Teachers, despite knowing that they should not be teaching to the tests, do alter the regular curriculum delivery to 'train' the students in the peculiarities of the tests. Much time is given over even in the previous year to NAPLAN, to enable the students to have the best opportunity to demonstrate their skills and knowledge.'

The impact of NAPLAN testing on time spent teaching non-NAPLAN-assessed subjects seems to be stronger. Fifty-seven percent of respondents say that their schools spend less time on those subjects in the run-up to NAPLAN tests each year. Of those, forty percent spend slightly less time (between one-three hours less) on non-NAPLAN subjects and seventeen percent spend significantly less time (more than three hours less) on them each week.

'In the lead up to NAPLAN, it becomes 'all about academia' and the social/emotional/spiritual aspects of learning seem to take a back seat.... NAPLAN limits our capacity to develop the non-NAPLAN aspects of holistic education.'

Thirty-five percent of respondents say that NAPLAN testing causes other impacts on the school curriculum at this time of year, the main one being increased stress on teachers. These comments typify those from respondents.

'Teachers worry about covering all the other areas. They try to integrate as much as possible.'

'With the stress of NAPLAN and the results for teachers, they spend a lot of time getting ready for the test and the curriculum suffers because of this, let alone the stress placed on teachers afterwards by trying to catch up. When this happens the curriculum is not taught to its full potential.'

'Despite my insistence, staff are spending time teaching in a manner which will have an impact on NAPLAN results. They do more testing, longer periods of work time, all designed as preparation for the three days of NAPLAN.'

'There is a degree of finger pointing at teachers of previous year levels if students achieve poorly or appear to lack preparation for the tests. This has a huge impact on staff teamwork and morale. The level of stress amongst the teachers in the term leading up to NAPLAN week is immense and directly impacts on many other more positive and constructive initiatives we have in place.'

NAPLAN testing can also be seen as inimical to the culture and philosophy of some schools.

'The testing environment is so different to the collaborative processes encouraged at our school. It is very unusual practice for our students.'

Respondents were asked about changes to the amount of rote learning in class in the run-up to NAPLAN testing each year. Thirty-four percent say that Year 3 and 5 classes now spend more time rote learning, but most say only slightly more.

More remote area school principals – more than double the average – report significant negative impacts on pedagogy in their classrooms in the run up to NAPLAN. Compared to the average, three times as many remote area schools spend much more time rote learning during that period.

Two-thirds of respondents reported that Year 3 & 5 class time is allocated towards preparation for the tests in the lead-up to NAPLAN each year.

'We don't allocate time for test preparation but classes do it anyway – and to excess. Staff and students are anxious about the results.'

When asked how many hours per week they allocate in the run-up to NAPLAN testing, half of the respondents said their schools allocate between one to three hours of class time per week. A further twelve percent allocate four to five hours per week on preparation. Very few allocate more time than that.

In terms of weeks of preparation prior to NAPLAN testing, there is no commonly adhered to starting date for preparations.

For the fifty-eight percent of schools that do spend class time preparing for NAPLAN, results were spread fairly evenly between one week and ten weeks. Twenty-eight percent allocate preparation time in the one to five weeks prior to the NAPLAN tests.

Around ten percent allocate time for NAPLAN preparation beginning six to nine weeks before the tests and a further nine percent start allocating time for preparation ten weeks out. Eleven percent allocate

preparation time more than ten weeks prior to the tests. Very few allocate time more than fifteen weeks out.

These data clearly indicate that NAPLAN testing is having an impact on teaching and learning in primary schools that, on balance, principals consider is negative.

(d) The impact on teaching and learning practices of publishing NAPLAN test results on the My School website;

Twenty-three percent of respondents to the CANVASS survey point to additional pedagogical impacts since the NAPLAN data began being published online. The main one noted by respondents is a greater focus on explicit, specific teaching and learning and more structured, formalised, teacher directed learning. These comments are typical:

'There is greater emphasis on teacher directed teaching rather than student self-directed learning.'

'There is a tendency to employ old-fashioned chalk and talk strategies, rather than child-centred inquiry. It's both positive and negative – more explicit teaching but less integrated learning i.e. a lot more skills taught out of context.'

'[NAPLAN] limits the students' involvement in their education in a personalised and integrated way. There is less time for individual assistance. Some teachers are concerned that it limits their abilities to be creative and innovative in the manner in which they facilitate and implement literacy and numeracy programs.'

'Co-operative learning, student-centred learning and higher order thinking are put on the back burner to cram in all the loose ends that may have been missed but which may be in the test.'

'As an inquiry school we find that the NAPLAN structure compromises our pedagogical approach. The actual testing procedure works in opposition to our regular classroom practice of open and shared questioning and learning.'

Also, APPA has concerns with the concept of schools' comparability based on them having statistically similar students. The complexity of school, family and community contexts makes APPA question the reliability of any comparisons made on this basis.

The reporting of these comparisons using colour codes that mask the numerical result causes confusion for parents, the general public and even members of the education profession. This confusion makes rational decision-making based on questionable NAPLAN data even more problematic. In view of this confusion, APPA believes the publication of NAPLAN scores only on school websites would meet the needs for accountability and improve clarity.

This is evidenced in the CANVASS survey by the sense of frustration principals from small and remote schools express about their schools' responses to NAPLAN reports. The CANVASS Report states that '(the

negative impacts of NAPLAN appear to be felt the most by remote area and small schools around Australia.'

Generally, these schools have less experienced professional staff and greater mobility of teachers and school leaders and might be expected to respond to NAPLAN data in less nuanced ways than larger less remote schools.

(e) Potential improvements to the program, to improve student learning and assessment;

Given the stated ACARA objective that 'NAPLAN is the measure through which governments, education authorities, schools, teachers and parents can determine whether or not young Australians have the literacy and numeracy skills that provide the critical foundation for other learning and for their productive and rewarding participation in the community' then APPA believes greater consideration needs to be given to annual sample testing of Australian students. This methodology is used in the PISA, TIMMS and PIRLS assessment programs to provide data on students that is internationally accepted as accurate. NAPLAN sample testing would achieve this objective without loss of fidelity. In fact, there is evidence that, over time, sample testing provides more accurate data on student achievement than census testing.

The advantage of sample testing for Australian students is that it does not lead to any lasting negative impacts on their wellbeing.

The stated objective that, '(the) tests provide parents and schools with an understanding of how individual students are performing at the time of the tests' would be more successfully achieved if the results of NAPLAN tests were available to students in a more timely manner.

The United Kingdom, through the recommendations of the Bew Report, is moving to school-based assessment in some areas to assist in speeding up the availability of data for schools. Similarly, the online testing in South Carolina and Virginia is contributing to more rapid return of data to schools. Both these potential improvements to the program would have a positive influence on student learning.

First, the Bew Report in the UK has recommended several adjustments in relation to the standardised testing of some of the key skills. For example, writing, speaking and listening, and science will be subject to summative teacher assessment. The change to teacher judgment in writing is an attempt to build the quality of creativity from students. As well as providing immediately available results, this adjustment also fits with the general direction toward the acquisition of contemporary knowledge and skills.

Second, in Virginia schools are phasing out pen and paper tests. In 2013, online testing of the Virginia Statements of Learning (SOL) will be the main form of completion of these tests. Where students have a documented need for pen and paper testing, this method will be available.

The benefits of online testing for students and schools include:

- Faster return of student scores
- Increased instructional and remediation time due to timely return of student results
- Improved efficiency of data collection and management

- Increased accuracy of student data
- Increased security of test content and student data
- Reduced administrative burdens on school and division staff
- The ability to include ‘technology-enhanced’ items that allow students to indicate their responses in ways other than multiple choice that also may demonstrate critical-thinking skills.

This greater flexibility emerging in the United States is further enhanced with states now functioning with an assessment window to enable schools to plan when they will be best placed to carry out the external assessments. This lessens the high stakes element for schools. In South Carolina, schools plan for a six week period within an eight week window. Other states operate in a similar way. The South Carolina model also has a ‘pause function’ where students can stop completing the tests on a set day and can resume the test at a later time without being able to change the already recorded entries of their test.

APPA believes both these improvements – teacher judgment of student performance and assessment windows – should be incorporated into the NAPLAN testing program.

ACARA points out that, ‘NAPLAN tests are one aspect of each school’s assessment and reporting process, and do not replace the extensive, ongoing assessments made by teachers about each student’s performance.’

In the CANVASS survey primary principals were asked a series of questions regarding assessment practices:

- i. **Which assessment practices used by your school provide aggregated data for your school?**
- ii. **Of those, which (if any) would you recommend for use across Australian schools, and why?**
- iii. **If you would like APPA to contact you to discuss the approach your school takes to such assessments, please provide contact details.**

The first two questions resulted in voluminous amounts of information from respondents. Almost ten per cent of respondents volunteered their contact details for further discussion with APPA about assessment practices.

In terms of the assessment practices used by primary schools, the leading categories were:

- Commercial Standardised Tests (approximately forty examples provided)
- Commercial Scales and Inventories (approximately eighty examples provided)
- School-based Tests and Other Assessments (approximately eighty examples provided)
- Unattributed Assessment Types (approximately forty examples provided)

This is clear evidence that primary teachers are routinely gathering normed data about their students. APPA believes making use of this data in a national assessment program is necessary for a complete and accurate picture of student achievement.

(f) International best practice for standardised testing, and international case studies about the introduction of standardised testing;

APPA believes the exceptional success of the Finnish system over an extended period of time is based in part upon the trust successive Finnish governments and the people of Finland have placed in teacher professionalism. This includes teachers' ability to assess and report student achievement accurately. The Finland education system is quite different to most others in the world. APPA has noted these elements:

- Finland has developed its own vision of educational and social change connected to inclusiveness and creativity, rather than using a standardised testing model that has been used elsewhere.
- The system relies on high quality, well-trained teachers with strong academic qualifications, who enter the profession with a societal focus and mission. Schools provide an autonomous and supportive environment for teachers to develop professionally.
- The system has an inclusive special education strategy where nearly half the students in Finland will have received some special education support before reaching Year 9.
- The Finnish system has developed teacher capacity to be collectively responsible for developing curriculum and diagnostic assessments instead of prescribed curriculum and standardised high stakes testing.
- Finland has linked educational reform to the creative development of economic competitiveness, social cohesion, inclusiveness and shared community within the wider society.

Finland has been successful in PISA, PIRLS, and TIMSS over the last decade. APPA believes this success arises from the trust mentioned earlier. Greater valuing of teacher professionalism and use of teacher judgments about student achievement would strengthen the National Assessment Program.

(g) Other related matters

APPA advocates for changes to a number of aspects of the National Assessment Program.

First, the cost to schools of diagnostic testing of students could be much lower if a freely available bank of test instruments were available online. Given proper safeguards, the data gathered as a result of schools using these instruments could be aggregated to provide information on the achievements of Australian students.

Second, the guidelines on student support during administration of the test must be altered to account for the age of students and the variability of their needs. This issue could be addressed very simply if teachers were trusted to interpret more general instructions to assist students as required without providing them with any 'competitive' advantage.

Third, the capacity of online testing to use activities such as simulations to test higher order thinking skills must be exploited. Testing higher order thinking skills would be more cost effective if sample testing were introduced.

Fourth, the National Assessment Program must be altered in ways that makes it more inclusive of the diversity of peoples and cultures that make up our nation. Through dialogue with Indigenous school

principals represented by APPA the following has been highlighted in regard to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students:

- The test is culturally biased in the use of language, structure and organisation.
- NAPLAN causes unnecessary stress to those Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students whose first language is not English.
- NAPLAN results do not reflect the complexities and validity of the context for Indigenous communities.
- NAPLAN has been viewed as an imposed initiative similar to the Northern Territory 'Intervention'.
- NAPLAN does not improve learning outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in any context.

Additionally, APPA is concerned about the increasing numbers of students being withdrawn from the National Assessment Program each year. We believe there needs to be a comprehensive investigation into the reasons behind this trend and any necessary adjustments to the program made as a result.

Conclusion

The CANVASS survey states, '(throughout) the results, there are a number of consistent trends. The most obvious is that primary principals have differing views on most of the impacts of NAPLAN testing according to the location, size and sector of their school. Broadly, around half observe NAPLAN impacts and half do not.' While APPA accepts this qualifier, we believe that the number of principals expressing concerns, and the level of those concerns, is more than sufficient when combined with other evidence as justification for this submission.

In addition to what is implicit in this submission we urge the Governments of Australia to implement the following actions:

1. Employ sample testing to achieve the objectives of NAPLAN wherever possible and consult widely with the profession before considering any expansion of the National Assessment Program.
2. Improve the administration of existing NAPLAN tests to include teacher judgements as part of the assessment; more timely reports to schools, parents and students; student support arrangements based on their individual needs; and, the provision of an 'assessment window' for students to sit the tests.
3. Implement online testing that incorporates an 'assessment window', pause function and capacity to test higher order thinking.
4. Investigate the harm to student wellbeing caused by NAPLAN testing, with particular reference to students in small and remote schools, and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. Improve NAPLAN administration and reporting arrangements to eliminate any harmful impacts on student wellbeing.

5. Provide clear and unambiguous guidelines for schools and parents that detail appropriate test preparation activities and the amount of time that should be devoted to them.
6. Improve the way NAPLAN data is reported to minimise improper use of those data and confusion for parents, schools and community.
7. Prevent the use of NAPLAN data for purposes for which is not fit.
8. Trust teachers to assess student achievement through, for example, the provision of affordable online diagnostic instruments that provide data on the achievement levels of Australian students.

APPA believes NAPLAN testing, because of the way it is reported and the way its data are used, has become high stakes. This has resulted in negative impacts on student wellbeing. Actions such as these will address the concerns of primary school principals.

Yours sincerely

Norm Hart
APPA President