



## Australian College of Educators

# Submission to the Inquiry into the Administration and Reporting of NAPLAN Testing

15 June 2010

### Introduction

The Australian College of Educators (ACE) is supportive, in principle, of governments moving to improve transparency and accountability in relation to school performance and the reporting of resources available to support that performance.

Our formal position communicated to Ministers in 2009 is that

Where governments decide to make data on school performance publicly available, this is best done in ways that can gain the confidence and support of professional educators; and that acknowledge their proper and legitimate concerns.

The College acknowledges and supports the protocols and procedures that governments have developed to this end; and is ready to work with governments to develop further measures to avoid the reporting process itself becoming a subject of unnecessary disputation and controversy.

ACE accepts that the collection and public reporting of data arising from student assessment can be used, as part of a broader suite of policies and practices, to improve educational outcomes. However, in our assessment, the case for how governments see the publishing of student performance data (based on NAPLAN test results) as contributing to this has not yet been made persuasively.

### Organisation of this paper

Section 1 addresses Part A of the Terms of Reference for this Inquiry. This seeks input on the conflicting claims made by Government, educational experts and peak bodies in relation to the publication of NAPLAN test results. In preparing this submission we examined the relevant Commonwealth/State documents<sup>1</sup> that set out the agreed intentions or claims of all Governments that related to the publication of NAPLAN. We found that the rationale presented in all documents was a conflation of the importance of the information for schools, for governments and for the public. In this paper we separate out arguments for NAPLAN reporting for parents and the public and assess the strength of the case for this public disclosure on its merits.

Section 2 addresses aspects of Part C of the Terms of reference but also relates to Part E – other matters. We believe that, in this submission, it is also important that we comment on the broader context that has led to the establishment of this Inquiry in the first place, and to outline an approach that we argue now needs to be set in place, in addition to this Inquiry in order to:

- acknowledge the legitimate concerns and the extent of the disquiet that has been generated, without dismissing the voices of concern as expressions of self-interest or lack of commitment to the school quality and equity agenda;
- take steps to address those concerns;
- increase the public and professional communities' confidence and buy-in to the broad agenda of the education revolution and the role of the transparency agenda within that;
- provide a framework and structure that ensures that, as this important series of education reforms progress, a sound evidence base is developed to inform ongoing developments and to document what can be learned from the process: and
- make good on the promise of transparency in terms of making available the sort of information that will equip the public to hold governments accountable for delivering a high quality and high equity schooling system

## Section One: Addressing Part A of the Senate Inquiry Terms of Reference

The Governments' claims in relation to the publication of the NAPLAN testing

There are a number of sound arguments for making school level data on student performance available to governments at both levels and to schools. These include:

- putting pressure on governments to focus their resources and policies on areas of highest priority;
- ensuring all schools have accurate information about how they are faring relative to agreed standards;
- identifying schools that punch above their weight as sites for research and for building lateral capacity through cross school collaborations;
- analysing school performance and identifying schools with particular needs;
- conducting national and international comparisons; and
- developing a substantive evidence base on what works, in what contexts and what does not work.

But in this submission we have tried to focus only on those arguments that specifically support making the NAPLAN test data available to the public at school level. In our assessment this task is made more difficult by the absence of a clear case for the public availability of NAPLAN data that is not mixed in with the above arguments for government and school level availability.

We have identified only three arguments that explicitly rely on making the NAPLAN data publicly available as part of a suite of data at the school level. They are set out below.

### Argument 1: The Transparency Argument

Government's need valid and reliable school level student performance information to support future policy reforms, system improvements and better directed resources. The public needs access to the same data to ensure that governments live up to their commitments – that is to keep governments honest.

This is clearly the intent behind the National Education Agreement where it states (in 5h) that “access to transparent school performance information enables the community to understand the decisions taken by governments and ensures schools are accountable for the results they achieve with the public funding they receive”.

It is clear that governments, at both levels, require valid and reliable school level student performance information. This has been available at the state level for some time and is now available at a national level and to the Commonwealth government as well.

However, the major decisions around Commonwealth resourcing for schools was finalised for a period of five years at the COAG Meeting in December 2008 where the National Education Agreement (NEA) was endorsed and National Partnerships were agreed. This clearly limits the capacity of the

Commonwealth to better direct its resources, at least for the next few years, unless there are resourcing flows that follow the Review of Schools Funding.

The transparency argument is that public also requires this information to support governments to fulfil this policy objective. The international literature on transparency and accountability for governments, provides strong evidence that public access to this sort of information is a potentially powerful force that can contribute to keeping governments focussed on their policy promises.

The problem with this argument is not the argument, but its applicability to this context. This is because the way in which the information has been organised for public consumption is not focussed around 'keeping the government honest'.

Public transparency requires rolled up information that focuses the public on the differences that governments have committed to addressing. So, for example, if the policy goal is to close the gap, then the public transparency should support the public to assess, at a glance, the extent to which the gap is being narrowed over time and whether adequate and appropriate resourcing has been applied to this issue.

The MySchool Website does the exact opposite of this. It provides information at the individual school level, with an ability to compare this data only to "like schools" or to the national average – in broad terms.

The audience for this information is not the citizen, as voter, to whom governments wish to be accountable; it is the citizen, as parent, to assist in school choice or to encourage parents to put pressure on underperforming schools. This could be seen as a transfer of responsibility for driving quality in schooling from governments to parents.

As Richard Teese reminds us "most disadvantaged schools don't have parents that can vote with their feet. They aren't going anywhere. They aren't going to march up to their local primary school to demand change. They rely on the active role of government"<sup>ii</sup>

In addition to this the framing of comparisons on like-to-like school data has tended to focus the public away from the very significant gap between high Socio-Economic Status and high need schools. It sends a message to schools that if their school is 'dark green' (i.e.. performing above their like school counterparts) they are doing a good job – thus displacing a shared national standard with a lower relative standard and naturalising unequal school outcomes.

If this transparency argument is to be made for NAPLAN results, it would be useful for governments to make explicit how this data will be used to improve teaching and learning, what they are willing to be held accountable for and what data will be used for transparency purposes - how it will support the public to hold governments to account.

The approach adopted has militated against a quality teaching agenda and approaches which recognise the sophisticated, complex, and powerful influences of interdependence between schools, students, parents/caregivers and their communities. Hence, we argue below for a key symbolic change in the redesign and naming from MySchools to OurSchools. In this way, the construction becomes one of a shared challenge for improving the educational outcomes of all Australian schools and all students.

## Argument 2: The Pressure Argument

Putting public pressure on schools, using student performance data will drive school improvement

This is a strong belief that underpins the USA No Child Left Behind (NCLB) initiative, where, in some states, schools are closed and teachers laid off for poor test performance. The evidence of the impact of this is very clear. If this sort of pressure is put on schools and teachers, those under the most intense pressure are more likely to resort to a wide range of measures to optimise their test scores – increased student expulsions for spurious reasons, students repeating grades that are not tested then skipping the test grades, students finding that they have been un-enrolled while home sick and of course the widely reported narrowing and dumbing down of classroom learning. This has led to high profile people like Diane Ravitch, a previous supporter of NCLB, to state quite unambiguously, “I was wrong”. Her latest book (Ravitch, 2010) is compelling reading and the title mirrors her insights supported by extensive evidence - *The Death and Life of the Great American School System: How Testing and Choice Are Undermining Education*.

The critically important point worth emphasizing here is that this negative effect was seen in the high need schools because they were the schools under test result pressure, where schools were closed and teachers were punished. This results in a widening of the quality gap in education service delivery, not a narrowing.

No teacher sets out to produce mediocre student results, and schools in our highest need schools are more likely to be our less experienced teachers. They need clear standards and support, not more pressure. ACE acknowledges that this crude reasoning has not been explicitly promulgated in the Australian context. Nevertheless, the information collected through schools surveys run by principal associations and the attempts by the AEU to boycott NAPLAN does suggest that some schools are under intense pressure from NAPLAN results and that there is a perception that these negative practices are occurring in some schools.

It is to the education ministers' credit that this argument has not been made in an explicit sense. ACE also acknowledges the steps taken by governments to establish protocols to guard against simplistic reporting and misuse of performance and achievement data. However, governments at both levels could do more to ensure that the potential negative effects of the perception that these tests are high stakes for schools is addressed.

## Argument 3: The Choice and Engagement Argument

To give parents the information they require to make informed choices about their children's schooling and to engage with their schools to drive high expectations

The argument that parents have the right to have reliable high quality information about the schools they have access to is fairly unassailable and it is clear that demand for this information is strong. But the actual working out of this logic in the current educational context is well known. Our schools are very different. Not only is school resourcing not delivering equal quality of educational servicing, but schools serve very different communities and these combined factors contribute to wide disparities in school outcomes.

For schools serving the most concentrated high need communities this may have no impact. For the most socially and economically marginalised school parent bodies, the logic of parent power and school choice, as a response to NAPLAN comparative information, does not apply. They do not have real choice and are unlikely to lead the charge about unacceptable student performance. This is not an effective lever for school improvement for these schools. Yet these schools are those that most need the supports and pressures required to drive real and sustained improvement.

For the more socially mixed school communities this strategy is two edged. Schools that most need active parents may well lose them as they choose moving rather than improving. This serves to further concentrate the social mix of the school with quite well known and predictable effects on student performance outcomes. Whatever the validity of the arguments for supporting informed parent choice and engagement, it is not part of the solution to inter-school differences in student achievement. In fact these two goals appear to be in conflict in current circumstances.

Indeed it could be argued that by using such terms as my school and implying that parent should have this information before choosing their child's school, the implicit message to parents is that it is their responsibility to choose the best option in terms of their child's individual benefit. To fail to do so is to be a somewhat neglectful parent. This ignores that strong tradition of parents making decisions within a larger context – that of the greater good.

For this reason we see the potential benefits of redesigning MySchool to become an OurSchools website. A MySchool construction of 'parent choice' overlooks the importance of parents working with their children and the children's schools to create better outcomes through respectful, relational partnerships. A MySchool discourse encourages a customer service delivery and choice model which militates against the promotion of an interdependent, collaboration quality teaching agenda built upon trust, respect, partnerships and agency which is essential to build a world class education for all Australian students.

Having said this, in real policy terms, we acknowledge that taking NAPLAN off the table is not an option. It is in the public arena to stay. The response moving forward needs to ensure that all schools are high quality schools (and we have a unique opportunity to address this through the Review of Schools Funding), NAPLAN quality issues and negative imposts are taken seriously and addressed; and that the data provided to parents is comprehensive, reliable, valid, and a measure of something of importance to parents, both as parents of specific students at specific schools and parents as active and informed citizens.

This will support parents at local level to engage with schools and support and contribute to school improvement. It will also support parents who see their role as committed to quality and student outcomes in all schools. This is not a minority position but a well established tradition based on enlightened self interest - of seeing the benefits in working not just for the educational benefits for their own children but in working to ensure that the education works to build the kind of world they desire their children to inherit. It is this type of parent informed choice that will most support the transparency agenda of holding governments accountable for delivering on greater equity in quality school resourcing and on closing the gap in educational outcomes.

## Section Two: Rebuilding public and professional confidence and buy-in to the school transparency agenda and the use of NAPLAN tests results for this purpose

Proposal One: That MCEECDYA agree to establish a Standing Expert Committee to ACARA

In the 2009 letter to Education Ministers, ACE recommended the establishment of a standing expert committee, with the backing of legislation, to provide independent expert advice to ACARA (and hence also to education ministers) on the establishment and ongoing operation of the national reporting process.

The ACE proposal stressed that the Expert Standing Committee membership should:

- include expertise in education (curriculum and assessment); education achievement measurement; and statistical matters arising from the collection and presentation of achievement data
- consider representation from major professional associations, including ACE on the basis that the representation meet the criterion of expertise; and
- be appointed through an open process and on the basis of demonstrated standing, experience and expertise; and could include overseas experts.

ACE also proposed that the advice provided by the Standing Committee should be made available publicly in a timely way, thus being consistent with the standards of transparency and accountability governments espoused for schools. This would increase public confidence in the national reporting process.

Instead of this, and only in response to the AEU threat to boycott NAPLAN testing for 2010, the Government has established a working group on student performance data with membership from AEU and IEU and other experts/ professional association representatives, but no details are publicly available.

Our enquiries with the ACARA media centre suggests that there was no open and transparent process of identifying which professional associations would be represented, who would be invited to join as an expert, or the basis of their expertise. We also understand that, at this point, there is no plan to make public the advice they provide to ACARA and ACARA's response. Moreover, this working group is not ongoing, is only expected to run until August 2010, and is not enshrined in legislation. This does not auger well for what is intended as a public confidence building process. It is unlikely to fulfill the functions first envisioned by ACE in its initial recommendation.

Accordingly, ACE recommends that the education ministers reconsider our original proposal to form an Expert Standing Committee along the lines we originally outlined.

Proposal 2: That MCEECDYA task ACARA to commission a paper on the validity and reliability issues that have been raised about the NAPLAN test results with a view to preparing a student assessment and reporting improvement plan.

Given the extent of the disquiet around using NAPLAN data as a proxy for a school's student performance outcomes, and in recognition that it was not designed with this purpose in mind, we recommend the development of a paper that provides advice to Government on this matter.

In particular, the paper should be prepared by an international expert, the draft approved through an expert working group, and the brief require the writer to bring together and assess the range of concerns raised about NAPLAN especially as a public reporting tool.

It should cover, but not be limited to, the following:

- the reliability and validity of the NAPLAN test results at the individual student level and at the school level;
- concerns expressed about wide random fluctuations in NAPLAN scores because the scores are based on only a small number of questions and options for addressing this;
- the use of the year and test specific mean scores as the basis of school to school, and state to state comparison, and an analysis of the confidence intervals for different classroom sizes and types and advice to ACARA about the protocols that need to put in place to ensure high reliability of this data<sup>iii</sup>;
- advice about improving the tests to meet the needs of all students including students who are significantly behind their age and grade cohort and who score a zero in the NAPLAN tests, and students who are English language learners for whom oracy is a critical precondition for literacy;
- advice on potential changes to the NAPLAN to address higher order thinking and student capabilities; and
- advice on guidelines or directives for systems and schools to ensure professionally, and ethically appropriate use of the NAPLAN data and to address the inappropriate practices and negative impacts evident;
- future improvement options including looking at the merits of supplementing NAPLAN data with information based on benchmarked classroom based assessment activities. This could help to guard against the more negative effects of testing on classroom practice and, at the same time, provide much more valid and useful data about student learning.

Proposal 3: That MCEECDYA and ACARA commission a discussion paper designed to feed into a consultation process to renaming the website to become OurSchools website and inform the full range of data that should be included on the current MySchool website

In an increasingly networked world, the research suggests that excellence occurs and improvement agendas are most effective when respectful, relational cultures are built through schools in partnerships with parents, caregivers and their communities. The development of networks, communities of practice, and communities of interest are not promoted through the school against school data presentation on a site which encourages parents to make a choice about their child's school based upon the MySchool construction. Rather, as portrayed by ACE, which is the professional association for all educators, we believe that the change of name to OurSchools can leverage an interdependent, shared spirit of



collaboration to improve student learning and outcomes. This would provide the agency for students, parents and school communities to contribute to building better schools in partnership with the profession. An OurSchools website would symbolically acknowledge the contributions which are made by many people to educate our students.

One of the main issues with the NAPLAN data is that, at this stage, in the MySchool development process there is not much else in the way of useful information on this website. This is a first step in a process and the context in which NAPLAN results are provided to the Australian public is not yet complete.

ACE understands that there are major processes already underway to include school-level financial data on MySchool, but there has been no broad consultation about how best to provide meaningful financial data on the resources that impact on each school's performance. Simply to provide the dollars brought to bear on each individual school will be simplistic and misleading. In some cases, for example, higher average costs will reflect uneconomic staffing and other unavoidable diseconomies, including fixed costs regardless of school size.

For example, it costs about 50% more to get a teacher to a very remote school, taking into account deployment, costs of professional support and remote loadings and allowances. But this is just the cost to provide a school place. We know that the vast majority of first year out teachers start their careers in the harder-to-staff schools, and remote and very remote schools have their unequal share of inexperienced novice teachers. So the reality is that these higher costs buy a lesser quality teacher resource in that the average experience and expertise is lower. An equal average experience and skill level to that available to a city school would cost more again. An equal average of skill and experience in the teacher resource with an additional load to address higher student need would cost more again.

If we want to use the MySchool website to provide public with information to keep the government to its commitments to high quality and high equity education we need to balance student performance data with data about the quality of the inputs that tells us about those quality elements. This means we need to ensure that there is data to assess whether there is an equal distribution of skilled and experienced teachers in our schools across all school types. The lack of public debate and thinking on this complex issue is a lost opportunity.

To build future professional capabilities and quality teachers, a key role of schools is to work in partnerships with Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) to train and educate future teachers. As the quality of our future education systems cannot exceed the quality of its future teachers, we suggest that the MySchool website should include transparent data about the number of student teachers each school hosts and the HEI/HEIs with which they partner.

Proposal 4: That the MCEECDYA decision to implement an evaluation of the impact of the MySchool data be implemented.

We understand that MCEETYA (now MCEECDYA) agreed to conduct an evaluation of MySchool in order to identify any unintended consequences of the MySchool data being made public.

To date there has been no public comment on the plans to undertake this evaluation and it is a concern that the public record of this decision only came to light on the basis of an FOI report. While it may well

be the case that it has not been publicly discussed because governments believe it is too early to commence such an evaluation. However, the lack of information in the public arena does not increase public confidence in the process.

Indeed, it could be argued that the earlier the evaluation is agreed and commenced the easier it will be to deal with issues early and to learn from experience. An evaluation would help policy makers to know:

- the extent, impact and potential consequences of the NAPLAN assessment data being made public;
- if it is unequally experienced in higher need schools;
- if it is modified over time or increased
- the extent to which there are state and territory or sector differences; and
- how well parent, the public and the profession understands and values the data and if there are gaps from their perspective.

ACE would like to see a public confirmation that there will be a proper evaluation of the MySchool website and we believe that the design of the evaluation should be developed now through public consultation.

Proposal 5:           Establish a Best Evidence Synthesis research capability under the auspices of MCEECDYA but with an independent capacity to publish and provide advice to MCEECDYA, ACARA and to AITSL

We commend the Government for its vision and passion to invest in the education of all Australians and acknowledge the political reality that necessitates short implementation timeframes and the need to get something up even if it is incomplete. This is political reality. However, we argue that the education policy decision making process was not well supported by the availability of well targeted, rigorous and relevant research.

Australian education research capability is not as mature as in comparative professions such as Australia's health research sector. It does not have a strong practice focused sector that is responsive to the needs of policy makers and schools. We believe that this is one of the reasons why, when a government comes to power with a strong commitment to make sustained and important changes in education, some of the details of the reform agenda do not stand up to close scrutiny as well as others. The ready availability of quality education research around driving education quality could have contributed to the fine-tuning of some elements of the current school transparency agenda.

To support ongoing improvements and the availability of rigorously derived evidence to support this we believe that there is merit in looking at the New Zealand government's Best Evidence Synthesis model. This would build public confidence that the government reforms are evidence driven.

## In Conclusion

ACE commends the holding of this Inquiry, but we submit that this is not an adequate response to the widespread disquiet about what is but a small part of a highly ambitious and important education reform agenda. Attending to the need for public and professional buy-in and confidence needs to be considered as a high priority. Our recommendations go to the transparency of the process itself and if taken up, would contribute to delivering on the promise of real transparency in the education decision making process and on public and professional confidence in the process itself.

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<sup>i</sup> These include:

National Education Agreement COAG, December 2008,

The Melbourne Declaration on Education Goals for Young Australians MCEETYA December 2008

Principles and Protocols for Reporting on Schooling in Australia MCEETYA June 2009.

<sup>ii</sup> SMH May 14 2010 'Tests must bring change not teacher bashing'

<sup>iii</sup> The protocols agreed mean that for cohort sizes of five or less, no mean score is used but it is our understanding that for schools with highly diverse students, even quite large cohort groups can give rise to a mean score that has a confidence interval so high as to be meaningless.. The work that has been done on this issue needs to be publicly available

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