

CHAPTER 4

Potential Improvements to NAPLAN

4.1 Some submitters argued that the national, standardised testing should be scrapped altogether and educational authorities should place more trust in the training and expertise of teachers as educators. Peta Gresham, from the University of Sydney's Faculty of Education and Social Work was typical of submitters who shared this view:

The program should be made redundant. Teachers are professionals; university graduates trained to educate students. Society needs to trust teachers and schools to nurture the learning skills of students – just as society is expected to trust Ministers of Parliament to do their job as professionals. No high-stakes testing for MP measuring aptitude. Stop enforcing high-stakes tests on schools.¹

4.2 The appropriateness of NAPLAN as a tool for assessing students who speak English as a second language was also a topic that drew strong views. Leonard Freeman, the Principal of Yirrakala School in the Northern Territory, did not think NAPLAN should not initially include students from a non-English speaking background, and even if the students became linguistically prepared, its use was questionable:

The NAPLAN testing regime is riddled with defects which makes it inappropriate and detrimental to ESL students. The judging of ESL students against benchmarks which are designed for native English speakers is fundamentally unfair. The practice of using these benchmarks as a starting point from which to set out expectations and design teaching programs is seriously misguided as no consideration is given to how ESL learners progress in learning a second language. In order to overcome these defects, ESL students should be exempt from NAPLAN tests until they are ready to enter a mainstream English classroom and no longer require ESL support. Furthermore, once ESL students are linguistically ready to sit NAPLAN tests, they still should not be disadvantaged by the use of culturally biased stimulus materials and questions.²

4.3 However many submitters suggested ways in which NAPLAN could be improved and developed, as it arguably has since its introduction in 2008. How the public perception of students and schools' is influenced by the *MySchool* website drew a significant amount of commentary in submissions to the inquiry, and there was also discussion of how NAPLAN works in relation to resource allocation, and whether it can provide a clear and effective set of data to effectively lift performance in the areas of literacy and numeracy. Whether the focus on literacy and numeracy is to the detriment of other educational objectives is a further topic raised by many submitters.

1 Peta Gresham, Faculty of Education and Social Work, University of Sydney, *Submission 64*, p. 15.

2 Leonard Freeman, Principal, Yirrakala School, *Submission 71*, p. 6.

MySchool Website

4.4 ACARA concentrated much of the development of NAPLAN on improvements to the reporting of NAPLAN results and how they can be used as tools to track and compare students and schools' performance. ACARA's submission focusses on changes made to the reporting of NAPLAN results, primarily through the *MySchool* website. Two of the changes highlighted by ACARA allow comparison of a student's results as they progress through their schooling which should allow parents and teachers to track a child's development, and also allow for a broader comparison between similar schools:

One measure compares the gains achieved by students over two years (for instance between Years 3 and 5) in each school with the gains achieved by students in other schools with similar student cohorts.

The other measure compares the gain in each school with the gain achieved by a 'notional school' in which the students start from the same point (for instance the same results in Year 3).³

4.5 However several submitters were of the view that the online publication of NAPLAN results must cease in order to mitigate the 'high stakes' nature of the program. To achieve this, NSW Parents' Council suggested that the dissemination of NAPLAN results should be limited:

[T]hat NAPLAN has the "high stakes" element of its regime removed so that the test results be only made available to schools, teachers and parents to enable it to revert from being a negative to a positive force in the lives and education of all our children.⁴

4.6 ACT Council of Parents and Citizens Associations stressed the value of the data provided through NAPLAN, and the usefulness of it to authorities, but concurred with the NSW Parents' Council that the data should only be provided to direct stakeholders:

There is no simple answer to solving the problems thrown up by NAPLAN. Removing NAPLAN will remove a valuable source of information that can identify which students and schools need extra support...

To this end the government should consider removing the publication of NAPLAN results on the MySchool website. Stopping the public reporting of schools' results would remove the high stakes nature of NAPLAN testing.⁵

4.7 Denise Angelo, an experience educator, recommended that if the 'high stakes' nature of the regime was to remain, the methodology of the testing should be altered to provide a broader focus to the tests which may lessen the negative impact that 'teaching to the test' may bring. A specific way to do this would be to:

3 Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority, *Submission 58*, p. 18.

4 NSW Parents' Council, *Submission 78*, p. 7.

5 ACT Council of Parents and Citizens Associations, *Submission 70*, p. 3.

[i]mprove the NAPLAN system to promote teaching and learning by preannouncing a topic of educational value (and public good) on which the NAPLAN Reading and Writing test materials will be based, e.g. “eating healthy food”, “importance of exercise”, “using water/power wisely” etc. A single “genre” or text type should not be pre-announced for writing. Since the “high stakes” nature of NAPLAN will drive schools to focus on this topic, their efforts will not be as devoid of curriculum content as current “teaching to the test” and basic skills-based “fixit” practices.

Frequency of testing

4.8 Submissions to the inquiry included a number of suggestions around the frequency of the tests, if it is necessary for all students/schools to be tested, and how long it takes for the results to be provided.

4.9 The submission for the Multicultural Development Association and Townsville Multicultural Support Group proposed an earlier starting point of NAPLAN that would allow education authorities to identify students with specific needs at an earlier stage:

While we applaud national testing commencing in Year 3, we think it would be prudent to introduce a further test earlier, in Year 1. An appropriate assessment at this point would enable school leaders and teachers to identify those students who may be having (or may be at--risk of having) difficulties in learning to read.⁶

4.10 Multilit, an organisation that develops research-based literacy programs for low-progress readers and at risk students, agreed assessment should take place at Year 1 level:

[W]e think it would be prudent to introduce a further test earlier, in Year 1. An Appropriate assessment at this point would enable school leaders and teachers to identify those students who may be having (or may be at--risk of having) difficulties in learning to read. Early intervention for students who are identified as having difficulties is much more effective and more cost effective than allowing difficulties to persist into the primary school years.⁷

4.11 The issue was raised of whether testing would be just as effective if done on a sampling basis rather than through the participation of every child in every school. The Australian Association for the Teaching of English recommended this approach:

If the program is to be retained, it should be changed from a census to a sample test. Sample tests are deemed adequate to provide information about such important areas of the curriculum as science literacy, civics and citizenship, and ICT literacy. Sample, rather than census, testing could also

6 Multicultural Development Association and Townsville Multicultural Support Group, *Submission 60*, p. 2.

7 Multilit, *Submission 63*, pp 2-3.

deliver adequate information about the overall performance of the nation's schools in literacy and numeracy.⁸

Timeliness of results

4.12 The time it takes for results to be returned to schools and students was a prominent issue in submissions, particularly in the context of NAPLAN being an effective diagnostic test. All submitters who commented were strongly supportive of measures that could improve the turnaround of the results to schools and students.

4.13 The Australian Association of Mathematics Teachers Inc.'s submission was fairly typical in its view of the time it takes for results to be returned to schools and students. It recommended that:

[S]tudent results be returned to the students, parents and schools in a much more timely fashion. For teachers, any time lag beyond a few weeks considerably diminishes the diagnostic potential of the program for individual students.⁹

4.14 This view was echoed by the Victorian Association for the Teaching of English that contended this issue coloured the perceptions of the testing processes even for those who were generally supportive of the program:

Many respondents wrote about the huge delay between the timing of the tests and when the schools receive the results of the tests. Even people who were positive about the testing wrote this as a criticism of the process, and numerous respondents stated that this time lag made the results useless to the school.¹⁰

NAPLAN Online

4.15 The submissions from ACARA, the Department, and some State education authorities hailed the myriad improvements that will be possible with the introduction of NAPLAN online. If realised, the improvements could address criticism of the scheme at a number of operational levels including the diagnostic effectiveness of the program:

The most significant future improvement to NAPLAN will come with the agreement in principle by ministers to adopt 2016 as a provisional target year for NAPLAN Online to commence. The online delivery of NAPLAN testing aims to provide a national online learning bank for students, parents and teachers that can enable a sophisticated diagnostic assessment of each student's strength and learning needs.³⁰ Online NAPLAN testing presents an opportunity to administer the NAPLAN tests in a way that overcomes some of the limitations of the current assessment model, and adds extra capability.¹¹

8 Australian Association for the Teaching of English, *Submission 40*, p. 8.

9 Australian Association of Mathematics Teachers Inc., *Submission 67*, p. 2.

10 The Victorian Association for the Teaching of English, *Submission 74*, p. 15.

11 Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, *Submission 69*, p. 27.

4.16 The Department also suggested online delivery could impact the methodology utilised to better measure a student's needs and progress:

The assessment of NAPLAN online will allow the assessment domains to be broadened, enabling the assessment of cognitive processes that cannot be properly tested through paper-based assessment....Computer delivery of tests introduces the possibility of adaptive testing – that is, assessment where items are selected and presented to students based on their performance in previous items.¹²

4.17 The ACT Government was optimistic about the potential improvements that could be achieved through NAPLAN Online. It suggested the ability to tailor the tests to the individual student would improve outcomes for students across the developmental spectrum:

NAPLAN online, through its tailored test design, will better target individual students' abilities. Understanding the achievement of higher performing students will be improved by the online system providing more challenging items and test content for these students.

In addition, the online test will increase the opportunity to collect information about factors that prevent underperforming students from reaching their full potential. Items can be developed that cater to a broader range of cognitive styles and encourage students to engage in higher level cognition.¹³

4.18 The Australian Council of State School Organisations Inc. was supportive of the introduction of NAPLAN Online, particularly its potential to address the lag between testing and the results being available:

ACSSO supports the implementation of the delivery of NAPLAN online. It is expected by parents that this mode of delivery will address improved data and student reporting and that there will be a reduced time between testing and reporting.¹⁴

Committee View

4.19 The committee has commented on specific issues at other points in this report. Contributors to the inquiry have pointed out a number of issues with NAPLAN, and some of the suggestions for improvements should certainly be considered by the government. The committee is cautiously optimistic of the positive impact that NAPLAN Online can have. The ability to structure the tests in a more dynamic and responsive manner has the potential to address many of the concerns of submitters who want to see NAPLAN benefitting all stakeholders. The committee's view is that NAPLAN tests needs become much more student focussed, which will in turn allow other stakeholders to manage resources and measure appropriate skills. The introduction of adaptive testing has the capability to meet this objective and the

12 Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, *Submission 69*, p. 28.

13 ACT Government, *Submission 77*, p. 6.

14 Australian Council of State School Organisations Inc., *Submission 81*, p. 1.

committee will be monitoring the roll-out of NAPLAN Online and the impact it makes.