



The Australian College of Educators

Submission to:

Education, Employment and the Workplace Relations References Committee on an inquiry into the effectiveness of the National Assessment Program - Literacy and Numeracy, with specific reference to Standing Committee of Education and Employment Inquiry into the Australian Education Bill 2012

The Australian College of Educators (ACE) is well placed to assist the Standing Committee in its deliberations. The College has a long history as a professional association and is the oldest association in the country that represents educators across the nation. ACE members are drawn from both the government and non-government sectors of schooling and across all levels of education from early childhood through tertiary. It is the professional voice for educators. As a self-funding body, the College is clearly focussed on providing the best outcomes in education for young people and operates free of agendas that do not relate to good education.

Background

In June 2010 the College made an initial submission to the Inquiry into the administration and reporting of NAPLAN results¹. The College is pleased to note that some of the concerns expressed there have been allayed by subsequent developments in NAPLAN and in the reporting on My School.

We note in particular that:

- There has been an improvement in the data provided in the school profile and in the use of the Index of Community Socio-educational Advantage (ICSEA) in an attempt to compare 'similar' schools, although weaknesses remain.
- Concerns about Media producing 'League' Tables seem to have been largely addressed.
- The proposal to include scientific literacy would widen the areas assessed, but still leave out many significant aspects of whole curriculum of schools

However many of the concerns expressed in the College's initial report have not been addressed and these will be looked at with respect to the Terms of Reference.

a) whether the evidence suggests that NAPLAN is achieving its stated objectives

In *Principles and protocols for reporting on schooling in Australia (June 2009)*² COAG Ministers with responsibility for school education agreed that:

... good quality information on schooling is important for schools and their students, for parents and families, for the community and for governments, and committed to working with all school sectors to ensure that public reporting on Australian schools would:

- *support improving performance and school outcomes*
- *be both locally and nationally relevant*
- *be timely, consistent and comparable.*³

While some commentators, and the media in general, have focussed on unintended, (but possibly not unforeseen) consequences of NAPLAN such as a distortion of good education by 'teaching to the test', in this submission the College will examine the quality and relevance of the material that is produced by NAPLAN and the My School process.

The value of NAPLAN material to support improving school performance and outcomes depends on the quality of the data produced, the timeliness of the availability of the data and the level of its interpretation and application, whether this be student, class, cohort, school, region or system.

Principle 5 of *Principles and protocols* states that "Schools require reliable, rich data on the performance of their students because they have the primary accountability for student outcomes"⁴.

Good schools continually produce such data and respond to it, whether it derives from teacher observation, parent, school-based assessments or other externally set standard tests. Teachers then have access to a range of rich data on each student's performance, achievements and progress, and can use such data to diagnose learning issues and devise strategies for student learning. NAPLAN results can be useful as part of this suite of evidence, but their usefulness has significant limitations.

While the data produced by NAPLAN could be called 'reliable' at a cohort, school or population level, at an individual student level the reliability of NAPLAN results alone are much less so, given that they are derived from one-off tests subject to variability caused by a child's state of mind or health. At the individual student level there are many problems

associated with the testing processes, and while these could occur in other assessment processes, the 'high stakes' perceptions of NAPLAN in a single test make these more significant.

A selection of those identified by primary school teachers are:

- The nature of the testing, through limiting items to those that allow uniformity of marking' leads to a narrowing of possible responses
- Often students have to choose from multiple source options which by their nature narrow thinking.
- Testing spelling is essentially done as a proofreading exercise. A recent study compared student performance on NAPLAN items with their performance when asked to spell the same words in a dictation activity and found that
 - Dictation and proofreading perform differently and therefore provide different information about student spelling ability
 - At all year levels more than 75% of students had more words correct when asked to spell them in a dictated context.
- Many children spend more time rubbing out written work than writing it down.
- Children can read the questions but cannot comprehend what is being asked of them.
- This years Maths tests had 'trick' questions which severely limits children with an EAL background
- In schools with a high proportion of recent arrivals, parents insist on students doing the test when they have no chance of anything but a low outcome

<p style="text-align: center;">b) unintended consequences of NAPLAN's introduction; c) NAPLAN's impact on teaching and student learning practices</p>

It is understood that NAPLAN is only the part of the National Assessment Program that deals with Literacy and Numeracy, and the review is concerned only with the impact of that. Currently only literacy and numeracy are assessed and this is done by around 40 questions in a fixed time at one occasion in the year, so even in these areas only a limited number of areas can be assessed. Although there are plans to include a NAP Science component, the Social Sciences, Humanities and Creative Arts, as well as many aspects of English and Mathematics are not assessed. The almost complete attention to testing of only certain kinds of literacy and numeracy skills serves to marginalise the other curriculum areas, especially in primary schools. This is inevitable when the stakes are raised by publication of results on My School.

This often causes standards in these curriculum areas to be compromised as they received insufficient attention in the school program.

d) the impact on teaching and student learning practices of publishing NAPLAN test results on the MySchool website

While improvements in the use of ICSEA have been noted and the details supplied on MySchool website have become more relevant there are still problems with the validity of comparison of schools.

Some observations are

- Academically selective schools can appear to outperform similar schools with the same ICSEA because they have taken out a subset of this community and this may also reflect negatively the results on neighbouring comprehensive schools who have 'lost' these students.
- The results of schools with a small student population are, because of sampling errors, subject to greater fluctuations year by year.
- The College would question whether there is evidence that MySchool is a significant factor in parental choice, and would suggest that other factors, such as the schools reputation in the local community, its particular curriculum, or its supportive nature are of far greater importance in parents' decisions.
- The College has concerns about the usefulness of the aggregated category of LBOTE to analyse NAPLAN data as it does not distinguish between widely different categories of new immigrant families

Some supporters of MySchool have argued, using a 'free market' model, that publishing comparisons of school performances will by itself lead to school improvement. They would argue that a 'Low performing' school will be motivated to improve to retain students. However school improvement takes time and what is likely to happen is that those parents who are able to do so will remove their students, only exacerbating the situation for the school involved and those students who remain. This 'free market' model also fails to acknowledge that many students, because of location or socioeconomic factors, have no effective choice.

Assuming that, despite the reservations already expressed, the NAPLAN results have some validity, what should be done in the case of a school that seems to be underperforming is to do a full investigation to determine

- If this portrayal is accurate
- If it does reflect some characteristics of the school, or of the community from which it draws, and what support needs to be put into place to rectify the situation.

e) potential improvements to the program, to improve student learning and assessment

As already indicated NAPLAN can only give a fairly broad and simplified indication of individual school achievement, and the introduction of other subject areas would not add significantly to any value it might have; it would remain a crude tool of measurement of an individual's learning.

A much more timely reporting of results would be a major improvement. At present, schools, parents and students wait for some four months before receiving a report of results, neutralising any potential diagnostic value of NAPLAN at any level. This can be improved using interactive online testing, allowing more rapid assessment and reporting of results. More importantly, online testing would have another important benefit of being able to adapt questions to the student's response in real time, and hence to provide a more precise diagnosis and analysis of each student's performance. The College understands that piloting of online national assessment is underway, and supports this development.

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

While the College believes this is an area that should be investigated, in the time frame for this response a literature survey is not possible. However, it is worth noting that many of those systems who do perform well on international comparisons (such as Finland) do not engage in standardised testing of this nature, while in the case of those jurisdictions who have used standardised testing in an attempt to raise the quality of their teaching and learning (United States, United Kingdom) there is currently little clear evidence of this generating improvements in student learning.

The College believes that in the light of the above observations, and because of the importance Governments and the Community place on NAPLAN and the cost involved in implementing it, an independent study of international evidence for the effectiveness of standardised testing would be justified.

¹ ACE submission to the inquiry into the administration and reporting of NAPLAN testing 15 June 2012
http://austcolled.com.au/sites/default/files/articles/ACE_Sub_Admin_Rep_of_NAPLAN_Testing.pdf

² Principles and protocols for reporting on schooling in Australia June 2009
http://mceecdya.edu.au/mceecdya/nap_principles_protocols_for_rep_on_school_2009,27896.html

³ ibid p 3

⁴ Ibid p 5

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