



Australian Primary  
Principals Association

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## **The Reporting and Use of NAPLAN**

**APPA supports the use of the National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) because the test results provide schools with standardised diagnostic information about the performance of students. However, problems can arise from using national tests when the stakes are high, that is, where serious consequences for system officials, principals and teachers hinge on the results.**

**APPA has developed the following principles to ensure that the reporting and use of NAPLAN has a beneficial impact on primary education and that the potential negative effects are nullified.**

## Overarching Principles Governing The Reporting and Use of NAPLAN

### 1. *Making informed and balanced judgments*

Global judgments about the performance of systems and schools should be based on multiple sources of reliable evidence that pertain to all of the key socio-emotional and academic goals of schooling.

*Though public statements about school NAPLAN results are sometimes prefaced with the observation that they form only one piece of evidence about the performance of a school, this caveat is commonly disregarded in practice. The situation is exacerbated when governments and system officials act as though NAPLAN is a sufficiently accurate indicator of a school's performance on which to base important personnel and policy decisions.*

*The solution, however, is not to be found in developing more quantitative indicators, or to turn to value added statistical models, but to develop appropriate professional appraisal mechanisms. This should be a school system, rather than Australian government responsibility.*

### 2. *Recognising the complexity of factors shaping school performance*

The reporting of NAPLAN results should be undertaken in a way that recognises that there are many systemic and local factors that mediate the performance of students on NAPLAN and which invalidate simple comparisons of school performance.

*Many principals found the 'like school' comparisons of school performance based only on the ICSEA scale to be misleading. The ICSEA scale, derived from census collector district data, does not produce results that are fine-tuned enough to yield an accurate score for all schools. As a consequence, in 2010 it misrepresented differences in the intake for schools that were supposedly alike.*

*By relying solely on ICSEA to identify 'like schools', MySchool also ignored important factors that explain the performance of schools.*

*MySchool should be developed as a tool for inquiry rather than as a notice board on which to post school results. The 'like schools' concept should be abandoned. Instead, principals and other interested parties should be able to use the website to compare their school's results on many factors other than ICSEA, for example, size, geographic location, level of resourcing, and staffing.*

## Overarching Principles Governing The Reporting and Use of NAPLAN

### **3. *Using rewards and sanctions ethically***

National, state and school system regimes of rewards and sanctions related to NAPLAN performance should comply with explicit, publicly available guidelines.

*Governments are allocating reward funding totaling hundreds of millions of dollars to states and territories that achieve performance targets. This is leading to downward pressure on schools to improve NAPLAN results at all costs.*

*In some systems principals report that line managers are transmitting this pressure in ways that are threatening and unprofessional. Because so much kudos is being assigned to schools with 'good' NAPLAN results, a climate is emerging where, in the absence of clear guidelines that can be invigilated, unethical practices are being adopted in order to inflate the school's NAPLAN results.*

*MCEECDYA should issue guidelines that clearly specify what states, systems and schools may, and may not, do to enhance their NAPLAN results.*

### **4. *Redressing erroneous imputations of performance***

Schools should have the capacity to challenge inferences drawn from NAPLAN results about their performance that they believe to be misleading and damaging to their reputation.

*It was clear from the initial response to the release of the 2009 NAPLAN results on the MySchool website that governments were unable or unwilling to intervene when the media published grossly simplistic results or even misinterpreted the results pertaining to individual schools. Once stories have appeared in the media it is almost impossible to have them retracted. Schools have little comeback and must bear the reputational consequences.*

*It is unreasonable to expect each school to deal with such events. MCEECDYA should establish an independent ombudsman with the capacity to quickly follow up complaints from schools.*

## Overarching Principles Governing The Reporting and Use of NAPLAN

### 5. *Reviewing the effects of NAPLAN on schools*

An independent body should monitor the impact of NAPLAN with a view to mitigating any unintended and perverse consequences.

*Overseas evidence indicates that the high stakes attached to the NAPLAN results are likely to produce a gradual narrowing of the curriculum because schools will be pressured to give greater emphasis to the subject matter that is tested. Further, pedagogy can be negatively influenced and standards, contrary to expectation, may fall.*

*MCEECDYA should appoint a small, independent group to monitor the implementation of MySchool and report to it on an annual basis. The group should be funded appropriately in order to enable it to achieve this task. The independence of the group should be made unambiguous given the vested interests that are likely to want NAPLAN and MySchool shown only in the best possible light.*

### 6. *Making NAPLAN fully transparent*

All facets of the NAPLAN assessment and reporting system, other than the identification of students, should be fully transparent.

*The current protocols adopted by MCEECDYA for NAPLAN properly protect the privacy of students. However, they are unduly restrictive insofar as they deny ready access to researchers and policy analysts to information regarding the development of the tests, their properties, and other aspects of the information contained on the website. It should be possible for any qualified researcher to be given ready access to the de-identified data to replicate findings reported by ACARA, undertake new analyses, and use the NAPLAN data base as a powerful research tool. This kind of use should be actively encouraged.*

## Examples of Perverse Effects from 2010 NAPLAN Tests

The research evidence from the United States and Great Britain clearly shows that high stakes assessment program, such as NAPLAN, can have an unintended, negative impact on the quality of teaching and learning. In particular:

- Schools narrow the curriculum around the focus of the tests and areas of the curriculum that are not assessed are diminished.
- Large amounts of valuable instructional time are consumed by coaching and practising tests.
- A testing industry grows which is driven by its own commercial interests.
- Schools are encouraged to participate in various forms of 'gaming' designed to improve performance.

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The following examples of perverse effects already evident from the 2010 NAPLAN tests sound a clear warning about the potential direction in which we are heading in Australia. Whilst so far only a small number of cases have been reported, it is important that inappropriate practices are sanctioned. Schools must be protected from such negative consequences.

1. Some line managers exerted pressure on principals to improve their test results at all costs without taking into account what the school has been doing to improve the students' performance and the particular factors that have made progress so challenging. As a consequence, principals reported feeling unfairly "threatened" if they failed to treat raising the average test performance as their absolute goal. It was implied that their job would be on the line if the school's results did not improve.
2. Some schools were required by their line manager to lift their results by a certain percentage. These schools then identified the students most likely to show improvement if given extra assistance. They then allocated their resources to this select group of students. Other students with greater needs did not receive as much attention for the first five months of the year until the completion of the NAPLAN tests.

## Examples of Perverse Effects from 2010 NAPLAN Tests

3. To improve test results, some schools spent a significant amount of time on test preparation techniques, allocating test practice as homework for their students. This has consumed valuable time that should have been spent on literacy and numeracy and other important areas of the primary curriculum.
4. A plethora of commercial products have been produced and are now available from retail outlets. Schools are also being contacted by companies offering to test their children and provide the results prior to NAPLAN. Assessment of this kind is often inappropriate and can undermine good teaching.
5. Some parents became very anxious and had their children spend a great deal of time at home practising for the test. They can now buy tests at supermarkets and, by administering them, unintentionally heighten their anxiety and confuse their children.
6. There have been media reports that some schools have encouraged parents to keep their children at home on test day if the school judged that the student would not perform well in the tests.
7. Some children became anxious on the test days (in particular Year 3s). Some became stressed, ended up in tears, gave up, went home, were upset that they did not complete the task, reported they felt ill, etc. There may be negative, longer term consequences for these young students.
8. A small number of teachers have provided assistance to students while sitting the tests to improve their test results, in some cases arguing that the students knew the answers but were confused or overly anxious on the day.
9. Some schools are being pushed to extraordinary lengths to anticipate what is in the test and to teach those aspects which are awarded the most marks and ignore other aspects. For example, a school found out that the students would only lose two points if they ignored the stimulus picture in the writing task. Students practised a piece of writing which they were encouraged to replicate in the test, irrespective of the stimulus picture, so they could maximise their scores. It was reported that a system line manager spoke to a group of principals endorsing this technique.
10. A principal reported that his year 3 and 5 teachers had found the pressure of the tests too much and have already requested a change of year level for 2011.

These examples show why the Australian Primary principals Association is concerned that without appropriate guidelines NAPLAN testing may eventually undermine the quality of primary education.