

As Education Minister Julia Gillard and the Australian Education Union continue to lock horns over boycotts to national literacy and numeracy tests, neither has considered the key stakeholders. **CANDICE KELLER** and **LUCY HOOD** investigate what parents want.

Parents: It's our turn to have a say on schools

THE national teachers' union and Federal Government are behaving like schoolyard bullies caught up in arguments about what is in the best interest for students.

But they forgot to ask parents – the key stakeholders – what they want for their children.

The rift between the Australian Education Union and Education Minister Julia Gillard reached fever pitch this week when teachers renewed their vow to boycott next month's NAPLAN tests.

Teachers believe the results are being used to “name and shame” students, teachers and schools. But parents want national literacy and numeracy (NAPLAN) tests to go ahead, according to the South Australian Association of State Schools Organisation, the state's key parent body.

They also want comprehensive statistics and information about how their child – and their school – is performing.

“The more information the better,” SAASSO director David Knuckey said.

“The attitude of most parents is that they want accurate, objective feedback about how their child is progressing at school.

“Sadly, parents aren't always consulted.”

The tests, from May 11-13, assess students in Years 3,5,7 and 9 on reading, writing, spelling and punctuation, grammar and numeracy skills.

The results are the basis for the Government's controversial school performance website, MySchool, which identifies schools performing at, above or below national averages in these skills.

The union is concerned this “snapshot” of results and comparative data is then being used by media and other organisations to create league tables, ranking schools from best to worst.

Associate Professor at the University of Newcastle James Ladwig – who is the chair of Curriculum, Teaching and Learning – says typically, the union speak around the reasons for the boycott was not entirely forthcoming.

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- SAASSO DIRECTOR
DAVID KNUCKEY

“This week, they made the argument that the reason they are holding up the tests was (for the) children,” he said.

“I don't buy that. They are defending teachers, so there is double-speak ... it is bad to leave the debate so shallow.

“Yes, there is a general concern about stigmatisation but that has just as much to do with (protecting) teachers as it does students.”

He added that when you have a system with “very, very few” mechanisms of accountability, there were not many options for parents.

“A union can stall just about anything and have until recently, made it very difficult to

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do anything around accountability,” he said.

“Most parents want some level of accountability of school performance ... I don't want a bureaucrat knowing what I can and cannot see.”

Mr Knuckey agreed, adding that parents would like to see the Government broaden the website's scope, not have it decimated by a political stoush with teachers.

Mr Knuckey said parents

would like to see three key additions to the website; financial data about schools, general details about the qualifications of school staff and opportunities for formal parent feedback. This, he said, would reveal a more complete and relevant story about what's happening within school grounds.

“When choosing a school, you're not just enrolling your children, you're enrolling yourself,” he said. “You want to know about the culture and atmosphere of the school too.”

The Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA), the Government body in charge of the MySchool website, has said financial data would be the next addition to the site by the close of 2010.

Further expansion, including parent comment, is still being negotiated.

Australian Primary Principals Association president Leonie Trimper said, the current site needed to be made more accurate before plans were made to expand it.

“I'm sure there is thinking that it's a narrow body of data and perhaps we do need something to paint a fuller picture of schools, (but) how do you get this information and how will it be fair?” she said.

“We've taken the position that we have to get the current site more accurate so that parents, teachers, principals and the community are more confident about the information.”

Parents feel there is a distinct lack of uniformity in schools providing information to them. While some schools excel, others need to lift their game.

The Australian Parents Council said, arguably, the best way for a parent to learn more about a school is to talk to those at the coal-face – the principals, teachers and parents of other children.

APC executive director Ian Dalton said parents would not get “sucked in” to relying on websites or test results as the sole reasoning behind selecting a school for their children.

“But if MySchool and NAPLAN results are used sensibly and appropriately it does



give a good picture about what schools are doing,” Mr Dalton said.

He said the NAPLAN boycott by union members was “acrimonious” and would taint the image of public schools and public school teachers.

MR Dalton says if boycotts are successful, fewer students will take the test, thus distorting national literacy and numeracy averages. Parents will be left with less comprehensive benchmarks with which to compare their child's results.

“If the testing doesn't go ahead in the Government school sector, the value of the data collected in the independent sector is diminished,” Mr Dalton said.

Regardless of who wins this tug-of-war, parents no longer want to be the piggy in the middle. It's time the Government and union put the ball in their court and ask them what is best for their children.

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400gm and 1kg

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