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Parents raise literacy alarm

BASIC SKILL ALERT

LAUREN NOVAK
EDUCATION REPORTER

PARENTS are raising "serious questions" about school students' basic literacy levels because they say too many are failing simple national tests.

The concerns have been raised after the state's peak school parent group viewed examples of tests given to students around the country earlier this year.

Parents have described questions put to Year 9 students as "primary school standard" and want a review of the curriculum following South Australia's average results in the national literacy and numeracy tests.

But primary principals want the curriculum further simplified while teachers and the Education Department have defended what is being taught in schools.

The South Australian Association of State School Organisations, which represents the parents of about 90 per cent of state school students, said the test results were more worrying in light of the "not challenging" questions.

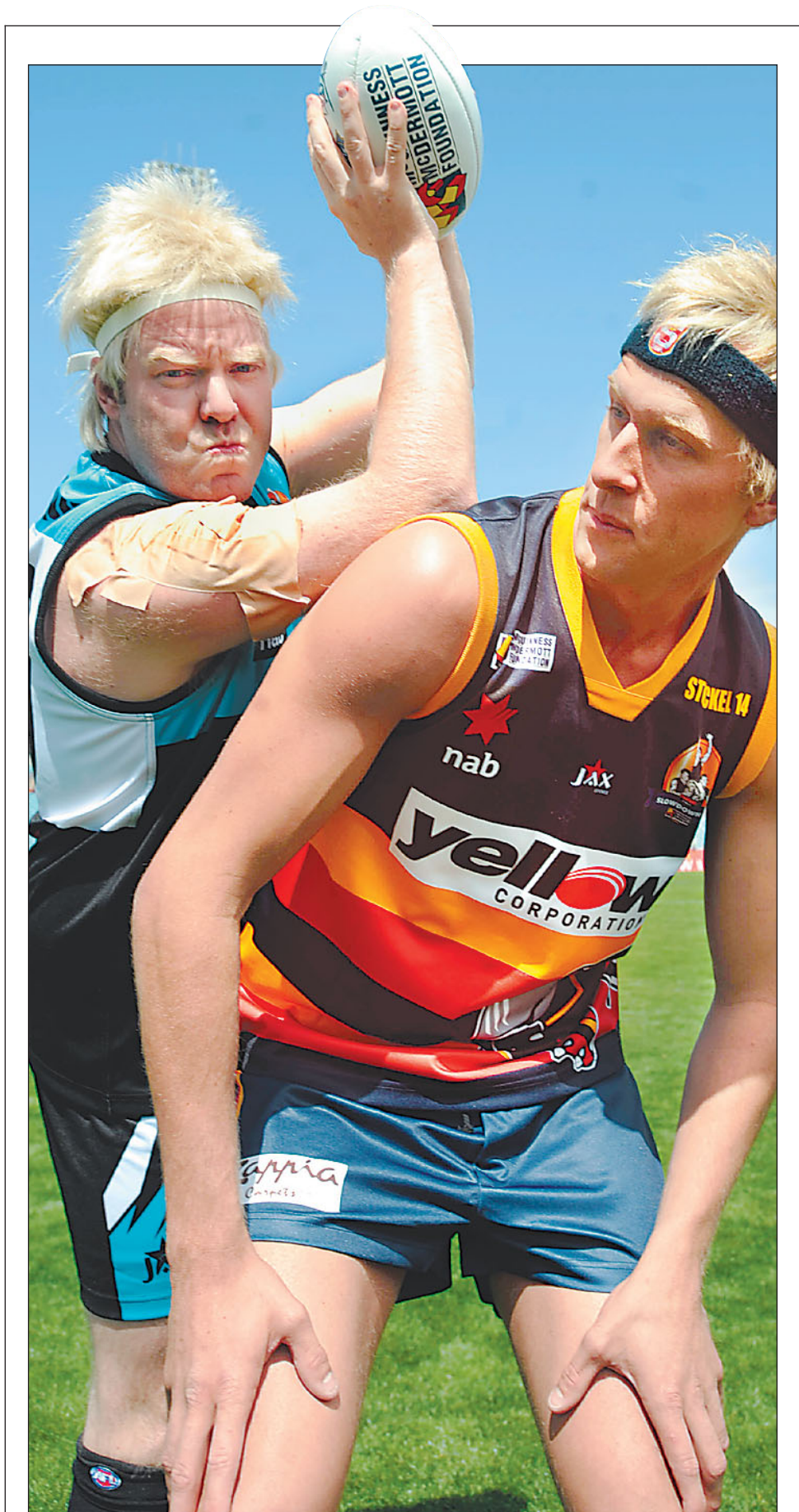
"If this is the level of question, you've got to wonder why anybody would fail to meet the minimum standard," association director David Knuckey said.

"Exactly where are the 20 per cent who have just met the minimum standards?"

"It raises serious questions about the basic literacy levels of our high school students (in particular)."

Other parents Mr Knuckey spoke to said they remembered more difficult testing when they were at school.

Continued Page 4



Picture: NAOMI JELICOE

That trademark Strauchanie magic over Crows ring-in and Olympian Hayden Stoeckel couldn't inspire the Power to win yesterday's Slowdown IX.

PAGE 25: Adelaide Confidential; PAGE 82: Match report



ON TRACK: Teacher Mel Watt with students from Pulteney Grammar School.

Picture: NEON MARTIN

Children 'in good hands'

YEAR 9 English teacher Mel Watt says parents should be confident their children are getting the best education.

Ms Watt, who teaches at Pulteney Grammar School in the city, said the literacy and numeracy tests were "reflective of what's taught in schools".

However, she stressed teachers did not confine their teaching to what was in the test outlines but also covered broader and more challenging topics.

"I think what we're doing in schools is we're noticing that there are some problems with literacy and we've really tackled them and taken them on board," she said.

"They shouldn't need to be taught (just) what's going to be in the tests, students need to be able to transfer their knowledge to different contexts."

Ms Watt said schools were making curriculum outlines available to concerned parents.

"I really think the kids are in good hands," she said.

Parents raise literacy alarm

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The Australian Primary Principals Association wants guidelines for teachers simplified when a national curriculum is developed. President Leonie Trimper said the primary curriculum "is far too crowded".

In May, about 80,000 South Australian students in Years 3, 5, 7 and 9 took part in the first national uniform testing of school students.

The results, released last month, show up to 10.5 per cent of students failed to meet the minimum national benchmarks and up to 21.8 per cent just made the grade.

SA students recorded scores below the national average in 15 of 20 categories and the state also had the highest proportion of students allowed to miss the test.

South Australian English Teachers Association president Alison Robertson said the standardised tests covered "a very narrow part of the curriculum".

Flinders University senior lecturer in education Lyn Wilkinson agreed "more is being taught than is being tested" and felt most children were challenged further in class.

"This (test) is really where you

SAMPLE QUESTIONS

YEAR 7 SPELLING

Read the text about recycling. The spelling mistakes in this text have been circled. Write the correct spelling for each circled word in the box.

Recycling

- My school already does some genral things to help the
- enviroment. We recycle paper, and we have bins for
- stuminans cans. However, I feel more could be done.
- Plastic botels and containers could also be recycled.
- Litter should not be left liesing around in the playground.
- To make recycling sucesful, people need to work together.

YEAR 9 SPELLING

Read the text about Jack. The spelling mistakes in this text have been circled. Write the correct spelling for each circled word in the box.

Jack

- It was good that finaly Jack
- was recevving the applause he
- deserved. The ordience seemed to
- really apreciate his singing as well
- as his stage presence and talent.

■ Examples of questions asked of Year 9 and Year 7 students in the Language Conventions category of national literacy and numeracy tests taken in May.

■ The Federal Education Department said about 60 per cent of the questions were in the "middle range" of expected student ability, and 20 per cent were at both the lower and upper end.

expect all Year 9 and all Year 7 kids to be. If they're not then there's cause for concern," said the specialist in basic skills testing.

Education Department chief executive Chris Robinson disputed the bar was set too low. "We don't believe that it's the curriculum that's deficient," Mr Robinson said.

"The tests are designed by experts to work out what students should be able to do at their year level. The parents, with all due respect, may not be in the best position to judge what the standard of the test is."

Mr Robinson said the department continually reviewed the curriculum.

The federal Education Department said the national tests were devised by state and federal governments, the non-government sector and independent experts.

State Education Minister Jane Lomax-Smith yesterday said she expected this group "will use feedback to improve the tests in future years".

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Do schools need to raise the bar on literacy?

At the time the results were released, Dr Lomax-Smith promised a raft of initiatives including intervention plans for every student who did not meet the minimum standards and coaches for principals and teachers at 32 of the state's most disadvantaged schools as part of a federally funded, \$4 million two-year trial.

Opposition Education spokesman David Pisoni expected more children to score better, considering the standard of testing.

"I certainly wouldn't say they (the questions) were difficult, if you were an average child you would have got about 90 per cent (correct)," he said.

"If there are children that didn't meet the national benchmark, especially at Year 7 and 9 level, we've got to ask questions of the education system."

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