

The Senate

Education and Employment
References Committee

Effectiveness of the National Assessment
Program – Literacy and Numeracy

Final report

March 2014

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RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendation 1

2.30 The committee recommends the quick turnaround of test results should receive the highest priority in the design of NAPLAN Online with achievable and measurable targets built in to the system.

Recommendation 2

3.31 The committee recommends that when designing adaptive testing for NAPLAN Online the needs of students with disability are taken into account.

Recommendation 3

3.34 The committee recommends that when designing adaptive testing for NAPLAN Online the needs of students from a non-English speaking background are taken into account.

Recommendation 4

3.52 The committee recommends that ACARA closely monitor the use of NAPLAN results to ensure results are published to assist the Government to deliver extra, targeted funding to schools and students who need more support, rather than the development of league tables.

CHAPTER 1

Introduction and overview

Referral

1.1 On 15 May 2013 the Senate referred to the Senate Standing References Committee on Education, Employment and Workplace Relations the matter of the effectiveness of the National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) for inquiry and report by 27 June 2013.¹ The committee called for submissions and published a total of 93 submissions. The committee conducted a public hearing in Melbourne on 21 June 2013.

1.2 The committee determined that the evidence provided in submissions, combined with evidence provided by witnesses during the committee's hearing demonstrated that the committee required more time to adequately discharge its reference and present a properly considered report. The committee's interim report provided a snapshot of the key issues, however did not reach any conclusions or make any recommendations.

Terms of reference

1.3 The terms of reference determined by the Senate required the Senate Education, Employment and Workplace Relations Committee to inquire and report into:

The effectiveness of the National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN), with specific reference to:

- (a) whether the evidence suggests that NAPLAN is achieving its stated objectives;
- (b) unintended consequences of NAPLAN's introduction;
- (c) NAPLAN's impact on teaching and student learning practices;
- (d) the impact on teaching and student learning practices of publishing NAPLAN test results on the My School website;
- (e) potential improvements to the program, to improve student learning and assessment;
- (f) international best practice for standardised testing, and international case studies about the introduction of standardised testing; and
- (g) other relevant matters.²

1 *Journals of the Senate*, 2013, pp 3928–3929.

2 *Journals of the Senate*, 2013, pp 3928–3929.

Conduct of the inquiry to date

43rd Parliament

1.4 During the 43rd Parliament notice of the inquiry was posted on the committee's website and advertised in *The Australian* newspaper, calling for submissions by 7 June 2013. The committee also wrote to stakeholders to notify them of the inquiry and invite submissions. The committee published a total of 93 submissions.

1.5 The committee conducted a public hearing in Melbourne on 21 June 2013. A list of witnesses who gave evidence before the committee is at Appendix 2. Copies of the Hansard transcript from the committee's hearings can be accessed online at <http://aph.gov.au/hansard>.

44th Parliament

1.6 The committee decided to readopt this inquiry and published 6 further submissions to add to the 93 published with the interim report. A list of all 99 submissions is included at Appendix 1. This appendix also includes information on documents tabled by the committee during the course of the hearing. A number of submissions were redacted prior to their publication to protect personal details.

The 2010 inquiry

1.7 This committee completed an inquiry into the administration and reporting of NAPLAN testing in November 2010.³ The terms of reference for that inquiry were:

- (a) the conflicting claims made by the Government, educational experts and peak bodies in relation to the publication of the National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) testing;
- (b) the implementation of possible safeguards and protocols around the public presentation of the testing and reporting data;
- (c) the impact of the NAPLAN assessment and reporting regime on:
 - (i) the educational experience and outcomes for Australian students,
 - (ii) the scope, innovation and quality of teaching practice,
 - (iii) the quality and value of information about student progress provided to parents and principals, and
 - (iv) the quality and value of information about individual schools to parents, principals and the general community; and
- (d) international approaches to the publication of comparative reporting of the results, i.e. 'league tables'; and
- (e) other related matters.⁴

3 Senate Education, Employment and Workplace Relations References Committee, *Administration and Reporting of NAPLAN testing*, November 2010.

4 *Journals of the Senate*, 13 May 2010, p. 3490.

1.8 The committee majority at this time made twelve recommendations targeted at reforming the NAPLAN assessment program. Recommendations included reforms to the publication and representation of test data, arrangements for students with a disability, provision for students with a language background other than English, measures to ensure the integrity of the testing process, reforms to the *My School* website and management of publication of league tables in the media. Government Senators (The Australian Labor Party at the time of the 2010 inquiry) and the Australian Greens also appended dissenting and additional comments to the report.

1.9 The Australian Government, in consultation with the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) and the relevant COAG council, has since implemented a number of the recommendations and introduced changes to the *My School* website.⁵

Structure of the report

1.10 This report is divided into five chapters. Chapter one sets out the administrative arrangements for the inquiry as well as an update of the recommendations from the committee's 2010 inquiry into *The administration and reporting of NAPLAN testing*.

1.11 Chapter two considers NAPLAN's objectives and whether or not they have been achieved. It also provides a background to NAPLAN testing in Australia and why NAPLAN was introduced.

1.12 Chapter three considers the impacts of NAPLAN on students, teachers and schools. It then discusses the *MySchool* website and what effect the publication of NAPLAN results has on the process.

1.13 Chapter four considers potential improvements to the NAPLAN testing program that may contribute to improved student learning and assessment.

1.14 Chapter five examines international best practice for standardised testing.

Acknowledgements

1.15 The committee extends its gratitude to the large number of individuals and organisations who made submissions to this inquiry, and to witnesses who offered their time to give evidence at public hearings and provided additional information. Both contributed greatly to shaping the committee's deliberations and report.

5 Australian Government Response to the Senate Education, Employment and Workplace Relations References Committee Report on the Administration and Reporting of NAPLAN Testing, August 2011.

CHAPTER 2

NAPLAN's Objectives

Background

2.1 NAPLAN is an annual assessment of Australian students in years 3, 5, 7 and 9 that tests students in reading, writing, language and literacy. The test has been conducted in May each year since 2008, and results are available four months later in September. Since 2010 results have been available publically on the *My School* website at an individual school level.¹

2.2 Literacy and numeracy testing was carried out at a state level for a number of years before NAPLAN was introduced in 2008. New South Wales had been testing since 1989 and other states and territories followed throughout the 1990s. According to Professor Barry McGaw, Chair of the Board of the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA), attempts were made to assess the results of the various testing regimes to provide a national perspective.² This approach was taken until the mid-2000's when ministers from all State, Territory and Federal Governments agreed to shift to using the same test, thus establishing NAPLAN.

Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians

2.3 In 2008 the Ministerial Council for Education, Early Childhood Development and Youth Affairs (MCEECDYA) agreed the Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians. The declaration commits all Australian governments to meet two high level educational goals for education at all stages of a child's schooling and is supported by the MCEECDYA Four Year Plan that outlines the key strategies that will be followed to meet the goals.

2.4 The two educational goals are:

- Australian schooling promotes equity and excellence; and
- All young Australians become successful learners, confident and creative individuals, and active and informed citizens.³

The key strategies from the MCEECDYA Four Year Plan that support them are:

- developing stronger partnerships

1 Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, *Submission 69*, pp 7–8.

2 Interview with Professor Barry McGaw (30 May 2013) *702 ABC Sydney*
http://www.acara.edu.au/verve/resources/Barry_McGaw_-_ABC_Interview_-_30May2013.pdf (accessed 15 January 2014).

3 Ministerial Council for Education, Early Childhood Development and Youth Affairs, *Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians*, December 2008. Available at:
http://www.mceecdya.edu.au/verve/resources/national_declaration_on_the_educational_goals_for_young_australians.pdf (accessed 20 January 2014).

- supporting quality teaching and school leadership
- strengthening early childhood education
- enhancing middle years development
- supporting senior years of schooling and youth transitions
- promoting world-class curriculum and assessment
- improving educational outcomes for Indigenous youth and disadvantaged young Australians, especially those from low socioeconomic backgrounds
- strengthening accountability and transparency.⁴

2.5 ACARA were given the responsibility under the Four Year Plan and the Declaration to manage NAPLAN and to 'link assessment to the national curriculum where appropriate'.⁵

Why was NAPLAN introduced?

2.6 Like many of the previous testing regimes, NAPLAN was introduced to identify students at an early stage who were not meeting minimum standards in literacy and numeracy. Professor Joy Cummings explained in her submission that the process for establishing minimum standards was established through the Hobart Declaration in 1989 where 'Ministers of Education agreed to a plan to map appropriate knowledge and skills for English literacy. These literacy goals included *listening, speaking, reading and writing*.'⁶ Professor Cummings goes on to explain that these goals were expanded further throughout the 1990s:

National literacy goals and subgoals were also developed in the National Literacy (and Numeracy) Plan during the 1990s, including:

...comprehensive assessment of all students by teachers as early as possible in the *first* years of schooling...to ensure that...literacy needs of all students are adequately addressed and to *intervene as early as possible* to address the needs of those students identified as at risk of not making adequate progress towards the national...literacy goals....use [of] rigorous State-based assessment procedures to assess students against the Year 3 benchmark for...reading, writing and spelling for 1998 onward [emphasis added].⁷

4 Ministerial Council for Education, Early Childhood Development and Youth Affairs, *MCEETYA Four Year Plan*, March 2009. Available at: http://www.mceecdya.edu.au/mceecdya/action_plan,25966.html (accessed 20 January 2014).

5 Ministerial Council for Education, Early Childhood Development and Youth Affairs, *MCEETYA Four Year Plan*, March 2009, pp 14-15. Available at: [http://www.mceecdya.edu.au/verve/resources/MCEETYA_Four_Year_Plan_\(2009-2012\).pdf](http://www.mceecdya.edu.au/verve/resources/MCEETYA_Four_Year_Plan_(2009-2012).pdf)

6 Professor Joy Cummings, *Submission 24*, p. 5.

7 Professor Joy Cummings, *Submission 24*, p. 5.

2.7 Professor Cummings added that to achieve these goals national standardised testing would be introduced to ensure consistency across the educational spectrum to ensure that:

...every child commencing school from 1998 will achieve a minimum acceptable literacy and numeracy standard within four years (recognising that a very small percentage of students suffer from severe educational disabilities).⁸

2.8 Other submitters agreed that the primary concern of national testing and assessment was to assist in identifying the progress of students at key stages in their educational development. Dr Kerry Hempenstall from the School of Health Sciences at RMIT University highlighted the importance of early assessment that allows for early intervention:

[A]ssessment can assist in the identification and management of students at-risk even before reading instruction commences. They can also help identify those making slow progress at any year level. This is especially important given the usually stable learning trajectory from the very early stages.⁹

2.9 Dr Hempenstall also suggested that the assessment of the intervention itself can inform its effectiveness:

If specific interventions are implemented, appropriate reading assessment can provide on-going information about the effectiveness of the chosen approach.¹⁰

NAPLAN's stated objectives

2.10 ACARA stated in their submission that the overall objective of NAPLAN is to provide education authorities, schools, parents and the local community with quality data. This allows the various stakeholders to:

- Better target resource allocation;
- Identify areas of strength and need for individual students;
- Measure how their child is performing against a national average; and
- Measure how a local school is performing against schools in similar areas or socio-economic circumstances.¹¹

2.11 ACARA stresses that NAPLAN cannot bring about improvement to student outcomes directly, but can provide valuable data to schools and education authorities that may allow improvement to take place:

8 Professor Joy Cummings, *Submission 24*, p. 5.

9 Dr Kerry Hempenstall, School of Health Sciences, RMIT University, *Submission 27*, p. 9.

10 Dr Kerry Hempenstall, School of Health Sciences, RMIT University, *Submission 27*, p. 9.

11 Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority, *Submission 58*, pp 4-5.

It should be emphasised that NAPLAN is a tool to inform school improvement, not an improver of educational outcomes. It is not the tests that will improve students' literacy and numeracy skills, but the way students' results (including school, system and national level results) are used by teachers, schools and systems to identify strengths and weaknesses, particularly in teaching practices and programs, that will improve student outcomes.¹²

2.12 Whether ACARA's description of the purpose of NAPLAN constitutes a clear statement of objectives was a question raised in a number of submissions. The Australian Association for the Teaching of English (AATE) suggested that while data from assessments 'has the potential to be useful...it needs to be used in ways that improve learning'.¹³ The Queensland Catholic Education Commission was of a similar view and said that the ACARA website describes what NAPLAN does rather than what it is intended to achieve. As such it is difficult to assess whether it has successfully achieved its aim or not.¹⁴

2.13 The School of Education at the University of Queensland submitted that the stated objectives of NAPLAN are not 'clearly communicated in any of the available documents' which is allowing NAPLAN to be used for 'a range of purposes beyond its stated objectives'.¹⁵

2.14 Other submitters focussed on the data collection potential of the NAPLAN tests, and how it could be utilised to improve student outcomes. The School of Education at the University of South Australia (the School) endorsed some elements of the program:

NAPLAN has made a contribution to providing schools with data to analyse progress; school leaders with a sense of trends occurring in their school that can inform program and policy decisions; and governments with regional data that can inform how to best support and resources areas of strength and need (Dooner, 2001).¹⁶

2.15 However the School was circumspect about whether there was evidence to support the conclusion that NAPLAN is benefitting all schools and students. Some of the issues that may prevent potential benefits being accessed by all schools and students include:

- NAPLAN's limited coverage of content and skills and the time allocated for sitting the test.
- The need for other sources of evidentiary data, including data gathered by teachers in a knowledgeable and principled way, to inform practices that improve learning outcomes.

12 Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority, *Submission 58*, p. 7.

13 Australian Association for the Teaching of English (AATE), *Submission 40*, p. 2.

14 Queensland Catholic Education Commission, *Submission 42*, p. 1.

15 School of Education, University of Queensland, *Submission 51*, p. 1.

16 School of Education, University of South Australia, *Submission 52*, p. 3.

- Limitations of NAPLAN as a non---diagnostic assessment procedure for informing improved student outcomes.
- Validity issues related to attributing students' test scores to school performance and teaching effectiveness.
- Cultural and linguistic appropriateness and accessibility of NAPLAN's content.¹⁷

2.16 Fintona Girls' School in Victoria commented that it is impossible for the tests to 'reflect the core elements of curriculum documents used in the different States and Territories', which is one of the objectives set out in the NAPLAN literature.¹⁸ This is due to a lack of flexibility in its delivery across the country:

...the recent implementation of the National Curriculum has shown that there is a necessity for flexibility in these curricula in order to address the differing educational priorities of States and Territories.¹⁹

Committee View

2.17 The objectives of NAPLAN at a macro level are clear. However evaluations of their effectiveness at that level are relatively meaningless, and highly dependent on the perception of a particular stakeholder.

2.18 The remainder of the report examines the various objectives as set by ACARA in more detail, but the committee's broad view of the objectives is that they need to be broken down to a meaningful level where each element can be separately measured and evaluated for its effectiveness. They then need to be communicated in a more accessible form so that schools, students, parents and the wider community all understand what the tests are intended to achieve, with regular evaluation to determine whether they are being as effective as possible.

NAPLAN as a diagnostic test

2.19 Most submitters had views on whether the aspirations of NAPLAN being a useful diagnostic test were met. Views were constructed by analysing the tests themselves, and by the way the data from the tests are used.

2.20 Fiona Mueller, literacy educator, raised concerns about whether a test with a multiple choice element could be considered diagnostic:

Apart from the absence of any recognisable structure in these tests, the multiple-choice design makes them virtually invalid as diagnostic or teaching tools. One of the most serious failings of the papers is that there is

17 School of Education, University of South Australia, *Submission 52*, p. 3.

18 ACARA, *My School Fact Sheet*, Jan 2010, available at: http://www.det.act.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0003/109749/My_School_FACT_SHEET_RELIABILITY_AND_VALIDITY_OF_NAPLAN.pdf (accessed 21 January 2014).

19 Fintona Girls' School, *Submission 31*, p. 2.

no opportunity for the students to show how they have arrived at a solution.²⁰

2.21 The Australian Literacy Educators' Association (ALEA) submitted that while NAPLAN is intended to be a diagnostic test it cannot, by virtue of the tests themselves, provide the same specific diagnostic outcomes as formative assessment that:

...provide students with specific feedback about the qualities of their work with advice on how it can be improved to build the resilience of students and support a classroom culture of successful learning.²¹

ALEA continued that, given the time delay of five months for the results of the assessment to arrive back in schools, 'it cannot be argued that they are assessing *for learning*'.²²

2.22 The delay highlighted by ALEA in returning test results was a theme for a number of submitters. The Australian Association of Mathematics Teachers cited the delay in the results of the tests being returned to students as evidence that it is not an effective diagnostic tool for assessing students and addressing their specific learning needs:

Any objectives relating to diagnosis at the student level are compromised by the time it takes for schools and teachers to receive student results.²³

2.23 Margaret Wu and David Hornsby, literacy educators, also denied the diagnostic effectiveness of the tests, pointing to the time it takes for the results to be known as one of the factors:

Even if the NAPLAN tests were diagnostic, the 5-month delay in providing the results would make them useless for informing teaching.²⁴

2.24 As discussed in the committee's interim report, the Whitlam Institute, in conjunction with the University of Melbourne is conducting a project titled: *The Experience of Education: The impacts of high stakes testing on school students and their families – An Educator's Perspective*. As part of the project a survey of educators was conducted to gather views on NAPLAN. One of the questions asked in the survey was whether the tests were a diagnostic tool for teachers. The survey found

20 L. Wilson, *Submission 11*, Fiona Mueller (2012), *Paper 14 – NAPLAN tests of language conventions are problematic*, p. 2.

21 Australian Literacy Educators' Association, *Submission 66*, p. 7.

22 Australian Literacy Educators' Association, *Submission 66*, p. 7.

23 Australian Association of Mathematics Teachers, *Submission 67*, p. 1.

24 L. Wilson, *Submission 11*, Margaret Wu and David Hornsby (2012), *Paper 1 – Inappropriate uses of NAPLAN results*, p. 2.

that 58 percent of teachers 'believing that NAPLAN was not a diagnostic tool', while two thirds of Principals believed it was.²⁵

2.25 The survey report posited that this variation in perception of NAPLAN as a diagnostic tool could be explained by considering how the data is used by a teacher who is primarily concerned with individual students, as opposed to the principal who is looking at the overall performance of a school:

It may be that at the school level, aggregate NAPLAN data can point to areas of the curriculum where average student achievement is low (with implications for Principals as they work to determine professional learning directions for their school) and are thus seen as useful by school leadership. In contrast, at the level of the individual student, the delay between testing and results makes the data less useful for teachers working to ensure individual students are developing in each of the areas covered.²⁶

2.26 The Tasmanian Department of Education considers NAPLAN to be an effective assessment tool for both teachers and parents. In its submission it states that NAPLAN:

...enables parents/guardians to monitor progress made since the child's previous NAPLAN assessment. Through various publications, the DoE encourages parents/guardians to discuss children's results and report with teachers.

In summary, NAPLAN data is both a key measure for teachers and parents/guardians as to whether or not young Tasmanians are meeting important educational outcomes and is used diagnostically to support improvement.²⁷

2.27 Christian Schools Australia Limited had reservations around how the data produced by the tests were used, but was positive in general about the potential of data as a diagnostic tool:

The use of a nationally consistent diagnostic instrument is widely accepted. It provides the opportunity to tap into a rich and deep source of comparative data and more meaningful information for teachers. NAPLAN used in this way we believe to be highly effective and highly beneficial. This function should remain the primary purpose of NAPLAN with accountability requirements clearly and explicitly playing a secondary role.²⁸

25 The Whitlam Institute within the University of Western Sydney, *Submission 26*, N. Dulfer, Prof. John Polesel and Dr S. Rice, (2012), *The Experience of Education: The impacts of high stakes testing on school students and their families – An Educator's Perspective*, p. 8.

26 The Whitlam Institute within the University of Western Sydney, *Submission 26*, N. Dulfer, Prof. John Polesel and Dr S. Rice, (2012), *The Experience of Education: The impacts of high stakes testing on school students and their families – An Educator's Perspective*, p. 14.

27 Department of Education, Government of Tasmania, *Submission 29*, p. 3.

28 Christian Schools Australia Limited, *Submission 37*, p. 2.

2.28 The committee noted evidence suggesting teachers and student teachers do not receive sufficient training or support to enable them to properly use or analyse data obtained by NAPLAN testing. ACARA noted the recommendation in the 2013 Senate report *Teaching and Learning – maximising our investment in Australian schools* that advised teachers needed more support in learning how to use evaluative data. ACARA submitted that states and territories already have sophisticated data analysis tools available for teachers to access; however, it is clear that more work could be done to support teachers in becoming skilled at interpreting and using NAPLAN data.²⁹

2.29 The Australian Education Union also commented that there is capacity for improvement in the training and skills of teachers in the application of NAPLAN data:

Can we do more in terms of professional development of teachers on the use of data, the interpretation of data and the application of information in informing our teaching and learning? I think we can always grow in that regard.³⁰

Committee View

2.30 The committee does not believe that the current administration of NAPLAN leads to it being as effective a diagnostic test as it could be. A number of elements inform this conclusion, such as the methodology of the test, which includes the use of multiple choice, and the exclusion of teacher assessment of the student. However the principle consideration is the length of time the results take to be disseminated to the students and teachers. The school year moves at a rapid pace and the turnaround of many months does not allow for meaningful intervention to ensure that students across the spectrum of development are given the appropriate support they require, either to meet minimum standards or to challenge them to reach their full potential.

2.31 The committee accepts that the introduction of NAPLAN Online should allow for much improved turnaround in the results, and is of the strong opinion that this should be a high priority in designing the online systems for the tests.

Recommendation 1

2.32 The committee recommends the quick turnaround of test results should receive the highest priority in the design of NAPLAN Online with achievable and measurable targets built in to the system.

29 ACARA, *Submission 58*, p. 15.

30 Mr Angelo Gavrielatos, Australian Education Union, *Committee Hansard*, 21 June 2013, p. 1.

CHAPTER 3

The Impacts of NAPLAN

Unintended Consequences

3.1 The committee's interim report cites examples presented by a number of submitters to the inquiry that a range of unintended consequences have emerged as a result of NAPLAN testing. These include negative or adverse consequences such as a narrowing of the curriculum or 'teaching to the test'; the creation of a NAPLAN preparation industry which compounds the perception that NAPLAN is a 'high stakes' test; and adverse or negative impacts on students.¹

Teaching to the test

3.2 The Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) acknowledge that there have been accusations that NAPLAN has resulted in a number of unintended consequences. However, it does not accept there is evidence that negative unintended consequences are endemic. ACARA also contends that some perceived unintended consequences are a result of a misconception of what NAPLAN is designed to achieve:

It is also important to note that some of these reports of unintended consequences have not accurately contextualised the purposes of the program and attributed unrealistic expectations to what NAPLAN should achieve. By way of example, the teacher survey undertaken by Murdoch University in 2012 invited participants to respond to statements such as: 'NAPLAN promotes a socially supportive and positive classroom environment' and 'NAPLAN has meant that students have control over the pace, directions and outcomes of lessons in my class'. Both of these aspects of classroom environment and curriculum planning are clearly the responsibilities of teachers.²

3.3 The Australian Primary Principals Association quoted from an independently conducted survey of primary school principals that showed the curriculum can be altered, even inadvertently, in preparation for NAPLAN tests:

'Teachers, despite knowing that they should not be teaching to the tests, do alter the regular curriculum delivery to 'train' the students in the peculiarities of the tests. Much time is given over even in the previous year to NAPLAN, to enable the students to have the best opportunity to demonstrate their skills and knowledge.'³

3.4 ACARA differentiates between negative consequences of preparing for the NAPLAN test, such as replacing the broader curriculum with a teaching-by-rote using

1 Senate Education, Employment and Workplace Relations Committee, *Effectiveness of the National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy – Interim report*, June 2013, p. 8.

2 Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority, *Submission 58*, p. 10.

3 Australian Primary Principals Association, *Submission 19*, p. 5.

NAPLAN past papers, and a welcome focus on the development of students' literacy and numeracy skills.⁴

3.5 The Tasmanian Department of Education (DoE) submitted there was no evidence across their schools that the curriculum was being narrowed as a result of NAPLAN testing. The Department fully acknowledges that there have been changes to teaching methods, but these changes are 'entirely appropriate':

[T]he DoE has no evidence to suggest that there is a narrowing of the curriculum in our schools or that teachers are 'teaching to the test' as a result of NAPLAN testing. Whilst the data supports schools in identifying areas for improvement and explicit teaching to address these areas may occur, these processes are entirely appropriate for improving students' learning outcomes.

In fact, the term 'teaching to the test' is often used to refer to just these situations where identification of areas for focus and then implementing appropriate strategies to address needs has occurred. Tasmania asserts that this represents pedagogically sound practice.⁵

3.6 The Department for Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR) concurred with the view that NAPLAN has had a transformative and positive impact on a student's education:

The impact on teaching practice is profound, and has led to culture change at schools as teachers have learned to use data and see the positive effects on their student's learning.⁶

Committee View

3.7 The committee accepts there are going to be changes in pedagogy when something as radical as standardised testing is introduced. The extent of these changes and the impacts on other aspects of the curriculum are issues that need careful consideration when analysing the effectiveness of NAPLAN.

3.8 The committee are also concerned with the comments made by ACARA that suggest unintended consequences can be as a result of a miscomprehension over what NAPLAN's intended consequences are. The overarching objectives of Naplan are clear, but as discussed in the previous Chapter, they are not clear at an operational level. To suggest that changes in the classroom are not as a result of NAPLAN is not taking full responsibility for the profound impact that standardised testing can have. This in itself is not a reason not to test, but it is something that educational authorities need to be cognisant of in providing support to schools as part of the NAPLAN process.

4 Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority, *Submission 58*, p. 11.

5 Department of Education, Tasmania, *Submission 29*, p. 4.

6 Department for Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, *Submission 69*, p. 5.

NAPLAN's impact on students

3.9 One of the most contentious aspects of NAPLAN's introduction is the impact national testing has on students. The committee received evidence from numerous submitters that they had experience of students being affected by the testing regime, with the majority of submitters reporting negative impacts.

3.10 The Australian Primary Principals Association commissioned CANVASS to carry out a survey to gauge the views of Primary Principals across the country. *Primary Principals: Perspectives on NAPLAN Testing & Assessment* (the survey), found that 'sixty-six percent of respondents said NAPLAN testing has a negative impact on the wellbeing of students.'⁷ According to the survey, 'the greatest impact of NAPLAN is on student wellbeing'.⁸

3.11 While the survey did not find that all students suffered adverse impacts from the testing, it did cite examples of the type of impacts that some respondents claimed the testing had on their students:

- Pressures surrounding NAPLAN trigger self-esteem issues and anxiety, leading to disengagement, absenteeism, apathy and behavioural problems e.g. playground fights
- Particular logistical difficulties for disabled students sitting the tests
- The demands of extra-curricular tutoring for NAPLAN impacting on student welfare
- Student boredom and a lack of enjoyment in the NAPLAN preparation.⁹

3.12 The Whitlam Institute also carried out research into the impact of the testing on students. This research reported that educators, as well as parents, are concerned with the effects on students:

The evidence from the data suggests that a large proportion of educators are reporting that at least some students are suffering health and well-being issues as a result of the NAPLAN. Difficulties include physical responses such as crying, sleeplessness, and feeling sick, as well as psychological responses such as an inability to cope emotionally, feelings of inadequacy, and concerns about the ways in which others might view them. Respondents also reported significant numbers of parents raising concerns about the impact of the tests on their children's well-being.¹⁰

7 Australian Primary Principals Association, *Submission 19*, p. 3.

8 Australian Primary Principals Association, *Submission 19, Attachment 1, CANVASS Report, Primary Principals: Perspectives on NAPLAN Testing & Assessment*, p. 6.

9 Australian Primary Principals Association, *Submission 19, Attachment 1, CANVASS Report, Primary Principals: Perspectives on NAPLAN Testing & Assessment*, p. 14.

10 The Whitlam Institute within the University of Western Sydney, *Submission 26*, N. Dulfer, Prof. John Polesel and Dr S. Rice, (2012), *The Experience of Education: The impacts of high stakes testing on school students and their families – An Educator's Perspective*, p. 17.

3.13 Epping Heights Public School reported the biggest impact on their students has been an 'increase in anxiety'. It highlighted potential long term issues with students' activities being focussed on two elements of learning at the expense of other activities which are also important for children to develop:

For these students their life experience is already affected by less time being given to developing interests, talents and creative thinking. In a rapidly changing world, students need skills to become life-long learners, adaptive and multi-skilled. How will students who have been coached to a narrow set of criteria succeed at a tertiary level and beyond to become well educated, creative and well-rounded citizens?¹¹

3.14 The Australian Council of State School Organisations submitted that feedback from parents has indicated that their students are adversely impacted by the testing and this can more evident in students at a younger age and also in more rural and remote schools:

Clearly we see students display signs of stress or sickness leading up to the NAPLAN testing regime, parents have expressed their concern with regard to their child either not wanting to go to school or are anxious about the exam.

Anecdotally the negative impacts on wellbeing appear greater in rural and remote schools, this we believe is due to the smaller sizes of the community and the ease of which whole school results can identify individuals.¹²

3.15 However the committee received evidence that research also showed that stress was the most reported impact, but this is the likely response to any test and therefore perfectly normal:

While test anxiety is of concern, NAPLAN testing has in no way created hysteria beyond what would be expected of any test situation. Being anxious about a test is quite normal and probably a useful emotion that all humans experience as part of life's great tapestry. To mount a case that somehow NAPLAN is damaging a generation of children says more about parenting than it does about the test itself. I am yet to be at a school that doesn't make every effort to support children through NAPLAN in a positive and encouraging manner.¹³

Committee View

3.16 The committee accepts that anxiety will be a factor for some students in any testing environment. What makes NAPLAN of particular significance is the

11 Epping Heights Public School, *Submission 21*, p. 3.

12 The Australian Council of State School Organisations, *Submission 81*, p. 3.

13 The Whitlam Institute within the University of Western Sydney, *Submission 26*, N. Dulfer, Prof. John Polesel and Dr S. Rice, (2012), *The Experience of Education: The impacts of high stakes testing on school students and their families – An Educator's Perspective*, p. 18.

perception of NAPLAN as a 'high stakes' test. This is an issue which is considered in later in this Chapter and the committee reserves its views to that section.

NAPLAN's impact on students with specific needs

3.17 The committee received submissions from a number of organisations on the impact NAPLAN testing has on students with various diverse need including those with disabilities, indigenous students, and students from non-English speaking backgrounds which includes refugees and migrants.

Students with disabilities

3.18 Adjustments are permitted for students with disability to support their access to the tests and facilitate maximum participation, and are intended to enable access to the tests on an equivalent basis to students without disability.¹⁴

3.19 ACARA's submission explained that students with disability are 'encouraged to take part in NAPLAN', and special provisions to support individual students with disability and special needs are outlined in the *National Protocols for Test Administration*.¹⁵ However submitters raised a number of issues with this, that can impact both schools and individual students.

3.20 One of the issues for many of these submitters is the danger that resources for a school are influenced by NAPLAN test results which can be impacted by a number of factors, often outside of the control of the school. According to evidence received there is pressure placed on a school to ensure it receives the best possible test results and this can lead to the exclusion of students with special needs. Epping Heights Public School raised this issue:

There are a number of students in our school with learning difficulties that require additional support but we receive very little support because the majority of our students achieve good results. We wonder if it is fair that these students are judged by the results of others in their cohort. Alternatively, it seems wrong that schools prevent students with difficulties from sitting the NAPLAN as it will 'bring down' their results.¹⁶

3.21 Submitters argued that the inherent comparative nature of national testing is incompatible with including students with varying degrees and type of special needs. Professor Joy Cumming urged caution in comparing results across schools, or even classes within schools for this reason:

Schools may use results to compare class results in terms of raw performance. Such results do not provide information on class differences in achievement, proportion of students with disability, or from language

14 For NAPLAN, disability is defined as per the *Commonwealth Disability Discrimination Act 1992*.

15 ACARA, *Submission 58*, p. 14.

16 Epping Heights Public School, *Submission 21*, p. 3.

backgrounds other than English. Therefore, comparisons across classes need to be made with caution.¹⁷

3.22 Professor Cummings' submission goes on to discuss the range of adjustments utilised in other testing environments around the world that can level the playing field, but that have not been introduced in Australia to the necessary degree:

NAPLAN administration at present makes inadequate allowance for the appropriate assessment of students with disability. They must participate in the standard NAPLAN tests with a small range of adjustments.

...

The question still arises as to whether the current approach to NAPLAN testing is compliant with the *Disability Standards for Education 2005* or whether students with disability are being indirectly discriminated against in current practices, through being expected to meet participation requirements that they are not able to meet but that students without disability can meet. The test forms do not enable students with disability opportunity to demonstrate what they know and can do.¹⁸

3.23 Data is also published on the MySchool website about the level of NAPLAN participation for each school, broken down by exempt, absent and withdrawn. This data is compared to the national average.¹⁹ Significant work is currently being undertaken by all governments to implement a Nationally Consistent Collection of Data on School Students with disability.²⁰

Students from a non-English speaking background

3.24 While the committee understands students from non-English backgrounds are exempt from the test if they have been in Australia for less than one year,²¹ it received evidence that students arriving from areas of conflict or traumatic events this may not be sufficient to put them on a par with other students.

3.25 A submission from the Multicultural Development Association (MDA) and Townsville Multicultural Support Group (TMSG) cited research that found students from refugee backgrounds are particularly vulnerable:

Students of refugee background are particularly vulnerable due to the significant interruptions to schooling and the social and psychological impacts of their refugee journey. Many students may have experienced

17 Professor Joy Cummings, *Submission 24*, p. 13.

18 Professor Joy Cummings, *Submission 24*, pp 29-30.

19 ACARA, *My School Fact Sheet*, Feb 2011, p. 1, http://www.acara.edu.au/verve/resources/About_NAPLAN.pdf (accessed 25 March 2014).

20 Department of Education, *Nationally Consistent Collection of Data on School Students with Disability Fact Sheet*, Feb 2014, p.1, http://docs.education.gov.au/system/files/doc/other/attachment_2_-_nationally_consistent_data_collection_-_schools_factsheet_0.pdf (accessed 25 March 2014).

21 ACARA, *My School Fact Sheet*, Feb 2011, p. 1, http://www.acara.edu.au/verve/resources/About_NAPLAN.pdf (accessed 20 February 2014).

forced migration, significant loss, violence, and trauma. These experiences impact on students' ability to learn in the school environment and require a whole of school response.²²

3.26 The Victorian Association for the Teaching of English also reported negative impacts on students from Non-English speaking backgrounds:

I was confronted with having to watch a number of intelligent and capable EAL students (who had been in Australia just over one year) not cope at all with all the tests and feeling frustrated and upset. In the end, they became so frustrated that they started making jokes about it and treating it as a waste of time. The Naplan tests are all very well for those who are successful academically, for children who do not meet the set benchmarks or are disadvantaged in some way, the tests are an attack on their self-esteem as they reinforce the message that they are failing.²³

3.27 The Australian Council of TESOL Associations was supportive of the government's efforts to improve educational outcomes for all students, and accepted that standards are necessary to ensure a certain level of education across the country. However they argued the NAPLAN tests are not an appropriate mechanism for measuring skills of those students where English is not their first language, or students that are culturally diverse from the educational mainstream in Australia. According to their submission, this because the tests make the following assumptions:

- students' proficiency in English relates to their maturity and their grade level in Australian schools
 - students' development in English follows an English-as-a-first-language pathway
 - students have a knowledge base related to "*the curriculum in each state or territory*" (as stated on the NAPLAN website)
 - students are urbanised
- and sometimes that:
- students are from middle class Anglo-Australian backgrounds.²⁴

3.28 Mr Leonard Freeman, Principal at the Yirrakala School in the Northern Territory contended that culturally specific content in the NAPLAN tests place students from indigenous and refugee backgrounds at a disadvantage. His submission provides some examples of where a student without similar cultural experiences would not be able to comprehend the scenarios in question:

The stimulus texts [...] focussed on included a narrative about a paperboy and an advertisement for a movie which included the title of the movie, session times, classification details and the price of admission []. While

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

23 Victorian Association for the Teaching of English, *Submission 74*, p. 4.

24 The Australian Council of TESOL Associations, *Submission 79*, p. 9.

cinema posters and newspaper deliveries are common place in cities and town across Australia, there are no cinemas or delivery boys in remote Indigenous communities.

...

The story begins with the householder complaining to the newspaper boy 'you left the paper jutting out of the back of my box' and we also learn the owner had previously complained the paper needs to be left 'in line with the fence'. This question was designed to test whether students could infer the meaning of new words and constructions. Yet to do so the students need to be familiar with the cultural context, in this case the students need to know that houses have a box on their fence line where mail and newspaper deliveries are left. If the student has grown up in a remote community or refugee camp where there are no letter boxes and few houses have fences they will not be able to access the meaning of the text.²⁵

Committee View

3.29 The committee shares the concerns of some submitters that while provision for students with disability and special needs is made, it is still leaving the students with disability at a disadvantage from those without disability. This in turn can lead to a distortion in test results that can impact the student and the school, especially if the impacts can affect resource allocation.

3.30 This is one of the reasons the committee is considering whether national testing based on samples of schools and students may be a better option than the almost universal tests currently carried out. It may be that adaptive testing introduced through NAPLAN Online could tailor the test to the abilities and progress of the individual student, and if this is the case, the committee would strongly support this approach.

Recommendation 2

3.31 The committee recommends that when designing adaptive testing for NAPLAN Online the needs of students with disability are taken into account.

3.32 The issue of NAPLAN testing for students from a non-English speaking background is one that elicits strong opinions. The committee understands students are given a one year grace period before they are expected to take part in the NAPLAN process, but in the committee's view, this is not sufficient to provide a level-playing field with native English speakers.

3.33 The committee also notes the assertion by ACARA that 'test developers must ensure NAPLAN tests are not culturally biased against Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students'.²⁶ While this is welcome, it still places students from a culturally diverse background, (which includes Indigenous students) at a distinct disadvantage. Similarly to students with disability and special needs, this has the potential to impact

25 Leonard Freeman, *Submission 71*, p. 3.

26 ACARA, *Submission 58*, p. 14.

both the individual student and the school. Again, the committee is optimistic that the introduction of adaptive testing will have a positive impact of this student cohort.

Recommendation 3

3.34 The committee recommends that when designing adaptive testing for NAPLAN Online the needs of students from a non-English speaking background are taken into account.

The impacts of the My School Website – A 'High Stakes' test?

3.35 The development of the NAPLAN testing and reporting regime has led to frequent accusations the test has become 'high-stakes'. It is not the tests themselves that make it 'high stakes', or even the impact on individual students, but the way the data is used. If substantial resources are allocated to schools on the basis of NAPLAN results, then schools understandably deem them to be of significant importance. If the tests results are used to construct league tables, the effects on schools and parents become significant.

3.36 Almost all submitters described the tests as 'high stakes', and most were critical of what they consider to be a disproportionate significance placed on the results. The NSW Primary Principals Association commented that the tests themselves are not high stakes for the pupils, because there is 'no personal consequences'²⁷ for them, however this is not the case for the school or broader community:

Students are not denied advancement in the school system as a result of their performance in the tests. More and more however, the public and the education community are hearing that the tests are high stakes tests. What is done with the results and how the results are used in the public arena is consistent with a high stakes assessment.

In short, NAPLAN is a low stakes assessment, the results of which are being used in a high stakes methodology. The recognition needs to be that NAPLAN is one test on one day and a snapshot at best of individual performance.²⁸

3.37 The Whitlam Institute's report, *The Experience of Education: The impacts of high stakes testing on school students and their families – An Educator's Perspective*, discussed earlier in this report, surveyed educators on their perceptions of the test and whether they considered it to be 'high stakes'. Their response concurred with other research:

Respondents' perceptions of the purposes of NAPLAN and their views of what impact reported poor results could have on schools strongly suggest that NAPLAN is viewed by the teaching profession as 'high stakes testing,'

27 NSW Primary Principals Association, *Submission 23*, p. 3.

28 NSW Primary Principals Association, *Submission 23*, p. 3.

confirming views already expressed by Lingard (2010) and Lobascher (2011).²⁹

3.38 The Whitlam Institute had previously conducted a literature review into the impact of high stakes testing and concluded there were serious impacts on student and their families, and arguing this was a consequence of publishing the test data on the My School website:

[T]he publication of NAPLAN results on the My School website, with the associated publicity and impact on schools and students, means that NAPLAN may be defined as constituting high stakes testing.³⁰

3.39 Other submitters argued that because NAPLAN is a test of literacy and numeracy only, and the results are subsequently published on the My School website, this marginalises other elements of the curriculum because schools are under pressure to concentrate on those results that are published:

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.³¹

3.40 According to submitters, it is not only schools that are subject to the pressure associated with NAPLAN being regarded as a 'high stakes' test. Some parents also see the emphasis placed on NAPLAN through the press and feel pressure to prepare their child to do well in the exams. Fintona Girls submitted that in their experience:

..[i]t is difficult to reassure parents that these tests simply provide one measure of a child's performance in a specific place in time when the results are made available on the *My School* website and performance league tables that use NAPLAN data appear in *The Australian* (as they did on June 1st, 2013).

...

As long as NAPLAN is the only measure used in the *MySchool* website to measure achievement, many schools will teach the tests and parents will do all that they can (including tutoring and purchasing commercial products) to enable their child to do as well in the tests as possible.

3.41 Other submitters also commented on the typical reportage of the NAPLAN test results and how this compounded the perception of NAPLAN being 'high stakes':

29 The Whitlam Institute within the University of Western Sydney, *Submission 26*, N. Dulfer, Prof. John Polesel and Dr S. Rice, (2012), *The Experience of Education: The impacts of high stakes testing on school students and their families – An Educator's Perspective*, p. 9.

30 The Whitlam Institute within the University of Western Sydney, *Submission 26*, N. Dulfer, Prof. John Polesel and Dr S. Rice, (2012), *The Experience of Education: The impacts of high stakes testing on school students and their families – An Educator's Perspective*, p. 10.

31 Australia College of Educators, *Submission 30*, pp 3-4.

The publication of school NAPLAN results on the My School website and the way that some parts of the media report and comment on these results have caused many people to quite inappropriately view them as a valid measure of whole-school performance. The tests probe only a very narrow slice of the whole school curriculum and are not designed and are not adequate to support this sort of evaluation.

A supplement entitled “Your School” issued with *The Weekend Australian* of 1-2 June, 2013 is a good example of the misleading practice described above. The supplement included pages headed “The nation’s top 100 primary schools” and “The nation’s top 100 secondary schools”.³²

3.42 The effect on teaching has also been profound according to Jenny Cullen, an experienced educator and Assistant Principal. She described the situation before and after test results were published on the My School website:

Prior to the introduction of this comparative website, NSW had been conducting Basic Skills Tests for many years each August. In primary schools, children were usually given 2 or 3 practice test experiences so they became familiar with test conditions and multiple choice questions.

After the introduction of My School website, the stakes were instantly raised. For months in advance of NAPLAN, teachers in Yrs 3 and 5 now shape their teaching to the test. Children sit many practice tests. In some classrooms they write each week in the NAPLAN test condition of 40 minutes with no assistance during this time[...]Teachers feel pressured and judged. The results are pounced upon nervously.³³

3.43 The School of Education at Deakin University described the publication of NAPLAN results on the My School website as a 'summative judgement', that is not a fair and true reflection of all the elements that make up an effective learning environment. The publication of the results also takes away from the positive aspects of a standardised test where the goal it is to 'diagnose the literacy and numeracy needs of individual students':

This goal, however, is being compromised by the publication of results on the MySchool website, which reduces the test results to summative judgments of a whole school’s performance, sometimes unfairly stigmatizing the school in the eyes of a general public that does not fully appreciate the complexities of teaching and learning and the complex judgments involved in assessing students’ abilities, especially with respect to addressing the needs of culturally diverse and disadvantaged communities.³⁴

3.44 The Australian Education Union (AEU) discussed the committee's previous inquiry into NAPLAN and emphasised the research available to the committee then had since been supplemented by further evidence from both Australia and

32 Australian Association for the Teaching of English, *Submission 40*, p. 3.

33 Jenny Cullen, *Submission 36*, p. 1.

34 School of Education, Deakin University, *Submission 45*, pp. 4-5.

internationally, of the negative impact on teachers and students from high stakes testing:

[T]he existing body of evidence on high-stakes testing in general, and NAPLAN in particular, has been supplemented by both international research literature and recent Australian research.

3.45 The AEU urged the Committee and the government to take notice of the research and reconsider the publication of data on the website in its current form:

We urge this Inquiry to heed the evidence-based findings about the largely negative impact of high-stakes testing on teaching and learning in the context of the NAPLAN program and publication of NAPLAN data on the My School website.³⁵

3.46 However the perception of the My School website as a basis for comparative analysis is very different for the educational authorities who require various tools to be able to address deficiencies across their area. Tasmania's Department of Education espoused the benefits of the My School website, while being conscious of the potential pitfalls:

The DoE considers that overall the *My School* website supports processes of accountability, evaluation, collaborative policy development and resource allocation within school communities. It also provides valuable comparisons of a school's data sets with those of a group of other schools with similar socioeconomic status (SES) profiles as a context.

However, the DoE does acknowledge the potential of *My School* data to be used to create simplistic league tables which do not take into account the local context and factors such as SES.³⁶

3.47 ACARA also defended the publication of NAPLAN results. ACARA's submission lists what it terms as 'clear advantages' of the publication of NAPLAN data and emphasises that every effort is made to avoid the compilation of league tables. Amongst the advantages they cite include:

- Encouraging discussion between parents, the wider community, and schools about school improvement.
- Illustrating the improvements that are being made in schools, sometimes in very difficult circumstances, and celebrating the positive contributions of teachers and schools. In particular, gain data can be used to highlight the improvements made by students between the test years.
- Encouraging professional discussions between schools on strategies that have been used to improve student literacy and numeracy skills. *My School* allows principals and teachers to identify schools with a similar student cohort which may be achieving a higher level student gain.

35 Australian Education Union, *Submission 57*, p. 13; p. 17.

36 Department of Education, Government of Tasmania, *Submission 29*, p. 5.

- Challenging schools in which students are achieving above average results to compare themselves to schools with similar student cohorts and examine whether students are improving at the rate expected or whether the school and its students are ‘coasting’.
- Providing a breakdown at a school level of the percentage of students achieving results in each proficiency band. This allows both the school and the community to monitor the progress of each student cohort and ensure that teaching practices are improving results for all students.³⁷

3.48 Data is published but sanctions to schools and teachers on this basis are not applied. In many cases, additional funding or other forms of assistance has been provided to schools that have not been performing as well as expected. The Department indicated that schools identified as having below average student outcomes in literacy and numeracy have been allocated additional funding of \$11 million in total, to assist them raise literacy and numeracy performance.³⁸

Committee View

3.49 The committee accepts that data obtained from NAPLAN is of significant value to stakeholders including students, schools, parents, education authorities, the wider community, and state and national governments and the provision of this data through MySchool has enabled greater understanding about the performance of schools. However there are also significant disbenefits from publishing the data in a manner that as part of its functionality either compares itself, or allows easy comparison between schools.

3.50 The committee further accepts that the Department and ACARA discourage the use of the data to develop league tables, but this does not diminish the facts that this occurs. One of its core elements of the *MySchool* website is the ability to compare schools, but given the number of variables involved in the testing process, and the almost infinite variation in students, a true comparison is not possible.

3.51 For this reason the committee would still like to see the data published, but some of the core ranking and comparative functionality removed from the website. This would allow for data to be published to schools and parents and education authorities, but it would limit the disingenuous use of the data to rank schools.

Recommendation 4

3.52 The committee recommends that ACARA closely monitor the use of NAPLAN results to ensure results are published to assist the Government to deliver extra, targeted funding to schools and students who need more support, rather than the development of league tables.

37 Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority, *Submission 58*, pp 16-17.

38 Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, *Submission 29*, p. 6.

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.

CHAPTER 5

International best practice for standardised testing

5.1 The inquiry sought to assess the effectiveness of NAPLAN in an international context to ensure Australia is using educational best practice to maintain and improve our global educational standing. As well as being informed by the submissions it received, the committee considered findings from a number of Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development (OECD) publications. These publications were also referenced by the Department and ACARA in their submissions to the inquiry.

5.2 The OECD report, *Synergies for Better Learning: An International Perspective on Evaluation and Assessment in Education*, highlights the importance of education in a global world:

Economic activity has become globally interconnected on an unprecedented scale... This growing integration of economies has an impact on strategies for national competitiveness, innovation, employment and skills. The emergence of the "knowledge society" and the strong skill bias in technological change have increased the value of education as a determinant of social and economic outcomes; this raises the payoff to good performance and amplifies the penalty for poor performance. The quality of education is necessary to achieve economic competitiveness in a context of global economic competition.¹

5.3 With specific regard to assessment and evaluation the report stresses the importance of being able to measure the benefits of achieving educational goals for individual students, but also on the broader community:

"Well designed evaluation and assessment activities are expected to ensure that: each student is provided with quality and relevant education; the overall education system is contributing to the social and economic development of the country; and each school agent is performing at their best to deliver efficient education services. A corollary of this is that educational goals place increasing emphasis on equity objectives, which enlarges the scope for evaluation and assessment activities."²

1 Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development, *Synergies for Better Learning: An International Perspective on Evaluation and Assessment in Education*, April 2013, p. 47, http://www.keepeek.com/Digital-Asset-Management/oecd/education/synergies-for-better-learning-an-international-perspective-on-evaluation-and-assessment_9789264190658-en#page1, (accessed 4 March 2014).

2 Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development, *Synergies for Better Learning: An International Perspective on Evaluation and Assessment in Education*, April 2013, p. 50, http://www.keepeek.com/Digital-Asset-Management/oecd/education/synergies-for-better-learning-an-international-perspective-on-evaluation-and-assessment_9789264190658-en#page1, (accessed 4 March 2014).

5.4 However the OECD report raises the controversy of whether to publish the data garnished from testing. In some countries national assessments cannot be used to rank schools. This differs from Australia, where the media publishes school rankings or 'performance tables' drawing on officially published data, although this practice is not supported by the Australian government. The OECD report states that:

[E]vidence on the effect of publishing student exam or assessment results is mixed, with some studies showing a positive relationship with student performance results, but others showing unintended strategic behaviour by schools, teachers and parents.³

5.5 One of the key factors in whether to publish data or not is how it is used. Australia is considered as making a high use of the results of evaluation and assessment for development (accountability) because most of the components of its evaluation and assessment framework are systematically linked to actions for development. A key challenge is to find the right balance between accountability and the development functions of evaluation and assessment:

While transparency of informed, high-quality data, and the accountability of school agents are essential for a well-functioning evaluation and assessment system, it is important to ensure that the existing data and information are actually used for development and improvement. This requires reflection on designing mechanisms to ensure that the results of evaluation and assessment activities feed back into teaching and learning practices, school improvement and education policy development.⁴

5.6 Both the Department and ACARA cited OECD publications to support their argument that NAPLAN represents international best practice for standardised testing. ACARA submitted that:

In 2010 the OECD undertook a review of Australia's evaluation and assessment processes as part of an international study into evaluation and assessment in education. The report on this review affirmed that NAPLAN is technically sound and results are credible among school agents.⁵

5.7 The Department referred to the OECD report, *Review of Evaluation and Assessment Frameworks for Improving School Outcomes*, which analyses the strengths and weaknesses of different approaches, and offers policy advice on using

3 Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development, *Synergies for Better Learning: An International Perspective on Evaluation and Assessment in Education*, April 2013, p. 633, http://www.keepeek.com/Digital-Asset-Management/oecd/education/synergies-for-better-learning-an-international-perspective-on-evaluation-and-assessment_9789264190658-en#page1, (accessed 4 March 2014).

4 Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development, *Synergies for Better Learning: An International Perspective on Evaluation and Assessment in Education*, April 2013, p. 66, http://www.keepeek.com/Digital-Asset-Management/oecd/education/synergies-for-better-learning-an-international-perspective-on-evaluation-and-assessment_9789264190658-en#page1, (accessed 4 March 2014).

5 Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority, *Submission 58*, p. 20.

evaluation and assessment to improve the quality, equity and efficiency of education.⁶ According to the Department's submission:

The report notes that Australia's National Education Agreement (effective 25 July 2012) has reinforced the role of evaluation and assessment as key tools to achieve quality and equity in Australian education, in particular with the introduction of the NAPLAN and the establishment of reporting requirements for all schools.⁷

5.8 The OECD report also noted the Government's opposition to the publication of data to create league tables, while identifying the publication of NAPLAN results in general as:

...a best practice example of public accountability through the reporting of standardised student assessment results at the school level for use by parents, government officials, the media and other stakeholders.⁸

5.9 A number of submitters disagreed with the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations and ACARA and pointed to alternative international approaches to standardised testing. For example, the Australian Literacy Educators' Association (ALEA) referred to the United Kingdom's standardised 'high stakes' testing regime similar to NAPLAN, which after analysis, had not been found to have improved student outcomes in English.⁹ ALEA also quoted research into the *No Child Left Behind* program in the United States as an example. This program has as its centrepiece a requirement for all states¹⁰ to develop standards that are measured through state wide testing.¹¹ The research cited by ALEA contended that substantial gains in the 1990s that were realised through educational reforms rather than testing, stalled or declined under the *No Child Left Behind* program.

5.10 In comparison, many submitters¹² cited the Finnish education system as one that does not rely on standardised testing but has nonetheless achieved excellent results in numeracy and literacy.

5.11 The Australian Primary Principles Association (APPA) suggested that the success of the Finnish system could be traced to the trust it placed in teacher professionalism, rather than in standardised testing. APPA further noted a number of key elements, including an approach connected to inclusiveness and creativity, a high

6 Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, *Submission 69*, p. 30.

7 Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, *Submission 69*, p. 30.

8 Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, *Submission 69*, p. 30.

9 Australian Literacy Educators' Association, *Submission 66*, p. 13.

10 The bill specifically prohibits any "national testing" or "federally controlled curriculum".

11 *No Child Left Behind, An overview of the testing and accountability provisions of the No Child Left Behind Act, 2002*, <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/schools/nochild/nclb.html>. (accessed 5 March 2014).

12 For example, Australian Primary Principles Association, *Submission 19*; Noel Bourke, *Submission 34*; Australian Association for the Teaching of English, *Submission 40*.

degree of special education support for students, and collective responsibility of teachers for developing curriculum and diagnostic assessments instead of prescribed curriculum and standardised high stakes testing.¹³

5.12 A number of submitters compared NAPLAN to the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA)¹⁴ in terms of its methodology and results. 2012 PISA results indicate Australia has higher than OECD average results in a number of areas, including overall performance. However, it also shows this is declining in the areas of mathematics and reading, with results for science showing a neutral trend with neither improvement nor decline. Student anxiety is around the OECD average with a lower than OECD average effect on performance.¹⁵

5.13 Professor Kaye Stacey, (former Chair of the International Mathematics Expert Group for the OECD PISA study in 2012), submitted a comparison of PISA and NAPLAN, focussing on mathematics. Professor Stacey submitted OECD's assessments focus on providing knowledge and skills 'that are likely to be important for knowledge economies in the future'.¹⁶ However she suggested that NAPLAN assessments are focussed on more basic skills:

NAPLAN does not provide an adequate model for the school mathematics curriculum. It does not promote complex thinking, or reasoning, or explaining mathematical ideas.¹⁷

5.14 The committee has noted a number of areas in the PISA 2012 *Results in Focus Report* where Australia performs above the OECD average. For example, Australia has achieved an above average performance in both mathematics and equity in education opportunities.¹⁸ The results also indicate that on average across OECD countries, 8% of students are top performers in reading; Australia has more than 10% of students that are top performers.¹⁹ The PISA 2012 results indicate that Australia is one of several countries - including Finland - that achieve above OECD average mean

13 Australian Primary Principles Association, *Submission 19*, p. 10.

14 PISA is the triennial international survey conducted by the OECD which aims to evaluate education systems worldwide by testing the skills and knowledge of 15-year-old students. It is not linked to a particular school curriculum and is designed to assess to what extent students at the end of compulsory education, can apply their knowledge to real-life situations and be equipped for full participation in society. The test lasts two hours and contains questions on reading, science and mathematics. Schools are selected randomly to participate. To date, students representing more than 70 economies have participated in the assessment. (<http://www.oecd.org/pisa/aboutpisa/>)

15 OECD, *PISA 2012 Results*, <http://www.oecd.org/pisa/keyfindings/pisa-2012-results.htm>. (accessed 5 March 2014).

16 Prof Kaye Stacey, *Submission 6*, p. 1.

17 Prof Kaye Stacey, *Submission 6*, p. 3.

18 OECD, *PISA 2012 Results in Focus*, 2013, p. 13, <http://www.oecd.org/pisa/keyfindings/pisa-2012-results-overview.pdf>, (accessed 5 March 2014).

19 OECD, *PISA 2012 Results in Focus*, 2013, p. 4, <http://www.oecd.org/pisa/keyfindings/pisa-2012-results-overview.pdf>, (accessed 5 March 2014).

performance and have a weak relationship between socio-economic status and student performance.²⁰

5.15 Another comparison that can be made between PISA and NAPLAN is the quality of the data it produces about schools, and how useful it is in considering the needs of students and schools as a whole. Much of the debate around NAPLAN has centred on the way information it collects is used as a diagnostic tool, and the corresponding way in which it may affect student stress levels. The quality of data produced by testing and the degree to which it can be interrogated to produce meaningful information that will assist parents, schools and governments to improve individual students' as well as overall school performance is considered critical to the success of standardised testing.

Committee View

5.16 It is the committee's view that Australia is performing well at an international level, as demonstrated by the most recent OECD report outlining the 2012 PISA results, and that NAPLAN does not appear to be inconsistent with international best practice. However, OECD data highlights a number of areas where Australia's overall performance is declining or is below OECD average, and areas where NAPLAN could be improved.

5.17 The committee believes it is important to consider how NAPLAN could focus on twenty-first century skills and testing that requires students to undertake a deeper analysis in responding to questions. Data collected should both be meaningful and able to be interrogated to produce reports that will result in better outcomes for students and schools.

**Senator Sue Lines
Chair**

20 OECD, *PISA 2012 Results in Focus*, 2013, p. 14, <http://www.oecd.org/pisa/keyfindings/pisa-2012-results-overview.pdf>, (accessed 5 March 2014).

AUSTRALIAN GREENS ADDITIONAL COMMENTS

Full list of Australian Greens recommendations

Recommendation 1:

1.9 The Australian Greens recommend that, if publication of individual school results on the *Myschool* site continues, the Government remove the functionality that enables ranking and comparisons of individual school results.

Recommendation 2:

1.10 The Australian Greens recommend that in the event that functionality for the ranking and comparisons of individual school results is removed from the *Myschool* website but improper and detrimental use of NAPLAN data continues (such as the creation of league tables) the Government remove the school-level data, in accordance with their prior policy position.

Recommendation 3:

1.18 The Australian Greens recommend that the Government clarify the purpose of NAPLAN testing, particularly with regard to its use as a diagnostic assessment, and adapt the structure and any publication of the data to align with the stated purpose.

Recommendation 4:

1.30 The Australian Greens recommend that the Government provide further support and training for teachers and schools to analyse the NAPLAN data and devise individual educational programs to assist students to ensure the resources used to run the tests and create the data are not wasted.

Recommendation 5:

1.46 The Australian Greens recommend that the Government consult with schools to determine the best time of year to hold the annual tests in light of discussions around the purpose of the testing.

Recommendation 6:

1.53 The Australian Greens recommend that NAPLAN Online uses the advantages of the medium to test a broader scope of knowledge within literacy and numeracy, more accurately reflect classroom learning styles and incorporate questions which encourage lateral and creative thinking from students.

Recommendation 7:

1.60 The Australian Greens recommend that ACARA actively consults with teachers and academics experienced in teaching students from language backgrounds other than English to scrutinise the tests for cultural assumptions and inappropriate content and styles of questioning.

Introduction

1.1 The Australian Greens are pleased to endorse the majority report. However, we believe that in light of the evidence cited and strong opinions expressed in the ‘committee view’ sections, the recommendations of the majority report are inadequate in responding to the full extent of the evidence presented to the committee.

1.2 While there were a number of suggested improvements for NAPLAN test itself, a large number of submitters attributed problems with the NAPLAN scheme to the publication of data on the *Myschool* site and the competitive, high-stakes culture this has created.

1.3 As noted in the committee report, there is widespread confusion about the purpose of NAPLAN testing. However, it is clear that NAPLAN was not designed for use as a ranking tool for schools.

1.4 Many of the groups made submissions in support of ceasing the publication of school-level data on the site.¹

1.5 The Australian Greens also note this was the position of the Liberal Party in opposition and has been reiterated by Education Minister Christopher Pyne since the election.²

1.6 The Australian Greens are willing to negotiate with the Federal Government on the best way for this to proceed.

1.7 We affirm our support for the need for measures to track student achievement and collect data about schools and students, but it is clear on the evidence presented to the committee that steps must be taken to restrict the competitive and unfair ranking environment created by *Myschool* site.

1.8 If the Coalition Government has altered its position, it is the view of the Australian Greens that the committee must formalise the view in Section 3.51 into a recommendation. It is a recommendation that we are prepared to make:

Recommendation 1

1.9 The Australian Greens recommend that, if publication of individual school results on the *Myschool* site continues, the Government remove the functionality that enables ranking and comparisons of individual school results.

Recommendation 2

1.10 The Australian Greens recommend that in the event that functionality for the ranking and comparisons of individual school results is removed from the *Myschool* website but improper and detrimental use of NAPLAN data continues

1 For example, see ACT Council of Parents and Citizens Associations, *Submission 70*, p 3; The Victorian Association for the Teaching of English, *Submission 74*, p 16; NSW Parents' Council Inc, *Submission 78*, p 3.

2 Alexandra Smith & Amy McNeilage, ‘Schools site receives a mixed report card’, Sydney Morning Herald, 8 March 2014, p 35.

(such as the creation of league tables) the Government remove the school-level data, in accordance with their prior policy position.

1.11 A full discussion of issues arising from the terms of reference and further recommendations follow. However all subsequent discussion and recommendations are made in the context of recommendations 1 and 2.

Intended purposes of NAPLAN testing

1.12 Since its inception, politicians and bureaucrats have assigned a number of different purposes to NAPLAN testing. It has been separately described as diagnostic and not diagnostic; a snapshot of learning on one day and a measure to identify systemic gaps; a tool for governments to allocate resources and a tool for parents to scrutinise teacher performance.³

1.13 The Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority's submission says NAPLAN tests contain 'insufficient items at each difficulty level to provide the detailed information that a diagnostic test is designed to do'.⁴

1.14 However, ACARA Chair Barry McGaw has also made the following comment in 2011:

NAPLAN is not a test students can prepare for because it is not a test of content. The federal government's intention in introducing and reporting NAPLAN results was to provide a diagnostic tool for teachers and parents, identifying gaps in students' skills.⁵

1.15 The Department of Education similarly listed the central aim of national assessment as

finding out what students can or cannot do and lifting the performance of every student in every school... the tests should focus on the diagnosis of each student's strengths and weaknesses as a means for planning educational interventions'.⁶

1.16 Fintona Girls School also pointed out the inherent contradiction in using NAPLAN simultaneously as a means to measure individual student performance and 'using these results to suggest that some schools are better than others'.⁷

1.17 As noted in the committee report, there remains significant confusion about the purpose of NAPLAN testing among educators.

Recommendation 3

1.18 The Australian Greens recommend that the Government clarify the purpose of NAPLAN testing, particularly with regard to its use as a diagnostic

3 See Australian Education Union, *Submission 57*, pp 7-8 for a more detailed summary

4 ACARA, *Submission 58*, p. 8.

5 ACARA media release quoted in Australian Education Union, *Submission 57*, p 8.

6 Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, *Submission 69*, p. 9.

7 Fintona Girls School, *Submission 31*, p 2.

assessment, and adapt the structure and any publication of the data to align with the stated purpose.

The impact on teaching and student learning practices of publishing NAPLAN test results on the *Myschool* website

Use of data

1.19 The reliability of data generated by NAPLAN testing has been called into question, particularly in regard to publication on the *Myschool* site.

1.20 As noted by Epping Heights Public School and many others cited in the committee report, small school cohorts and other mitigating factors can influence the perception of overall school performance.

1.21 In the competitive market *Myschool* creates, some schools are understandably eager to control these factors. Numerous submitters provided evidence of student withdrawal as a way to avoid students with difficulties from sitting the NAPLAN and ‘bringing down’ school results.⁸

1.22 Accounting for factors such as diverse language backgrounds and disability, good NAPLAN results do not always correlate to good schools, but *Myschool* has generated a need for schools to emphasise improvement in NAPLAN scores over efforts to provide a rounded education.⁹

1.23 Other submitters, including the NSW Primary Principals' Association, noted the inherent problems with interpretation of complex data by those unfamiliar with the education system.¹⁰

1.24 The Australian College of Educators rejects the notion the *Myschool* website provides incentives for low-performing schools to improve:

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.¹¹

1.25 The Australian Greens support the collection of data for education authorities and the provision of information to parents and schools, but we agree with submitters who said publication of the results on the *Myschool* site had led to incorrect or mischievous use of the data.¹²

8 See Epping Heights Public School, *Submission 21*, p. 2; Queensland Association of State School Principals Inc, *Submission 22*, p 3.

9 See, for example, ACT Council of Parents and Citizens Associations, *Submission 70*, p. 1.

10 NSW Primary Principals' Association, *Submission 23*, p 4.

11 Australian College of Educators, *Submission 30*, p 4.

12 Mr Norm Hart, President, Australian Primary Principals Association, *Proof Committee Hansard*, 21 June 2013, p. 19.

1.26 For this reason, it is the view of the Australian Greens that the Government must act to limit this misrepresentation of schools as described in Recommendation 1.

1.27 However, the committee also heard extensive evidence that teachers and schools are not equipped to interpret the data produced by NAPLAN testing.

1.28 A survey conducted by the Independent Education Union of Australia showed only one third of members found the results useful.¹³

1.29 The Australian Education Union recommended schools be given more resources to allow for professional development for teachers on the use of data, the interpretation of data and the application of information in informing teaching and learning.¹⁴

Recommendation 4

1.30 The Australian Greens recommend that the Government provide further support and training for teachers and schools to analyse the NAPLAN data and devise individual educational programs to assist students to ensure the resources used to run the tests and create the data are not wasted.

Effect on student learning and wellbeing

1.31 The publication of NAPLAN results on the *Myschool* site has created a high-stakes test for schools, resulting in significant media coverage of the tests. Along with the natural inclination of parents to want the best for their child, it is our belief that creating a high stakes environment for schools has had a flow-on effect for individuals.

1.32 A commercial market has sprung up for NAPLAN preparation, including textbooks, soft toys, fish-oil supplements, targeted tutoring and more.¹⁵

1.33 As noted in the majority report, a large number of submitters noted negative impacts of NAPLAN testing on student wellbeing. Among other evidence cited, we note concerns articulated by Epping Heights Public School and others about the long-term educational impacts on students feeling they are failures.¹⁶

1.34 The Australian Education Union also noted reports of increasing numbers of parents seeking psychological counselling for their children because of anxiety and stress associated with NAPLAN.¹⁷

13 Independent Education Union of Australia, *Submission 41*, p. 9.

14 Mr Angelo Gavrielatos, Australian Education Union, *Proof Committee Hansard*, 21 June 2013, p. 14.

15 See Australian Education Union, *Submission 57*, pp 9–10; Independent Schools Queensland, *Submission 73*, pp 3–4.

16 Epping Heights Public School, *Submission 21*, p. 2

17 See Australian Education Union, *Submission 57*, p 10.

1.35 Even in schools which actively limit discussion of NAPLAN testing, schools have reported a strong parental push for prior preparation. Heads of Independent Schools of Australia director and principal Mr Phillip Heath told the committee:

My school does not talk about NAPLAN at all. We do not publish the results. We keep it very much to what it is designed for—that is, to give feedback to us and to an individual student. But, for about half of those present, their parents are giving them tests at home to prepare for the experience. That really surprised me. That is in a context where we say nothing, as a school, and I would suggest that is a pretty common picture around the country. Parents at home who are used to a testing regime—that is how they grew up—consider this a very high-stakes experience, much higher than, in fact, it was intended ever to be.¹⁸

Effect on teachers and teaching practice

1.36 A large portion of submitters provided evidence the publication of NAPLAN data on the *Myschool* site is increasing pressure on teachers and school leaders, diverting attention from other areas of the curriculum and ‘teaching to the test’.

1.37 Along with the evidence cited in the committee report, we also note the evidence of Queensland Association of State School Principals Inc, which directly ties this stress to the comparative and competitive nature of the *Myschool* site:

School principals are also feeling immense pressure exerted by the system as both schools and states jockey for league position. They, in turn, explicitly or inadvertently, place additional pressure on their teachers.¹⁹

1.38 Submitters also gave evidence the pressure is so high, teachers are requesting not to teach year levels with NAPLAN testing.²⁰

1.39 Evidence provided to the committee regarding narrowing of the curriculum and teaching to the test is well covered in the majority report.²¹ We also note the evidence of MTeach student Andrew Irwin who witnessed planned lessons for Year 2 students being replaced with coaching on pre-written NAPLAN number problems – almost a year out from when student would sit the test.²²

1.40 Publication of NAPLAN data on the *Myschool* site also has negative consequences for teacher morale. The NSW Primary Principals' Association said

18 Mr Phillip Heath, Director and Incoming Chair, Association of Heads of Independent Schools of Australia Ltd, *Proof Committee Hansard*, 21 June 2013, p. 2.

19 Queensland Association of State School Principals Inc, *Submission 22*, p 4.

20 Spensley Street Primary School, *Submission 76*, p 2; Mr Chris Watt, Federal Secretary, Independent Education Union of Australia, *Proof Committee Hansard*, 21 June 2013, p 26.

21 See also for example: Ms Jane Hunter, *Submission 7*, p 2. See also, Association of Heads of Independent Schools Australia, *Submission 56*, p 2; The Whitlam Institute, *Submission 26*, p 6; Dr Alyson Simpson, *Submission 64*.

22 Dr Alyson Simpson, *Submission 64*, Attachment 2, p 1.

Elevating the status of NAPLAN results via the *Myschool* website diminishes the public's trust in the teaching profession and portrays NAPLAN incorrectly as a definitive and absolute measure.²³

1.41 The Victorian Association for the Teaching of English submitted teachers are 'required to respond to parent expectations' by providing NAPLAN preparation and regularly feel 'quite disempowered as their professional knowledge is undermined by being forced to be so narrowly focussed'.²⁴

1.42 In light of the evidence presented in the majority report and above, it is our view the committee recommendations do not go far enough to tackle the serious and adverse, consequences of the publication of data on the *Myschool* site.

Potential improvements to the program, to improve student learning and assessment

Timing

1.43 The committee heard significant evidence that the delay in returning NAPLAN results to teachers significantly restricted the effectiveness of NAPLAN testing as a diagnostic tool.

1.44 We endorse the recommendation of the committee to improve the turn-around time of data from NAPLAN testing to teachers.

1.45 However, some submitters including the Independent Education Union of Australia, suggested that the timing of the tests should be dependent on the clarification of the intention of NAPLAN testing:

It would seem sensible to conduct a 'diagnostic test' as early as possible in the school year... If on the other hand the tests are intended to be a summative assessment of the literacy and numeracy levels against a benchmark it makes little sense to assess students in May of the school on the basis of intended capacity for that year's benchmark expectations. Such a test would be better administered at the end of the school year.²⁵

Recommendation 5

1.46 The Australian Greens recommend that the Government consult with schools to determine the best time of year to hold the annual tests in light of discussions around the purpose of the testing.

Testing of creative or higher-order thinking

1.47 NAPLAN testing examines a very narrow selection of skills within very narrow subject matter. It also does so in a way that is incongruent with current teaching and learning styles.

23 NSW Primary Principals' Association, *Submission 23*, p 6.

24 The Victorian Association for the Teaching of English, *Submission 74*, p 16.

25 Independent Education Union of Australia, *Submission 41*, pp 12-13.

1.48 Ms Lorraine Wilson submitted that the NAPLAN Reading, Writing and Language Convention Tests are ‘a terrible mismatch with today’s best classroom practice’:

The type of literacy able to be measured by multiple choice, machine marked tests is low level literacy. It is the type of literacy we taught in the 1950s, 1960s in Australia. Since that time there has been much excellent research which has illuminated the types of reading and writing necessary for a changing, global, highly technological society, as well as research about how children learn language (both oral and written).²⁶

1.49 The committee also heard evidence that multiple choice testing is unable to test creative and higher-order thinking, inconsistent with the increasing global demand for entrepreneurial skills and creativity.²⁷

1.50 Steiner Education Australia, among other submitters, noted NAPLAN is inconsistent with daily teaching and learning experiences for students and examined the design of questions to ‘trick’ students.²⁸

1.51 For example, Ms Lorraine Wilson singled out questions which ask students to identify spelling errors:

Misspellings may introduce incorrect letters which the child might never have included in his production of the spelling, but seeing it in the test question, causes confusion. ‘NAPLAN makes a pedagogical assumption that proofreading can act as a proxy for a student’s spelling ability’ (Bartlett & Buchanan 2012).²⁹

1.52 Several submitters also noted the international movement away from standardised testing,³⁰ while the Australian Literacy Educators' Association argued the limited nature of NAPLAN testing was inconsistent with the *Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians* to ‘promote creativity, innovation, cultural appreciation and personal values to ensure they become confident and creative learners equipped for a rapidly changing world’.³¹

26 Ms Lorraine Wilson, *submission 11*, p 2.

27 Queensland Association of State School Principals Inc, *Submission 22*, p 7.

28 Steiner Education Australia, *Submission 43*, p 15; see also Australian Primary Principals Association, *Submission 19*, p 6.

29 Ms Lorraine Wilson, *Submission 11*, pp 7-8.

30 For examples see Ms Jane Hunter, *Submission 7*, p 4; Dr Kerry Hempenstall, *Submission 27*, p 7; School of Education, Deakin University, *Submission 45*, p 5; Association of Heads of Independent Schools of Australia, *Submission 56*, p 2.

31 Australian Literacy Educators' Association, *Submission 66*, p 2.

Recommendation 6

1.53 The Australian Greens recommend that NAPLAN Online uses the advantages of the medium to test a broader scope of knowledge within literacy and numeracy, more accurately reflect classroom learning styles and incorporate questions which encourage lateral and creative thinking from students.

Inclusivity

1.54 NAPLAN testing to date has contained cultural assumptions that have disadvantaged students from language backgrounds other than English, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students.

1.55 Ms Jane Wenlock, a teacher experienced in teaching secondary students from LBOTE backgrounds, told the committee ‘Skippy the bush Kangaroo’-style questions were inaccessible to her students:

that NAPLAN, in fact, discriminates against our students, as they are unable to access much of the written material to show their true capabilities.³²

1.56 The Australian College of Educators also raised concerns the ‘trick questions’ common in NAPLAN tests disadvantage LBOTE students.

1.57 Yirrkala School principal Mr Leonard Freeman also told the committee many of the indigenous students at his school do not have sufficient grasp of Standard Australian English or the cultural and social knowledge that the tests assume:

Year 3 and 5 remote indigenous students who work hard at school, whose family supports their learning and ensures good school attendance, are still regarded as having failed based on NAPLAN results.³³

1.58 It is the opinion of the Australian Council of TESOL Associations that NAPLAN tests provide ‘distorted, inaccurate and unreliable’ data for these students and no basis for developing appropriate pedagogy or programs for these learners.³⁴

1.59 They also raised concerns publication of NAPLAN results on the *Myschool* site has resulted in parents removing their children from schools with high numbers of students learning Standard Australian English as an additional language or dialect.

32 Ms Jane Wenlock, *Submission 13*, p 1.

33 Mr Leonard Freeman, *Submission 71*, p 2.

34 Australian Council of TESOL Associations, *Submission 79*, p 3.

Recommendation 7

1.60 The Australian Greens recommend that ACARA actively consults with teachers and academics experienced in teaching students from language backgrounds other than English to scrutinise the tests for cultural assumptions and inappropriate content and styles of questioning.

Senator Penny Wright

APPENDIX 1

Submissions and Additional Information received by the Committee

- 1 Dr Van Davy
- 2 Dr Gloria Latham
- 3 Mrs Edith Knight
- 4 Mrs Patricia Buoncristiani
- 5 Dr John Ridd
- 6 Prof Kaye Stacey
- 7 Ms Jane Hunter
- 8 Aitken College
- 9 Ms Eunice Bailey
- 10 Mr Les O'Gorman
- 11 Ms Lorraine Wilson
- 12 Mr Trevor Stockley
- 13 Mrs Jane Wenlock
- 14 Mr Leon Voesenek
- 15 Kingsgrove High School
- 16 Mr Brian Joye
- 17 Better Education Pty Ltd
- 18 St Philip's Christian College Gosford
- 19 Australian Primary Principals Association
- 20 Professor Patrick Griffin, Assessment Research Centre, Melbourne
Graduate School of Education
- 21 Epping Heights Public School
- 22 Queensland Association of State School Principals Inc
- 23 NSW Primary Principals' Association
- 24 Professor Joy Cumming

- 25 P and C Federation
- 26 The Whitlam Institute within the University of Western Sydney
- 27 Dr Kerry Hempenstall
- 28 Ms Maureen Anderson
- 29 Department of Education, TAS
- 30 Australian College of Educators (ACE)
- 31 Fintona Girls' School
- 32 Ms Denise McKee, Suzuki Piano Studio
- 33 Ms Muriel Johnson
- 34 Mr Noel Bourke
- 35 Mr David Hornsby
- 37 Christian Schools Australia Limited
- 38 Ms Rachael Sowden
- 39 Westralian Association for the Teaching of English to Speakers of Other Languages (WATESOL)
- 40 Australian Association for the Teaching of English (AATE)
- 41 Independent Education Union of Australia
- 42 Queensland Catholic Education Commission (QCEC)
- 43 Steiner Education Australia
- 44 Catholic Education South Australia
- 45 Deakin University (Burwood)
- 46 Mr Robert Hassell, Association of Independent Schools of Western Australia
- 47 Mr Mark Ammermann
- 48 P and Cs Qld
- 49 Ms Yvonne Meyer
- 50 Mr Tony Stokes
- 51 School of Education, The University of Queensland
- 52 School of Education, University of South Australia

53	Mr Glyn Parfitt
54	SA Primary Principals Association
55	Australian Parents Council
56	AHISA
57	Australian Education Union
58	Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA)
59	Dr Nicole Mockler
60	Multicultural Development Association and Townsville Multicultural Support Group
61	Mr Ken Woolford
62	Mr Brad Ahern
63	MultiLit Pty Ltd
64	Dr Alyson Simpson
65	Mr Ben Zonca
66	Australian Literacy Educators' Association
67	Australian Association of Mathematics teachers Inc. (AAMT)
68	Ms Remana Dearden
69	Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations
70	ACT Council of Parents and Citizens Associations
71	Mr Leonard Freeman
72	Mr Derek Synnott, Yarralumla Primary School
73	Independent Schools Queensland
74	The Victorian Association for the Teaching of English
75	Silkwood School
76	Spensley Street Primary School
77	ACT Government
78	NSW Parents' Council Inc
79	Australian Council of TESOL Associations (ACTA)
80	Department of Education, Training and Employment (QLD)

- 81 Australian Council of State School Organisations (ACSSO)
- 82 Ms Denise Angelo
- 83 Mr Phil Cullen
- 84 Name Withheld
- 85 Name Withheld
- 87 Name Withheld
- 88 Name Withheld
- 89 Name Withheld
- 90 Name Withheld
- 91 Name Withheld
- 92 Name Withheld
- 93 Name Withheld
- 94 Mr Philip Henseleit
- 95 Name Withheld
- 96 Ms Jan Paterson, South Australian Secondary Principals Association (SASPA)
- 97 Hon Peter Chandler MLA, Northern Territory Government
- 98 Mr Otto Dargan
- 99 Ms Aowham Aldujayli