

# **Submission to NAPLAN Review Panel**

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of New South Wales

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## Introduction

Federation of Parents and Citizens Associations of New South Wales (P&C Federation) is thankful for this opportunity to contribute to this review of NAPLAN. P&C Federation supports the position of individual educational and developmental needs met by a range of differential services expressed through appropriate and well-planned curricula, programs and environments conducted by sensitive and well-trained personnel in conjunction with parents<sup>1</sup> and families.

The core belief of P&C Federation is that the education of our children and youth is the most fundamental means of ensuring individual and collective success and, as a result, our greatest national resource. We also support the concept that it is primarily the responsibility of governments to ensure education is well rounded and fully funded.

## Submission

### **Our view of a national assessment program and standardised testing**

Parents recognise the importance of a national assessment program for identifying the shortfalls and strengths in education in order to plan for the future. More importantly parents see this form of assessment as a key method for informing teaching and learning and allowing students to grow and achieve their full potential.

While gathering national data through standardised testing is important, it should not become the key driver for education or be the silver bullet to solve sliding standards. We see improvement being driven from the bottom up rather than from the top down. We also see local, regional, state and national data being derived from frequent school-based assessment which is part and parcel of teaching the curriculum and largely transparent to students. Fundamentally this means not teaching to the test.

Our view of what nationalised assessment should look like consists of the following:

- First and foremost, it must be a diagnostic tool that informs teaching and learning.
- It must help inform parents of their child's progress against the curriculum. Parents not only need to know, but have a right to know how their child is performing and how they and the school can further support student learning.
- It must be low-impact, non-disruptive testing: as far as possible, it must be part and parcel of the normal day-to-day teaching and learning process. This would reduce the considerable stress generated by mass testing, remove the teach to the test mentality, remove the logistical nightmare from schools and refocus efforts on child-centric learning. We would argue that this change alone would see a marked improvement in student outcomes.

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<sup>1</sup> "Parent" refers to anyone with legal care of a child, such as a parent, carer or legal guardian

- Any standardised testing must primarily provide localised and timely data on student performance for teachers and parents and help to quickly identify any trends that need to be addressed for the child, teacher or the school.
- School-based test data would then feed outwards, deidentified, to inform systems and governments on the bigger picture in regard to the performance of regions, states/territories and the nation, thereby informing policy.
- Schools and systems must be accountable for their overall performance within the context of their environment. The focus here should be on positive improvement through targeted support and non-punitive measures.
- Testing and assessment must be directly linked to the curriculum. Anything else detracts from teaching and learning.
- Teachers are best placed to know how a child is progressing and therefore report to parents. This is why we support the use of more frequent low stakes, class-based assessments as the front-line tool in the overall assessment of children.
- Any standardised testing regime must be inherently transparent in its methodology.

#### **NAPLAN's ability to meet these objectives**

The existing national assessment program has essentially failed. Attempts to streamline and improve the process, such as going online, have only made the situation worse, damaging any remaining confidence in the methodology and appropriateness of the testing. It has produced an environment where the interests of schools, systems and governments are put ahead of that of the student. The My School website and has created a false sense of school performance, driving movement of students away from what are perceived to be badly performing schools. It has promised to deliver many things but most importantly it has failed to drive an increase in educational outcomes. In summary, NAPLAN is not fit for purpose, and without question must be replaced with a more student-centric model.

The current system fails specifically in the following respects:

- NAPLAN is a point-in-time snapshot of how students are performing within limited domains of learning. With two-year gaps between testing the only information that can be gleaned from the data in practice is a very general trend in a child's learning trajectory. As a test to inform teaching and learning, the data points are too far apart and contain considerable error.
- The publication of NAPLAN results on the My School has created de facto league tables, which has in turn made NAPLAN a high stakes test. It pits one school against another as they seek to maximise NAPLAN results for fear of losing students to other "higher performing" schools. Anecdotally, there are numerous cases of schools gaming the results by asking underperforming students to not sit NAPLAN for fear of lowering the schools

ranking in published results (though to our knowledge, this phenomenon has never been investigated).

- It has led to teaching-to-the-test approaches, with a large part of Term 1 devoted entirely to getting students ready for NAPLAN at the expense of teaching to the curriculum.
- NAPLAN results ignore various factors such as random individual variation (which may impact individual NAPLAN results by as much as  $\pm 12\%$ <sup>2</sup>) and the size of schools (as smaller schools may show greater natural variation in their scores than larger schools).
- NAPLAN only measures a narrow (albeit important) range of parameters, and due to its inherent limitations as a measure of student progress and its susceptibility to gaming outlined above, it is not a holistic view of student achievement even within the narrow range of parameters tested.
- The validity of NAPLAN results has been undermined by the introduction of NAPLAN Online. Due to inadequate technology and supporting infrastructure, a considerable number of schools are still sitting the pen-and-paper version, in effect creating two tests. Although ACARA insists the results of both versions are comparable, we have serious doubts about the validity of this argument. These doubts were further compounded by the failures of the 2018 and 2019 NAPLAN Online tests.
- NAPLAN consumes a great deal of teachers' time that could arguably be better spent on core teaching and learning against the curriculum. It may actually be a contributing factor to the perception of the curriculum being overcrowded with teachers having to play curriculum catchup once NAPLAN is completed.
- The tests impact significantly on teaching and learning for the remainder of the school that are not sitting the tests. This is the result of the complex logistics of implementing mass testing. Combined with the testing needs for the HSC minimum standard and the HSC, the overall impact on schools is significant.
- It should be noted that Australia is unique in its demographics and geography with particular challenges in relation to regional, rural and remote (RRR) education. Until the inequity between metropolitan and RRR contexts is addressed there will continue to be a wide variation in results across schools, state and territories.

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<sup>2</sup> Wu. 2009. *Interpreting NAPLAN Results for the Layperson*.

## Suggested Reform

We suggest that reforms to national testing should include the following:

- Testing should principally exist to help inform teaching and learning (test the teaching not teach to the test).
- Embed the assessment process as part of normal teaching and learning.
- Inform students and parents as to how the student is progressing against the curriculum.
- Align assessment completely with the curriculum.
- Move to more frequent, low-stakes, class-based testing supplemented by national standardised assessments that could be taken at any time at a class level or across a sampling of students. This would create a blend between frequent updates for parents and teachers with more infrequent, but nationally referenced standards, for comparison purposes.
- Increase the frequency and detail of reporting to parents without overburdening teachers.
- Provide significant and meaningful professional learning for teachers.
- Individual assessment results should not be publicly available. Individual results for children should only be available to the school and to the child's parents.
- Lock out the ability for any entity to produce league tables and protect the privacy of students.
- Put in place a system of accountability that allows for the positive reinforcement of identified issues through targeted support.

In terms of real-world examples of this practice we would refer the review panel to the approaches taken by New Zealand, Scotland and to some extent Singapore. Although not completely aligned to our proposal, they possess in their own way many of the essential elements.

We believe that advocating only for changes in timing or a change of content will do nothing to address our fundamental concerns. It is P&C Federation's firm view that nothing short of a major overhaul of NAPLAN is required, including a redefined purpose, a less disruptive and stressful assessment process and the provision of meaningful and targeted professional development to support such changes.