



**Australian Primary Principals Association
position paper on the
publication of nationally comparable
school performance information**

Introduction

The Australian Primary Principals Association (APPA) represents 7,200 Government, Catholic and Independent principals. It supports the adoption of high academic standards, the routine collection of evidence regarding the performance of students in key areas of the primary curriculum, and the responsible release of information about the resources available to schools and the performance of their students.

APPA notes the decision of the Ministerial Council for Education, Employment and Youth Affairs (MCEETYA) at its meeting of 17 April 2009 to proceed with the development of a system for comparing the performance of schools using NAPLAN results and other kinds of information. The Australian, State and Territory Education Ministers announced this decision as a major step forward in the national transparency agenda.

APPA supports the principle of transparency on the understanding that appropriate safeguards are put in place to ensure that the release of information about students and schools has a beneficial impact on primary education and that the potential negative effects have been nullified.

The research evidence from the United States and Britain clearly shows that high stakes assessment programs, such as NAPLAN, can have an unintended, negative impact on the quality of teaching and learning when low performance is heavily sanctioned. In particular, schools tend to narrow their curriculum around the focus of the tests, the importance of areas of the curriculum that are not assessed is diminished, higher order skills that are not able to be tested decline, large amounts of valuable instructional time are consumed by coaching and practising tests, a testing industry grows which is driven by its own commercial interests and authorities and schools are encouraged to participate in various forms of 'gaming' designed to improve performance. Hence, it is important to protect primary schools from such consequences.

In response to the decision of MCEETYA, this policy paper outlines the arrangements that APPA believes should be put in place in the interest of all Australian primary schools.

Ensuring that the national transparency agenda has a positive impact on the primary curriculum

APPA supports the use of NAPLAN (National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy) to provide schools and system authorities with information about the performance of Australian primary students in literacy and numeracy. However, APPA urges Australian governments to emphasise that NAPLAN is only one source of information about student achievement and that the primary curriculum is designed to promote the social and emotional development of children as well as their academic attainment across all learning areas of the curriculum.

APPA supports the commitment by the Australian government to close the gap on NAPLAN performances between indigenous and non-indigenous students.

APPA has always maintained that primary schools should endeavour that all students reach minimum national literacy and numeracy standards.

However, national literacy and numeracy assessment results must be used carefully and every effort must be made to ensure that the uses to which the assessment results are put lead to an enhancement of the quality of primary schooling.

Through MCEETYA, Australian governments have produced a position statement *Principles and Protocols for the Collection and National Reporting of MCEETYA Key Performance Measures for Schooling in Australia*. With regard to NAPLAN, this document makes no reference to serious risks that arise from the use of 'high stakes' testing. This is an important omission.

1. APPA recommends that MCEETYA adopts a common set of protocols that school authorities are expected to observe that will:

- **Preserve the overall balance of the primary curriculum;**
- **Prevent anti-educational, unethical 'gaming' practices designed to inflate test results; and**
- **Encourage schools to teach higher order skills and provide deep understandings about selected areas of the curriculum.**

APPA is aware that some proponents of national testing contend that coaching for the tests should be encouraged and that primary schools should make the improvement of NAPLAN assessment results their overarching goal. This view is strongly opposed by Australian primary principals. This raising-test-scores-at-all-costs-by-any-means approach will seriously degrade the quality of Australian primary education.

It is reported that in some overseas jurisdictions a whole semester is devoted by some schools to practise for the test. Such a misuse of instructional time should be strongly discouraged. Primary schools are under intense pressure to cover all the learning areas in the curriculum and can ill-afford instructional time being devoted to tasks of low educational value.

2. APPA recommends that MCEETYA stipulates a standard program of NAPLAN assessment preparation of no more than several hours' duration prior to the scheduled testing be adopted as the preferred practice in primary schools. Such preparation would be sufficient to ensure that all students become acquainted with the testing format. Without such a strong guideline there will be an inevitable expansion of time allocated for test practice and preparation.

The negative effects of high stakes testing can occur in subtle ways as pressure accumulates on lower performing schools to improve their test results and on schools performing at a high level to maintain their level of performance. In order to detect the impact it would be necessary to acquire a systemic view and not rely on anecdotal evidence. It would also be important for the review to be conducted by experts who are independent of the body that has been given carriage of the assessment – the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA).

The pressures on schools to produce improved assessment results will also stem from the policy of the Australian Government to reward states with bonus (reward) funding if their overall assessment results improve.

3. APPA recommends that MCEETYA commissions an independent review of NAPLAN in 2010 to establish whether the uses to which the results are being put are having a positive impact on primary schooling.

Fair and accurate school comparisons

In formulating its position on school performance reporting MCEETYA assumes that the information gathered about schools will be sufficient, reliable and valid. There is no certainty that this will be the case.

If schools are to be compared with other 'like schools', as indicated by MCEETYA, then there will be serious consequences for schools that are shown to have performed at lower levels than other like schools. It will be assumed by the public that the poor results are the consequence of inadequate school leadership or poor teaching – these are the logical conclusions to be inferred since supposedly other factors have been taken into account.

Therefore, APPA does not support the public reporting of school results in a 'like school' format. The so-called 'like schools' may be similar according to some selected measures but will be unlike each other on other, unmeasured variables. Principals are aware from prior experience of anomalies that arise from 'like school' comparisons and therefore do not support the practice as a central feature of the school reporting framework. They are aware of cases where nominally 'like schools' have significant differences in regard to performance-related factors that were not taken into account in the definition of 'like schools'.

4. APPA does not support the comparison of like schools. However, if MCEETYA implements a like school comparison, APPA recommends that the methodology used to determine the school groupings be made fully transparent with appropriate caveats prominently displayed.

Once the results are in the public arena, it will be hard to retract them should it eventuate that the low performance of a school can be best explained by factors well beyond its control. The damage will have been done.

In some schools the reporting may lead to a decline in school enrolments which in turn precipitates the closure of the school. Some observers regard this as a healthy outcome as it brings to bear market mechanisms on schooling. APPA, however, considers 'naming and shaming' to be a primitive and potentially dangerous approach to school improvement. If the methods used to assess the performance of the school can be shown to be flawed then there should be an appropriate mechanism for recourse by the school community.

Because of the potentially grave consequences of public comparisons of school performance it is crucial that MCEETYA ensures that the process used to calculate each school's performance is as transparent as its results on the performance measures.

Currently details describing the reliability and validity of the NAPLAN tests are kept from the public. This means that it is not possible to estimate the confidence that can be attributed to differences in test scores. In regard to school performance reporting it is conceivable that differences between high and low performers may be due to measurement error.

5. APPA recommends that MCEETYA immediately authorise the release of technical reports describing the reliability and validity of the 2008 NAPLAN tests. The technical report for the 2009 NAPLAN tests should be released at the same time as the 2009 assessment results are released to schools.

Transparency will become an even more complex issue if the raw scores for the test are scaled using sophisticated value –added models.

The reporting of statistically adjusted scores using complex formulae disempowers school principals since they are reliant on experts to explain why their scores have been adjusted upwards or downwards. In effect, most forms of statistical adjustment make the release of information less transparent than if unadjusted results had been released. The formulae are often so complex that they can only be understood by statisticians.

6. APPA recommends that MCEETYA resolves to set up a process whereby a school may have its results independently audited by an appropriately qualified statistician. Such a process is fully in keeping with MCEETYA's national transparency agenda.

There are numbers of other issues that must be attended to. The issue of students who do not sit the test must be resolved. Clearly, a school's results may be inflated if a group of students fail to attend the testing. There is also the issue of errors of scoring. There are examples in the US and UK where schools have been sent results that have been incorrectly computed. It is imperative that MCEETYA ensures that measures of school performance are accurate and that comparisons are based on reliable differences.

Implementing the national transparency agenda

It is essential that MCEETYA fully develops the proposed assessment and reporting system and invites professional comment on the system before it commences implementation. As, indicated above, it would be a mistake to defer consideration of the hard issues in a rush to put some kind of system into effect.

7. APPA recommends that MCEETYA ensures that there is an ongoing consultation process established whereby primary principals can contribute to the development of the national transparency agenda.

For example, the current proposal calls for the inclusion of each school's income in the reporting framework. APPA has consistently called for the disclosure of individual school incomes after its research showed conclusively that is currently a weak correlation between a school's income and its students' needs.

It is unfair to disclose a school's student performance results without also revealing the school's resource base relative to other schools. APPA is under no illusion that producing this data will take a major effort from system finance officials.

Finally it is important that the proposals are not hastily finalised and put into effect without the opportunity for public professional comment. There are clearly many issues yet to be resolved.

8. APPA recommends that MCEETYA issues the detailed draft proposals for public comment prior to putting them into effect.

Conclusion

APPA strongly supports the principle of transparency. It therefore in principle supports the work of governments to make Australian education a more transparent enterprise. However, there are clearly dangers, enunciated above, from using the NAPLAN assessments for purposes for which they are not suited. Over-reliance on NAPLAN scores as the single source of evidence regarding school and system performance will almost certainly have unintended, negative consequences. Primary schools are particularly vulnerable. APPA seeks to work with governments to ensure that the national transparency agenda serves the interests of Australian primary schools.

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