

AUSTRALIAN EDUCATION UNION

POSITION STATEMENT on NATIONAL TESTING

November 2017

NAPLAN HAS FAILED

A generation of proliferating mass basic skills testing has failed. It has narrowed the taught curriculum; it has corresponded to an inexorable decline in outcomes across the performance spectrum. It has failed the nation. Most grievously, it has undermined the quality, depth and breadth of education that students experience and it has thereby limited their capacities and futures.

The NAPLAN testing regime has failed to lift national performance as measured by global tests; it has failed to enrich the quality of teaching practice; it has narrowed the range and depth of what is taught in the nation's classrooms; it has caused a culture of shaming vulnerable children and communities with a profound human cost; it has led to a decline in the educational experience of school children in the creative, performing and imaginative arts and in parts of the curriculum that are intangible and immeasurable but vital to the human and ethical development of young people. NAPLAN has failed by every criterion that it has set itself.

The current approaches to this type of assessment and testing must be replaced.

Assessment and testing must remain as a central though proportional element of education policy and practice. As educators we have an obligation to assess the progress of existing programs and practices. As a public system we also have a unique obligation to locate areas of greatest need and to devote resourcing and support to where the challenges are great.

A BETTER WAY

A new approach to assessment and testing needs to be developed as a matter of urgency.

Such an approach needs to incorporate the following processes and principles:

- Respect for the privacy of children and school communities at a time when privacy is emerging as a fundamental concern and human right both nationally and across the globe;
- Alignment of testing and assessment processes with high quality syllabus and curriculum development and what is consequently taught in classrooms;
- Consistent provision for differentiation in system-wide testing and assessment so that the full range of capacities can be closely developed, monitored and supported so that students can demonstrate what they know, what they understand and what they can do;
- Allowing for schools to request the specific, diverse and culturally appropriate assessment profiles in testing items to correspond to the needs of students within a particular school and the teaching programs and differentiation that have been developed to respond to these needs and capacities. Banks of assessment items, based on the relevant mandatory syllabus and curriculum documents, should be centrally and continuously developed and schools can then draw from the range of these to match the nature of their local school and student profile;
- Establishing an appropriate system-wide balance between costs allocated to identifying and addressing student need. Governments and education departments have become more and more preoccupied with allocating funding, personnel and resources to the external testing of student achievement, and the collection and analysis of the resultant data, at the expense of investing in direct teaching and learning support to meet student needs. This imbalance must be corrected so that a minimal proportion of funding is allocated to assessing student needs and the maximum proportion is allocated to remedying these needs. All system level testing must be true to its original

stated purpose of being diagnostic. The diagnosis should reasonably attract a small proportion of the investment. The remedies should attract the great bulk of the investment;

- Teacher professional judgement of student learning be systemically restored;
- Teachers are to be deeply involved in developing and reviewing curriculum and assessment at all levels;
- Teachers actively write, mark and moderate assessments throughout stages of schooling.

NAPLAN ONLINE

Conditions do not yet exist for a move to mass online assessment systems including NAPLAN Online. There are major professional concerns about its inequity, the unequal technical capacities of schools, the self-serving goals of edu-businesses in the entire continuum of such processes, the prospect of exacerbating inequality in outcomes and reinforcing privilege and the uncertainty in the uses of the data being collected. NAPLAN Online is opposed and will be resisted.

COMPUTER ROBOT MARKING OF STUDENT WRITING

Computer robot marking of creative and extended prose is totally unacceptable. It reinforces a tendency towards mediocrity by favouring the narrow and low-grade assessment items that a computer can handle. It diminishes the deeply human basis of the teacher-student relationship. It is based on a deceitful proposition that robots can adequately assess the full range of student performance in assessments. Algorithms do not exist to appreciate the deeply rich and personal capacities that higher forms of human expression entail. The academic research¹ of Dr Les Perelman, a world leader in the assessment of writing, confirms that robot marking of student writing should not be implemented.

DIAGNOSIS IN THE TRUE SENSE

The current modish obsession with “evidence” in the form of data needs to be replaced by a more sophisticated understanding of what truly constitutes evidence in education. Data is one, relatively low grade, element in evaluating student progress and refining teaching programs but it is only useful in context when deployed with respect for teacher judgement. As the leading research indicates, data collection on its own is of relatively minor efficacy.

Diagnostic tests should return to being just that – private assessments of the progress of various groups of students to determine their growth against professionally set objectives. They need to reflect the differentiated teaching programs that the profession has been encouraged to develop for most of this century and to accordingly have differentiated content and levels of intellectual demand.

Diagnosis and testing for credentialing or the achievement of “targets” are quite distinct and often contrary processes. Diagnostic tests are completely inappropriate for establishing some form of “pre-qualifying” for the award of a credential on the completion of secondary education. Whilst the establishment of a “minimum standard” has appeal as an equity measure to ensure all students in need attract sustained, system-level support in order that they can have the skills to thrive in their years beyond schooling, the actual time to qualify for a credential should be within the coursework and assessment and testing processes associated with that credential.

NATIONAL PHONICS TESTING OF SIX-YEAR-OLD CHILDREN

The AEU opposes the Federal Government’s policy regarding phonics testing of six-year-olds.

This policy is sourced from England’s experiment with phonics testing, which is based on one narrow and controversial area, “synthetic phonics” – the connecting of sounds to letters including the use of made-up words devoid of any meaning or context. Evidence shows that this controversial approach in England has not been successful in improving student literacy.

¹ *Automated Essay Scoring and NAPLAN: A Summary Report*, Les Perelman, Ph.D., 1 October 2017

Teachers already teach and assess phonics. It is mandatory in the curriculum. As Professor Robyn Ewing of the University of Sydney confirms, “teachers already have a deep understanding of the repertoire of strategies and approaches that need to be chosen to suit the intellectual and learning needs of individual children.”

Instead of embracing simplistic experiments from overseas, and adopting even more mass basic skills testing, the Federal Government should provide the funding necessary to meet the learning needs of all students.