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Gonski Institute for Education: Submission to the Education Council of the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) NAPLAN Reporting Review 2019

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The core mission of the Gonski Institute for Education (UNSW Sydney) is to address growing inequality in Australian education as well as improving access for students to high-quality education wherever they may go to school. We believe that every young person has the potential to succeed in a leading education system defined by best-practice, care and inclusiveness but most importantly a system that is equitable.

With these objectives at the forefront of work undertaken by the Institute, please find herein our submission to the Education Council of COAGs review of the current approach to the presentation of the National Assessment Program - Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) data.

Much of the debate about standardised national testing occurs at a political level, heavily influenced by the national education agencies and the need for data. Similar debates and considerations about the role and impact of system-level student assessment take place in many other countries. For example, in Singapore, the Netherlands, Scotland, Alberta (Canada), and China education policies are shifting towards less-frequent and lower-stakes standardised assessments to give more room for teachers' professional judgment in assessment and reporting.

Our submission is based on a rigorous analysis of the large body of academic research literature about NAPLAN and the My School website with a focus on what is in the best interests of students. Our submission is also informed by a series of outreach events and professional learning activities that have both engaged and sought input from key stakeholders.¹ Furthermore, our submission has international perspective: it aims to make sure that Australia moves to the forefront when it comes to student assessment and monitoring education system performance.

The recommendations below are intended to help redesign the national assessment and reporting system for Australian schools.

It is beyond the scope of this submission to get into the technical details of what a new National Assessment System that includes diagnostic, formative and summative student assessments and the monitoring of school performance would look like. However, it is clear that it should be based on

¹ These activities include a symposium on the topic of *Beyond NAPLAN: What should come next?* held on Tuesday 12 March 2019, hosted by the Gonski Institute for Education together with the International Congress for School Effectiveness and Improvement (ICSEI). This symposium brought together sixty representatives from the major Australian education stakeholders across all school sectors to discuss the future of national testing and reporting and to identify a new approach that would better serve the needs and interests of students.

commonly agreed policy and practice that is evidence-based and is informed by the profession and international research. The following recommendations, therefore, only focus on the role and function of standardised student assessments, reporting of the results of these tests, and linking other student and school assessments to the assessment system.

We believe that building a new national assessment system should follow the following recommendations:

Recommendation 1: A national assessment and reporting system should have a single clearly defined purpose

It is problematic, if not impossible, for one student assessment to accurately serve a range of different purposes, i.e. formative, summative, school comparison and accountability, as NAPLAN does today.

Therefore;

- We recommend that the design of a national assessment and reporting system must be determined by the agreed, overarching purpose of education in Australia. That purpose, as informed by the Goals set out in the Melbourne Declaration on Education Goals for Young Australians ought to be that:

“Australian schooling promotes equity and excellence and that all young Australians become, successful learners, confident and creative individuals and active and informed citizens.”

- It is paramount that this clearly defined and commonly shared purpose of education drives the redesign of the new national assessment and reporting system, not the other way around.
- Based on the above, we recommend that the sole purpose of the national assessment and reporting system should be to monitor education systems performance against the purpose of education, particularly on the issues of educational excellence, equity, wellbeing and students’ attitudes toward learning.
- We recommend that any national student assessment that is part of the national assessment system should only serve that one purpose in order to remain accurate, useful and valid.
- We recommend that a reformed national testing and reporting system should be regularly evaluated against an updated statement of National Education Goals for Young Australians.

Recommendation 2. A national assessment and reporting system should be based on scientific sampling and have a positive effect on student learning, wellbeing and equity in education

A national assessment and reporting system must have no negative consequences for students. Consideration of policy proposals against this recommendation should cause policy makers to think about the purposes of national assessment and reporting as part of the larger education policy ecosystem. Even if the purpose is not to lift student attainment, but rather to monitor educational performance and report on it, then the principle still applies.

Therefore;

- We recommend that an Australian national assessment system should use scientifically determined sampling of students rather than the current census approach. A sampling approach lowers the stakes that testing has on children, parents, and schools. Sampling rather than census also strengthens the role of classroom-based diagnostic, formative and summative assessments led by teachers and schools.
- It is important that a national assessment and reporting system positively influences classroom practices, supports collaborative professionalism in and between schools, and remains efficient in terms of administration. We therefore further recommend, that the new national assessment system would link system level standardised assessments to school and classroom level assessments and evaluations. This would ensure that the assessment would have a positive benefit for students and teachers, while also raising the quality and equity of education outcomes in schools and overall in Australia.

Recommendation 3: A national assessment and reporting system should provide rich, accurate and timely information to the community, school systems and the government

Schools, education systems and governments make decisions about the deployment of resources to schools and directly to students as well as guiding policy decisions. These decisions require information, including data that can be obtained through an effective national testing and reporting system. A national assessment and reporting system can play a critical role as a source of accurate, useful and valid information.

Therefore;

- We recommend, in order to provide information about the performance of Australian education, that regular assessments of students' knowledge and skills in different subjects and different year levels should include sample-based standardised tests, school level assessments of performance and classroom-based assessment by teachers. This assessment system should be supported by thematic evaluations, systematic research, and surveys on specific aspects of educational equity and outcomes.
- As a result of this change:
 - Publication of school-by-school results on the My School website will no longer be available. The My School website should continue to publish information about what the Gonski Institute for Education calls data on 'how is my school good?' instead of data on 'how good is my school?'.
 - The high stakes nature of the current national assessment system on both students and teachers will be dramatically reduced.
 - Removing the high stakes nature of the current national assessment and reporting system will reinstate the primary role of teachers and schools in student assessment and reporting will increase trust in teachers as professionals.
 - Unnecessary administrative burdens on school staff in administering the tests will be removed.
 - Overall cost of student assessment will decrease, and cost savings can be used to support the schools' role in assessment and reporting.
 - We recommend that the new national assessment system should also include resources that would support the role of schools' in reliably evaluating and reporting school-based assessments as well as other education outcomes, including student and teacher wellbeing and equity of schooling.

Recommendation 4. The design and implementation of a national assessment should be driven by the teaching profession and be effective, efficient and economical

Being confident in the quality of assessment and the data it produces is of fundamental importance in any national testing and reporting system. Stakeholders will be confident when the purpose of the assessment and what it is testing is clear, that it is testing what it was designed to test and that it is doing it in a fair and consistent way for all students.

The recent public and media discourse around NAPLAN suggests that there is work to be done in restoring teachers' and principals' confidence in the national student assessment system. Teachers as professionals should participate in a process that gives them a say in how well students do in school and how to improve their performance. Teachers are best positioned to keep student assessments safe from unintended consequences and policy changes that are not based on evidence or success elsewhere. Teachers expect education policies, including student assessment, that are consistent with the values of Australian education.

Therefore;

- We recommend that the role of teachers be strengthened in all levels of a new national assessment system. Teachers know what they need and what works in their classrooms and to that extent, systems must place more trust in the professionalism of their teachers and school leaders.
- We recommend that teachers be deeply involved in the development of a new national testing and reporting system, particularly redesigning and articulating its purpose and testing new instruments in their own work before they are implemented in schools.

Recommendation 5. A national assessment should be supported by reliable and effective communication

Clear, consistent and frequent communication on the purpose and benefits of assessment programs and strategies is essential.

The recommendations proposed here align with those outlined in several national reports, such as 2011 *'Review of Funding for Schooling'* and the 2018 *'Through Growth to Achievement: Report of the Review to Achieve Educational Excellence in Australian Schools'*, both led by David Gonski AC. These recommendations also resonate well with current international developments in student assessment and educational evaluation. The focus of a redesigned national assessment and reporting system ought to be redirected to individual student achievement and the introduction of new reporting arrangements that focus on both learning attainment and learning gain. This would provide meaningful information to students and their parents and carers about individual achievement and learning growth that comes from various purposefully determined sources, rather than from a sole standardised test. We strongly believe that Australia should be walking among the top nations in the world when creating a new national student assessment system that works for the benefit of all children, strengthens the professionalism of and trust in all educators, and provides parents and decisionmakers with a much more accurate picture of what young Australians learn in schools and what they need to live happy and healthy lives.

We have approached the terms of reference for this review through a series of commonly asked questions about NAPLAN. The supporting materials that are provided in Appendix 1 deal with each question in turn by considering the current research and stakeholder perceptions of NAPLAN and the My School website.

The time for action is now. We sincerely believe that a reformed national assessment and reporting system, capitalising on the potential of assessment to not only report on, but also support and drive learning, is within reach.

We would of course be happy to provide further input to the review and would welcome the chance to present our findings in person, should it be desired.

Kind regards,



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The Gonski Institute for Education would like to acknowledge the contributions made to this submission by Dr Rachel Wilson (Educational Measurement & Assessment Hub, Sydney School of Education and Social Work, University of Sydney) and Carol Taylor (Educational Measurement & Assessment Hub, Sydney School of Education and Social Work, University of Sydney).

Appendix 1. Beyond NAPLAN: What Should Come Next?

NAPLAN's multiple purposes compromise its design

In 2010, then Education Minister Julia Gillard, in a [letter to the President of the Australian Education Union](#) made it clear that the Government was committed to:

1. the value of transparency and accountability for ongoing school improvement
2. effective assessment and reporting of student achievement including the diagnostic value of the NAPLAN
3. the power of accurate data to provide comparable national reporting of school effectiveness.

Minister Gillard also made her views on the purpose of NAPLAN and the My School website clear in a media statement on the 12th August 2008.

"We can learn from [Joel] Klein's methodology of comparing like-schools with like-schools and then measuring the differences in school results in order to spread best practice," she said. "Something Joel Klein is personally and passionately committed to is the identification of school need, the comparison of like-schools and the identification of best practice. (Ferrari and Bitá, The Australian, August 12, 2008)

It is clear that the aims and purposes of NAPLAN were very broad and ambitious. The originally stated purposes were further complicated by the additional uses that emerged with the creation of the My School website, such as competition between schools.

Sitting beyond the stated purposes was the underlying belief that NAPLAN would, through these various outcomes driven by NAPLAN, lift our national educational attainment.

Assessment purposes can be categorised into three ambitions:

1. Assessment which can inform day-to-day classroom learning (Assessment for Learning (AFL) through diagnosis and feedback)
2. Assessment to provide information beyond the pupil-teacher relations - to parents, other schools (for transition and/or selective entry), university, other education institutions and employers
3. Assessment for accountability

The first NAPLAN report released by the ACARA stated that:

"By locating all students on a single national scale, which maps the skills and understandings assessed, each scale provides significantly more information about the literacy and numeracy achievement of students than was previously available" (ACARA, 2008).

By the time of the 2013 Senate Enquiry, looking into the effectiveness of NAPLAN, it was clear that the purpose of NAPLAN had already become confused.

"Question on Notice: 6

It is apparent in the submissions to this inquiry that there is confusion and inconsistent statements about the purpose of NAPLAN."

For example, according to then ACARA Chief Executive Peter Hill (October 2010):

"The purpose of national testing has been to get a snapshot of student performance for reporting back at different levels. That was the purpose from the beginning, and the purpose has never been diagnostic assessment."

However, early and continued aims included 'diagnostic' and 'school improvement' purposes. According to ACARA Chair, Barry McGaw, for example:

“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.” (March, 2011)

Confusingly, McGraw’s perspective contrasts with much ACARA documentation explaining the multiple purposes for which NAPLAN is now intended to satisfy.

It is evident that NAPLAN was expected to meet all of three of the purposes outlined above. Education assessment systems are evaluated primarily upon how they meet their stated aims – in gauging this we most often ask “Is assessment X fit for purpose?” (Harris, 2017). This multitude of purposes proposed for a mid-year assessment, which uses mostly multiple-choice questions of forty-minute duration every two years makes the simultaneous use of the data for some of these purposes questionable.

NAPLAN has only a limited value for teachers

There is apparent confusion on this matter as a result of different understandings of the term “diagnostic” in relation to NAPLAN assessments. The conventional meaning of a diagnostic assessment is an instrument that measures the level or state of development of a student’s knowledge and skills in a particular area prior to further instruction. Assessments designed to be diagnostic provide specific information that can be used to inform the content and strategy of a subsequent learning program. They are primarily used to analyse student difficulties and to guide lesson and curriculum planning so those difficulties can be remediated.

Within the body of commentary on NAPLAN it is clear that, from the beginning, at an individual student level, and even to some degree at classroom and school levels, the results have had limited diagnostic, or formative value. In large part, this was, and still is, due to the time lag of around four months between when students sit the tests and when the results become available. This was immediately apparent from the initial year and claims around the diagnostic, or even formative, usefulness of the tests continued despite the fact the timing issue has never been addressed.

Initially, many teachers, and their professional bodies, wanted to embrace the formative potential of the test, even if questioning its diagnostic credentials. State departments invested in programs to support and encourage this aspect. However, the pressures to teach to the test may have surpassed the potential to teach from the test. The diagnostic dimension failed to deliver on teachers’ expectations. Confusion, criticism and cynicism followed, and the credibility of the test was called into question (Carter, Manuel, Dutton, 2018).

The unintended consequences of NAPLAN and the My School

The school choice market, within sectors and between sectors, that My School platform was designed to inform imposed a new high stakes dimension upon the tests. Parents and other stakeholders use the results published on the My School website to compare and choose schools; and this created institutional pressure that cascaded down as stressors upon school leaders, teachers and in turn students.

While research shows that some parents value the information about their children provided by NAPLAN, they also share concerns regarding “disadvantage to less resourced schools, stress on students, diversion of teaching time from the curriculum, exclusion of students from the test and concerns as to whether NAPLAN accurately reflects student performance” (Colmar Brunton for ACARA, 2018, p. 7).

From the beginning the publication of NAPLAN scores on the My School website has proved controversial. Teachers were particularly doubtful and indeed predicted many of the unintended consequences that have since emerged. For the first time, assessment data together with other school information was presented to the public along with an invitation for audiences – parents, media etc - to make judgements about schools. In doing this, there is a strong argument in the body of commentary that the My School website has made test results ‘high stakes’ for schools and teachers, and consequently students and parents. Media and political hype served to increase the stakes, particularly through the construction of league tables and identification of winners and losers.

By adding high stakes element to the tests, MySchool has introduced other uses for the NAPLAN tests. These include:

- The use of results as a basis for students to transition from school to school
- The use of results, as part of a student profile, for admission to independent selective and non-selective schools (McDougal, 2011)
- The development of a wide range of commercial NAPLAN test-preparation products (Bousfield and Ragusa, 2014)
- The orientation of coaching schools and edu-business to NAPLAN-type instruction and test preparation (Bousfield and Ragusa, 2014)
- The generation of school league tables (see [here](#))
- Influencing the value of residential real estate (Schlesinger, 2015)

NAPLAN leads to teaching to the test and a narrowing of the curriculum

There is a consistent theme throughout the body of commentary that the high stakes associated with NAPLAN and My School have served to distort the curriculum, teaching and learning. Once an assessment becomes high stakes, more teaching time is devoted to teaching to the test. Teaching to the test may not be a bad thing if it is a good test, but many educators and international research studies suggest (Thompson & Harbaugh, 2013) that there is potential for the curriculum taught in the classroom to be narrowed because what is tested is only a subset of the broader areas of literacy and numeracy and an even smaller subset of the curriculum as a whole.

In a most recent survey of English teachers’ views on NAPLAN Carter, Manual and Dutton (2018) found common perspectives included:

- The tests added little to teachers’ understanding of literacy levels
- The assessment was a poor and narrow measure of student achievement
- Teachers felt pressured to prepare students for the tests and this detracted from other learning opportunities
- The pressure to “teach to the test” frustrated many teachers and reduced their sense of professional autonomy

NAPLAN students’ and teachers’ wellbeing

Schools fear that NAPLAN results defines their quality and effectiveness, significantly raising the stakes for the tests and the stress levels of students, teachers and parents. To date, the largest survey of teachers suggests that most commonly see the purpose of NAPLAN as “either a school ranking tool or a policing tool” (Dufler, Polesel & Rice, 2012, p.8). Analysis of the submissions of the 2010 NAPLAN Senate Inquiry demonstrated:

“adulthood in Australian schools, with children subjected to developmentally inappropriate expectations, pressure, stress and precocious knowledge in response to NAPLAN testing and reporting” (Bousfield & Ragusa, 2013, p.171)

While the Australian evidence base on the long term impact of NAPLAN upon students is unclear, there is in the body of commentary a prevailing view, that growing numbers of students are displaying symptoms of stress ranging from anxiety to suicidal thoughts around NAPLAN test time. A survey of more than 5,500 teachers showed that while over 40% felt that some children looked forward to undertaking NAPLAN, some 90% stated that at least some students reported feeling stressed and over 60% said that some students had reported anxiety. This is corroborated by students reporting negative feelings toward the test in both preparation and testing phases (Swain & Pendergast, 2018)

Another reasonably common assertion, supported by research (Davies, 2012) is that NAPLAN can be a negative experience for students with special needs because of the inadequate special provisions to allow these students to access and respond to the test questions in a fair way.

There have also been concerns over the culturally inappropriate nature of standardised testing that may prevent Indigenous, and other minority, students from fully engaging (Macqueen, Knoch, Wigglesworth, Nordlinger et al. 2018). Some teachers also suggest that significant amounts of teaching time has to be devoted to teaching test conventions to students (Carter, Manual, Dutton, 2018).

The pressure of public comparisons to perform well as a school under media scrutiny goes to the heart of their worth as a teacher. Some schools and teachers concerned about their reputations being damaged by poor student performance have allegedly encouraged low performing students not to participate in the tests. There are also assertions that teachers may be reluctant to take Years 3, 5, 7 and 9 classes because of the demoralising effect NAPLAN results have when they imply their worth as a teacher.

NAPLAN has not improved educational performance in Australia

Nationally, the magnitude of improvements in the quality of student achievement and equity of these outcomes have been insignificant and in many of the assessment domains show no improvement.

Significant gains are only seen in Years 5 and 9 numeracy, Years 3 and 5 reading, Years 3 and 5 spelling, and Years 3 and 7 grammar, all of which are significantly above the NAPLAN 2008 average. Thus, many year groups and domains show no significant progress. In particular, significant and consistent declines are evident in writing test results across Years 5, 7 and 9, since the first year writing was assessed in 2011.

It is fair to say that the learning outcomes measured by NAPLAN have not improved over time. In some areas, like writing, they are disturbing. Similar concern has been expressed regarding Australia’s performance in international assessments, with substantial declines in mean scores in PISA, and lower than expected performance in TIMSS and PIRLS (Ainley and Gebhardt, 2013; Masters, 2016).

NAPLAN and My School are seen to represent an approach to education that is inconsistent with and detrimental to the values of Australian educators with particular reference to equity, fairness and

excellence. A common theme in the body of commentary is that NAPLAN and the way it is reported is undermining equity and fairness in Australian education.

A theme linked to equity, is that whilst My School purports to support parental choice about the school their children will attend, the fact is that not all parents have a full range of choices available to them depending on their location and their SES. This aspect of My School undermines the principle of equality of choice and the right of every child to attend a high-quality school by drawing attention to the inequality inherent in the social, economic and geographical features of Australian life.

Perhaps the most concrete evidence of the undermining effects of the current system is demonstrated through private tutoring. This industry is seen to capitalise on parental fears and aspirations and is only available to those who can access and afford it.

Parents' views about NAPLAN and My School

ACARA's recently commissioned survey of parents shows that one in three parents use the My School website (Colmar Brunton for ACARA, 2018). Although parent engagement with My School is relatively low, this does not appear to have restrained the performance pressure experienced, or perceived, by schools. The My School website provides data that is easily misinterpreted and risks poor and incorrect conclusions being drawn about school effectiveness.

Despite attempts to provide more information designed to contextualise results, there is little evidence that most users of the website bother to read or have an understanding beyond the red and green colour-coding. Providing more contextual information does not always appear to prevent audiences making incorrect judgements.

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