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Bad path in school tables

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Education Minister Julia Gillard has on many occasions acknowledged the damaging impact of school league tables. Opening a public education forum in Canberra in March, she said, "I understand that league tables based on raw test scores can create a misleading picture and make the job of principals and teachers that much harder." That view accords with those of parents, principals and teachers.

There is clear evidence in Australia and overseas of the effect on students and school communities of inaccurate and invalid ranking of schools in league tables.

But what Gillard said next was even more important. "We are working with state and territory education ministers to ensure the side-effects of a new transparency framework are not negative ones."

' Here in a nutshell is what we have been waiting in vain for ever since. This week six major organisations, representing parents, teachers and principals from public and private schools, wrote to Gillard urging her to act on growing concerns that what she plans to do with national test data risks damaging schools and school communities.

Our concerns centre on the plan to publish online within weeks the raw test scores from schools across the country.

Those aggregated scores are from a once a year literacy and numeracy, or NAPLAN, test with just 40 questions undertaken by a limited number of students in a school Years 3, 5, 7 and 9 only. The test scores will be the primary source of information on a school's performance on the Government's website. But as we pointed out in our letter, the NAPLAN tests were never designed for this.

They are at best a diagnostic measure, one useful source among many for parents and schools to determine the progress and learning needs of students.

A leading expert in educational statistics, Professor Margaret Wu, of Melbourne University, has warned of the dangers of the Government's plan, saying what it proposes goes beyond the accuracy and validity of the NAPLAN results. But this is not the worst of it.

What teachers, parents and principals are most concerned about is that nothing is being done to prevent the misuse of this data. Any organisation looking to profit can take the results of schools from the new website and turn them into misleading and simplistic league tables.

As seen in the Hobart Mercury earlier in the year these league tables are inevitably sold to readers on the basis of discovering the "best and worst schools".

This may sell extra papers, but the effect is negative and long-lasting. The schools at the bottom of the league tables are often in the most disadvantaged areas. To go with the social and economic issues with which these communities battle, children, parents and teachers face the humiliation of their local school being unfairly branded as one of the worst in the state, territory or nation based on a single test.

We have repeatedly raised this issue with Gillard urging her to protect students and parents and honour her commitment to "ensure the side effects of a new transparency framework are not negative ones".

In her consultation with principals last week Gillard was urged to protect students and schools from league tables. Our letter this week asked for "the conclusive evidence by which the Government decided that the publication of comparative school data will assist, rather than impair, school education in Australia".

It concluded, "Minister it is within your power to stop the damage that would be done through invalid school comparisons and the creation and publication of league tables." We are hopeful of a positive reply.

Without action, Gillard risks her attempts to improve the education system having unintended but devastating consequences for students, teachers and parents.

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