



2010 Annual Federal Conference
President's Report on the
Stop League Tables Campaign
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Conference, the campaign to stop league tables represents one of the most important campaigns in the history of education in Australia.

Because of the irrevocable damage caused by a high-stakes testing, low quality league table regime, the campaign to stop league tables has united the profession in a way never seen before.

Of course that unity extends beyond the profession and it includes the national parent organisations.

In fact, opposition to league tables extends across the country and includes the overwhelming majority of parents. Extensive polling conducted by UMR, the polling company used by the ALP, found that 63% of parents with children at school want the Federal Government to pass new laws preventing the creation and publication of league tables.

Conference, we are solid in our opposition to league tables and any other inappropriate, invalid ranking and comparisons of schools because we know the damage caused by the narrowing of the curriculum and deepening inequality and segregation in schooling that will follow.

Proponents of this agenda have this perverted belief that the complex, social and human dynamic of teaching and learning can be reduced to a single artificial figure. Proponents of this agenda believe that the life of a school and everything it offers a child can be reduced to a single artificial figure.

Colleagues, in November 2008 the Deputy Prime Minister held a “national conversation” with over 150 principals. Concerns about this narrow view of teaching and learning and its consequences on the provision of high quality teaching and learning were raised repeatedly by principal after principal.

Julia Gillard’s response to these real concerns came approximately 24 hours after the conclusion of the “national conversation” when she declared deridingly of the principals “...*I actually don’t believe our aim is to have schools full of happy illiterate, innumerate children.*”

That is what one calls a studied insult. What the minister fails to understand is that if children are illiterate and innumerate, they are unlikely to be happy and if the child is happy in him or herself and happy at school, they are more likely to be successful learners. That comes from Education 101.

Conference, we reject the attempt by the Minister to taint the profession with the cancer of low expectations. We will not tolerate attempts to portray us as proponents of low expectations. As teachers with our fundamental belief in the transformational power of education and what it means to each individual child and the nation as a whole, we will continue to strive for the very best for our students within the context of genuine school improvement where teachers are given the space, time and respect to engage in the progressive refinement of teaching and learning in the interest of setting high aspirations necessary for all students to achieve their full potential.

This, of course, is only possible through a rigorous, rich and rewarding curriculum, not one which is being reduced to a dry husk courtesy of a high stakes testing, low quality league table regime. To quote Ken Boston on the effects of similar government policy in England, *the government’s approach to the key stage tests has sucked the oxygen from the classrooms of primary schools. It is not the tests themselves so much as the high stakes attached to them, the archaic method of delivery and marking and the multitude of invalid uses to*

which the results are put. In all but those schools principled enough to resist the pressure upon them, the primary school curriculum has become a dry husk. The teaching programme focuses on what is to be tested and on practising for the tests, because the future of the school (not that of your son or daughter) is dependent upon the result.

Why do we continue to import failed policies from the US and UK???

Conference, it's important to note and make very clear, particularly for our friends from the media here today, that our opposition to league tables is not an opposition to assessment, it is not an opposition to accountability nor is it an opposition to a "parent's right to know".

As we have often stated, effective assessment is at the heart of successful teaching and learning. It provides information on student progress to students and their parents and important diagnostic evidence that assists teachers in planning for ongoing improvement. It is the right of all parents to access relevant information on their child's progress. Of course, ethically, information about student performance belongs to students, their parents and their teachers.

School and teacher accountability is also essential. Accountability measures should be aimed at creating the preconditions that allow for constant evaluation and improvement in all schools and the development of a culture where everyone, teachers, parents and governments accept and fulfil their responsibility. To do otherwise accepts a culture of blame shifting.

As we have already announced in our ***charter of school accountability, improvement, assessment and reporting***, *accountability processes must be driven by a shared vision of schools as learning communities where the primacy of teaching and learning is understood and embraced. Successful learning communities are of course characterised by a culture of ongoing evaluation and the progressive refinement of teaching and learning.*

This process can be further supported by external peer led, cyclical reviews of school operations and performance. Conducted by panels consisting school leaders, teachers and other education experts, the purpose of the review would be to affirm the work of schools against quality standards and assist schools in setting new targets so that all students can achieve their personal best.

We recognise and support the view that parents, students and the public have a right to know that schools are implementing high quality, effective teaching and learning programs. Information can and should be meaningfully reported to each school's community in ways which will enable parents and prospective parents to make an informed judgement about the effectiveness of school programs. However that information must be reported in a way that supports school improvement. It cannot be provided in a way that damages students, school communities and the provision of education as a whole.

As a profession we collect and interrogate data, formal and informal, every day. Some would say every minute of the day. Governments and systems also have an obligation to aggregate and interrogate data, and they have an obligation to act on information regarding student performance. They must act in a way that targets resourcing necessary to foster improvement in all schools in order to lift overall student performance and underachievement.

Conference, all of this, and more, is reflected in our **charter of school accountability, improvement, assessment and reporting** which I referred to a moment ago.

Charter of school accountability, improvement, assessment and reporting.

- 1. The primary purpose of accountability in education is to support the pursuit of excellence and the highest standard education for every student. The teaching profession is defined by this pursuit.*
- 2. Accountability in education enhances the capacity of teachers, school leaders, schools, systems and governments to fulfill their respective roles and responsibilities and leads to sustained improvement.*
- 3. Parents, students and the public have a right to know that school leaders and teachers are professionally competent and students are engaged in high quality learning. They need to know that our education systems are operating at peak levels of educational performance and administrative efficiency.*
- 4. Accountability processes must be driven by a shared vision of schools as learning communities where the primacy of teaching and learning is understood and embraced. Successful learning communities are characterised by a culture of ongoing evaluation and the progressive refinement of teaching and learning.*
- 5. This process can be further supported by external peer led, cyclical reviews of school operations and performance. Conducted by panels consisting school leaders, teachers and other education experts, the purpose of the review would be to affirm the work of schools against quality standards and assist schools in setting new targets so that all students can achieve their personal best.*
- 6. Effective assessment is central to successful teaching and learning. It provides evidence that assists teachers in planning and can inform students and their parents on important aspects of their child's progress.*
- 7. Parents have an absolute right to know how well their child is progressing at school. Information about the performance of individual students should remain confidential and belongs to the student, his/her parents and teachers.*
- 8. Teachers, schools and systems have an obligation to collect reliable data that can be used to judge the effectiveness of teaching and learning; and to interrogate that data objectively to ensure that high professional standards are maintained. Information for accountability purposes is gathered in a variety of ways from all relevant sources, and reported and used in ways that respect the limitations of the data.*
- 9. Aggregated test results should form part of a comprehensive suite of data about the school reported to the school's community on a regular basis. This data enables parents to judge whether the school is meeting their expectations and allows prospective parents to make informed judgements about the school. The use of assessment results for other purposes should not be permitted to impact negatively on this prime function.*
- 10. Governments have a responsibility to enact policies that target the resources necessary to ensure the ongoing development of new and experienced teachers, support and improve overall student performance and should report to parliament and the community annually on the effectiveness of their programs.*

Conference our opposition to league tables and other inappropriate, invalid forms of school rankings and comparisons is based on the fact that they are misleading, inaccurate, damaging, demoralizing and totally unnecessary.

- ***Misleading: Publicly ranking schools based on students' results in mass standardized tests presents an invalid and misleading picture of school performance.***
- ***Inaccurate: The NAPLAN national tests were never designed to be used to compare schools. Margins of error and distortions created by student attendance/ absence accentuate the inaccuracy.***
- ***Damaging: Schools where students do not do well in mass standardized tests will be unfairly branded as 'failing' schools***
- ***Demoralising: It takes schools many years to throw off the tag of a 'failing school' and it is demoralising for students, teachers and parents. It makes it much harder for those schools to improve the performance of their students***
- ***Unnecessary: Politicians don't need schools to be publicly ranked to know which ones need help and more resources. Parents can already access relevant information on school performance by directly contacting schools.***

To illustrate this last point, I'd like to draw your attention to some of the analysis derived from the 2009 NAPLAN results.

The analysis shows that the percentage of students estimated to be working at or above the national minimum standard is markedly lower for Indigenous students than for non-Indigenous students in all jurisdictions and at all year levels. Similarly, the mean scores for Indigenous students at all year levels are substantially lower than those for non-Indigenous students.

For example, in Year 3 Reading the difference between the mean score for Indigenous and non-Indigenous students in Australia overall is 88 points. The difference in the Northern Territory is 144 points and in Western Australian it is 99 points. In Year 5 Reading the difference between the mean scores for Indigenous and non-Indigenous students in Australia overall is 84 points. The difference in the Northern Territory is 148 points and in Western Australia it is 99 points. In Year 7 Reading the difference in the means for Australia as a whole is 71 points. The difference in the Northern Territory is 128 points and in Western Australia it is 85 points. In Year 9 Reading the difference in the means for Australia as a whole is 74 points. The difference in the Northern Territory is 146 points and in Western Australia it is 86 points. The difference in the Northern territory is consistently 40 -50 points more than the difference in WA.

Here's the point. The Northern Territory is the only jurisdiction in Australia that staffs its schools on the basis of attendance not enrolment. Rather than staffing its schools in the expectation that all students attend school, it staffs its schools in the hope that they don't attend. So much for high aspirations! Students in the NT are being denied hundreds of teachers! This impacts most negatively on students enrolled in schools with significant Indigenous enrolments.

This has been going on for years. You don't need a league table to rectify it. The situation continues unchanged. It has not only been known by governments, it's been perpetrated by governments.

Conference, throughout the year governments and Ministers have constantly stated an opposition to simplistic league tables and that they themselves will not be creating league tables. Well, I remind them that the creation of league tables is only possible because of their policies. Stating an opposition to league tables and doing nothing about it is disingenuous and hypocritical.

On the theme of disingenuous statements and actions let me add this.

In departmental correspondence on behalf of the prime Minister and the Deputy Prime Minister we are told, and I quote, that *“the concern in the community is recognized about the possible misinterpretation or misuse of information about schools, including formulation of league tables. On 12 June 2009, the Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs agreed to protocols for school data collection and reporting. These protocols support meaningful and comparable data reporting and the responsible use of information, including active communication about proper interpretation of data and making fair comparisons.”*

The protocols referred to in that correspondence replaced the protocols developed less than 12 months earlier, in July 2008.

One of the most significant points of difference in the new set of protocols is the omission of the following *“ethical principle”*:

The avoidance of harm to members of the community: this could occur where the privacy of individuals would be compromised or where the reputation of an institution or group of people would be damaged through the publication of misleading information or stereotyping.

By omitting this principle, education ministers conceded that there will be ‘harm’ to individuals and schools as a result of the creation and publication of league tables.

Conference, we take our ethical responsibility, our professional responsibility to our students and our school communities very seriously. We will not sit by and watch our students’ test results become an adult spectator sport, an adult spectator sport which will result in ridicule and humiliation. We will not sit by and allow the provision of education to be damaged through a narrowing of the curriculum and a deepening inequality and segregation of schooling.

A few months ago Professor Brian Caldwell said *“parents and the profession will be standing on high ground if the language of radical dissent is adopted on this issue”*.

Conference, it’s deeds not words that matter most. So let us be clear, in the absence of the introduction of measures necessary to stop the further creation and complication of league tables, the profession cannot and will not cooperate with the implementation of NAPLAN 2010.