



→ Briefly

- The federal government intends to publish results from the national schools assessment program on a new website later this year.
- Critics say the move will distort teaching priorities, limit curriculum and stigmatise already disadvantaged schools.
- The government's preferred testing models have been controversial and unproven in the UK and US.

Turning the tables

The federal government's support for a testing regime that will lead to league table-style rankings is drawing widespread opposition, reports **Carolyn Rance**.

The federal government's determination to publish school results on a national website risks embroiling Australia in controversy that mirrors the long-running row in England over national testing and school rankings.

The level of anger at the potential stigmatisation of schools with low National Assessment Program—

Literacy and Numeracy scores was demonstrated at the NSW Teachers Federation conference in July. Many present still remembered the outrage when *The Daily Telegraph* illustrated a front-page story on educational inequity with a photograph of Mt Druitt High School's 1996 graduating class under the headline 'The class we failed'.

"Since then, the NSW government

has banned publication of tables based on information it has collected, but now it wants to allow the release of that information by the federal government," says NSWTF president Bob Lipscombe.

Making national test data publicly available threatens to distort teaching priorities and "strip mine" curriculum of the arts, creativity and innovation, says education

UK teachers talk boycotts

Threats by teachers to boycott national school tests next year are the latest controversy dogging England's high-stakes testing regime. Critics of the SATs (Standard Assessment Tests) system of national curriculum assessment say it has given politicians the power to micro-manage schools to the detriment of curriculum. Australian educator

to national testing had sucked the oxygen from England's primary school classrooms and reduced curriculum in many schools to a dry husk. Australians should learn from the English experience and focus on testing to diagnose and remedy problems, Professor Gordon Stanley, former head of the NSW

“[national testing has] sucked the oxygen from England's primary school classrooms and reduced curriculum...to a dry husk.”

Ken Boston, who became chief executive of England's Qualifications and Curriculum Authority during a crisis over A-level gradings in 2002, resigned late last year after delays and incorrect marking plagued the 2008 SATs.

During his period as one of the UK's most senior public servants, he described England's approach to public examinations as a high-risk activity in a very complex and fraught environment. Writing in *The Sunday Times* in April, he concluded that the importance politicians and the media attached

Board of Studies and now the inaugural director of the Oxford University Centre for Educational Assessment, told *The Sydney Morning Herald* this year. A roundtable of assessment professionals held at the Oxford centre in October noted that the English system had led to de-skilling of teachers who now lack confidence in their own judgments and feel under pressure by a system of external accountability that allows test results to be displayed in league tables.

consultant Professor Brian Caldwell, a professorial fellow at the University of Melbourne where he was dean of education from 1998 to 2004.

He is scathing about the Australian government's insistence on following England and the United States down a high-stakes path that lacks useful information about “the performance of a particular child in a particular

classroom with a particular teacher”. He says Australia should rely on better and less divisive models of assessing and reporting student and school performance.

The Mercury in Hobart recently published high school rankings based on literacy and numeracy tests, and student attendance. The rankings were simplistic, says AEU Tasmanian branch president Leanne Wright.

“They provide no explanations of why things are as they are,” she says. “Teachers at schools near the bottom of the list are often dealing with students who face all sorts of life challenges, and being told the school doesn't stack up is a slap in the face that leads to staff feeling demoralised.”

The federal government intends publishing results from the National Assessment Program on the new Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority website later this year.

The new system of reporting individual school performances would make national test results available to policymakers and parents in a way that will emphasise a school's performance relative to ‘like schools’, Education Minister Julia Gillard said in a speech to the Brookings Institute in Washington in June. The objective was greater transparency, not a desire to name and shame poorly performing schools, she said.

“Our aim is... to find out what the higher-achieving schools are doing right and replicate that success elsewhere,” said Gillard. “The schools serving the poorest communities have nothing to lose from this process, but much to gain.”

Deepening inequality

The AEU does not share her view. Federal president Angelo Gavrielatos says the teaching profession supports effective assessment and the right of parents to know about the progress of their children. But it opposes the construction and publication of league tables because they can deepen inequality if parents respond by shifting their children to other schools.

State education ministers know the risks, Gavrielatos says. “At a meeting in June, the Ministerial Council for Education, Early Childhood and Youth Affairs endorsed a new protocol for national reporting.

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 have conceded that there will be ‘harm’ to individuals and schools as a result of the creation and publication of league tables.”

The idea that comparisons arising from publicly available NAPLAN

of schools at the higher and lower boundaries of each group than between schools clustered either side of group boundaries, and there can be inconsistencies in the measures used to determine the groups.”

Cobbold says like-school comparisons are partial league tables with the same problems as full league tables. “They narrow student learning in the same way, provide the same incentives for schools to rig their results, and the lowest-ranked schools in each like-school group will be pilloried and humiliated. Partial and full league tables discourage collaboration and cooperation between schools.”

Hysterical overreaction

Making more test data publicly available is likely to adversely affect curriculum, says Queensland Teachers Union president Steve Ryan. “Queensland’s poor showing

The value schools add is not measurable by simplistic references to test scores and attendance, says AEU Victorian branch president Mary Bluett. “Schools with large numbers of disadvantaged children or recent arrivals from overseas may not rank highly on test scores, but they add enormous value to students,” she says. “In Victoria every government school has to prepare an annual report that records the NAPLAN test results, VCE [Victorian Certificate of Education] information and school attendance. The data is all there for parents who want to look.”

Bluett says it is galling to have politicians naming and shaming schools when the debate should be about “how governments have, decade in and decade out, failed to adequately fund schools”.

Life options open

In Singapore, high-stakes testing comes at an emotional—and financial—cost to many families. While the nation is proud of its students’ achievements, especially in maths and science, its testing regime moves children into the form of education that will dictate their place in society for years to come, says academic Erica McWilliam.

“Sorting and credentialing begins at the primary level and is very much a public matter,” she says. “By contrast, Australian schooling keeps life options more open, and this is preferable.”

McWilliam is an adjunct professor at the ARC Centre of Excellence for Creative Industries and Innovation at Queensland University of Technology, and professor of education in the Centre for Research in Pedagogy and Practice at the National Institute of Education in Singapore.

the construction and publication of league tables...can deepen inequality...

data can be restricted or controlled ignores flaws in current models that claim to compare ‘like schools’, says Save Our Schools national convenor Trevor Cobbold.

“Existing models that group schools by socioeconomic status used in Australia, and Gillard’s favoured New York model, fail to compare like with like,” says Cobbold. “They generally fail to distinguish different ethnic populations of schools, which have a bearing on school results. Also, the measures used to determine the socioeconomic composition of schools are unreliable. For example, there may be larger differences in the profile

in the national literacy and numeracy tests last year prompted an absolutely hysterical overreaction from the state government that did not take into account the fact that the state’s children start school later than in some other states or the relatively high number of remote and regional schools.”

Ryan says an aggressive pursuit of the NAPLAN agenda from the Premier’s Office down resulted in demands that schools spend time on test preparation at the expense of other subjects, and threats from education bureaucrats that teachers and principals could face unsatisfactory performance reviews.

“...the debate should be about how governments have, decade in and decade out, failed to adequately fund schools.”

The Singapore approach creates a “hothouse environment of nervous energy and distress” for all schools, students and parents, and a booming industry in paid tutoring, says McWilliam. She is concerned that overemphasis on standardised testing in Australia could lead to a rise in “teacher bashing” by politicians who think they can use testing to force quality. “An education revolution won’t come from single scores on league tables. It will come from shifting the culture of schools in ways that develop public confidence in what they can do.”

Australia should be considering other models of evaluation, says McWilliam. “Finland does not have standardised testing and sees no need to make school-based test results visible, but it tops the OECD’s Programme for International Student Assessment. Transparency comes from the cultures that schools build through the value a society places in its teachers. In Finland, university applicants need a higher score to get into teacher education than to get into medicine.”

Governments and parents have a right to expect that schools teach

the basics well, says McWilliam. Research shows that students with high levels of literacy and numeracy do much better in their use of digital tools for highly complex learning. She says standardised testing needs to be part of a much larger portfolio of evaluation that includes non-test criteria to reveal how flexible children are in their thinking and how well they collaborate with others, engage in community and use digital technology. ●

Carolyn Rance is a freelance writer.

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