

# Overturning the tables

With a Senate inquiry, a government working party and AEU expert panel, the campaign to stop league tables gathers momentum.

Interviews by **Paul Somerville**

**T**he fight to safeguard student test results and stop the public ranking of schools in league tables is now being waged on three fronts.

Two hundred and sixty submissions have been made to the Senate's Education, Employment and Workplace Relations Committee that is due to report on 13 August. This Senate inquiry is examining the conflicting claims around NAPLAN testing, possible safeguards around presenting the test data, and the impact of NAPLAN on education.

The federal government's My School working party, convened to address concerns expressed by education supporters including the AEU, is continuing to meet. This working party will also present its recommendations to education ministers at the end of August.

The AEU has also invited a group of education academics—Brian Caldwell, Margaret Wu, Allan Luke, Alan Reid and Barbara Preston—to form an expert advisory panel. This panel will work with the AEU to explore ways of safeguarding NAPLAN test results that are used to publish league tables.

## Missing the mark

On the following pages our five leading education academics discuss standardised testing and the effect of publishing the results online.

### Brian Caldwell

**Professional fellow**  
University of Melbourne

**Managing director**  
Educational Transformations



**I**t's no coincidence that the world's leading nations in education, for example Finland, have no national testing. They test students often—and they test them well—and regular assessment is a key part of their teaching programs. But national testing would not be accepted by the teaching profession or the community in those countries, and they would certainly not post the results in league tables on a website.

The fact is that national tests, like NAPLAN, are necessarily limited in their scope. And publicly displaying the results on the My School website has some dysfunctional effects.

Research has been conducted on these things over several decades. We know that the difference between classrooms at the one school is bigger than the difference between schools. So, leaving aside the sheer narrowness of what My School is communicating to

parents, it's not really telling them what they need to know about their child's education.

Similarly, the studies all say that if you focus on a narrow range of outcomes and put those results on websites, two things occur. Firstly, there is an extraordinary amount of practising tests; and secondly, the curriculum tends to narrow. Sadly, this is occurring in Australia precisely at a time when curricula should be expanding to cover 21st century skills like creativity, critical thinking, teamwork and communication.

Comparing test data also puts teachers, principals and students under exceptional stress. In the UK last September, *The Times* listed every British primary school ranked in order from one to 12,000. Interestingly, on every page of its website, there was a paid advertisement from an Australian company (because I was accessing the site from Australia) offering assistance in preparing for the NAPLAN test. When I went to the website for that local company it contained an ad for Beyond Blue, the national depression initiative. It was a telling juxtaposition between the pressure to excel and the high-degree of stress (and potentially, depression) that may result.

It's tragic that we are subjecting some of our youngest kids to national tests when everything we know about early learning tells that it should be a time of encouraging imagination and enjoyment of learning. ●

**"... the My School website has some dysfunctional effects."**

## Margaret Wu

**Associate Professor**  
Assessment Research Centre,  
University of Melbourne



It's understandable that schools, teachers and parents want to know how students are going, and testing is a typical way of helping them to find out. The problem is that a single test is, in itself, an inaccurate measure of student performance. It provides only a small snapshot of progress because it's just one set of test items and a student's response to them at one time and place. These variables mean that a test result is not a definitive statement of a child's ability or improvement.

My concern, therefore, is that the NAPLAN results are not being used appropriately. There is too much reliance on data that comes from one test.

There are other limitations too. NAPLAN tests are conducted by grade—in primary school, they are just for students in year 3 and year 5—so they don't provide a broad representation of a student's education across the

totality of their early schooling. Moreover, Australian primary schools are typically quite small: some 50 per cent of them have less than 25 students in each grade. These small sample sizes mean we should expect fluctuations when test results are aggregated.

So it's my view that, while the results may provide indicative trends for stakeholders, they should not be used to make high-stakes decisions, such as determining whether or not schools are doing well. To take the further step of using these somewhat inaccurate results to rank schools and to assess teacher performance is very problematic.

I would argue, in fact, that it's extremely difficult to measure school performance through any kind of student testing. Even when we take into account a school's socioeconomic status, there are still many other factors, such as natural ability and personality that account for the variability in student's results, over and above the effect of teacher and school.

It's not that I'm against student testing. I actually believe that assessments should occur more frequently, which would lessen the pressure associated with each task. These ongoing progress tests could still be standardised, which would allow some comparison between schools and jurisdictions. And improving technologies, such as the ability to conduct tests online, will make them increasingly efficient. ●

**"... [NAPLAN results] should not be used to make high-stakes decisions..."**

## Allan Luke

Professor of Education  
Queensland University  
of Technology



**T**here are profound problems facing schools and teachers but I question the widely held claim that a new focus on the 'basics' is the answer.

An Australian Research Council study we are undertaking found recently that teachers in low socioeconomic schools in metropolitan Brisbane are spending between 500 and 600 minutes each week on phonics and alphabets. Yes, there is evidence that the problems affecting equity are issues of curriculum and pedagogy, but the core issue is a documented lack of intellectual demand, depth and instructional focus. The current situation where teachers nationally are concentrating on the teaching and testing of basic skills will do little to address this, and may exacerbate the situation.

Unfortunately, the current policy settings mimic US strategies which

were generated in response to a very empirically different set of challenges and problems. These included highly decentralised systems, 50 different curricula and teacher-accreditation systems, variable taxation and funding bases, and deteriorating conditions in inner city schools.

Ten years down the line, we know that competitive, market-based approaches in schools in the UK and US are at best very rough policy instruments that have not improved equity or quality—the subject of literally hundreds of published studies.

Poverty does have an impact on student performance, but quality pedagogy and curriculum can make a difference. To improve equity, we need a greater degree of school-based management to identify professional and curriculum reform issues and build distinctive responses to community and student cohort needs.

We need 'informed prescription' in the form of simple and parsimonious, clear and coherent curriculum documents. And we need 'informed professionalism' where teachers can put the requisite content, pedagogical and community knowledge and skill into developmental diagnostic assessment to work in developing school-based curriculum programs. To assume that a high-stakes testing regime and league tables will do the trick is simply naive. ●

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**“... the current policy settings mimic [ineffective] US strategies...”**

## Alan Reid

Professor of Education  
University of South Australia



**T**he claims made about the supposed benefits of the My School website need to be carefully scrutinised.

The federal Education Minister says that the site will lift the quality of education and help parents to choose between schools. But material that gives people a real sense of a school's success should go far beyond its test scores on reading and writing. It would need to cover a broad range of things, including the social and cultural outcomes the school generates and the feeling of community it engenders. Merely uploading the NAPLAN results is quite dangerous because it purports to say something substantial about schools when in fact it doesn't.

Similarly, I wish there was more reference to the extensive overseas research about how test information used for diagnostic purposes becomes

high stakes when it is released publicly.

Many studies have demonstrated the damaging effects not only on students and teaching, but also on the curriculum. When high-stakes tests are based on a limited range of learning outcomes, the curriculum is narrowed quite alarmingly.

Moreover, when everything depends on a single test result, educators are more likely to throw up smokescreens to hide the problems they are confronting than they are to openly discuss issues and dilemmas, as would happen in a truly accountable system.

Prime Minister Julia Gillard says that My School will increase accountability. However, creating genuinely accountable processes is far more complex than simply setting up a website containing one source of information.

Quality learning outcomes are best fostered by collaborative endeavours within and across schools, not the competitive posturing produced by league tables. We need to see schools as community centres that encourage people to work together to tackle problems and improve quality, not just leave when they think the results on a narrow range of tests are not good enough.

Educators have spent decades grappling with issues around social justice and education. We don't need the My School website to tell us where disadvantage is to be found—this is well known.

Of more benefit would be well-thought-out strategies designed to address the causes of unequal outcomes over an extended period, rather than quick-fix solutions implemented on timelines determined by the NAPLAN testing cycle. ●

## Barbara Preston

### Independent researcher

Barbara Preston Research

### Doctoral student

Faculty of Education,  
University of Canberra



**T**he My School website makes some effort to give context to the NAPLAN test results published for each school.

However, I believe the way the data is presented should be approached with caution.

My School compares average NAPLAN results for what it describes as 'statistically similar' schools. Each school's page on the site features a chart setting out the school's average NAPLAN scores for each domain. Immediately below are the average scores for 'statistically similar' schools as well as for all Australian schools. There is a bar above each of these scores that indicates by colour whether the particular school is 'substantially above' (green), 'above' (pale green), 'close to' (white), 'below' (pink), and 'substantially below' (red) 'statistically similar' schools and all schools.

Schools are deemed to be 'statistically similar' using the Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage (ICSEA). The major component of ICSEA is based on Australian Bureau of Statistics 2006 census data on characteristics such as income and occupation of all individuals and households in the Census Collection Districts in which each student at the school lives. However, while each district (of around 225 households) is treated as one socioeconomic unit, there is great variation between the incomes of different households within them.

Further, the type of school students who attend is not random. According to census data, there is a tendency for students from families with higher incomes, even in the most disadvantaged districts, to attend Catholic or independent schools. Similarly, there is a tendency for the poorer students, even in the most advantaged districts, to attend government schools.

My School does not recognise the diversity within districts and that the type of school that students attend is linked to their families' incomes. That's a problem because, if a school has a lot of red and pink compared with 'statistically similar' schools, you would automatically think it's not performing well. But it may be that the school is in fact drawing from students with the lowest family incomes in their neighbourhood. It is being compared with schools that are not similar in socioeconomic status, even though the addresses of its students, on a superficial reading, may suggest otherwise. ●

Paul Somerville is a freelance journalist.