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Data danger unanswred

Education ministers have failed to indicate what they will do to stop the creation and publication of simplistic league tables.

At the time of writing, students in years 3, 5, 7 and 9 were sitting the NAPLAN tests—national tests created before a national curriculum and in the absence of a common school starting age across the country.

As announced at the meeting of education ministers on April 17, “...from 2009 the new Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority will be responsible for publishing relevant, nationally comparable information on all schools. This will include publication of the 2008 NAPLAN data and associated contextual information. The information will enable comparisons of each school with other schools serving similar student populations around the nation and with the best-performing school in each cohort of ‘like schools’.”

Later that day, minister Julia Gillard declared that “education ministers have always said there’s no point in reporting on raw scores or having simplistic league tables”.

While continuing to express rejection of simplistic league tables, the ministers have failed to say how they intend to stop their creation and publication.

The publication of league tables in the Hobart *Mercury* on

Wednesday 6 May 2009 did not only expose the hollowness of the statements by ministers in opposition to league tables, it validated our concerns and the profession’s calls for a legislative response to prohibit their creation.

Similarly, the report outlining the intention of the NSW government to amend its legislation and related regulations introduced in 1997 preventing the publication of school league tables has also legitimised and validated our call for a legislative response.

“...we will have to take measures which will not allow the creation of league tables.”

The answer to school improvement does not lie in the approach outlined in the “national transparency agenda”. It lies in proactive policies aimed at properly resourcing and supporting schools, and establishing a culture of evaluation, progressive refinement and improvement of teaching and learning in all schools. To do otherwise accepts a deficit model of thinking, a culture of blame shifting rather than a culture where everyone, teachers, parents and

governments, accept and fulfil their responsibilities.

Fifteen peak professional associations wrote to all education ministers on March 19 urging them to take legislative action prohibiting the creation and publication of league tables flowing from the collection and release of student and school performance data. (A copy of the letter can be found at www.aeufederal.org.au/Debates/Ltablesletter.pdf). The ministers have failed to listen to the profession.

The damage to curriculum provision, students and entire school communities caused by league tables is well-documented in international research and evidence. Research also shows that league tables create greater inequality and increased segregation as a result of shifts in student enrolment patterns.

It is now beyond dispute. Unless appropriate action is taken by governments the creation and publication of league tables in all states and territories is inevitable.

If ministers fail to take appropriate action, we will have to take measures that will not allow the creation of league tables. ●



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