



## **Australian Education Union**

### **Submission to the**

## **Education Council of the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) Review of NAPLAN Data Presentation**

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## Executive summary

The Australian Education Union (AEU) represents more than 187,000 members employed in public primary, secondary and special schools and the early childhood, TAFE and adult provision sectors as teachers, educational leaders, education assistants or support staff.

The National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) was never intended as a vehicle for the public comparison of results of individual schools, and the ability of parents to use My School to compare and potentially select a school solely on the basis of the very broad, simplified and misrepresented results reported on the website allows for significant misinterpretation and potential misuse of its data.

The availability of de-contextualised NAPLAN data for individual schools creates a particularly high stakes scenario for schools, where reputation and enrolment numbers can hinge on a single year's NAPLAN results, and teaching and learning processes are distorted due to an overemphasis on NAPLAN results at the expense of the rounded and varied education teachers would prefer to provide.

This high stakes assessment narrows teaching strategies and curriculum, increases stress for students and impacts on their health and wellbeing, lowers staff morale, and can negatively impact on school reputations and capacity to attract and retain students and staff.

This submission includes evidence from world experts in assessment, who reach the striking conclusion that “the design and execution of the 2018 NAPLAN make it so flawed that its results are of very limited use to students, parents, and schools”<sup>1</sup> and that “there are no studies I know of that report successful use of the two testing modes on a regular single national assessment... In sum, the 2018 NAPLAN results should be discarded.”<sup>2</sup> The disastrous attempt at bi-modal delivery of NAPLAN in 2018 has broken the longitudinal time series (despite ACARA's attempts to preserve it at all costs to data integrity) and the data should not and cannot be used in this way.

Furthermore, and aside from the 2018 debacle, the presentation of NAPLAN data on the My School website is, at best, vague and at worst, misleading. Average scores for individual schools are presented in a rigid colour coded display, while the unusually wide confidence intervals that the data is subject to are downplayed in reporting to the extent that the average visitor is unlikely to be aware that the score is not an authoritative single number as presented, but actually a possible range of scores of up to two entire NAPLAN scoring bands.

This misrepresentation of the NAPLAN data is then subject to further de-contextualisation through the use of the Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage (ICSEA) for the “similar schools” comparison without any regard to sector, or the varying level of recurrent funding available to schools labelled as “similar”, or the impact that the high stakes of NAPLAN testing may have on test preparation regimes and the varying instance of “teaching the test” at schools ostensibly branded as “similar”.

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<sup>1</sup> Perelman, L. & Haney, W., (2018) *Problems in the Design and Administration of the 2018 NAPLAN*, retrieved from [https://www.qtu.asn.au/application/files/5615/3543/9603/Naplan\\_2018\\_Report\\_Perelman\\_Final.pdf](https://www.qtu.asn.au/application/files/5615/3543/9603/Naplan_2018_Report_Perelman_Final.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

For these reasons the Australian Education Union (AEU) has reached the policy conclusions and recommendations outlined below.

## **AEU POLICY CONCLUSIONS**

- 1. The 2018 NAPLAN test cannot be validly used for comparison data processes such as My School deploys.**
- 2. My School data can only be refreshed with a new longitudinal starting point when all students are using the same assessment mode.**
- 3. The original stated purposes of NAPLAN and My School have been terminally corrupted.**
- 4. The My School website causes great social harm especially to our most vulnerable students and schools.**
- 5. The website is incompatible with contemporary policy approaches to privacy rights.**
- 6. Alignment with the 2018 Gonski “Growth to Achievement” approach provides a framework for resolving the profound problems that NAPLAN and My School have caused.**

## **AEU RECOMMENDATIONS**

- 1: That a comprehensive review of NAPLAN is undertaken, focusing on whether the current approach to standardised testing is fit for purpose.**
- 2: That the use of standardised testing, such as NAPLAN, as a scorecard for individual schools or groups of students in those schools, as currently promoted through the My School website, is ceased.**
- 3: That ACARA provide plain language explanations to parents of the very wide error margins used to calculate student and individual school scores and the misleading manner in which they are presented to parents on the My School site.**
- 4: That an exploratory study is undertaken to determine the requisite sample size at the state/territory, sector and national levels for a new assessment program to replace NAPLAN.**

## Introduction

The Australian Education Union (AEU) represents more than 187,000 members employed in public primary, secondary and special schools and the early childhood, TAFE and adult provision sectors as teachers, educational leaders, education assistants or support staff.

Numerous stakeholders, including teachers, principals, the AEU, state education ministers, education academics, international assessment experts and many others have repeatedly called for a full and comprehensive review of the suitability of the National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) in its entirety. We are gravely concerned that rather than the full and comprehensive review we have consistently advocated for, this current review has a narrow focus on the manner in which NAPLAN data is presented and reported and does not seek to answer the most urgent and pertinent question about NAPLAN –whether it is a viable and useful method of assessment.

We have addressed each of the questions from the issues paper individually below.

### **1. Perceptions of NAPLAN and My School data, including the potential for misinterpretation or misuse**

There is widespread condemnation within the teaching profession of My School as the vehicle for the public comparison of the NAPLAN results of individual schools and the ability of parents to potentially select a school on the basis of results reported through the website alone. This is not an accurate way to determine the character of a school and is not the way that NAPLAN results were originally intended to be used.

In order to gauge the character of a school it is vitally important that parents visit that school and talk to the principal, teachers and the wider school community. Encouraging parents to visit the My School website to compare NAPLAN results removes all nuance from the process of choosing a school and encourages parents to pass judgement about a school based purely on a narrow set of measures and without any of the context that comes with direct engagement.

The NAPLAN data, and its manner of presentation on the My School website creates a particularly high stakes scenario for schools, where reputation and enrolment numbers potentially hinge on a single year's NAPLAN results. The high-stakes nature of the test has wide-reaching, and often negative, implications for schools and can lead to the distortion of teaching and learning process as schools are encouraged to overemphasise NAPLAN test results at the expense of more important elements of the rich and varied education which teachers would prefer to prioritise for their students.

When asked, AEU members are consistently certain in their assessment that there is no good outcome from the publication of school-level NAPLAN data. A recent AEU South Australia Branch survey of South Australian teachers and school leaders showed that 82% of educators believe that test data about their school should not be publicly available. According to the respondents it would be more appropriate for NAPLAN data to be available only to staff at the school, the student and their family. As stated above, the publication of school-level NAPLAN data raises the tests' stakes, and therefore also significantly raises its level of priority in the classroom.

There is a wealth of evidence from the US, UK and now Australia demonstrating the negative impacts of high-stakes standard assessment. In 2017, The Whitlam Institute concluded that such testing protocols inevitably lead to:

- The narrowing of teaching strategies and of the curriculum
- Negative impacts on student health and wellbeing
- Negative impacts on staff morale, and
- Negative impacts on school reputation and capacity to attract and retain students and staff<sup>3</sup>

The experience of AEU members' confirms the findings above - In South Australia, two thirds of teacher respondents said they have felt pressure to change the way they teach as a result of NAPLAN and two thirds of respondents also reported that practice tests had been conducted during lesson time at their school.

***Does the NAPLAN data currently available on the My School website provide an appropriate balance between the right to high quality information and the possibility of misinterpretation or misuse?***

*General comments on misinterpretation and misuse of the My School website*

There is no doubt that valid, reliable and contextual information about schools and school performance should be publicly available to track progress at a systemic level. However, the construction of the NAPLAN tests, and the mode of delivery of those tests has repeatedly been shown to be unreliable and is presented through My School in such a way that is easily and frequently misinterpreted by parents who make use of the website. Additionally, there are numerous examples of media outlets and third parties abusing the privilege of accessing this information to brand schools as either failures or successes without consideration of any of the contextual factors that contribute to a school's NAPLAN results. The very fact that NAPLAN results are made available at individual school level in such detail is, perversely, what leads to them being almost uniformly viewed as the most important outcomes a school produces, and whilst the current public reporting regime continues, that will never change.

Educators have the professional skills to implement appropriate programs and support that meet the needs of the students in their classes on a continual basis. They use a variety of assessment tools to gauge student's performance and identify the support those students need. The best feedback for improved student learning is targeted and immediate. In contrast to this approach, My School presents a delayed snapshot of NAPLAN results, entirely without context. It can take to 4 months before teachers receive a student's NAPLAN results. NAPLAN is just one test, a snapshot, and on its own it provides a narrow and incomplete picture of a student's education. It can't measure creativity, critical thinking, engagement or the culture and community of a school.

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<sup>3</sup> Dulfer, N., Polesel, J. & Rice, S., *The Experience of Education: The impact of high stakes testing on schools students and their families*, The Whitlam Institute, 2017, retrieved from <https://www.whitlam.org/publications/2017/10/17/an-educators-perspective-the-impacts-of-high-stakes-testing-on-school-students-and-their-families>

Reporting of each individual school's delayed results publicly via My School has negative impacts on students, teachers and schools and is clearly not in the broad public interest. Over the last decade, Australia's results in mathematics and literacy have not improved, and NAPLAN and My School have not driven the improvement it was claimed they would when launched. As NAPLAN has failed in its core task of improving literacy and numeracy standards for Australian students, there is little point in continuing to report its results, and particularly no point in reporting them at the individual school level.

*Comments specific to the 2018 NAPLAN test*

In relation to the questions of whether the 2018 NAPLAN test and consequent data provide high quality information, and whether the data could be open to misinterpretation or misuse, we cite the findings of research on this issue conducted by Perelman and Haney, both world experts in assessment and reporting, on the bi-model delivery of the 2018 NAPLAN test.

In reviewing the delivery modes of NAPLAN 2018 they found that:

1. "Simultaneously administering Computer Adaptive Testing (CAT) to one part of a national population and pen and paper tests (P&P) to the other appears to be an unprecedented strategy for evaluating the transition of a large scale national test to CAT;
2. The fatal error of calibrating CAT item choices for Grammar and Punctuation on performance on the Reading portion invalidates individual student marks on the CAT for at least the Grammar and Punctuation sections, and, possibly the entire test;
3. There has been no publication of studies that are reported to equate the two test modes and to demonstrate that the marks on the two test modes are comparable;
4. The strategy employed by ACARA for cross-mode design invalidates comparisons of the 2018 NAPLAN, both the CAT and P&P versions, with prior years' NAPLAN tests;
5. Online writing tasks are inherently incomparable with P&P tests;
6. The design and execution of the 2018 NAPLAN make it so flawed that its results are of very limited use to students, parents, and schools."<sup>4</sup>

Based on their findings the AEU concludes that the 2018 NAPLAN test was deeply flawed and its results cannot be validly used for any consequent public reporting. At the school level the only partially useful data would be for an individual student on the actual papers they sat, and the only portion of that suitable for longitudinal comparison is the P&P writing task, which in itself has many methodological defects.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Perelman, *Op. cit.*

<sup>5</sup> Perelman, L, (2018) *Towards a New NAPLAN: Testing to the Teaching*, retrieved from [https://www.nswtf.org.au/files/18116\\_towards\\_a\\_new\\_digital.pdf](https://www.nswtf.org.au/files/18116_towards_a_new_digital.pdf)

Longitudinal My School data is rendered invalid as the bi-modal 2018 NAPLAN operation breaks the longitudinal sequence. From the point that the sequence is broken students are not being compared, over time, with comparable testing modes. As Perelman states “there are no studies I know of that report successful use of the two testing modes on a regular single national assessment.... In sum, the 2018 NAPLAN results should be discarded.”<sup>6</sup>

Additionally, following the 2018 NAPLAN online debacle public trust in NAPLAN is now severely compromised. Dr Steven Lewis, of Deakin University, has stated that “any lack of statistical comparability, be it perceived or actual, between the online and pen-and-paper tests jeopardises its utility as a trusted means of comparison. Such a lack of comparability could mean that comparisons cannot be made between schools using different modes of testing in 2018, or between a single school’s year-to-year performances if the school has piloted the online delivery format”.<sup>7</sup>

In its public communication on the issue, the Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) claims that it has consulted ‘independent experts’ who have “confirmed the results are comparable” between testing modes, but strangely doesn’t readily offer any details as to who these experts are, or the methods they used to arrive at these conclusions. After assuring us that all is well with the 2018 results, ACARA then immediately state that “this years’ results for Year 9 students who completed the test online were, on average, higher than for students who completed the test on paper”, and that the difference “appears to be a result of the test mode”.<sup>8</sup> The lack of transparency around the statistical procedures and experts used by ACARA to attempt to present the 2018 data as ‘valid and comparable’, can only result in a complete lack of trust in the results.

Additionally, the Victorian branch of the AEU has heard from numerous Principals who were shocked when advised by the Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority that they could make ‘manual’ calculation adjustments to enable comparability between NAPLAN writing assessments completed online and by pen and paper.

The 2018 NAPLAN online debacle clearly demonstrated that for ACARA preserving the perceived sanctity of the testing regime was of greater importance than ensuring the valid, consistent and reliable assessment of student achievement.

NAPLAN and My School are irredeemably compromised and cannot be validly used to compare the performance of individual schools using the 2018 NAPLAN test results.

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<sup>6</sup> Perelman, L. & Haney, W., (2018) *Problems in the Design and Administration of the 2018 NAPLAN*, retrieved from [https://www.qtu.asn.au/application/files/5615/3543/9603/Naplan\\_2018\\_Report\\_Perelman\\_Final.pdf](https://www.qtu.asn.au/application/files/5615/3543/9603/Naplan_2018_Report_Perelman_Final.pdf)

<sup>7</sup> The Educator (2018) ‘Impossible’ to know validity of NAPLAN testing – experts, retrieved from <https://www.theeducatoronline.com/au/news/impossible-to-know-validity-of-naplan-testing--experts/253502>

<sup>8</sup> ACARA media release, 28 August 2018, retrieved from <http://www.acara.edu.au/docs/default-source/Media-Releases/20180828-naplan-summary-media-release.pdf?sfvrsn=2>

***Is there anything you find difficult to understand or is there any different NAPLAN information you would like to see included on My School?***

There is a general and complete lack of transparency in the way that the NAPLAN test is developed and its grading criteria. Again, to quote, Perelman:

*There is no publicly available document that presents the rationale for the 10 specific criteria used in marking the NAPLAN essay and the assignment of their relative weights. This lack of transparency is also evident in the failure of the Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) to include other stakeholders, such as teachers, local administrators, parents, professional writers, and others in the formulation, design, and evaluation of the essay and its marking criteria.”<sup>9</sup>*

The “Technical and Statistical Information” section of the My School website contains very little actual information of the sort, and instead offers a series of platitudinous statements. For example, the “Reliability and validity of NAPLAN” fact sheet found in the “Technical and Statistical Information” section refers numerous times to various “specialists” and “experts” who develop, quality assure, trial and provide advice on the NAPLAN tests, but provides no actual detail on how any of this is done. A prime example of this obfuscation is where the fact sheet states that:

*Equating tests are delivered by specially trained independent test administrators. This ensures that the security of the equating tests is preserved. The equating process for NAPLAN was developed following expert advice and enables ACARA to say with confidence that any test difference has been taken into account before making statements about one year’s results compared to the next.<sup>10</sup>*

Nowhere on this ‘fact sheet’ are we presented with any actual facts about how the tests were devised, the statistical procedures the “specially trained independent test administrators” used in the equating process or any details of what the impact of the equating process is on the raw data.

Similarly, while, several clicks into the technical and statistics information section of the My School website, there are PDFs available that partially explain the standard error ranges for NAPLAN data by sample size, the actual data as presented on My School significantly downplays the very wide error ranges in the data presented, and presents what are actually incredibly imprecise results as precise and absolute.

As seen in the example below, the NAPLAN results “numbers” display on My School only shows the error range for school average scores when the user hovers over a number and even then, it is shown greyed out and without any accompanying explanation of what it represents.

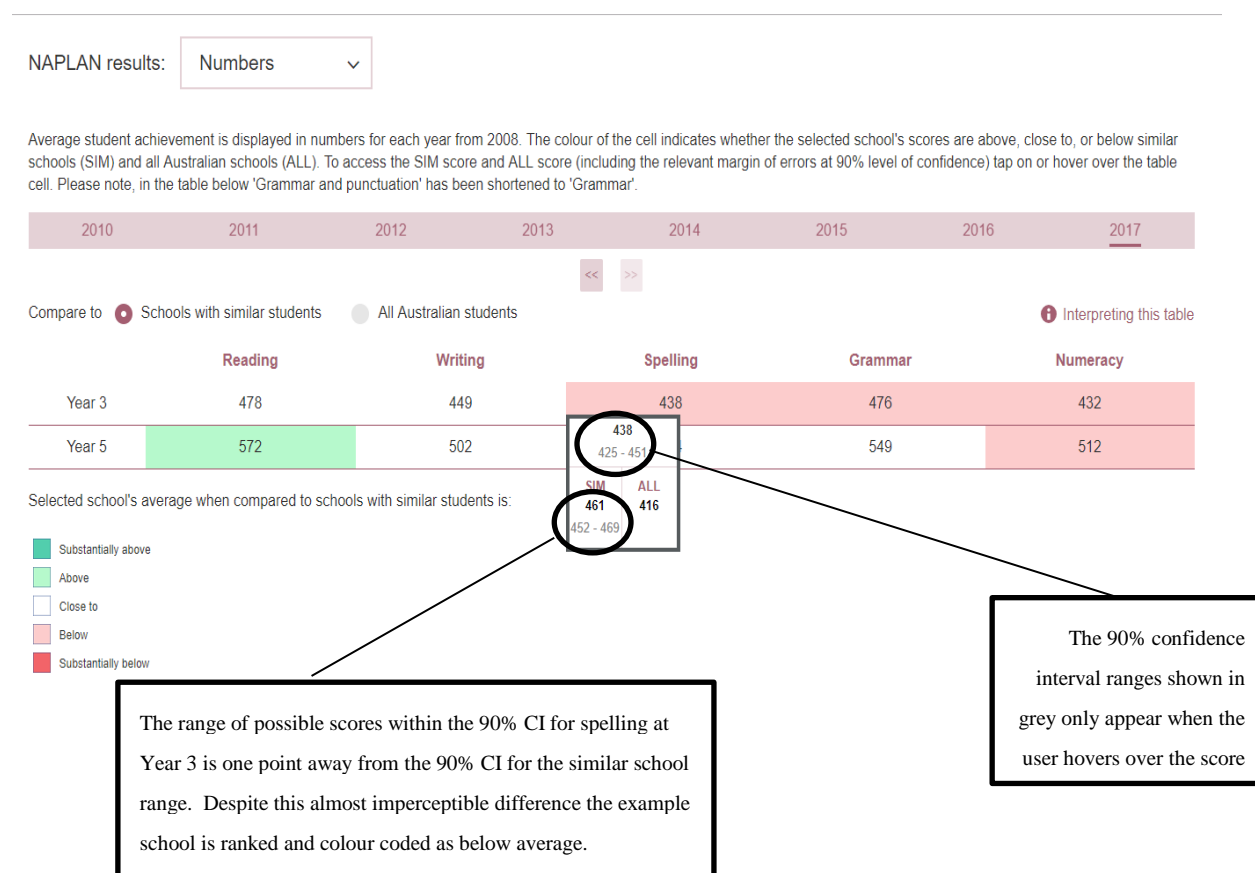
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<sup>9</sup> Perelman New NAPLAN

<sup>10</sup> [https://www.myschool.edu.au/media/1068/reliability\\_and\\_validity\\_of\\_naplan\\_file.pdf](https://www.myschool.edu.au/media/1068/reliability_and_validity_of_naplan_file.pdf)



**Figure 1: Example of how scores and error ranges are presented in My School**



Users must click a link to reveal a picture showing that this range is actually a 90% confidence interval, which is used across all NAPLAN data on My School, and is a much lower level of confidence than the standard 95% confidence interval used in most social and educational research. As shown by Mockler (2018) the 90% confidence interval covers approximately two bands of NAPLAN scores - enough to turn red to white, or white to green and entirely change the way a school is perceived by the public.

The use of the 90% confidence interval hides the complete imprecision of the scores and their banding. As Mockler shows using an example from the 2016 NAPLAN technical report, a score of 615 in grammar and punctuation is in fact a score within the range of 558 and 672 at the 90% confidence interval. The application of the standard 95% confidence interval to this result would present an even wider range of 547 – 683 – “in other words, the student’s ‘true ability’ might be very close to the national average, toward the bottom of Band 7, or quite close to the top of Band 9...That’s a very wide ‘window’ indeed.”<sup>11</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Mockler, N. (2018) *It's time to be honest with parents about NAPLAN: your child's report is misleading, here's how*, Australian Association for Research in Education, retrieved from <https://www.aare.edu.au/blog/?p=2870>

In many cases, the range of scores within a standard 95% confidence interval would be sufficient to move a school from a pink “below” score to a white “close to” or even a green “above” score. The presentation of what is actually a very wide range of possible scores as an objective and absolute judgement at an individual school level has the potential to severely impact a school’s overall scoring within the colour coded system, its ranking in various league table aggregators and in the media, its reputation with parents and ultimately its enrolments and resourcing.

All the nuance and detail required to properly interpret this data at school level has been either stripped out or deliberately deprioritised in the data’s presentation in favour of a simple colour code that purports to tell parents whether their child’s school, and their child’s score, is either good or bad.

The crux of the problem is that this representation of student performance at a school level is what the My School website is built on, and My School is the primary online resource Australian parents are encouraged to use when considering schools for their child. The vast majority of parents are not inclined to trawl through the NAPLAN technical reports and academic critiques to glean the information above. Most simply trust that what they are presented with is the true state of their child’s education and make important decisions based on it.

The looseness with which ACARA treats its reporting responsibilities when it comes to disclosing the imprecision of student and school level NAPLAN data has undoubtedly resulted in many parents being unnecessarily alarmed and many schools’ and teachers’ reputations being needlessly damaged.

The AEU has heard numerous concerns from school principals about the use of individual school NAPLAN data by parents when choosing a school, including:

- The dominance of the “colour-based” comparisons between schools serving students from statistically similar backgrounds provides a narrow, one dimensional view of school performance that ignores an array of critical contextual elements about the school and the performance of students, including the knowledge and skill base from which students start
- The effect of the misused visual representation of comparative performance on school enrolment patterns within and across communities and geographic locations
- The impact of NAPLAN based marketing of schools and their apparent performance for the purposes of attracting enrolments.

***Is the explanatory material on My School around “statistically similar schools” sufficiently explained, easy to understand and does this support fair comparisons for schools?***

Because NAPLAN is a point in time snapshot, and schools (even statistically similar schools) make different decisions about how the test is to be regarded, the data cannot possibly be reliable. There is no contextual information about a school available before the system jumps straight to the headline numbers, and the finance data showing the level of total recurrent funding and recurrent funding per student is presented entirely separately from the NAPLAN comparisons and from the schools Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage (ICSEA) value, which has the effect of obscuring the huge impact that funding and finance have on performance.

For example, a randomly selected public primary school in inner Melbourne has a high ICSEA of 1149 and is listed on My School as receiving \$8,837 recurrent funding per student in 2017. Its most appropriate comparative Catholic school (as offered by My School) has a similar ICSEA of 1125 and received recurrent funding of \$10,210 per student in 2017, 15.5% more per student than the public school. There is no way to directly compare funding levels at the same time as perusing NAPLAN scores without clicking back and forth between schools and their various tabs of data, and therefore no way to analyse a schools' scores within My School in the context of the amount of funding available to that school and the impact that may have on results. The labelling of schools as similar based only on an ICSEA score is also in itself problematic, as it encourages people to believe that all differences have been somehow accounted for and discourages further investigation of the type described above.

There is also a wealth of evidence, both Australian and international, that shows that the fundamental approach to assessment often differs between high and low socio-economic status schools, and that this inevitably shapes the way that learning is approached. In the USA "Poor districts offer stripped-down drill and practice approaches to reading and math learning, rather than teaching for higher order applications ... Critical thinking and problem-solving, collaboration, effective oral and written communication, accessing and analysing information, curiosity and imagination ... have typically been rationed to the most advantaged students in the United States." Additionally, in Queensland: "Far from students in poorer communities lacking 'basic skills', they in fact receive more work on decoding at the expense of other critical aspects of reading and literacy." Teese and Lamb draw this conclusion from their national research: "Since public perception of schools based on league tables particularly disadvantages low SES schools, the consequence is a focus on "performance", rather than "achievement".<sup>12</sup>

***What consideration should be given to comparisons over time and between schools while schools progressively transition to NAPLAN online?***

As shown above, every attempt has been made by ACARA to present the 2018 online and pen and paper results as compatible, but these attempts have been universally condemned by independent assessment experts, and it is clear that the online and paper NAPLAN tests are not and cannot be made to be comparable.

The bi-modal nature of data collection in 2018 also breaks the longitudinal time series of My School data. As such, the 2018 results should not be shown on the My School website and no data for 2018 should be published publicly. Additionally, ACARA should recognise that its longitudinal time series has been broken and that any compiled data, or comparison of 2018 with previous years, is unreliable and invalid.

If, as ACARA asserts, NAPLAN is to become an entirely online administered test, the time series could only be started afresh from the point that it becomes an entirely online exercise, and any further attempt to use the 2018 data to stitch together the paper based online versions and any future data collected online will only further undermine ACARA's already severely damaged credibility.

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<sup>12</sup> Fitzgerald, D., (2017) *Crossroads: A green Paper on Assessment Policy*, NSW Teachers Federation, p.12

## **2. How My School and NAPLAN contribute to understanding of student progress and achievement**

The AEU has long held that the solution to improving educational outcomes is to engage students in life-long learning, not by encouraging competition between schools. If we want to see improved student outcomes, we need to invest additional resources in our schools, so every student is supported to reach their full potential.

In terms of how NAPLAN data is disseminated and reported, the least damaging and safest thing to do would be to keep the school-level data available only to the school. Schools can then evaluate their teaching practices without the de-contextualised glare of public scrutiny.

***To what extent do schools and school systems use NAPLAN student progress and achievement data, including comparisons with statistically similar schools, to inform their school improvement strategies?***

The widespread publication of NAPLAN results gives high scoring schools a privileged status with the public and the media, who perceive the scores as a direct measure and indicator of teacher and school effectiveness. This is further reinforced, for example in Victoria, where the Department of Education and Training uses NAPLAN results to initiate school improvement processes, reviews and interventions, despite their limited utility because of the profoundly narrow rendering of a school's context, as detailed elsewhere in this submission.

This use is inappropriate when consideration is given to the NAPLAN's many problems with validity and reliability, and often results in resources, teacher attention and class time being soaked up with attempts to improve the results of under-performing students on the tests. It means that the scope and depth of the curriculum is often ignored in favour of drills and activities aimed at improving student test performance. In these circumstances an improvement in test performance may mean a decline in the quality of education experienced by students and affect their achievement in the long term.<sup>13</sup> For many years, principals have expressed significant concern to the AEU about the impact that this annual process has on staff and student morale, which exacerbates the challenges faced by schools to improve student learning and achievement.

***To what extent is whole-population assessment data necessary to meet school systems' and governments' need for sound information to support school improvement?***

The whole population NAPLAN results currently collected are unsuitable for anything other than state and national demographic data about performance trends in broad student groupings, and it is therefore entirely unnecessary to test the entire school population. Data with an equally high level of confidence and representativeness could be gathered in a far less costly manner, and without all of the negative impacts on schooling, through properly stratified sample testing.

In terms of the broad public interest and policy coherence, there is now a historic opportunity to seize the opportunity offered by the underlying philosophy of the Gonski #2 Report, "Through Growth to Achievement" to align our approaches to assessment, reporting and student improvement.

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<sup>13</sup> Carter, D. (2017) *The dark side of NAPLAN: it's not just a benign 'snapshot'*, Australian Association for Research in Education, retrieved from <https://www.aare.edu.au/blog/?p=2325>

We can now begin to provide data that is, “valid, reliable and contextualised” and “sufficiently comprehensive” if we embrace this Report’s endorsement of “individualised growth-focused teaching and learning”. In particular, its call for “adopting assessment and reporting models that can describe both achievement and learning growth” provides the way forward that would best enhance the interests of school students and deliver to parents what they most want for their children.

The work begun in this area provides the foundation for optimised student progress. It will involve the professionally collaborative development of appropriate teaching and assessment tools and the replacement of A-E reporting with measures that both tracks and enhances growth.

Alongside this evolution, there will be a continuing need for regular, mass sample testing of students in fundamental areas of knowledge in order that the public, administrators and responsible politicians are aware of how funds are being spent and where the greatest areas of need are. There will not, however, be a need for the continued and needless testing of every single student in the country.

As Associate Professor Nicole Mockler from the University of Sydney makes clear:

*We could collect the data we need by using a rigorous sampling method, where a smaller number of children are tested (a sample) rather than having every student in every school sit tests every two years. This is a move that would be a lot more cost effective, both financially and in terms of other costs to our education system.<sup>14</sup>*

Or as Tim Dodd in the Australian Financial Review put it:

*There is no need to test all of Australia’s 3.8 million students on a regular cycle to get this information. We could test a far smaller sample.<sup>15</sup>*

### **3. How schools use achievement data, including NAPLAN, to inform teaching**

#### ***To what extent are NAPLAN data and the My School website used to inform teaching?***

A high stakes focus on standardised testing distorts what is being measured and it encourages practices such as teaching to the test. When a school’s results rise, it is unclear whether there has been an improvement in student literacy and numeracy skills or an improvement in the level of test preparation. Bonner and Shepherd have pointed out that the ‘flat-lining’ of results has been found in many overseas jurisdictions after implementing a new barrage of tests similar to NAPLAN: “Results get better for the first few years as teachers get better at teaching to the test and then of course level out.” A recent major study of over 8,300 teachers by the University Of Melbourne Graduate School Of Education found that more than half of these teachers admitted that NAPLAN impacts the style and content of their teaching, with just over two thirds reporting it has led to a timetable reduction for other subjects in their schools. Roughly two thirds of teachers’ surveyed also reported a reduction in ‘face-to-face’ teaching time due to test preparation.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Mockler, *Op.cit.*

<sup>15</sup> Dodd, T (2017) *After 10 years it’s time to ask: What is the purpose of NAPLAN?*, Financial Review, retrieved from <https://www.afr.com/news/policy/education/after-10-years-its-time-to-ask-what-is-the-purpose-of-naplan-20170730-gxlogw>

<sup>16</sup> Dulfer, N., Polesel, J. & Rice, S. *Op.cit.*

Standardised assessment, in its current form, is clearly having a severe impact on teachers and on the way they teach. It is no longer fit for its original purpose. The continued use of NAPLAN and the ever increasing emphasis on it as a ranking tool impacts hugely on teachers' autonomy in the classroom, forces them to "teach to the test" and undermines the professionalism of educators. The AEU's 2018 *State of Our Schools*<sup>17</sup> survey found that:

- 76% of teachers say publication of NAPLAN data has led to an increase in the pressure on teachers to improve NAPLAN results
- 75% of teachers say publication of NAPLAN data has led to an increase in the use of NAPLAN data to measure school performance
- 65% of teachers say publication of NAPLAN data has led to a noticeable increase in the stress levels of students in the lead up to the test
- 61% of teachers say publication of NAPLAN data has led to a greater focus on preparing for the test, including pre-testing

It is clear that the erosion of teachers' professional autonomy through an increase in published standardised assessment impacts teacher's sense of professionalism and stifles professional development and progress. The current prescriptive approach to curriculum and assessment can only serve to de-motivate and ultimately de-skill teachers, to stifle the morale of the workforce and degrade the status of the profession.

The predicament that many principals and teachers find themselves in under the current My School reporting system is aptly described thus:

*Teachers, principals and school communities have also seen, over this time, the grave damage that thoughtless system and media reporting of these test results has caused to vulnerable communities and students. Consequently, and with the best of protective sentiment, schools without any particular affection or trust in the testing regimes have thrown their lot into seeking to ensure that their students are not the ones to be this season's victims. And so they teach to the test. They have special sessions and classes and tutorials and experts and targets and strategies and staff meetings and practice tests to get their kids over the line. Sometimes they come up green and sometimes they come up red.*<sup>18</sup>

***Which assessment tools, approaches and data analytics services do schools and school systems use to inform teaching?***

The tools and approaches that teachers use to assess students and inform teaching are discussed across the entirety of this submission. In addition to this, internal whole school, class and year level sample data are used to track progress in conjunction with the sharing of professional knowledge and judgement between school colleagues and the sharing of approaches and work samples at the interschool level.

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<sup>17</sup> Australian Education Union (2018) *State of our Schools* survey data, available on request

<sup>18</sup> Fitzgerald, *Op.cit.*

### ***What opportunities are there to improve the timeliness of NAPLAN reporting?***

The timeliness of reporting of standardised assessment in Australia could be improved by removing the need to test every single school student in the country, and by removing the need to provide school and student levels results every year. National, State/Territory and sector level reporting of a larger stratified sample should be able to be completed in a much timelier manner than the current NAPLAN regime.

#### **4. How My School and NAPLAN data are reported to students and parents**

In the decade since NAPLAN and My School have been coupled we have seen the mass reporting across the nation of these notionally diagnostic tests. Schools are now colour coded into winners and losers. Children are placed on reporting continuums on a linear sequence of achievement or failure. By the time many students had completed Year 9 they had been told repeatedly that they were very poor at learning. Many heed the lesson.

It is instructive to note what Professor Geoff Masters, head of ACER, concludes of the NAPLAN/My School decade. Writing in *The Conversation* in 2018, Masters found that,

*“Since the introduction of NAPLAN, there has been a marked increase in the stakes attached to these tests. School results have been made available for public comparison on the My School website. Some schools even use NAPLAN in their marketing and student selection processes ...*

*Parents, teachers and schools now place greater importance on NAPLAN results ... This has led to reports of inappropriate levels of practice testing and increased student test anxiety. It has also narrowed teaching to the test, and led to occasional cheating.*

*The decision to make all schools’ NAPLAN results public was based on a belief this would provide parents with better information when choosing schools.*

*This was a market-driven belief that, for schools, the risk of losing students would be a powerful incentive to improve. But test based incentives have proven largely ineffective in driving school improvement.*

*An obvious strategy is to stop reporting school results publicly and to restrict access to school-level data to individual schools and school systems. The primary focus of literacy and numeracy testing might then return to its original purpose of informing teaching and learning.”<sup>19</sup>*

#### ***To what extent do schools communicate individual, whole school and comparative NAPLAN data to students, parents and families?***

In addition to the damage caused by children being told that they are either at, above or below standard, there are additional, broader consequences for children and communities from the publication of NAPLAN results on the My School website, and the communication of school and student level results to parents and students, and to the population in general.

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<sup>19</sup> Masters, G., (2018) *We need to reform NAPLAN to make it more useful*, *The Conversation*, retrieved from <https://theconversation.com/we-need-to-reform-naplan-to-make-it-more-useful-93555>



Every year the media uses NAPLAN results as reported on My School to identify a list of school winners and losers. This may be either through highlighting the current years' results or by comparing current results to previous results to identify progress or decline. In both cases the information is misleading because the NAPLAN tests are unable to provide valid and reliable comparisons at the school level. As shown earlier in this submission, the report presented to parents lacks any contextual information on the error margin or very wide confidence interval applied to their child's results and therefore does not allow for any proper interpretation or understanding of what the results mean. Instead, the results are communicated to parents as if they represent a very high level of precision, despite the fact that the [technical report issued by ACARA each year](#) (although not available on My School or easily accessible to parents) suggests that the margins are so wide as to be almost meaningless.

***To what extent do parents and families use NAPLAN data on My School to make informed judgements, make choices and engage with their children's education?***

***&***

***What NAPLAN reporting information do students need in order to contribute to their own education?***

Principals and teachers report that where there is an overt reliance on NAPLAN data to characterise individual student achievement this can lead to contradictory insights into that child's performance when compared to teacher professional judgement and other diagnostic assessment methods used in the classroom. In some cases, where the reporting of an individual student's performance is dominated by NAPLAN results, this can lead to a significant mischaracterisation of the performance, which in turn may pervert the approaches which a teacher may take to support the student's learning in the future.

This narrow and often singular focus on NAPLAN results has an extremely detrimental impact not only on student's learning, but on their mental health and general wellbeing. The University of Melbourne study found that almost 90% of over 8,300 teachers surveyed reported students talking about feeling stressed prior to NAPLAN testing, and significant numbers also reported students being sick, crying or having sleepless nights.<sup>20</sup>

This shocking description of the impact of NAPLAN and My School on students demonstrates that the combination of NAPLAN and My School does substantially more harm than good. Not only does it provide imprecise and often valueless data in a format devoid of accompanying context, and invite absolute and final judgements of the quality of schools, communities and individual students based on entirely imperfect information, it also encourages or even forces teachers to abandon their creativity and professional autonomy and to teach to the test, and it stresses students to the point that they feel physically ill. All this is the end result of a system of assessment that has produced no determinable improvement in results for over a decade, and has "corresponded to an inexorable decline in results across the board for Australian students in international measures. It correlates with a cross-curriculum decline in top end outcomes, without any commensurate lift in bottom-end achievement. It has narrowed the taught curriculum. It has sapped the joy from too many classrooms and programs. In fact, it has conspicuously and remorselessly failed by every criterion and goal that it has set out for itself."<sup>21</sup>

<sup>20</sup> Dulfer, N., Polesel, J. & Rice, S. *Op.cit.*

<sup>21</sup> Fitzgerald, *Op. cit.*, p.12-13



## **AEU POLICY CONCLUSIONS**

- 1. The 2018 NAPLAN test cannot be validly used for comparison data processes such as My School deploys.**
- 2. My School data can only be refreshed with a new longitudinal starting point when all students are using the same assessment mode.**
- 3. The original stated purposes of NAPLAN and My School have been terminally corrupted.**
- 4. The My School website causes great social harm especially to our most vulnerable students and schools.**
- 5. The website is incompatible with contemporary policy approaches to privacy rights.**
- 6. Alignment with the 2018 Gonski “Growth to Achievement” approach provides a framework for resolving the profound problems that NAPLAN and My School have caused.**

## **AEU RECOMMENDATIONS**

**1: That a comprehensive review of NAPLAN is undertaken, focusing on whether the current approach to standardised testing is fit for purpose.**

**2: That the use of standardised testing, such as NAPLAN, as a scorecard for individual schools or groups of students in those schools, as currently promoted through the My School website, is ceased.**

**3: That ACARA provide plain language explanations to parents of the very wide error margins used to calculate student and individual school scores and the misleading manner in which they are presented to parents on the My School site.**

**4: That an exploratory study is undertaken to determine the requisite sample size at the state/territory, sector and national levels for a new assessment program to replace NAPLAN.**