



LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY
FOR THE AUSTRALIAN CAPITAL TERRITORY

STANDING COMMITTEE ON EDUCATION, EMPLOYMENT AND YOUTH AFFAIRS
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Submission Cover Sheet

Inquiry into Standardised Testing in ACT Schools

Submission Number: 10

Date Authorised for Publication: 20 November 2018



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Standing Committee on Education, Employment and Youth Affairs
Legislative Assembly for the ACT

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INQUIRY INTO STANDARDISED TESTING IN ACT SCHOOLS

This submission is from a member of the public now retired, with former involvement in school curriculum in Australia and New Zealand.

PREAMBLE

Public understanding of standardised testing is minimal, and prone to be unduly influenced by media statements presented as being authoritative. We are also subjected to commentaries on student learning that are laden with shafts of political ideology. It is therefore both appropriate and timely for the Standing Committee to conduct this current inquiry. It is also a matter of public record that the Minister, the Hon Yvette Berry, has raised questions about NAPLAN with her Commonwealth, State/Territory Ministerial colleagues. How these matters are resolved could impinge directly on standardised testing in ACT public schools, as will the deliberations of the Standing Committee.

Behind the focus and Terms of Reference of the Standing Committee lies the fundamental proposition of the place/value of standardised testing in the evaluation/accountability framework of the ACT Department of Education.

The direct corollary to this foundation is consideration of the ways in which the results of standardised testing are to be used. It should be recognised that while standardised testing is predominantly achievement testing of what has been learnt (i.e. it has a 'backward' orientation), the more positive application is a focus on improvement/reform (i.e. emphasis on a quality education model).

Such an application as well as providing information on what students have learned vis a vis what is expected they should learn, can also identify where there are gaps in learning in individuals and particular groupings of students.

As well as providing feedback to teachers, standardised testing can direct light on all partners accountable for educational results: school leadership, system administration, policy formulation and system-wide resources allocation.

The wording of the Terms of Reference implies there is a background interest in overall standards but it is not evident this is embodied in an all-encompassing approach to school improvement. Notwithstanding, its presence provides a 'measuring stick' with which the opinion/advice of this and other submissions may be assessed with respect to student achievement. But it is also applicable to judgement about leadership and teaching performance in schools and the fidelity of policy and administration at the system level.

THE PERSPECTIVE OF THIS SUBMISSION

This submission assumes the ACT continues in partnership with other States, the Northern Territory and the Commonwealth in national collaborative curriculum and related matters. As a signatory to the Common and Agreed National Goals for Schooling in Australia (1998) and

subsequent revisions, and through its historic and current participation in NAPLAN, there is demonstrated commitment to working towards cohesive nationwide educational outcomes. It is also assumed the Territory will subscribe to the conditions and requirements determined in the Commonwealth's Gonski 2.0 initiative. The expected emphasis on individuals and a lessened instrumental approach should be welcomed.

It has been noted that the Minister has raised concerns about the ambit and approach of NAPLAN with her Ministerial colleagues. This, and possibly other concerns are to be addressed by the Meeting of Ministers. As a consequence there may be modifications made to the current form of standardised testing.

Against this geopolitical setting, the ACT is seeking to assess the place and value of a regime of standardised testing currently in use. It is the expectation of this submission that standardised testing in some relevant form will continue in the evaluation armoury of ACT teachers.

The setting does not convey the whole picture. It is with the **context**, and **processes** as well the **outcomes** of public schooling this inquiry should be concerned.

It is hoped the Standing Committee following consideration of submissions and the evidence of other research findings, is of a mind that identifies standardised testing as an element in achieving societal and individual aspirations and goals for public schooling, and just not as a single indicator used to judge student results, persuade parent opinion on school choice, or inform system-wide policy, resourcing and administration.

EVALUATION AND ASSESSMENT

The fact that national (NAPLAN) and international (PISA) assessment by standardised testing invites comparison rather than internalisation, is a cause for debate. Proponents point to a value as baseline data with which to see how we stack up against others. Opponents have little difficulty in outlining weaknesses, citing questionable relevance, unfairness and so on.

The Standing Committee will doubtless receive much opinion and research findings supporting both sides of the discussion. This submission is not treading that path, other than to acknowledge the dissonance between the situations and timing of teaching and learning, and the conditions and nature of testing. This is the nub of the issue.

There is a dynamic, either structured or not, between the learner and the learning sources; person, materials, experience (singly or in combination), that is intrinsic to achieving the intellectual purpose we hold for schooling. Planned or serendipitous, learning occurs in classrooms where many things come together: teacher knowledge and skill, student background and experience, appropriateness of the setting, the quality of the resource, the methodologies, the interaction itself. It is from the interplay of these factors that the acquisition and growth of knowledge and abilities can occur, and it is this outcome that can be captured through evaluation and assessment. This means the gathering of evidence about the intention of the learning experience, the adequacy of the resources and materials, the appropriateness of teaching methods, as well as what students learned is vital. Many researchers point to a correlation between, "What is taught best is that which is tested best".

This is more than an aphorism, as it gives emphasis to evaluation that is formative, thus forward looking. By providing feedback teaching practice can be enhanced and lead to consequential improvement in student outcomes. Teachers want to know how their students are progressing along their individual learning curve, as well as gaining a feeling about the collective achievement of the group or class. Generally, teachers are quite adept at rank ordering their students. That a particular student's position in the ranking order is lower than the cohort as a whole, is the trigger for intervention and support. For those students performing at the top end, the teacher challenge is to encourage extension activities and experiences. It is only by focussing the assessment aspect on the differential on the achievement of individuals, (and doing so with knowledge of their abilities and aptitudes), that the professionalism of teaching becomes productive in our mass delivery style of education.

It is contended that such application of student achievement by teachers could be supported should the diagnostic usefulness of NAPLAN be substantially improved. By abandoning the emphasis on outcomes that invites comparison either with whole school populations of similar socio-economic status, or other countries, the significance of standardised testing would be with qualitative improvements to the context and processes of schooling. In simple terms, a constrained and frequently stressful collective experience quite remote from the learning environment of the classroom, could be justified (or at least its effect on students ameliorated), by contributing formative assessment that supported teachers in tracking student achievement in real time and in real situations.

STANDARDISED TESTING in WHOLE SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT

It will be clear to the Standing Committee, that this submission is predicated on subscription to a model of **whole school improvement** in which the evidence from evaluation and assessment, informal or standardised, formative, diagnostic or achievement-oriented, contributes.

The proposal is based on the surety that any focus on **outcomes** of standardised testing that does not give equal weighting to the **context** in which learning occurs and the **processes** embodied in effective teaching/learning, will have minimal, even questionable impact.

It is noted that the June 2018 Meeting of Education Ministers moved but slightly on Minister Berry's proposition for modification of NAPLAN. It is assumed the next round of NAPLAN will proceed (perhaps in some modified form), so that standardised testing will continue next year, as will presumably ACT involvement in the online rollout.

Therefore a proposition that may be attractive to the ACT Education Department follows.

- * Student data from NAPLAN, along with other trend data and indicators, e.g. teacher assessment, student and parent opinion, can inform a differential model of school review.
- * In this reviewing process three groupings of schools may be recognised:
 - + schools with student outcomes above the expected level (this could be the national level , or whatever is set by the ACT education community).
 - + schools with satisfactory student outcomes but with readily identifiable scope for improvement.
 - + schools with student outcomes below the expected level.
- * This judgement becomes the performance trigger for support and intervention, with all the interactive components of **whole school improvement** at play.
- * It is suggested that this drive towards improved outcomes for learners and continuous school improvement be a charge on leadership at both school and system level. The leadership processes involved are well documented and include: aligning management systems, team building, developing individuals and reflecting analysing and planning.
- * With the focus on the classroom where the impact of leadership is enmeshed with reflections of school climate, motivation and development, as well as with curriculum and learning/teaching, the support and intervention required could take the form of:
 - + leadership development programs
 - + coaching and mentoring of teachers
 - + consultancy in evaluation practices

- + co-operative teaching and teaching partnerships
- + enhanced learning materials, including electronic and digital
- + use of student and parent data in assessment
- + development by the school community of an accountability charter.

* At the system level, there needs to be a transparent school accreditation scheme that recognises and values performance and development-culture schools.

* Integral to achieving qualitative school improvement is a requirement to reduce the administrative and business management loads on school leaders, and to give priority to the professionalism of teaching.

FINAL OBSERVATION

In calling for public submissions on this issue, the Minister through SCEEYA is clearly indicating a concern that is basic to the quality of public schooling in the ACT. Any solution cannot rely on a “bandaid” approach (such as modification to existing NAPLAN, or re-gigging of the MY SCHOOL site). Standardised testing is not a pernicious evil, when it is set in the totality of a plan supported by the appropriate resourcing for **whole school improvement**.

David Francis

