



**LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY**  
FOR THE AUSTRALIAN CAPITAL TERRITORY

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STANDING COMMITTEE ON EDUCATION, EMPLOYMENT AND YOUTH AFFAIRS  
Mr Michael Pettersson MLA (Chair), Mrs Elizabeth Kikkert MLA (Deputy Chair)  
Mr Chris Steel MLA, Mr Andrew Wall MLA

## Submission Cover Sheet

### Inquiry into Standardised Testing in ACT Schools

**Submission Number:** 5

**Date Authorised for Publication:** 7 August 2018

The Committee Secretary,  
Standing Committee on Education, Employment and Youth Affairs,  
Legislative Assembly for the ACT,  
GPO Box 1020,  
CANBERRA ACT 2601.

**Submission to the ACT Legislative Assembly Standing Committee on Education,  
Employment and Youth Affairs Inquiry into Standardised Testing in ACT Schools**

**From the ACT Principals' Association (ACTPA)**

Dear Chairman and Members,

The ACT Principal's Association (ACTPA) thanks the Standing Committee on Education, Employment and Youth Affairs for the invitation to present a submission to the Inquiry into Standardised Testing in ACT Schools.

We are delighted to forward the views of ACTPA regarding the matters addressed in the Standing committee's Terms of Reference

ACTPA is the professional association for Principals and Deputy Principals in ACT Public schools. Its members lead education for all ACT public schools through direct and constructive action.

ACTPA has a strong focus on optimising student learning and wellbeing and recognises that supportive, effective and efficient assessment practices are fundamental to ensuring maximum growth in learning for every student.

ACTPA notes the widespread interest in reviewing national assessment practices with a view to improving effectiveness of assessment and avoiding unintended negative impact.

The Association strongly supports the idea of reviewing current standardised assessments, especially NAPLAN, and is most appreciative of the initiatives of the ACT Education Minister and the Standing Committee on Education, Employment and Youth Affairs.

Yours sincerely,

M. Battenally<sup>4</sup>

Liz Bobos

ACTPA Co-Presidents

30/7/18

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## **Use of Standardised Testing in ACT schools**

### **The purpose of standardised testing**

The purpose of standardised testing is to provide valid and reliable data upon which schools can base judgements about the effectiveness of teaching and learning. Reference to standardised test norms can assist schools to compare the progress of their students with larger (eg ACT or national) population samples.

### **Current Use of Standardized testing**

#### **NAPLAN**

NAPLAN tests are administered in Years 3,5,7 and 9

NAPLAN data are currently used by ACT public schools as indicators of success in school improvement plans. Schools also utilise the data to arrive at assessments of student attainment and growth. Schools derive some benefit from analysis of NAPLAN data and the data are of some value in indicating system-wide achievement levels.

NAPLAN data have been used in at least one ACT college to support transitions of students from Year 10 to Year 11 and have been found to be of value for predicting Tertiary Entrance Statement (TES ) completion and Australian Tertiary Admission Rank (ATAR).

However ACTPA recognises a number of significant issues related to NAPLAN. Many of these problems have been identified by other educational stakeholders within the ACT and in jurisdictions across the country.

#### **Significant Issues re NAPLAN;**

The extended delay between testing and teachers being able to access, analyse and use test data. Even with recently implemented NAPLAN Online, results were not immediately available. A recent Queensland Teachers Union (QTU) survey found that 57% of Queensland teachers find NAPLAN data to be of little use in their teaching practice. ACTPA believes that similar views are held by the majority of ACT teachers.

Reporting on the ‘My School’ website has resulted in publication of league tables leading to unhealthy competition between schools. Most teachers are of the opinion that protections put in place to prevent league tables have not worked. ACTPA agrees with NSW Education Minister Mr Rob Stokes who stated that the NAPLAN tests are being used dishonestly as a school rating system. *ABC News, 4/5/18*

The complexities of each school’s circumstances are inadequately demonstrated on the ‘My School’ website leading to simplistic, inaccurate and often unfair judgements. Again, ACTPA broadly concurs with the view expressed by NSW Education Minister Rob Stokes who stated that the test has been used and abused and was not useful as it did not take into account any differences between different schools and communities. *ABC News,4/5/18*

As a result of publication on the Myschool Website, NAPLAN results have become a driver in education. ACTPA believes that we should measure what we value (this is a complex issue) but when we value only what we measure we are left with a much reduced education system. In the view of the Association the competitive league tables have increased the stakes to the point where non-participation in the competition is not really an option for most schools.

The relatively narrow focus of NAPLAN tends to mitigate against appropriate emphasis on curriculum areas other than English and Mathematics. Areas that may be neglected include any of the following; Science, Humanities, Social Sciences, the Arts, Technologies, Health and Physical Education, Languages Other than English, Digital Literacy and the General Capabilities eg. Critical and creative thinking, personal and social capability.

ACTPA believes that NAPLAN is strongly biased towards comparisons between students and easily leads to categorisation of students. This is contrary to the emphasis on implementation of personalised learning which the current focus of the ACT Education Directorate and ACT public schools.

Teachers and principals are generally not supportive of NAPLAN in its current form. The QUT survey found that 78% of teachers thought that student outcomes have not improved in the past decade and two thirds thought that NAPLAN has, in fact, been harmful. Again ACTPA believes that this finding reflects the views of ACT teachers.

The perception that the NAPLAN tests are high stakes results in most schools conducting practice tests in preparation for NAPLAN despite principals and teachers generally believing that time devoted to practice could be better spent.

Some students experience stress and anxiety about the tests.

### **ACTPA Recommendations re NAPLAN**

ACTPA strongly supports the views expressed by ACT Education Minister Yvette Berry who stated;

“Federal, state and territory governments are rightly obliged to demonstrate accountability for the vast amount of public money invested in school education. But the right performance measures at the right level of aggregation should be what is reported, so that governments are accountable for the right things. Teachers and individual schools should be accountable in ways that fairly reflect their level of control over their work and the resources they have to do it.” (*Yvette Berry, Canberra Times 21,3,18*)

ACTPA believes that system level achievement could be more efficiently and effectively monitored by taking a valid and reliable sampling approach similar to that used for TIMSS, PISA and the Australian Civics and Citizenship Assessments.

The Association's view is strongly reflected in a recent statement by the President of the Australian Government Schools Primary Principals Association (AGPPA) Ian Anderson who stated,

"AGPPA recognises the need for, and supports, authentic accountability of system, school and student performance. As an alternative to this high-stakes testing regime, AGPPA supports the national sample testing of students on a cyclical basis. A sample testing model removes the problems caused through the creation of league tables, which in recent years have been assembled by the media utilising the MySchool web site." *AGPPA Media Release 9/3/18*

ACTPA also supports the view expressed by ACT Education Minister Yvette Berry regarding more appropriate forms of assessment,

"What if instead of ranking and comparing individuals and schools, assessment data looked at each individual child to understand where they were doing well, and diagnose and support areas where their learning needs to grow?" *Yvette Berry, Canberra Times, 21/3/18*

Similarly ACTPA strongly supports the following recommendation in,

*'Through Growth to Achievement, Report of the Review to Achieve Educational Excellence in Australian Schools' Gonski, D. et al March 2018 (Gonski Review 2018)*

"Develop a new online and on demand student learning assessment tool based on the Australian Curriculum learning progressions." *Recommendation 11,p.14*

ACTPA believes that a high quality, reliable and valid online, on demand formative assessment tool has potential to be highly supportive of teachers' implementation of personalised and precise learning and teaching. Such a tool could enable iterative teaching to be based on timely analysis of each student's particular needs.

### **Trends in Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) and Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA)**

ACTPA believes that data obtained from TIMSS and PISA do have value for assessing achievement at system level. We believe that both tests employ sophisticated techniques to generate quite useful estimates while, because they are sampling tests, they minimise the disruption and costs associated with the testing whole cohorts of children as is the case with NAPLAN.

TIMSS and PISA provide countries with more objective measures of educational performance but, as with all standardised tests, results should be interpreted with care.

With regard to PISA ACTPA notes, with interest, the comment made by OECD Education Director, Andreas Schleicher commenting on Australia's education system

"If all our students were achieving at the same level as those in ACT schools Australia would be outperforming all other countries including China and Finland," *quoted in article by Ben Henerby in 'The Educator' 16/3/16*

The level of aggregation of data reported through PISA and TIMSS means that they have little value in the day to day work of teachers in classrooms. They do, however give an indication of broad system-level achievement.

ACTPA notes research by Australian Educational expert, David Hornsby, that has shown that Australia's mean scores in PISA have consistently declined since the introduction of NAPLAN.

ACTPA suspects, along with David Hornsby, that this may have occurred, at least in part, because of a narrowing of the curriculum caused by the focus on NAPLAN. *David Hornsby, The Guardian, 6/12/16*

### **Reservations about Use of PISA & TIMSS Data**

ACTPA does have concerns about the use made of PISA and TIMSS data and recognises that, like all standardised assessments, they have limitations.

The Association's concerns are well reflected in a 2016 paper by Simon Breakspear.

Discussing PISA Breakspear argues that if the educational narrative is dominated by the performance of 15 year olds (the age group that undergoes PISA tests) other important educational goals such as social and emotional development, interpersonal and intrapersonal skills, civics, health and wellbeing, as well as the progression to further work and employment, will be held at the margins of the debate.

ACTPA concurs with the view expressed by Breakspear that how we choose to measure educational system progress will define and shape what policy makers and the public come to understand to be educationally valuable.

ACTPA also concurs with Breakspear's view that there is an opportunity for PISA sponsors, the OECD, to avoid convergence around narrow educational ends, standardised national approaches to curriculum and assessment and heightened pressure on policy makers through a highly publicised three-yearly league table.

Breakspear argues that the OECD could leverage the strong brand of PISA to lead national governments into a rich discussion about the broad capabilities that matter for learners in the 21st century. The OECD could educate policy makers on the limits of indicators, encourage research that delves into country context and culture in order to understand differential system performance. He argues that the OECD could decrease the stakes on policy makers in order to accelerate learning." *p.14 Seminar Series240 'How does PISA shape education policy making? Why how we measure learning determines what counts in education' Breakspear, Simon, Centre for Strategic Education Nov 2014*

ACTPA believes that the same as the above can be said about TIMSS (TIMSS samples students in Year 4 and year 8). TIMSS is a project of the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA) and is administered in Australia by ACER.

### **Performance Indicators in Primary Schools (PIPS)**

ACTPA is aware that the use of PIPS is well embedded in ACT public schools.

Implementation of the PIPS assessments in terms one and four of the Kindergarten year is well supported and adequately resourced by the ACT Education Directorate.

Schools find the PIPS data are useful for assessing the achievement levels of children at the commencement of the Kindergarten year. The data are also useful for gauging progress of individual students and cohorts at the end of the Kindergarten year. PIPS data may also be used to assist in identification of students who may be at risk and require special intervention to support their literacy or numeracy learning when they progress to Year One.

Reports for parents are generated automatically as part of the administration of PIPS. Teachers appreciate the one-on-one teacher -student interaction that occurs in the administration of PIPS. The time and effort involved in administering PIPs is commensurate with the value of the data.

### **Other Standardised Tests**

ACTPA is aware that many schools choose to use other standardised tests as part of their assessment regimes.

Popular examples include tests available for purchase from the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER) such as Progressive Achievement Tests (PAT) in Literacy and Numeracy and the Neale Analysis of Reading. A range of other standardised test may be purchased at the discretion of individual schools.

In general other standardised tests are used to triangulate school based assessments in an effort to ensure that the school's assessment program has optimal validity and reliability. A number of schools use periodic administration of standardised tests to gauge student growth over a defined period.

Tests are selected because they are seen as fit for the particular context and purpose of the individual school. They are utilised as long as the cost and effort associated with administration is judged to be commensurate with the value of the data to the school.

Other standardised tests tend to be used sparingly. On the whole most schools make more regular use of their own school-based formative assessments which are more useful for informing day by day decisions regarding iterative teaching.

## A to E Reporting

A to E reporting was introduced to ACT schools following a 2010 National Education Agreement. The policy intention is to give accurate and objective reports of students' achievement, for each learning area, based on the Australian Curriculum learning standards.

A five point scale A,B,C,D or E is used for reporting on achievement of students from Years 1 to 10.

ACTPA has a number of concerns about A to E reporting and in general, sees A to E reporting as a negative influence that reinforces what is often described as the outdated industrial model of schooling.

The position of ACTPA is well reflected in views expressed by Geoff Masters, Chief Executive of the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER).

In summary the views expressed by Masters are as follows;

This traditional way of thinking about schooling is sometimes referred to as an 'industrial' or 'assembly line' model. Students move with their peers from one school year to the next. At each station on this 'assembly line' a teacher stands ready to deliver the relevant year-level curriculum. All students are judged and graded on how well they perform on the delivered curriculum before moving to the next station/year. The grading of performance is a familiar part of production processes. For example, the products of industrial and agricultural processes are routinely graded for their quality.

All of this may be unproblematic if students in the same year of school were more or less equally ready for the same year-level curriculum. However, this is far from the case. In learning areas for which we have good measures (in particular, reading and mathematics), the most advanced 10 per cent of students begin each school year five to six years ahead of the least advanced 10 per cent of students. If schooling were a running race, all students would be judged against the same finish line (year-level expectations), but would begin the race widely spread out along the running track.

And the result is predictable. Students at the back of the pack who begin the school year two or three years behind average for their age group, and two or three years behind year-level expectations, struggle. They begin the school year on track to achieve low grades and, given that the best predictor of performance in the later years of school is performance in the earlier years, many of these students receive low grades year after year.

When a student receives the same low grade (for example, a grade of 'D') year after year, they are given little sense of the learning progress they are actually making. They could be excused for concluding that they are making no progress at all. Worse, they may be sent a message that there is something stable about their ability to learn (they are a 'D' student). Little wonder that so many less advanced students become disenchanted with school and eventually disengage.

...At the front of the pack there is a different problem. These students begin the school year on track to receive high grades. Some of them do this without a great deal of effort. Some cruise. In fact, there is research evidence to suggest that the least year-on-year progress is made by some of our most advanced students.

### **...Is there an alternative?**

The alternative is to think differently about the nature of learning, the characteristics of learners, the school curriculum, what it means to ‘teach’, the role of assessment and the nature of ‘reporting’. In short, think differently about schooling itself.

**...Learning:** An alternative to defining successful learning with reference to a body of taught curriculum content deemed appropriate for all students of a particular age or year level is to define learning ‘success’ in terms of the progress that individuals make, regardless of their starting points. Learning progress usually involves the development of deeper understandings, more extensive knowledge and/or more sophisticated skills.

**...Learners:** An alternative to accepting that there are inherently better and worse learners is to recognise that, for a variety of reasons, students are at different points in their learning and may be progressing at different rates, and to see every student as capable of making further progress if they can be engaged, motivated to make the necessary effort and provided with appropriate learning opportunities.

**...The curriculum:** An alternative to viewing the curriculum as a specification of what teachers are to teach and all students are to learn in each year of school (that is, an identified body of content) is to view the curriculum as a roadmap – a picture of what long-term progress in an area of learning looks like. When the curriculum is viewed from this perspective, continuity and progression become important. Learning progressions, typically extending over a number of years of learning, describe typical sequences and paths of learning and make explicit what it means to develop deeper understandings and more advanced skills in an area of learning.

**...Teaching:** An alternative to viewing teaching primarily as the delivery of a common year-level curriculum is to view teaching as a process of establishing where students are in their long-term progress and then targeting teaching and learning opportunities to meet students at their points of need. The differentiation of teaching and learning in this way is sometimes referred to as ‘clinical practice’. It involves diagnosing where individuals are in their learning, then designing interventions and targeting teaching to maximise the probability of successful further learning.

**...Assessment:** An alternative to viewing assessment as the process of determining how well students have learnt what has been taught is to view assessment as the process of establishing and understanding where students are in their long-term progress in an area of learning at the time of assessment. Rather than holding all students accountable for achieving the same age and year-level expectations, assessments are undertaken to understand the points students have reached in their learning.

**...Reporting:** An alternative to reporting how students have performed against year-level expectations only is to provide meaningful information about the points individuals have

reached in their learning together with guidance on what can be done to support further learning." *Masters, Geoff N., "Is there another way to think about schooling?"* (2016).

[https://research.acer.edu.au/ar\\_misc/19](https://research.acer.edu.au/ar_misc/19)

The views quoted above are also strongly supported in the Gonski 2018 review;

.... Australia needs to review and change its model for school education. Like many countries, Australia still has an industrial model of school education that reflects a 20th century aspiration to deliver mass education to all children. This model is focused on trying to ensure that millions of students attain specified learning outcomes for their grade and age before moving them in lock-step to the next year of schooling. It is not designed to differentiate learning or stretch all students to ensure they achieve maximum learning growth every year, nor does it incentivise schools to innovate and continuously improve.

...Although this problem is widely recognised by teachers and educators, schools' attempts to address the issue are hampered by curriculum delivery, assessment, work practices and the structural environments in which they operate.

...The constraints include inflexibility in curriculum delivery, reporting and assessment regimes, and tools focussed on periodic judgements of performance, rather than continuous diagnosis of a student's learning needs and progress. (*p.ix*)

...Priority one: Deliver at least one year's growth in learning for every student every year  
Student growth is a measure of the individual progress a student makes over time along a defined learning progression. Focusing on student growth matters because it enables every student to progress regardless of starting point or capabilities.

...To achieve this shift to growth, the Review Panel believes it is essential to move from a year-based curriculum to a curriculum expressed as learning progressions independent of year or age. Underpinning this, teachers must be given practical support by creating an online, formative assessment tool to help diagnose a student's current level of knowledge, skill and understanding, to identify the next steps in learning to achieve the next stage in growth, and to track student progress over time against a typical development trajectory (*p.X*) *Gonski Review 2018*

ACTPA strongly agrees that the Year by Year Curriculum should be replaced by a curriculum based on typical progressions and that emphasis should be on valid, reliable formative assessments that equip teachers to accurately determine each student's progress along the trajectory and the requirements to move on to the next phase of learning.

## **Major Recommendations**

In summary, ACTPA makes the following major recommendations regarding standardised testing in ACT public schools;

- I. ACTPA strongly supports a full and independent review of NAPLAN, and the MySchool website, which have now been in place for a decade. This must include an analysis of the impact on students and schools.
- II. ACTPA recommends that the review of NAPLAN consider the question of what are the appropriate performance measures at the appropriate level of aggregation for reporting to Government.
- III. ACTPA recommends that individual schools be accountable in ways that fairly reflect their control over their work and the resources available to them to carry out that work.
- IV. ACTPA recommends that the current form of NAPLAN be replaced by sampling tests. A system of sampling tests will more efficiently and effectively provide data about system level performance. Sampling tests will minimise the disruption and costs associated with the testing of whole cohorts as currently occurs with NAPLAN.
- V. ACTPA strongly recommends that the Year by Year Curriculum should be replaced by a curriculum based on typical progressions and that emphasis should be on valid, reliable formative assessments that equip teachers to accurately determine each student's progress along the trajectory and the requirements to move students on to the next phase of learning.
- VI. ACTPA recommends discontinuing the use of the MySchool website so as to prevent the publication of league tables.
- VII. ACTPA recommends that system data be reported and analysed within jurisdictions in a manner that prevents continuation of inappropriate use of data.

VIII. ACTPA strongly recommends that a new online and on demand student learning assessment tool based on newly developed Australian Curriculum learning progressions be developed as recommended in the Gonski Report 2018  
*(Recommendation 11,p.14)*

IX. ACTPA endorses the three priorities identified in the Gonski Report 2018;

“Priority one: Deliver at least one year’s growth in learning for every student every year

Priority two: Equip every child to be a creative, connected and engaged learner in a rapidly changing world

Priority three: Cultivate an adaptive, innovative and continuously improving education system.” *Gonski 2018 (p.X)*