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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

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Submission on

Inquiry into Standardised Testing in ACT Schools

**Conducted by Standing Committee on Education, Employment and Youth
Affairs**

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Mr Pettersson, Mrs Kikkert, Mr Steel and Mr Wall,

Thank you for this opportunity to express my opinion on some aspects of standardised testing in ACT schools. I will address issues associated with **NAPLAN, PIPS and A-E reporting**.

I have retired from teaching only this year. I have been an enthusiastic and passionate teacher for my entire working career and have always strived to achieve excellence in the public education sector. I began my teaching career in secondary education (Mathematics), but spent the majority of my teaching career in the primary sector. For many years I was involved in what was then called Learning Assistance and developed specialist skills in teaching literacy. I was also heavily involved in whole-school literacy planning, administration and program implementation.

NAPLAN

Since 2007, I have been a relief teacher. During this latter part of my career, I have marked the written component of NAPLAN papers for several years, have acted as an invigilator for NAPLAN moderation testing, and have observed at first-hand the conduct of NAPLAN assessments in schools.

I can see a valuable place for Australia-wide standardised testing. Schools and parents can gain additional insights into student performance from this testing. Parents are very keen to see how their child has performed against national benchmarks. They are also interested to see how their child has performed relative to other Australian students and relative to other students at their own school. Parents are also able to track performance over time as their child completes NAPLAN assessments in Years 3,5,7 and 9.

Schools and individual teachers are also keen to see how their students perform against national benchmarks and relative to other students in Australia. They are also very keen to see how a cohort progresses from Years 3 to 5 in primary school and from Years 7 to 9 in secondary school. The analysis of the NAPLAN results received by schools always includes very rich, meaningful and practically applicable data. Schools use this data to inform individual teaching plans, year-level teaching programs, and whole-school planning for literacy and numeracy.

There are very many benefits of the NAPLAN program. Sadly, however, NAPLAN has become synonymous with unhealthy competition between parents and schools, demonization of some schools as “poor” performers, a hijacking of the learning curriculum, and unnecessary stress on teachers and students.

In my view, these negative effects of the NAPLAN program are primarily caused by the publication of data on the My Schools website. This data is too easily misinterpreted and subject to uninformed and sensationalised use. Until recently, The Canberra Times shamefully collated the My Schools data as soon as it was available to create its annual League Table of Canberra Schools. This highly damaging and superficial use of the data has caused untold anguish to staff, parents and students of schools rated in the lowest parts of the tables.

I have experienced the despair of such students at first hand. I was involved as an invigilator in the moderation process for NAPLAN in the ACT. I was assigned to conduct testing at a

Tuggeranong secondary school that had previously been “rated” by The Canberra Times as one of the lowest performing secondary schools. Testing was initially delayed because many students had taken themselves away from the school grounds to avoid the testing process. When the students were finally assembled in the classroom, I explained the moderation process to them. However, they remained generally reluctant to give 100% effort. “We are the dummies – what’s the use” were the words that they used. For me as a teacher, this was heart breaking and the saddest indictment of the misuse of the My Schools website data. Clearly the impact of NAPLAN testing on the mental health and wellbeing of these students was very negative.

Anecdotally, I have spoken with parents who have considered changing schools for their children based on NAPLAN results. Many parents look at this “objective” data and give it undue weight and significance when making schooling choices for their children. It is very difficult to explain to some parents that a school that appears to be performing at a lower level than another may in fact be performing at a superior level based on other factors. It is also important to remind parents that a school has many more aspects to its character than its NAPLAN results. Again, this negative effect of NAPLAN is related to the misuse and misinterpretation of data from the My Schools website.

A further problem associated with NAPLAN testing is the amount of time and energy devoted to preparing for the actual tests. This occurs both in and out of the classroom. Any cursory inspection of bookshops, newsagencies and so on reveals an abundance of books available for parents to buy so that their children are better prepared for NAPLAN. In addition, schools are under pressure to prepare their students as well as possible for their NAPLAN tests. I am aware of one primary school in which the NAPLAN preparation for Year 3 was begun in Term 4 of Year 2 with explicit teaching of the NAPLAN writing genre. The effect of this focus on the requirements of NAPLAN has meant a narrowing of the curriculum, particularly during the term leading up to the testing. Teachers feel that their professionalism is being assessed by the NAPLAN results of their students, so they feel compelled to spend significant class time “teaching to the test”. Such teaching has never been considered good pedagogical practice.

In the same way, when schools receive the NAPLAN results, teachers frequently feel judged by their peers if results are less than expected. This has led to low teacher morale amongst some teachers.

To prevent the possibility of lower than expected results, some schools “encourage” particular students to opt out of the testing. This practice effectively penalises those schools that actively encourage every student to participate in the testing regardless of their ability. Some students feel so stressed by the testing process that their parents keep them away from school on the testing days.

These observations clearly point to the fact that the testing has become highly stressful for some students, parents and teachers. This is not a deliberate, necessary or inevitable outcome of standardised testing. To my mind, this is clearly a result of the misinterpretation of the data published on the My School website. I recall that the ACT previously had a system-wide assessment program known as ACTAP. It, too, provided rich data to schools about the progress of their students relative to other students in the ACT. Using these results, schools were able to inform and design individual learning plans, year level teaching programs and whole school plans. Significantly, there was no student stress associated with this testing

regimen; it was simply another classroom assessment conducted without any fanfare. There was no outside comparison of schools based on any of this data, as it was not made available to those who might have had limited understanding of the implications. This would be a far more preferable way to administer the NAPLAN assessments, too.

PIPS

I have also had significant experience in the administration of the PIPS assessment and in the analysis and use of the data provided by this assessment. This assessment is another example of a testing regimen that provides parents, teachers and schools with rich data whilst not creating stress and anxiety amongst the students.

By its nature, the PIPS assessment lends itself to being considered by students to be a special time with their teacher. Students are generally happy to be involved and teachers are able to gain valuable insights into their development by spending this 1:1 time with them. The analysis of the results, particularly at the end of the year, is immensely valuable and generally an integral part of planning for the following year. Parents receive their children's results and appear to be comfortable with the information that is imparted to them. In summary, I feel that the PIPS assessment in Kindergarten has been a positive experience for students, teachers and parents. Again, it is significant to note that the PIPS data is not available to external bodies that might misrepresent it.

A-E REPORTING

My third area of comment is regarding the use of A-E reporting. This is a part of assessment and reporting that I find very problematic for the earlier years of schooling. I am totally happy that A-E reporting is appropriate for secondary school students. There is also a good case for using it with Years 5 and 6 in primary school. The use of A-E reporting with Years 3 and 4 is a grey area for me. However, I feel very strongly that A-E reporting is entirely inappropriate for Kindergarten-Year 2.

After many years of teaching experience in these earlier years of schooling, it is apparent to me that a student's development is rarely linear and may, in fact, be full of bursts and plateaus. For instance, some children develop reading skills very quickly, whilst others need to work very hard to attain them. However, students from both these camps may be indistinguishable from one another by the time they reach Year 3. The difficulty with assigning A-E grades for students during periods of profound development is that they and/or their parents may become dispirited about an apparent lack of progress. They may develop an image of themselves as a low achiever and consequently fail to put in the effort that would disprove this. The self-fulfilling prophecy is a very real phenomenon in this case.

An additional problem with A-E reporting in the early years of schooling is that a grade of C appears to be a disappointing grade to parents. Teachers go to great lengths to explain that a C grade usually means that their child is performing appropriately at grade level; however, parents rarely feel comforted by this. Inevitably, their disappointment is transferred to their children at this critical time of development.

As a teacher, parent and grandparent, I know that children are more likely to retain enthusiasm for learning and to make better progress when they are encouraged and

applauded for their achievements. A-E reporting sadly works against this by assigning grades that are frequently interpreted negatively by parents and students. Kindergarten-Year 2 students are in a critical stage of development and A-E reporting does not generally support this development in a positive way.

Reporting against achievement/behaviour descriptors is a better way to inform parents of student progress in these early years. Whilst there may still be five categories in each reporting area, descriptors are easier for parents to understand and seem to align more with a parent's perception of their child's progress. A-E appears to be a harsher form of assessment to parents of younger children. A grading of D or E automatically means "fail" to parents; whereas a teacher using a descriptor "Early stage of development" conveys a totally different image of the child to a parent.

I would very strongly support the reintroduction of descriptive reporting in the early years of schooling.

Thank you for allowing me the opportunity to comment on these matters about which I feel very strongly. Please feel free to contact me regarding any of the issues that I have discussed.