

**Government Response to
Standing Committee on Education, Employment
and Youth Affairs on Report 5
Inquiry into Standardised Testing in ACT Schools**

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Government Response to Report of Standing Committee on Education, Employment and Youth Affairs, March 2019

Standardised Testing in ACT Schools

Introduction/Background

The ACT Government welcomes the Legislative Assembly's Standing Committee on Education, Employment and Youth Affairs *Report number 5 - Standardised Testing in ACT Schools* (the Report), provided to the Speaker of the Assembly in March 2019. The Report made twenty recommendations.

The Committee inquired into the purpose and use of standardised testing in ACT schools including consideration of how the results inform teaching and the governance of schools. The Committee explored the impacts of both testing and subsequent publication and analysis of results on students, teachers and teaching practices. The Committee also looked into the ACT's performance in standardised testing across primary and secondary schools, and in government and independent schools.

Government position on Recommendations

Recommendation 1 - The Committee recommends that the Education Directorate continue to recognise that standardised testing, including NAPLAN, is a valuable diagnostic tool when used appropriately.

Government response

Agreed. The Government supports the recommendation and notes that the individualised student responses to standardised testing, including NAPLAN can be used to inform teaching and learning when results are made available in a timely way. In addition, the system uses results to analyse performance issues and target support to areas of greatest need within and across schools. In addition to NAPLAN, there are also a number of standardised testing tools used at the school and classroom level that can provide detailed and timely information on student progress to aid teachers in meeting the needs of their students.

Recommendation 2 - The Committee recommends that the Minister for Education and Early Childhood Development explore, through Education Council, whether the Index of Community Socio-educational Advantage (ICSEA) values are being calculated in a way that accurately reflects disadvantage, especially in smaller jurisdictions.

Government response

Agreed in principle. The question of whether ICSEA values are calculated in a way that accurately reflects disadvantage, especially in smaller jurisdictions, was formally raised with ACARA by the ACT in 2018. The issue is complex and is subject to ongoing analysis being undertaken by ACARA and the ACT Education Directorate.

The results of this analysis are anticipated later in 2019 and the ACT will seek independent expert statistical advice ahead of any necessary actions in response to

the results. Consideration of whether a broader review of ICSEA would be beneficial will emerge from the initial analysis of ACT data.

Recommendation 3 - The Committee recommends that the Education Directorate initiate a public inquiry, in collaboration with the government and non-government school sectors, into the causes of the observed underperformance of ACT schools in NAPLAN.

Government response

Not agreed. There have been a number of recent reviews into performance of ACT schools in NAPLAN, including the Standardised Testing inquiry and considerable reform is underway arising from the findings of these reviews.

The question of '*observed under performance*' is drawn from commentary around 'statistically similar schools' reported through My School and using ICSEA as a basis of comparative performance. Definitive judgements as to '*observed under performance*' cannot be made ahead of the outcome of the analysis of the operation of ICSEA in small jurisdictions, currently being undertaken by ACARA, as described in Recommendation 2.

Measuring the performance of ACT schools should involve more than ICSEA based comparisons. For example, the National School Improvement Tool has been adopted by the Education Directorate for public schools. This tool provides a nine-domain framework for assessing school improvement against. The issue of the overall performance of the ACT education system was also aired through the Future of Education consultation and is well understood and a clear message received around the importance of quality and equity for all learners, regardless of their life circumstances.

Another analysis of the past using ICSEA based comparisons will not contribute significantly to the current understanding, or to intended directions, and is more likely to simply delay the implementation of strategies to improve outcomes, to the detriment of the children. Evidence of system supported literacy and numeracy initiatives was provided to the committee. Specific targeted initiatives are: Early Years Literacy, High School Writing, Count me in Too, Middle Years Computation, Principals as Numeracy Leaders and resolve: Maths by Inquiry.

Recommendation 4 - The Committee recommends that the Minister for Education and Early Childhood Development request the Education Council commission research on why some states make greater progress in some areas than others, with a focus on the fact the ACT is consistently making progress below the national average at both primary and secondary levels on a like-for-like basis.

Government response

Noted. This recommendation goes to questions of comparisons that are often made across jurisdictions and that are subject to the analysis of ICSEA referred to in recommendation two above, and any questions of comparison between the ACT and

any other jurisdiction are dependent on the results of this analysis. The ACT does not agree that this is an appropriate basis on which to rank the performance of schools.

Analysis of this nature is properly the preserve of jurisdictions to undertake and the ACT Government does not agree that this is a matter for the Education Council to pursue, however once Education Council has determined the structure, functions and resourcing of the national evidence institute, consideration will be given to national research priorities. The ACT Education Directorate will follow the progress of any work in this area closely.

Recommendation 5 - The Committee recommends that the Education Directorate collect better information on teaching effectiveness, so they can better understand the links between government policy, what teachers do in the classroom, and student progress.

Government response

Noted. Reforms in teaching and learning in ACT public schools are informed by the best available evidence.

It is well recognised that teachers are the single most important ‘in-school’ influence on student educational outcomes both directly and indirectly by fostering a positive, inclusive and safe learning environment. The evidence base supporting this is outlined in the Future of Education Research Report

(https://www.education.act.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0010/1274347/Future-Of-Education-Research-Report_FINAL.pdf)

The development of quality of teaching indicators is a question that the Productivity Commission is considering and, due to the significant complexities in separating out the contribution an individual teacher makes from the other factors involved in student progress, there are no measures currently available to consistently collect data and report nationally on quality teaching.

A key action under the Future of Education Strategy is to enhance the role of the ACT Teacher Quality Institute’s (TQI) to share excellent practice and contemporary research evidence across the ACT and explore the creation of an ACT teaching evidence clearing house, possibly as an extension of the TQI. The scoping for this work will commence in coming months.

As per Recommendation 4, once Education Council has determined the structure, functions and resourcing of the national Evidence Institute, consideration will be given to national research priorities. The ACT Education Directorate will follow the progress of any work in this area closely and alignment of an ACT clearing house will be core to considerations.

Recommendation 6 – The Committee recommends that the Minister for Education and Early Childhood Development advocate for the introduction of a supplementary report to NAPLAN that shows student learning gain.

Government response

Noted. Student learning gain, at aggregated level, is currently included in the NAPLAN National Report and reported at school level via *My School*. The review into NAPLAN Reporting currently under preparation for the COAG Education Council will address the overall issue of NAPLAN reporting and, once delivered, its recommendations will need to be considered by the Education Council.

The Education Directorate has introduced in the 2019-2020 budget a strategic indicator showing student learning gain; drawing on the concept of a year's learning for a year's teaching. Student learning gain is measured by comparing student progress between Year 3 and 5; and Year 7 and 9 NAPLAN scores.

An Education Council sub-committee is also exploring measures of learning gain used across states and territories ahead of recommendations concerning future directions for national reporting of learning gain.

Recommendation 7 - The Committee recommends that the Education Directorate implement strategies to encourage NAPLAN participation across all year groups.

Government response

Noted. The Education Directorate will continue to work with principals and school communities to ensure the highest possible level of engagement with NAPLAN testing. The transition to NAPLAN online provides an opportune time to revisit the system benefits of participation.

As outlined in the National Protocols, all students in Years 3, 5, 7 and 9 are expected to participate in the annual NAPLAN assessment. It is up to parents or carers to make decisions about withdrawal of their child from the tests in order to meet religious or philosophical objections to testing. The Education Directorate recommends that withdrawal be considered in consultation with a child's school.

A formal exemption may be granted for a student with disability that severely limits their capacity to participate in the assessment, or for a student who has recently arrived in Australia and has a non-English speaking background.

The government position is that standardised testing needs to have lower stakes and in the current climate can place unnecessary stress or pressure on students, which may mean that withdrawal is appropriate for some students.

Recommendation 8 - The Committee recommends that the Education Directorate identify what NAPLAN practice testing is occurring in ACT schools.

Government response

Noted. The Education Directorate endorses schools providing broad and comprehensive teaching programs as the best form of preparation for NAPLAN. The Education Directorate policy in relation to preparation for NAPLAN testing is addressed against recommendation nine.

The NAPLAN Handbook for Principals includes protocols for test preparation. Currently all ACT schools participating in NAPLAN online in 2019 will have conducted a 'practice' test. This short test is designed to familiarise students and teachers with the assessment platform and with test formats and comprises a combination of simpler elements of the different NAPLAN domains that will be tested. The results of this test are not marked and are not recorded, and it is not a 'practice test' as far as the content of NAPLAN testing is concerned.

Each year the messaging to ACT public schools and non-government schools regarding the impending NAPLAN testing and reminds principals of their obligations, as outlined in the NAPLAN Handbook for Principals. This includes the message that 'Excessive coaching and test preparation is not appropriate'. Correspondence and Newsletters sent to ACT schools since the 2012 NAPLAN assessment years included this same messaging.

Recommendation 9 - The Committee recommends that Education Directorate introduce and enforce a clear policy prescribing that preparation for NAPLAN is limited to introducing students to the testing methodology and environment.

Government response

Noted. The Education Directorate already provides advice to all ACT schools regarding 'preparation' for NAPLAN testing, as described in the response to Recommendation eight.

With the advent of NAPLAN online, schools are requested to familiarise students with the locked down browser and response types for the online environment. The 'practice test' that schools are currently engaging with is an omnibus test (reading, conventions of language and numeracy) and students are allocated 45 minutes to complete the questions. These familiarisation tests are not marked and are not recorded. Schools, as well as parents/carers, can also access the demonstration tests on the NAP website. Schools are advised that:

- NAPLAN should be treated as a routine event on the school calendar
- The best preparation for students is the teaching of the curriculum
- The provision of broad and comprehensive teaching and learning programs is the best preparation schools can provide for their students
- Excessive coaching and test preparation is not appropriate
- What is taught in the classroom (Australian Curriculum) is what is in the NAPLAN tests. There is no need for additional studying.

ACARA has developed an information brochure for parents and carers which states: *NAPLAN assesses literacy and numeracy skills that students are learning through their regular school curriculum. ACARA does not recommend excessive preparation for NAPLAN or the use of coaching providers. NAPLAN is about assessing learning progress in literacy and numeracy.*

These messages are also reinforced in the 'Handbook for principals' which outlines the national protocols for NAPLAN testing and is provided to schools prior to NAPLAN testing each year.

In its role as the ACT Test Administration Authority, the Directorate will provide this advice to both Catholic and Independent sectors.

Recommendation 10 - The Committee recommends that the Education Directorate ensure that parents and teachers are well informed about the role and intent of NAPLAN and other standardised tests and that no excessive or unnecessary emphasis is placed on such tests that might lead to increased levels of stress and anxiety among students.

Government response

Noted. In the ACT, NAPLAN and other standardised testing is intended to be 'low stakes' testing. In keeping with this stance, the Education Directorate works with, and will continue to work with, schools and with parents and carers to ensure that they are well informed of the role and intent of NAPLAN and other standardised tests to limit the amount of stress and anxiety experienced by students.

The government has encouraged news media to avoid raising the stakes of standardised testing through the publication of league tables and similar reporting.

Recommendation 11 - The Committee recommends the Education Directorate continue to provide support and counselling to students experiencing stress or anxiety from participation in standardised testing.

Government response

Noted. The Directorate will continue to provide support to students experiencing stress or anxiety in any aspect of their schooling experience.

In its role as the ACT Test Administration Authority, the Directorate will provide advice on this finding to both Catholic and Independent sectors.

Recommendation 12 - The Committee recommends that the Education Directorate investigate ways it can better utilise standardised testing data to improve academic outcomes.

Government response

Agreed. Appropriate use of the results of standardised testing is a significant component of strategies to improve the overall outcomes achieved by ACT schools. These changes range from the strategic, where the emphasis in strategic reporting has shifted from reporting NAPLAN mean scores to reporting student growth and equity, to ensuring that schools have access to detailed NAPLAN data through a contract with the NSW Department of Education for access the SCOUT system. This system is an upgraded system that is able to take advantage of the earlier access to

the results of NAPLAN through online testing and make them available to schools and teachers at the level of the individual student. In particular, individual student item level responses and individual student learning gain are helpful to inform teaching and learning, although only available once every two years so not as critical as school-based assessment data.

Schools are also encouraged to use school based standardised testing tools, such as PAT-Reading and PAT-Maths, and other school-based assessments to provide quick feedback on student progress, and more particularly, to provide insights into the individual strengths and weaknesses of students in a way that supports teachers to provide differentiated learning in an ongoing basis.

As context and student circumstances play an important role in shaping student outcomes, NAPLAN data is being used in conjunction with other organizational administrative data, including data on school satisfaction and on the school climate, in order to better identify areas for targeted support. Similarly, NAPLAN data is one source of data used to evaluate the effectiveness of various interventions which are being implanted to improve the student outcomes.

Recommendation 13 - The Committee recommends that teachers in ACT government schools be provided with training to increase their understanding of data analysis in respect of all standardised tests used in ACT schools.

Government response

Noted.

In 2017 the Education Directorate commenced an initiative '*Enabling Evidence Based Improvement in Canberra Public Schools – Valuing Data as Evidence to Inform Great Teaching*'. The initiative is designed to:

- align school and system data for planning and accountability;
- clarify the agreed data sets and their presentation to ensure that they are fit for purpose and meet the specific needs of teachers, school leaders and the Education Support Office;
- increase teacher and school leader knowledge and skill in the use of data analytics including the use of the achievement standards of the Australian Curriculum to drive planning, assessment and reporting of student achievement; and
- provide timely and differentiated professional learning and support for school leaders in the use of data to inform improvement student and overall school performance.

Building upon this base, a key government priority is to increase the effective use of data to ensure students, schools and the system continues to be high performing and improves education achievement for all students, regardless of their

background. This priority was a key theme emerging from the future of education consultation and is embedded in the 2018-2021 strategic plan.

Putting this plan into action, a Data Plan for School Improvement was developed, and implementation commenced in 2018. This plan provides for more strategic support for principals, school leaders and teachers in the presentation of data for improvement, identification of key data sets appropriate to the different stages of schooling and annual data analysis. A core element in the plan is the use of rigorous professional learning communities for teachers to collaboratively analyse a range of available student achievement data and plan for subsequent learning.

At a practical level, staff in ACT public schools are supported in their use of data, including data from standardised testing in a number of ways. This includes ensuring that data is made available to them in a timely manner, organising the data effectively in order to provide an effective 'narrative' for school principals and other school leaders, and by providing greater depth of analysis in support of school improvement, both at the system level and the individual school level.

Principals and their staff are provided with access to a school data tool and are provided with training in the tool on an as required basis.

Additionally, the new University of Canberra Affiliated Schools Program commenced in 2019 in partnership with the ACT Education Directorate and is providing teachers from 25 participating schools with the opportunity to participate in the Teachers as Researchers program. This program supports classroom teachers to collect and analyse data with the aim of improving student learning. The program will also enhance teacher education through school-based preservice teacher clinics and professional experience placements to ensure graduates are well equipped to enter the workforce. In their final school placement preservice teachers will be expected to demonstrate a capacity to analyse a variety of student assessment data and use it to inform future planning to enhance the learning of all students

Recommendation 14 - The Committee recommends that the ACT Education Directorate work more closely with ACARA on further development and delivery of online NAPLAN testing with a view to delivering results to schools and parents faster than current practice.

Government response

Agreed. All states and territories are working with ACARA on the transition to online assessment which will enable results to be delivered to schools and parents faster than in previous years. The ACT has been the leader in this field, with over 90% of ACT schools, and 100% of ACT public schools adopting NAPLAN online in 2018. This was by far the highest participation nationally.

The objective of the ACT with regard to NAPLAN online is to both ensure that the NAPLAN online testing platform is as robust and capable as possible, and that it deliver information to schools, teachers and to students and their families as quickly

as possible. ACT, despite its small size as a jurisdiction, has also been a strong contributor to the national conversation in this area, including strong participation on the ACARA and other working groups developing and delivering NAPLAN online.

In line with this objective, the ACT was the first jurisdiction to publish NAPLAN data through the Student and School Summary Report for schools on 4 July 2018, following the implementation of NAPLAN online in May of 2018 – the first time that data have been available to schools within the term that the test was conducted. Historically data have been available in September, with some improvements to processes resulting in data being available in mid-late August.

Recommendation 15 - The Committee recommends that the Minister for Education and Early Childhood Development advocate for the Education Council to publish the findings from the 2018 NAPLAN review as soon as possible.

Government response

Noted. The report of the Review into NAPLAN Reporting is currently scheduled for consideration at the next meeting of Education Council on 28 June 2019.

Any publication of the review report, its findings, or of any agreement to its recommendations, will be made through consensus decisions as required under Education Council protocols.

Recommendation 16 - The Committee recommends that further consideration be given to how NAPLAN results are made available and whether publication on the My School website is an appropriate repository of such information.

Government response

Agreed. The publication and presentation of NAPLAN results is the subject of the current Review of NAPLAN Reporting initiated by the ACT and endorsed by Education Council. The recommendations made by this review will be considered by Education Council, which will require consensus agreement for any changes to the current approach to publishing and presenting NAPLAN results.

Recommendation 17 - The Committee recommends that the Minister for Education and Early Childhood Development advocate at Education Council for an independent and comprehensive review of NAPLAN. This review should consider what appropriate performance benchmarks are, include an analysis of the impact that testing has on students and schools, and how data and results are being used.

Government response

Noted. A review of NAPLAN reporting was initiated by the ACT at Education Council. The ACT advocated for a broader review of the overall NAPLAN program than that ultimately agreed by Education Council; a consensus decision of the Education Council was required.

The ACT Government, as one of the nine members of the Education Council, will consider the recommendations and other relevant matters raised in the existing review and contribute to the consensus-based decision-making process regarding the future directions of NAPLAN.

Recommendation 18 - The Committee recommends that the Minister for Education and Early Childhood Development explore with Education Council whether a sampling approach is more appropriate than a full student cohort NAPLAN testing.

Government response

Agree. Sampling is already undertaken for international tests, and for some subjects under the National Assessment Program (NAP), including civics and citizenship, science literacy, and for information and communication technology literacy.

The ACT Government notes that this recommendation is linked to Education Council decisions that may be made following the existing review of NAPLAN. Any decision on sample testing for the whole of the NAPLAN program will require a decision of the Education Council, and the ACT Government, as one of the nine members of the Education Council, will take account of these recommendations and other relevant matters and contribute to the consensus-based decision-making process.

Recommendation 19 - The Committee recommends that the Minister for Education and Early Childhood Development explore with Education Council the current A to E reporting requirements, in light of potential misunderstandings of the current application of each letter.

Government response

Agreed in principle. The government recognises that improved consistency in student grading an important part of ensuring that teachers accurately assess student learning and progress. Care in the approach to grading and reporting is required to ensure that student engagement in learning is not negatively impacted.

Following its completion by the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) in 2016, the Australian Curriculum has been progressively implemented in the ACT. The final phase of implementation was completed at the end of 2018.

Achievement Standards and grade level descriptors in the Australian Curriculum assign a 'C' grade when a student demonstrates the expected level of learning for a year level. This level of achievement should be recognised, alongside encouragement of effort and pursuit of individual student interests and passions. Improving the understanding of parents, students and the community of what the curriculum achievement standards represent is an important part of this process.

Planning, teaching and assessing using achievement standards is a change of practice for ACT teachers. Teachers will continue to be supported to develop effective and coherent planning and assessment practices that utilise ACARA's work samples and

promote consistency of teacher judgement against the achievement standards across the ACT, including as Academic Reporting module of the School Administration System is rolled out in ACT public schools over the 2019-20 financial year.

Moderation through teacher collaboration around standards-based assessment is correlated with reducing in-school variation of student achievement and will achieve the consistency sought by this recommendation.

Recommendation 20 - The Committee recommends that the Education Directorate undertake a voluntary trial of teacher-led approaches in government and non-government schools, which includes rigorous and ongoing analysis of the effects of alternative teaching methods on student outcomes.

Government response

Noted. ACT schools incorporate a range of teaching approaches into school improvement, including teacher led approaches, and the government is pursuing initiatives such as Teachers as Researchers (within the Affiliated Schools Program), the development of the ACT clearing house and later of a national evidence institute. There will be ample opportunities to enhance the ACT's contribution to the growing national and international evidence base in effective teaching and learning.