# Standardised Testing in ACT Schools

Standing Committee on Education, Employment and Youth Affairs

March 2019

Report 5

## The Committee

### Committee Membership

##### Current Membership

* Mr Michael Pettersson MLA Chair
* Mrs Elizabeth Kikkert MLA Deputy Chair
* Ms Elizabeth Lee MLA Member (from 01 November 2018)

##### Past Membership

* Ms Tara Cheyne MLA Member (from 23 August 2018 to 20 September 2018)
* Mr Chris Steel MLA Member (from 13 December 2016 to 23 August 2018)
* Mr Andrew Wall MLA Member (from 13 December 2016 to 01 November 2018)

### Secretariat

* Ms Kate Harkins Committee Secretary (from January 2019)
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### Resolution of appointment

On 13 December 2016, the ACT Legislative Assembly agreed by resolution to establish legislative and general purpose standing committees to inquire into and report on matters referred to them by the Assembly or matters that are considered by the committees to be of concern to the community, including:

A Standing Committee on Education, Employment and Youth Affairs (the Committee) to examine matters related to early childhood education and care, primary, secondary, post-secondary and tertiary education, non-government education; industrial relations and work safety; and youth services.

The Legislative Assembly agreed that each committee shall have power to consider and make use of the evidence and records of the relevant standing committees appointed during the previous Assembly.

### Terms of reference

The Standing Committee on Education, Employment and Youth Affairs shall consider the following matters:

1. The use of Standardised testing in ACT Schools, including but not limited to:

a. The purpose of standardised testing.

b. The current use of standardised tests including;

i. National Assessment Program - Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN).

ii. Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA).

iii. Trends in Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS).

iv. Performance Indicators in Primary Schools (PIPS).

v. Any other relevant standardised assessment models.

c. Alternate forms of assessment and reporting (such as A-E reporting).

d. How test results are used to inform teaching on an individual basis and as a cohort.

e. The amount of time devoted to preparing for and conducting these assessments.

f. The impact on student wellbeing and mental health.

g. The effect on teacher morale and professional autonomy.

h. The efficacy of current testing materials.

i. The cost of standardised testing.

2. The ACT’s performance in standardised testing, including but not limited to:

a. The level of achievement of ACT schools compared to similar counterparts nationally and internationally.

b. The long term trend of performance in the ACT.

c. How the ACT Education Directorate uses test data to inform policy and teaching principles.

d. The measurement of learning gains in ACT schools.

e. How standardised testing results inform school enrolment decisions.

3. The Committee will also consider the ACT Auditor-General’s report No.4/2017, Performance information in ACT public schools as part of its inquiry.

4. Any other relevant matter.

## Acronyms and Abbreviations

| ACARA | Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority |
| --- | --- |
| ACER | Australian Council for Educational Research |
| ACTCPCA | ACT Council of Parents and Citizens Associations |
| ACTPA | ACT Principals Association |
| AEU | Australian Education Union |
| AGPPA | Australian Government Schools Primary Principals Association |
| AISACT | Association of Independent Schools of the ACT |
| COAG | Council of Australian Governments |
| Committee | The Standing Committee on Education, Employment and Youth Affairs |
| Directorate | The ACT Education Directorate |
| EYL | Equivalent Year Level |
| Gonski 2.0 | Australian Government, Review to Achieve Education Excellence in Australian Schools: Through Growth to Achievement, April 2018 |
| ICSEA | Index of Community Socio-educational Advantage |
| ICT | Information and Communication Technology |
| IEA | International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement |
| Minister | Minister for Education and Early Childhood Development |
| NAP | National Assessment Program |
| NAPLAN | National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy |
| OECD | Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development |
| PAT | Progressive Achievement Tests |
| PEA | Priority Enrolment Areas |
| PIPS | Performance Indicators in Primary school |
| PIRLS | Progress in International Reading Literacy Study |
| PISA | Programme for International Student Assessment |
| SCSEEC | Standing Council on School Education and Early Childhood |
| 2010 Senate Inquiry | Inquiry into administration and reporting of NAPLAN testing |
| 2010 Senate Committee | Senate Standing Committee on Education, Employment and Workplace Relations |
| 2014 Senate Inquiry | Senate Standing Committee on Education and Employment Committee |
| 2014 Senate Committee | Inquiry into effectiveness of the National Assessment Program - literacy and numeracy |
| SES | socioeconomic status |
| TIMSS | Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study |
| UNESCOUIS | United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization Institute for Statistics |
| UWA | University of Western Australia |

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[Recommendation 2](#_Toc5874642)

[2.8 The Committee recommends that the Minister for Education and Early Childhood Development explore, through Education Council, whether the Index of Community Socio-educational Advantage values are being calculated in a way that accurately reflects disadvantage, especially in smaller jurisdictions.](#_Toc5874643)

[Recommendation 3](#_Toc5874644)

[2.59 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.](#_Toc5874645)

[Recommendation 4](#_Toc5874646)

[2.60 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.](#_Toc5874647)

[Recommendation 5](#_Toc5874648)

[2.61 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.](#_Toc5874649)

[Recommendation 6](#_Toc5874650)

[2.72 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 to Education Council for a supplementary report to NAPLAN that shows student learning gain.](#_Toc5874651)

[Recommendation 7](#_Toc5874652)

[2.79 The Committee recommends that the Education Directorate implement strategies to encourage NAPLAN participation across all year groups.](#_Toc5874653)

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[2.95 The Committee recommends that the Education Directorate identify what NAPLAN practice testing is occurring in ACT schools.](#_Toc5874655)

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[2.96 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.](#_Toc5874657)

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[2.117 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.](#_Toc5874659)

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[2.118 The Committee recommends the Education Directorate continue to provide support and counselling to students experiencing stress or anxiety from participation in standardised testing.](#_Toc5874661)

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[2.129 The Committee recommends that the Education Directorate investigate ways it can better utilise standardised testing data to improve academic outcomes.](#_Toc5874663)

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[2.140 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.](#_Toc5874665)

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[2.164 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.](#_Toc5874667)

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[2.186 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.](#_Toc5874671)

[Recommendation 17](#_Toc5874672)

[2.187 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.](#_Toc5874673)

[Recommendation 18](#_Toc5874674)

[2.210 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.](#_Toc5874675)

[Recommendation 19](#_Toc5874676)

[3.86 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.](#_Toc5874677)

[Recommendation 20](#_Toc5874678)

[3.105 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.](#_Toc5874679)

## Introduction

* 1. The Committee resolved to inquire and report on 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 wished to explore the impacts of both testing and subsequent publication and analysis of results on students, teachers and teaching practices. The Committee was also interested in understanding the ACT’s performance in standardised testing across primary and secondary schools, and in government and independent schools.
  2. This Report begins by providing the history of, and context for standardised testing in the ACT. The Report then analyses the primary forms of standardised testing that occurs in the ACT. This includes discussion of 4 different standardised tests including the National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN). The Report also considers the effect of A – E reporting on students and teachers.
  3. The Committee acknowledges that whilst language in this report primarily references parents and teachers, the impact of standardised testing can be felt by all carers of participating students and staff within schools. The Committee commends all carers and people working within the education sector for their ongoing dedication to the education and wellbeing of young people in Canberra.
  4. The Report makes 20 recommendations.

### Conduct of the inquiry

#### Self-referral

* 1. At a meeting on 22 May 2018, the Committee agreed to conduct an inquiry into the matters set out in the Terms of Reference. The Committee provided the Assembly with an update on the Inquiry on 20 September 2018.[[1]](#footnote-1)

#### Submissions and Discussion Paper

* 1. The Committee advertised in May 2018 for submissions to the Inquiry, closing on 1 July 2018. The Committee received twelve submissions, including two late submissions. A listing of submissions received and published by the Committee is at Appendix B – Submissions.

#### Hearings

* 1. On Tuesday 11 September, Friday 14 September, Monday 24 September, Tuesday   
     25 September and Tuesday 2 October 2018, the Committee held public hearings and heard evidence from a range of witnesses.[[2]](#footnote-2) A list of all witnesses that appeared at the hearings is at **Appendix A.**

### Background: National Assessment Program

* 1. The National Assessment Program (NAP) includes ‘all domestic and international assessments that the Australian Government and state and territory education ministers have agreed Australian students should sit.’[[3]](#footnote-3)
  2. States and Territories are required by the *Australian Education Act 2013* to participate in the NAP and implement the Australian Curriculum in accordance with the regulations (the *Australian Education Regulation 2013*).[[4]](#footnote-4)
  3. The NAP is directed by the Education Council (formerly known as Standing Council on School Education and Early Childhood (SCSEEC)). The NAP is described as:

…the measure through which governments, education authorities and schools can determine whether or not young Australians are meeting important educational outcomes. [[5]](#footnote-5)

* 1. The Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) is responsible for the overall management of the NAP ‘in collaboration with representatives from all states and territories and non-government school sectors.’ ACARA is an independent statutory authority.[[6]](#footnote-6)
  2. The NAP includes:
* the National Assessment Program - Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) - which is conducted annually for every student in Years 3, 5, 7 and 9,
* three-yearly NAP Sample Assessments in Science Literacy, Civics and Citizenship, and Information and Communication Technology (ICT) Literacy, and
* international sample assessments (ACARA does not oversee the delivery of these assessments), including:
  + - * Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS);
      * Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS); and
      * Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA). [[7]](#footnote-7)
  1. NAPLAN is discussed further in Chapter 2. The international sample assessments are discussed further in Chapter 3.

### National Schooling Reforms

* 1. The Education Directorate’s *Annual Report 2017-18* identifies that schooling reforms are subject to continuing negotiations with the Australian Government, underpinned by the *Review to Achieve Education Excellence in Australian Schools: Through Growth to Achievement* (Gonski 2.0).
  2. The National School Reform Agreement is a joint agreement between the Australian Government, States and Territories ‘to lift student outcomes across Australian schools’ and will operate from 2019 to 2023.[[8]](#footnote-8)
  3. The ACT signed a bilateral agreement with the Australian Government on 6 December 2018 that sets out state-specific actions to improve student outcomes to be implemented between 2019 and 2023.[[9]](#footnote-9) The Agreement makes general provision for all school sectors (Government, Catholic and Independent) to work collaboratively on reforms relating to NAPLAN and the Australian Curriculum.[[10]](#footnote-10) Of particular reference to this Inquiry, the Agreement includes a specific commitment for all school sectors to:
* Play a lead role in national efforts to refine ACARA’s national learning progressions in literacy and numeracy;
* Play a lead role in national efforts to develop the digital formative assessment proof of concept;
* Play a lead role in the development of national learning progressions in general capabilities;
* Play a lead role in the refinement of the digital formative assessment tool, and implement relevant aspects as they become available; and
* Provide national leadership in NAPLAN online by maximising implementation in all ACT schools. [[11]](#footnote-11)

### Purpose of Standardised Testing

* 1. The Committee received a range of responses on the purpose of standardised testing.
  2. The Association for Independent Schools of the ACT (AISACT) advised the purpose of assessment is to promote learning.[[12]](#footnote-12) They stated that the purpose of standardised testing (also referred to as norm referenced testing) is:

…to report on a student’s achievement in comparison to other students, using the using the same materials and administrative procedures for all students. As such, it is a valuable diagnostic tool; an additional piece of information in the jigsaw of summative and formative assessment. It should not be an ‘add on’ but an ‘add in’ to assist in the identification of areas of growth and need, and, in turn, driving priorities and targeted professional learning.[[13]](#footnote-13)

* 1. The ACT Principals Association (ACTPA) outlined the purpose of testing as follows:

…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. [[14]](#footnote-14)

### Value of Standardised testing

* 1. The Committee considered different perspectives on the value of standardised testing. Evidence was heard that there is value at a system-wide level, and also, an individual application where students, parents and carers, and teachers are provided with insight.
  2. The NAP website states that ‘two benefits of the NAP are to help drive improvements in student outcomes and provide increased accountability for the community.’[[15]](#footnote-15) The site further states:

Without the nationally comparable data about student performance that the NAP provides, states and territories have only limited information about the achievement of their students in relation to their peers. NAP data provide an additional suite of information, thus enhancing the capacity for evidence-based decision making about policy, resourcing and systemic practices.[[16]](#footnote-16)

And:

The national tests, which replaced a raft of tests administered by Australian states and territories, improved the comparability of students’ results across states and territories.[[17]](#footnote-17)

* 1. At the system level, the AISACT advised the Committee that:

Standardised testing, when triangulated with a range of other micro and macro assessment sources, is beneficial. A rich triangulation of data highlights educational trends, strengths and gaps; informs teaching and learning program development and pedagogy to best meet student needs; informs contextualised strategic plans and professional learning.[[18]](#footnote-18)

* 1. The AISACT further advised that ‘standardised testing is most valuable when diagnostic data is returned promptly; is easily accessed; and, when all stakeholders have competent data literacy skillsets.’[[19]](#footnote-19)
  2. The ACT Minister for Education and Early Childhood Development (the Minister) advised that

…there is a role for standardised testing, at the level of the classroom and school, at the level of the whole jurisdiction, at the national level, and internationally.

The important thing is to ensure that the right standardised tests are being used for the right purposes, and that the results are effectively contributing to improved outcomes for students and, most importantly, that the results are not being misused, either inadvertently, or for narrow purposes that result in low-stakes testing becoming high-stakes testing.[[20]](#footnote-20)

* 1. The Committee was also advised that there is a valuable place for Australia-wide standardised testing where schools and parents can gain insight into student performance against national benchmarks, and relative to peers nationally and within individual school. Tracking performance over time is also valuable for parents. [[21]](#footnote-21)
  2. One submission emphasised that standardised testing has great value in whole school improvement, by informing a ‘differential model of school review’ in conjunction with other indicators and assessment.[[22]](#footnote-22) The author proposes using a range of evidence to group schools (be they above, at, or below an expected level) which in turn triggers supports and intervention.[[23]](#footnote-23)
  3. The Committee notes that this proposal appears to hold similarities to the Education Directorate’s School Improvement strategy outlined in *People, Practice and Performance: A Framework for School Performance and Accountability*.[[24]](#footnote-24)

##### Committee comment

* 1. The Committee accepts evidence that there is a clear purpose and value in the concept of standardised testing. The Committee agrees that the question is not if standardised testing should be used in the ACT, rather, the Inquiry should consider factors that influence how standardised testing be conducted in a way that meets its intended aims for students, parents, educators and policy makers.

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

## NAPLAN

### Overview

* 1. First administered in 2008, the annual NAPLAN assessment for all students in Years 3, 5, 7 and 9, covers reading, writing, language conventions (spelling, grammar and punctuation) and numeracy skills. The NAP website states ‘NAPLAN tests skills in literacy and numeracy that are developed over time through the school curriculum.’[[25]](#footnote-25)
  2. The assessments are undertaken every year in the second full week in May.[[26]](#footnote-26) The NAPLAN test results and the student reports are released the following September. [[27]](#footnote-27) The ACT Education Directorate website states:

The results provide information about student achievement that can be used to inform teaching and learning programs. NAPLAN tests provide point-in-time information regarding student progress in literacy and numeracy and are intended to complement the wide range of formal and informal assessments that are already conducted in schools. NAPLAN test results are not intended to be used in isolation from other school-based assessment programs.[[28]](#footnote-28)

* 1. NAPLAN replaced state based assessments. In Canberra, the ACT Assessment Program operated prior to NAPLAN being rolled out nationally. The Committee heard that this reporting:

[H]ad no fanfare, and no media attention, but which also provided the rich data to schools and gave schools an overview of how their students sat in relation to other students in the ACT. It gave a good range of information upon which to build individual programs, cohort programs or school-wide literacy plans.[[29]](#footnote-29)

#### Index of Community Socio-educational Advantage

* 1. On the My School website, each school is assigned an Index of Community Socio-educational Advantage (ICSEA) value. That value provides an indication of the level of the school’s ‘educational advantage.’[[30]](#footnote-30) This is calculated by looking at certain factors for each student and for the school. Factors include:
* parents’ occupation,
* parents’ education,
* a school’s geographical location, and the
* proportion of Indigenous students at the school.
  1. The ICSEA value was designed to allow for ‘fair and meaningful’ comparisons of NAPLAN results to be made between schools of similar socio-economic advantage.[[31]](#footnote-31)
  2. The My School website utilises ICSEA values to allow users to compare a school’s NAPLAN results with similar schools. The website states:

A school's ICSEA value enables it to be placed within a group of up to 60 schools that serve students who are identified as having similar levels of socio-educational advantage. This group is referred to as a Statistically Similar Schools Group (SSSG). While these schools may be found in varied geographic locations throughout Australia, based on ICSEA their students can be determined as having similar levels of educational advantage.[[32]](#footnote-32)

* 1. The Committee notes that a number of witnesses raised the effect that ICSEA values can have on the perception and analysis of ACT NAPLAN results.[[33]](#footnote-33) The Committee notes that there are ongoing concerns in relation to this.

Recommendation 2

* 1. [The Committee recommends that the Minister for Education and Early Childhood Development explore, through Education Council, whether the Index of Community Socio-educational Advantage values are being calculated in a way that accurately reflects disadvantage, especially in smaller jurisdictions.](#_Toc772417)

### ACT Performance in NAPLAN

* 1. The Committee notes that the ACT, on face value, appears to exceed in NAPLAN when raw mean scores are compared across jurisdictions.
  2. The Minister advised that the ACT has performed well against key measures for reading, writing and numeracy over time and that most variations in NAPLAN performance over time mirror changes in National results. The Committee was advised that a gradual increase in NAPLAN performance nationally in years 3 and year 5 reading has gradually eroded the ACT’s advantage; whilst the outcomes for years 7 and 9 have been generally consistent. [[34]](#footnote-34)
  3. The Minister advised that writing outcomes have gradually declined over the 10 years of NAPLAN, consistently just below NSW and Victoria, although year 9 results have frequently been the highest in the writing domain.[[35]](#footnote-35)
  4. However, the Committee also considered a number of recent reports comparing NAPLAN performance using data adjustments for socio-economic factors to establish how the ACT has performed in comparison to similar schools and similar cohorts in the other Australian jurisdictions. The Committee is concerned that this data suggests the ACT is lagging in performance against cohorts in all jurisdictions, across all subject test areas. This is discussed below.

#### Auditor-General’s Report No.4 of 2017: Performance information in ACT Public schools

* 1. In May 2017, the ACT Auditor-General released Report No.4 of 2017: *Performance Information in ACT Public Schools*. The Audit considered ‘the extent to which the Education Directorate and ACT public schools use performance information to improve schools’ and students’ performance’[[36]](#footnote-36), focusing on

…performance information relevant to ACT public schools’ and students’ from Kindergarten to Year 10 and focused on performance information collected, managed and reported over 2015 and 2016. ACT public colleges were not considered as part of the audit.[[37]](#footnote-37)

* 1. Key findings of the Audit to support its conclusions comprised the following areas:
* ACT Public Schools’ Performance;
* Governance arrangements for student performance information;
* Availability of student performance information; and
* Analysis and use of student performance information.
  1. The Audit notes that results from NAPLAN, Performance Indicators in Primary Schools (PIPS) and school-specific assessments that may be summarised in A to E reporting were key sources of student performance information in ACT public schools, and were the main focus of the audit.[[38]](#footnote-38)
  2. The Audit report contained the following conclusions around ACT public school performance:

The Education Directorate publicly reports ACT public schools’ NAPLAN performance using mean NAPLAN scale scores, which represents performance at a point in time, and compares these results against the Australian average. On this basis ACT public schools tend to perform higher than the Australian average on most NAPLAN tests. However, this does not provide a full picture of the performance of ACT public schools, as it does not take account of the relatively higher socio‐educational advantage of the ACT and it does not measure performance over time.

Students at ACT public schools generally have higher socio‐educational advantages, as measured by the Index of Community and Socio‐educational Advantage (ICSEA). **A comparison of ACT public schools with other Australian schools with similar ICSEA values shows that the majority of ACT public schools’ NAPLAN results are lower than similar schools in Australia. Furthermore, a comparison of ACT public school students’ learning progress, as measured by comparing students’ NAPLAN results across different years and cycles of assessment with expected measures of predicted growth, shows considerable variation in performance across ACT public schools**.

Although the influences on, and reasons for, student performance may be varied, the effective use of student performance information is an important mechanism by which student (and school) performance can be improved.[[39]](#footnote-39) [Emphasis added].

* 1. The Audit made seven recommendations which are outlined below. The Government Response to the Audit was tabled 15 August 2017.[[40]](#footnote-40) The brief Government Response is included in brackets against each recommendation:

RECOMMENDATION 1: STRATEGIC PLAN PERFORMANCE OBJECTIVES AND INDICATORS   
The Education Directorate should provide guidance on how performance indicators in its Strategic Planning cycle 2018‐2020 are to be measured as well as associated quantitative targets associated with the indicators.

[Agreed]

RECOMMENDATION 2: EDUCATION DIRECTORATE NAPLAN INDICATORS   
The Education Directorate should develop new Strategic Indicators which are based on measuring student progress over time.

[Agreed in principle]

RECOMMENDATION 3: SCHOOL STRATEGIC PLANS AND ANNUAL ACTION PLANS   
The Education Directorate should improve the quality and comprehensiveness of schools’ Strategic Plans and Annual Action Plans by requiring: a) explicit objectives and strategies in relation to student performance information and its use in driving school improvement; and b) performance measures based on students’ educational progress. [Agreed]

RECOMMENDATION 4: GUIDANCE AND SUPPORT FOR SCHOOLS   
The Education Directorate should examine what may be the appropriate level of support for school Principals with respect to the use of student performance information to drive school improvement and determine how this is to be provided. This should recognise the balance between school autonomy and accountability and central oversight and support from the Education Support Office.

[Agreed]

RECOMMENDATION 5: NAPLAN PARTICIPATION RATES   
The Education Directorate should develop strategies to address the low participation rates in NAPLAN testing in some ACT public schools, specifically with respect to Year 9 participation.

[Noted]

RECOMMENDATION 6: A TO E REPORTING   
The Education Directorate should implement a standards‐based moderation process across schools and school networks in order to achieve consistency in A to E grading and reporting.

[Agreed in principle]

RECOMMENDATION 7: PROFESSIONAL LEARNING FOR USE AND ANALYSIS OF DATA   
The Education Directorate should develop a comprehensive professional learning program for school Principals and teachers on the use of student performance information and how it can be used to inform differentiated teaching and learning to students and overall school improvement.

[Agreed][[41]](#footnote-41)

* 1. The Education Directorate’s *Annual Report 2017-18* identifies the agreed actions against Recommendation 3 were completed. Actions against the remaining recommendations, which were either agreed, agreed-in-principle or noted, are all identified as ‘in progress.’[[42]](#footnote-42)
  2. The Minister advised the Committee at its hearings into 2017-2018 Annual and Financial Reports that ‘[s]ome of the recommendations are probably work that will be ongoing and so will never have a “complete” beside them.’[[43]](#footnote-43)
  3. The Committee notes comments from the ACT Council of Parents and Citizens Associations (ACTCPCA) supporting the findings of the Auditor-General and encouraging the Directorate to ‘provide assistance, monitoring and oversight of ACT public schools to ensure that data from standardised testing is used to inform resourcing, personnel and curriculum planning, to improve performance of ACT public schools.’[[44]](#footnote-44)
  4. The Committee was advised that the Audit Office drew on information in the report prepared by Prof Stephen Lamb (discussed below) in preparation of their report.[[45]](#footnote-45)
  5. At the public hearing for this Inquiry, a senior official told the Committee:

We are really on track in terms of delivering on the Auditor-General’s findings, which came from the Lamb report. This gives us a real essence now, with the Future of Education Strategy, that we have a framework to take that forward. [[46]](#footnote-46)

#### Measuring student progress: A state-by-state report card -Grattan Institute 2018

* 1. In October 2018 the Grattan Institute published its report *Measuring Student Progress: A State-By-State Report Card* which aims to provide ‘a clearer picture of student progress by state and territory, giving policy makers a better understanding of where the pockets of success lie.’[[47]](#footnote-47)

##### Methodology

* 1. The Grattan Institute’s assessment measures student progress using NAPLAN data adjusted using a time-based measure the authors refer to as ‘years of progress.’[[48]](#footnote-48)
  2. The report uses an ‘Equivalent Year Level’ (EYL) measure which ‘translates student NAPLAN scores into the year level in which the typical student would be expected to achieve a given NAPLAN score.’ Additionally, it considers ‘Years of Learning Progress’, measuring student progress by comparing differences in EYL over a given time-frame for a given student cohort.[[49]](#footnote-49)

##### ACT Student Progress

* 1. The Grattan report’s overall assessment of the ACT’s performance is that once relative advantage is taken into account ‘…the ACT consistently makes the least progress of all states and territories, at both primary and secondary level, compared to similar schools in other states.’[[50]](#footnote-50)
  2. The report also notes a similar trend when looking at the ACT’s achievement:

ACT schools achieve higher than the national average overall, but lower on an ICSEA-adjusted basis, for all three subject areas, at Year 3, 5, 7 and 9. This result is broadly consistent with previously-published results in Lamb (2017), ACT Auditor-General (2017) and Macintosh and Wilkinson (2018).’[[51]](#footnote-51)

###### ACT Primary schools

* 1. The report provided the following assessment of ACT Primary School performance:

On average, ACT primary students made around three months less progress than the national average in numeracy, and about 1.5 months less progress in reading, compared to similar schools in other states, between Year 3 and Year 5.

And the ACT has fallen further behind the national average in recent years. The 2010-12 cohort made around two months less progress than the national average in numeracy, and close to the national average in reading. But the 2014-16 cohort made five months less progress than the national average in numeracy, and four months less in reading...

There is a similar worrying trend for the ACT in Year 3 and Year 5 achievement reading results, which sharply declined over the 2010-2016 period.

It should be noted that our results show only a part of the ACT performance, because very advantaged schools (which educate around one third of students in the ACT) are excluded. However, Appendix D suggests that the low relative progress continues to hold true for ACT primary schools with ICSEA higher than 1124.[[52]](#footnote-52)

###### ACT Secondary Students

* 1. Similarly, the report provided the following assessment of ACT Secondary School performance:

Before educational advantage is taken into account, ACT students have high achievement results and generally make better-than-average student progress. But ACT students are, on average, more socio-economically advantaged than students from any other state or territory. There are no remote schools in the ACT and none with high proportions of Indigenous students.

In absolute terms, ACT secondary students make the most progress in numeracy: two months more progress than the national average over two years of schooling.

But compared to similar schools in other states, ACT secondary students make three months less numeracy progress than the national average over two years of schooling.

The low rates of progress in ACT secondary schools are evident across the different levels of school advantage examined in our analysis, and in all three sectors – government, Catholic and independent schools.

…

These poor progress results should be a wake-up call for the ACT.[[53]](#footnote-53)

#### Government school performance in the ACT – paper by Professor Stephen Lamb

##### Overview

* 1. The analysis paper *Government school performance in the ACT* was prepared for the ACT Education Directorate by Professor Stephen Lamb of the Centre for International Research on Education Systems and Victoria University in 2017. The Directorate’s website states that:

The report was commissioned to provide the Directorate with a deeper understanding of:

* The performance of ACT schools relative to like schools in other jurisdictions, particularly given the socio-economic and other advantages of the ACT;
* The performance of low SES (socioeconomic status) students in the ACT relative to students from similar backgrounds in other jurisdictions;
* The negative impact of residualisation on school performance in the ACT.
  1. The analysis paper considers ACT school performance based on 2013 NAPLAN results for Years 5 and 9 in Reading and Numeracy against comparable or like schools in other jurisdictions, controlling for socio-economic and other differences in student intake and school context. [[54]](#footnote-54) Those differences included:
* socio-educational advantage (measured using ICSEA)
* SES concentration effects (percentage of students from the top ICSEA quartile)
* proportion of students from language backgrounds other than English
* proportions of females, and
* school size (enrolments).[[55]](#footnote-55)
  1. The analysis excluded selective-entry schools and was restricted to government city schools (non-metropolitan). Professor Lamb notes that ‘this may raise the performance of the ACT in the analysis’, as the population of students in ACT schools includes equivalent students to those in selective-entry schools in other jurisdictions. [[56]](#footnote-56)

##### Use of NAPLAN

* 1. Professor Lamb highlights that ‘there are few sources of data available in Australia to measure school performance at a national level or across state and territory boundaries.’[[57]](#footnote-57) He advises that:

Currently, comparable measures of performance are limited to student academic achievement skills measured through the National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) program. While not adequate for measuring how well schools are serving students and their communities in a broad way, NAPLAN data do provide an important guide to assessing how well schools are performing in promoting the acquisition of academic skills, an important function of schools.[[58]](#footnote-58)

* 1. The analysis states ‘it is not clear that test score results are a measure of school learning or achievement, but they do provide an assessment of skills that we might expect children to possess at given ages and for schools and teachers to help develop.’[[59]](#footnote-59)

##### Findings

* 1. The analysis paper, which is partially redacted, includes the following findings in relation to the performance of ACT Government schools:

…after taking account of intake and context differences, ACT government schools on average achieve negative results on every measure. For example, in Year 5 Numeracy mean scores the ACT records the worst result of any jurisdiction. On average, students are performing 20 points lower than comparable students in [other jurisdiction redacted].[[60]](#footnote-60)

The patterns in Table 1 show that Numeracy is the area of greatest concern. While results are also significantly lower on all reading performance measures, the numeracy results are markedly below the rest of the country, compared to what would be expected based on the populations schools are serving in the ACT. [[61]](#footnote-61)

ACT schools have higher ICSEA values as a group. This equates to higher mean scores for NAPLAN compared to schools in other states and territories where the tails of performance reduce raw mean scores. The effect is to conceal the real levels of performance in the ACT which is lower than expected (predicted) based on the student population and weaker than schools serving similar populations in other states.[[62]](#footnote-62)

##### Comparing similar schools

* 1. The ACT Government submission advised the Committee that Professor Lamb was able to compare data beyond that available on the My School website with equivalent data form other jurisdictions, which added value to the Directorate’s ongoing NAPLAN analysis.[[63]](#footnote-63)
  2. The Committee notes that a senior official informed the Committee that the data used by Professor Lamb was different to that used by Professor Macintosh for his report (discussed in the following section).[[64]](#footnote-64)
  3. The Committee was advised that the Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage (ICSEA) measure ‘has the potential to create anomalies in jurisdictions that varied significantly from the national population’, noting that parents and carers with degree qualifications or higher are significantly over-represented in the ACT.[[65]](#footnote-65) The Committee heard that following the 2017 Audit Report:

…the Education Directorate commenced and is continuing to work with the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) to develop a more ‘fine grained’ understanding of the application of the Socio-educational Advantage (SEA) measure that lies at the heart of the ICSEA measure.[[66]](#footnote-66)

##### Equity and NAPLAN results

* 1. The ACT Government submission noted that one key issue identified by the paper was the ‘educational outcomes in the ACT of students from low socioeconomic families when compared with those of similar background in other jurisdictions.’[[67]](#footnote-67) A senior official at the public hearing told the Committee:

What Professor Lamb’s report found … is that the ACT performance issue is one of equity … The performance at the high end of socio-educational advantage is very close and comparable to other jurisdictions. But at the lower end, that is where the gap is…[[68]](#footnote-68)

* 1. The Committee heard that this finding echoed the Auditor-General’s report, ‘Professor Lamb’s report, as you are probably aware, was picked up by the Auditor-General when the Auditor-General did that report. Those reports are really consistent.’[[69]](#footnote-69)
  2. The Committee notes that there is no agreement in relation to how equity related matters influence NAPLAN results. In a newspaper article published on 12 October 2018, Professor Lamb is quoted as saying ‘an equity problem was no more to blame for poor academic results in Canberra than in any other school system in Australia.’ The article states that Professor Lamb said ‘his remit had been to assess the sector’s performance, not find the reasons behind poor results.’[[70]](#footnote-70) Professor Macintosh, in the same article, also questions equity being the only factor when the results were not even across the board with ACT students performing better in reading, but not writing and numeracy. [[71]](#footnote-71)

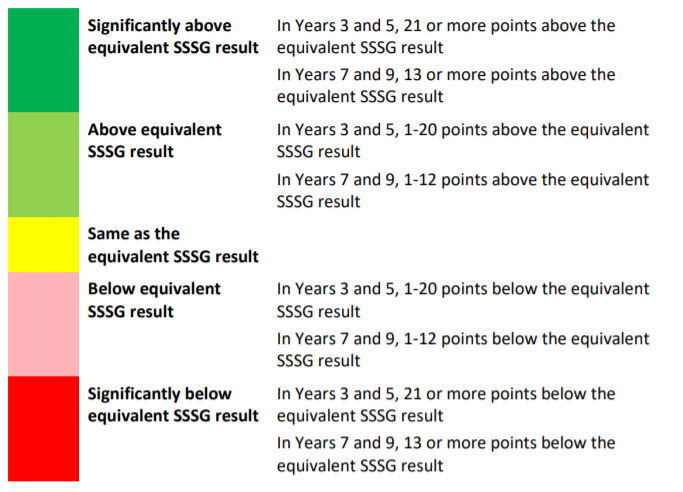
#### Academic underperformance in ACT schools: An analysis of ACT school performance in NAPLAN over the period 2012 to 2016 – Paper by Professor Andrew Macintosh and Debra Wilkinson

* 1. The ANU working paper prepared by Professor Andrew Macintosh and Debra Wilkinson entitled ‘*Academic underperformance in ACT schools: An Analysis of ACT School Performance in NAPLAN Over the Period 2012 to 2016*’ notes that schools should only be compared with those sharing a similar socio-economic profile, and as such the report grouped sampled schools into three socio-economic groupings using the ICSEA values.[[72]](#footnote-72)
  2. The paper considers the mean NAPLAN results for all ACT government and non-government school for Years 3, 5, 7 and 9 over the period 2012 to 2016 compared to the mean of the relevant Statistically Similar Schools Group (SSSG) used by ACARA on the My Schools website. Results are presented across reading, writing and numeracy.[[73]](#footnote-73)
  3. The Report includes the following table representing ACT performance:

This chart shows Years 3,5,7 and 9 in mean results for reading, writing and numeracy.



* 1. The key for the table is as follows:



* 1. The report states that these measures were chosen based on:

The delineators of significance—21 or more points in Years 3 and 5 and 13 or more points in Years 7 and 9—were selected because they represent approximately 6 months of learning in primary and secondary school respectively. For example, if the mean result from an ACT school in Year 5 is 21 points above the equivalent result from the school’s SSSG, it suggests that, on average, the students at the ACT school are 6 months ahead of students at comparable schools (and vice versa).[[74]](#footnote-74)

* 1. The paper concludes that ACT schools have consistently underperformed in NAPLAN tests over the period 2012-2016.[[75]](#footnote-75) Underperformance was a material issue at ACT government and non-government schools, particularly at the high school level, however it was more pronounced in government schools.[[76]](#footnote-76) The report states:

Across the ACT school sector, there was an alarming number of schools where the students were, on average, more than 6 months behind the levels of learning of students in other comparable schools. The underperformance was most pronounced in government schools but there was also a material issue at non-government schools. For both government and non-government schools, the extent of underperformance was greatest at the high school level, and in numeracy and writing. Notably, NAPLAN performance was consistently better in reading than the other two subjects. [[77]](#footnote-77)

* 1. The Committee heard that the Education Directorate questioned the analysis used in the Macintosh report. A senior official told the Committee ‘Professor Lamb and Professor Macintosh’s reports are qualitatively different. That is partly because Professor Lamb was able to use a much more detailed dataset to inform it.’[[78]](#footnote-78)
  2. The Committee heard that Professor Macintosh compared schools using the My Schools website that compares “statistically similar school groupings.” A senior official told the Committee that whilst ACARA has made every effort to make things as comparable as possible, there are threshold issues. The Directorate gave three examples including Lyneham High School, Alfred Deakin High School and Telopea Park high School which are compared primarily to non-government schools, and some selective schools.[[79]](#footnote-79) The Minister told the Committee ‘the comparison is not apples with apples.’[[80]](#footnote-80)
  3. In relation to the rate of underperformance (and the table above) a senior official told the Committee:

In respect of the sea of red, the colour classifications that were used by Professor Macintosh are inconsistent with those used in My School … error margins are really important. Measurement error has to be factored in when you are doing comparisons across schools. In ACARA analysis, in two schools that would be deemed to be in the same score range there could be a variation of plus or minus about 16 points. In primary schools it tends to be a bit higher; so plus or minus about 16 points. In high schools it would be plus or minus about 10 points, or 12 points.

…

If we applied the My School comparative logic, which is nationally agreed and has been since My School was established, it would be much more like a sea of yellow. There would some pink and a couple of dots of red, probably in writing. So I think it is really important that we do not seek to misinterpret the information. If we were to recast the tables, they would not be red and they would definitely be much more yellow. [[81]](#footnote-81)

#### Submission 9 – Dr Mark Drummond

* 1. In an effort to provide a valid like-for-like comparison, one submission to the Committee included comparisons of mean NAPLAN data across cohorts of students living in metropolitan areas or major cities (or closest approach thereto) and across cohorts of students with at least one parent who possesses a Bachelor degree or higher qualification.[[82]](#footnote-82)
  2. Dr Drummond notes that these data sets, particularly data limited to students with a degree-educated parent, are the best available data sets to compare the ACT’s achievements in NAPLAN against the States and the Northern Territory whilst taking into account the ACT’s generally higher socio-economic status.[[83]](#footnote-83)
  3. The submission further noted that the best like-for-like comparisons can be made using data based on the degree educated parent cohort for students in the ACT, NSW, VIC, TAS and SA as they have been of very similar ages throughout NAPLAN’s history. Dr Drummond noted that students in these jurisdictions sitting NAPLAN have on average ‘been a quarter to half a year or so older than their counterparts’ in the other three jurisdictions with ‘WA and QLD students being by far the youngest.’[[84]](#footnote-84)
  4. The submission’s findings indicated that, using data adjusted for socio-economic factors to achieve like-for-like comparisons, NSW has achieved significantly more of the highest mean NAPLAN scores over the years from 2008 to 2017, with Victoria also ahead of the ACT across the four NAPLAN years (Years 3, 5, 7 and 9) for the five domains (Reading, Writing, Spelling, Grammar and Punctuation and Numeracy). Dr Drummond presented these as the number of ‘number one’ rankings for each jurisdictions over the ten years.[[85]](#footnote-85)
  5. The submission states that reading is the strongest area of NAPLAN performance in the ACT, followed by grammar and punctuation. Spelling and writing have been the weakest areas of performance.[[86]](#footnote-86)

#### Other

* 1. A number of submissions also highlighted the ACT’s low NAPLAN performance when compared to similar schools in other jurisdictions.
  2. Submission 2, for example, highlighted one family’s lived experience of education standards across a couple of NSW and ACT schools with similar ICSEA values.[[87]](#footnote-87) The author expressed concerns that the ACT has poor academic standards, poor teacher quality and, at the high school level, poor school discipline and culture. The author noted what they perceive as an ‘inability to move beyond the mediocre and even to celebrate it’ in the ACT.[[88]](#footnote-88)
  3. The ACT Council of Parents and Citizens Associations (ACTCPCA) advised the Committee that ‘data from standardised testing over the past few years indicates decline in student performance, inconsistent with resourcing and educational advantage.’[[89]](#footnote-89) ACTCPA believes that this decline is related to inconsistencies between schools arising from the very autonomous school-based management model. They highlighted the discrepancies between ACT public schools, with some able to offer a wide variety of specialist programs whilst other struggle to provide a specialist language teacher or a qualified teacher librarian. ACTCPA suggests the Education Directorate needs to provide greater oversight of public schools and equity in education across all ACT schools to ensure their performance.[[90]](#footnote-90)

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| Recommendation 3   * 1. 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.[[91]](#footnote-91) |
| Recommendation 4   * 1. 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. [[92]](#footnote-92) | |
| Recommendation 5   * 1. 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. | |

### Key Issues

#### Measuring Gain

* 1. The Committee understands that NAPLAN data could be used to measure learning gain for both individual students and cohorts of students. The Grattan Institute report *Measuring Student Progress: A State-By-State Report Card,* discussed earlier in this Chapter, clearly identified that they see the need for growth measurements. It remarks:

Australia puts too much emphasis on students’ achievements at different points in time on their schooling, and not enough on students’ progress over the course of their schooling.[[93]](#footnote-93)

* 1. The report also states:

A great virtue of NAPLAN is that is enables comparisons of student achievement *and* progress. Students sit the test every two years, so their learning can be tracked as they move through school … It is a rich dataset. But too little attention is paid to student progress. The NAPLAN national reports focus mainly on achievement. [[94]](#footnote-94)

* 1. The Auditor-General’s report also recommended that student growth measures be referenced in strategic indicators and performance measures, not solely achievement measures.[[95]](#footnote-95)
  2. The AISACT (Association of Independent Schools of the ACT) also suggest that the educational narrative should centre on growth in student learning.[[96]](#footnote-96)
  3. The Education Directorate’s *Annual Report 2017-18* advises that the Directorate will introduce, for the 2018-19 reporting period, new and revised indicators ‘that focus on the gain in student learning by supplementing existing reporting on NAPLAN mean scores with measures of student learning gain through comparing student progress between Years 3 and 5; and Years 7 and 9.’[[97]](#footnote-97)
  4. The Minister advised:

To measure the growth in student outcomes over time in the education system, the Directorate compares the NAPLAN mean reading and numeracy scores of children in year 3 and in year 7 with the NAPLAN mean reading scores of the same children when they have reached year 5 and year 9 respectively. The difference (gain) in the results indicates how the children’s learning outcomes are changing over time and demonstrates whether the Directorate is achieving a growth in student outcomes (ideally, the gain will be maintained with a gradual increase over time).[[98]](#footnote-98)

* 1. The Committee was advised that the Directorate has also introduced an indicator to measure progress in the ACT towards greater equity in educational outcomes over time. The Minister noted:

To help assess its progress towards greater equity in the system, the Directorate is currently developing and testing indicators using NAPLAN scores that represent the performance gap over time between the most disadvantaged group of students—based on parental education (those whose parents have not completed year 12)—and the most advantaged group of students – those with parents with a university qualification.[[99]](#footnote-99)

* 1. The Committee notes that caution will need to be taken when presenting growth data as ‘NAPLAN gain scores make it hard to compare the progress of groups of students who are at different stages of their learning. This is because students typically learn at different rates at different stages.’[[100]](#footnote-100)

###### Committee comment

* 1. The Committee accepts evidence that NAPLAN data is useful for a range of stakeholders including the Directorate, principals, teachers, parents and students. The Committee agrees that results need to be presented in a way that enables stakeholders to compare both student performance and student growth. Data used for comparison purposes needs to be presented in a manner that recognises factors that influence results. Examples would include location of the school (regional, rural, remote), percentage of students from non-English speaking backgrounds, socioeconomic factors, and selective entry schools.
  2. The Committee also notes that knowing where the ACT sits in comparison to other States and Territories is of value only if the Directorate then evaluates the underlying reasons for the different achievement levels and learning from those that are excelling.

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| Recommendation 6   * 1. 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 to Education Council for a supplementary report to NAPLAN that shows student learning gain. |

#### ACT Participation Rates

* 1. The ACT Auditor-General Report No.4 or 2017: *Performance Information in ACT Public Schools* notes that the accuracy of the ACT’s NAPLAN results may be distorted by comparatively low participation rates in NAPLAN by some ACT public schools, and in Year 9 generally.[[101]](#footnote-101)
  2. The Audit found for ACT public schools in 2015, NAPLAN participation rates:
* were lower for all year levels than the participation rates for all ACT schools (public and private) and schools Australia‐wide (public and private); and
* in Year 9 (85.3 percent) were significantly lower than ACT public schools’ participation rates in Year 7 (93.2 percent) and the Year 9 participation rate for schools Australia wide (public and private) (91.6 percent). [[102]](#footnote-102)
  1. The table below shows the ACT participation rate compared to the national participation rate for all year groups.[[103]](#footnote-103) Cohorts are split between national public and private schools, ACT public and private schools and ACT public schools only. The Committee notes that ACT public schools have a lower participation rate across all age groups.
  2. The Committee notes that the Directorate does have policies around optimising participation, which is centred on engagement with parents.[[104]](#footnote-104)
  3. The Committee was advised that value of standardised testing data is questionable as it skewed by a number of schools limiting participation of a proportion of students, usually those who are struggling, in order to improve their overall results. ACTCPCA (ACT Council of Parents and Citizens Association) informed the Committee that this occurs ‘by implication’ rather than on direct advice from the schools and may explain the ACT’s higher than average rate of withdrawal. The Committee was advised that greater oversight from the Directorate of the implementation of standardised testing could address these challenges.[[105]](#footnote-105)

###### Committee Comment

* 1. The Committee agrees that low participation rates are a risk to the value of NAPLAN data, and notes that the Education Directorate has a role to play in ensuring that consistent messages are reaching public, Independent and Catholic schools in the ACT providing clear advice in relation to participation expectations.

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| Recommendation 7   * 1. The Committee recommends that the Education Directorate implement strategies to encourage NAPLAN participation across all year groups. |

#### Cost

* 1. The Committee received the following advice from the ACT Minister for Education and Early Childhood Development about the costs of conducting NAPLAN in the ACT:

In 2018 the approximate full cost for delivery of NAPLAN related services will be $1,400,000. This equates to approximately $65 per student. This cost has declined slightly from 2011, where the cost per student was calculated at $68 per student.[[106]](#footnote-106)

* 1. The Committee was also advised that the ACT has a service level agreement with NSW for NAPLAN delivery which includes ‘printing of test papers, marking of writing materials, preparation and printing of student reports’ and access to an online analytical tool for ACT teachers.[[107]](#footnote-107) The Minister advised that:

It is anticipated that there will be some savings to the overall cost of NAPLAN delivery/reporting once the transition to NAPLAN Online is completed and printing of test papers is no longer required.[[108]](#footnote-108)

* 1. In relation to other costs, the ACT also has a NAPLAN team within the Education Directorate,[[109]](#footnote-109) and the Committee was advised that there are additional indirect costs for administering some standardised tests including reallocation of teachers, room preparation, training and IT requirements.[[110]](#footnote-110)
  2. According to a 2016 United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization Institute for Statistics (UNESCO UIS) report,[[111]](#footnote-111) the costs of recent standardised testing (in US dollars) were:

International assessment costs (in US$)

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Assessment** | **Cost per student per year (sampled)** |
| TIMSS 2015 | 57 |
| PIRLS 2016 | 49 |
| PISA 2015 | 39 |

* 1. The Committee notes that the costs of NAPLAN testing are comparable to the costs of other standardised testing.

#### NAPLAN Preparation

* 1. The Committee received conflicting evidence around the level of preparation for NAPLAN undertaken prior to testing.
  2. The Director-General of the ACT Education Directorate advised the Committee that the overarching view in the directorate is that sitting NAPLAN ‘should be approached as if it were any other day at school.’[[112]](#footnote-112) She went on to explain: ‘if we do expose children to any preparation it is really just to reduce anxiety around the process of sitting the test.’ [[113]](#footnote-113) The Committee heard that students are exposed to practice test conditions chiefly because it differs from standard classroom set up and standard teacher and student interactions.[[114]](#footnote-114)
  3. The Committee heard from the Principal of the Canberra Montessori School that their schooling model does not put any emphasis on NAPLAN reporting or preparation.[[115]](#footnote-115)
  4. In contrast, the Committee also received evidence that practice tests are common and significant time is set aside for NAPLAN preparation in ACT schools. The Committee received evidence of written directives from an ACT high school principal and heads of department, over a number of years, insisting on NAPLAN practice, including one request for teachers to specifically set aside a week for NAPLAN preparation.[[116]](#footnote-116)
  5. In addition, the Committee received a range of anecdotal evidence that NAPLAN preparation is undertaken, to varying degrees, in many ACT schools. The AEU[[117]](#footnote-117) for example, in its survey of 550 educators - including 400 teachers, highlighted that 48 percent of respondents agreed practice tests are conducted at their schools in preparation for NAPLAN.[[118]](#footnote-118)
  6. One submission noted the ‘pressure and time wasted by teachers, students and parents alike.’[[119]](#footnote-119)
  7. The AISACT advised that the ‘mechanics of preparing for and conducting the assessment’ are different for primary and secondary schools. They highlight that educators have experienced excessive time demands around the NAPLAN assessments, including from practice tests, staff training, changing timetables and IT support for NAPLAN online.[[120]](#footnote-120)
  8. One submission suggested that the time and energy devoted to NAPLAN, both in and out of the classroom, is problematic. The Committee was told about one school where Year 3 students began preparing for NAPLAN in the last term of Year 2 ‘with explicit teaching of the NAPLAN writing genre.’[[121]](#footnote-121) The author told the Committee that schools are under pressure to prepare their students as well as possible and advised that in some cases that also led to schools encouraging particular students to opt out of testing to prevent the possibility of lower than expected results.[[122]](#footnote-122)
  9. The Committee was also advised that preparation for NAPLAN will be limited by the introduction of NAPLAN online:

…now that we are online there are quite a lot of limitations. When it was pen and paper you could actually get quite a lot of items and spend quite a lot of time on the preparation. Now that it is online there is only a limited window of practice items to get used to the test conditions…[[123]](#footnote-123)

###### Committee comment

* 1. Given the mixed evidence received on the level of NAPLAN preparation being undertaken in ACT schools, the Committee is concerned that the core message to “not explicitly practice” isn’t being filtered down from the Directorate through principals and classroom teachers.

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| --- | --- |
| Recommendation 8   * 1. The Committee recommends that the Education Directorate identify what NAPLAN practice testing is occurring in ACT schools.  |  | | --- | | Recommendation 9   * 1. 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. | |

#### Effect on curriculum

* 1. The Committee received a range of evidence that suggested teachers shape learning to ensure that it aligns with NAPLAN testing methods. The Australian Education Union (AEU) noted ‘some schools focus on teaching to the test and that valuable learning time is focused on trying to achieve the best NAPLAN results.’[[124]](#footnote-124)A former teacher also told the Committee:

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.[[125]](#footnote-125)

* 1. The ACT Principals Association (ACTPA) advised:

Anecdotally we are aware that, although I do not think it is too bad in the ACT, around the country things are being distorted by people being too worried about it and seeing it as a big thing, about giving your school a competitive edge. Then it does do what we always feared it would: narrow the curriculum, make the curriculum much less valuable than it should be for the needs of the modern era.[[126]](#footnote-126)

* 1. Other evidence suggested that teaching the curriculum is the best approach for NAPLAN preparation. One submission advised that concentration on the ‘three Rs’ (reading, writing and arithmetic) would achieve ‘better results overall.’[[127]](#footnote-127) The AISACT told the Committee:

The preparation for NAPLAN is the teaching of the Australian curriculum because the NAPLAN questions are – and more so in current years – closely aligned to the Australian curriculum. [[128]](#footnote-128)

* 1. The Committee was also advised that publication of NAPLAN results, and the resulting competition, have led to undue emphasis on NAPLAN in education priorities.[[129]](#footnote-129) ACTPA advised 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.’ [[130]](#footnote-130) ACTPA explained:

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.[[131]](#footnote-131)

#### Impact on students

* 1. The Committee received a range of evidence suggesting that students are negatively impacted, particularly by stress or anxiety.
  2. The ACT Council of Parents and Citizens Associations (ACTCPCA) advised that the impact of standardised testing on student wellbeing and mental health, particularly anxiety, was a serious concern, and that NAPLAN can cause unnecessary pressure and stress for some students.[[132]](#footnote-132)
  3. ACTPA noted that some students experience stress and anxiety about the NAPLAN tests, however, this was not characteristic of all students.[[133]](#footnote-133) The Committee was advised that the discrepancies in school approaches to NAPLAN, with some schools treating it as a high stakes test with a lot of preparation and others treating is as ‘just another day’, may be partially responsible for the range of student experiences.[[134]](#footnote-134)
  4. The Association of Independent Schools of the ACT ACT (AISACT) provided the Committee with data from a survey of Daramalan College students on their 2018 NAPLAN experience. 31 percent of Year 7 students and 27 percent of Year 9 students completing the survey indicated that they felt anxious or stressed by completing NAPLAN.[[135]](#footnote-135) The submission noted that whilst schools encourage all students to participate as required, student engagement remains the students’ respective choice. AISACT also noted that ‘cultural values and beliefs do impact student attitudes and effort.’[[136]](#footnote-136)
  5. The AEU survey of educators outlined that 64 percent of respondents believe the students have a negative attitude towards NAPLAN and 28 percent believe students are indifferent to the test.[[137]](#footnote-137)
  6. The Committee also received two submissions with personal examples. One submission noted a Year 5 student was very anxious about NAPLAN testing and believed it would affect his ability to get into high school.[[138]](#footnote-138) A second provided the example of one school where students were reluctant to participate or give their best effort because of lasting impression set by the publication of league tables.[[139]](#footnote-139)
  7. The Committee also heard evidence that stress arising from standardised testing can be managed, and also act as a tool for teachers to identify which students require additional support.
  8. ACTCPCA[[140]](#footnote-140) advised that standardised tests provide ‘opportunity to become familiar with testing and develop appropriate strategies and practices to manage this life skill’ given tests are a part of assessment in education more broadly and in the workplace.[[141]](#footnote-141)
  9. Professor Macintosh stated:

I have heard the anecdotal stories about people getting really stressed about them. Of course nobody wants to see children being overly stressed. That is not a good thing. But then again I have not seen any data to show that it is a systemic issue. In any of these tests there are going to be children who get anxiety about it. And I would add that I think that conducting this sort of system-wide testing that we have with NAPLAN gives people a chance to identify those kids who have those characteristics, who get stressed in tests. At the end of the day, whoever you are, you are going to have to do tests at times in your life. It is unavoidable. So it gives the opportunity to treat them at the same time and go through processes to help people who suffer those sorts of anxieties. But before we do anything, I would like to see some data on to what extent this is a problem.[[142]](#footnote-142)

##### High stakes/low stakes

* 1. The Committee was advised that the NAPLAN test has a perception of being high stakes, resulting in increased preparation and potentially create additional stress for children, parents and teachers.[[143]](#footnote-143)
  2. The Committee notes that the ACT Government’s *Teachers’ Guide to Assessment* provides a definition of high stakes assessment as being assessment that generally caries a significant consequence such as admission exams to a select entry school, Year 12 exit exams/assessment and university entrance exams.[[144]](#footnote-144)
  3. The Minister advised the Committee that ideally, ‘the high-stakes emphasis that is placed on key aspects by some families, some schools, some reporting and some stakeholders would be significantly reduced’ for standardised testing in the future.[[145]](#footnote-145)
  4. The Committee understands that the publication of results and the production of league tables may be the reason that NAPLAN generates a sense of high-stakes. One article states:

My School, along with the increased media focus on NAPLAN results, are in large part responsible for pushing NAPLAN into the high stakes realm.

Theoretically NAPLAN testing for individual students should, as ACARA asserts, be low stakes.[[146]](#footnote-146)

* 1. A former teacher also told the Committee that when the ACT test prior to NAPLAN took place, results were not published, and there was little anxiety encountered by students or parents regarding the process.[[147]](#footnote-147)
  2. The AEU survey also asked educators whether NAPLAN has been harmful. The majority of respondents (65 percent) agreed that it has been harmful with many providing commentary relating to stress on students and teachers to perform.[[148]](#footnote-148)

###### Committee Comment

* 1. The Committee accepts that some students experience anxiety in relation to NAPLAN. The Committee agrees that supports should be in place for these students. The Committee notes that this support should be targeted as the majority of students do not experience heightened stress as a result of NAPLAN.

Recommendation 10

* 1. 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.

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| Recommendation 11   * 1. The Committee recommends the Education Directorate continue to provide support and counselling to students experiencing stress or anxiety from participation in standardised testing. |

#### Student Effort

* 1. The Committee notes the 2018 education research brief by Save our Schools entitled ‘*Have Kids Stopped Trying at PISA and NAPLAN”?*’ whichconsidered Australia’s improving Year 12 results compared to declining or stagnating Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) (Year 10) and Year 9 NAPLAN results. The brief argued that students put less effort into ‘low stakes’ tests where there are no personal consequences. The paper suggested caution in interpreting PISA and NAPLAN results, using data for comparison of educational systems or drawing policy conclusions.[[149]](#footnote-149) The paper also proposed that some students have become more resistant to putting in effort into PISA and NAPLAN because of the pressure from schools for students to perform each year. It also noted negative attitudes from teachers and/or parents may filter through to an increasing number of students, influencing their level of effort. [[150]](#footnote-150)
  2. The Committee notes that of the students who completed the Daramalan College survey on students’ NAPLAN 2018 experience, the majority of Year 7 and Year 9 students agreed or strongly agreed that they tried to do their best on the NAPLAN test.[[151]](#footnote-151) The survey also asked about parents’ attitudes towards NAPLAN testing, with 26 percent of Year 7 and 37 percent of Year 9 responses disagreeing or strongly disagreeing with the statement ’my parents had a positive attitude towards NAPLAN testing.’[[152]](#footnote-152)
  3. The Committee notes that there are a range of views on student effort, and agrees that this consideration should be taken into account when discussing the nature of NAPLAN being considered a high or low stakes test. The Committee notes that these results would suggest that whilst parents may have a negative view, students continued to try their best.

#### Effect on teachers

* 1. The Committee notes that a number of submissions discussed the effect that NAPLAN has on educators. Respondents to the AEU survey (including teachers and principals) rated their support for NAPLAN in its current for as extremely low.[[153]](#footnote-153) Conversely, the AISACT suggested that there does not appear to be a direct link between the effects of using standardised testing and teacher morale.[[154]](#footnote-154)
  2. The Committee considered two academic reports that considered teacher perceptions of NAPLAN. Both found that the publication of results from 2010 had encouraged the growth of competition both within and between schools, and feeling increased pressure to ‘teach to the test.’[[155]](#footnote-155)

#### NAPLAN Data Use

* 1. The Committee was interested to understand if the value of standardised testing was being realised within the ACT. The Committee considered how standardised testing results were reviewed and used to enact change at a system, school (principal and teacher) and individual level (students and carers).

##### By the Education Directorate

* 1. A senior official told the Committee that at the system level, the Directorate is “interested in NAPLAN data from the top down.” [[156]](#footnote-156)

What we do is look at all the data from the whole jurisdiction. We are interested in the extent to which schools are showing growth over time. We are interested in the extent to which outcomes are as equitable as possible. We are looking at that. We are looking at where the ACT sits compared to other jurisdictions … we look at the NAPLAN data relative to the demographic profile of a school. Is that demographic profile changing over time? ACARA provides data on the socio-economic advantage of a school, divided in quartiles. We look at that. Is that changing over time? Are the changes in a school’s outcomes, as measured by NAPLAN, affected by changes in the underlying demographic picture? We look at that. We look at schools over time. We go back over many years and we look at the growth patterns over time. Again, we look at each of the domains. The main focus is on reading, writing and numeracy. We look at it between networks. We look at every possible way of cutting and dicing the data to get a picture of what is happening at the school, the network and the overall jurisdiction level.[[157]](#footnote-157)

* 1. The Committee noted that the Auditor-General considered the use of NAPLAN data carefully in its report and made a number of findings. The Committee in particular notes the following:

Annual external reviews of ACT public schools have consistently identified shortcomings in ACT public schools’ analysis of student performance information and the use of this data to inform specific and tailored educational instruction. Improving the performance of schools in the targeted use of data needs special attention by the Education Directorate.[[158]](#footnote-158)

* 1. The Committee notes that the Auditor-General report quoted the *ACT External System Review Report 2016* which also considered the use of data:

Data was not always readily available for classroom teachers in some schools or not frequently accessed by teachers. Some teachers would benefit from professional learning to develop their capacity to routinely use data to inform their planning and personalise the learning[[159]](#footnote-159)

Sixty‐eight percent of school Principals agreed with the statement ‘My school has sufficient skilled staff, able to analyse student assessment data for the purpose of improving student learning outcomes’, while 10 percent of respondents neither agreed or disagreed and 22 percent of respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed. With respect to the capability of teaching staff, 56 percent of school Principals agreed with the statement ‘at the classroom level, teachers have sufficient skills to analyse student assessment data for the purpose of improving student learning outcomes’, while 14 percent of respondents neither agreed or disagreed and 30 percent of respondents disagreed or strong disagreed. A number of responses were also received from school Principals highlighting the variability of skills and capabilities across the teaching faculty.[[160]](#footnote-160)

###### Committee Comment

* 1. Whilst the Committee was advised by the Minister that the Directorate is building capability in the use of data and evidence in schools,[[161]](#footnote-161) the Committee was not given detailed information regarding the nature of data analysis provided to schools. For example, the Committee is not aware of any trend or school specific analysis undertaken by the Directorate and given to schools as standard practice following standardised testing results being analysed. The Committee considers this an area that warrants further consideration.

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| Recommendation 12   * 1. The Committee recommends that the Education Directorate investigate ways it can better utilise standardised testing data to improve academic outcomes. |

##### By Schools, Teachers

* 1. The Committee was advised that principals at some schools use standardised testing data for whole of school personnel and curriculum planning, which is in turn used to inform teaching and learning practices in the classroom. ACTCPCA informed the Committee that they do not believe this is the case in all ACT public schools.[[162]](#footnote-162)
  2. In response to the treatment of data within schools, a Directorate official told the Committee:

When the NAPLAN data comes out, one of the first things a principal does is look at it with their leadership team, look at it with their teachers, and at the very next board meeting take the school board through a very comprehensive look at the results that have come through, but matching those with the other small data results that are coming through to the school so that there is a more comprehensive picture. Then it would be a narrative about that with some of the statistics and perhaps some of the information that came from the school satisfaction survey and the school climate survey, which are ones the Education Directorate does for schools. That would be published in the newsletter. It would be discussed. Quite often at the P&C meeting following the board meeting there would be a discussion about, “This is what our data is showing us. These are areas of strength. These are areas of challenge. This is what we’re doing to work through that.”[[163]](#footnote-163)

* 1. The Committee was advised in a submission from a retired teacher that NAPLAN data is used by schools:

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.[[164]](#footnote-164)

* 1. The Committee notes that the use of data by school principals was considered in the Auditor-General report. That report stated:

School Principals advised that NAPLAN and PIPS data is used primarily for monitoring progress against the school’s annual Action Plan (66 percent) and strategic direction‐setting for the school (63 percent). They also identified the need for ‘triangulation’ of NAPLAN and PIPS data with other sources of information to inform decision‐making. In contrast to the use of school‐specific assessment data, only 56 percent of school Principals advised that NAPLAN and PIPS data was used to inform the development of differentiated teaching and learning for students.[[165]](#footnote-165)

* 1. The Committee notes that in a similar vein, the AEU survey indicated 66.8 percent of respondents never or rarely used NAPLAN data in their teaching practice. 29 percent responded that they use it sometimes.[[166]](#footnote-166) Responses also indicated that NAPLAN data was not of much use in teaching practice with 24 percent agreeing it was useless, 42 percent saying was barely useful and 30.7 percent saying it was somewhat useful.[[167]](#footnote-167) Some responses stated that the data is occasionally used to work out class placements,[[168]](#footnote-168) whilst another stated it is ‘great as a diagnostic tool.’[[169]](#footnote-169)
  2. The ACTCPCA advised that parents find NAPLAN provides more detailed information on certain components of student performance, such as grammar, rather than performance in English overall. They note that parents appreciate the detailed information, as an addition to the A to E reporting. [[170]](#footnote-170)

##### Teacher Data Literacy

* 1. The Committee was advised by AISACT that NAPLAN data, when used well, can inform student and school growth. However, they also cautioned that the inability to interpret data may impact upon the use of standardised testing results. AISACT advised that both pre-service and substantive teachers need to be supported to develop data literacy skills and knowledge so that analysis of a range of data and assessment sources can be used to better plan targeted teaching.[[171]](#footnote-171) They note:

Comment was made that there is limited use of NAPLAN data at a classroom level. This is perhaps reflective of a lack of teacher data literacy analysis skills, lack of time, lack of ease of access to data, and/or a combination of factors.[[172]](#footnote-172)

* 1. The AEU advised the Committee that:

Standardised testing is of very little value to teachers. We are trained to use formative assessment. Formative assessment means we can respond to students learning at the point of need. For example, my students are writing, I can check in before they finish so that they can edit and use their new learning in an authentic way.[[173]](#footnote-173)

* 1. The Directorate informed the Committee that they are working with schools to improve data literacy skills:

Principals, deputies and executive staff in schools have been involved in a program of professional development throughout term 3 this year, focussed on using multiple sources of evidence to drive school improvement. Schools have also supported with a range of targeted programs, based on system level evidence and data, for supporting schools to improve the pedagogy and practice in literacy and numeracy.[[174]](#footnote-174)

###### Committee Comment

* 1. The Committee notes that the Education Directorate has identified teacher data literacy as an area requiring development, and undertaken activities to encourage professional development in this respect. The Committee agrees that strong data literacy skills may assist teachers to engage with standardised testing results.

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| Recommendation 13   * 1. 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. |

##### By Parents and Carers

* 1. The ACTCPCA advised that Committee that only 22 percent of parents completing the Facebook poll asking parents ‘is your child’s NAPLAN report useful?’ responded favourably to the statement. Some of the comments provided alongside responses to the poll noted the delay between the NAPLAN testing and reporting was too long – a concern discussed later in this report. Others found the NAPLAN results reports too unspecific.[[175]](#footnote-175)

###### Committee Comment

* 1. The Committee agrees with the sentiment expressed by many stakeholders – the value of standardised testing is only realised if results are considered and findings taken into account when making decisions regarding planning and training.
  2. The Committee acknowledges the Auditor-General’s report finding there are shortcomings in respect to data literacy and believes this plays a role in perceptions of NAPLAN effectiveness.

##### School enrolment decisions

* 1. The Committee received a range of anecdotal evidence that parents utilise NAPLAN results when choosing a school. One submission noted that parents look to published NAPLAN data as being ‘objective’ and give it undue weight when making schooling decisions.[[176]](#footnote-176) The submission noted:

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. [[177]](#footnote-177)

* 1. Evidence provided through the AEU survey of educators indicates a high level of NAPLAN being used by families to help make school choices. 77 percent of respondents indicated that they know of families choosing a school at least partially based on the NAPLAN results published on the My School website. The Committee notes that not all of these respondents would be parents, so the results reflect educator perceptions.
  2. Conversely the Committee was advised that Priority Enrolment Areas (PEA) policies in public education reduce the level of school choice, limiting the NAPLAN influence. ACTCPCA conducted a poll asking ‘is NAPLAN an important influence in choice of school?’ which resulted in 59 out of 60 respondents indicating that NAPLAN did not influence their choice of school. [[178]](#footnote-178)

##### use of NAPLAN results as enrolment criteria

* 1. The Committee notes claims that NAPLAN results are used by some schools to determine enrolment eligibility.[[179]](#footnote-179) The AISACT advised that its Member schools do not filter enrolments based on standardised testing results, although they did note increasing numbers of parents are influenced in school enrolment decisions by publically available NAPLAN and ATAR results as reported by media and on the My School website.[[180]](#footnote-180)
  2. One response to the AEU survey advised that ‘[a]t the college level we use the data (as well as other measures), in consultation with students and parents to try enrol students in the correct package (Tertiary or Accredited) as early as possible.’[[181]](#footnote-181) This practice was also seen by another respondent as a harmful use of NAPLAN data:

At least one college I know ([Year] 11 & 12 in ACT) uses [Year] 9 NAPLAN results to advise year 10 students on their course selections for college. To me it seems ridiculous to use a test that was conducted on a day, a year and a half before college, to advise students of what to do. Any given student could have had a bad day on the day of testing or been unwell, or they could have put their head down and worked harder since. I have known students who were denied (or strongly urged not to do) tertiary package subjects.[[182]](#footnote-182)

* 1. The AEU noted in its submission that some state governments have made a decision to attach NAPLAN results to Year 12 Certification which they describe as ‘a bastardisation of NAPLAN’s alleged intent.’[[183]](#footnote-183)

##### use of NAPLAN results as indicators of school performance

* 1. The Committee was advised by the ACTPA that NAPLAN data is of some benefit to schools, and ‘of some value in indicating system-wide achievement levels.’[[184]](#footnote-184) The submission advised that NAPLAN data is utilised by ACT public schools in school improvement plans as an indicator of success.[[185]](#footnote-185)
  2. The AEU advised that:

There is also an overemphasis on NAPLAN data in schools. For example, we have been told we MUST have targets related to NAPLAN in our school strategic plan. This has overshadowed other data collected within the school.[[186]](#footnote-186)

* 1. The Committee notes the use of NAPLAN as an indicator of performance is discussed in the *Education Directorate Annual Report 2017-18*.[[187]](#footnote-187) It also notes that mean NAPLAN scores will be considered alongside indicators focusing on gain in student learning for the next reporting period. [[188]](#footnote-188)

###### Committee Comment

* 1. The Committee understands that there are ongoing reservations in regard to the alternative uses of NAPLAN data. The Committee notes that evidence in relation to the scope and nature of alternative uses of NAPLAN data is largely anecdotal. The Committee agrees that this practice may be contributing to the levels of stress and anxiety felt by students. The Committee encourages all stakeholders to be mindful that the application of NAPLAN data should be limited to core purposes as stated by ACARA.

##### Timeliness of Data

* 1. A range of evidence provided to the Committee indicated that the delay between NAPLAN tests being conducted and the release of the NAPLAN data makes it less valuable and relevant for analysis.[[189]](#footnote-189) The AEU informed the Committee “by the time you have got that data it is several months later and it is too late.”[[190]](#footnote-190)
  2. The Committee heard mixed reports in relation to timeliness and NAPLAN moving online. ACTPA noted that even NAPLAN Online results were not immediately available, lowering their usefulness.[[191]](#footnote-191) Whilst the AISACT told the Committee:

In terms of reporting speed, digital is going to get the data back to you in a very timely manner. The sooner the data comes back, the sooner you can action it. With paper there are months in between—too long.[[192]](#footnote-192)

###### Committee Comment

* 1. The Committee understands that there are ongoing concerns about the timeliness of NAPLAN data being provided to schools, teachers and parents. The Committee agrees that a faster turnaround of results would provide benefits to all stakeholders.

##### NAPLAN Online

* 1. NAPLAN is moving from a paper test to an online test over a two-to-three year period, this transition commenced in 2018. The online tests claim to enable testing to be tailored to a student’s skills and performance and facilitate faster access to results.[[193]](#footnote-193) The ACARA[[194]](#footnote-194) website states:

NAPLAN Online uses a tailored test or adaptive design, where the test automatically adapts to a student's performance and asks questions that match the student achievement level, allowing the student to demonstrate their knowledge. This provides teachers and schools with more targeted and detailed information on students’ performance on the tests. Tailored testing also provides an opportunity to broaden the scope of the assessments.[[195]](#footnote-195)

* 1. There are suggestions that the online platform will improve student engagement with the tests. ACARA advises on its website that ‘ACARA research into online assessment has shown that students have engaged well with electronic tests.’[[196]](#footnote-196)
  2. The Minister advised that:

Advances in technology, including those demonstrated by the recent implementation of NAPLAN Online in the ACT, offer opportunities, including the technical platforms, to administer standardised tests more effectively, more cheaply and with less negative impact on students. The benefits of these advances are likely to include much faster feedback for students, teachers and families on student progress and consequently, much more useful information at the classroom level that a teacher can use to adjust their teaching to meet the needs of their students.[[197]](#footnote-197)

* 1. The Committee also received a range of evidence discussing the benefits of the recently introduced NAPLAN online. The AISACT informed the Committee that the NAPLAN Online adaptive capacity may provide ‘enhanced diagnostic granularity’ in addition to the new platform for accessing the data.[[198]](#footnote-198) It stated:

The AISACT view is that NAPLAN Online testing provides an opportunity for ‘just in time’ feedback that has value in informing school and student programming, when triangulated with other assessment data. [[199]](#footnote-199)

* 1. One submission noted that use of a computer for the test should be standard.[[200]](#footnote-200)
  2. The Committee also received some student feedback regarding NAPLAN online via the AISACT’s survey of Daramalan College student survey on their NAPLAN 2018 experience. The majority of both Year 7 and Year 9 students completing the survey found the online test ‘a good way to do a test.’[[201]](#footnote-201)

###### Committee Comment

* 1. The Committee notes the significant amount of evidence received that suggests moving to an online platform will provide benefits to students, parents and teachers. The Committee is also conscious that an online platform may allow for increased options regarding the use of formative assessment.

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| Recommendation 14   * 1. 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. |

### Publication and Reporting of NAPLAN Data on the My School Website

* 1. The Committee was advised that when My Schools data is used to publish rankings of school performance, perceptions are skewed. The Minister noted:

A major contributor to the ‘high-stakes’ interpretation of some standardised testing, including NAPLAN, is a consequence of poorly informed reporting, leading to information inconsistencies being created in the parent and in public perceptions of certain schools and then to a market schools which is not truly reflective of their intrinsic value.[[202]](#footnote-202)

* 1. ACTPA[[203]](#footnote-203) supported the Minister’s view and advised that the accessibility of NAPLAN data on My School has resulted in the publication of league tables, creating competition and ‘simplistic, inaccurate and often unfair judgements.’[[204]](#footnote-204) They stated that the protections put in place to prevent league tables have not been successful and the competitive focus is contrary to the ACT Education Directorate’s current emphasis on personalised learning. [[205]](#footnote-205) This evidence was reflected in a number testimony heard by the Committee. [[206]](#footnote-206)
  2. AISACT also advised that:

Representation of data on the My School website encourages a comparative and competitive narrative which activates the opposite of what NAPLAN was designed for in the first place; that being its diagnostic capabilities.[[207]](#footnote-207)

* 1. The AEU, in its member survey on NAPLAN and My Schools, found little support for the My School website.[[208]](#footnote-208) 92 percent of educators who completed the survey do not find the My School website useful as a teacher.[[209]](#footnote-209) Further, 91 percent of responses agreed that protections against the creation of school league tables since the introduction of the My School website have been unsuccessful,[[210]](#footnote-210) and 73 percent of respondents to the survey agreed that NAPLAN results are being used for purposes beyond NAPLAN’s original intention.[[211]](#footnote-211) 82 percent say test data should not be publicly available on not on the My School website,, with 85 percent supporting a notion that it would be more appropriate for NAPLAN data to be available only to the student, their family and staff at the school rather than on My School. [[212]](#footnote-212)
  2. The Committee also heard that league tables can be misleading:

A school may actually be doing remarkably well with the students they have. If you have students from a low socio-economic background, you are really starting further back. For a school that might appear not to have done so well in year 3, for instance, considering where the students came from, and the level that they were at when they began, the school may have done exceptionally well. But that is masked if you just rank that school compared to other schools. You need to be able to understand a lot more than those raw figures will indicate. That is where you need to be able to interpret the data a little more carefully. [[213]](#footnote-213)

* 1. Equity issues were also raised in relation to the way the My School website presents ACT results compared to statistically similar school groups. The Education Directorate tabled a document showing raw comparison data from the website. The Directorate suggests that Lyneham High results are compared to 51 other schools, with 88 percent of those being non-government schools, and three that are selective entry high schools. Alfred Deakin High School is compared to 52 other schools, where 73 percent are non-government and 5 are selective entry schools. Telopea Park High School is compared to 10 other schools, with 90 percent being non-government schools. In this instance the Directorate suggests that 7 of those schools have annual fees in excess of $10,000.[[214]](#footnote-214)
  2. The Minister told the Committee that concerns about the reporting of NAPLAN results are felt nationally and that the ACT strongly supports the review underway:

Although different interstate ministers have different views on this issue, we all agree that a review into reporting principles is required, and that is happening now. It is important to separate the issues of testing and reporting, and that is what I have attempted to do in shaping the national review.

Nobody is saying that they are anti tests. Teachers test and assess their students all the time, every day, and they do so in line with where their children sit. Even a nationalised standardised test, done properly, can be okay if it is actually an enabling framework: something which empowers students, teachers and schools more than it stresses them out, which it clearly is. This is exactly the opportunity that an online and a more formative model brings us.

My argument is that the problem is with the current reporting regime, that NAPLAN reporting, as it plays out on My School and in the media, has lost touch with its own guiding principles. It is important to understand what those principles are.[[215]](#footnote-215)

#### Education Council review of NAPLAN data presentation

* 1. Education Council is a Council of Australian Governments (COAG) Ministerial Council. The Council:

… provides a forum through which strategic policy on school education and early childhood development can be coordinated at the national level, and through which, information can be shared and resources used collaboratively towards the achievement of agreed objectives and priorities.[[216]](#footnote-216)

* 1. Education Council agreed in June 2018 to an independent review of NAPLAN data presentation including information published on the My School website, following requests by a number of state and territory ministers. The ACT Government initiated this process and has carriage of the national review.[[217]](#footnote-217)
  2. The review considered the current presentation of data in the context of the principles and protocols for reporting on schooling established in 2009:
* Principle 1: Reporting should be in the broad public interest.
* Principle 2: Reporting on the outcomes of schooling should use data that is valid, reliable and contextualised.
* Principle 3: Reporting should be sufficiently comprehensive to enable proper interpretation and understanding of the information.
* Principle 4: Reporting should involve balancing the community’s right to know with the need to avoid the misinterpretation or misuse of the information.[[218]](#footnote-218)
  1. The review, due to report to the Education Council in December 2018 will also consider:
* The extent to which current presentation of data to schools and their communities supports their understanding of student progress and achievement.
* Perceptions of NAPLAN reporting and My School data and the extent to which they meet reasonable public accountability and transparency expectations and requirements, including considering any misinterpretation and misuse of information and subsequent consequences.
* How teachers and school leaders use NAPLAN and its results and My School data to inform teaching practice.
* How teachers and school leaders communicate NAPLAN results and My School data to students and parents.
* International best practice for teacher, school and system level transparency and accountability.[[219]](#footnote-219)

###### Committee comment

* 1. The Committee acknowledges that parents should have access to all relevant information about a school and its academic achievements. The Committee notes that further consideration could be given to how NAPLAN results are made available and whether publication on the My School website is an appropriate repository of such information.[[220]](#footnote-220)
  2. The Committee also notes that it has not yet seen the report which was scheduled for completion in December 2018. The Committee supports the review of NAPLAN data presentation including consideration of the information published on the My School website.

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| Recommendation 15   * 1. 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. |

### Comprehensive review

* 1. The Committee heard evidence that a comprehensive review into national standardised testing including NAPLAN was needed. The AEU told the Committee “NAPLAN must be subjected to a comprehensive national review.”[[221]](#footnote-221) The Committee also notes the AEU survey results show 92 percent of respondents were in favour of a comprehensive review.[[222]](#footnote-222) The Committee notes that a significant number of people skipped this question which may influence this result, and also notes the range of viewpoints received by teachers in the comments section of the survey which suggests there is not a homogenous view.
  2. One comment to the question stated:

Is NAPLAN perfect...I don't know, but I'd rather see a solution offered rather than just a biased bashing that doesn't seem to be leading much of anywhere except for the hint of a 'comprehensive review' of NAPLAN that could come out of this. I hope my blunt words don't come across as [too] annoyed - I'm just writing this on a lunch break between planning lessons and marking assessments and hoping to make the world a better place [before I work out when my Year 5 NAPLAN online training is] so there's, sadly, no time to edit this.[[223]](#footnote-223)

* 1. Another respondent wrote:

After 10 years of NAPLAN testing, it is probably time for a national review of it's effectiveness. That said, I think there are big benefits for students, their families and schools. I think the My School website is a useful resource for those working in education, but it's usefulness as a public resource is debatable.[[224]](#footnote-224)

* 1. Conversely, one respondent wrote:

A comprehensive review of NAPLAN is bound to be expensive. Spending money on a review actually reduces money that could be spent on students at schools, particularly government schools.[[225]](#footnote-225)

* 1. The ACTCPCA told the Committee:

Generally, parents express a lot of support for standardised testing and independent testing. We want to understand how well our students are performing, what they are achieving and what the learning gain is. Whether NAPLAN, as a tool for that, is the best tool, we have a lot of questions about. Generally speaking, our members would like that to be reviewed.

We did a recent poll in our meeting, asking parents for their thoughts and feelings on those things. The response essentially was that two-thirds of parents would like it reviewed and one-third of parents would actually like NAPLAN gone. This was all the P&C representatives in our general meeting.[[226]](#footnote-226)

* 1. Professor Macintosh told the Committee that due to the ACT performance, any review must also consider the methods of teaching being employed in schools:

Either we are systematically underperforming in our schools—that is, our students are not learning as well as students are in other jurisdictions—or we have a systemic problem with NAPLAN. NAPLAN is not comparing apples with apples; it is comparing apples with oranges or some other fruit.

…

I am imploring you as our politicians to conduct a thorough investigation to find out what is causing this. We have no answers because we do not know what is going on in our schools. There is no good data, for example, on what teaching methods we are employing in our schools. We do not know. That is number one.[[227]](#footnote-227)

###### Committee Comment

* 1. The Committee acknowledges the wide range of views relating to a comprehensive review being undertaken. The Committee recognises the importance of stakeholders, including parents, having access to relevant information about a school and its academic achievements and notes that changes made as a consequence to the review of NAPLAN reporting may alleviate many of the concerns currently held. The Committee agrees that there is value in comprehensively reviewing NAPLAN.

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| Recommendation 16   * 1. 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. |
| Recommendation 17   * 1. 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. |

### Senate reports

* 1. The Committee considered the two Senate inquiries regarding NAPLAN to understand if the issues raised in this Inquiry were consistent with national messages.

#### 2010 Senate Inquiry

* 1. In 2010, the Senate Standing Committee on Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (the 2010 Senate Committee) conducted an inquiry into the administration and reporting of NAPLAN testing (the 2010 Senate Inquiry).[[228]](#footnote-228)
  2. The purpose of the 2010 Senate Inquiry was to appraise evidence about the conflicting claims made by the Government, educational experts and peak bodies in relation to the publication of NAPLAN testing and the implementation of possible safeguards and protocols around the public presentation of the testing and reporting data. The Inquiry further examined the impact of the NAPLAN assessment and reporting regime on students, parents, principals, and teaching practice.[[229]](#footnote-229)
  3. The 2010 Senate Committee majority concluded that:
* NAPLAN is an important foundation for measuring the performance of students but needs to be strengthened as follows:
* It needs to provide a more accurate and detailed picture for all students, particularly those not meeting performance standards;
* Test developers need to consider ways in which to reduce the margin of error;
* To provide an even better understanding of student progress trajectories year on year, the national testing should be conducted every year.[[230]](#footnote-230)
* There is substantial and justified lack of confidence in the My School website among the parent, teacher and wider community. The website must include information on the value added by schools to student performance, taking into consideration background and extrinsic factors in a much more reliable fashion than is currently being achieved by the use of ICSEA values as a basis for comparison.[[231]](#footnote-231)
  1. The Committee majority made 12 recommendations relating to the publication and representation of test result data, measures to guarantee the integrity and security of the testing process, arrangements for students with a disability, and provision for students with non-English background, provisions for higher and lower student achievers. [[232]](#footnote-232)
  2. In August 2011, the Australian Government tabled its response noting that work has been already progressed in a range of areas related to recommendations, including to the My School website.[[233]](#footnote-233) The response also noted that it had consulted with ACARA and with state and territory authorities in preparation of the response.[[234]](#footnote-234)

#### 2014 Senate Inquiry

* 1. In the 44th Parliament, the Senate Standing Committee on Education and Employment Committee (the 2014 Senate Committee) conducted an inquiry into the effectiveness of the National Assessment Program - Literacy and Numeracy (the 2014 Senate Inquiry).[[235]](#footnote-235)
  2. The purpose of the 2014 Senate Inquiry was to assess if NAPLAN was achieving its stated objectives and to explore any unintended consequences of NAPLAN introduction. The Inquiry also examined the impact of the NAPLAN assessment and reporting regime on teaching and learning practices, as well as potential improvements of the program assessing the best international practice for standardised testing.[[236]](#footnote-236)
  3. The 2014 Senate Committee concluded that:
* The current administration of NAPLAN is not as effective a diagnostic test as it could be, noting that the introduction of NAPLAN Online should allow for much improved turnaround in the results which will aid effectiveness.[[237]](#footnote-237)
* The overarching objectives of NAPLAN are not clear on an operational level and that educational authorities need to be cognisant in providing support to schools as part of the NAPLAN process.[[238]](#footnote-238)
* Due to evidence about student anxiety and standardised testing disadvantages for students with various diverse needs (including those with a disability and non-English background), national testing should be based on samples of schools and students, or use adaptive testing introduced through NAPLAN Online to test better abilities and progress of the individual students.[[239]](#footnote-239)
* The My School website provides a significant value to students, parents, teachers, schools, educational authorities, the wider community and governments, but cannot provide a true comparison between schools due to the number of variables involved in the testing process. [[240]](#footnote-240) For this reason, the Committee suggested the removal of core ranking and comparative functionalities to avoid the creation of league tables.
* NAPLAN results appear to be consistent with international standards. However, the Committee acknowledged OECD data highlights a number of areas where Australia’s overall performance is declining or is below OECD average.[[241]](#footnote-241)
  1. The 2014 Senate Committee majority made 4 recommendations, they included references to:
* Developing NAPLAN Online to provide timely results,
* ensuring that there are achievable and measurable targets built into the online test,
* designing adaptive testing for students with disability and for students with non-English background, and
* provisions for ACARA to closely monitor the use of NAPLAN results to ensure results are published in a way that assist the Government to deliver extra, targeted funding to schools and students who need more support. [[242]](#footnote-242)
  1. The Australian Government tabled its response in June 2014.[[243]](#footnote-243)The Government agreed in-principle with the recommendation relating to the design of NAPLAN Online stating that ‘a key element of the rationale for delivering NAPAN online testing is that it will be a significant reduction in the time to provide feedback to schools, students and parents.’[[244]](#footnote-244)
  2. Recommendations on adaptive testing for students with disability and non-English background were agreed.[[245]](#footnote-245)
  3. The response noted the recommendation made regarding publishing of results, highlighting that ‘a key purpose of NAPLAN is to provide information for all Australian governments to underpin school improvement and target funding where it is most needed in Australian schools.’[[246]](#footnote-246) It was further noted that My Schoolwebsite

… allows users to compare schools with statistically similar groups of students, providing contextual information to support fairer and more meaningful comparisons. If the performance information is separated from the contextual information, meaning and fairness are diminished.[[247]](#footnote-247)

###### Committee comment

* 1. The Committee notes that the concerns identified by the inquiries above, remain largely unresolved in respect of publishing and the call for sampling.

### Alternative Approaches to the Current Design of NAPLAN

#### Sampling rather than full cohort

* 1. The Committee heard varied evidence calling for the use of sampling for NAPLAN testing rather than full student cohorts.
  2. Comments from educators responding to the AEU survey included the following:

We should move away from standardised testing of all students. We should do a random sample like what occurs in PISA testing. Standardised testing doesn't reflect what happens in our classrooms.[[248]](#footnote-248)

* 1. The Committee notes the Australian Government Schools Primary Principals Association (AGPPA) also supports ‘national sample testing of students on a cyclical basis’ which removes the problems caused by the creation and publication of league tables using data from the My School website.[[249]](#footnote-249)
  2. In contrast, a different survey response noted that sampling would not be useful to individual teachers,[[250]](#footnote-250) and the AISACT also cautioned against sampling saying that whole cohort data is needed to see trends within the classroom.[[251]](#footnote-251)
  3. In their submission ACTPA supported a sampling approach in order to provide a system of accountability without the pitfalls of league table creation. Thy advised 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.[[252]](#footnote-252)

* 1. However, when they appeared before the Committee, the value of cohort data was recognised:

Certainly at every school I have ever worked at, the cohort data, the historical data year by year tells an interesting story. It is certainly something that as schools we take on board when we are making our five-year plans or we are looking at our annual action plans. Some of that data is drawn across in areas that we can target, particularly if you have not gone so well in a certain area for a particular cohort.[[253]](#footnote-253)

* 1. The Committee also notes that as highlighted in the previous section of this report, the 2014 Senate Committee on Education and Employment made recommendations in favour of a sampling approach.

###### Committee Comment

* 1. The Committee agrees that sampling may be appropriate for consideration in any review undertaken. A system of sampling tests may increase efficiency and effectively provide data about system level performance. Sampling tests could minimise the disruption, likelihood of practice testing occurring and costs associated with the testing of whole cohorts, as currently occurs.

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| Recommendation 18   * 1. 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. |

#### Measuring student learning growth

* 1. The Committee was advised that whilst standardised testing should remain as one of the evaluation tools for teachers, there should be a greater emphasis on improvement, including formative evaluation, as teaching becomes more productive when assessment is focused on the achievement of individuals.[[254]](#footnote-254)
  2. The ACTPA told the Committee:

The general approach that we have recommended … is to go to looking at learning a bit differently, not comparing yourself necessarily to the person next to you but comparing yourself to what you can do today compared with what you could do yesterday and gearing our assessment processes more effectively to that so that we can acknowledge the successes every child has.[[255]](#footnote-255)

* 1. The Committee also heard from ACTCPCA that:

That is what we are looking for … in terms of a testing tool, to understand that if there is a problem, what is being done to address it? It is about having a more diagnostic approach to make sure that they are meeting the learning goals and that they are actually progressing and not having gaps in their learning. [[256]](#footnote-256)

* 1. The Minister told the Committee:

I think that NAPLAN will evolve. It needs to evolve to become more formative so we have more rich, useful data that can be usefully understood by teachers and students and parents, easily accessible and which tells the real story of a child’s learning journey.[[257]](#footnote-257)

* 1. The Committee acknowledges the Gonski 2.0 report which recommends that new reporting arrangements be developed with a focus on learning attainment and learning gain.[[258]](#footnote-258) This is based on finding 7 of the report which provides ‘there is compelling evidence in Australian schools and internationally that tailored teaching based on ongoing formative assessment and feedback are the key to enabling students to progress to higher levels of achievement.’ [[259]](#footnote-259)

#### On-Demand assessment tools

* 1. The Minister noted that the future of NAPLAN may be influenced by calls for ‘an online, on-demand formative assessment tool based on the Australian Curriculum’ as raised by the *Review to Achieve Educational Excellence in Australian Schools* [Gonski 2.0]*.*[[260]](#footnote-260)
  2. ACTPA supports the development of an on-demand formative assessment tool, stating:

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.[[261]](#footnote-261)

* 1. One submission advised that the ‘diagnostic usefulness’ of NAPLAN could be improved substantially if it contributes to formative assessment that supports teachers to track student achievement. The submission notes:

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.[[262]](#footnote-262)

###### Committee Comment

* 1. The Committee agrees that formative assessment is central to overall student growth, and that measuring growth is an important aim of assessment. The Committee believes that the relationship between NAPLAN and formative assessment should be further explored as the value of knowing that students are meeting national benchmarks is also a priority.

## Other standardised tests and assessment

### Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA)

* 1. The Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) is a two-hour cognitive assessment[[263]](#footnote-263) that tests the skills and knowledge of 15-year-old students in mathematics, reading and science. PISA assesses the application of skills, such as collaborative problem solving,[[264]](#footnote-264) to real-life problems rather than being curriculum-based (like TIMSS).[[265]](#footnote-265)
  2. PISA uses questionnaires to collect information on students’ family background, attitudes and motivations and engagement towards learning. Principals and sampled teachers also complete questionnaires about their schools’ resourcing, school environment and staff qualifications, training and teaching practices. [[266]](#footnote-266)
  3. Commencing in 2000 and directed by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), PISA has been conducted every three years with a different domain being the primary focus of each assessment cycle. The 2015 assessment focused on scientific literacy. [[267]](#footnote-267) In addition to the core literacy domains of mathematics, reading and science, PISA assesses extra domains in each cycle. In 2015, ‘collaborative problem solving and financial literacy’ were also assessed.[[268]](#footnote-268)
  4. PISA is included in the National Assessment Program (NAP).

#### Sampling

* 1. PISA sampling for Australia used a ‘two-stage stratified cluster design.’ At least 150 schools were selected in most countries (where that number existed) and 42 students were randomly selected within each school. [[269]](#footnote-269)
  2. In 2015, 758 Australian schools and a total of 14,530 students participated, which included sampling every student from a participating school, within the age range, who identified as Indigenous.[[270]](#footnote-270)ACER advises that:

Australia took a larger sample than the one required by PISA in order to oversample smaller jurisdictions and Indigenous students to ensure that reliable estimates could be inferred for those populations.[[271]](#footnote-271)

#### Participation

* 1. In the ACT, 42 schools participated in the 2015 assessment. The table below shows the number of ACT students participating in previous PISA assessment rounds and the proportion of those students that were attending ACT public schools.

#### Performance

* 1. The Committee considered the ACT’s PISA performance in 2015, and also an overview of the ACT’s performance over the six PISA cycles since 2000. [[272]](#footnote-272)
  2. The Committee was pleased to note that in 2015 the ACT had the highest proportion of high performers across Australian jurisdictions in scientific literacy.[[273]](#footnote-273) In regards to reading literacy, the ACT had a significant decline in performance between 2000 and 2009. Changes in performance from 2009 to 2015 were not significant.[[274]](#footnote-274) A similar decline was also seen in respect of mathematical literacy. Between 2003 and 2012 the average mathematical literacy scores declined significantly in the ACT.
  3. The Committee notes that in all domains the ACT performed at a significantly higher level than the OECD average. [[275]](#footnote-275)
  4. The tables below present an overview of the ACT’s performance in each of the three core domains, over the years of PISA testing (2000-2015), including comparisons to the Australian mean, the OECD mean, and the Australian metropolitan mean. The decline in performance in PISA testing is evident across at three domains, although remains above comparison results.
  5. The ACT PISA performance data did not appear to be available by reference to socioeconomic status. The table below shows Australia’s mean scores in mathematical literacy by socioeconomic status compared to the ACT mean score overall. It seems to indicate that the ACT mean score was below the highest quartile for the last three years.

#### Discussion

##### Performance decline

* 1. The Committee was advised that Australia’s mean scores in PISA have been consistently declining since the introduction of NAPLAN.[[276]](#footnote-276) One possible explanation is that this may have occurred in part because of a narrowing of the curriculum by a focus on NAPLAN.[[277]](#footnote-277) The Committee notes that is did not receive a significant amount of evidence in respect of this claim, and is unable to make a finding in relation to the relationship between NAPLAN and declining performance in PIMS.

##### Data usage

* 1. Primarily, PISA data is used for comparisons across OECD countries. ACER also presents Australia’s results in an international context, and provides comparisons across Australian jurisdictions.[[278]](#footnote-278)
  2. Schools participating in PISA and TIMSS are provided with a school report so that participating schools are able to analyse their own results. A 2006 report commissioned by the then Ministerial Council on Education states:

Participating schools and students receive their own results compared with the overall results for Australia and these can be used by the school for evaluative purposes. Students and schools also receive a certificate in appreciation of their participation.[[279]](#footnote-279)

* 1. The Committee was advised by the Association of Independent Schools of the ACT (AISACT) that

…the random ‘cohort selection’ process limits this assessment’s value regarding school and student growth. Its value lies predominately in offering comparative data at an international level and offers little to the classroom teacher and school planning.[[280]](#footnote-280)

* 1. Similar comments were provided by ACTPA, advising that PISA and TIMSS data has little value to classroom teaching due to the level of aggregation of the data reported. However, ACTPA advised that PISA and TIMSS have value assessing achievement at a broader system-level.[[281]](#footnote-281) It also provides an objective measure of education performance for participating countries.
  2. ACTPA noted that the test employs ‘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.’[[282]](#footnote-282)
  3. However, ACTPA also warned that results need to be interpreted with care as with any standardised tests. ACTPA pointed to the concerns with standardised assessment raised in a 2014 paper by Simon Breakspear.[[283]](#footnote-283) That paper highlights:

[H]ow we choose to measure educational system progress will define and shape what policy makers and the public come to understand to be educationally valuable.[[284]](#footnote-284)

…

If the educational narrative is dominated by the performance of 15 year olds in PISA, other important educational goals such as social and emotional development, interpersonal and intrapersonal skills, civics, health and wellbeing, will be held at the margins of the debate. [[285]](#footnote-285)

* 1. Breakspear notes that the limits of PISA as a tool for policy action need to be explicitly stated by the OECD ‘as a narrow metric devoid of cultural or contextual insights.’[[286]](#footnote-286) He highlights the opportunities to harness country-specific policy work undertaken by other division of the OECD Directorate of Education and Skills and the OECD’s potential ‘to lead national government into a rich discussion’ around broad 21 century capabilities.[[287]](#footnote-287) This is similar to findings made in the Gonski 2.0 report which identified the need for the Australian curriculum and assessment to change to meet the educational needs of students in the 21st century.[[288]](#footnote-288)

### Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS)

* 1. The International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA) directs the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS), an ‘international comparative study of student achievement’ assessing Year 4 and Year 8 students’ knowledge and understanding of mathematics and science.[[289]](#footnote-289)
  2. TIMSS was first conducted in 1995, and reports every four years. Australia has participated in all six cycles,[[290]](#footnote-290) and is TIMSS is included in the NAP.
  3. In Australia, the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER) manages TIMSS. ACER is jointly funded by the Australian Government and the state and territory governments’[[291]](#footnote-291) proportional to the size of their student populations. ACER advises that:

TIMSS is designed, broadly, to align with the mathematics and science curricula used in the participating education systems and countries.[[292]](#footnote-292)

* 1. In addition to the tests, students complete questionnaires to provided data on their background and experiences in learning mathematics and science at school. Questionnaires are also completed by school principals and the students' mathematics and science teachers.[[293]](#footnote-293) These provide contextual information on the education systems school organisational approaches and instructional practices. [[294]](#footnote-294)

#### Sampling

* 1. Like PISA, the sample used in TIMSS 2015 was a two-stage stratified cluster design. ACER advises:

The first stage consisted of a sampling of schools, and the second stage of a sampling of intact classrooms from the target year level in the sampled schools. [[295]](#footnote-295)

* 1. ACER’s report on Australia’s results for TIMSS 2015 notes in relation to class sampling:

The usual process was for each school to have only one mathematics classroom sampled. However, in cases where the classes were small (such as composite classes), at least two classes were sampled in order to allow the total number of students more closely to approximate the average class size. Where schools used streaming or tracking to allocate students to classes, two classes were sampled in order to balance out the academic abilities of selected students. In addition, in Australia, any student in the target year that identified as Indigenous was selected to participate in TIMSS 2015.[[296]](#footnote-296)

* 1. At the State and Territory level schools were oversampled to ensure reliable estimates for smaller jurisdictions.[[297]](#footnote-297)

#### Participation

* 1. For TIMSS 2015, 287 primary and 285 secondary schools in Australia participated in the data collection. [[298]](#footnote-298) In the ACT, around 30 schools participated in TIMSS in 2011 and 2017. In the 2003 and 2007 TIMSS assessments 15 ACT schools participated. The graph below shows the number of ACT Year 4 and Year 8 students participating in each TIMSS cycle since 1995.

#### Performance

* 1. The ACT has shown variable performance in Year 4 and Year 8 over the five occasions TIMSS has been conducted.

#### Discussion

* 1. As with PISA, the AISACT advised that TIMSS random sampling process limits the value of the assessment at the classroom and school level.[[299]](#footnote-299) ACTPA also advised that its’ commentary and concerns around PISA apply equally to TIMSS.[[300]](#footnote-300)

### Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS)

* 1. Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) is an international test measuring reading literacy in Year 4 students. It has been conducted every five years since 2001, with Australia participating in the last two cycles (2011 and 2016). [[301]](#footnote-301)
  2. PIRLS is directed by the IEA, and ACER implements PIRLS in Australia as part of the NAP. [[302]](#footnote-302)
  3. The PIRLS assessment considers two areas of reading literacy. Firstly, it considers the two purposes for reading that Year 4 students engage in: ‘reading for literary experience and reading to acquire and use information.’[[303]](#footnote-303) Secondly, PIRLS assesses four processes of comprehension used by young readers:
* focusing on and retrieving explicitly stated information,
* making straightforward inferences,
* interpreting and integrating ideas and information, and
* evaluating and critiquing content and textual elements.[[304]](#footnote-304)
  1. Like TIMSS, PIRLS is conducted as a sample survey. The basic sample design is:

‘a two-stage stratified cluster sample design.’ The first stage consists of a sample of schools and the second stage consists of the identification of a single classroom selected at random from the target year level in sampled schools. [[305]](#footnote-305)

* 1. PIRLS participants are allowed 40 minutes to complete each part of the test with a required break in between the two sections. Students are also provided 30 minutes after the administration of the assessment components to complete the student questionnaire with extra time provided as needed. [[306]](#footnote-306)

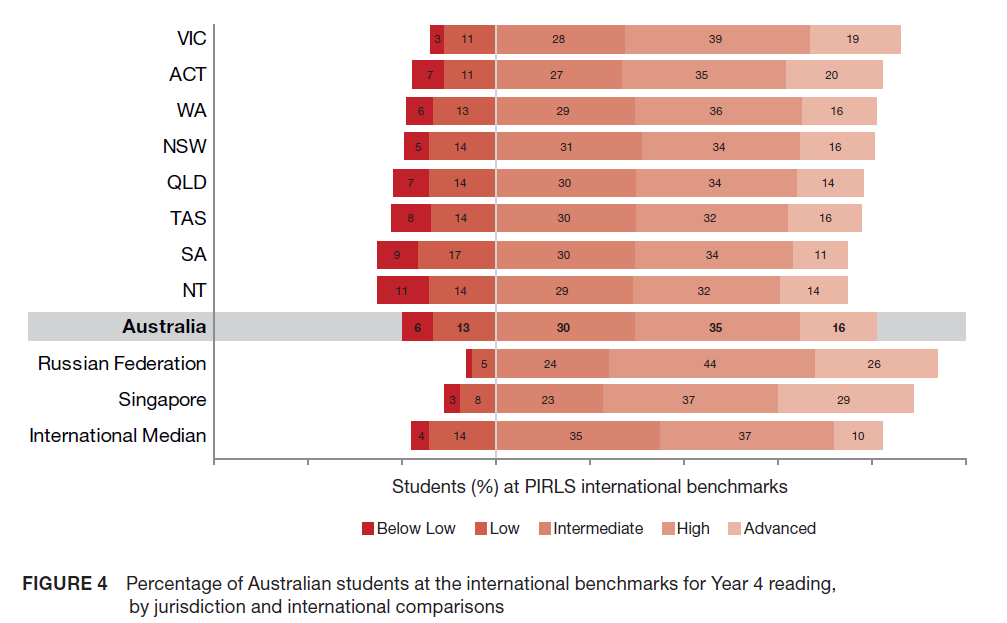
#### Participation

* 1. In 2016, 6341 Australian Year 4 students participated in PIRLS,[[307]](#footnote-307) selected from 286 primary schools. The sample consisted of ‘at least one intact Year 4 class, along with all Indigenous students in that year level, from each school...’ in order to provide a representative student population.[[308]](#footnote-308)
  2. In the ACT, 30 schools (equating to 617 students) participated in the 2016 PIRLS assessment. In 2011, 609 ACT students participated.[[309]](#footnote-309)

#### ACT Performance

* 1. The following table shows the ACT’s mean PIRLS results for 2011 and 2016, in comparison to NSW, Victoria and Australia.[[310]](#footnote-310) The ACT’s average reading result dropped from 2011 to 2016 by 6 points.[[311]](#footnote-311)
  2. PIRLS performance is measured at four levels (2016):
* the ‘Advanced international benchmark’, which was set at 625
* the ‘High international benchmark’, which was set at 550
* the ‘Intermediate international benchmark’, which was set at 475
* the ‘Low international benchmark’, which was set at 400.[[312]](#footnote-312)
  1. The figure below provides a jurisdictional break down of students at each of the 2016 international benchmarks for Year 4 as well as comparison to the percentages for Australia as a whole, Singapore, the Russian Federation and the International median.[[313]](#footnote-313)

Australian student performance at the PIRLS benchmarks across the jurisdictions[[314]](#footnote-314)



* 1. This shows that the ACT has both a higher rate of below low performance (with 7 percent), and advanced performance (20 percent) than the International median, which is 4 percent for below low, and 10 percent for advanced.
  2. The Committee notes that this may represent the equity divide that the Directorate referenced, and has informed the Future of Education Strategy. [[315]](#footnote-315)

### Performance Indicators in Primary Schools (PIPS)

#### Overview

* 1. Performance Indicators in Primary Schools (PIPS) is an on-entry baseline assessment program, administered by the University of Western Australia (UWA), designed for use in students’ first year of school. It assesses early reading, phonics and numeracy skills across two assessments: the first in the early weeks of Term 1 and the second in the early weeks of Term 4 to measure progress.[[316]](#footnote-316)
  2. All public schools in the ACT are required to assess kindergarten students using PIPS at the beginning and end of each year. [[317]](#footnote-317)
  3. PIPS is an online test conducted on a one-on-one basis with the classroom teacher. The results can be used to inform teaching relevant to the needs of individual children. [[318]](#footnote-318) The ACT Education Directorate website advises:

The PIPS data is used to identify, as early as possible, students who may need extra support or enrichment. The PIPS data helps teachers plan appropriate learning experiences for every child in the class.[[319]](#footnote-319)

…

The PIPS assessment is different from other assessments as the focus is not solely on what the student knows and can answer correctly, but how the student goes about determining the answers. Teachers can gain valuable insight through the one-to-one administration of the assessment. [[320]](#footnote-320)

PIPS gives an indication of individual student needs in early literacy and numeracy development. The assessment predicts future performance and assists teachers to identify students who might benefit from early intervention or extension programs. The final assessment provides information on how well students have progressed during the year relative to their starting point. Schools use this data to monitor and revise their teaching programs in the next year of schooling.

PIPS is conducted in a supportive environment, and is an integral part of the teaching and learning cycle... [[321]](#footnote-321)

##### Reporting on PIPS

* 1. The UWA website advises how PIPS assessment results are received and utilised:

Schools will receive whole school, class and individual student data to be used by teachers to inform their teaching program to assist in:

* the identification of students requiring more intensive intervention
* facilitating home-school partnerships
* setting goals for individual students.

An individual PIPS report for each student will be printed and distributed to schools by the Education Directorate.

The individual student results must be kept confidential at all times and securely filed and may not be reported in any form other than to parents and carers.[[322]](#footnote-322)

* 1. The Education Directorate further advises on its website that:

… The PIPS results are part of the wide range of assessment information collected by teachers. Individual student reports based on PIPS results are provided to parents during term two and term four. Parents and carers are encouraged to discuss their child's progress with teachers, establishing a partnership that supports their child's future learning.[[323]](#footnote-323)

* 1. The PIPS reports provided to parents outline the nature of the testing, placement of a child’s scores for reading and numeracy within the bands 1-5 [indicating whether they are below, at or above expected standard] and noting the percentage of ACT children in each band. [[324]](#footnote-324)
  2. All schools are offered access to AusPIPS, a secure website for viewing and downloading feedback online,[[325]](#footnote-325) although PIPS data and results are not publicly available.

#### Participation

* 1. In the ACT, an information brochure is sent out to schools for distribution to parents of all kindergarten students. UWA advises:

Parents who do not wish their children to participate in the assessment program have the option to withdraw them following discussions with the school principal.[[326]](#footnote-326)

* 1. The Committee did not hear any evidence to suggest that participation rates were a concern for the Education Directorate.

##### Cost of PIPS

* 1. UWA charges a school fee and a student fee as follows:

The school fee is $304.44 + GST = $334.88, which covers all 2019 PIPS Materials and services.

The student fee is $8.06 + GST = $8.87, which includes the Baseline and Final assessments and covers data analysis.[[327]](#footnote-327)

##### PIPS usage

* 1. PIPS is used in a number of countries including:
* Australia,
* England,
* Netherlands,
* Scotland, and
* New Zealand.
  1. UWA advises that, ‘in England, PIPS is the most widely used on-entry assessment.’[[328]](#footnote-328) This has also provided the opportunity for international comparative analysis.

#### Key issues

* 1. Evidence to the Committee around the PIPS assessment was generally positive.

##### Student wellbeing

* 1. ACTPA advised that ‘teachers appreciate the one-on-one teacher to student interaction that occurs in the administration of PIPS,’ [[329]](#footnote-329) and that the assessment is also a positive experience for the students as the one-on-one assessment process is often considered by students as a special time with their teacher.[[330]](#footnote-330)
  2. The Committee was advised by ACTPA that ‘[t]he time and effort involved in administering PIPs is commensurate with the value of the data.’[[331]](#footnote-331)
  3. The Committee notes that there does not appear to be any sort of preparation for the PIPS assessment. Nor was any evidence received that suggested students, teachers or parents experience stress or anxiety around the time of the assessment.

##### PIPS Data usage

* 1. The Committee was advised by the AISACT that PIPS has value as a diagnostic tool for the classroom teacher and for school planning.[[332]](#footnote-332)
  2. A former teacher also advised the Committee that PIPS ‘provides parents, teachers and schools with rich data whilst not creating stress and anxiety.’[[333]](#footnote-333) The submission noted the analysis of PIPS data, particularly the second assessment, is valuable and integral to the planning for the following year.[[334]](#footnote-334)
  3. The Committee was further advised that PIPS data is not available to external bodies so cannot be misrepresented.[[335]](#footnote-335)
  4. The Committee notes it did not hear evidence of PIPS data being used across schools or networks.

##### PIPS usage in school improvement program

* 1. The Committee was advised that PIPS assessment trends are one of the factors taken into account to identify schools in greater need of support in the early years, especially in literacy, under the ACT’s current school improvement program.[[336]](#footnote-336)
  2. ACTPA advised the Committee that PIPS is well embedded in ACT public schools and is well supported with adequate resourcing by the ACT Education Directorate.[[337]](#footnote-337)

###### Committee Comment

* 1. The Committee notes that PIPS appears to meet the assessment needs identified in Gonski 2.0 as it measures learning gains for individuals through the year.

### A to E Reporting

* 1. Twice-yearly A to E school reporting (or reporting on an equivalent 5 point scale) is required for any student who is in years 1 to 10 under the *Australian Education Regulation 2013 (Cth)*.[[338]](#footnote-338) A to E reporting was introduced in the ACT as an outcome of the *National Agreement Performance Information 2010: National Education Agreement*.
  2. With the introduction of the Australian Curriculum, reporting for ACT public school students was revised to ‘include English, Mathematics, Science and History with reference to the Australian Curriculum Achievement Standard for each year level.’ [[339]](#footnote-339)
  3. Achievement Standards describe what students are typically able to understand and do at each year level.[[340]](#footnote-340) The Australian Curriculum website advises:

The Australian Curriculum provides the content that students will learn but does not provide grades against that content. A to E grades are generally determined by state and territory curriculum and school authorities.[[341]](#footnote-341)

* 1. Reporting for kindergarten students does not use the A to E grade scale. The Directorate advises that ‘parents will receive information about the Kindergarten Achievement Standard attached to their school-based report.’[[342]](#footnote-342)
  2. The Education Directorate ‘*Guide to Reporting Student Achievement in ACT Public Schools*’ states that in addition to the A to E grade scale:

…all ACT school-based reports will continue to provide parents and carers with detailed information on the progress of their child. This will include student strengths, areas for further development, strategies to support and/or extend their learning, social development and student involvement in school programs and activities. Information about the student’s attitude and commitment to learning is also included. [[343]](#footnote-343)

…

Your child’s report will list a grade for each subject studied. The number of A-E grades given to students in each year level will also be included as part of your child’s report.

The following A–E descriptors will appear on the report:

* A demonstrating excellent achievement of what is expected
* B demonstrating a high achievement of what is expected
* C demonstrating satisfactory achievement of what is expected
* D demonstrating partial achievement of what is expected
* E demonstrating limited achievement of what is expected[[344]](#footnote-344)
  1. The Guide further advises:

In ACT public schools the Australian Curriculum Achievement Standard is aligned with a ‘C’ grade. The ‘C’ grade indicates that your child has demonstrated a satisfactory level of knowledge, understanding and skill in relation to the Achievement Standard.[[345]](#footnote-345)

* 1. Another ACT public school guide states:

…a ‘C’ rating indicates that a student is performing at the standard expected of students in that year group.”[[346]](#footnote-346)

* 1. A small number of students are exempt from A-E reporting. [[347]](#footnote-347) Additionally, a small number of students have personal learning plans in place based on an adjusted curriculum designed to meet specific additional learning needs. The A-E report includes an identifier for subjects where a personal learning plan is in place. [[348]](#footnote-348)
  2. Independent schools are also required under legislation to provide A-E reporting against the Australian Curriculum Standards twice yearly.
  3. The AISACT told the Committee ‘we hold the position that reporting student growth would be better.’[[349]](#footnote-349) They provided the example: ‘if a child is consistently working towards standard and is having enormous growth as they are working towards standard, yet with A to E there is a D sitting for English, there is a D sitting for maths, and that is not necessarily engaging.’ [[350]](#footnote-350)

#### Discussion

* 1. A number of concerns with A to E reporting were raised by the ACT Council of Parents and Citizens Association (ACTCPCA). They advised that the new reporting template significantly reduces the level of detailed information on student performance. The Committee was also advised that many parents find these reports meaningless, particularly where reporting language is ambiguous, unnecessarily technical and not in plain English. ACTCPCA advised that whilst A to E reports provide a general overview on how students are performing is some areas, it does not provide information on which aspects students are struggling with or are easily achieving. The A to E grading is also approached differently across schools, with some adopting a bell curve approach and others not. [[351]](#footnote-351)

##### Understanding and application of the A to E labels

* 1. The Committee received a range of evidence suggesting that there is a lack of understanding in the community, including amongst parents, around the A to E labels and what they signify in terms of student achievement.[[352]](#footnote-352)
  2. The AISACT noted that ‘parents/carers, having been shaped by their own educational experiences, can misinterpret reports - eg ‘C’ is not good enough. Therefore, clear communication is key.’[[353]](#footnote-353) They further emphasised that reporting student growth would be a preferred approach and there are challenges doing that within the A to E paradigm. [[354]](#footnote-354)
  3. Another submission noted that parents risk transferring their concerns to their children including negative interpretations of a ‘C’ grade or any apprehensions around an apparent lack of progress. Children may in turn ‘develop an image of themselves as a low achiever’ which may become self-fulfilling.[[355]](#footnote-355)
  4. ACTPA advised that it sees A to E reporting as ‘a negative influence that reinforces what is often describes as the outdated industrial model of schooling.’[[356]](#footnote-356)
  5. The Committee was advised that A to E reporting is particularly problematic for the early years of schooling, predominantly Kindergarten to Year 2, because student development is rarely linear in the early years.[[357]](#footnote-357)

##### Moderation

* 1. The Auditor-General report noted a lack of Education Support Office-driven approach to moderating results across schools. The Office told the Committee:

The information that we had at the time of the audit was that moderation, if it did occur, was not systemic and widespread across the networks. As I recall, I think there might have been some moderation initiatives in place for perhaps one network, for example. But otherwise, on the information we had at the time, it was not widely practised and widely moderated across the schools.[[358]](#footnote-358)

* 1. The Audit highlighted that value of A to E reporting as a mechanism for informing teaching practices and information parents and carers is diminished with the inconsistency in moderation across schools.[[359]](#footnote-359)
  2. The Audit recommended the Education Directorate implement a standards-based moderation process across schools and school networks in order to achieve consistency in A to E grading and reporting.[[360]](#footnote-360) This recommendation was agreed-in-principal and its implementation is in progress. The Education Directorate *Annual Report 2017-18* states:

Teacher professional development in the application of the Australian Curriculum and the achievement standards was strengthened significantly in Term 4, 2017 and Term 1, 2018 with full day curriculum application workshops held for primary and secondary teachers. This robust development program supports consistent judgment through standards-based assessment processes and the assigning of A-E grades.[[361]](#footnote-361)

###### Committee comment

* 1. The Committee agrees that there needs to be greater understanding in relation to grading structures for parents and students to ensure that growth in learning is recognised and celebrated to ensure ongoing engagement with schooling.

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| Recommendation 19   * 1. 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. |

### Alternative Assessment and Reporting

* 1. The Committee was advised by the AISACT that other forms of assessment and reporting to parents and carers include the use of annotated portfolios, online feedback for assessment, student designed and led exhibitions of their project work and student led conferences which ‘provide opportunities for student voice, agency and engagement.’[[362]](#footnote-362)
  2. The AISACT also highlighted that their Member schools found the assessment, sub-types and strategies listed in the *ACT Teachers’ Guide to Assessment* (2016 update) valuable.[[363]](#footnote-363)
  3. One submission called for the re-introduction of descriptive reporting in the early years of schooling (Kindergarten to Year 2), including reporting against achievement or behaviour descriptors.[[364]](#footnote-364) The Committee was advised that descriptors are easier for parents to understand and align with parental perceptions of their child’s progress:

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.[[365]](#footnote-365)

#### Measuring Growth or Learning Gain

* 1. The Committee heard a range of evidence that there would be greater value in reporting student growth or learning gain than mean scores for a cohort group.
  2. ACTPA provided the Committee with a summary of the views expressed by Geoff Masters, Chief Executive to ACER in relation to adopting a growth (or learning progress) mindset around learning, learners, the curriculum, teaching assessment and reporting rather than the traditional ‘industrial’ model of schooling.[[366]](#footnote-366)
  3. The Committee was advised by the ACTCPCA that current public school reporting offers very little to measure or indicate a student’s learning gain over time. The submission noted that the measurement of learning gains demonstrates development of individual students and allows for celebration of individual success and ‘foster an individual growth mindset’ which compares their performance against previous performance rather than comparisons with other students. ACTCPCA believes this approach would be more informative for parents and carers and should be included an addition to the current reporting and grading requirements.[[367]](#footnote-367)
  4. The Committee heard that the AISACT would like to see educational narrative focus on growth in student learning rather than normative referencing.[[368]](#footnote-368)
  5. The Committee also notes the Auditor-General recommended that the Education Directorate change their strategic indicators to include acknowledgement of student growth, not only mean NAPLAN scores, and that this recommendation was agreed in principal. The Government Response states:

There is not yet a nationally agreed measure for system-level reporting of student gain, despite this being the most effective measure of school improvement, and only one of the three current school-level gain measures would be appropriate for national reporting.

The Education Directorate has sought assistance from the Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority to develop additional NAPLAN indicators that will demonstrate growth achieved by students in ACT public schools. These measures are likely to include a longitudinal measure that compares the growth of ACT public students between NAPLAN assessment points, such as between years 3 and 5 and years 7 and 9, compared with the growth achieved by students in other jurisdictions with the same starting scores.[[369]](#footnote-369)

###### Committee Comment

* 1. The Committee agrees that measuring student growth would be helpful for students, parents and teachers. The Committee notes that standardised testing could potentially be designed in a way that achieves this and also provides information on mean scores for comparative analysis purposes.

### Other Testing Options

* 1. The AISACT advised the Committee that its member schools use a range of standardised tests to provide diagnostic data including:
* ACER’s Progressive Achievement Tests (PAT) which is used in most schools as a diagnostic tool that has a prompt turnaround of data: deemed of value when triangulated with other data. [[370]](#footnote-370)
* Allwell Tests as provided by Academic Assessment Services which are used in a number of schools and deemed of value as it looks at potential as well as performance for students. It offers an 80 plus item test, which leads to greater confidence in its diagnostic capacity. Cost has been identified as an obstacle to its wider use. [[371]](#footnote-371)
* The Cognitive Abilities Test is used in some schools and deemed valuable as it assesses students’ reasoning abilities by measuring three separate cognitive domains. It was noted that this test provides a broad perspective on a student, identifying strengths and weaknesses other instruments would miss. [[372]](#footnote-372)
* The International Competitions and Assessments for Schools is used in most schools as diagnostic tool. [[373]](#footnote-373) Run by UNSW the test can be used to measure student growth and reflects changing curriculum. Parents and teachers can access individual information via a website to view growth data.[[374]](#footnote-374)
* The Otis-Lennon School Ability Test is a multiple-choice K-12 assessment that measures reasoning skills with several different types of verbal, non-verbal, figural and quantitative reasoning questions. Schools commonly administer the OLSAT for admissions into gifted and talented programs.[[375]](#footnote-375) The Committee heard it has limited use in the ACT. [[376]](#footnote-376)
* ACER’s General Ability Tests which is a series of tests designed to assist teachers of students aged seven to sixteen years in their assessment of students’ general reasoning ability.[[377]](#footnote-377) The Committee heard it has limited use in the ACT. [[378]](#footnote-378) The Committee also learned there was a middle years test similar in nature and managed by ACER, called MYAT (ACER Middle Years Ability Test) which has limited use in the ACT. [[379]](#footnote-379)
  1. Year 12 specific testing includes the ACT Scaling Test, overseen by the Act Board of Senior Secondary Studies, designed to measure skills necessary for success at university[[380]](#footnote-380) and the International Baccalaureate.[[381]](#footnote-381)
  2. The AISACT also noted that PAT and Allwell tests are commendable in terms of the efficacy of current test materials.[[382]](#footnote-382)
  3. ACTPA advised that PAT tests are purchased at the discretion of individual schools. They advised that other standardised tests are selected where they are fit for purpose as long as the cost and effort of administering the test is commensurate with the value of the data to the school. ACTPA further noted that most schools more regularly use their own school-based formative assessments as they are more useful to inform day-to-day teaching decisions.[[383]](#footnote-383)
  4. The Committee notes the Auditor-General findings in relation to school specific assessments:

Schools reported using a large number (around 38) of school‐specific assessment tools to assess students, together with programs to assist them to improve. The most common tests were the Progressive Achievement Tests (PAT) provided by the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER). Six different PAT tests were used, as well as a total of 32 others. Ninety‐four percent of respondents to the school Principal survey either agreed or strongly agreed with the statement ‘school based assessment data are useful in supporting my school’s decision making.’ There is a high satisfaction rate with school‐specific assessment tools that are within the discretion of schools to use and apply.

School Principals overwhelmingly agreed with the statement ‘school based assessment data are useful in supporting my school’s decision making’, with 47 percent strongly agreeing and 47 percent agreeing with the statement. The survey also identified a widespread use of commercial testing products, with six different PAT tests and 32 others reported as being used by school Principals. Decision‐making associated with the use of commercial testing products resides very much with schools and school Principals, and at present there is very little advice from the Education Support Office on which tools to select for which purpose, which ones are considered to offer the best value for money and how best to employ the tools.[[384]](#footnote-384)

* 1. The Committee was also advised that the ACT takes part in NAP sample assessments ‘which test students’ skills and understanding in science literacy, civics and citizenship and information and communication technology literacy.’ These tests are undertaken by a representative sample. The ACT over samples to ensure any results for the ACT are a reliable indicator. [[385]](#footnote-385)

#### Teacher Led Learning

* 1. During the public hearing the Committee heard that due to the policy of school autonomy in the ACT, a diversity of teaching practices are used across schools.[[386]](#footnote-386) As such, it was suggested that the ACT would be well suited to trial different teaching practices and then use NAPLAN to measure the effect of those different approaches.[[387]](#footnote-387) One method identified was teacher led learning.
  2. The Committee understands that teacher led learning can be described at a very high level as breaking a subject down into its components.[[388]](#footnote-388)

The mantra behind teacher-led education is: “I lead, we do it together and then you do it.” The teacher starts, breaks down the subject into its components, whether it be maths, reading or anything else, teaches the students those components, builds them up into the whole, then moves on. We as the class then carry out the same activity and you then apply it on your own, apply the subject and, through the application of it, it ingrains the knowledge into you and it makes it easier for you to apply it going forward.

The polar opposite of it is constructivism. That is the idea that you can learn by exposure and simply by problem-based learning; so if we expose people to problems, they will learn the processes and learn the knowledge that way.[[389]](#footnote-389)

###### Committee Comment

* 1. The Committee notes that it is not clear what teaching methods are being utilised across different schools and that there may be value in trialling various approaches.

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| Recommendation 20   * 1. 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. [[390]](#footnote-390) |

#### ATAR and Year 12 retention

* 1. The Committee heard from Mr Fowler of the AEU that the ACT’s year 12 ATAR results have actually been increasing, as has year 12 retention. He further noted:

If you look at how ACT kids perform in the first year of university, you will see that those results have always been impressive. So we do not buy into the idea that the ACT is failing at all. We think there are many ways to look at school achievement.[[391]](#footnote-391)

* 1. The Committee notes that according to the *Report on Government Services 2019: Child care, education and training*,[[392]](#footnote-392) the ACT attainment rate dropped from 88 percent in 2015 to 82 percent in 2016, though remains higher than the Australian average which is 80 percent for schools with high socioeconomic status.
  2. The Committee also notes that the rate of attainment drops to 79 percent when all ACT schools are included. This rate is slightly higher than the national average of 76 percent.
  3. The Committee notes that the Productivity Commission used the following definition for attainment:

‘Attainment’ (attainment rate) is defined as the number of students who meet the requirements of a year 12 certificate or equivalent expressed as a percentage of the estimated potential year 12 population. The estimated potential year 12 population is an estimate of a single year age group that could have attended year 12 that year, calculated as the estimated resident population aged 15–19 divided by five.[[393]](#footnote-393)

### Capabilities focus (21st Century skills)

* 1. The Minister advised the Committee that a key focus of the ACT Government’s Future of Education Strategy is a focus on general capabilities or ‘soft skills’, as a significant area of development for quality assessment.[[394]](#footnote-394) The Committee was advised:

Learners need to have skills to look at challenges in innovative ways and assessment techniques need to acknowledge and evaluate these diversified and varied creative skills. It is highly likely that recall plays a critical role in performance in standardised testing compared to learners’ skills for critically analysing the gaps and inconsistencies in a task. [[395]](#footnote-395)

* 1. The Minster also noted the importance of students’ emotional engagement with the teaching, stating that formative assessment tools and surveys will be critical to strengthening the breadth of what is measured and valued. [[396]](#footnote-396)
  2. AISACT similarly noted:

Additionally, increasing awareness of the importance of 21st Century skills needs to be considered in conversations around standardised testing. Professor Bill Lucas in his recently released paper *Capabilities in context: A snapshot of historic and global approaches* states, ‘Education systems are responsible for more than developing knowledge and skills – they also need to equip young people to become capable all-rounders. … Calls to embed capabilities in schools are gaining prominence in Australia. Education policy discussions are increasingly focusing on how capabilities can unlock potential in young people – preparing very young children for school, improving assessment scores at school, supporting transitions through education and preparing young adults for work.’[[397]](#footnote-397)

* 1. The Committee also notes that 21st century skills were a focus point of the Gonski 2.0 report, as discussed earlier in Chapter 2.

### Curriculum progression

* 1. The Committee heard that along with a focus on measuring growth and focussing on skills for the future, assessment should take into account curriculum progression. ACTPA told the Committee:

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.[[398]](#footnote-398)

### School Improvement Program

* 1. In response to matters raised by the Auditor-General and the reviews of ACT school performance discussed in Chapter 2 of this report, the Education Directorate told the Committee that a school improvement program is currently being rolled out. The Committee was advised that the program is in its third year of implementation, with around 18 schools being reviewed each year. [[399]](#footnote-399) The Committee was advised that:

Improving performance in ACT schools is the result of actions on a number of fronts, including the process by which individual schools are reviewed, the development of strategic action plans at the school level, as well as building the capability of school leaders to use data to inform their decision making.[[400]](#footnote-400)

* 1. The Minister told the Committee that ‘the school improvement work that is happening across our schools is about individualised learning plans and formative assessments all the way through.’[[401]](#footnote-401)
  2. The school improvement program includes use of the National School Improvement Tool designed by ACER which assesses across nine domains:
* Domain 1 - An explicit improvement agenda
* Domain 2 - Analysis and discussion of data
* Domain 3 - A culture that promotes learning
* Domain 4 - Targeted use of school resources
* Domain 5 - An expert teaching team
* Domain 6 - Systematic curriculum delivery
* Domain 7 - Differentiated teaching and learning
* Domain 8 - Effective pedagogical practices
* Domain 8 - School and community partnerships.[[402]](#footnote-402)
  1. The Committee was advised that standardised testing information contributes to domain 2 of the review, in addition to other assessments such as PIPS. [[403]](#footnote-403) Data sets are grouped into four ‘sources’ including:
* Additional student learning data: less formal individual student data captured through formative assessment as well as more formal school agreed assessment.
* School processes data: instructional strategies and pedagogical approaches
* Demographic data: considers student learning data or school process data by subgroups such as socio economic groupings or gender, including enrolment trends over time.
* Perception data: how students perceive their learning, environments, effective learning and feedback are successful for individuals. Includes data from staff and student surveys.[[404]](#footnote-404)
  1. The Committee heard about the role that NAPLAN results play as part of the review:

There is analysis and discussion of data, which is where NAPLAN comes into the conversation, but only as one source… It looks at a culture that promotes learning, which is something that all of our schools do very well at. It looks at targeted use of school resources and expert teaching teams. And it looks at the systematic curriculum delivery, not just in literacy and numeracy but across the full breadth of the curriculum: how the school is implementing the curriculum across the whole school. It also looks at differentiated teaching and learning: as the minister said, how to individualise personalised learning for students and how that is being accommodated to meet the needs of all students in the school.

It looks at effective pedagogical practices, looking at the impact and effect of the strategies that teachers are deploying in the school to support the outcomes for the school and what their impact is. It also looks at school and community partnerships: how well the school is engaging with its stakeholders, engaging with and leveraging school partnerships. It is a very holistic approach to determining where a school is up to. NAPLAN is an important part of that but it is only a small part of that overall assessment. [[405]](#footnote-405)

* 1. The review teams include ACER assessors to provide a level of independence in the review process. [[406]](#footnote-406) The Committee was advised:

They [ACER] provide their own assessors who are qualified and certified to come to the ACT and work with us on those reviews of our schools. So there is a level of independence in those reviews as well. All of their work is evidence based. They are a national body that provides support for school improvement.[[407]](#footnote-407)

* 1. The Committee understands that the review process leads to the development of a five-year strategic plan and annual action plans with specific recommendations for individual schools to take forward.

[S]chools then come up with recommendations based on that independent review. Those recommendations feed into their school strategic plan, which then has targets. Those targets can include things like NAPLAN in terms of equity and growth and those sorts of measures. But there is a whole range of other targets they can include which are relevant to the needs of the school. Those are then worked on with the directors of school improvement. We have four directors of school improvement, who have approximately 22 schools each. They then work closely with those principals on assessing how that school strategic plan is being implemented, what the needs of the school are and what professional development and support they require. A lot of that is evidence driven based on that review process.[[408]](#footnote-408)

* 1. In regards to implementation, the Committee heard supporting new school leaders is a focus:

One particular example I can talk about is Kingsford Smith School. It was an early-career principal. It is a P to 10 school. The other leaders in the school were new to leadership. The PIPs trends and the NAPLAN trends showed that we needed to look more closely at this school. A group of schools were like this; I am just going to talk about one school. A group of us met with the school leadership. We went into all the data to get the current reality. PIPS and NAPLAN are one bit, but what else is happening in the school? We did things called learning walks and talks, where we go in and look with a lens of early years literacy at what is happening. What is happening with student learning? What is happening with teaching instruction? What is the level of variance?

Then the consultant works very closely with the leadership team. We build the capacity of the middle-level leaders for the executive teachers to have a stronger role in coaching with their teachers and with their teaching teams. Then there is professional learning for the teachers in the essential literacy practices that should be happening every day for every child in every classroom. There is work with the teachers to support planning. We work with the coach level. We work with the leader level.

This has gone on since 2017 and is continuing. We now have 20 schools working in this model. We check in on this and we teach the leaders different ways to check in on implementation.[[409]](#footnote-409)

* 1. Understanding standardised testing data is also a part of implementation. The Minister advised the Committee that the directorate is working with school leaders on a common approach to analysing achievement at all levels to enhance continuous improvement processes. This includes a range of targeted programs for supporting schools to improve pedagogical practice in literacy and numeracy. [[410]](#footnote-410) The Committee was advised:

Principals, deputies and executive staff in schools have been involved in a program of professional development throughout term 3 this year [2018], focussed on using multiple sources of evidence to drive school improvement.[[411]](#footnote-411)

* 1. The Committee also learned that there are formal structures for follow up:

Every school receives support from the director of school improvement in the outyears as well. They are always looking at an annual action plan. Each five-year strategic plan is broken up into annual action plans. That then informs how they are tracking on that. The DSIs will go out there and visit with the school, have conversations around school performance with the principal, do immersion visits around the school and provide feedback on how the school is tracking. All of that is part of the regular practice of support and improvement that we have for our schools.[[412]](#footnote-412)

* 1. The Committee also notes that the ACT Education Strategic Plan 2018 includes strategic indicators in equity, growth and student engagement.[[413]](#footnote-413)

###### Committee comment

* 1. The Committee recognises the Education Directorate for its commitment to ongoing school improvement.

The Committee notes that the program involves examination of individual school measures and developing a plan based on that data. Whilst the Committee agrees there is value in this approach, the Committee considers there is also potential value in analysing general strengths and weaknesses across school networks and the broader ACT-wide education system. High level analysis would enable schools not participating in the performance program to start considering reform options and may provide general insight relating to poor ACT performance in standardised testing results.

## Concluding Comments

* 1. The Committee acknowledges the ongoing work of all teachers, principals, volunteers and learning assistants in our schools. Schools are more than a place of learning; they are a defining place for our community, with the outcomes of education directly impacting the future of Canberra. It is essential that students, educators and parents and carers are supported to provide the best outcomes for our young people in the ACT.
  2. The Committee acknowledges the Education Directorate’s proactive School Improvement Program.
  3. The majority of the Committee noted the downward trend in relation to ACT performance in standardised testing results are concerning, and that the causes for this are uncertain.
  4. Finally, the Committee would like to acknowledge the quality of the submissions made to the Inquiry. They, and the evidence heard at the public hearings, has provided valuable learnings and perspectives to the Committee when considering the terms of reference.

Mr Michael Pettersson MLA

Chair

26 March 2019

## Appendix A – Witnesses

#### 11 September 2018

###### ACT Principals Association (ACTPA)

* Gareth Richards
* Liz Bobos
* Murray Bruce

###### Individual

* Anna Chrysostomou (retired teacher)

#### 14 September 2018

###### ACT Council of Parents & Citizens Associations

* Kirsty McGovern-Hooley (Volunteer Council President)

###### ANU

* Professor Andrew Macintosh

#### 24 September 2018

###### Australian Education Union – ACT Branch

* Mr Glenn Fowler
* Mr Shane Gorman

#### 25 September 2018

###### ACT Education Directorate

* Ms Yvette Berry MLA, Minister For Education and Early Childhood Development and
* Ms Natalie Howson, Director-General
* Ms Deb Efthymiades, Deputy Director-General, System Policy and Reform
* Mr Mark Huxley, Executive Director, School Performance and Improvement Division
* Mr Robert Gotts, Director, Planning and Analytics
* Ms Kate McMahon, Director, Learning and Teaching
* Ms Jo Padgham, School Improvement Leader, School Improvement

###### Canberra Montessori School

* Mr Anthony Vandermolen, Principal

###### ACT Audit Office

* Mr Brett Stanton, Director, Performance Audit

#### 2 October 2018

###### Association of Independent Schools of the ACT

* Ms Kath Morwitch, Senior Manager Curriculum and Learning

## Appendix B – Submissions

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Submission Number | Submitter | Received |
| 1 | Name Withheld | 31-May-18 |
| 2 | Name Withheld | 24-Jun-18 |
| 3 | Australian Education Union – ACT Branch | 26-Jul-18 |
| 4 | Association of Independent Schools of the ACT | 26-Jul-18 |
| 5 | The ACT Principals Association | 29-Jul-18 |
| 6 | Anna Chrysostomou | 30-Jul-18 |
| 7 | Canberra Montesorri School | 30-Jul-18 |
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