

Australia: Rudd Labor's NAPLAN school "league tables"

"NAPALM that kills learning"

By Will Marshall
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The Rudd Labor government is pressing ahead with a system of standardised national testing in schools that will pit them against each other across the country. The National Assessment Program for Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) is the precursor to the implementation of league tables.

Last month over a million students—from public and private schools—in years 3, 5, 7 and 9 sat NAPLAN tests in English and Maths. In all, more than 9,000 schools across Australia participated over three days. The first-round of tests was held in 2008.

In April, the Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs announced that a profile of every Australian school would be posted later this year on a central government website. The Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) will publish a range of results, including an average score on national literacy and numeracy tests and average improvement over time. The NAPLAN results will feature as a central component in the ranking of schools.

For the first time schools will be compared by the number of students from immigrant as well as Aboriginal background, as well as by the proportion of children they cater to from low socio-economic backgrounds, or with a disability.

ACARA will compare 'like' schools i.e., those from similar socio-economic backgrounds. Schools will also face ranking over their students' tertiary entrance scores, and will be compared with others in similar geographical areas. ACARA will reveal how much funding schools receive, automatically boosting the enrolment profile of those schools with additional revenue streams.

According to federal education minister, Julia Gillard, her government is "committed to improving outcomes for all Australian children through clear reporting on student and school performance".

Labor's measures, however, have nothing to do with improving educational standards. The Council of Australian Governments' (COAG) meeting in November of last year, which finalised plans for the implementation of Labor's "education revolution", declared that its overriding aim was "to increase Australia's productivity—starting with the earliest years, and moving through school and into the training system".

The NAPLAN test regime dovetails with a seismic shift underway in the entire concept of education—away from the all-rounded physical, intellectual and cultural development of young people, toward a system based on narrow "outcomes" defined by the productivity requirements of business.

"Teaching to the test"

The implications of Labor's standardised testing regime are

far-reaching. Everything from school funding, teacher pay, and the viability of individual schools will be determined on the basis of "student outcomes". Underlying this approach is an essentially punitive conception of school performance.

Under the Rudd government's new test system, a large percentage of each school's final ranking will be determined by the students' NAPLAN results. Yet this method of evaluation has been endowed with a prominence out of all proportion to the information that standardised tests can legitimately provide. For instance, last year's Year 9 NAPLAN test for numeracy covered an exceedingly wide range of topics including algebra, proportion, ratio, geometry, probability, graphs, and percentages. A sweeping assessment across such a broad range of subject matter is likely to provide results that are, at best, tenuous.

Standardised tests, with their associated time constraints, lend themselves to a definite type of questioning. In the 2008 maths test, students confronted 32 questions, which had to be answered within 40 minutes. At least 13 questions required specialised knowledge of formulae, procedures, or definitions. Many students struggled to finish their test papers on time. The emphasis placed on test outcomes means that rapid work based on cramming, rather than reflection at a deeper level, is being rewarded.

Fears of a return to "the three Rs" are widespread. English teachers point to the many NAPLAN test questions on spelling and punctuation. A recent letter to the *Age* newspaper from Karen Dreher, a teacher with expertise in literacy education, argued the following: "With a bias towards written skills, the NAP literacy test seems to offer a narrow idea of literacy, with limited consideration of higher order thinking skills. The focus seems to be on mechanics more than meaning and comprehension".

The Queensland branch of the Australian Literacy Educators' Association has also raised objections: "We need to remember that, actually, the NAPLAN language conventions test doesn't tell us much at all and it probably masks what may be a bigger problem: can students use a wide variety of language features in a range of contexts in order to achieve particular purposes and effects".

There is no doubt that students need to be assessed by their teachers. But a diagnostic assessment, able to discover the strengths and weaknesses in a child's development, takes far more time, and is only one aspect of a far broader process of educational growth. Standardised tests at best provide a snap-shot of basic skills, while providing no measure of the creativity, humour, initiative, imagination, determination, or other faculties critical to lifelong learning.

Many teachers warn that an emphasis on testing—and, inevitably, comparison—will have negative consequences, especially for students with learning difficulties or poor self-esteem. An experienced HSC English teacher pointed to questions from the 2008 Year 9 literacy test. "Some of

these questions are aimed at sorting out high performers. For instance, a multiple choice question asks why a writer uses the 'first person'. One option offers the following, that 'first person' is used to 'employ figurative language to achieve the narrative'. This type of question intimidates many students, adversely affecting their results."

"Bog standard comprehensives"

The Rudd government's school reports will reproduce a scenario already played out in Britain, where league tables have been in place for over a decade. Last year, Professor Peter Mortimore, a former vice-chancellor of the University of London, warned Australian schools they would be adversely affected by the Rudd government's ranking system: "Once the curse of failure has been put on a school, parents will try to transfer their children".

He outlined the dire circumstances of poor schools in working class neighbourhoods across Britain, languishing at the bottom of league tables: "At the very top are the most prestigious schools, then religious schools... And right down the end are what Alistair Campbell [a former adviser to Tony Blair], famously called, 'the bog standard comprehensive schools.'" In June 2008, 300 schools in Britain were threatened with closure if their test scores did not improve.

Prime Minister Kevin Rudd has already issued similar threats, declaring that if schools failed to lift their performance they would face closure or amalgamation.

Last year NAPLAN test results for Queensland students were below those of the other states. In response, the state's Labor Premier Anna Bligh wrote to parents in February, announcing that children in years 3, 5, 7 and 9 would sit practice tests to prepare them for the 2009 round of tests. English Teachers Association of Queensland president Garry Collins said teachers he spoke with were using one day out of every week to prepare their students.

According to reports in Queensland's *Courier Mail*, Queensland teachers have coined the term "NAPALM" to describe Labor's new testing regime. They claim its focus on test results, to the exclusion of other aspects of the curriculum, "kills" learning.

Again, the evidence from Britain is overwhelming. A 2002 report by Galton & MacBeath, entitled, *A Life in Teaching? The Impact of Change on Primary Teachers' Working Lives* shows the outcome of standardised testing in British primary schools. The researchers found that "the amount of time available for teaching each day does not allow for a broad and balanced primary curriculum. Art, drama, music and ICT are being squeezed and are only partially covered by lunchtime and after-school clubs. The decline in the curriculum time available for these creative subjects is matched by a decline in teachers' own sense of creativity. In some schools, music typically is now allocated thirty minutes a week while elsewhere art is dropped altogether for Year 6 pupils until their tests have been completed. Time for science and technology has been cut back by an hour a week".

The Queensland experience has pointed to another central aspect of the Rudd government's NAPLAN regime: the victimisation of teachers who fail to deliver the required test score "outcomes". Queensland Teachers' Union president Steve Ryan told the press: "I hear that teachers are being threatened with action if they don't make students sit formally the practice tests. Teachers are being told that if the results don't improve, their own employment positions will be reviewed".

In fact, the Australian Education Union and its state offshoots have laid the groundwork for the victimisation and sacking of teachers who resist Rudd's new test regime. Last year the teacher unions recommended a series of statewide agreements that included streamlined dismissal procedures for "underperforming" teachers. The unions have embraced the central tenets of performance pay.

The pressures on schools to teach to the test will only intensify. A retired principal from Victoria recently wrote to the *Age*, explaining: "Emails have been sent to schools emphasising the importance of Victorian students performing well. Regions are issuing schools with lesson plans and hints to make sure students are 'test ready'. Clearly, schools are being asked to teach to the program, and therein lies a real danger for schools and, most importantly, our students".

Federal education minister Gillard previously claimed Labor would not introduce a similar educational model to that in Britain where lowly ranked schools are "named and shamed". She claimed that "there's no point in reporting on raw scores, or having simplistic league tables" and that "governments will not themselves devise simplistic league tables or rankings".

But this is precisely what is occurring. In March, 15 professional educational associations, including the Australian Secondary Principals Association, Australian Science Teachers Association, Australian Literacy Educators' Association, and the Australian Council for Educational Leaders, wrote to federal Labor urging the government to prohibit the publication of league tables.

Their pleas were ignored, and after league tables were published in Tasmania on May 8 in Rupert Murdoch's *Mercury*, Gillard's response was to go on the offensive, praising the Tasmanian government as "brave", and insisting that its measures should be "applauded".

As expected, schools in wealthier areas outperformed those in less affluent neighbourhoods. For instance, the primary school servicing the poorer suburb Bridgewater had several areas of its report that were colour-coded red, meaning it was being labelled a "concern". This included its ratings in literacy and numeracy, while its attendance rate was raised as an "issue". South Hobart Primary School, located in a relatively well off region, gained high ratings in all categories with the exception of "parental satisfaction".

Murdoch's *Courier Mail* published a league table of Queensland's schools on May 25.

A wealth of experience particularly in Britain and the US, demonstrates the detrimental impact of accountability based regimes on the poorest sections of society, and thus what can be expected to occur under the Rudd government.

A 2008 US report, *Avoidable Losses: High-Stakes Accountability and the Dropout Crisis*, analysed the impact of the No Child Left Behind educational policy on students in the state of Texas, where the standardised testing system became the national model. The report found that dropout rates were highest for African American and Latino youth, with more than 60 percent of surveyed students exiting the school system early. Each year 135,000 youth leave education early in Texas. The conclusion drawn by the authors is unambiguous: "High-stakes, test-based accountability leads not to equitable educational possibilities for youth, but to avoidable losses of these students from our schools".

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