

Survey shows Australian teachers oppose NAPLAN testing

By Oliver Campbell
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A survey released last month has revealed deep hostility among school teachers toward NAPLAN, the standardised literacy and numeracy tests taken by students in years 3, 5, 7 and 9 across Australia. The survey was compiled by University of Melbourne academics specialising in education, from the replies of 8,353 teachers and principals across the country.

Titled, “The Experience of Education: The Impacts of High Stakes Testing on Schools, Students and their Families, An Educators’ Perspective,” the survey documents the social and educational impact of NAPLAN and the federal Labor government’s education policies more broadly.

Introduced in 2008, NAPLAN provides data for the government’s *MySchool* web site, which assesses school performance based on literacy and numeracy test results. While Prime Minister Julia Gillard’s government has repeatedly tried to defend NAPLAN by saying it is not the same as publishing “league tables” of supposedly better and poorer performing schools, the media has used MySchool data to publish de facto performance rankings.

NAPLAN is part of the Gillard government’s regressive education agenda, known as the “Education Revolution.” It is centrally aimed at further undermining the public education system by promoting a shift to private schools, and at meeting the immediate demands of business for a more productive workforce by narrowing the curriculum and reducing the time spent by pupils on music, art, sports and other “non-testable” subjects.

The NAPLAN regime is based on the US education model, which has resulted in hundreds of school closures in working class areas, moves to introduce so-called performance pay as a means of dividing the teaching workforce, and the establishment of for-profit

charter schools operated by private businesses.

More than 70 percent of surveyed teachers either agreed, or strongly agreed, that ranking schools was a central purpose of NAPLAN testing. Seventy percent of teachers and principals also agreed that one of NAPLAN’s purposes was “policing schools”. The report quotes the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority, the government body responsible for the national curriculum in primary and secondary schools, which stated that one of NAPLAN’s key purposes was to “perform an accountability function”.

More than 65 percent of primary school teachers disagreed that NAPLAN “is a means of informing parents about the progress of their children.” The authors of the report commented: “This data suggests that respondents believe that teachers who have the closest relationships with parents remain unconvinced that NAPLAN is informing parents about their student’s progress.” Only eight percent of teachers strongly agreed that the purpose of NAPLAN was to serve as a diagnostic tool, while 58 percent disagreed.

These results demonstrate that the overwhelming majority of teachers reject the central pretexts used by the Labor government to justify the NAPLAN tests.

The survey shows that the tests, and extensive in-class preparations for them, are significantly narrowing the curriculum, as intended by the Gillard government. More than 80 percent of respondents reported that NAPLAN preparations were adding to “an already crowded curriculum,” and that “teaching practice had been altered to areas covered by NAPLAN,” leading to a “teach to the test” culture.

The data in the report, supplemented by verbatim comments from teachers, indicates that NAPLAN is creating distress among children. The report comments

that “81 percent of the participants reported having at least one student say they felt sick before the NAPLAN test and 11 percent of respondents stated that more than 10 students had complained of feeling unwell.”

In addition, 58 percent of teachers said some students complained of sleeplessness as a result of NAPLAN. More than 60 percent of teachers reported at least one student crying as a result of NAPLAN. Another 87 percent of respondents said some students had raised self-esteem issues relating to the tests, with 11 percent stating that more than 10 of their students had raised such concerns.

The test data has been used in the media to “name and shame” so-called under-performing schools, particularly those in working class and impoverished areas. One teacher quoted in the report commented that some students have a belief “that they are viewed as dumb by the community.”

Labor’s education minister, Peter Garrett, contemptuously dismissed the results, labelling the survey “self-selecting” and not “helpful”. His response underscores the Gillard government’s determination to press ahead with its education agenda, and its imperviousness to the needs and sentiments of students and teachers.

Garrett claimed that the survey was not representative of broader sentiments among teachers who did not participate in the survey. “There’s a lot of teachers in Australia and this doesn’t constitute a large number of them,” he declared. Garrett made no serious attempt to refute the methodological foundation of the survey, or the reasoned argument on the part of the survey’s authors, that respondents were generally representative of the teaching population in terms of age, number of years teaching and other criteria.

The results of the survey are an indictment of the trade union covering teachers, the Australian Education Union (AEU), and its state-based branches. The data demonstrates the deep opposition to NAPLAN testing among teachers across the country, and indicates a widespread understanding that it is part of a reactionary education agenda. The survey also indicates hostility to NAPLAN among parents, with 61 percent of teachers reporting that at least some parents had removed their children from testing, because of their opposition to it.

In 2010, the introduction of the *MySchool* web site resulted in a groundswell of opposition to NAPLAN

among teachers. Seeking to head off this hostility, the AEU and its state affiliates called for a limited national boycott of NAPLAN, and pleaded for talks with the government. The planned boycott was called off a week before the tests were due to be taken, after the government pledged to establish a working body, which included senior trade union bureaucrats, to examine how the test results were being used.

In other words, as soon as the government agreed to utilise the AEU’s services in implementing the NAPLAN regime, the union junked its campaign. Since then, the education trade unions have worked assiduously to prevent the emergence of any organised struggle against NAPLAN and Labor’s other attacks on public education.

To fight against NAPLAN and the Labor government’s pro-business education agenda, teachers need to break out of the confines of the AEU and form independent rank-and-file organisations, including action committees, that unite teachers, education staff, parents and the working class as a whole in a political struggle against the Gillard government. Above all, the fight to defend education requires a socialist perspective, based on the recognition that high-quality and free education is a fundamental social right, but one that will never be recognised within the framework of the profit system.

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