

Think very carefully about the options and appropriate good practice models...

Brian J. Caldwell, SCOPE, 28 September 2009

Parents recently received a letter explaining how well their children performed on the national tests of literacy and numeracy (NAPLAN). This followed release of results for 2009 and league tables that ranked the performance of states and territories. Overall there was little difference from 2008 apart from small gains in grammar and punctuation for students in Year 3.

Federal education minister Julia Gillard immediately claimed credit, as reported in *The Age* of 12 September: "I think we are already seeing the benefits of (our) education revolution but, of course, to drive major changes in schools and school quality . . . is going to take time". Gillard is dead wrong on cause-and-effect links with the 'education revolution' but correct to note that education reform takes time.

No initiative in the so-called 'education revolution' proclaimed by the Rudd government could possibly have had an impact on NAPLAN 2008 results which have generally flat-lined to the levels achieved in 2009. Taking up her second observation, if there is any political credit, it could be credibly claimed by former minister Brendan Nelson, who commissioned the national inquiry on literacy chaired by the late Ken Rowe, and his 'against the odds' achievement in gaining the support of state and territory counterparts to act on the findings.

Julia Gillard can take credit for one important decision and that is the appointment of Dr Peter Hill to serve as the first chief executive of the Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Agency (ACARA). Hill is a pre-eminent authority in the field world-wide. He served as head of a curriculum and assessment body and head of a state system of education in Australia before his appointment as professor of educational leadership and deputy dean of education at the University of Melbourne. Over the last decade he has been head of research and development at the National Centre on Education and the Economy in the United States and secretary general of the Hong Kong Examinations and Assessment Authority. Along with Professor Barry McGaw, chair of ACARA, who was head of the education division at OECD for several years, Australia has a leadership team that few if any nations can match.

However, McGaw and Hill will need to negotiate a political and educational minefield in the months ahead, as illustrated by the news from two other countries that should send shivers down the spines of those, including Julia Gillard, who have regarded them as benchmarks of good practice. These concern the publication of league tables and report cards on school performance in England and New York respectively.

Anyone in doubt about the impact of league tables ought to read *The Times Online* in England which has carried results for primary schools since their release on 5 August. The website (www.timesonline.co.uk) lists 14,097 primary schools in England in order of achievement on national tests in English, mathematics and science. There is no contextual information, just a simple list from best to worst.

Those who fear that such tables will lead to an inappropriate focus on teaching to the test and potentially harmful effects on students and teachers will find their fears confirmed. Every page contains a sponsored link to an Australian service that provides online practice for NAPLAN tests (www.naplanonline.net.au). A visit to its website will find a link to *beyondblue*, Australia's national depression initiative (www.youthbeyondblue.com). The implied connections between testing, league tables, coaching for tests, stress and depression are hard to ignore. Julia Gillard's plans to attract more people to teaching and school leadership will surely be thwarted as have similar intentions in England. It is no wonder that some of England's best performing schools are now starting to boycott national tests.

Julia Gillard should be just as concerned about the latest news from New York. For nearly a year she has been in thrall of Joel Klein, chancellor of New York City's public school system that issues A to F report cards on school performance on state-wide tests. Their credibility was destroyed a fortnight ago when it was announced that 84 percent of primary and middle schools received an A in 2009 compared to 38 percent in 2008 and 23 percent in 2007. Moreover, every school that got an F in 2008 got an A or a B in 2009. Astonishingly, six of the city's eight schools on the state's list of violent schools received an A or a B (test scores on reading and mathematics are weighted 85 percent in compiling a school's letter grade whereas safety - a significant concern to students and their parents - is weighted just 2.5 percent). There may well be a legal challenge to the way the system disperses \$33 million in performance-based bonuses. Amid charges of the dumbing down of state standards on New York, by Gillard's own criterion for the time it takes to achieve major reform, any further reference to New York City ought to be abandoned.

It is encouraging that Peter Hill has promised that Australia will learn from the mistakes of others. It is also encouraging to recall that his research of 15 years ago found that the differences in performance between classrooms at the same school are much greater than the differences between schools. This suggests that Australia should move as quickly as possible to providing parents with information about how their children are performing within the school rather than providing spurious reports that claim to validly compare schools, even if those comparisons are for 'like schools'.

Ministers may have declared their opposition to 'simplistic league tables'. It is regrettable that their defence of a more transparent approach is to argue that opponents of league tables are against testing and against providing parents with information that will assist them in their choice of schools. Nothing could be further from the truth. Australia should follow the lead of top-performing Finland, where there are no national tests and no league tables, and build the capacity of schools to test well, personalise learning, and provide useful, valid and timely information to parents.

Brian Caldwell is managing director of Educational Transformations and professorial fellow at the University of Melbourne where he was dean of education from 1998 to 2004. He is co-author of Why not the Best Schools published by ACER Press in 2008.