

A principled stand on national testing

Brian J. Caldwell, 19 January 2010

The position taken today by the Australian Education Union at its annual conference in Melbourne on a possible boycott in relation to national tests is a principled one. It is also supported by evidence of what has occurred in other countries when similar practices have or have not been introduced.

The AEU position plays out a scenario I described in my Agitation Hill Lecture in Castlemaine on May 29 last year (the full lecture is available at www.educationaltransformations.com.au).

The creation of 'league tables' is one issue. An examination of sample reports on the My School website reveals that such tables can be readily produced despite assurance by ministers that this will not occur. As I concluded in Castlemaine: 'Unless there is agitation on an epic scale, such as refusal by teachers to administer the tests or by parents to have their children sit for them, it seems that league tables of limited validity that mean little to parents are a fait accompli'.

It seems that agitation on this scale is now occurring.

Before looking afresh at the international evidence, it is helpful to put the results of the NAPLAN tests and the reports on the My School website in context. First, the tests were administered last May. Parents will receive the reports at the end of January, eight months later. It is hard to conceive of a more educationally reprehensible approach to assessment and reporting.

Second, the first release of the 2009 NAPLAN results on a state-by-state basis was on December 17, the day after schools closed for 2009, and most educational journalists and leaders of professional associations were on leave. It is hard to conceive of a more cynical act, in which all governments were complicit, especially as the results showed no change or slight decline in performance since 2008.

Third, we are left with a situation that has no counterpart in any nation of which I am aware in which Grade 3 students are subjected to 50-item, machine-scored, error-prone national tests.

Fourth, the scheme ignores the consistent evidence that the differences in performance between classrooms within the same school are greater than the differences between schools. Parents want to know which classrooms their children will be in and with which teachers.

Now let's look at international experience.

Finland has been the top performing nation on international tests over the last decade. It has a broad national curriculum but has resisted approaches to testing and reporting along the lines of NAPLAN and the My School website. There is of course a comprehensive program of testing within schools in Finland. In some instances schools use tests that are developed by the National Board of Education. There are substantial amounts of data on the progress and achievement of students and teachers have high levels of expertise in interpreting them. The public and the profession in Finland would never countenance what is occurring in Australia.

Consider experience in England as reported by Gordon Stanley, former head of the Board of Studies in NSW and now director of the Oxford University Centre for Educational Assessment: 'We [Australia] could well end up with a similar situation to the UK, where you get a whole industry created around improving performance on the tests rather than necessarily improving students' learning skills'.

We are clearly locked in to a schedule of reporting over the next fortnight. What should be done to avoid the long-term educational harms that have accrued elsewhere?

First, we need to immediately make federal funding for teacher education conditional on providing teachers with the skills that their counterparts in Finland have, that is, know how to test well and continuously ('assessment for learning' as well as 'assessment of learning'), and train a large cadre of specialist teachers who are always on call to provide small group or one-on-one support for students who fall behind by as little as 24 hours (this is one reason why gaps between high- and low-performing students in Finland are so narrow). This approach is immediately transferable to Australia. Parents can receive information on the progress of their children from expert professionals as often as they wish rather than wait eight months.

Second, combined with the above, we should place a 'sunset' on the national testing of all students, as Jessica Harris and I proposed in our 2008 book *Why not the Best Schools*. There may still be national testing but with samples of students, thus enabling schools and classes that need support to be identified.

Taking all things into account, Julia Gillard's assertion that a failure to administer the tests will be 'bad for students, bad for parents and bad for the future of the nation's education system' does not stand up to critical scrutiny if the flaws of the current approach are critically examined in the light of international experience. Indeed, the opposite may be the case.

This command-and-control approach, ever more centralised and bureaucratised, is inconsistent with trends elsewhere where governments are seeking to strike the right balance between autonomy, accountability and choice at the same time they help build the capacity of the profession. Even the People's Republic of China is abandoning its command-and-control strategy.

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Source:

<http://www.educationaltransformations.com.au/files/Principled%20Stand%20on%20National%20Testing.pdf>