

Why we should continue to oppose NAPLAN

James Tonson*

This is the eighth year of NAPLAN testing. It is no longer a 'new initiative', enjoys bipartisan support and appears to have become an entrenched part of our education system. So some might wonder why we should continue to campaign against it.

* James works in environmental education with the Understandascope and is Vice-President of Environment Education Victoria. He was Coordinator of the Victorian Student Representative Council from 2006-09.

The reasons for ongoing opposition to NAPLAN relate to:

- its classroom impact,
- what it represents in a policy context,
- the sense that many teachers feel unable to speak out against it and
- an opportunity to engage parents and community in discussion and action about educational practice.

I will elaborate on each of these reasons in turn.

While NAPLAN is intended to help improve school and whole system performance, its most concrete impact is at the chalkface. Students and teachers have their entire curricular program interrupted by a special series of tests that have little to no relevance to their individual learning or teaching. This isn't just a short interruption for a day or a week, but in many cases for several weeks as pressure is ramped up to prepare and perform well on the tests. All of this is designed not to measure individual learning, but to provide a narrow measure of the 'performance' of schools and the school system as a whole. That we tolerate such an enormous and intrusive measuring exercise is a testament to the distance between the classroom and much of contemporary education debate and decision-making.

In policy terms, NAPLAN is both a symbol and a product of a managerialist approach that has gradually come to dominate our education system. This approach is based on the idea that perceived inadequacies in schools are most effectively addressed by 'performance management'. This means regularly testing schools to check whether particular 'learning outcomes' are being achieved and then either providing incentives for schools and teachers to improve, or threatening them with funding cuts. In a society with high performance expectations, where market mechanisms dominate, this approach may appear to make good sense. However, measuring performance in this way actually tells us very little about individual performance and using market mechanisms has a range of negative consequences.

In the case of NAPLAN, the competition-creating (dis)incentive for schools is the public listing of their results on the *My School* website. While competition may be healthy in some contexts, competition between schools has nasty side-effects such as deterring schools from welcoming disadvantaged students, and reducing a sense of collegiality and common purpose among schools and teachers who are otherwise engaged in the shared activity of educating our young people.

The *My School* website also encourages parents to compare and choose between schools on the basis of a very narrow set of indicators. While there is much to be gained from parents being more engaged in their children's schooling, they will understand far more about a school's environment by engaging directly with students and teachers than by reading online datasets constructed from narrow assessments. In the process they would save valuable classroom time.

The positive NAPLAN offers for engaging parents is that they are the ones who have the greatest power to undermine it – by withdrawing their children from the tests. It is very rare for parents to have such a clear opportunity to withdraw their consent for a distinct

program without doing any harm to the educational outcomes of their children. Hopefully this can provide a basis for parents to engage in ongoing discussion and action to help shape the kind of schools they and their children would like.

At times, parents may find it hard to engage with what happens at their children's school. However, allowing this discontent to become a tool for politicians to play parent voters and teacher public servants off against each other will mean that both parents and teachers, and more importantly, students, will be the losers. This is part of the dynamic that leads to calls for more 'accountability' and the resulting creation of instruments like NAPLAN and *My School*. We'd all be better off if we can find ways for teachers and parents to have an effective dialogue at the school level. This would enable them to unite in pursuing more resources for schools, instead of wasting resources on divisive tests.

Teachers also suffer the unnecessary distractions of preparing for both the tests and the misuse of the results. Worse still, many teachers feel unable to voice their opposition publicly, or even in their workplace due to fears for their job security, disillusionment or explicit contractual arrangements. Teachers' widespread concern about and opposition to NAPLAN is an indicator of the harm it is doing. That this view is so often going unspoken, particularly within schools, indicates a much deeper malaise arising in response to a managerialist approach to education.

While NAPLAN is not the only element of this approach, it is a distinct feature of it. As such, it provides a starting point for a much broader conversation about the kind of education we want. We all have a stake and a role to play in education and the debates about it. I hope *Breaking Out* and other forums will provide a place for critical and respectful conversations that will empower local communities of students, teachers, parents and others to shape an education system where:

Schools and universities are primarily places for learning, not just for obtaining the results necessary to ensure a well paid job and a life of privilege;

Teachers are respected for their professional skills and practice, not used as political footballs by politicians forever promising parents better results with less resources;

Students, teachers, parents, principals and policy makers are able to collaborate in learning and decision making, instead of competing for status, resources and a voice in the discussion.

NAPLAN works contrary to all of these intentions, in the classroom, in the community and in our political conversations. This is why we should continue to oppose it and urge parents to ask their children and their teachers about NAPLAN and to exercise their right to withdraw your children from the tests.

References

Cashen, J., Say NO to NAPLAN papers, Literacy Educators Coalition, <http://www.literacyeducators.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2013/12/naplan-papers-set-1.pdf>

Wu, M., NAPLAN results for the lay person, http://www.edmeasurement.com.au/_publications/margaret/NAPLAN_for_lay_person.pdf