

Australia: NAPLAN “breaches” by schools almost double

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Figures released last month indicated that the number of breaches by teachers, school staff and principals in administering the 2011 National Assessment Program—Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) tests almost doubled from 2010. The results point to the immense pressure on schools and teachers to achieve high scores under the Gillard government’s *My School* testing regime.

In 2010, as part of its “education revolution,” the Labor government launched the *My School* website to rank schools nationally based on their performance in NAPLAN tests. Labor’s aim was not to identify students needing additional support—such indicators were already available—but to pit schools and teachers against each other, driven by the threat of falling enrolments, cuts to funding and eventual closure.

According to the Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA), in the 2011 NAPLAN tests held last May for students in years three, five, seven and nine, there were 54 breaches by school staff, who either prevented pupils from sitting the tests or helped pupils cheat, compared with 34 breaches in 2010.

An examination of the breaches shows school staff trying to counteract the punitive effects of student “underperformance.” Numbers of breaches were along these lines: “School inappropriately asked parents to withdraw their children from the NAPLAN on the basis that it may be too stressful an event for them.” Another breach consisted of the school showing “some tests to a parent prior to the start of testing so that the parent could decide whether or not their child was capable of participating or not.”

In 2011, a “Principal reported in media interviews that he would not allow students to sit the tests and subsequently that parents would be encouraged to

withdraw students.”

ACARA chief executive Peter Hill downplayed the significance of the outcomes, arguing that in the context of a million students in 9,500 schools sitting the tests annually, the breaches represented “only very isolated cases.” However, New South Wales Secondary Principals Council president Christine Cawsey told the media that “high-stakes” testing in schools contributed to cheating in schools and put extra pressure on teachers and principals.

Evidence from the US and Britain indicates that reported incidents of cheating and security are the tip of an iceberg. Reports of widespread cheating include a recent US Education Department investigation of schools in Atlanta, Georgia, in which, “Seventy-eight percent of teachers and principals in 44 of the city’s 56 public schools examined were found to have cheated on tests” with a “culture of fear, intimidation and retaliation” driving teachers to give students answers during tests and changing wrong answers after the tests were completed.

Under the guise of education reform, school testing regimes in the US and Britain have led to “underperforming” or “failing” public schools being handed over to the private sector in a range of forms, including academies, trust or charter schools.

Testing regimes have also accelerated the emergence of a two-tier system of education, with schools in deprived areas narrowing their curriculum, more directly gearing students to the needs of business for low-wage and largely unskilled employees. Australian schools are under intense pressure to concentrate lesson time on Maths and English at the expense of non-tested subjects, and spend ever more time and resources cramming for the NAPLAN tests.

Practising for NAPLAN tests has taken over the

curriculum for the first half of the school year, with teachers pressured to drill their students for months. In a survey of schools last year, 65 percent reported increasing the class preparation time for NAPLAN tests and 70 percent had increased the time spent practising tests.

Gillard's associated "Empowering Schools Program" gives principals the power to hire teachers and manage school budgets. Currently being trialled in 1,000 schools, it provides a whip against teachers whose students are deemed to have "underperformed."

As part of the Labor government's campaign for greater powers for principals to discipline teachers, Education Minister Peter Garrett told Sydney's *Sunday Telegraph* last month: "Principals have been calling for more say over the important decisions in their schools for some time, as they know the positive effect it has for their students."

In reality, there is a growing divide in the education system, with teachers in poorer, and less-resourced, schools under fire for allegedly producing inferior results, and parents being led to conclude that they must pay private fees to ensure a decent education for their children.

The teachers' unions bear direct responsibility for this situation. In 2011, faced with overwhelming hostility among teachers to NAPLAN, the Australian Education Union (AEU) announced a belated and limited NAPLAN boycott, only to call it off on the eve of the tests, at Prime Minister Julia Gillard's behest. The AEU has remained noticeably silent on the rise in NAPLAN breaches.



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