

Australia: Unions, state governments, try to rescue standardised testing as student performance declines

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Continuing reports on the destructive effects of the National Assessment Program—Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) tests, launched by the Rudd Federal Labor government a decade ago, are threatening the viability of what has been the key mechanism in the assault on public education, prompting attempts at damage control.

NAPLAN annually assesses Australian school students in years three, five, seven and nine across reading, writing and numeracy. There are now plans to extend the test to year one, i.e., six-year-old children.

A recent paper by Dr John Ainley, described as the “most comprehensive analysis of NAPLAN data yet undertaken,” found there had been no improvement in maths and reading in a decade, and the results of disadvantaged students had sharply declined.

The report, commissioned by the New South Wales Education Standards Authority (NESA) in Australia’s most populous state, found there had been modest improvements among high-performing primary school students in reading, due to investments in early childhood education, but these stopped once they reached high school.

Children from poor families, regional and rural areas, and those with learning difficulties, struggled the most to improve their literacy and numeracy, the report revealed.

Similar conclusions were compiled in a recent study by the Public Education Foundation (PEF), entitled *What Price the Gap*, which focussed on education inequality. That paper compared the education achievement of Australian students, as measured by the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) tests, and concluded, “While all groups have fared worse on the international PISA tests, the performance of those at the bottom has fallen by almost 50 percent more than those at the top, exacerbating inequality between the two ends.”

“Kids at the bottom are falling faster and further than those at the top,” with the bottom 10 percentile falling 21.3 points, while those in the top 10 percentile falling by 14.4 points.

The paper found that education inequality in Australia was increasing across a wide range of dimensions, including access to teachers, resources, curricula and test performance; that inequality for new student cohorts worsened over time, and that inequality increased as students moved through their school years. Finally, and unsurprisingly, the report found that the main drivers of educational inequality were socioeconomic status and parental education.

Last week, former Western Australia Primary Principals’ Association president Stephen Breen told the media that a root and branch review of NAPLAN was long overdue.

Saying he was speaking on behalf of teachers and principals who were effectively gagged from talking about NAPLAN, Breen said “People are just fed up, they’re angry. The problem is that NAPLAN is now so high stakes, it’s out of hand. Basically teaching and learning is secondary to NAPLAN.

“[Teachers] are aghast at what parents are doing about preparation for NAPLAN. You are having homework classes, before-school classes, you are having holiday classes on NAPLAN. It’s like year 12 (the final high school examination that determines tertiary entry). A lot of people retire early, simply because they are fed up. They think, “this is not what we got into education for. We now teach less time, because of the bureaucracy, than we did 20 years ago,” Breen pointed out.

Touted by then Federal Education Minister Julia Gillard as a “means of improving outcomes for all Australian students,” the effects of the NAPLAN testing regime on Australian schools were highly predictable from the start.

Decades ago, when the US, the UK and New Zealand introduced high stakes standardised testing, it unleashed divisive struggles. Schools were ranked by their test performance on league tables, with those allocated the least funding and resources at the bottom. Class inequalities were exacerbated, curricula were narrowed as teachers were pressured to teach “to the test,” under threat of suffering

professional consequences if they failed to lift test results. “Under-performing” schools were closed. At the same time no improvements were made in literacy and numeracy.

Rudd’s unabashed intention in launching first NAPLAN and then the *MySchool* website, which publishes NAPLAN test results, was to establish an education market place. In terms of this agenda, NAPLAN has been highly successful. It has accelerated privatisation, rewarding and punishing the “good” and “poor” performances of schools and teachers. Moreover, it has not only driven enrolments from public to private schools, but has been responsible for a drift in the public school system itself, from disadvantaged to advantaged public schools—a move, according to academics, directly linked to the creation of school league tables.

Utilising evidence from the *MySchool* website, retired school principals Chris Bonnor and Bernie Shepherd reported that between 2011 and 2015, enrolments in disadvantaged government schools dropped by 7,500 students nationwide. During the same period, enrolments in advantaged government schools increased by 22,000. Bonnor concluded with a warning that Australia was headed towards a two-tiered education system.

In an act of damage control, NSW education Minister Rob Stokes has back-flipped on the policy *Stronger HSC Standards*, which directly linked NAPLAN results to the HSC. In 2017, Year 9 NSW students were, for the first time, required to score Band 8—equivalent to an 80 percent score—in reading, writing and numeracy, in order to qualify for the HSC and therefore tertiary entry. Almost 70 percent of students failed to meet the minimum standards. Stokes scrapped the policy earlier this year, protesting that “NAPLAN should be a simple check-up, not a major operation ... not a high-stakes test. A number of my colleagues in different governments across the nation are keen to review the process...”

Queensland Education Minister, Grace Grace raised, “I think after 10 years of it being in place that it’s timely for us to re-evaluate; is NAPLAN delivering what it was setup to deliver?” South Australian Education Minister, Susan Close declared, “I think the high stakes of NAPLAN has come out of this obsession with reporting NAPLAN and judging schools on their NAPLAN results.

Adding to this political shadow-boxing, the NSW Teachers Federation (NSWTF) has commissioned academic Les Perelman, from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), to write a critique of NAPLAN entitled *Towards a New NAPLAN*.

The paper, while containing legitimate criticism of the program as a valid test of students’ writing skills, is silent—as are state education ministers and teacher unions—on NAPLAN’s fundamental agenda. Supported by the entire

official establishment, NAPLAN’s remit has been to accelerate the corporatisation of schools and to dismantle public education.

Maurie Mulheron, the current NSWTF president, is falsely claiming that *Towards a New NAPLAN* is aimed at “dismantling the existing NAPLAN regime.” In reality, if every one of the recommendations in *Towards a New NAPLAN* were adopted, nothing would be done to address the government’s ongoing cuts to social spending, or the vicious circle NAPLAN has created in the most disadvantaged public schools.

Neither the Australian Education Union (AEU) nor its state affiliates have ever opposed NAPLAN tests or the *MySchool* website. In 2010, faced with anger and opposition from teachers, the union announced a boycott, which was nothing but a cynical exercise from start to finish. It was called off, without any discussion among teachers, when the union joined the government’s “working party” in order to oversee the process.

Over the past decade opposition has only deepened. In a recent Queensland Teachers Union ballot on NAPLAN, 95 percent of public school teachers called for a national review, itself a pale reflection of the extent of hostility towards the testing regime.

NAPLAN, however, cannot be fought in a piecemeal fashion; it must be rejected entirely. The defence of the public education system requires a political struggle against state and federal governments and the unions and the turn towards a socialist perspective. The Socialist Equality Party has established the Committee for Public Education (CFPE) to fight for the establishment of workplace committees in schools, universities and TAFEs, independent of the unions, that will mobilise education staff, students and other sections of the working class in an offensive against the capitalist system itself—a system that has proved itself entirely incapable of meeting the critical social needs of the working class.



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