

Australia: Why is the New South Wales Teachers Federation promoting a new NAPLAN?

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Earlier this month, the New South Wales Teachers Federation (NSWTF) hosted a public lecture entitled “Towards a New NAPLAN: Testing to the Teaching.” It was delivered by former Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) director of Writing Across the Curriculum, Dr Les Perelman, reportedly one of the world’s leading experts in school education and assessment. The NSWTF commissioned Perelman to develop the academic paper “to contribute to the debate about dismantling the existing NAPLAN assessment regime.”

NAPLAN, the National Assessment Program—Literacy and Numeracy, currently assesses Australian students annually in years three, five, seven and nine. It was introduced by the Rudd Labor government a decade ago, part of a conscious agenda aimed at restructuring public education to lower costs, narrow the curriculum, fill the coffers of edu-businesses, such as Pearson and McGraw Hill, and produce “work-ready” youth.

A decade later the test has come under fire. Claims by then Labor federal education minister, Julia Gillard, that NAPLAN would boost achievement have been widely discredited. Test results across the board have failed to improve while the performance of the most disadvantaged students is in free-fall.

Perelman is best known for his criticisms of a new addition—an essay—to the Scholastic Assessment Test (SAT), a standardised test widely used by college administrators for college admissions in the United States. He was not opposed to an essay portion of the test *per se*; he considered it a good idea if done well. His chief criticism was that length, more than any other factor, correlated with a high score in the marking of the SAT. After meeting Perelman in 2012, David Coleman, president of the College Board—the organisation that

administers the SAT and is partly funded by foundations such as the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation—redesigned the test.

According to critics, the motivation of the College Board was not educational, but the fact that SAT was increasingly losing market share to a rival college entry test, the American College Testing (ACT).

Growing numbers of colleges and universities were choosing ACT instead of SAT because they considered it more closely aligned with the Common Core State Standards (CCSS), a federal initiative promoted by former US President Barack Obama and funded by various corporate interests, including the Gates Foundation.

Commencing in 2013, CCSS established national rather than state-by-state curriculum standards, and began testing all children, starting as young as five years old, to see if they were “college or career ready.”

In other words, Perelman’s criticism of the SAT test was not focused on dismantling high-stakes testing regimes, but to help develop tests that would capture a larger market share of the new billion-dollar growth industry: selling curriculum and testing materials to school districts across the United States.

Perelman’s criticisms of NAPLAN and his review of the test were widely reported in the Australian media. The federal education minister, Simon Birmingham, commented that he “certainly expected” his government’s assessment authority, the Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA), would closely examine Perelman’s criticism.

At the public lecture, held in the union’s auditorium and attended by representatives from parent groups, government, religious and independent schools, along with teachers and students, Perelman ripped the NAPLAN writing test to shreds, exposing it as perhaps the world’s

worst practice. Among his criticisms were:

- * The exam is constructed without any public documentation regarding its design.

- * It rewards writing mechanics—spelling, punctuation, grammar—over the communication of ideas.

- * It rewards the use of uncommon words spelled correctly. A student could get a top mark simply by using an uncommon word multiple times.

- * It uses a 10-point scale for marking essays. This means markers have 90 seconds to read the student's essay and 270 seconds to make 10 decisions on the scales.

- * Students write an essay after being given a prompt or stimulus (picture or words). Until 2014, the same prompt was given to years three, five, seven and nine. Beginning in 2015, one prompt was given to years three and five and a different prompt to students in years seven and nine. The essays are scored without the marker knowing the student's year.

Exposing NAPLAN's writing test as an utter sham was not, however, the main goal of the NAPLAN lecture. Its aim was two-fold: First, as a means of lifting the NSWTF's badly damaged credibility in the eyes of Australian teachers. During Perelman's lecture, teachers responded with loud laughter and applause to virtually every criticism of NAPLAN, making unmistakably clear their hostility to the test. And introducing him to the audience, NSWTF president, Maurie Mulheron, hailed the lecture as a "momentous day," holding aloft the front page of the *Sydney Morning Herald* headlining a call by NSW Education Minister Rob Stokes for the ditching of NAPLAN.

In 2010, the Australian Education Union (AEU) and its state affiliates had shut down a proposed boycott of NAPLAN testing, which would likely have involved a major strike. Unlike the teacher union bureaucrats, Australian teachers have been almost universally hostile to NAPLAN from the start, due to its debilitating consequences for both teachers and students.

Second, the union is anxiously pitching for a seat at the table during discussions around the federal government's new testing regime. "Gonski 2.0" *Review to Achieve Educational Excellence in Australian Schools* was announced earlier this month and has already been approved by Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull.

Far from scrapping them, the new Gonski *Review* insists on intensifying testing and data collection throughout Australia, already one of the most data-driven education systems in the world. One of its key recommendations is an online assessment tool to enable teachers to focus on

"measuring and tracking student growth and performance, across a year and between years." Teachers will be directed to access a "Large store of validated assessment items and tasks in multiple learning areas, mapped across learning progression." Principals will be held accountable for ensuring students, who will be identified by a "unique student identifier," achieve a "year's improvement" every year. Scrutiny of test results and subjecting students to an assembly line of assessment items will ever-more strangle creativity and stifle critical thinking and any other element of enlightened education.

This is completely in line with Perelman's view that NAPLAN should not be discarded but rather, "reformulated and reimagined to promote and reinforce the curriculum and classroom teaching." According to critics, Perelman among them, NAPLAN is not aligned with the curriculum. But the curriculum will remain one that demands conformity, standardisation, testing and a rigid series of "learning steps."

One senior educator pointed to these issues in her question to Perelman at the conclusion of the lecture: "I hate NAPLAN," she began, "but am concerned that we will be replacing it with another tyranny, testing children every two weeks and creating even more spurious league tables."

The union's promotion of Perelman and his report is a conscious effort to pull the wool over teachers' eyes. It is posturing as a critic of a regressive regime that will shortly be replaced, with union support, by one that is even more aligned with the profit requirements of the primary "stake-holders" in education—"edu-businesses," in the major corporate and financial sectors of the Australian and global economy.



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