

Despite intense opposition, NAPLAN tests restart in Australian schools

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Australian state and territory governments resumed National Assessment Program—Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) tests in schools this month, defying widespread opposition among teachers, education experts, parents and students.

All students in years 3, 5, 7 and 9 must sit the tests, providing data that is then exploited to produce assessments of schools' performances. The federal government's My School website publishes a de-facto league table, ranking schools throughout the country.

The underlying purpose of NAPLAN is to convince parents to withdraw their children from "underperforming" schools, further eroding the under-funded public education system and boosting better-resourced private schools.

Far from producing helpful diagnostic information for improving students' learning and outcomes, NAPLAN places intense pressure on students and teachers, and leads to a narrowing of curriculums as schools spend months coaching students for the literacy and numeracy tests.

The federal government is planning to have all tests conducted on-line in 2022, a move which will further disadvantage schools in impoverished working-class areas and those in remote locations without access to high-speed internet connections.

State and territory education ministers last year cancelled the 2020 tests, knowing that NAPLAN was increasingly discredited and unpopular. Officially, the cancellation was blamed on the COVID-19 pandemic.

However, in line with the government position that the risk of the virus spreading among school-aged children was "very low," the cancellation was reportedly not based on concern that students, sitting in crowded halls for hours at a time, might become infected.

Rather, the ministers said the pandemic's impact on "the operation of centralised marking centres" could have "implications for nationally comparable data if an insufficient number of students are available to do the test."

School attendances had dropped dramatically, reflecting widespread scepticism among parents and teachers about official claims that schools were safe places. Parental concerns were compounded by reports that schools lacked basic hygiene equipment, such as soap for handwashing, and the knowledge that social distancing was impossible in the school environment.

From its introduction in 2008 by the Rudd Labor government, teachers have opposed NAPLAN, aware that similar regimes in the US and the UK have transformed schools into testing factories and exacerbated already stark socio-economic class inequalities, with "underperforming" schools in working class areas subjected to sanctions and closures.

By 2010, teachers called for a nation-wide boycott of the regime, but this was blocked by the Australian Education Union (AEU), the New South Wales Teachers Federation (NSWTF) and other teacher unions. These unions were given a place on the Labor government's "working party" to oversee the tests and the use of the My School data, a move that the unions falsely presented as a victory for teachers.

NAPLAN was touted by then federal education minister, Julia Gillard, as a means of "providing information for mums and dads and improving outcomes for all Australian students." As the WSWs warned, NAPLAN was actually about accelerating the shift to private schools, helping to create one of the most privatised and socially-segregated education systems among comparable countries, with public schools left with the most disadvantaged students.

Continuing reports on the downward trajectory of student performance have threatened NAPLAN's viability. In 2018, former New South Wales (NSW) education minister Adrian Piccoli, currently a director of the Gonski Institute for Education at the University of NSW, wrote: "The NAPLAN testing and reporting regime is clearly in its death throes."

In 2020, in an attempt at damage control, the premiers of NSW, Victoria and Queensland launched a review of the testing regime, calling for aspects of its operations to be tweaked. The review made several limited suggestions, such as moving the test until later in the school year, but advocated the retention of NAPLAN.

The federal Liberal-National government has reiterated its determination to maintain the 12-year-old regime. Federal Education Minister Alan Tudge declared recently: "We must protect NAPLAN, and not give in to those who call for less accountability and less information for teachers and parents."

Likewise, the Queensland state Labor government's Education Minister Grace Grace said teachers had to continue to implement NAPLAN, insisting that some form of standardised testing was required, even though "we know from parents and teachers there are shortcomings with how NAPLAN currently operates."

Last October, Queensland teachers voted overwhelmingly to ban NAPLAN in all its forms. More than 94 percent of the more than 8,000 members who participated in the Queensland Teachers Union's (QTU) ballot voted for the outright ban.

However, the QTU abandoned the ban after the Queensland Industrial Relations Commission declared it would be unlawful industrial action, ruling in favour of the state Labor government.

To placate teachers, the QTU then urged its members to withdraw their own children from NAPLAN. This is a limited, individualised form of protest that effectively allows NAPLAN to resume.

In similar manoeuvres, the AEU and the NSWTF have issued empty appeals to the federal government to abolish NAPLAN, citing surveys showing overwhelming opposition to the test by teachers, principals and education support staff.

An AEU survey of 12,000 public school staff conducted in 2020 found that 94 percent of teachers and 85 percent of school principals believed NAPLAN

contributed to student anxiety; 85 percent of teachers and 75 percent of school principals did not believe NAPLAN improved student outcomes; and 78 percent of school principals and 66 percent of teachers believed NAPLAN increased teachers' workloads. Large majorities also did not think that NAPLAN was effective in measuring or comparing school performances.

AEU federal president Correna Haythorpe said the union "again calls on the federal government to scrap NAPLAN and develop a new assessment framework based on sample testing in consultation with the teaching profession and its union."

This is a recipe for once more establishing a "working party" partnership between the governments and the union leaders to continue a NAPLAN-style regime, perhaps in a slightly modified form.

Teachers and parents need to take the fight against NAPLAN out of the hands of the unions. NAPLAN cannot be tweaked or re-modelled. High-stakes testing and the pro-business agenda behind it must be rejected.

The Committee for Public Education calls for the formation of rank-and-file committees of school staff, parents and students, totally independent of the trade unions, for the widest discussion and action to be developed.

The fight for the right of all students to free, first-class public education requires a political struggle against the Labor and Liberal-National governments alike, which are determined to degrade public education to a second-rate system for those children whose parents cannot afford private schooling.



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