Effectiveness of the National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy

QCEC Submission, June 2013

On 15 May 2013 the Senate referred to the Education, Employment and the Workplace Relations References Committee an inquiry into the effectiveness of the National Assessment Program - Literacy and Numeracy. The Queensland Catholic Education Commission (QCEC) submits the following response on behalf of the 22 Catholic schooling authorities representing 290 Catholic schools in Queensland. The response aligns with the terms of reference of the Senate inquiry.

a) whether the evidence suggests that NAPLAN is achieving its stated objectives

To answer this question one has to be aware of the stated objectives of NAPLAN with the understanding that an ‘objective’ is a statement that identifies something worked towards; being striven for; a goal.

The ACARA NAPLAN website does not clearly state the objectives of NAPLAN rather it provides descriptions of what NAPLAN actually ‘is’ rather than statements about the intent or objectives of NAPLAN. The following extracts were texts located on the ACARA website that referred to the purposes of NAPLAN:

- ... it tests skills in literacy and numeracy that are developed over time through the school curriculum.
- NAPLAN tests identify whether all students have the literacy and numeracy skills that provide the critical foundation for their learning, and for their productive and rewarding participation in the community.
- It tests the sorts of skills that are essential for every child to progress through school and life, such as reading, writing, spelling, grammar and punctuation, and numeracy.

In the section on Scales it states: ‘One of the main objectives of the National Assessment Program is to monitor trends in performance over time. In order to do this, proficiency scales have been developed for each of the sample assessment domains.’

In the Parent section it states: ‘NAPLAN tests give you information on how your child is progressing against national standards. This information allows for additional intervention if necessary to ensure your child progresses at a rate where they can fully participate in all aspects of the curriculum.’

Therefore, if the above statements are accepted as ‘objectives’ of NAPLAN testing, the following is true:
NAPLAN tests literacy and numeracy skills in four domains – reading, writing, language conventions (spelling, grammar and punctuation) and numeracy.

NAPLAN uses proficiency scales to monitor trends over time.

NAPLAN rates a student’s performance on NAPLAN against national benchmarks. With reference to this last point, the arbitrary nature of national benchmarks generates significant discussion among educators. One point of frustration is the Year 5 benchmark being 2 Achievement Bands above the Year 3 benchmark – the only incidence of this occurring across the year levels. For many students, given their Year 3 Scale Scores, it is not possible, given the number of questions on the test paper to improve their position relative to the national minimum standard from Year 3 to Year 5. Overall, Year 5 achievement appears to be lower due to the arbitrary benchmark which has been agreed. In addition, the minimum standard associated with the national benchmark is of such a low standard, many dismiss its relevance to most Australian students.

Parents have another source of data about their child’s learning to add to the ongoing supportive conversations between home and school.

The objectives of NAPLAN need to be clearly identified and named. It does not appear on the NAPLAN website that a clear objective of NAPLAN is to improve student learning (which is the business of schools).

**b) unintended consequences of NAPLAN’s introduction**

NAPLAN is now broadly viewed as a ‘high stakes test’ because the results are publicly available and compare schools. Once any testing becomes ‘high stakes’ it can lead to unintended consequences which include:

- **Increased stress:** Even though Statewide testing and NAPLAN testing have been taking place for many years the place given to NAPLAN in more recent years within the media and public domain has increased anxiety for:
  - Some teachers are apprehensive about how they will look to their colleagues and parent community if the students in their class do not perform well;
  - Some students, particularly Year 3 students, are anxious throughout the NAPLAN testing period. Anxiety has been evident with students crying excessively and sleeplness;
  - Some parents are worried about their child’s performance on the tests, particularly parents of children who experience difficulty in learning but do not fit the categories for exemption.

- **Labelling of schools:** the media labels some schools as being ‘low performing schools.’ Many parents report that NAPLAN results are not a criterion in their selection of a school for their child as they know they are many other facets to a young person’s overall development. Parents value the characteristics of a Catholic school – a sense of worth and belonging, a caring and nurturing learning environment. As reported by Henry Gray in the ACEL Journal (2010) ‘while academics are important, so too is developing the individual in a social, emotional and moral/spiritual context.’

- **Distraction to schools:** there is considerable concern of the distraction that NAPLAN has on the teaching time available to schools and the interruption it makes to usual routines.
c) NAPLAN's impact on teaching and student learning practices

NAPLAN results are used meaningfully to inform the future practices of systems, schools and teachers. Schools tend to look at NAPLAN results at the broader national/state/sector/school level before drilling down to the class and student level. Educators in schools and Catholic schooling authorities are becoming increasingly proficient in analysing NAPLAN data by comparing and examining year on year and trend data. Some schools have formed data teams which meet regularly to analyse all the data sets available to the school. As a consequence, teachers participate in a range of data analysis processes, including data walls and focused conversations.

Schools and systems analyse trends over time to identify areas of strength and areas that need future professional learning and resourcing. After mapping content and skill development schools deliver appropriate professional learning to address the needs of teachers and revise whole school programs to enhance skill development and ensure continuity across year levels.

At the classroom level teachers analyse the questions that students answered correctly and incorrectly and draw conclusions about the level of understanding of individuals, groups of students or whole cohorts on specific content, concepts, processes and skills. As a result of analysing NAPLAN data for their class/es, teachers examine their class programs and pedagogical practices and identify areas for change in professional practices.

Although NAPLAN has limitations as a tool for diagnosing a student’s present state of learning, given the results are not available until mid-September, teachers can focus on embedding teaching of literacy and numeracy skills across all learning areas. Students, particularly those in years 7 and 9 as they increasingly take responsibility for their own learning, can commit themselves to learning necessary literacy and numeracy skills.

One reason that NAPLAN is viewed as not a useful tool to impact on teaching and students’ learning practices is because individual students are not able to be tracked easily as their cohort moves through the years of NAPLAN testing. As students across Australia do not have a unique student identifier it is difficult to track a student’s progress from one test period to the next. If schools were able to track students across years, NAPLAN would be a more useful tool in investigating the literacy and numeracy needs of individual students, especially when students move between sectors and states/territories.

Although it is stated that NAPLAN tests broadly reflect the Statements of Learning for English and Mathematics and aspects of literacy and numeracy common to the curriculum in each state or territory there is a need for NAPLAN tests to align closely with Australian Curriculum, particularly the general capabilities of Literacy and Numeracy. It is vital in building teacher confidence in NAPLAN that there is alignment between the national curriculum and the national assessment program.

d) the impact on teaching and student learning practices of publishing NAPLAN test results on the MySchool website

While QCEC highly values educational accountability it is concerned that there may be a disproportionate emphasis on NAPLAN results in measuring the overall quality of education being received by students. When NAPLAN results are used publicly as a measure of the quality of education it does not acknowledge the many facets of an individual’s development in receiving a holistic education. The emphasis on valuing a school by the results of a ‘point in time’ test conflicts with a much broader view of the purpose of education.

NAPLAN only measures a student’s achievement in a narrow slice of literacy and numeracy. Despite these two areas being acknowledged as being foundational for success in all learning areas there are
other dimensions that contribute to an individual’s growth and development – physical, emotional, social, cultural, aesthetic and spiritual. QCEC is concerned that some people and groups, most notably large sections of the media, portray NAPLAN results as an overall measure of a school’s value and quality.

Many Catholic schools cater for students with a diverse range of learning needs – students with disabilities, Language Background Other Than English, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, refugees and students from low socio-economic backgrounds. Teachers working in these challenging school environments implement a range of programs and initiatives to support the diverse needs of students. The hard work and dedication of teachers is not valued when these schools are reported as low performing schools.

The MySchool website’s reporting on a school’s performance from year to year allows for differences in starting points while maintaining expectations of improvement for all. Concern is expressed when NAPLAN data is misinterpreted or incorrectly reported in the media and it is not corrected.

e) potential improvements to the program, to improve student learning and assessment

Suggestions to improve NAPLAN so that it can be better used by educators to improve student learning include:

- Make NAPLAN results available to schools in a much quicker timeframe – at present receiving results in mid-September does not enable it to be used effectively as a diagnostic tool;
- Align the NAPLAN tests with the Literacy and Numeracy general capabilities of the Australian curriculum;
- If NAPLAN Online is able to provide the opportunity for students to progress through the test at a level suitable for their ability, e.g. if students answer particular questions correctly before progressing onto another series of questions to challenge their thinking, the data would provide teachers with a much deeper knowledge and understanding of each student’s strengths and needs;
- ACARA to summarise trends in NAPLAN nationally around the different aspects of literacy and numeracy. Such information about generalised patterns would be a prompt for future planning and teaching by schools. The annual test report produced by the Queensland Studies Authority, especially in relation to Writing, is a valuable resource for teachers;
- As a cost effective method use cohort sampling to gain the same information on the standard of performance of Australian students.

f) international best practice for standardised testing, and international case studies about the introduction of standardised testing

Much has been written over the years about the impact of standardised testing. In the United States and United Kingdom research on standardised testing has resulted in a divisive educational debate. Proponents have supported testing for its benefits in transparency, curriculum focus, test preparation skills, data-informed practices and public accountability. Those against standardised testing put forward arguments about narrowing of the curriculum, stress, unfair school comparisons, and having a broader vision of education. It is also argued that countries that do not implement national standardised tests, e.g. Finland and Sweden, perform well in international assessments (PIRLS and TIMMS).
Two recent articles that appeared in The Australian newspaper on 17 May 2013 reveal the dichotomy of views about standardised testing - Jennifer Buckingham (Centre of Independent Studies) supported NAPLAN testing in her article, *My School Sheds A Welcome Light* whereas the article by Kevin Donnelly (Education Standards Institute) *NAPLAN Fails to Pass Its Own Test* identified a number of arguments against standardised testing.

**g) other relevant matters**

- **Concerns about test security and administration protocols:** As NAPLAN has become increasingly ‘high stakes’ data ACARA has developed resources to ensure that tests are administered ethically across the nation. The current requirement for schools and individuals to report all test incidents, including those which are just a suspicion or the result of an administrative error elevates the testing to a high stake activity. All such incidents whether found to be of substance or not, a mistake, or an attempt to cheat are reported as part of the national reporting framework. It would be more appropriate not to report nationally those incidents found to be without substance or of a minor nature.

- **NAPLAN commercial resources:** In recent years there has been an increase in the number of NAPLAN publications available for purchase, with many on sale in supermarkets. Schools have informed parents that there is no need to purchase these materials and that engagement with the school curriculum best prepares their child for the test. Although ACARA has also stated it does not support the use of these publications as preparation for NAPLAN, more pressure may need to be exerted on publishers regarding this matter.

QCEC trusts that this submission to the Senate on the effectiveness of the National Assessment Program - Literacy and Numeracy will support decision-makers to focus on the foundational purposes of a holistic education for the 21st century as identified in *the Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians*. 