



**LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY FOR THE AUSTRALIAN CAPITAL
TERRITORY**

**STANDING COMMITTEE ON EDUCATION, TRAINING AND
YOUTH AFFAIRS**

(Reference: Educational achievement gap)

Members:

**MS A BRESNAN (The Chair)
MR J HANSON (The Deputy Chair)
MS M PORTER**

TRANSCRIPT OF EVIDENCE

CANBERRA

TUESDAY, 16 FEBRUARY 2010

**Secretary to the committee:
Dr S Lilburn (Ph: 6205 0199)**

By authority of the Legislative Assembly for the Australian Capital Territory

Submissions, answers to questions on notice and other documents relevant to this inquiry that have been authorised for publication by the committee may be obtained from the Committee Office of the Legislative Assembly (Ph: 6205 0127).

WITNESSES

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Amended 21 January 2009

The committee met at 4.28 pm.

BARR, MR ANDREW, Minister for Education and Training, Minister for Planning, Minister for Tourism, Sport and Recreation and Minister for Gaming and Racing
WATTERSTON, DR JIM, Chief Executive, Department of Education and Training
WILKS, MS TRISH, Director, Learning and Teaching, Department of Education and Training

THE CHAIR: I thank the minister and the department for making themselves available this afternoon to come to this further hearing on the achievement gap inquiry. The My School website and debate are relevant to what we have been looking at and, having regard to some of the issues that have come up during the hearings, it would be useful to have some questions around that, and for the department to provide information as well.

I draw your attention—although you have probably all seen it before—to the privilege statement that is in front of you. Before we go to questions from members, minister, would you like to make an opening statement?

Mr Barr: No. We have got an hour, so let us go to questions, Madam Chair.

THE CHAIR: My first question is in relation to the concerns that have come up about teaching to the test. I know there have been some instances in the US where that has become a problem on a number of occasions. Given what is probably the unique situation we have in the ACT, where disadvantage is not in pockets but is spread more across different schools, what processes will be put in place to make sure that teaching to the test—obviously there will be a focus on numeracy and literacy—does not happen here? Obviously it has happened in the US and also in the UK. What are we going to do to make sure that does not become the focus of programs?

Mr Barr: Our focus will be on literacy and numeracy. To the extent that that is teaching for the test, I do not have a problem with that. The way that NAPLAN is designed and the sorts of skills that it is testing are basic skills that we would want all students to have. I think the risk that some see in terms of testing that might have occurred in other countries is not quite as apparent in the context of what NAPLAN is and what it is assessing. I understand the point you are making. Certainly, it is not the intention of the ACT government for NAPLAN to become a new subject area within the curriculum. But, equally, I do not have any concerns that what we teach, what we should be teaching in terms of literacy and numeracy, will be aiding our efforts in terms of our NAPLAN results if we teach our literacy and numeracy well.

I do not quite see that there is such a concern in the context of NAPLAN. Dr Watterston might want to expand a little in terms of the education methodology around NAPLAN itself. But these issues were extensively canvassed by education ministers in the lead-up to the development of the national assessment program in the first instance and have been independently and rigorously assessed by the Australian Council for Educational Research. There was quite an extensive and collaborative exercise in developing the tests themselves, before they even went into schools in 2008. I think the evidence from two years of testing is that this concept of teaching for the test is not applicable in this context.

Dr Watterston: The idea that you teach to a test is founded on the premise that the test is similar each year. These tests are different every year, but they are sample-based tests. The sample can be drawn right across the curriculum, both in literacy and in numeracy, so it is impossible to predict. I will paraphrase Professor Barry McGaw, who spoke at Senate estimates last week about this very issue. He is the chair of ACARA, who monitor and assess the test. He said there would be nothing better than for people to try and teach to the test because the only way to do that would be to teach right across the literacy and numeracy curriculum for that particular age cohort. So while he was a bit flippant in making that comment, he is 100 per cent right because, as I said before, there is no way of predicting what is going to be in those tests, so you are going to have to be well versed right across the curriculum and very proficient.

From a test point of view, we want the kids to be test-ready. That is the phrase we are using in the ACT. So for year 3 students especially, they have not been through many test situations and nor have they been used to the procedure or the processes around a test. I think some people are confusing systems or schools working to make kids test-ready or literate around the test with teaching to the test. You may hear of some schools that have practice tests and talk students through the processes involved, and I think that is a sensible requirement and it does prepare children for something that is going to be unfamiliar and new to them. There is quite a bit of work that goes on around preparation, but I think it is all relevant and it is certainly part of the curriculum.

THE CHAIR: Given the situation in the ACT where we do have perhaps—and I am sure this happens in other states—more disadvantages, in that you might have particular students in particular schools that will have some issues around numeracy and literacy, in that instance how would that be accommodated in that process? Would there be a focus on particular students to make sure they are able to participate in that test at the same level—at a level that other students would be able to participate at? Sometimes that might take the focus off some other areas of their schooling that might be more appropriate for them, whether it is art, sport or anything like that.

Mr Barr: If I understand the direction of the question, I come back to the point I have made time and time again in the Assembly. Your capacity to excel in so many other areas of schooling is pretty well contingent on your capacity to read and write and your future life opportunities are restricted considerably if you do not have those core skills. Whilst no-one is suggesting that the curriculum narrow only to what is taught within the tests within the context of NAPLAN, certainly, in primary education in particular, that emphasis on those core skills has to be there. I have no policy objections at all to a strong focus on literacy and numeracy, particularly in those early years. That has been the direction of government policy for some time and it is pretty fairly enunciated in the literacy and numeracy strategy. We do pick up on a very key point, though—that all teachers are teachers of literacy and numeracy, regardless of whether it is in a specialist construct or in other areas of the curriculum.

I understand the point you are making. I think you are perhaps overstating the impact of NAPLAN on the curriculum.

MS PORTER: I want to pick up on that strategy that you just mentioned, minister. I want to see how that ties in with this. How does the four-year strategy on literacy and numeracy tie in with what we are talking about today?

Mr Barr: One of the things that has perhaps been missing from the public debate in response to the data being made available this year was in fact that NAPLAN was first conducted in 2008. So data became available a year ago. We released our five-year literacy and numeracy strategy last year, so we are already a year into it. We are one of the few jurisdictions in the country to see measurable improvements, a statistically significant improvement, from 2008 to 2009 in a number of the domains that were tested. Again, we were one of the few jurisdictions that did not go backwards at all in any domain between 2008 and 2009.

I think we are seeing the early evidence of the success of the literacy and numeracy strategy. I might get some more commentary from the department on its application on the ground within schools, but that, combined with the new curriculum framework and its alignment with the national curriculum that we will be hearing more about in coming weeks, I think sets the ACT on the right path. That is not to say that this system is not without its challenges. My School did highlight some weaknesses within our system as well. That clearly presents, through the national partnerships and the targeted funding that the Deputy Prime Minister and I announced last week, the opportunity to address some of those concerns. But the literacy and numeracy strategy was put in place last year. Yes, we had the data last year. It is just that what was published at the end of January was in fact two years worth of data. What was published in the *Canberra Times* was only the 2009 test data. Dr Watterston and others might want to add a little more on the literacy and numeracy strategy and its implementation in schools at this point.

Dr Watterston: I would certainly like to endorse the minister's comments about what has been missed, I think, in this whole debate and turn to the My School and the raw scores from the NAPLAN testing. As Minister Barr said, there was considerable improvement right across the board in the ACT and that was not replicated in the states, even though other states are doing well. While the ACT may not have been the top in each particular area, the consistency of the improvement is something that cannot be overlooked if you overlay the literacy and numeracy strategy.

Twenty-one field officers that have been paid for through national partnerships and through a government budget initiative is a really significant deployment of resources. When you think there are only 83 schools in the ACT public education system, from my point of view, that is a massive investment. I do not think we have seen the best of that strategy, even though there has been some improvement already. The work that is going on in schools to create consistency of practice and to make sure that what we are doing in each classroom is replicated across the system with, as I said before, that consistency or that standardised belief about what works and what does not work, I think, will pay dividends as we pursue and work through this strategy over the four years.

As I said, it is a big investment. It is one that we are working hard to make sure it pays off. It is based on a coaching model. A lot of improvements in teaching and learning

have been attempted through professional learning. This is why that is practical as well as professional. In terms of the learning, the coaches are in the classrooms, working shoulder to shoulder with classroom practitioners. Everyone is benefiting from the expertise that is being deployed through these 21 positions. I think it is a marvellous strategy.

I was not here and I cannot take any credit for helping put it in place but, as an observer who has come in six months after the fact, I could not suggest a better way forward. I have every confidence that what we are doing will pay dividends. It is already starting to work.

MR HANSON: I have a supplementary, if I could, and then a question on the field officers. Have the 21 field officers been replaced in schools? Is there a deficit in schools? If we have taken our best 21 out of schools, have we left a deficit?

Mr Barr: They are working in schools.

MR HANSON: I know, but they are in specific positions, are they not? They have been taken out of classrooms as such to provide specific overlay?

Ms Wilkes: The field officers, as you are saying, have come from the workforce certainly. But what we have done is take 21 absolutely exemplar people to strengthen their knowledge and understanding of literacy and numeracy across a larger cohort. Instead of just working with one class or, in high school, a couple of classes, they are working with up to 10 teachers at any one time. Their knowledge and expertise are being spread across. I would not say we are taking them out. I would say we are putting them in.

MR HANSON: On a comparative analysis with other states, when you look at peer schools, we do not appear to be doing as well. If you take the ACT in isolation, we have a higher socioeconomic status. We have discussed this before at other hearings. We can now look at peer schools in other states. Based on that analysis, we are not doing as well as we might expect. I think the analysis I have seen is that about three-quarters underperform.

Mr Barr: I take some issue with that.

MR HANSON: Sure. That is the first point, if you could talk to that. The second is: when did you become aware of this? The data became live on the website recently but how long have you been aware of that data?

Mr Barr: The first point to make is that that figure of three-quarters was, obviously, derived from a *Canberra Times* analysis and is not, in fact, reflective of the data that was available on the My School website. I know there are 18 public schools that the *Canberra Times* listed as below the national average that were, in fact, performing as they were expected to, in that they were given a clear status on the My School website. With understanding and interpreting the data, there is a statistical margin of error. A school can fall within that.

In the case of the *Canberra Times* table, they drew an arbitrary line that was what they

determined to be the national average and said that anything below that, even if it was one point below that, represented a below-average performance. Statistically speaking, that is incorrect. The *Canberra Times* analysis was not correct in that context.

It is worth exploring further. This is a moving average. There must be 50 per cent of schools below it and 50 per cent above it. That *Canberra Times* analysis did not take account of the statistical variations and, in fact, was not a direct take from the My School website. Again, that is the *Canberra Times*—

MR HANSON: Do you not accept the point that—

Mr Barr: Let me finish my response. The second point to make is that, as I say, by the nature of the measure, 50 per cent of schools must be below. That said, once you take out the schools that fall within the statistical margin of error, I think it is fair to say that there are still more than 50 per cent of ACT schools who did not compare favourably with their interstate counterparts, based on ICSIA scores. There has been a lot of commentary about ICSIA. I have some concerns in relation to the methodology and its application in the ACT as it does drill down only to census collection district level.

We all know, and as Ms Bresnan indicated, even within a census collection district, which is about 200 households, there can be disparities in terms of income within that district. We will be looking at—it is certainly on the agenda, and the federal government has announced it—some further assessment and reassessment of how a school's ICSIA score is calculated.

Having said all that, I still think there are some issues within the ACT system that we need to address. I have been on the public record as saying that there are some of our schools whose raw scores are quite good and they perform very well and well above the national average but, once you equate them with their socioeconomic counterparts, there are schools in other jurisdictions that are doing even better.

Another important point to note is that some of those schools are selective entry schools. It would come as no surprise that the top school in the country was a government selective school in New South Wales, just in terms of their raw scores. You have got to ensure that your comparisons, when you make big, sweeping statements like the *Canberra Times* did that three-quarters of schools underperform, make some allowances for that range of factors.

MR HANSON: The statistics being what they are—and they are the ones that have been put out by the federal government and, I guess, accepted by all the state and territory governments—based on your data and the federal government's data, that is the analysis at this stage. Until that is refined—

Mr Barr: It is not telling us three-quarters. I made the point that, obviously, half the schools have to be below but it is not a fixed measure. I suppose the one fixed measure we have is performance above or below the minimum national benchmark. I am not sure whether you are aware that the ACT—

MR HANSON: If it is two-thirds or three-quarters, whatever it is, it goes to the

second part of my question. When did you notice? The impression I have been getting from you, sitting on this side—

Mr Barr: The first time that we saw the comparison with interstate schools was when the data was released on the My School website because we would never have had data from any other jurisdiction. What we do know, and what we have known from the 2008 NAPLAN data, which is why we have national partnerships and why we have put resources into particular schools, what we did know in 2008, is how all the ACT schools went on that NAPLAN testing. That is why we put in place the measures we did. That is why we identified, through the national partnerships, 29 ACT schools that are receiving \$17 million out of the national funding.

MR HANSON: The impression that has been created by you to this committee is that we are exceeding performance levels now.

Mr Barr: It depends which measure you look at. If your goal is to get as many students as possible above the national benchmark and to be outperforming Australian averages in all those areas, then we are. But if the question is “once you adjust for socioeconomic status, are all of our schools performing better than similar schools everywhere in Australia?” the answer is no.

MR HANSON: Certainly not all. I think the impression which has been created has been that, based on all those arguments and comparing apples with apples, we are still doing better. I think this has been disproven to some extent.

Mr Barr: I would not necessarily accept that as a statement on the totality of the education system because you have got to look at the actual results. They show that more ACT students are above the national minimum benchmark and are performing at higher levels than students anywhere else. As we discussed before, you would anticipate that being the case.

I am not suggesting that there are not issues that we need to respond to. They are principally in two areas. One is to ensure that we get everyone who is performing below the national minimum benchmark above it. That would be a pretty important goal. Secondly, we look to see what we can do through our gifted and talented policies and practice in schools to be stretching our highest performers. If there is one thing that is clear from the selective school models we have interstate, it is that some jurisdictions are really pushing their best and brightest.

MR HANSON: Are there selective schools here?

Mr Barr: I do not think our system is big enough to take an entire high school off line.

MR HANSON: You are not philosophically opposed to the concept?

Mr Barr: No. Our policy has been to focus on the school within the school model for gifted and talented education. I think there is greater capacity for specialisation within our system. Geographically, with 17 high schools, if you take one or two or three out—they would no longer serve their local communities; it would be selective entry only—that would leave a significant geographical gap to fill. I do not think

stand-alone selective high schools, for example, are the answer but the school within the school model can be and is being supported.

MR DOSZPOT: Minister, it was decided in August at COAG—you have already mentioned this, and it is part of the national partnership program—that funding be directed to four schools. What data, besides NAPLAN results, was this decision based on?

Mr Barr: This is the low socioeconomic national partnership. Obviously the schools had to qualify in the national context as serving low socioeconomic communities. As to how the four schools themselves were determined, I will ask Ms Wilks to answer.

Ms Wilks: There was a list of about seven or eight schools which qualified under the DEEWR guidelines. We looked at those in terms of their data around literacy and numeracy and the other programs that were in their schools and then made the decision on the four, which were, with one exception, the top four. The other one, which I know you are going to ask about, is Jervis Bay. At Jervis Bay we also have other programs to support them.

MR DOSZPOT: The question was based on NAPLAN and other results that were available to you. Is that what you are saying?

Ms Wilks: Yes, that is right. For instance, Florey is one of them. It caused some people to question why Florey was chosen. Florey has a very high percentage of ESL students. When you drive through the suburb you may not see it but there are considerable pockets of public housing. There was a particular need that we recognised and that is why Florey was one of them. The others are Kingsford Smith, Charnwood-Dunlop and Richardson.

MR DOSZPOT: How will future determinations be made—along the same lines or will additional information be coming along?

Ms Wilks: It is a seven-year program. We expect that those four schools will be involved in the program for three years and we will reassess at the end of three years. The national partnership is a seven-year partnership.

MS HUNTER: I wanted to go back to the statistically similar schools discussion that was had earlier. Have you had any concerns from any of the schools across the territory about who they were compared to on the My School website? As you have just said, it is not necessarily the most accurate methodology that is used at the moment.

Mr Barr: I think there was some confusion about what the figure represented. I think there was a sense of confusion around what was a similar school, as opposed to schools serving similar student populations—students from similar backgrounds. The number is derived from a rather complex formula that looks at everything from income through to home internet access, occupation of parents and educational level of parents. There are a range of factors. As I said, it is drilled down to a census collection district level. It is a much more sophisticated analysis than we have ever had before. Previous funding models and previous socioeconomic models have been

based around postcode assessment. We know in the ACT that, for example, the postcode 2603, which covers Red Hill, covers the richest people in Canberra and some of the poorest people.

ICSIA was a step forward in terms of being able to drill down to a finer level of detail. There was confusion in school communities that they thought a similar school would mean, say, in the primary sector, another primary school in a metropolitan area with a similar sized school population. Clearly there were some schools like that on the list of 60 statistically similar schools on the ICSIA scale, but there were some others that clearly raised some eyebrows. Obviously I had some school principals, teachers and parents saying, “How did the school of the air get compared with a school in the ACT?” The answer to that is that when you look at the student body and their socioeconomic status against the set of variables that derive the ICSIA score they were similar. One of the issues that I think we will need to consider as education ministers through MCEECDYA this year is whether in fact we refine that a little further to take account also of school size—

MS HUNTER: Amenity.

Mr Barr: Yes, as more information becomes available. Certainly, it has always been the intention to add more data to the My School website. As that becomes available then I think that will further refine that statistically similar school assessment.

MS HUNTER: I note that in the media there were something like 26 schools perhaps across Australia that had raised that query and they went back to have another look at each of those schools. I was also interested in your comment, minister, a moment ago that maybe the *Canberra Times* analysis was not always spot on. In question time last week you had raised that issue around feeling that this was a lot of information—

Ms Bresnan: It was, yes.

MS HUNTER: I am trying to explore that a little bit more. Where else do you think the analysis may not have been quite as robust as it could have been? I pick up on the point that that is the thing that people pull out of the paper and start making judgements and assessments on. So to get the record correct—

Mr Barr: I think more people access the My School website, with the greatest respect, than the *Canberra Times*. The My School website remains a constant source of information; whereas I am not sure how many people diligently cut out or kept the article. I know I have. I take it that I am a slightly different case. The majority of Canberrans do not even read the *Canberra Times*. You have got to have that as a sense of perspective. As I have said consistently through this process, the *Canberra Times* will ultimately be accountable for what they publish. If people believe that their analysis is reliable then they will take that analysis on board, like they do in any aspect of the *Canberra Times* reporting.

I congratulate them on what I think was a better effort than many other newspapers around the country in terms of the amount of resources and time they devoted to it and the fact that they followed up the next day with a further layer of information. I understand they intend in future to seek to further refine the quality of their coverage.

I do not want to be too critical of them, other than to say that I think in this instance, in terms of the data they published on the second day, on the Saturday, what they overlooked was the statistical margin of error. That was clear on the My School website. That information was there and available. They chose to present it in a slightly different way, which I think was a little unfair. That is the one negative comment I have had and I have made it to them about their coverage. Otherwise I think they did a pretty fair job.

THE CHAIR: Mr Doszpot, you had a follow-up?

MR DOSZPOT: I have a supplementary on the definition of “similar schools”. You have partly answered it, and I just want to dig a little bit deeper, if you don’t mind. It is a quite controversial definition amongst some of the schools—they are querying how it is put together. Whether it is the definition itself or the way that the schools are being grouped, is there a commitment from COAG to really look at this in more detail, to make sure that it does become more concise?

Mr Barr: Yes, the federal government has announced through ACARA that there will be a review of ICSEA. Certainly the things I will be taking to the table as part of that conversation are that, in terms of the public presentation, we need to be a bit clearer about exactly what that index represents. There is a range of technical issues that are available on the My School website in terms of how that score is derived. So, if you want to do a little bit more research, you can go and have a look at which variables input at which level into the creation of that particular score.

Although I have got some background in statistics, I do not claim to be the world expert on this, but the basis of what they have done to develop that is pretty robust. I am not going to take issue with the weighting that is given to home internet connection versus parental occupation. That is all very robust. What was not made clear enough, I think, is the issue around the school population and the socioeconomic background of the students versus the widely disparate nature of schools. There were some schools that were in the like-school analysis that had student populations of 40 or 50 and they were being compared with schools of 1,500.

There are clearly, from our NAPLAN data, very different results in different settings, depending on school size. In metropolitan settings—and this has been the case in the ACT—larger schools outperformed small schools by 10 to 15 per cent in the NAPLAN testing across 2008-09. So there is a very clear trend that schools that have larger student populations have better resources, have stronger educational programs and are getting better results. That was pretty clear through this testing for 2008-09. So schools that have more than 500 students were doing much better than schools that had 200—across every domain, every year level, by 10 to 15 per cent generally in the ACT. That is fairly consistent across the board in the territory.

THE CHAIR: My next question relates slightly to the first question I asked when you were talking about some of the processes that have been put in place at a national level—it has been discussed by ministers—to make sure that the processes that are followed by each school are—I do not want to use the term “above board”; that is not the right term to use. But I am wondering what has been done, or if there has been any work done, when looking at the statistics on each school, to make sure that the

number of students that are shown to sit the test actually do sit the test. Has there been any consideration of that? This probably goes to the experience in the US—ensuring that the number of students shown in the statistics as sitting the test actually are sitting the test. I guess it is a point about manipulation of figures.

Mr Barr: There has been a range of accusations—that some schools would say to certain students, “Do not come in today; do not sit the test.” If you are excluded or you do not sit, then you are in fact deemed to be below the national benchmark. So the system is set up in a way so that it is not in the interests of a school to say to someone, “Do not sit the test.” That is why you will see that there are some students who are excluded for reasons of severe disability and there are some students who are excluded because they have only just arrived in the country—I think it is inside 12 months—or because their English language proficiency is not strong enough to sit the test. But otherwise, if you do not, then you are not counted as above the benchmark; you are counted as below. So there is not an incentive for schools to be saying to students, “Do not sit the test.”

THE CHAIR: I see what you are saying, but in terms of the information that a school may provide, how is that treated?

Mr Barr: Are you asking what the auditing process is if 500 tests are handed out at the school and you want to be assured that 500 students have sat the test?

THE CHAIR: Yes.

Mr Barr: I will have to take that on notice in terms of exactly what auditing process ACARA has for that.

Dr Watterston: There are clear and specific instructions about how the tests are to be implemented, so there is consistency right across Australia in terms of the processes that are employed. I am aware of one teacher in Victoria who has been dismissed over not implementing those tests correctly. But, in general, I do not think there is any doubt about the quality of supervision or the efficacy of the tests in that sense. There has never been a question that I have heard of about states or schools or particular locations somehow or other being able to manipulate their results.

THE CHAIR: Could you elaborate on the Victorian example?

Dr Watterston: It was one year ago, in the first year of NAPLAN, and a teacher had somehow or other changed some answers on one of the tests, and I am not even sure how she was caught doing that. But it was followed up in the most severe way. So each jurisdiction monitors their own processes. I do not know if Trish could add to how we do it in the ACT, but certainly there are clear guidelines and I am not aware of too many people ever suspecting that they have been breached.

Ms Wilks: In terms of the number of papers, the papers are counted out and counted back in and so there is no provision for somebody to slip one under the table and then use it to coach their kids—or for doing anything there. Again, as Dr Watterston has said, it is around very clear, very concise, very direct questions and procedures that need to be followed and then they have to be signed off. So somebody who breached

that would actually be breaching the code of ethics. So I think that the structures are very strong around the administration of the test.

MR HANSON: Minister, the national partnership rewards funding is there, as I understand it, to target schools that have slipped below benchmarks, and we have a number of schools that have received funding; is that correct?

Mr Barr: You might have just confused terminology there. The national partnership funding works in two ways. There is an implementation phase, so the first few years of funding are around setting up the programs, and then there are reward payments triggered in the latter years, if you achieve the outcomes that you signed up for.

MR HANSON: Does that reward funding then go to schools or to the ACT? How is that measured—by school or by jurisdiction?

Ms Wilks: The reward payment will come into play this year on the 2010 NAPLAN data. Assuming that we meet our targets, and I am sure that we will, it will come into the ACT. It will then be distributed in the same way that the money has been distributed before; that is, on the percentage of students who fell below the benchmark. That was how the percentages were given to the Catholic Education Office and to the AIS. It will not be given directly to schools, as none of this has been given directly to our schools. We will use it to maintain and expand the programs that are operating.

MS PORTER: I wanted to ask a question around the size of schools—comparing large schools with smaller schools—and the minister has answered that question: the larger schools right across the board are actually doing better.

Mr Barr: I am happy to provide some more detailed information about that to the committee.

MS PORTER: That would be good, if you could provide that detail.

Mr Barr: We have done an assessment of the 2008 and 2009 data for schools smaller than 200, which we will call small; schools between 200 and 500, which we will call medium-sized; and schools larger than 500 students, which we will call large. Across the board the mean score rises as the school gets larger. As I say, the variances are up to more than 40 mean score points in some instances. For example, in year 3 grammar and punctuation, a small school year 3 student has a mean score of 381. That rises to 422 for the students in a larger school. That is a variation of more than 10 per cent from a small to a larger school. That is pretty consistent across the board. The gap is not always that big. Sometimes it is a little bigger. The year 3 reading score in 2009 ranged from 400 in a small school to 451 in a larger school. So that is a statistically significant difference in performance.

MR HANSON: How did small schools in a rural setting go, minister?

Mr Barr: There weren't any small schools in a rural setting.

MR HANSON: Sorry. I forgot. Yes, that is right.

Mr Barr: Although I can observe, Mr Hanson, that this phenomenon of educational results has been pretty consistent for a little while.

MR HANSON: I guess, we will never know, will we? We will never know.

Mr Barr: We have been able to improve our position and our literacy and numeracy outcomes and our educational outcomes as a result of moving away from the small school model.

MR HANSON: In a rural setting.

MS HUNTER: Could I clarify whether that is across just government schools or across all—

Mr Barr: This is public schools.

MS HUNTER: I do note in the results that some of the small independent schools did quite well.

Mr Barr: This data is just public schools. I will give the whole table to the committee.

MR DOSZPOT: Minister, how will the new push for literacy and numeracy improvements affect ESL programs?

Mr Barr: It will be through a range of budget initiatives. There is a strengthening of ESL programs through separate ACT government funded initiatives. They involve increasing the amount of resources available—the amount of teacher assistant positions. Each school was able to get access to more resources as a result of an injection of additional funding into ESL specific programs. I think it depends on the level of English language proficiency. Through our introductory English centres in primary schools and high schools, very intense programs operate—again, based around individual need. So some students can come in and spend a relatively short period of time in the introductory English centres before moving out into a mainstream education environment. Others will spend a more intense period in that introductory English language program. It will depend, and it will vary case by case, based on the needs of the student. But more resources are available.

It is interesting when you look at the performance improvement for ESL students from year 3 through to year 9. There is a gap in the early years, but that is closed; in fact, I think by year 9 ESL students are generally doing better. So I think our interventions are working and are effective. These additional resources are targeted at students who are not meeting the minimum benchmarks. I go back to the point I made earlier: for some students who are only recently arrived, perhaps inside 12 months, they are not participating in the NAPLAN testing. But their needs are looked after by even more intense support programs through the introductory English language centres.

Ms Wilks: The other thing that we have recognised is the need to further develop our ESL teachers. So we have a scholarship program which will start in semester 2 at the University of Canberra. We expect about 30 teachers to take up the offer to get

additional training in teaching English as a second language. We see that as another important plank to support those students.

MR DOSZPOT: My question also relates to what you were talking about before regarding funding and the fact that targets have to be met. As I understand it, they only get a percentage of the funds up front and if the targets are not met the following amount is not given. Is that correct?

Mr Barr: The structure of the national partnerships is around performance of the states and territories. So the federal government set pretty clear criteria about what will trigger further payments.

MR DOSZPOT: What happens to a school if it has employed additional teachers, additional skills, in order to meet the targets and they do not get the funds following through? What happens to those teachers?

Ms Wilks: With respect to the additional teachers we have employed through the department, some of them—a small number—have been funded through the national partnerships. We are confident that we will achieve at least some of the targets, a proportion of the targets. What will happen is that it carries over; should we not get 100 per cent as designated by the commonwealth, they will continue to sit there. We then have another opportunity to go to that. So we will not be pulling out resources from schools. We have used the money that we have received—

MR DOSZPOT: But if you are not meeting the targets—

Mr Barr: I will give some context to this. Of the 21 extra positions, the ACT government alone is funding 17 of them. So only four are in the context of the national partnerships.

Ms Wilks: And the remainder of the money is being used now across the system to put in resources et cetera which will then be there forevermore. So we very judiciously used that facilitation funding, and they are not reliant on meeting our targets, although we fully expect to.

MR DOSZPOT: I have a final question on that. Do the 21 field officers that have been recruited include high schools as well as primary schools?

Mr Barr: Yes.

MR DOSZPOT: And these people that have been recruited, the 21, you mentioned before that some of them already came from schools. So by going into these new positions, did they have the skills required or do they have to be upgraded to go into these new areas?

Ms Wilks: Certainly, these were high-quality people who came in through a merit selection process. Having said that, none of them have the entire suite of skills that we would want them to have, so they are experiencing fairly intensive professional development to bring them to the level that we would hope them to have. Again, we are upskilling the capacity of our teachers.

MS HUNTER: I do not know, minister, whether you have heard about a private company called Australia School Ranking group, who have decided to jump into the market, and for \$97 have pulled together the rankings across Australia and ranked them, and have upset quite a few people. Particularly in Queensland, it has caused—

Mr Barr: In this capitalist system we live in, people will find ways of making money out of nearly everything.

MR HANSON: Well, we are moving towards a socialist utopia here, so I am sure you will be well satisfied, Mr Barr.

Mr Barr: With your full support, Jeremy?

MR HANSON: Not quite.

MS HUNTER: Obviously, it has been slammed by educational stakeholders because it is very much around simplistic leagues tables. I know that a P&C union, and a number of stakeholders, have come out to slam this particular publication. I understand that the owner of the company is quite pleased with how trade is going. I guess it does bring—

Mr Barr: All of this publicity from angry stakeholders will no doubt only increase the interest.

MS HUNTER: I guess it does come back to this discussion at COAG level and with Julia Gillard and so forth. There was talk that this was around providing benefit rather than harm to school communities. That was very much a discussion by various state and territory education ministers. What is your response? Is this something that you would take up in your next COAG meeting to see how this sort of thing might be tackled or what sort of strategies could be put in place?

Mr Barr: The most interesting suggestion I have heard is for ACARA to copyright its data.

MS HUNTER: ACARA were upset about this as well. The CEO made a comment.

Mr Barr: That would probably be the most effective response to this sort of thing. We have explored it at some length. I personally do not favour attempts to censor the press. It did not work in New South Wales, anyway. Their legislation was pointless, meaningless and in fact probably ended up provoking certain newspaper outlets to go further and—

MS HUNTER: Just cop any fine and go ahead; that is right.

Mr Barr: stick the middle finger right up to the legislature. I think that is how you could accurately describe how they went about it. One would imagine that ACARA would want to look at—

MS HUNTER: The copyright option?

Mr Barr: Yes, on that. My advice to the general public would be that the My School website is the authoritative source for information and that if you are going anywhere else then you are obviously running the risk of receiving information that is entirely coloured by the party that you are purchasing that information from. Again, if you are time poor and determined that you will not take the time yourself to look up that information and you want to pay someone to do it, there are probably other means by which you could do that, rather than through some of these data-mining companies that have set themselves up.

MS HUNTER: Is that something that you would support? Is ACARA exploring these copyright options?

Mr Barr: I do not have an in-principle objection to them doing that. We will have to take some further advice on the implications and how that would work in practice for individuals to access the information. I would have to take that advice and think about it. I do not have an in-principle objection to ACARA wanting to ensure that the data that is made available is appropriately used.

THE CHAIR: We do not have much time left. Have any members particularly burning questions they want to ask?

MR HANSON: There are always questions to ask. One school that has seriously underperformed and that has come to attention is Lake Tuggeranong college. How is it that they have slipped through the radar and we have come to the point that we are aware of that now?

Mr Barr: The Lake Tuggeranong college has a small number of students in a years 9 and 10 program. That is an alternative education setting. The college's principal role is years 11 and 12 study. It is one of three colleges that offer an alternative education pathway for students who are not coping in a mainstream high school environment. The year 9 students sat the NAPLAN test. Perhaps not surprisingly, given their disengagement from high school, they did not perform well.

Some funding has been allocated through this program by the commonwealth, directly through the ACT government, to this program. We will be able to provide some more support for those students. I don't think you can read that as a commentary on Lake Tuggeranong college; I think you can read it as a commentary on students who—

MR HANSON: That is a fair point. Do we have any other seriously underperforming schools of particular concern that you are aware of?

Mr Barr: I do not think there are any schools that are seriously underperforming. There are 29 schools in the ACT that are receiving additional support through the various national partnerships. They are across all education sectors—the Catholic system, the independent system and the public system. If you want an overall commentary on how the ACT went in the 2009 NAPLAN tests, I would say—

MR HANSON: No. What I am trying to target here—thanks for the information on Lake Tuggeranong college—is the ones that are really well below the benchmark.

There is going to be a range, as you have identified. I guess there will be some that sit towards the bottom. They are the ones I am talking about, specifically in line with the context of this inquiry, the ones that sit at the bottom. Are there a number of those that you are concerned about? Are there none of those? Where do we sit? Are there any that the red flag has gone up on?

Mr Barr: We have some particular challenges in Jervis Bay. We have a specialist program in place there. Jervis Bay had the lowest ICSIA score of any school in the ACT. The national mean is 1,000. Jervis Bay came in at, I think, 845. That gives you a sense of the significant socioeconomic disadvantage. To put it in a national context, I understand the lowest ICSIA score nationally was in the 500s. In the context of the ACT, Jervis Bay is the most disadvantaged school. In the national context, though, it is relatively well off compared to elsewhere in the country.

ACT schools range, though. I think there were only four or five that had an ICSIA score below 1,000. They were all in the public system. The bulk of ACT schools sat, as you would expect, above the national mean in terms of their socioeconomic status.

MR HANSON: We looked at those and you have given an explanation for Lake Tuggeranong college. Jervis Bay, perhaps, had socioeconomic factors. Have we looked at the others to see whether something is going wrong? Is it simply socioeconomic or is there another factor there?

Mr Barr: As I was going to say earlier, you can draw the conclusion from the ACT results as a whole that, within each sector—public, Catholic and independent— there are some schools that are doing exceptionally well and performing perhaps ahead of their socioeconomic status in terms of what you would anticipate their results to be. There is clearly some very good practice within the ACT system. There are others who are performing exactly as you would anticipate, given their socioeconomic status. It comes across the range of results. There are some schools that are not doing as well.

I think the challenge, as we move forward, is to look at what is best practice. We know we have got it in each system. How can we replicate that across all schools within the territory? I think this is where we need to move to a more collaborative approach across the sectors and schools working together. Certainly a very strong focus of the department's policy direction, the department's strategic plan and the department's thinking as we move forward is more collaboration, schools working together, cross-sectoral work.

I do not know whether you heard Jeremy Irvine, the director of the Association of Independent Schools, on the radio this morning. It seems the front page of the *Canberra Times* provoked some media interest. Jeremy was spot-on when he said that perhaps the most significant initiative that we are going to see in the ACT in the years ahead is around teacher quality and the establishment of the teacher quality institute. That is a collaborative exercise across all sectors. That is going to be the number one factor that improves school results—the quality of teachers.

MR HANSON: I do not dispute that. My question specifically is trying to get to the bottom of it. It refers to the ones at the bottom of the system where we do not have time necessarily to bring on programs and wait for initiatives to come aboard. Do we have

a sense that they are—

Mr Barr: Those resources started to flow last year through the literacy and numeracy strategy. There are schools that have been identified through the national partnerships. The money is there now. There are 29 of them across the territory. They are in all three sectors.

MR DOSZPOT: Taking a slight detour from some areas that you are concentrating on such as literacy and numeracy, there has been quite an unfortunate cut in funding to areas like the rock eisteddfod. For some schools that were perhaps not performing as well in some areas, that was great for them from a self-boost point of view. Is there anything being considered for those schools so that they can maintain the leadership that they have had in that area?

Mr Barr: It is certainly the case for Calwell; I turned the sod on their new performing arts centre earlier this month. Clearly the announcement that they were not able to continue in the rock eisteddfod this year was very disappointing. I know that the federal government did step in and make \$700,000 available. It seems that it might be too late for the 2010 event but I understand there is some hope or optimism for 2011. As I understand it, there was corporate sponsorship.

MR DOSZPOT: Sure. I thought there were ACT funds withdrawn from that as well.

Mr Barr: I think the \$10,000 through the Healthpact grants was made available for a couple of years but I do not think the rock eisteddfod—

MR DOSZPOT: You will supply that?

Mr Barr: I do not think the rock eisteddfod running nationally hinges on \$10,000 from the ACT. There are bigger issues at play nationwide. Clearly it is disappointing. What I have certainly been able to say and confirm is that our local event, step into the limelight, will continue to run. Given the size of the ACT compared to the rest of the nation, we were never in a position to bail out the rock eisteddfod.

MR DOSZPOT: I did not suggest that.

Mr Barr: I do not want to suggest that you did suggest that. No-one has. Recognising that the national opportunity will not be there through rock eisteddfod, we will certainly have a very strong emphasis this year on step into the limelight.

THE CHAIR: Unfortunately we are out of time. Thank you, minister and department officials for appearing today.

The committee adjourned at 5.30 pm.