



**LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY FOR THE AUSTRALIAN CAPITAL TERRITORY**

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

(Reference: [Inquiry into standardised testing in ACT schools](#))

**Members:**

**MR M PETTERSSON (Chair)**  
**MRS E KIKKERT (Deputy Chair)**  
**MR A WALL**

**PROOF TRANSCRIPT OF EVIDENCE**

**CANBERRA**

**TUESDAY, 25 SEPTEMBER 2018**

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**Secretary to the committee:**  
**Mrs N Kosseck (Ph: 620 50435)**

**By authority of the Legislative Assembly for the Australian Capital Territory**

Submissions, answers to questions on notice and other documents, including requests for clarification of the transcript of evidence, relevant to this inquiry that have been authorised for publication by the committee may be obtained from the Legislative Assembly website.

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## **Privilege statement**

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*Amended 20 May 2013*

**The committee met at 9.37 am.**

**BERRY, MS YVETTE**, Deputy Chief Minister, Minister for Education and Early Childhood Development, Minister for Housing and Suburban Development, Minister for the Prevention of Domestic and Family Violence, Minister for Sport and Recreation **Error! Bookmark not defined.** and Minister for Women

**HOWSON, MS NATALIE**, Director-General, ACT Education Directorate

**EFTHYMIADES, MS DEB**, Deputy Director-General, System Policy and Reform, ACT Education Directorate

**GOTTS, MR ROBERT**, Director, Planning and Analytics, ACT Education Directorate

**McMAHON, MS KATE**, Director, Learning and Teaching, ACT Education Directorate

**PADGHAM, MS JO**, School Improvement Leader, Schools Improvement, ACT Education Directorate

**HUXLEY, MR MARK**, Executive Director, School Performance and Improvement Division, ACT Education Directorate

**THE ACTING CHAIR** (Mrs Kikkert): Mr Pettersson is stuck in traffic. He will be here in about five minutes. Sorry to keep you waiting and thank you for your patience. We really appreciate it. Welcome to this public hearing of the Standing Committee on Education, Employment and Youth Affairs. Today we will hear from witnesses in relation to the committee's inquiry into standardised testing in ACT schools.

Please be aware that the proceedings today are being recorded and transcribed by Hansard and will be published. The proceedings are also being broadcast and webstreamed live. I welcome the chair. Witnesses are also asked to familiarise themselves with the privilege statement provided at the table. Could I confirm that you have read the privilege card on the table before you and sent to you by the secretary and that you understand the privilege implications of the statement?

**Ms Berry:** Yes.

**Ms Howson:** Yes.

**Ms McMahan:** Yes.

**THE CHAIR:** Before we proceed with questions, would you like to make a short opening statement?

**Ms Berry:** Yes, please. Thank you for the chance to talk today. I think the timing of this inquiry is really good because governments around Australia are looking at this issue and it is good that the Assembly does as well.

From my point of view, both before as a parent and since becoming minister for the education sector and broadly, I have been hearing concerns about NAPLAN from the community and I meant to confront some of those issues that I saw that were emerging when I was appointed minister.

Insofar as various reports I have received as minister are concerned, they showed that our school system was showing poorer outcomes and some residualisation in lower income schools and communities. It is important to understand any link between these factors and the current standardised testing regime.

It is fair to say that there has been some strong scepticism about current arrangements under NAPLAN in our school communities. It has been a recurring theme in the conversations that we have been having around the future of education. It is a significant concern for teachers. The AEU, I understand, outlined their concerns yesterday and, indeed, our own Auditor-General reflected on NAPLAN as an incomplete measure of school quality. That is not to say that it has no value if used properly at the school level but I would argue that its intent in that regard has been overshadowed by the unintended consequences, which I understand was a lot of your focus yesterday during committee hearings.

Although different interstate ministers have different views on this issue, we all agree that a review into reporting principles is required, and that is happening now. It is important to separate the issues of testing and reporting, and that is what I have attempted to do in shaping the national review.

Nobody is saying that they are anti tests. Teachers test and assess their students all the time, every day, and they do so in line with where their children sit. Even a nationalised standardised test, done properly, can be okay if it is actually an enabling framework: something which empowers students, teachers and schools more than it stresses them out, which it clearly is. This is exactly the opportunity that an online and a more formative model brings us.

My argument is that the problem is with the current reporting regime, that NAPLAN reporting, as it plays out on My School and in the media, has lost touch with its own guiding principles. It is important to understand what those principles are.

Principle 1 is that reporting should be in the broad public interest. Principle 2 is that reporting on the outcomes of schooling should use data that is valid, reliable and contextualised. Principle 3 is that reporting should be sufficiently comprehensive to enable proper interpretation and understanding of the information. Principle 4 is that reporting should involve balancing the community's right to know with the need to avoid the misinterpretation or the misuse of the information.

I am happy to provide and table, if that is helpful, the terms of reference for the review that the ACT will be conducting on behalf of state and territory ministers.

**THE CHAIR:** That sounds good.

**Ms Berry:** I think it is important to ensure that the commentary on our system that is occurring right now should actually be based on broader factors, as we do under the national school improvement tool, which we can talk about and also provide some more information to you about the actual work that our system is doing, rather than using such a narrow measure as NAPLAN reporting.

This work that is happening across our system is using credible reviews of our

schools' performance and shows continued strength in literacy and numeracy. But I have said on a number of occasions that some of the issues of inequity with the future of education were put front and centre to me, and that is why the focus for the future of education has been around addressing equity. We know, from all the evidence across all the leading countries and systems in the world in education, that if you address equity, your system will improve.

With that, I am happy to take questions and provide some more information to the committee.

**THE CHAIR:** I apologise for being late; traffic was terrible. We have got a long list of witnesses. Before you speak for the first time, acknowledge the privilege statement. I will lead off with the questions and we will make our way down. Yesterday this committee heard that the ACT government de-emphasised preparation and practice testing for NAPLAN. Is there a policy in place that guides this?

**Ms Howson:** It is definitely our overarching view in education that sitting a NAPLAN test should be approached as if it were just any other day at school. Of course we have policies related to optimising participation and, because of the value of the information, it is important that we get our schools lined up around those issues. I think that Mr Gotts could outline the specific guidelines that are available to schools and we could probably provide those to the committee in some detail in terms of our expectations around engagement with NAPLAN.

**Mr Gotts:** I have read and understood the privilege statement. Essentially, as Ms Howson says, we have policies designed to encourage participation in NAPLAN. Schools write to parents to encourage participation. Parents have the option of withdrawing their students if they wish, but all parents are encouraged to participate.

**THE CHAIR:** To the core of the question, though, in practice testing is there a policy of the government to encourage or—

**Ms Howson:** I will pass over to my colleagues who have actually got some experience, very relevant and contemporary experience, in administering NAPLAN testing in schools, but most importantly if we do expose children to any preparation it is really just to reduce anxiety around the process of sitting the test. We are very conscious of the fact that, depending on a student's past experience, they will have a different orientation to the way that the test is applied. But, as a general rule and across our system, our schools and our classrooms, we do de-emphasise it as a measure of any judgement against a student. That is not what it is for. I will pass over to Kate. Would you like to take that question?

**Ms McMahan:** Sure. My substantive position is principal at Charles Weston School in Coombes. Students will be given an opportunity to practise test conditions because it is quite different from a normal classroom setting. With the introduction of Chromebooks we might have had opportunities for students to use their books, do a practice run-through not of the test but of the actual conditions. Because it is a standardised test, conditions are set on how it should be administered, how children should be sitting in the classroom, whom they can talk to, whom they cannot talk to,

when they can talk. The script that a teacher uses as part of the introduction to the test is quite different from the way that a teacher would normally speak to children. Practising test conditions is what we would do in preparation for NAPLAN testing.

**THE CHAIR:** How does that compare to other jurisdictions? Do other jurisdictions encourage practising these conditions in these tests?

**Ms Efthymiades:** I acknowledge that I have read the privilege statement. I have had a number of national roles. I have previously been in the Northern Territory jurisdiction, then in the commonwealth and now in ACT. When NAPLAN came in in 2008 I think most jurisdictions were fairly low key about it because they had had their own state-based tests but this was the first time it was national. Things did not change for people very much.

In 2008 there were a few rude shocks in terms of performance results. Queensland and Western Australia in particular had low results. Queensland's were particularly low. What we know is that they had quite a response to that in terms of engaging with NAPLAN as an event each year. They did quite a lot of preparation and they actually did set policy parameters around the extent of preparation. It was quite extensive for their students across every school.

Queensland has seen quite a significant improvement. Whether it is to do with the preparation or just the fact that 2008 was a really low year and there was a lot of room to grow, it definitely did make a difference. They have in more recent years tapered that off a little because of the pressure that was building around it. That was sustained for a few years but they have tapered it back off in the past few years because of the pressure that was building

I think that, on balance, we are probably the lowest key jurisdiction. It very much is just another day. As Ms McMahon said, now that we are online there are quite a lot of limitations. When it was pen and paper you could actually get quite a lot of items and spend quite a lot of time on the preparation. Now that it is online there is only a limited window of practice items to get used to the test conditions, as Ms McMahon said. I think that will shift things overall in terms of how much preparation is invested by everybody across the country, but the ACT definitely, by national standards, is a low-key jurisdiction for NAPLAN preparation.

**MRS KIKKERT:** I understand that parents receive the data of their kids' NAPLAN results. What sort of data do the principals and schools receive?

**Ms Howson:** They would receive their school's information, so they receive information for every student in every classroom that has completed the NAPLAN testing, and that is only one slice. This is a really good question because we would like to explore the range of information and data that a principal or any school leadership group would consider in a school when making decisions about what to do and where to place their emphasis in order to lift the outcomes for their students.

**Ms Berry:** I think this is really important, and it is a really good question about the information that gets back to teachers, the important data that can inform a teacher and school leaders about how an individual student is performing.

One of the recommendations by Gonski and one of the strong themes under the future of education conversation is how we develop a formative assessment which provides more than just literacy and numeracy information to parents and teachers and students about their learning gain from the start of the year throughout the year through continuous assessment and improvement and then towards the end of the year.

Some of that work already happens through the continuous assessment tools, which Jo is better at talking about, having spent such a long time in our schools. But the way I feel that we are heading towards is that there will be an assessment tool that will be more overarching, more informative, much more comprehensive and much more useful for everyone. On a Chromebook that students have now they could easily access their information and see where they might need extra support in different subjects on a page on a screen. That is what I am hearing teachers want the most rather than a point-in-time test which provides only a very narrow amount of data. It is useful data but a very narrow set of data which does not give a comprehensive view of a child's learning.

**Ms Padgham:** Teachers really want as much information as they can get about every child and student that they are working with so that they can take them from exactly where they are at in their learning now to where they need to be next. We talk about the edge of their learning.

NAPLAN can give you some insights at a point in time that you can test against all of the other information you have. Then as a parent comes to see a teacher, if it is after the NAPLAN test in years 3, 5, 7 or 9, they can say, "Well, this is what the NAPLAN report is. What else do you have?" And that is the really important conversation that teachers and parents can have, and with students.

NAPLAN only tests certain aspects of literacy and numeracy and not all of the literacy and numeracy that is taught and learned. So we need to have other tools and, as Minister Berry said, the formative ones. If we look at reading, teachers every day are working with students to look at the reading behaviours they are demonstrating and making really good judgements: "Based on those reading behaviours I am seeing little Mark exhibiting, this is what I need to give him in his feedback. This is what will take him to the next part of his learning." They are the formative assessments.

Schools also have some school-agreed and system-agreed ways of looking at student learning so that at more frequent points in time than NAPLAN you can look at those reading behaviours or the maths problem-solving or the writing assessments or how they are doing at spelling and all of that.

All those school-agreed assessments are put into a monitoring schedule. For instance, it might be that all of the teachers agree that, "At this period of each term we're going to look at these reading behaviours and this writing. We're going to analyse it together." And then that information is fed back to the parents and to the students as well.

It is a much more comprehensive picture of a child's learning. You can just loop back to the NAPLAN when it comes along and go, "Well, how does that align? Is it a

surprise? Is it what we expected?” It does not have the depth and the day-to-day information we get from the other assessments.

**MRS KIKKERT:** I completely understand that and I get it. What I am trying to ask is: is there any accountability of schools to the Education Directorate in regards to NAPLAN tests? When the results come in they can obviously compare their results from last year or the year before that. In regards to a year 5 student, do they go back and look at the year 3 data and compare the student to how they did two years ago? What do the schools do to hold themselves accountable when they see the results? They have a continuum of data backing the students up from several years ago. Do they return with a report?

**Ms Howson:** Yes, all of that data is also available at a system level and it informs our school improvement agenda. Mr Huxley and Ms Padgham are here today to illuminate that a bit more for you if you would like to hear more about what that involves. But at a system level we have a range of information that we consider against what the minister outlined in her opening statement: the national school improvement tool, which has nine domains against which we would assess the performance of each of our schools. That improvement framework gives us an assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of individual schools.

We couple that with information about the school cohort, the population, the demographics of the children and families in those schools that might inform us around other needs and other issues pertinent to that school community. We look at that information holistically and then we design particular initiatives to support the schools on an individual basis and, again, at the system level.

Jo can talk about some of the initiatives that we are running across at a system level which go to the issues that the minister already outlined in her opening statement in relation to some of our concerns around equity and the results that have come through the standardised testing regime of NAPLAN, TIMSS and PISA.

**MRS KIKKERT:** To clarify, the school principals do not need to be accountable for the NAPLAN test results?

**Ms Berry:** What do you mean by “accountable”?

**MRS KIKKERT:** Accountable as in talking to the directorate, “This is what’s going on in my school. I want to see this improvement.”

**Ms Berry:** All the time.

**Ms Howson:** Yes, constantly. So when I said at a system level, I mean that we engage with each school principal on what is going on in their school. This is the role particularly that Jo and her team play in relation to their relationship with school principals. Of course we are ultimately accountable publicly because we use the NAPLAN data to report to the parliament on how our system overall is tracking. We could talk a bit more about that later if you like.

If you would like to understand what we do around the school improvement agenda

when that engagement between a principal and the department occurs, we can go through what happens.

**Ms Berry:** It is important to understand where education is coming from in the ACT. What I am hearing from ministers across the country is that it is not the data or the testing that is the issue; it is how it is used. That is the issue for us and that is the issue I have had support from ministers to investigate through the review. I have provided you a copy of the terms of reference. The data itself has become more timely because it is online, so that is useful. It does not take six months to get so by the time you get it the principals and teachers know what is going on in the classroom with their children. So all of that is good.

I think that NAPLAN will evolve. It needs to evolve to become more formative so we have more rich, useful data that can be usefully understood by teachers and students and parents, easily accessible and which tells the real story of a child's learning journey.

The school improvement work that is happening across our schools is about individualised learning plans and formative assessments all the way through. In the ACT we have the benefit of our geography keeping us close together. Our schools can work very closely in clusters, and our school principals work very closely together supporting each other.

One of the important things with the work that Jo is doing is that, with her incredible experience in the sector, she is one of the school mentors that the government committed to funding to support new and beginning teachers and also new and beginning school leaders around really good literacy and numeracy work and formative assessment and individualised planning.

**Mr Huxley:** It might help to set the framework for how we engage with schools and school principals and support them in their school improvement journey, and then provide some good examples of programs that are targeted based on evidence and need, of which NAPLAN is one of the measures. NAPLAN itself is one indication of school improvement. But the national school improvement tool is a much more comprehensive and holistic approach as to where a school is up to now and recommendations for their next steps. We have a five-year planning cycle for schools strategic planning. It is headed by the Australian Council for Educational Research, who independently come in—

**MRS KIKKERT:** When did that five-year plan start?

**Mr Huxley:** We are in the third year. Approximately 18 schools a year go through that process. It is a holistic process. It looks at nine domains. There is an explicit improvement agenda for the school. There is analysis and discussion of data, which is where NAPLAN comes into the conversation, but only as one source, with all of the other things that Jo talked about, the formative assessment and the other diagnostic tools that schools might use. The perception data and things from students, staff and parents is all considered as part of that domain: an analysis of the school.

It looks at a culture that promotes learning, which is something that all of our schools

do very well at. It looks at targeted use of school resources and expert teaching teams. And it looks at the systematic curriculum delivery, not just in literacy and numeracy but across the full breadth of the curriculum: how the school is implementing the curriculum across the whole school. It also looks at differentiated teaching and learning: as the minister said, how to individualise personalised learning for students and how that is being accommodated to meet the needs of all students in the school.

It looks at effective pedagogical practices, looking at the impact and effect of the strategies that teachers are deploying in the school to support the outcomes for the school and what their impact is. It also looks at school and community partnerships: how well the school is engaging with its stakeholders, engaging with and leveraging school partnerships. It is a very holistic approach to determining where a school is up to. NAPLAN is an important part of that but it is only a small part of that overall assessment.

Out of that, schools then come up with recommendations based on that independent review. Those recommendations feed into their school strategic plan, which then has targets. Those targets can include things like NAPLAN in terms of equity and growth and those sorts of measures. But there is a whole range of other targets they can include which are relevant to the needs of the school. Those are then worked on with the directors of school improvement. We have four directors of school improvement, who have approximately 22 schools each. They then work closely with those principals on assessing how that school strategic plan is being implemented, what the needs of the school are and what professional development and support they require. A lot of that is evidence driven based on that review process.

That is an ongoing cycle of improvement. We are into the third year of that now. Some of the evidence we use then informs the professional learning and programs. We target and select schools based on their point of need, going through that review process, using NAPLAN as one dataset that informs the response. Jo is in a really good position to talk about some of the programs that we then provide schools, through that, to support their improvement journey.

**MRS KIKKERT:** Did you say 18 schools?

**Mr Huxley:** Approximately 18 schools.

**MRS KIKKERT:** Approximately 18 schools are doing NAPLAN?

**Ms Howson:** No. Eighteen schools are independently reviewed a year against those nine domains that Mr Huxley outlined.

**Mr Huxley:** Every school receives support from the director of school improvement in the outyears as well. They are always looking at an annual action plan. Each five-year strategic plan is broken up into annual action plans. That then informs how they are tracking on that. The DSIs will go out there and visit with the school, have conversations around school performance with the principal, do immersion visits around the school and provide feedback on how the school is tracking. All of that is part of the regular practice of support and improvement that we have for our schools.

**Ms Howson:** We can make that information about that framework available to the committee.

**MRS KIKKERT:** Yes, please do.

**Ms Howson:** The other thing that I think it is important to emphasise is that we do involve ACER, the Australian Council for Educational Research. They provide their own assessors who are qualified and certified to come to the ACT and work with us on those reviews of our schools. So there is a level of independence in those reviews as well. All of their work is evidence based. They are a national body that provides support for school improvement. We can make that available to the committee.

**MRS KIKKERT:** That is great, thank you.

**Mr Huxley:** I will pass to Jo to talk about some of the initiatives around the early years program.

**Ms Padgham:** Through the school improvement process a number of schools were identified as needing greater support in the early years in terms of literacy in particular. There were discussions with the directors of school improvement looking at the previous cycle of school review and looking at the PIPS, which are the kindergarten start and end of year assessments. They are looking at all of those trends but also looking at the leadership teams in the school, how much experience they had and what other factors were happening in that school's context, to select a group of schools to work very intensively with people like me in the education support office and a national consultant in early years literacy.

One particular example I can talk about is Kingsford Smith School. It was an early-career principal. It is a P to 10 school. The other leaders in the school were new to leadership. The PIPs trends and the NAPLAN trends showed that we needed to look more closely at this school. A group of schools were like this; I am just going to talk about one school. A group of us met with the school leadership. We went into all the data to get the current reality. PIPS and NAPLAN are one bit, but what else is happening in the school? We did things called learning walks and talks, where we go in and look with a lens of early years literacy at what is happening. What is happening with student learning? What is happening with teaching instruction? What is the level of variance?

Then the consultant works very closely with the leadership team. We build the capacity of the middle-level leaders for the executive teachers to have a stronger role in coaching with their teachers and with their teaching teams. Then there is professional learning for the teachers in the essential literacy practices that should be happening every day for every child in every classroom. There is work with the teachers to support planning. We work with the coach level. We work with the leader level.

This has gone on since 2017 and is continuing. We now have 20 schools working in this model. We check in on this and we teach the leaders different ways to check in on implementation. They are now running their own learning walks and talks where they go in and observe teachers. They are setting very fine-grained goals about different

literacy practices in the school.

We can see a huge lift in school leader knowledge and confidence and capability to lead literacy improvement. We can see a huge shift in the support of the classroom teachers and a much more coherent, consistent approach. It is not just lots of different ways that we might support young children in learning to read and write; it is a research-supported approach that comes from the consultant. The teachers are much more focused on ensuring that every child is learning every day in the lessons.

There have been some changes. One of the school improvement domains is use of resources. They have looked at how they have used the human resources to support responding to student need. They have looked at the physical resources, and there has been a bigger investment in quality literature; at the coaching support; and at planning time for teachers.

The results, when you look at any intervention such as this initiative, need to be over time, looking at the three years before that support was put in place and at the results during the support time and after it. But the early indicators are things like one of the formative assessments we use: looking at children's reading against a particular benchmark range. That is increasing. Greater percentages of students are more effective at their reading and writing than they were prior to this initiative.

This is supporting early-career leaders. It is supporting teachers to have a consistent, coherent approach. It is supporting the whole school to have a narrow focus but looking at a rich set of data. At the same time, we are working with early-career principals to support them in their leadership. This particular principal has said, when he has given a presentation to all of the principals in the leadership forum, that the support he has got through this early years literacy initiative has hugely increased his capacity to be an instructional leader. All of the international research shows that we need our principals, our deputies and our middle-level leaders to be very strong at having deep knowledge of instruction and pedagogical practices in the school so that they can lead the learning and teaching. He feels very strongly that a key factor that has helped him to become a really strong instructional leader has been all of the supports he has received as his school has gone through this early years literacy initiative.

**MRS KIKKERT:** Is that success story feeding to other principals and other schools so that they could implement it in their own schools?

**Ms Padgham:** Absolutely. I mentioned the learning walks and talks. We have 20 schools involved in this early year's literacy initiative. We have leaders from other schools who have come in. We have brought them on in three phases so far. He was in a phase one school. Phase two and phase three schools are sending their leadership teams on these learning walks to have a look at the difference in practice. So those leaders who have made huge uplifts in their capacity, in their teachers' capacity and in their students' achievement are sharing those. All of the research internationally shows that when leaders collaborate on improvement you get very big uplift.

And you really need to focus on the small data. The big data, which is the NAPLAN, tells you, "Let us have a look at what is going on there," but we have to go

behind it. The early years literacy initiative is a really good example of going behind, looking at all of the sources of data and looking at the universal professional learning that everyone might need, then going into the targeted and selected—and it is sustained; it is over a period of years.

**MRS KIKKERT:** Who decides on what data is available to parents? Is that the directorate, or is that at federal level; the data that the parents review for the results of their kids and also the results of the school? Who decides what data is available to parents? And do you think that parents should have the available data that the teachers also receive with regard to the grade of their child?

**Ms Howson:** We set standards at our system level in terms of the information that should be available to parents.

**MRS KIKKERT:** So you decide.

**Ms Howson:** In addition to that, information is available at the school level that is more comprehensive and is incorporated into school reporting. Principals have a lot of say in relation to what their school community are looking for. School boards would be engaged in those conversations as well. That would be my understanding.

**Ms Padgham:** When the NAPLAN data comes out, one of the first things a principal does is look at it with their leadership team, look at it with their teachers, and at the very next board meeting take the school board through a very comprehensive look at the results that have come through, but matching those with the other small data results that are coming through to the school so that there is a more comprehensive picture. Then it would be a narrative about that with some of the statistics and perhaps some of the information that came from the school satisfaction survey and the school climate survey, which are ones the Education Directorate does for schools. That would be published in the newsletter. It would be discussed. Quite often at the P&C meeting following the board meeting there would be a discussion about, “This is what our data is showing us. These are areas of strength. These are areas of challenge. This is what we’re doing to work through that.”

**MRS KIKKERT:** I do not see that happening in reality but okay, thank you.

**Ms Padgham:** I think it is happening.

**MR WALL:** Could you give the committee a bit of insight into how the data that you receive from NAPLAN is used at a directorate level?

**Mr Gotts:** Essentially we are interested in NAPLAN data from the top down. What we do is look at all the data from the whole jurisdiction. We are interested in the extent to which schools are showing growth over time. We are interested in the extent to which outcomes are as equitable as possible. We are looking at that. We are looking at where the ACT sits compared to other jurisdictions—

**MR WALL:** Sorry, can you expand on that, Mr Gotts. What do you mean by “outcomes are as equitable as possible”?

**Mr Gotts:** There is a new strategic indicator for education in the budget papers that you might be familiar with. That is an indicator that looks at equitable outcomes. Essentially, the measure looks at the extent to which there is a difference between students from the most advantaged families in the ACT relative to students from the least advantaged families in the ACT on the basis, as the minister outlined in her opening comments, that equity is an important concept that came through the future of education. So this is a mechanism of looking at the extent to which equity in the system, as measured by that difference, is changing over time.

**MR WALL:** Sorry to interrupt. Thank you for the expansion. Can you return to that broader use of the data?

**Mr Gotts:** Yes, that came through the Auditor-General's report. As I said, we look at the NAPLAN data relative to the demographic profile of a school. Is that demographic profile changing over time? ACURA provides data on the socio-economic advantage of a school, divided in quartiles. We look at that. Is that changing over time? Are the changes in a school's outcomes, as measured by NAPLAN, affected by changes in the underlying demographic picture? We look at that.

We look at schools over time. We go back over many years and we look at the growth patterns over time. Again, we look at each of the domains. The main focus is on reading, writing and numeracy. We look at it between networks. We look at every possible way of cutting and dicing the data to get a picture of what is happening at the school, the network and the overall jurisdiction level.

**MR WALL:** Is any benchmarking work done to assess where ACT schools are in comparison to their peers in other jurisdictions?

**Ms Efthymiades:** Yes. Mr Wall, the core piece that was done to stimulate a lot of the activity was the report that was prepared by Victoria University, with Professor Stephen Lamb's leadership. I think the committee is familiar with that.

**MR WALL:** Yes.

**Ms Efthymiades:** I would say that that is one of the core sets of reference. It was a very well-designed piece. It was only possible because Professor Lamb had actually worked with multiple jurisdictions over a number of years. Therefore, he had access to data, albeit they could not be used in a public way—hence why there are some redactions in that report—but could be provided to us internally around comparisons across jurisdictions.

What he actually had was student-by-student information tied to the socio-educational advantage quartiles et cetera. So he was able to do a much deeper, more intricate analysis of how the comparisons weighed up across the scale of socio-educational advantage. What Professor Lamb's report found, and it is clear in figure 1 in that report, is that the ACT performance issue is one of equity.

The performance at the high end of socio-educational advantage is very close and comparable to other jurisdictions. But at the lower end, that is where the gap is and

hence a really strong driver that came through from the minister, positioning equity right at the forefront of future of education. It has flowed through; it is now a strategic indicator.

Professor Lamb's report, as you are probably aware, was picked up by the Auditor-General when the Auditor-General did that report. Those reports are really consistent. That is the stuff that we really have drawn from to cast our directions.

I would not mind considering the other core document that has been put before the committee, the ANU document. I watched Professor Macintosh's contribution to the inquiry with great interest, because we are always interested in different lenses. He declared a passion for making good use of quality datasets and we share that passion. A number of us are data nerds. I note that Professor Macintosh was clear that he is not an educational expert, and that is completely fine and proper. But he does have a passion for data and we are always interested.

I guess in that work the assessment that we have come to is actually that Professor Lamb and Professor Macintosh's reports are qualitatively different. That is partly because Professor Lamb was able to use a much more detailed dataset to inform it. But I guess in the analysis that the ANU provided, we have rerun that analysis if you like using information available on My School.

What we are really mindful of is that when My School was set up in 2009 there were principles and protocols for effective reporting. I am going to read one to you because I think that this gets to the nub of the issue relating to the difference between those two reports. It is balancing the community's right to know, which is obviously really important, with the need to avoid misinterpretation and misuse of information.

That is the kind of crux of the reporting review that Minister Berry has the leadership of for the Education Council, that misinterpretation and misuse—because not everybody is going to use information in the same way. Even though Professor Macintosh said, "Our results are the same as Professor Lamb's," our analysis would show that that is not the case.

The information that I am about to refer to actually is available on the My School website. None of it is the extra information that Professor Lamb had. But at that level of publicly available information, Professor Macintosh made reference in his report to the sea of red. In respect of the sea of red, the colour classifications that were used by Professor Macintosh are inconsistent with those used in My School. Importantly, My School—I was on the ACARA board when My School was established; so I have quite a deep technical understanding of it—was established to give the closest that could be done to fair comparisons.

In doing so, an important thing to note, because there are not actually that many kids in each school sitting the test, is that error margins are really important. Measurement error has to be factored in when you are doing comparisons across schools.

In ACARA analysis, in two schools that would be deemed to be in the same score range there could be a variation of plus or minus about 16 points. In primary schools it tends to be a bit higher; so plus or minus about 16 points. In high schools it would be

plus or minus about 10 points, or 12 points I think it was when I did some digging into this over the weekend.

Professor Macintosh has said that you are the same if you get exactly the same score. If you get plus one you are green. If you get minus one it is different; you are pink. And if you minus a certain number of points, you are red et cetera to create the sea of red.

If we applied the My School comparative logic, which is nationally agreed and has been since My School was established, it would be much more like a sea of yellow. There would some pink and a couple of dots of red, probably in writing. So I think it is really important that we do not seek to misinterpret the information. If we were to recast the tables, they would not be red and they would definitely be much more yellow. I have not had time to recast the tables. It is a PDF document and it was not easy. But we could actually do that and furnish it to the committee if that would be helpful.

**MR WALL:** But that is still yellow and not green?

**Ms Efthymiades:** Correct, but yellow is the same. The way it has been cast is that all ACT schools pretty much are failing, that it gets worse by year 9 and it is particularly bad in numeracy and writing. The first element I would note is that the measurement error has not been factored into the ANU report that My School would say must be factored in.

There is also another aspect, though. Professor Macintosh used the term “statistically similar school groupings”—SSSGs I think they are called—and that they are genuinely properly comparable. Like I said, I was an ACARA board member when it was established. ACARA has made every effort to make things as comparable as possible, but there are some pretty threshold issues.

For example, let us look at just a sample of schools. I chose year 9 numeracy because that was kind of the pivot point that Professor Macintosh was indicating was quite problematic. I took three high SEA public schools and one high SEA independent school. Take as an example Lyneham High School. Three of the schools in the comparison group are academically selective. I am happy to table this, minister, if that is okay.

**Ms Berry:** They are the ones from New South Wales academics?

**Ms Efthymiades:** Correct, New South Wales academically selective, Victorian academically selective schools.

**Ms Berry:** We do not have selective schools in the ACT; so the comparison is not apples with apples. That is what Deb is getting to.

**Ms Efthymiades:** That is right. In respect of these scores up here—I am happy to table them; they are marked up—it is up to 100 points per kid higher in academically selective schools than it is in a mainstream school, a comprehensive school that has a full range of kids. That is quite a significant impact on how comparisons pan out.

Lyneham is one example.

The other thing that is obviously not apples with apples is that in the Lyneham group, 88 per cent of the comparison schools are non-government schools. A large number of those—I think it is 25—have paid fees of over \$20,000 a year on average. While that is not as obviously apples with apples as the academically selective schools are, there is something there that is maybe not a quite fair comparison.

If you go to Alfred Deakin, they actually have five academically selective schools in their mix, some from Victoria, one from New South Wales. Again, 73 per cent of their comparison group is non-government schools, a large number of those being high fee paying.

Teloepa Park only has 10 schools in its group; so there is an issue in itself. They are not 60 schools or 50 schools. This has to compare to only a group of 10. In that there is one other public school. You will see that Teloepa is the purple dot in the bottom graph. The other government school is the one that has got exactly the same score as Teloepa Park. With everything else there, you can see the fees that people are paying on average per year for their kids to attend those schools.

This is what happens when you take the lid off what is on My School. This is all there. I have just used the My School site to drill into this. The financial information is there—everything. What is hard to do is that you cannot then re-create the average of the comparison schools unless you have a deeper dataset.

That is what Professor Lamb did. When he did the analysis for us, he did two key things. One was he limited the schools in the comparison groups to metropolitan schools. He felt that if schools in regional centres were of a similar SEA it probably was not a really fair comparison because they do not have the advantages that come from being in a metropolitan area. So he pulled those out.

He also pulled out the academically selective schools because they are, by definition and by evidence on here, incredibly different in terms of the performance. Those adjustments that were made by Professor Lamb in his deeper analysis, which Professor Macintosh could not have done, in our view give evidence that the Victoria University report is the most robust report that could be used to inform our performance agenda.

The Auditor-General picked it up. The findings of the Auditor-General's report are consistent with that. A large number of the actions we have taken have been shared by our colleagues from the school improvement area and the other ones are around our performance measures shared by Mr Gotts.

We are really on track in terms of delivering on the Auditor-General's findings, which came from the Lamb report. This gives us a real essence now, with the future of education strategy, that we have a framework to take that forward.

Just to be unbiased—even though we are the Education Directorate—Professor Macintosh did reference non-government schools as well. Look at Canberra Grammar—the purple dot is Canberra Grammar—and relative performance. The

PROOF

score is incredibly high but there are eight selective schools from New South Wales and Victoria that Canberra Grammar is being compared against.

So that is not apples with apples. The evidence that Professor Macintosh provided around the sea of red on two counts I suggest is a misunderstanding, a misinterpretation of the information. I am happy to provide more information on that if you would like. It took me into a data land.

I just think that it is so important for a committee, an inquiry like this which is really significant and important to us, to have the best evidence at your disposal to make sense of where you have got potential.

**MR WALL:** If there is anything else you can provide, that would be appreciated.

**Ms Efthymiades:** Sure.

**THE CHAIR:** With the time being 10.30—

**Ms Efthymiades:** Sorry.

**THE CHAIR:** There are worse problems in the world. Do not worry about it. The committee will now suspend for a short break but I suggest that there might be some questions on notice.

**Ms Efthymiades:** Yes. We have quite a lot of written product that we could pull together if that is helpful for you but obviously we could also take questions on notice.

**THE CHAIR:** Thank you.

**Hearing suspended from 10.30 to 10.47 am.**

**VANDERMOLEN, MR ANTHONY**, Principal, Canberra Montessori School

**THE CHAIR:** Witnesses are asked to familiarise themselves with the privilege statement in front of you, the pink sheet. Could I confirm that you have read it and that you understand the implications of the statement?

**Mr Vandermolen:** Yes.

**THE CHAIR:** Before we proceed to questions, would you like to make an opening statement?

**Mr Vandermolen:** I have made some notes this morning and I am happy to read these out, if that is okay.

**THE CHAIR:** Take it away.

**Mr Vandermolen:** Ideologies are often plagued by contradiction, and our traditional education system is widely referred to as being based on an industrialised model where, for all intents and purposes, children are asked to sit down, shut up and have curriculum imposed upon them, and they are then assessed on their capacity to regurgitate information. Whilst this is a very general view, our children deserve to be treated as having individualised value, and education should be personalised as opposed to being an instrument to meet the desires and perspectives of others. That was all.

**THE CHAIR:** I will lead off with the questions and then we will make our way down the line.

**Mr Vandermolen:** Sure.

**THE CHAIR:** In your submission you talk about NAPLAN being focused on a very narrow range of topics. Do you think NAPLAN focuses on the wrong things, not enough things?

**Mr Vandermolen:** I think it is an instrument designed to meet a specific need that is now being used to fuel other needs. The interpretation of information around NAPLAN does not actually demonstrate the particular learning journeys of each child in the school environment, and if we are looking at just raw data it is a really flawed methodology.

**THE CHAIR:** What does NAPLAN look at?

**Mr Vandermolen:** NAPLAN? Measuring the reading and writing capacity of children, comprehension. Those broad-range skills are measured in a discrete instrument, but it does not take into consideration the learning journey of the children in the cohort that is being assessed and where they are at a particular point in time.

For me, in a variety of contexts that I have been in, whether it is Indigenous schools, Montessori schools or religious-based schools where NAPLAN is not treated as a

priority, it is not really an accurate measure of what is happening. I have also worked in grammar school environments where we actually teach to the text and we prepare our children for NAPLAN assessment. The measurement that is coming out is completely skewed.

**MRS KIKKERT:** I like your school. I want to come and visit.

**Mr Vandermolen:** Please do.

**MRS KIKKERT:** You mentioned you do not really prepare the kids for NAPLAN. You do not really put as strong an emphasis as other schools do on NAPLAN?

**Mr Vandermolen:** Not at all, no.

**MRS KIKKERT:** When they are sitting for tests, we have heard stories from other people that within their classrooms they take down posters and things like that. What does the classroom look like for the kids who are sitting the NAPLAN test?

**Mr Vandermolen:** Very, very different to most environments. Our classrooms are prepared environments where all the materials are designed to meet the needs of the children. We do not actually have pretty posters and various artworks and things up on the walls. It is the children's environment, and those things are a product of learning. Our focus is on the process of learning, not the product.

We treat NAPLAN as something that the children can engage with, but we do not force them to do it. Most of them see it as a fun opportunity to engage with something different. I would argue that the level of seriousness they take it with varies from child to child. It is obviously something that we engage in, but it is not something that we really put a great deal of focus on.

**MRS KIKKERT:** How do some of those students come to a conclusion that this is a fun thing to do, in regard to NAPLAN?

**Mr Vandermolen:** We do not actually have assessments like this at school, period. Our materials are designed in a specific way that has control of error built in. We have something like the trinomial cube. When the child is pulling apart the cube and putting it together, can they do it or not? They have just been assessed. There is not, "Let's sit down. Here is a piece of paper. Here are the questions. We need you to answer them." Through teacher observation and working with materials, assessment happens all the time. To do something like NAPLAN is something that is very, very different.

**MRS KIKKERT:** But they think it is fun?

**Mr Vandermolen:** Yes.

**THE CHAIR:** Just a supplementary on that, we have heard from other witnesses that doing these tests causes kids stress, but in your circumstance you are saying the kids enjoy it. Can you maybe comment on why that might be?

**Mr Vandermolen:** We do not put any great emphasis on preparing the children in any way, shape or form. This is just something that we are going to do today. Because it is so different to what we have in our normal classroom environment they are not used to sitting down doing tests like this. Because of that difference it is something that they are prepared to engage with. A lot of the anxieties that our children would manifest with would generally be coming from the parents.

**THE CHAIR:** Is that a conversation that happens frequently in your school, that parents talk about NAPLAN testing?

**Mr Vandermolen:** Not so much. I think most of our parents have been educated in a traditional model. They are used to the concept of NAPLAN and what NAPLAN means: “Oh my goodness, you have got NAPLAN today. Are you going to be all right to sit there for that long?” It is we as adults that are imposing those anxieties on children that do not necessarily need to be there. And for us our focus is on the personal learning of each child. We would not try and impose any kind of anxiety like that on the children.

**THE CHAIR:** You are a principal. Have you ever had someone, a parent, ask you about your NAPLAN scores?

**Mr Vandermolen:** Yes.

**THE CHAIR:** Is that a positive or a negative conversation?

**Mr Vandermolen:** It is, “I have my NAPLAN scores. They are available for parents to see.” Do we put a great deal of emphasis on interpreting them? No. Our focus is purely on the children, not the data. Yes, we use data to inform what we are doing as a school, but our focus is always 100 per cent on the child and their learning journey, period.

**MRS KIKKERT:** How many students are there in your school?

**Mr Vandermolen:** Close to 200.

**MRS KIKKERT:** And how many of them sat the NAPLAN test this year?

**Mr Vandermolen:** Not many. I would say, off the top of my head, across the three, five age groups, probably about 40.

**MRS KIKKERT:** About 40?

**Mr Vandermolen:** That is a guesstimate. Do not hold me to the numbers.

**MR WALL:** You mentioned you worked across a number of school sectors—grammar schools, Indigenous communities and obviously the Montessori School—and they are all vastly diverse educational scenes. For each of the areas that you have worked in, how have you found that NAPLAN has, I guess, been compatible with the way the curriculum is delivered in those schools?

**Mr Vandermolen:** If we are talking about my diverse experience in Indigenous schools and alternative school settings like this one, zero compatibility. It is not an accurate measure at all.

**MR WALL:** We have heard from a number of witnesses that one of the flaws of NAPLAN potentially is that it is just a point-in-time measure of where a student is at. How is that not a compatible measure of where a student is at in, say, an alternative school setting?

**Mr Vandermolen:** I think I am answering your question in a diverse way. I have seen NAPLAN scores used as a measure of the efficacy of a school and how well a school is going and, by association, how well the teachers are performing in that context. If you look at an Indigenous school as an example, the NAPLAN scores would be abhorrent, but for all intents and purposes those who attend school regularly are making incredible progress.

My same argument here in this context is that, whilst we do not put a great deal of emphasis on the NAPLAN scores or the testing per se, our children are making great progress. I would hazard to say, “Find me another school where your parent satisfaction rate is around the 98th percentile.” Our parents and our community are very happy with the personalised journey that the children are on because they are not exhibiting the anxieties and the stresses associated with learning.

In that first year I was at this particular school I could not understand why the children were running down the path to come into school. I could not figure it out. I have seen children running out of school and jumping out of windows, but these children actually run into school. It is because they are excited to be engaged in the learning that takes place. There is no teacher telling them to sit down and shut up, no teacher forcing them to learn particular things. These children have the capacity to follow their own learning pathway in their environment.

That is an amazing thing to see. I have got a psych background. When I tour with parents it is a fishbowl environment. You can see what happens in the classroom. We have children with autism. We have children who cannot speak English. We have children with learning difficulties. You cannot pick them in the environment. I challenge parents to stand there and try and pick these children out. You cannot pick them because they are so comfortable and engaged in this environment. For me, working in that broad range of settings, this is an amazing thing to be able to see because I have not seen it or experienced it before.

**THE CHAIR:** You have mentioned that you de-emphasise NAPLAN testing at your school. Do you think we should get rid of NAPLAN testing?

**Mr Vandermolen:** Having a psych background I understand the purpose of standardised testing and the reasons we have testing. Getting back to the roots of, the purpose of, NAPLAN testing probably holds more efficacy for me as an education professional. I do not like that it is being used—again I am generalising—as a teacher assessment or a school assessment. It really needs to be used for the purpose for which it was designed.

**THE CHAIR:** You are all right with standardised testing across schools, but what about the publishing of that data?

**Mr Vandermolen:** To what end? I have a very high population of tertiary-educated parents in the school, probably one of the highest I have ever been in—doctors, professors et cetera. They have chosen this setting because of the nature of the education we provide and the lack of assessment as we know it. We assess heavily in this school but you do not see it, you do not know it and the children do not feel it.

When they feel it, that is when all these anxieties and disorders et cetera come out. That is when all these anxieties actually become pervasive in the minds of parents. That is the stuff that we try and avoid as a school because it is counterintuitive. It is counterproductive and when these assessments become counterproductive that is when they need to be rethought, which is essentially what is happening.

**MRS KIKKERT:** For how long have you been the principal at this school?

**Mr Vandermolen:** Four years.

**MRS KIKKERT:** Have you shared some of your successful stories and policies that you implement with other school principals who have concerns about NAPLAN or other standardised testing and how it impacts their students?

**Mr Vandermolen:** That is the journey we are on as a school at the moment. We have gone through a whole culture change in our school where we want to try and evidence the effectiveness of what we are doing as a school. I am also on the board of the Montessori Australia Foundation and the Montessori Children's Foundation.

My passion is around Indigenous education, and I see this style of education to be highly relevant to Indigenous contexts. Building that evidence base is a journey we are on now so that we can deliver these things in a broader forum. Getting our teachers to engage with action learning and with traditional schools in colloquiums et cetera in the ACT is a journey we are on now.

**MR WALL:** You touch in your submission on A to E assessment reporting. Do you want to give the committee a bit of background on what is applied in Montessori schools as far as reporting to parents?

**Mr Vandermolen:** We report on an A to E scale because we are required to. Do I hold much for that report in regard to its efficacy? No. Our reporting is pretty much on a daily basis to our parent community. Our parents come in and see the teachers whenever they want to, for however long they want to.

We can show the parents where the children are developing rapidly, through the mastery of materials. We can highlight to the parents where the children are having difficulties. We look at it as a three-legged stool with the parent, the child and the school; if one of those is not collaborating then the stool falls over. So the collaboration with parents is really fundamental for us.

When a parent gets that report, for the most part they probably would not even look at

it because it does not give them any more information than they have already received from the teachers. That is where our strength is—that personalised learning journey. I say to parents, “If you think this is a school where you can drop your child off at 8 o’clock in the morning and pick them up at 3 o’clock, this is not the school for you, because we want you to be involved in your child’s education. We expect you to have communication with the teacher on a daily basis.” That is where our strength is.

When it comes to looking at an A to E standardised label, our students do not have them. We do not have bullying, per se. We do not have children running around saying, “He’s stupid,” or anything like that. We have a differentiated classroom environment. We have gifted children working at their level and we have children who have learning needs working at that level, but it does not look any different.

We do not take children out of a classroom for any reason. The responsibility for the child is with the teacher and we never abdicate that responsibility. All of the children we are talking about, whether they have language difficulties, ADD, autism or any of those things, they are working within that classroom context and you cannot pick them.

**MRS KIKKERT:** That is very different to what a lot of schools do. When they have gifted children, they go to a separate class for an hour or two hours to give them more work or something like that.

**Mr Vandermolen:** Think about the social dynamic and the culture you are creating when you are pulling a child out of a class. What are you saying about that child to the other children? “He’s really smart.” Those throwaway labels are actually what feeds social difficulties in school settings. We do not have those labels. The kids do not care because they do not see it. We do not use them because they serve no purpose.

I have been a psych in the education system, where I have done the IQ tests. The teacher will say, “I’ve got a gifted child. They need an IQ test.” For what purpose? I can absolutely do it. I can absolutely reinforce what you already know. You are already putting things in place to support the child. What is knowing their IQ actually going to achieve?

**MRS KIKKERT:** What is the teacher and student ratio in your school?

**Mr Vandermolen:** One to 22. We have an early childhood setting, so we have classroom assistants. In the early years it is a one to 11 ratio, so a teacher and/or an assistant will be in the classroom environment. In the upper primary sector the ratio is about one to 22, one to 26, depending on the classroom. So they are fairly small class sizes. We have a small school for a reason. We do not want to be a large school because we have a focus on personalised education. What is important to our families is that personalised approach to education. Our children are happy.

**MRS KIKKERT:** You have to be careful what you wish for—it might grow into a bigger school because it is so popular.

**Mr Vandermolen:** We will get a different school, yes. Our children are happy, and that is what our parents want. I am a D student; I failed school terribly. I went out and

wagged school and did terrible things. I did grade 12 twice. I did it the second time in New South Wales and failed again. So I am a failure in the eyes of the school setting.

I have six university degrees now. If I believed what schools told me, I would not be very successful. That is one of the catalysts for me being passionate about personalised learning—it is not individualised. I have this curriculum and I need to deliver it to all of you and you are having a little bit of difficulty with it, so I will individualise it. I am still delivering the same curriculum to you, I am just doing it a different way. I am not interested in that.

For us it is about personalised learning. We will follow the passion of the children wherever that takes them and we can backwards map that to the curriculum. We are absolutely meeting curriculum outcomes, but that is not the focus of our attention. Our focus is the child.

**THE CHAIR:** What do your teachers do when they get the NAPLAN data? You talk about a very comprehensive relationship between the teacher and the student where they are every day assessing them in a very informal manner. When they get that information dump in NAPLAN results, what do they do with it, if anything?

**Mr Vandermolen:** Nothing. It is just for awareness. It is literally, “Thank you very much.” The data they have already about the children far exceeds what they are getting from NAPLAN. It outweighs it exponentially. NAPLAN is largely meaningless.

**MR WALL:** This is a question I have not asked any witness, so I do not know the answer. Do the NAPLAN results of a school have any influence on the funding the school receives?

**Mr Vandermolen:** No.

**THE CHAIR:** Are you of the view that NAPLAN results sway enrolment decisions for parents?

**Mr Vandermolen:** Yes.

**THE CHAIR:** Does that affect enrolments for a school like Montessori?

**Mr Vandermolen:** Yes and no. Keep in mind that the majority of our parents are educated in the traditional model, so they do not fully understand the intricacies of the material. They have a broad understanding of the philosophy, and that is what they commit to. I can tell you with probably about 90 per cent accuracy that if I have a parent with a child of enrolment age come through the school and have a look, they enrol, period. They do not leave without signing enrolment documents, because they love what they see.

They ask us about things like NAPLAN and we tell them about how we assess their children and how we have a personalised education model and how we communicate everything to them. That is what they get sold on. The NAPLAN information just drops away. I would argue no parent currently involved with the school at this point

has a particular interest in NAPLAN results.

**THE CHAIR:** One of the pressures a lot of schools feel is that they need good NAPLAN results, otherwise people will be trying to go to a different school. Do you feel there is competition in your space in the education sector such that that pressure exists and you are competing with other schools?

**Mr Vandermolen:** Schools are a business; education is a business. Independent schools, we have to make ends meet like any other business. Yes, enrolments are incredibly important to us, but philosophically I cannot go down a pathway where I make NAPLAN so important as an attractant to get parents. It is essentially going to be at the expense of the children, and I cannot do that. Our children will always be our priority, so we make the choice that for us the best criteria is the happiness of the child and their capacity to engage.

**THE CHAIR:** I appreciate that. Do you think you would come under pressure as a school if, say, across the road another school with the teaching model was to open up but their NAPLAN scores were better than your school?

**Mr Vandermolen:** In that context—like and like—probably.

**MR WALL:** It is a great school that you run; a very unique environment.

**Mr Vandermolen:** Please come and have a look. The kids are gorgeous. They welcome me on the path every morning: “Hello, Anthony.” The smiles are beautiful. The parents are happy. We have conversations with parents, and I will give you an example. Mum is sitting on the chair and I might be sitting over here and the little toddler comes running past. Mum sweeps up the toddler and gives them a big cuddle and says “You’re going to be all right,” because mum was afraid the toddler was going to fall over.

Who cares if the child falls over? The child is only this big. They are only going to fall this far. It is the anxieties we have as adults that we impose on these children that cause many of the problems we have. The very first day I sat in a Montessori environment I thought it was a cult. I sat there in the classroom, and you are told if you are observing, “Please don’t get involved in what happens. Just sit there and observe.”

So I sat there and this little child—who would have been probably 2½, if that—went to a drawer and pulled out a knife. And I am looking at all these people in the classroom environment thinking, “What are you doing? This child has a knife. Are you going to stop the child?” The child grabbed the plate, put an orange on the plate, quartered the orange then washed up the knife, put it away, sat down, ate the orange and washed up the plate.

Because of my concern about the knife, I would have stopped that child from doing something that they proved that they could be quite successful at without my interruption or my interaction. So, for me, it is about pulling back as adults and not imposing our anxieties on the children. That is what affects them.

## PROOF

That is why they are exhibiting these problems when they are engaging with things like NAPLAN and the pressures of assessment. My grade 12 son bawled his eyes out because he felt so much pressure at school, in a grammar context, to be successful. Why? Why is there so much pressure and anxiety placed on these children when they should be enjoying the learning process, not being afraid of it? Sorry, that is my soapbox.

**THE CHAIR:** That is quite okay. Mr Vandermolen, thank you for coming in.

**Mr Vandermolen:** Please do come and have a look; it blows your mind.

**THE CHAIR:** We will be in touch, and you will be sent a copy of the transcript to check.

**STANTON, MR BRETT**, Director, Performance Audit, ACT Audit Office

**THE CHAIR:** I would like to draw to your attention the pink privilege statement in front of you. Before you speak for the first time, could you acknowledge that you have read it and have understood the implications of it? Would you like to make an opening statement?

**Mr Stanton:** Yes, I have read and understood the privilege statement. If I could, I will just take a couple of minutes of your time to provide a brief overview of the performance audit. Thank you for the opportunity to attend the committee's hearing today.

The Audit Office's report *Performance information in ACT public schools* was tabled in the Assembly on 31 May 2017. The audit sought to comment on the extent to which the Education Directorate and ACT public schools use performance information to improve schools' and students' performance. The audit took place between October 2016 and May 2017.

For the purpose of the audit, performance information in ACT public schools was taken to mean any information or data that helps school leaders and teachers to better understand the educational performance of the students. Key sources of student performance information which were considered as part of the audit were NAPLAN, PIPS—performance indicators in primary schools—and school specific assessments, which may be summarised in the A to E reporting.

Audit fieldwork was informed by discussions with executives and education support office staff on an analysis of ACT public schools' NAPLAN data for 2015 and 2016, discussions with principals and teachers in schools and a survey of school principals. Fieldwork was conducted at a selection of 16 schools encompassing all geographical networks in the ACT, each type of school in scope—primary schools, high schools et cetera—and a balance of schools of different sizes.

The survey of school principals was sent to 80 principals of schools and 72 responded, which was the 90 per cent response rate. Responses were evenly distributed across the four networks.

The overall audit conclusion referred to the performance of ACT public schools against similar schools in other jurisdictions in relation to NAPLAN and the overall lower performance of ACT public schools.

The Education Directorate's efforts included commencing initiatives to improve governance and administrative arrangements for the use of student performance information across the schools and the variety of practices that were in place across ACT public schools with respect to the use of student performance information and the information systems and tools in use across those schools.

Seven recommendations were made in a range of areas, including directorate-level performance indicators and reporting on student performance, school-specific strategic plans and action plans, guidance and support for school principals with

respect to the use of student performance information, and professional learning opportunities for the use of analysis of performance information.

**THE CHAIR:** I will lead off with questions and we will make our way down. One of the things I found interesting was the recommendation, recommendation 6, about A to E reporting and there being a lack of moderation. I thought our schools and our teachers were moderating work. Is that not the case?

**Mr Stanton:** The information that we had at the time of the audit was that moderation, if it did occur, was not systemic and widespread across the networks. As I recall, I think there might have been some moderation initiatives in place for perhaps one network, for example. But otherwise, on the information we had at the time, it was not widely practised and widely moderated across the schools.

**THE CHAIR:** You use the term “network”. Excuse my ignorance. What do you mean by that?

**Mr Stanton:** When I use the term in that context, that was the four networks in the ACT: Tuggeranong, Weston, Belconnen and Gungahlin.

**MRS KIKKERT:** Thank you for being here today. On page 4 of the report it says that a comparison of ACT schools in 2016 with similar schools in Australia, based on ICSEA, shows that the majority of ACT schools’ NAPLAN results are lower. What response did you have from the Education Directorate to this finding?

**Mr Stanton:** We certainly put that into the report and draft report. As I recall, the Education Directorate provided some commentary in relation to the draft report and we incorporated that in the final report. But, as for a specific response to that, we would be expecting any response to recommendations in the government response to the report.

**MRS KIKKERT:** I guess that will come out with how many recommendations the Education Directorate comes up with, as well in their response to your report.

**MR WALL:** To what extent did the audit actually assess how the data the schools received was used or implemented in, I guess, informing curriculum and teaching practices and the like?

**Mr Stanton:** Yes, absolutely. We certainly did a lot of fieldwork in 16 schools across the networks. As part of that fieldwork we spoke with principals and the leadership team in the schools. We spoke with a cohort of teachers in the schools as well. We sought to get some qualitative information in relation to how performance information in general and some specific types of performance information was used within the schools. Our information in that particular space was also informed by our survey of school principals.

We talked, to a certain extent in chapter 5, in relation to how the data or the performance information has been used. There are some specific questions that we asked as part of the survey, for example, of the NAPLAN data and the PIPS data. I draw your attention to table 5-1 on page 121. That is the survey results of the

principals as to what they actually did pursue with performance information.

Nine out of 10 principals identified that they use the performance information for differentiated instruction, for the teachers to tailor the instruction and the education for particular kids in the classes. And then the balance of that table goes through all the other uses of performance information, and 2.86 per cent of the responses talked about how it informed the funding allocation.

In the following paragraph of the report there is some qualitative information on how the teachers and the principals in the schools actually use NAPLAN and PIPS data and other performance information. There are also some case studies from page 126 onwards about some of the experiences in the schools.

**MR WALL:** The first place I have spotted where you touch on it is in the summary, where the response to the survey showed that 24 per cent of school principals agreed with the statement that the directorate’s guidance and training to schools about using assessment data to drive and improve is sufficient, while 52 per cent disagreed or strongly disagreed. It is a pretty large proportion of those surveyed that did not think that there was sufficient guidance or training on how to use the data. What were the deficiencies that those who were surveyed felt needed to be addressed in either direction or interpretation?

**Mr Stanton:** We certainly got a handle on what direction and support was there from the education support office, through some of its policies and guidelines. It is *Great teachers by design* and *Great teaching by design*, the performance framework. But absolutely, when we went to the principals themselves, from about paragraph 3.81 onwards in the report, that is the information on the responses that were coming through from the principals themselves in the survey. And that is where that data, that assessment, came from. It is articulated in the last part of chapter 3.

In the responses from those principals—and there was some qualitative information that came through the survey response as well—as to how they felt about that question, certainly there were some principals that said that they were appropriately supported. And then there was that cohort that said that they were not. That is the information that we got. We certainly wanted to put that in the report and bring that to the attention of the Education Directorate and then make a recommendation about finding out what that level of support should be for the schools and the principals.

**THE CHAIR:** Recommendation 1 suggests that the Education Directorate should provide some more guidance on how the performance indicators should be measured. But, having read what they were, they seemed quite straightforward. They talk about the number of students who achieve certain academic results. Could you expand on how that may not be explicit enough?

**Mr Stanton:** That is in chapter 3?

**THE CHAIR:** It is 3.27.

**Mr Stanton:** This derives from the commentary around the planning and the strategic plan, from about paragraph 3.23 onwards. There was a strategic plan in place for the

directorate from 2014 to 2017. I have not been apprised of or seen how that has been updated since then. That was supported by an action plan as well. Paragraph 3.27 says, for example, that in the strategic plan at the time there were two objectives and four performance indicators. “Increase the number of high performing students” was supported by performance indicators such as “Increase the performance of all students in reading, mathematics and science.” We were looking for some more information on what that actually means, quantitatively as well, and what they are striving to achieve by it; for example, increasing the performance of all students in reading, maths and science. That and some of the other commentary was the basis of that recommendation.

**THE CHAIR:** I am very impressed that you are taking questions on a report that was written nearly two years ago. Well done.

**Mr Stanton:** Thank you.

**MRS KIKKERT:** Why did you not make any recommendation directly referencing the need to use ICSEA when comparing the results of schools from other jurisdictions?

**Mr Stanton:** We wanted to get that information out there, but the focus of the audit and the audit report was on schools’ and the Education Directorate’s initiatives to use and analyse performance information. So the balance of the report talks about the initiatives that are in place within the education support office for schools and the like, and the flow of data to and from them for the purpose of the report. We made the recommendations in relation to, for example, student growth measures for NAPLAN reporting. At the time the strategic plan and the annual report reported on the mean achievement of NAPLAN across the board. We sought improvements to that by focusing on student growth. But as for a recommendation in relation to ICSEA, we did not feel the need to go there at the time for the report.

**MRS KIKKERT:** Fair enough. Have you seen any appetite within the Education Directorate to use ICSEA scores?

**Mr Stanton:** We have not since this order was tabled. We certainly have not been back to or sought any information or further updates from the Education Directorate. But, yes, at the time we understood—and some of that is in the report, in chapter 2—that the Education Directorate, the education support office, was using NAPLAN data and ICSEA data to analyse at a system level the performance of schools. We understood that that was happening at the time.

**MR WALL:** This is not directly related to your performance audit, but I am keen for an educated opinion on the value of standardised testing. There have been calls from a number of witnesses for varying levels of change or intervention in the NAPLAN system, from scrapping it completely to restructuring the way it is delivered or restricting the data that is available. From an Audit Office perspective, what is the value of having the standardised test not just across all schools in this jurisdiction but also nationally, where you can measure, benchmark and assess performance?

**Mr Stanton:** We did not form an opinion on NAPLAN. We simply recognised it as a

national standardised test that facilitated assessment across schools and jurisdictions. So we took that as the starting point for our analysis and referred to, for example—I think it is early in chapter 2—some of the endorsement of NAPLAN as a means by which to measure students' progress by the Grattan Institute in its April 2016 report. That is the extent to which we are qualified to comment on NAPLAN.

**MR WALL:** If NAPLAN had not existed, even if we just wound the clock back to pre-NAPLAN, so pre-2008, what level of work would have been required on the Audit Office's part to assemble a report like this looking at different schools?

**Mr Stanton:** The NAPLAN data simply would not be there, so we would certainly have to work out a way to do the report, focusing on whatever performance information is actually there. We used it for the purpose of this report to analyse schools' performance and students' performance, how that is being measured over time, and initiatives put in place to recognise, improve and build upon that. So NAPLAN was helpful to assist in that analysis.

**MR WALL:** So there is still huge value in at least jurisdictions, departments and systems having access to a standardised form of assessment that allows them to measure where they are tracking?

**Mr Stanton:** I would simply point to the Grattan Institute report. We found that particularly illustrative and particularly instructive for us at the time. The endorsement that was provided by the Grattan Institute for NAPLAN testing is at paragraph 2.4 of the report: that the results from NAPLAN testing represent a reliable measure of educational achievement that is consistent across Australia. We also note that the NAPLAN results are used by the directorate in its strategic planning and its performance measures.

**THE CHAIR:** The audit covers kindergarten to year 10—why not colleges?

**Mr Stanton:** Colleges were taking it to another level in terms of the performance information and the uses of performance information in preparing kids, students, for beyond. We certainly had rich data there in terms of NAPLAN and its use between 3, 5, 7 and 9, from primary through to high school.

**THE CHAIR:** Is there not a lot of data coming out of our college system with the ATAR system and the moderation that occurs in the college system?

**Mr Stanton:** There might very well be. For the purpose of the audit report, we discounted that and went away from that early in the planning for the audit.

**MRS KIKKERT:** Do you know when the government is going to respond to your recommendations?

**Mr Stanton:** The government did respond to the recommendations.

**MRS KIKKERT:** They did?

**Mr Stanton:** There was a government response, yes.

**MRS KIKKERT:** Okay, great.

**THE CHAIR:** Your report notes trends in participation rates. Could you expand on what you observed?

**Mr Stanton:** When we did the analysis, one of our audit questions was about the usefulness and comprehensiveness of information that was available. It became apparent to us that with NAPLAN data its usefulness as a measure against all schools and all students was dropping off as it got to year 9, and the participation rate in year 9 was lower. That goes to the comprehensiveness of the NAPLAN data, particularly for year 9.

Paragraphs 4.6 through to 4.12 of the report talk about participation rates in NAPLAN testing, and figure 4-2 does a comparison across Australian public and private schools and ACT public and private. The year 9 participation rate in 2015 for NAPLAN was somewhere between 84 and 86. It was lower in the ACT public and private, which was 90 or 91, than in Australian public and private, which was up closer to 92. We noticed that in the data. We questioned whether that provided as comprehensive data as possible and we made a recommendation, in relation to that, for the Education Directorate to address that low participation rate particularly in year 9.

**THE CHAIR:** Thank you for your help today. You will be sent a proof copy of the transcript.

**The committee adjourned at 11.38 am.**