



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, 2 OCTOBER 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

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WITNESSES

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Amended 20 May 2013

The committee met at 9.33 am.

MORWITCH, MRS KATHLEEN, Senior Manager, Curriculum and Professional Learning, Association of Independent Schools of the ACT

THE CHAIR: Welcome. Could you confirm that you have read the privilege card on the table before you and that you understand the privilege implications of the statement?

Mrs Morwitch: I have.

THE CHAIR: Would you like to make a short opening statement?

Mrs Morwitch: Thank you. I currently work in the office of the Association of Independent Schools of the ACT as senior manager, curriculum and professional learning. Prior to that role I was a teacher for 30 years in a range of schools in the ACT.

You are probably already aware of the fact that we have 18 independent schools here in the ACT. They come in a great diversity of sizes in terms of enrolments and a diversity of communities. I think currently we have enrolled in our schools in excess of 14,000 students, and we employ close to 3,000 full-time equivalent staff. To use a phrase that our executive director, Andrew Wrigley, often uses when he describes the office of the Association of Independent Schools, we are a boutique organisation. Clearly we are not a system. As such, the submission that you have before you reflects the professional and considered opinions provided by representatives from a range of our independent schools and from staff in the office of the Association of Independent Schools. Our executive committee of the independent schools asked that we gather and collate information to respond with a submission to this inquiry, and that is what you have in front of you.

In terms of an opening position statement, I will just point you to perhaps halfway down the first page of the submission in front of you and I will paraphrase a paragraph from that. Overall the AIS ACT schools agree that this inquiry provides an opportunity to shape the educational narrative around growth in student learning, rather than just standardised testing. We have the position that standardised testing, when triangulated, combined with and compared to a range of other assessment data, is valuable and is beneficial. It is one piece of the jigsaw puzzle of assessment that, when combined with on-balance teacher judgement, provides as close as you can get to an accurate current reality. That is when the conversation starts: “If this is our current reality and this is where we need to go, what is the professional conversation to be had to get to where we need to go, the next step?”

Going back to the point there, it is a rich triangulation of data that will highlight educational trends, strengths and gaps. Depending on what the diagnostic tool is, those educational trends might be at the national level, state level, territory level, system level, school level, year group level or classroom level, plus your individual students. That is really valuable. A rich triangulation of data will also inform teaching and learning programs and pedagogy to best meet student needs, to best meet the next

step, to show growth, to encourage growth. It creates valuable professional learning conversations based on student progress. I do like this point that was contributed: it implicitly conveys a continuous improvement message to all of our stakeholders. Lastly, of course, a rich triangulation of data informs strategic planning and shapes professional learning directions. That is the position of our member schools.

THE CHAIR: You mentioned in your opening statement that standardised testing is just one piece of the puzzle. Do you think standardised testing is testing the right things? Does it test everything or does it only test certain subjects?

Mrs Morwitch: Clearly it does not test everything. Standardised tests, depending on what their intention is, test certain things. If you look at the second page of the paper that was presented, we can perhaps unpack some of the things that different standardised tests do. Would you like to me to go through some of those? Would that be of benefit?

THE CHAIR: Yes, go for it.

Mrs Morwitch: Obviously with NAPLAN you have it testing its various domains, the literacy and numeracy domains that it has. The PAT tests, the ACER progressive achievement tests that are commonly used in our schools—I am speaking from that position—test science, maths, reading, vocabulary, spelling, punctuation and grammar areas. Allwell tests, which are another standardised test, are looking at general ability. They have also got a maths test, reading comprehension, spelling and written expression. Another standardised test which is used in our schools is the CogAT, which is a cognitive abilities test. That is looking at your verbal and non-verbal reasoning and quantitative problem-solving skills. No one test will test everything. They all have something to add. When they are compared with each other, you get a richer picture. Again, on-balance teacher judgement comes into that equation.

THE CHAIR: I understand that you are not in the classroom yourself at this point. How would a teacher use the results of a standardised test in the classroom?

Mrs Morwitch: That is a great question. The teacher would use the results from a range of standardised tests and then they would compare those results with a range of other macro or micro tests that they might have, such as a common assessment year level test, a classroom assessment piece and their consistent observation of what is happening in the classroom. With that combination and with professional discussions with other teachers, they would be making ongoing judgements all the time about the next step in this progress of stepping the student towards growth. They would also be using that to inform their teaching learning programs and any other professional learning they would need.

MR WALL: There has been quite a bit of commentary in this inquiry, and likewise in the broader media, around how NAPLAN data is made available on an annual basis and how it is used by parents and by schools or school systems, as well as the media. Some are pointing the finger particularly at the *Canberra Times* for the way they have previously dealt with NAPLAN data. What is the view of the independent schools that you represent on how data is made available, how it should be used, and any improvements in that space that you think would be necessary?

Mrs Morwitch: Our whole position is that it is not helpful to have a narrative around competition and ranking out in the general public, however that is conveyed by the media. NAPLAN, for example, as a standardised test, was only ever designed as a diagnostic tool. To then have it taken into the public arena as a comparative ranking tool is not useful, because the general public may well jump on board in terms of: “That is a better school than this one; they are doing better teaching in comparison to this one.” That is not helpful in terms of what the tool is designed to deliver.

MR WALL: Why do you think NAPLAN attracts that level of attention? Your submission lists almost a dozen other forms of standardised testing that are used across your member schools. Why is it that NAPLAN attracts that level of attention or scrutiny?

Mrs Morwitch: There is the time it is given as a topic piece by the media; you have that. It is also a unique educational tool for Australia. As such, being unique, it is going to attract some commentary. However, its uniqueness is also a bit beneficial, because now we have a longitudinal set of data for our Australian schools to use that can inform trends, strengths and gaps that we should address.

THE CHAIR: You mentioned that the community pays so much attention to the results of NAPLAN because the media does. Why do you think the media pays so much attention?

Mrs Morwitch: This is my personal view; I will not be presenting an AIS ACT view. I hope the media pays so much attention because it comes from them wishing to support the youth of Australia and have the best possible education for all students in Australia. Let’s be Pollyanna-ish and say they are trying to draw attention to some gaps to maybe bring about some change that might benefit our schools. That is a Pollyanna view; I have no other comment in that space.

THE CHAIR: I think the media reports on these things because parents want to know. When the *Canberra Times* publishes these league tables, everyone reads them. I think you have the cart before the horse on this one—I think the community wants to see the league tables, which is why media publishes them.

Mrs Morwitch: Potentially that is the case. The parents have transparency in their own child’s results and the school’s results. Perhaps that is the case. I have no comment.

MR WALL: There has been a big change in the way NAPLAN is delivered. I note you have attached a survey from one of your member schools that conducted the examination this year online. How many AIS member schools did the NAPLAN test this year online?

Mrs Morwitch: The majority did. I have not got the exact numbers, though. You would need to speak to them independently to get their accurate feedback.

MR WALL: Sadly, they have not all made submissions.

Mrs Morwitch: Yes, that is exactly right. However, there was general consensus that there are advantages to this transition to the online NAPLAN in that it will provide a faster turnaround, which is fantastic in terms of using the data to inform teaching and learning. The adaptive capacity of the questions is also considered to be of value. It will much more quickly give detailed data at that top end and bottom end that we can then look at. With the online interface there could be an engagement level there that would be of value.

One survey result that was included in your paper from one of our member schools—I commend them for being so proactive in looking at the welfare of the students, if you will, as they were transitioning to online—shows that it was well received. There were no heightened anxiety levels or anything through changing to that particular way of doing the NAPLAN test.

MR WALL: This is the first time we have got hard data, and one of the most interesting responses was to the statement, “I tried to do my best in the NAPLAN test.” Overwhelmingly students either agreed or strongly agreed with that, with only a very small handful not agreeing. Anecdotally the evidence is put that a lot of kids just do not try at NAPLAN because they realise it has no meaning. But, as I say, this is the first bit of hard data we have been provided with which canvasses that, so thank you for including that in the submission.

Mrs Morwitch: All schools encourage their students to engage. Ultimately it comes down to a student choice as to whether they do or do not at a point in time. And NAPLAN data is literally just a point-in-time capture of information.

THE CHAIR: We have heard from the ACT Education Directorate that they try to de-emphasise preparation and practice for NAPLAN testing. As an association of independent schools I understand that there is not a uniform approach to NAPLAN testing, but does preparation and practice go on in independent schools for NAPLAN?

Mrs Morwitch: No. The preparation for NAPLAN is the teaching of the Australian curriculum because the NAPLAN questions are—and more so in current years—closely aligned to the Australian curriculum. There would be common-sense approaches going on in terms of familiarisation with software and interface and familiarisation with a style of testing. Perhaps for the younger students there would be familiarisation with, “This is the classroom that you are comfortable sitting in, doing this particular tasking.”

I would imagine there are positive conversations such as: “This is just another opportunity, a snapshot, a point in time, to capture what you are great at. Isn’t it also great that we can maybe pick up some areas that we can work on in an intentional way into the future?” So, no, there is not teaching to the test taking place.

THE CHAIR: Does a dialogue go on amongst parents where parents are interested to know whether there is going to be preparation or practice or even if the parents themselves are encouraging their children to practise for the test?

Mrs Morwitch: I do not have that information, so you would need to speak to our respective schools and with their respective parent bodies, which come from diverse

communities, to see if that would be the case.

MR WALL: A to E reporting also forms part of this inquiry. Does AIS hold a broad view as to the application of A to E testing in ACT schools? Do you think it is adequate? Do you think improvements need to be made? What is the collective view on it?

Mrs Morwitch: I draw your attention to point (c) in that space. We do A to E reporting twice annually; it is the norm in all our schools; it is legislated that we do so. We hold the position that reporting student growth would be better. As you know, with A to E reporting if I report you, Michael, as a C—

THE CHAIR: This is on the public record.

Mrs Morwitch: You just had that woeful face.

MR WALL: You just got told you're average.

Mrs Morwitch: You have just proved my point, because C with the achievements standards is at standard. You have shown a year's growth by the end of the year or the band or whatever it is. You are at standard. That is fantastic, and yet the perception out in the public is that C is perhaps not good enough and that this child should be achieving a B or an A.

Keeping with that scenario, what if a child is consistently working towards standard and is having enormous growth as they are working towards standard, yet with A to E there is a D sitting for English, there is a D sitting for maths, and that is not necessarily engaging.

Another way that helps in reporting growth is using annotated portfolios. Some of our schools use that: "Here is a piece at this point in time. Here is a piece that has been annotated. Look at the growth in this space." Some of our schools are trialling online feedback for assessment tasks—as soon as it has been assessed, out it goes, back to the students and to the carers and to the parents, as does the next piece. You can track the growth with real data in front of you, real examples.

Student-led conferences are also being used in some of our schools—great opportunities for student voice, student agency, student description and ownership of their journey and growth. Some schools also incorporate student design tasks and inquiry projects.

Mr WALL: In the example you gave where you awarded Michael a C—

Mrs Morwitch: He is smiling now because it is at standard.

THE CHAIR: It would be easier to give Mr Wall a C, but—

MR WALL: In my school days, Michael, I would have been happy with a C. What has caused this issue where the professional side sees a student who is performing well and is at standard but the perception is that that student is below average? Is there

misinformation? What is the role of the policy space in trying to balance that? It seems more a perception issue than a flaw in the reporting mechanism holistically.

Mrs Morwitch: My personal opinion in this space is clarity of communication, so ongoing communication around this is an achievement standards Australian curriculum that we have and what that means when those standards are reported. So it is about clarity of communication.

Our independent, government and Catholic education schools have done a lot of work this year with the consultant Dr Tracey McAskill, who was working with ACARA when the curriculum was designed. She has run a series of workshops, and a number of teachers have been attending those, with great positive feedback. They are gaining more clarity in that space, so we are all working. We all need to continue to—

MR WALL: So there is a gap even for teachers in their understanding and interpretation?

Mrs Morwitch: There has been. It has been a transition phase into this new curriculum.

MR WALL: I understand that you are not in the schools, but are you aware of any information that member schools are sending out with school report cards to try to inform parents of what an A through to E equates to in their child's learning?

Mrs Morwitch: You would have to speak individually to the schools, but I can assure you that they would be sending out descriptions of that.

MR WALL: You touch in your submission on online feedback for assessments being trialled in some schools. Can you expand on how that is used or where it is being used so that we can at least ask questions in the right direction?

Mrs Morwitch: I could direct you to those schools.

MR WALL: What has been the feedback from that?

Mrs Morwitch: They spoke about it positively.

THE CHAIR: You have spoken a lot about the value you see in the different forms of standardised testing. Are there ways that certain standardised tests could be improved in the way they are practised?

Mrs Morwitch: In the way they are practised?

THE CHAIR: Or implemented.

Mrs Morwitch: Implemented? So it is about not what is in the actual tool but the way it is deployed?

THE CHAIR: I would be interested in both. I am asking about all standardised testing to see if any of them stand out as tests that could be improved and, if so, how

they could be improved in terms of their content and the way they are implemented in the school system.

Mrs Morwitch: Implementation of any standardised test—indeed, any assessment tool—should be couched in the language of a positive growth mindset in the classroom or in a school or even in the community. It is not a scenario of: “You must pass or else”—the do or die type scenario. Rather, it is: “This is an opportunity at a point in time to demonstrate what you know in this particular space that is being tested by this particular test. Great; let’s find out what your strengths are. Let’s unpack where the gaps are. That’s going to be a way of informing how we can best meet your particular needs”—or the needs of this class or this cohort or this year group or this school’s pattern, whatever it is—“to move forward. It is all about positive positioning of this being just another opportunity, another experience in the educational arena, to help.

THE CHAIR: Should standardised testing be done at a cohort level or by sample?

Mrs Morwitch: Great question. I want to take you back to our response here. Cohort level, two standardised tests—PISA and TIMSS. They are international tests, as you are aware, and they are conducted by a random cohort selection process. That really limits the assessment value regarding school and student progress. At an international comparative level it is fine, but it is just a sample. It is not robust enough to be a whole group cohort sort of thing.

THE CHAIR: Those are international tests, but for domestic tests like NAPLAN is there any value in sampling or should it be cohort wide?

Mrs Morwitch: Cohort wide, because you want the results for every student in their class. As a teacher I want to get on the new Scout platform. Have you been on it, by any chance? The new Scout platform is the BI platform for analysing the tests, just released this year. It is fantastic, so much faster.

THE CHAIR: We will look into that suggestion.

Mrs Morwitch: When I get on to it I can see the patterns, I can see the trends, but I can drill down to my own class’s individual results. There are Michael’s results, there are Andrew’s, Nicola’s, Elizabeth’s, whoever. I can then say, “Right, in all the questions he or she answered here are the strengths; here are the gaps.”

I can drill down even further and there are teaching strategies I can bring into play to help that. There is a whole group in my class for whom I can now use this data, when I test it against other data to confirm its accuracy, to inform what I need to do. So I need the results for all of the students.

THE CHAIR: Overwhelmingly we are hearing from teachers that they are not doing that; they are not drilling deep into the individual data of students. We have received some evidence that they look at cohort trends. The example you are talking about sounds quite nice, but I am not sure anyone is doing that.

Mrs Morwitch: I take your point on board. I think it brings to this conversation the

importance of data literacy skills for our teachers and supporting data literacy skills not just for NAPLAN but for any standardised test or test done in a school.

That is one side of the equation. There has to be ease of access to that data, and there has to be time to access, analyse, talk about and cross-reference it with other data. So it is not that the data is not great or that the tool is not great; it is about having really effective data literacy skills and ease of access to that data. That then informs the next step in a high-impact cycle to get where you need to go.

THE CHAIR: Do you think that standardised testing should occur in digital format or in paper format, in terms of the reporting speed of the results?

Mrs Morwitch: In terms of reporting speed, digital is going to get the data back to you in a very timely manner. The sooner the data comes back, the sooner you can action it. With paper there are months in between—too long. That is only talking about a standardised test. If it is perhaps something done in a classroom, that is different. That is absolutely fine to be paper. A case in point is AST.

MR WALL: What more do you think needs to be done to improve data literacy for teachers and parents, those that are being exposed to the information NAPLAN provides, and then to inform them on how best to interpret that? Are there areas where you see a deficiency or where AIS has become aware that there is an unmet need for development?

Mrs Morwitch: Professional development in any area is ongoing. It is going to be a different scenario perhaps in each school. There will be different platforms that are a repository for the data. Different staff members will have more skills, potentially, in that space. But it is the school's professional responsibility to work with their teachers in that space. I believe they are doing so and doing so very well. It just needs to be ongoing. For example, with the Scout being deployed, the new system this year, they have already had cross-sectorally in excess of six professional learning opportunities for a train the trainer model to then go back into the schools to work with the teachers to navigate that platform and use the data. So there is ongoing professional learning in that space. New teachers coming on board out of university are all going to need to be developed in that space.

MR WALL: Following on from Michael's questions around the whole cohort as opposed to randomised samples, PISA and TIMSS particularly use a randomised sample for their tests. How are they selected?

Mrs Morwitch: I run these in schools. You just receive your email from the organisers: "These are the student IDs that have been selected randomly. They are the ones who are going to go into the hall and sit that test at this point in time, with external supervisors coming in to do so." You do not get a say in swapping in or swapping out students. "Would this be a better fit?" or whatnot does not really matter. That is what it is.

MR WALL: So the assessment agency essentially has a list of all the students, all their IDs, and it just randomly plucks out a list?

Mrs Morwitch: Yes, randomly.

MR WALL: So it is not up to the schools individually to choose?

Mrs Morwitch: No, absolutely not. Sometimes people look at the list and say, “Oh my goodness, this is great. Here we go. I hope they’re at school that day.”

MR WALL: I guess the randomised nature of it means you can potentially select the best of the school, the worst of the school or somewhere in between—

Mrs Morwitch: Exactly.

MR WALL: in reasonable samples because of the quantity of students.

Mrs Morwitch: The randomisation of it, yes.

MR WALL: How many students are selected to undertake these tests at any one time?

Mrs Morwitch: I would have had to book the hall to set it up. It seats a classroom size. I could not give you the exact number.

MR WALL: Are we talking fewer than 100, more than 10?

Mrs Morwitch: Yes, fewer than 100. Perhaps that is also determined by the school size. Perhaps it is a percentage of a cohort. I am not quite sure of that.

THE CHAIR: We might dig into that. Do you think NAPLAN is a high-stakes or a low-stakes test, and for which individuals or groups?

Mrs Morwitch: That is a really interesting question, high stakes or low stakes. It would depend on the perspectives of the stakeholders when they are looking at it. So I am going to take the point of view of students in a way. For some it can be extremely high stakes, for a range of reasons, and for some it can be low stakes. A lot of high anxiety is associated with NAPLAN, for example, as a standardised test, which I think you are referring to here.

Coming out of educational research, and you are probably already aware of it, is the window of tolerance model. Tom Brunzell from Berry Street School in Melbourne—it has many campuses in Victoria—refers to the window of tolerance model quite a lot. Within this window of tolerance the majority of students fluctuate. When emotional triggers come their way, such as NAPLAN or whatever, they will deal with that appropriately.

Some of our students, for whatever reason—trauma-informed backgrounds or even EAL/D, English as an additional language backgrounds or whatever it is—complex reasons, sit on the fringes of this window of tolerance. An emotional trigger comes along and it will skyrocket them into perhaps a hyper-arousal state, your fight and your flight, where the adrenaline kicks in, the cortisol kicks in and the prefrontal cortex, which is where your reasoning happens, is just not functioning. No learning is

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taking place; challenging behaviour is escalated. That will happen. Then there is the other range where there comes an emotional trigger and they could go into what is called the hypo-arousal state, where they are disengaged, they are really detached emotionally—anxiety, depression and those types of things.

For those students, sure, it is really high stakes in terms of their emotional wellbeing. If NAPLAN were not there, perhaps it would be other assessment pieces or tasks that were pushing them into these atypical states. It could be having to do an oral presentation, a fight with the friendship group at lunchtime, bullying on social media or issues from the home situation.

The point is not getting rid of emotional triggers. They are on every teacher's radar. The schools are working really hard in this space. How do the wellbeing programs and the individual learning programs help to build emotional regulation and resilience strategies for these students to get them back into the window of tolerance so that their learning can take place and they can exit at the end of schooling to the best of their potential?

THE CHAIR: Is NAPLAN high stakes or low stakes for the schools themselves? Do your members feel pressure to do well?

Mrs Morwitch: I am not in a position, wearing my hat, to answer that, because they are independent schools, which is a strength of theirs.

THE CHAIR: There is not a collective view?

Mrs Morwitch: No, it is not a collective view. I really think that to answer that accurately you would need to speak to the respective schools about how they balance the immediate perception out there that it is high stakes or low stakes and you must do well or you must not do well. I believe and feel from my anecdotal conversations with them that they see NAPLAN as what I put in the opening statement: just another piece of that jigsaw that is valuable. It is valuable in a triangulated—

THE CHAIR: We had one of your member schools here last week, the Canberra Montessori School.

Mrs Morwitch: That speaks to my point that you need to speak individually to schools.

THE CHAIR: Their view vastly played down the assessment. Kids can do it. If they do well, great. If they do not, great.

Mrs Morwitch: Exactly.

THE CHAIR: It is an unusual activity, given the way the curriculum is delivered in that school, and it has engaged with it differently. That was a good example of some of the diversity that exists.

Mrs Morwitch: Yes. All schools have commented that they encourage them all to do the best they can possibly do, knowing that ultimately it is the student's decision at

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the point in time when they are sitting there to do so.

THE CHAIR: Thank you for coming in. The secretary will provide you with a copy of the proof transcript of today's hearing when it is available.

The committee adjourned at 10.11 am.