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)
MS T CHEYNE
MR A WALL

TRANSCRIPT OF EVIDENCE

CANBERRA

TUESDAY, 11 SEPTEMBER 2018

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

By authority of the Legislative Assembly for the Australian Capital Territory

WITNESSES

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Amended 20 May 2013

The committee met at 9.32 am.

BRUCE, MR MURRAY, Principal, Gordon Primary School and Executive Committee Member, ACT Principals Association
BOBOS, MS ELIZABETH, Principal, Latham Primary School and Co-President, ACT Principals Association
RICHARDS, MR GARETH, Principal, Namadgi School and Executive Committee Member, ACT Principals Association

THE CHAIR: 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. Proceedings are also being broadcast and webstreamed live. Witnesses are asked to familiarise themselves with the privilege statement provided at the table, the pink sheet. Could I confirm that you have read the privilege card on the table before you, which was also sent to you by the secretary, and that you understand the privilege implications of the statement.

Mr Bruce: Yes,

Ms Bobos: Yes.

Mr Richards: Yes.

THE CHAIR: Would you like to make an opening statement?

Mr Bruce: Thank you very much for hearing us today. We are three representatives of the ACT Principals Association. That is the association of principals in public schools here in Canberra. We represent all of the public school principals. We are very appreciative of your investigation and the opportunity to talk to you, because a lot of the issues that are raised are of great importance to us. We are very pleased with the idea that there be a full inquiry into, particularly, the use of NAPLAN.

The ACT Principals Association has two presidents; one comes from the primary sector and one from the secondary sector. Liz is our president from the primary sector. Gareth Richards is an executive member of the association. He is the principal of Namadgi School, which is a P-10 school. Liz is the principal of Latham Primary School. I am the principal of Gordon Primary School.

THE CHAIR: Thank you for being here. I feel a bit strange; I feel as though I am at school again somehow, sitting across from teachers.

Mr Bruce: Three principals.

Ms Bobos: I feel as though I am in an interview.

MS CHEYNE: We are all uncomfortable.

THE CHAIR: I will lead off with questions and we will make our way down the line. Your submission states that there is a perception that NAPLAN tests are high stakes for schools and that there is strong pressure from schools and students to do well. Do you think NAPLAN in its current form does more good than harm, and is it worth keeping in its current form?

Ms Bobos: I think that in its current form it does more harm than good. I know that, while we represent our association, I also have to speak as a principal of my school and that is my current context. I do not have a problem per se with some form of standardised testing for governments and systems to check how things are going, but, for me, the levels of anxiety and stress that I have seen increase in children over the years disturbs me considerably, and I have seen parents who are anxious because of their children on the increase.

I have been teaching for a very long time. When we used to have state and jurisdictional tests—I was in the Northern Territory at that time—there were not people concerned. There were not people anxious about the results. We did not have withdrawals. It was just part of what we did in our year's teaching and assessment. I have seen that change over the years.

THE CHAIR: Why has it changed? Is it because of the my school website?

Ms Bobos: I think that is part of it, but it is media attention, particularly, and the hype that has wrapped around it. Instead of just being part of what we do, it has become the thing that everybody talks about, certainly in the media. I think that has a lot to do with it.

Mr Richards: I have two students currently in the system, one in year 7 and one in year 4. Both of them are going through the NAPLAN process. As a parent, I could choose to withdraw my children if I wanted to, but we choose to go through that process. One of my kids can undertake a pen and pencil test no problems and is quite angst free. My son, on the other hand, as Liz was just saying a minute ago, takes on a considerable burden of anxiety, not only during the testing period but when waiting for the results to come back. I think that is an undue stress that we do not need to place our kids under these days, not just my own, but the ones that I see in our schools as well.

From that aspect, I think there is a humanitarian approach that we need to have a look at here around the health and wellbeing of our students. As we have suggested in the paper, maybe there are other ways of collecting the data that we need to see how we are going as jurisdictions and as a nation.

THE CHAIR: Why are the kids stressed? Are they concerned about their results or are they concerned about the impact on the school?

Mr Bruce: I think it comes from the parents, largely. When it is not discussed in the way it is now, as Liz mentioned, kids are not stressed when teachers give them exercises and tests in class. They can do it in such a way that kids rarely—occasionally they will—get stressed.

It is the whole hype about it, and that flows from the my school website, from the misuse of the data, from the publicity. Parents getting anxious about it can contribute. And sometimes teachers are overly concerned about what the results might be, too. All of that comes through so that some children will experience stress. It is not all; for some children it is like water off the back of a duck, thank goodness.

Ms Bobos: Another thing is that children today, because of social media and access to the world, know so much more than they did 20 years ago. I have a set of twins going into year 3 this year. One of my parents said to me, "We don't practise for the test. It's not a big thing at my particular school." One of the parents said that her kids went into the scholastic book fair that was going on and they were given some money each. The two girls went off to buy something of their choice. She said one of the girls came back with a NAPLAN practice test. She goes, "What was that about?" That obviously had not come from her. It had not come from the school. The question is: where did that come from? I think that even our young children have access to a picture of the world that perhaps 20 years ago an eight-year-old had no clue about. They are much more savvy today than they used to be.

Mr Richards: The high stakes sort of testing and the pressure that comes with that through the media are possibly something that the kids are now feeling as well. As I said, I do not have any data or evidence around that; it is just something that I have observed through school and through being a parent. But it is certainly there.

THE CHAIR: One of the things you have mentioned a couple of times is practice testing. How does practice testing come about? Is it a decision of a certain teacher of the school or of the principal to run practice tests? I would love someone to explain it to me.

Mr Bruce: I would say it is an individualised sort of approach. A lot of principals would not pay much heed to that approach. When you run children through a regime of practising for a test, you lose sight of all the other wonderful things that you can do through the teaching and learning phase. For some staff, and maybe even for some schools in particular, the importance of practising for a test is because of that high stakes outcome. With my schools and where they sit in relation to that, I do not think that is the main driver behind why we go to school and do the work that we do and why kids like being there.

THE CHAIR: So some schools make that decision; they succumb to the pressure and they conduct practice tests?

Mr Bruce: Yes.

Ms Bobos: That is my understanding.

Mr Bruce: At my school we do a bit. Because of the awareness of the children, and we want them to experience success in everything they do at school, I would like them to feel that they can show what they are capable of in NAPLAN as well. I believe we do it in a very balanced way, just enough.

One of the issues about NAPLAN is that it is a style of testing that is not typical of how we work out, day by day, how the children are progressing with their learning. It can be unfamiliar to them. One idea is to make them a bit familiar. So we do a bit of it, but I believe we keep it in balance and do not do it too much. It is very easy to be drawn into feeling that you have to look good. Therefore, you are going to get out of balance and it really can distort the program.

Some people would say that even the small number of preparation exercises that we do is taking us away from the other very valuable stuff that we do. It is a matter of judgement by particular schools and particular teachers as to what happens.

Anecdotally we are aware that, although I do not think it is too bad in the ACT, around the country things are being distorted by people being too worried about it and seeing it as a big thing, about giving your school a competitive edge. Then it does do what we always feared it would: narrow the curriculum, make the curriculum much less valuable than it should be for the needs of the modern era.

MRS KIKKERT: Thank you for letting us borrow you for the next hour before the school gets you back. We really appreciate it. My question is in regard to children from broken homes. We have seen an increase in domestic violence within the community and we have also seen the ACT police come in to some public schools and talk about domestic violence. With respect to children that come from broken homes, their mental health can be pretty much broken. What role does that play in the results that come back from NAPLAN and other standardised tests?

Mr Richards: My school is situated in Kambah. We are a fairly low SES background school. I do not think it is something that is just found in public schools. Obviously, any school can experience this.

With respect to the impact of students coming from there and having to sit through, say, NAPLAN assessments, I do not think there is strong value behind doing that assessment when you have come from a very disruptive morning start. We are probably not getting the correct measure out of our students who are having to sit for these assessments when they have come from fairly tumultuous family backgrounds. They are concentrating more on having missed breakfast, having had a massive argument in their house before leaving, or maybe being exited from the house earlier than would be comfortable. They might have been wandering around for an hour before the day starts at 9 o'clock.

I am sure that having to try and overcome that external baggage before we can even sit down and concentrate on doing an assessment piece has a great influence on the outcome of that assessment, and probably not in favour of what the student actually knows, can understand and can do.

MRS KIKKERT: What sort of support mechanism do you have in place for that particular child? Surely, that experience that the child is going through is not just an overnight thing that happens. You would have seen, as teachers and principals, that it progresses throughout the weeks and months leading up to the NAPLAN tests. What sort of supportive mechanism does the school provide for that particular child?

Mr Bruce: I would like to talk about some of the things that are happening at Gordon Primary School at the moment. You have touched on a crucial issue, actually, and it is one of the complexities of NAPLAN results and things that need exploration.

There is the AEDC, which you are probably familiar with, the early childhood index. The number of children who arrive at school with vulnerabilities in certain areas of learning are very important in determining what your chances of success with them are. For example, there are significant numbers of children experiencing the kinds of difficulty you are talking about or other difficulties which are going to impinge on their ability to learn. We have a very active equivalent of two staff members a day dedicated to student wellbeing. For example, we have what is called a friendship hub. If a child is unable to settle in class—sometimes that can lead to disruptive behaviour, of course, because of the kinds of issues that Gareth was referring to—they can go and be counselled and have a little time to settle and work through their feelings and so forth in the friendship hub.

We have young children who have immaturity issues and are not able to play in the normal systematic way that children can usually happily play in. We have set up a thing called a play pod where there are more adventurous opportunities to play and do cubbyhouses—more like what younger children with less development would do. We have two staff available to deal with any issues that arise during the day, to address their needs, settle them, talk to their parents and bring in additional support if required—all designed to plug them back into the learning program.

There are lots of moderations of the program and activities to address those sorts of needs. I think it is a crucial thing about the complexity of school results that needs a lot of digging into, if you really want to understand why sometimes it is quite hard to get a child to get to a certain level in the curriculum, despite the very best efforts by all of the teaching staff.

MRS KIKKERT: Sometimes, with all of those best efforts, there are still children that fall through the cracks. Would you be open to having some community services come in to schools and work in partnership to educate and support the development of a child?

Ms Bobos: Absolutely. At Latham we already have a pretty strong relationship with Belconnen Community Service. For two years we have run a pre-preschool play group. Because our AEDC data is so low, and it shows that our children are coming well behind the eight-ball, we are trying to work with children and families—parents—regarding some of the early skills that they can give before they even hit preschool. They come and run a bungee group each term with some of our children who are perhaps more socially disadvantaged. So we already have a really strong relationship with them.

The other thing we do at our school is that we always have a young Raider, from the under 20s, come and work with them. Their connection with kids with that social and emotional need is the strongest. We have been doing that for about three years as well. So, yes, we already do that.

Mr Richards: We have links with PCYC, with Menslink. At our school, because

I have two youth support workers who work out of my engagement hub in the high school, we ran a community services day. All the community services in our local area would come to the school between two and 4 o'clock one afternoon in term 1. Families entering the school to pick up children could go through their marquees and pick up flyers and information. Lifeline and those types of things were there as well.

We actively, through the school, try to find out what is in our community and bring that to the school, as a central hub, for our families to access. We also plug in to those community services and have them running through the school, working with our students. Circus warehouse is another program that we have around building social skills and resilience. You will probably find that in each school there are lots of little things going on behind the scenes. The more of that support that we can tap into, the better.

MRS KIKKERT: Are you aware of whether there are some primary schools and high schools that do not have similar support to what you provide?

Mr Richards: Not that I am aware of. When I speak to colleagues, I know of other programs that are happening in their schools, or they are developing internal mechanisms to tap into PCYC or something like that in the area, or local community groups that might come in and provide support—Lions Youth Haven and those types of things. I think they are fairly well utilised. I would not say there is a school working in isolation where nothing is happening in it.

Mr Bruce: It varies. With breakfast programs, for example, lots of schools have those, and they are often supported by community groups such as church groups. The extent to which it is available in your particular area can vary a bit, but, in general, people are very aware of the value of these wraparound partnerships and are looking for opportunities.

MS CHEYNE: Following on from the line of questioning, it is clear that children are stressed, parents are stressed, teachers do not really see the value of NAPLAN, and I note that in the submission it says it has been harmful. That is how people are feeling about NAPLAN and about doing it, but what is the flow-on effect for students when there is this stress with the testing? Do you see students who would normally be performing pretty well acting out or playing up a little bit? Do you see students who are disengaged become more disengaged because of the process? Is it having this broader flow-on effect on your ability to get good outcomes generally in the school environment?

Mr Richards: During the assessment period, I do see some of our older students who perform quite well in other assessments that we run at school actually not turning up on the day that NAPLAN is on because they are so stressed about doing it. We always say to them, "There are other options that day; if you are withdrawing and you bring the notes from home to support that, we can find something else for you to do at that time while the cohort's going through the assessment."

In general I think the effect on those students is one of unnecessary stress. Sometimes they are playing it up in their own heads and catastrophising as to what is going to go

wrong because of this agenda or this hidden pressure from waiting for the assessment data to come through. I think the knock-on effect into school might be that you could have quite a turbulent week leading up to NAPLAN and then after NAPLAN you have the ripple effect of that that occurs. You could lose a good three, four or five weeks of work with that student because of the unsettling period. NAPLAN does not just go for a week anymore; it now extends over a fortnight, and you have an even longer period of time.

MS CHEYNE: Is that replicated?

Ms Bobos: I cannot say that I have seen a particular effect after the testing period—certainly, for the week preceding and during. I thought that, with the online testing this year, our children were very engaged, just because they had a computer in front of them. They were much more engaged than they had been beforehand.

We do not get many withdrawals at our school. We get a couple of parents who say, "I don't want my child to do that." What I noticed, particularly with year 3 children, was that the children would say, "I'm going to do this." They do day one, then perhaps they are away the next day; they are sick. They do not withdraw, but they just do not come to school. I see that, but I do not see any flow-on after the testing period, and I do not see kids, certainly in primary school, waiting for their results. I think it is just there and it is gone.

Mr Richards: Particularly years 7 and 9 students do, because they are very aware of that. That is more the age group I was talking about where we see the ripple effect. The younger students still seem a little bit more excited by it. Particularly in years 7 and 9, there is certainly that disruption.

Mr Bruce: We have quite a few parents who choose to withdraw their children when they know that it will be stressful for the child and they do not feel it will be a good experience for them. We have had in the past small numbers of children who have acted out during the testing period, but the staff have handled that and have ameliorated it.

It tends to be confined to the period. The whole thing about it is that, because of the scale of it all, it is a bit of a distraction from the main game of what you want to be happening in your school. If it was a sampling approach and less intense, we would get the data we need about the system without the distraction, the disruption and the anxiety, for those who do get anxious about it.

MS CHEYNE: Both of you talked about there sometimes being a reluctance to withdraw. But kids just do not turn up. Do you think that is because kids are worried about being seen as different or being treated differently? Rather than just withdraw, they say, "I'm sick"?

Mr Richards: I am not sure it is about being seen as different; I think it is more just the anxiety or stress of undergoing the assessment. They would go home that night, probably play merry hell for the parents at home about not going in the next day, and then you do not see the child. I think that is probably more my assessment of that.

Ms Bobos: I do not really know. This year I happened to be at a meeting or something or other so that I came in late on the first day of testing this year. As I came in, one of our children, who is not a high flyer but just a fun sort of a kid, was standing waiting for somebody to pick him up. I said, "What's the matter?" He said, "Oh, Mum's coming to pick me up." I said, "What's the matter?" He said, "I couldn't write anything." I said, "What do you mean?" He said, "I couldn't write anything. Everybody else was writing. I couldn't write anything. I can't. I'm going home."

I said, "It's okay. Tomorrow's another day. It's okay. It doesn't matter. It's not whatever." He did not turn up the next day. He did not withdraw. We had to make up those tests. But I just looked at him and he was comparing himself to the other kids. He just felt frozen. He said, "I couldn't write anything." That broke my heart. This kid is normally like: "Ya, ya, ya, ya."

Mr Richards: I have witnessed kids do that, but I have also witnessed kids who have done it like a silent protest, particularly some of the older students. They would sit there in the writing test and their pen would be there and nothing gets done. You would come over and you would say, "Are you going to have a go today?" And they would just go, "Nope."

We have defeated the purpose of having assessment in the first place to find out where that student is and how they are tracking, because they are literally, yes, protesting against doing the assessment. Yet when we do other assessments in school, as Murray was talking about, some of the more formative assessments—giving students feedback, working one on one with the teacher, giving commentary on the student work and whether it is assessment rubrics or success criteria and talking them through how we can build on what they have done here to make it better—they are far more engaged in that process than they are in the pen and paper or even the online version, I would assume.

MS CHEYNE: Given your own concerns about the testing and its value, what is the messaging that you give to parents, carers and students in the lead-up to and after the testing? Do you say, "Don't worry about it. It'll be fine"? Or do you say, "Try your best, but forget the rest—whatever?" Are there support mechanisms that you can provide or are you just trying to play it down a little? I guess it is a balance of trying not to overstress the kids, but you do want them to still try.

Ms Bobos: Yes.

Mr Bruce: There is a formal requirement on us to encourage parents to have their kids involved because of the government agreement. If we were found to be discouraging them, that would not be approved of. So we do that. But we also do talk about it in balance. And parents are entitled to withdraw their children. We certainly let them know that. They are given all the information about it.

With the kids themselves, yes, the teachers do what they always do—try to make the situation as productive and good for the kids as possible. We say to them, "We want you to do your best and we want to see the best you can do with this kind of test." We do not say, "Don't worry about it," or anything like that. But we also do say, like everything else, "If you do your best and it doesn't work, that doesn't matter. That's

good. We love making mistakes because that's how we learn better than anything else really." We are trying to remove that level of anxiety and worry about it, and it is just another task that you have a go at and do your best, really.

Ms Bobos: Yes.

Mr Richards: It is the same, yes. I think it is a fairly standard response. We do not want to overstress the situation. You do not play it down. It is important to give something a go, and that is what we encourage them to do.

Ms Bobos: I think, too, the message that I give to my parents and my children is that this is a point in time. This is a measure that we use. It is not the only measure. This is one thing. You do your best. If you do not do well, that is okay. We have got other things. You know what I mean? It is putting it in its place, rather than making it bigger than Ben Hur.

Mr Richards: We encourage parents to come to learning journeys and open nights and we encourage them to have parent-teacher meetings and read the end of semester reports as well. When you look at that on balance then you are getting a pretty fair measure of where the child is.

Ms Bobos: Yes.

MS CHEYNE: Just on that, is NAPLAN particularly problematic because it is so focused on numeracy and literacy? I think in the submission it mentions somewhere that it mitigates all the other things that kids are learning in terms of science and humanities and being that well-rounded child, yes. Being able to spell and being good at figures and things like that is important, but critical thinking is pretty important as well. Is it really showing that off in that testing, that holistic version of the child?

Mr Bruce: Yes, I think so. That is reflected in the Gonski report, for example, and in writings by quite a few analysts at the current time. It always was the danger that too much focus on that was going to narrow the curriculum. People get worried about the skill aspect of reading and writing and numeracy and so on—all of which we know kids have to learn to do well.

There is a big requirement to use creativity. We were talking yesterday about one of the very good speakers we love to listen to, of an Asian background, who talks about the supposed success of Shanghai, for example, in standardised testing and how the systems where there is strong focus on that kind of thing result in a certain kind of learning so that in the longer term a lot of people who have been very successful in those systems are not necessarily successful in the world of business, where we need entrepreneurial thinking and people able to collaborate and work well with each other—all that kind of thing.

There is a danger with the emphasis around NAPLAN that the curriculum gets narrowed—dropping the more creative, the arts. There are some very witty speakers who talk about schoolteachers who have heard about social science and the arts but they have never actually seen them happen in their school. I think he was talking in an American context. I hope that would not be true in Australia, but that is what the

worst-case scenario would get to if you had too much emphasis on this kind of high stakes testing.

MS CHEYNE: It is not about, "No, we don't care about facts and figures and spelling and literacy." It is that by putting an overemphasis on it we are potentially not getting the best?

Mr Richards: With the way in which the examinations are undertaken, I do not think it lends itself to students who can articulate their learning in other ways—students who can give you a more verbal sort of understanding of a particular situation. I think, again, about my own two kids. One can take a paper and pencil test or an online test very well and the other one would really struggle in that environment. But if I sat him down and talked to him about his learning and he articulated his learning, you would find actually a very in-depth knowledge and understanding of the subject matter. He just struggles to go from here to the paper. I think we are probably missing a fairly substantial portion of our students' knowledge and understanding and assessing where they are through that one modal process of assessment.

THE CHAIR: I have a supplementary on something Mr Cheyne raised. When you were talking about attendance for these tests, you mentioned that there are always a few that withdraw. Can you quantify how many people are maybe wagging from school that day and how many people are sick that day as well?

Mr Bruce: I can anecdotally talk about typically five or six students out of 120 on the day who might get sick and not be there. I think it is of that order; less than 10 per cent.

Ms Bobos: I do not know about high school, but in primary school wagging is not really a thing. It is more like parental collusion. But I do not think we had any children that did not turn up—what is the right word?—without a good reason, unjustified, on the first day. But we certainly had some people on the second day, once they realised what it was. I do not know about high school wagging?

Mr Richards: I would say there would be a small percentage of students who would. Out of a cohort of maybe 60-odd students you might have two or three at least. It is not a massive proportion of students here, but I think it also shows that these kids are impacted by that; otherwise they would have been at school that day, yes.

THE CHAIR: I am not sure if you actually have these numbers with you, but how many students do you have and how many of the NAPLAN tests were completed? I am not sure if you can tell me that right now.

Mr Richards: I do not have that data.

Ms Bobos: I do not have that either.

Mr Bruce: Anecdotally, almost all the ones who started completed in our setting. There would be the few kids who have struggled and have great difficulty who do very little. They sit there and attempt what they can. We have in the past had refusals of children who have just put their name on the paper and then said, "I'm not doing

it." But through encouragement and so forth we do not seem to have that happening nowadays. If they really do not want to do it, I think they negotiate with their parents and they are not at school that day.

Ms Bobos: And then there is a make-up period afterwards. If someone is legitimately sick, you can—

Mr Bruce: There is a catch-up that you just miss out because you are sick, yes.

Mr Richards: There is something that probably has not been raised yet that I would flag as well: students with complex needs, special needs. There are a number of students who are still required to sit NAPLAN assessments and they really are not offered any other diverse way. We can offer them additional supports, whether it is braille text or whether it is having an LSA support person with them in the room. It can still only do so much to assist them. I think that is probably another downfall of this style of assessment and it is putting pressure on students who have complex or significant needs. They are in a special needs setting to access learning and yet we are putting them through this process as well. We probably need to think a bit more about how we deliver the assessments if we are going to continue with a national assessment process. Maybe some more consideration in that space for those students would be something to consider.

THE CHAIR: What supports are lacking currently? I know you mentioned the format of the testing, but are there any supports that could be implemented if we were going to continue with this format?

Ms Bobos: You can ask for some adjustments or modifications to be used if they reflect what normally happens in the classroom. If you have a child who, through their fine motor skills or whatever, is not able to write, they can have a scribe. If that is what normally happens in the classroom to support their learning, that can happen again for NAPLAN. But if, like Gareth, I have a child who does not want to do it, I cannot use a scribe if that is not normal classroom practice. But, yes, there is that facilitation if it is reflective of classroom practice.

But there are no blanket exceptions. I have two autism units and I have children who are non-verbal. They are not exempt on a blanket case. It is up to parents to say, "I don't think that my child would do that." It is a pretty tough gig for a child who is non-verbal to be able to do a test moderated against his age peers across the country.

THE CHAIR: Should it be opt in, opt out? Should be it optional? Should it not be—

Ms Bobos: I am certainly not going to say to a parent that they can or cannot put their child in. It is a parent's choice. But I raise my eyebrows in respect of some parents. I think, "Really, you want to test them?" Quite typically their children do not do well.

Mr Richards: I think there has been some debate in the past around having another way of assessing students in those environments, but I have not seen that come to light yet. We have the same approach.

MR WALL: In a school setting, what is the consequence for a student of not setting

the world alight in their NAPLAN assessment?

Mr Richards: None. Why would you have one?

MR WALL: That is why I am asking. I am trying to get to the root of the anxiety. The anxiety generally comes around in the space where there is expectation, competition or a consequence. I take in part your comments earlier about the media discussion around it, but that is normally after the fact, not on the day of assessment.

Mr Richards: Through personal experience with my own son, it is not so much that there is a consequence if you do not do well, because at home I would not punish him or give him a consequence of not doing well in NAPLAN. It is his own internal driving mechanism where he feels embarrassed that students have got particular grades and he did not get them or he is compared against other students across the nation. He can see that he is either just below level or maybe a bit further down.

For a child who spent a lot of his early years with occupational therapists doing various bits and pieces, he was probably a bit behind the eight ball to start with to be considered a mainstream functioning student when compared with others. But that piece of paper really smacks him in the face: "You are behind the eight ball, mate." As a parent, it is really hard to have those conversations with your child to say, "You are doing okay for where you are, who you are and your own abilities within that space."

I would encourage him, if he chooses, to take that information on board and say, "Have we shown growth? Are we going on the right trajectory? Let's look at your school report and see what that says as well." On balance, it is what I was saying before. We have to make those assessments. But I think it is an internal thing. A lot of kids feel the stress.

MR WALL: But NAPLAN is four occasions through their entire education, through 13 years of formalised education and perhaps in early childhood settings prior to that. In the scheme of a child's education journey, it is a very small, microscopic part of what they do. Yet I think there is a lot of beat-up around it.

Mr Richards: Yes.

MR WALL: I personally see a need for it. I believe that there is value in it. I am just trying to get to why it has been blown out of all proportion when it does not contribute to a student's assessment and it does not change the outcome of what happens in the classroom for them the next day or for going further in their schooling. As you said, Mr Richards, often it is a measure and they are not on par with their peers. They might be slightly above or below, but is that not in itself a teaching opportunity, that everyone is not equal and that some kids or some people perform better in some areas than others? Is there not a valuable life lesson in that and a valuable teaching opportunity in that in itself?

Mr Bruce: Yes, I believe there can be. For example, you may have been shown in your four NAPLAN experiences that you are in the bottom cohort. There was reference in the terms of reference to the A to E reporting. If you have been told every

semester that you are a D child, all of this kind of thing can lead to the kind of perception that may be not productive for children.

That is why the general approach that we have recommended in our paper is to go to looking at learning a bit differently, not comparing yourself necessarily to the person next to you but comparing yourself to what you can do today compared with what you could do yesterday and gearing our assessment processes more effectively to that so that we can acknowledge the successes every child has.

Certainly, when you do not have a success and you have made mistakes, acknowledge that, learn from it and deal with it in a balanced way. But we do not want to give kids messages that may cause them—wrongly perhaps—in their perception to think, "Okay. I'm a D student. I'm never going to do very well," when we know from history that some people who have been dismal failures in school have been wonderful world leaders and so forth afterwards because of the wonderful attributes and talents they have been able to develop.

Hence, we would like to move more to the line that has been recommended in the second Gonski report of looking at the curriculum as a continuum over a number of years, noting what you have achieved, telling you what you have to go through to get better and using that kind of data more. We are happy with standardised testing but using it well, using the data appropriately, for the welfare of every child in the school and not having anybody thinking, "I'm labelled as a not very useful kind of learner."

MR WALL: How is the data used in your respective schools both on a cohort basis, an across-school basis and then on an individual basis?

Ms Bobos: I think this picks up on something you said before. Taking away the aberration of children who put down their pencil and say, "I'm not going to work," or whatever, over the whole cohort I find that there are rarely any surprises in the NAPLAN results. The children who have performed poorly, we already have a story around those children. We have already got supports, we have got a whole range of assessment data. So generally I find that you say, "Yes, we know about that kid. We know what the support mechanisms are. We know the story around each of those children." Teachers know their children very well.

I suppose it is a confirmation. Every now and again you think, "What happened for that child?" You might ask some questions, but generally I find that the spread of results is pretty much what we already know and expect. I think the difficulty we would look at as a whole school is how we are tracking as a school and whether we are missing any opportunities.

This year we triangulated some data between year 3, year 5 and year 7, although they are not at our school. We did this in respect of the children that we have been responsible for. We were able to say, "Last year we didn't do very well with any questions around poetry." So we have put a bit of an emphasis in our reading program to make sure that we are including poetry in reading and writing now. We would use it like that to see whether there are trends that perhaps we as a school have forgotten about, for example, teaching good quality poetry.

But for us in terms of students and what interventions we put in, the results come so late that they are not relevant. For the tests that are done in May, the year 3 and year 5 teacher feels responsible, but actually it has been more the work in the years before that because they have only had them for a term. You are getting the results in the middle of September. We do not have the results yet. It is almost like the horse has bolted. In terms of what interventions and support we put in for children, I find it useless.

MS CHEYNE: So it helps you overall for the school to be able to say, "We are maybe missing out in this area," but in terms of actually helping an individual student and saying, "We're not doing the right thing by you," it is meaningless?

Mr Bruce: It is limited, because the time factor is a big thing there. Things have moved on a lot by the time you get the results, yes.

Mr Richards: But certainly at every school I have ever worked at, the cohort data, the historical data year by year tells an interesting story. It is certainly something that as schools we take on board when we are making our five-year plans or we are looking at our annual action plans. Some of that data is drawn across in areas that we can target, particularly if you have not gone so well in a certain area for a particular cohort. We ask, "Why is that?" We will have our own internal mechanisms for investigating that. So it is used in that space.

MR WALL: Is the other side of it looked at and said, "We outperformed our peers in, you know arithmetic? What are we doing differently to other areas? How can other schools learn from us?" Is that aspect of it looked at as well?

Mr Bruce: Yes, it is. Not that I like the my school website, but there is the like school comparison where you can see how you have gone with supposed like schools. Not that that is without complications either, the ICSEA rating. But, yes, certainly we look at that and the particular growth statistics, for example. Is our rate of growth from between year 3 and year 5 comparable to comparable schools or better? You would be very pleased if it is always better, of course, in aiming to do the best.

MR WALL: At a curriculum coordinator/principal-type level, is there much dialogue around, "Well, your school did really well in that area. What are you doing differently from our school? We'd like to improve this. How can we learn from you?"

Mr Richards: There are obviously contextual issues you can take into account school by school. But, certainly, it has opened the door to conversations between networks and jurisdictions—just in the ACT anyway that I am aware of—to do school visits, for instance, and look at the programming and the planning behind what they are doing. So we are learning from each other and having those conversations.

Mr Bruce: A crucial thing if we want to do better as a nation in the school system is that collaborative process. It is not necessarily driven by NAPLAN or that particular set of data, but that is one of the fundamental things. I think we do it very well in the public school sector in Canberra. For example, we are connected in our networks within the ACT. We have what are called immersion visits where we go for a systemic visit to another school and look closely at what they are doing to share ideas

and make sure that we are not all having to reinvent the wheel.

People can over simplify it and say, "Oh, they're looking good at NAPLAN. They must be doing wonderful things." I have actually been in the situation of working in a school that performs very highly and one that struggles to perform as highly, and it is very complex. It is more to do with the socioeconomics of the area and all that than what was happening differently within the schools. There are lots of complex factors there.

Nevertheless, working collaboratively, not competitively, about best practice—solving pedagogical problems, what is making this learning work for this group of children but not this one and so forth—is very useful and very good practice. We would want systems that promote and encourage that.

If we had a progressive sort of assessment and a view of the curriculum as progressions and we saw that some people seem to be moving faster along it, that kind of collaboration would be a good way to keep spreading the good news and keep improving.

MS CHEYNE: Even though there is value in the league tables for that reason, you could still get that if those league tables were sent to the principals of the schools but not necessarily published far and wide, is that right?

Mr Bruce: In fact, you would probably get it more freely then because people would not be worried about who is looking over their shoulder and whether you are being compared in a competitive way and working as an individual rather than working collaboratively around improvement.

THE CHAIR: Tell us how you use NAPLAN data? How do parents use the NAPLAN data from what you see?

Mr Bruce: In my situation the level of interest is not overly high. I do not think I have ever had a parent come to the school inquiring. They might have looked it up on the my school website beforehand, but people never ask me about it. If they are interested, I always give a pretty comprehensive presentation of it to the parent body every year. Usually it is a small group who come and look at it with interest. But I think they have a very balanced view, as we were talking about before, that it is one piece of assessment, just one small aspect of what goes on in the school. They are a bit interested to see how we are looking and how it compares.

There would be some parents—and this is where we think it is a worry—that take it too seriously and put pressure on their child in a way that may not be productive for the child. But, on the whole, my experience of parents has been that they have a pretty balanced approach to it.

THE CHAIR: One of your recommendations is that we should transition from full cohort testing to sampling of students. Why do you recommend that?

Mr Bruce: Our main thinking is that it is a lot less expensive, it is a lot less intrusive, it is less likely to have the negative impacts on curriculum et cetera that we have been

talking about, and it would give the system level data. If the NAPLAN data has any validity, that is probably where most of it is: where you look at it across a broad system indication of performance.

That is achieved equally well through the sampling technique and it has much less impact. It would be on a cyclical basis, certain schools do it at certain times. We already do it with TIMSS and with the civics and citizenship test, and it is much less disruptive and would be much less costly for governments as well. We could put the money into more proactive formative assessments things that will produce the results we want.

THE CHAIR: Would it be a longitudinal test? Would you have the same students do it in years 3, 5, 7 and 9, or would you get a different sample each time?

Mr Bruce: My understanding, if I remember correctly, is that the civics and citizenship one does not go back to the same students necessarily. I think it can be either, but the picture I have in my head would be that it would not be longitudinal with the same children unless there were a particular reason for doing that. I have not heard that canvassed as a suggestion.

MS CHEYNE: While you say the sampling tests—PISA and TIMSS—would be better, you also say in the submission that the level of aggregation of the data means those test results have little value in the day-to-day work of the teachers. They give an indication of broad system-level achievement. Is that similar to what we were talking about with the poetry example before? Doing that sampling test could reveal across the school, "Oh, no, we've got a bit of a weakness here, but we're really strong here. Maybe we need to rejig it a little bit." Is there anything those tests could be doing differently or reporting on differently to help in that day-to-day value for teachers? Does it come down to the timeliness of finding out those results?

Ms Bobos: Yes.

Mr Richards: That is one significant element behind that. But also we have to pay credit to the ongoing assessment happening in classrooms on a daily basis, which also give us similar data. What we are not seeing in the broader picture is the individual school sets of data we are keeping as well. Underneath these assessment items lots of things are happening across the course of a week at any given school that is giving constant feedback: where do we go next in our teaching and learning cycle? How is the student doing? What support mechanisms can we put in place? That is constantly being tinkered with and reviewed as well.

Mr Bruce: The PISA and TIMSS kinds of tests, the sampling tests, could follow the format suggested in the Gonski report using modern technology to have it online, on demand. The ability to test kids on, say, "You're doing fractions now. We're going to give you a little test on that component," and we could have the result instantly because it is on the computer and we can modify the teaching program tomorrow to address any weaknesses.

One of the things mentioned in the submission is a report written by a fellow called Breakspear who talks about the opportunities of the people who sponsor the PISA test

to reconfigure. We were talking before about the narrowing effect of too much concentration on literacy and numeracy, and he is talking about looking at the 21st century capabilities that people need and that the OECD through PISA could show examples to countries around the world of how to emphasise that in the assessment processes using modern technology et cetera. That is one of the exciting opportunities that the current situation is providing for us and that has been hinted at strongly in that Gonski report.

MRS KIKKERT: One of your recommendations is that individual schools be accountable in ways that fairly reflect their control over their work and the resources available to them to carry out the work. What would that look like and to whom should schools be accountable?

Mr Bruce: That is a big question. The in-depth thrashing out of that issue is what would happen with a comprehensive review of NAPLAN. But the notion is very appealing to us. Currently, because of the way it gets viewed and dealt with, schools might be having to account for things that they actually do not have control over.

We have referred several times to the context, for example, the AEDC data, the nature of the cohort coming into your school and the impact that that can have on your learning. There are all those sorts of localised issues that can make comparisons, as they happen now, a bit fraught.

What is the school able to do with the cohort you have got? We are able to take the children where they are at and then move them as far and as fast as we possibly can through the Australian curriculum. Learning hopefully will become a progressive rather than a year-by-year curriculum. Addressing all of the contextual issues that we have to address in that process.

A system that would require you to account for that would be fair and reasonable, and schools could do that now, really: show how we are finding out the data about where children are when they arrive at school and what we are doing about addressing their needs. Gareth was referring to the complex data sets schools have about children. So that could be done and dealt with within the jurisdiction appropriately.

I do not know that doing it on the front page of the *Canberra Times* is the best way to deal with it because we get into this competitive argument and so forth and criticisms of people. It could lead to better collaboration about best practice and all of that kind of thing. The ideal behind it is that we figure out what does this entity, the school, have control of and responsibility for; what does this entity, the ACT public education system, have control of and responsibility for, and that we report appropriately to the appropriate people in a way that will be productive.

MRS KIKKERT: Who might that be?

Mr Bruce: For instance, in schools it would certainly be our Education Directorate. There is a report, of course, to the Legislative Assembly that comes every year from that directorate looking at the system. Obviously the Legislative Assembly is the overall governing body that would be interested. For us it is the Education Directorate, and also for the non-government schools.

MRS KIKKERT: Do you feel parents need to be part of that reporting too? I understand a lot of parents praise NAPLAN and other standardised testing because it allows them to know exactly where their child is and also allows them to help them out at home to improve some of the issues they might have with their school. They might not come to the school, to the teachers or the school principal and talk about the results their kids have had on their tests, but they might be proactively applying things at home to help that child with their school. Do you feel parents need to be in partnership with the reporting and being accountable?

Mr Richards: A lot of our school planning, our strategic planning, involves building better partnerships with parents in our community. Part of that is engaging with them around how their child is going. The parent teacher nights, the learning journeys we do and the end of semester reports that come out that supplement the information with NAPLAN give us and parents a really clear picture to talk about. It is about improving those mechanisms just as much as focusing on the final results of an assessment piece. Parents can be in partnership with schools to develop that learning with their children.

Ms Bobos: That is for an average child. For our children who are struggling or need extra supports, the reporting mechanism is far wider than that. I have teachers who are on the phone, they are emailing, they are meeting in person on a daily basis to keep parents up with what is happening, what they can do to support at home. That is far richer. I do not ever see parents analysing a NAPLAN test saying, "I'm going to support you on that." They work with teachers and schools about what they know about their students and how they can help.

The greatest accountability from a school is to the students and to the parents. They are entrusting us with their children. I understand governments and directorates need to know we have bang for our buck and that our money is put in the right place. I get that. But for me in my school, my highest accountability is to the students and to their parents.

Mr Richards: And a lot of the times, too, with our end of semester reports, it will highlight where the student has been working and what they need to work towards and mechanisms for helping in that process, too. I do not know if that is a common thread throughout all schools, but I know from a number of schools that I have worked at and from colleagues I have spoken to that that is part of the reporting mechanism as well, to improve that communication.

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

CHRYSOSTOMOU, MRS ANNA

THE CHAIR: Good morning.

Mrs Chrysostomou: Good morning, and thank you for giving me the time to speak with you.

THE CHAIR: That is quite all right. Witnesses are asked to familiarise themselves with the privilege statement in front of you, the pink sheet. Could I ask that you confirm that you have read the privilege card on the table and that you understand the privilege implications of the statement?

Mrs Chrysostomou: I certainly have, and I do.

THE CHAIR: Would you like to make an opening statement, Mrs Chrysostomou?

Mrs Chrysostomou: There is not too much to say other than the fact that I have been a teacher all of my working career so I have a vested interest in education. I have always been a passionate advocate for public education. I have retired from full-time work and since 2007 I have been doing relief work. During that time I have also worked as a marker for NAPLAN testing and an invigilator for NAPLAN testing. So I feel I have a broad experience of it.

I have also been quite involved with PIPS as an assessment tool and in the interpretation of the data. NAPLAN, PIPS and A to E reporting are my specific areas of interest as far as your inquiry goes. I am happy to take any questions that you might have on my submission.

THE CHAIR: Thank you. I will lead off the questions and we will make our way down.

Mrs Chrysostomou: Sure.

THE CHAIR: Do you think that NAPLAN in its current form does more good than harm, and is it worth keeping?

Mrs Chrysostomou: In my opinion, it does more harm than good. I am not happy to keep it in its current form. The main reason that I say that I feel it does more harm than good is not the testing itself per se, not the reporting to schools and to parents, but the misuse of the data that is publicly available.

I feel that in Canberra, in particular, in the ACT in particular, we have been much harder done by as far as the misuse of the results is concerned than in any other jurisdiction. This is because—and this is interesting because yesterday's paper was talking about it—relative to New South Wales and Victoria our results have been decreasing over the past 10 years. I would attribute a lot of that to the misuse of the data in the sense that every school in the ACT was included in the league tables that were published each year by the *Canberra Times*. It was a really immoral use of the data to create league tables. It was never intended to be used in that way, and

educationally it is harmful, to students especially, but to the teachers, to the parents and to school communities.

You would have read in my submission about one school where this was brought home to me so clearly. I was sent as an invigilator to this school. It was a moderation test, so it was not going to be something where the students themselves were going to have reports sent home about them or anything like that. It was purely for moderation purposes. I was there at 9 o'clock in the morning. Barely half of the students turned up. The teachers were highly embarrassed. The students did not want to be there. They did not want to have anything to do with anything associated with NAPLAN.

When they came back, I felt it was important to just talk to them before administering the test. I explained what it was all about, that it was not a reflection on themselves and this and that and the other. But their comments were: "We're the dummies. What's the use?" This was because their school had been rated down near the bottom. That is a misuse of the data as far as I am concerned. It is not what the data was meant to be used for. It is a very superficial analysis of the data.

When data is properly used, it is actually fantastic. My background was as a maths teacher, so I am really fascinated by all the statistics, all of those tables and all of that information that is able to be gathered. That sort of data can give really rich and valuable information to schools to help them plan for individual students, for class groups, for year cohorts. It gives them a wonderful lot of information for whole-school planning for literacy and numeracy. When the superficial results are used in that sort of way, it has just taken away a lot of benefits of NAPLAN.

That would be my reason for saying that I feel that NAPLAN has been more harmful than good, particularly in the ACT. In Victoria, for instance, you are not going to get a state-wide ranking of all the schools. That would not be done. They probably do some ranking, but it is never every school, and every student by extension. In the ACT, every school, every student, is impacted by that. That upsets me every year. The *Canberra Times* letters to the editor people were probably waiting for my letter every year.

MR WALL: Just to follow on from that, in your opinion, if the my school website were not publishing the data, the NAPLAN process would be a net benefit to schools, students and administrators of systems?

Mrs Chrysostomou: It would be much more useful. It is not even the publication per se; it is the fact that somebody, an entity like the *Canberra Times*—

MR WALL: Likes to make a news story of it?

Mrs Chrysostomou: Will misuse the data. It is not even the publication in itself. Even having said that, if you go onto the my school website and look at the data, you cannot just look at it superficially and get the meaning from it. If you look at it superficially, yes, you will be subject to misinterpreting the data. But there is a lot of good information there. It is not so much even the publication; it is the misuse of the data, using that data to create the league tables.

Because that has happened, I feel that it seems to have tainted the whole NAPLAN process, particularly in the ACT, as I said, because we are a smaller jurisdiction and it seems to have affected every student. I have a friend who moved from here to New South Wales. Her grandchildren are in a New South Wales country school. She said, "NAPLAN just came and went. It was not a big deal." Here in the ACT, it seems to have become a very big deal.

MS CHEYNE: With that shame that you spoke about before with students who come to school and say, "We're the dummies. Why even bother?", if that happens to them in year 5 or 7, does that potentially stay with them into something like year 9, no matter what school they go to?

Mrs Chrysostomou: These were year 9 students, but their school was down near the bottom in both years 7 and 9. I am suspecting that, yes, those two cohorts would be carrying that from year to year.

MS CHEYNE: And because it is so public and they already feel the way they feel, do you think that then becomes almost cyclical? They are already saying, "Well, what's the point." Then they go in and they go, "Why even bother," continuing to leave them at the bottom of this public analysis?

Mrs Chrysostomou: Yes. It is an insidious sort of cycle. I have also seen schools that were near the top and would spend an inordinate amount of teaching time and energy to stay there. Again, that is not the purpose of NAPLAN. Schools teach much more than what is assessed by NAPLAN. Just focusing on, for instance, the genre of writing, there are so many genres of writing, but the poor students will do it over and over. They do a NAPLAN practice test and go right through this again. "We'll do this and we'll do that." That is all relating to NAPLAN. It is a narrowing of the curriculum, and our schools do and need to focus on a lot more than that. Teaching to a test has never been a good way to educate.

THE CHAIR: I want to bring together a couple of things you have said. You gave us that anecdote about kids not turning up for the tests and their teachers being embarrassed because they wanted the kids to attend. Also, in your submission you talk about schools encouraging particular students not to attend. I was wondering if you could try to explain to me how those two things can occur either simultaneously or in different circumstances.

Mrs Chrysostomou: The first situation was when the students themselves felt the pressure and, knowing that they were inadequate, did not want to participate. The other one is that there are some schools which perhaps have a higher proportion of students with special needs, and these students with special needs are not necessarily going to be able to achieve as well on these tests as others, because of cognitive ability or some other particular problem that they might have. If they are not included as part of the cohort, the average goes up.

THE CHAIR: But how does that work in practice? Is there a teacher making a phone call to a parent saying, "Your child should be sick tomorrow or they should withdraw"?

Mrs Chrysostomou: There are discussions. Often the parents of those students understand that this is going to be a difficult situation for their child. They will often approach the teacher and say, "How should I help my child to prepare?", or this or that. The teacher could say, "In the end, it might just be easier to keep him or her at home. It might be less stressful for your child to keep him or her at home." That can affect the whole school's averages, the one student, or two or three or five or 10, who will bring the averages down.

THE CHAIR: Why do teachers feel that pressure to make sure that their school performs well?

Mrs Chrysostomou: Because of the publication of the results. It is that shaming, the public shaming. The way that I see it, the way that I see the compilation of the league tables, is that it is like a public shaming for those schools that are down near the bottom. And that is despite the fact that these schools may actually be doing fantastically well. They may have a different cohort of students depending on the socioeconomic level of the community that they are dealing with. Again, in the same way as some schools might keep or encourage certain students not to be at school, others are very proactive and want every student to have a go. Effectively they might penalise themselves by encouraging every student: "We want you to have a go. We want you to try doing this." I have lost my train of thought now.

THE CHAIR: So teachers are very aware of where their school stands on these league tables?

Mrs Chrysostomou: Absolutely.

THE CHAIR: Is it something that teachers talk about?

Mrs Chrysostomou: Yes, teachers do talk about it. Teachers talk about it; parents talk about it. Generally the students are more aware of it by the time they are in years 5, 7 and 9. The year 3 students, not generally. But from year 5 onwards, they are aware of it, yes.

MR WALL: Talking about the role that teachers are playing in the preparation of students, the Principals Association appeared prior to you. I do not know if you heard the comment that certainly in one of their schools they do some preparation tests. Do you think that that unnecessarily builds expectation around the child's or the class's performance or that it perhaps detracts from the purpose of what NAPLAN was designed to do, which is a baseline point-in-time read across all schools in the country? What is your experience of seeing, experiencing or partaking in preparation for NAPLAN?

Mrs Chrysostomou: It is a fine balance. You do not want your students to feel unprepared for an experience that they are going to be facing. I do not say that there should be no preparation. I do believe that you need to do some preparation, particularly in year 3. This is their first experience of any sort of standardised testing and you really need to give the students some sort of guidance and experience. Some preparation is definitely necessary.

The problem is more about when there is an undue emphasis on it. The NAPLAN testing is in term 2, and all of term 1 could be spent saying, "We're going to be doing this next term. This is the writing genre," constantly, over and over. As I mentioned in my submission, one school even started from term 4 of year 2 preparing the students for what was going to be happening in term 2 of their year 3. That is a long preparation on one particular aspect of writing.

Yes, I think there can be undue emphasis on preparation. But I do think you need to prepare students. You cannot just say, "This is another day and you're just doing this."

MR WALL: Business as usual?

Mrs Chrysostomou: Yes. So it is a bit of a balance.

MRS KIKKERT: Thank you, Anna, for being here today. For how long have you been a teacher?

Mrs Chrysostomou: I had my first year of teaching in 1975.

MRS KIKKERT: That is for many years.

Mrs Chrysostomou: It is a long time.

MRS KIKKERT: With the increase in attention paid by the media to the NAPLAN test, do you think that with that increase there has also been an increase in stress for the children?

Mrs Chrysostomou: Yes, I do feel that there has been an increase in stress for the students.

MRS KIKKERT: The students who sat for the NAPLAN test many years ago, before it was a hot topic in the media, did fine. They did well; there was not that much stress in regard to sitting for the test?

Mrs Chrysostomou: Yes.

MRS KIKKERT: Until the media put a big emphasis and focus on it?

Mrs Chrysostomou: When NAPLAN began, I think the media focus began as soon as the results were published on the website. Prior to NAPLAN, the ACT had another assessment program, ACTAP, which had no fanfare and no media attention, but which also provided the rich data to schools and gave schools an overview of how their students sat in relation to other students in the ACT. It gave a good range of information upon which to build individual programs, cohort programs or school-wide literacy plans.

It never seemed to have any sort of stress related to it as far as teachers or students were concerned. It was just part of the program. Again there was a certain amount of preparation, of course, because you do need to prepare students for different

experiences. But the outcome of it all was never a big deal because parents got the results and the schools got the results, and that was where it stopped.

The schools were able to use this information to inform their teaching programs and parents were able to see how their children ranked in relation to the rest of the ACT. It seemed to fulfil those needs really well.

MRS KIKKERT: Would you recommend that the *Canberra Times* should stop reporting on NAPLAN?

Mrs Chrysostomou: Absolutely. Last time they did not create those tables, and I was so grateful. There was another aspect of the reporting which I thought was much more responsible reporting, when they spoke about the improvements over time that were evident. When you have a cohort that is in the same school for year 3 and then is in the same school for year 5, you can judge the difference, you can see progress, if they have stayed relatively at the same level or if they have made more improvements than you would have expected if they had continued in a linear progress.

When a school is able to do that, it is really adding value to students. The *Canberra Times* reported—I have to give credit there—on some of those issues, on some of those outcomes, and that was fantastic. They were able to say that this school, with this cohort, from year 3 to year 5, showed significant improvements in their reading, their grammar or their numeracy. That is responsible reporting, and that is one of the useful things that NAPLAN can give us.

It can show us, "These were the results in year 3. With this group we're going to implement this program, that program and the other." By the time they resit the test in year 5, you can see what you have managed to add in value to the students' profile, and that is really wonderful.

That sort of data is there in the NAPLAN. It is there. But if they do not choose to focus on that, that is where the problem is. So it is the reporting on the data that is my biggest issue. Parents will look at that and not look at a school that is doing so many things other than NAPLAN. This is where I was heading before. A school may actually be doing remarkably well with the students they have. If you have students from a low socio-economic background, you are really starting further back. For a school that might appear not to have done so well in year 3, for instance, considering where the students came from, and the level that they were at when they began, the school may have done exceptionally well. But that is masked if you just rank that school compared to other schools. You need to be able to understand a lot more than those raw figures will indicate. That is where you need to be able to interpret the data a little more carefully.

MRS KIKKERT: That is great feedback; thank you.

MS CHEYNE: I have a similar question. I think I know what your answer might be, but, for the record, is NAPLAN really an accurate indicator of whether we are doing the right thing by our students in terms of teaching them numeracy and literacy?

Mrs Chrysostomou: I do not think that it is necessarily an indicator at all. It is just

one aspect of the way that we are teaching literacy and numeracy. As I say, I think there is value in standardised testing. I am not against standardised testing per se. There is value in it. The data that is provided to schools can be immensely rich, detailed and useful.

The only way that you can justify the standardised testing is by asking: is it benefiting the students? If it is not benefiting the students then why are we doing it? We really need to be doing something that is benefiting the students. If the students are able to get the benefit from it perhaps by the school being able to devise different programs or focusing on specific areas then that is beneficial. But NAPLAN is not the be-all and end-all of what schools teach.

MS CHEYNE: Numeracy and literacy obviously have flow-on effects into other areas in the curriculum.

Mrs Chrysostomou: I was a maths teacher as a secondary teacher, so I love maths. All of our students need to be numerate. But in my primary school career, if you do not have literacy you do not have anything. There needs to be such a focus on literacy, in those early years of schooling in particular. It is just critical. The students cannot progress without it.

Even in numeracy, if there is a question that is written, you might be able to do the maths, but if you do not understand the question, you cannot do the calculations. They are the basis of all of our learning. But when we are talking about literacy in the NAPLAN, we are talking about one genre of writing. How many purposes for writing do we have? There are many.

MS CHEYNE: So it is about accuracy in assessing students?

Mrs Chrysostomou: Yes. The class teacher is the one who knows the student best. When the teacher is reporting to parents, sure, they will use the NAPLAN results, but that is just one aspect of the reporting. There is much more to the student overall than their performance in NAPLAN. When a parent has an interview with a teacher, the conversation will be far more wide-ranging than just the results of the NAPLAN.

MR WALL: In your submission you make some comment around A to E grading, particularly for the very early primary years. How is a teacher currently attributing an A to E grade to a child in year 1? What would be the basis for saying, "This student gets an A"?

Mrs Chrysostomou: That is a good question, and it probably varies from school to school. At the one school that I had most to do with when we were organising that sort of stuff, it was a broad range. For instance, for writing, we would do an assessment—again, an in-school assessment—for the whole of year 1. We used a rubric and for the children, for instance, we said whether the writing was legible, whether the thoughts were logical and the use of vocabulary. They would get a certain score for each one of these things, to get a raw score.

Inevitably, you do get your bell curve. Your C students are in the middle, you have your A and B students, and your D and E students at the tail. Generally, it is

interesting to see that you will get that bell curve if you have structured your assessment tool correctly.

MR WALL: What do you see as the better form of reporting for those formative years?

Mrs Chrysostomou: For those formative years, for the student who is at that tail end, instead of getting a D or an E, I would prefer to see words like, "developing," "developing vocabulary", or "emerging". Words like that that give an indication that they are not quite there but you are not saying, "You're a failure," which is what parents will think. No matter what we say to parents, if the child gets a C, they will think, "Why didn't they get an A or a B? They're not working hard enough." C indicates you are in that average group. A indicates "exceptional". If you do things according to a bell curve, most of the children are going to be in that C group. You are only going to have one or two As, three or four Bs, the majority in the Cs, then Ds and Es.

If you are able to say, for those students, "This student is still developing phonic skills," in year 1, that is still okay. That is fair enough. Some children need a full two years to develop those skills appropriately. Other students in kindergarten have understood spelling and are able to go straight into getting the rules and they move straight into it. The student who has that is achieving, but for the student who is still developing, it is demoralising to say that to them.

MR WALL: Your submission stated that there is value in retaining that method of grading, particularly for secondary students. What is the benefit in the older years of learning of having a structured A to E system?

Mrs Chrysostomou: By the time students are getting to secondary years, I think they are more responsible for their own learning. Also they need to understand the relationship between the effort that they put in and the outcome that they produce and where they stand relative to other students. By that stage they have a better understanding and need to know how they are achieving relative to the other students. I think that they are much more able to be objective about the result, whereas when students are still very young, because they develop at a very uneven rate in those very early years, it can give a lasting negative impression if they start believing early on that they are not achieving appropriately.

THE CHAIR: The committee's hearing is now adjourned. On behalf of the committee I would like to thank you for appearing today. The secretary will provide you with a copy of the proof transcript of today's hearing when it is available.

The committee adjourned at 11.06 am.