



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

TRANSCRIPT OF EVIDENCE

CANBERRA

MONDAY, 24 SEPTEMBER 2018

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

By authority of the Legislative Assembly for the Australian Capital Territory

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

WITNESSES

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Amended 20 May 2013

The committee met at 2.04 pm.

FOWLER, MR GLENN, Branch Secretary, Australian Education Union (ACT)

GORMAN, MR SHANE, Branch Executive Member, Australian Education Union (ACT)

THE CHAIR: Good afternoon, everybody, and welcome to the third public hearing of the Standing Committee on Education, Employment and Youth Affairs inquiry into standardised testing. On behalf of the committee, I would like to thank you both for attending. Could I ask you to please read the privilege statement in front of you and confirm that you have understood its contents.

Proceedings are being recorded by Hansard for transcription purposes and webstreamed and broadcast live. Before we go to questions, would you like to make an opening statement?

Mr Fowler: Yes. Thank you for listening to us today. NAPLAN must be subjected to a comprehensive national review. The NAPLAN data for 2018 is fatally compromised and should be disregarded. The longitudinal data has also been compromised. NAPLAN data should be removed from the My School website now and in perpetuity.

The AEU ACT branch's submission to this inquiry presented compelling quantitative data and thousands of detailed educator comments which, in near unanimity, call for the aforementioned outcomes. I will not be going through any of that material in this five-minute presentation.

There is a strong element of fatigue amongst educators about NAPLAN, My School, the annual circus of commentary around it and the rise and fall of overnight education experts who want to critique our professional work in a way that commentators do not do for other professions. If doctors said in near unanimity that a practice did more harm than good for their patients, would they be ignored for nine years? If psychologists said in near unanimity that a practice did more harm than good for their patients, would they be ignored for nine years? If architects, engineers, nurses or midwives spoke out repeatedly against a practice that in their considered professional opinion did more harm than good, would they be ignored for nine years?

Teachers and principals are sick to death of being ignored when they have expressed their grave concerns in an articulate fashion for the best part of a decade. NAPLAN has given us little or no discernible benefit. Results have not improved in any meaningful way. There are myriad perverse outcomes, most of which we predicted but not all.

Public school educators do not support NAPLAN in its current form. Catholic and independent school educators do not support NAPLAN in its current form. Public and private school principal groups, including the ACT Principals Association, do not support NAPLAN in its current form. Most parent groups oppose NAPLAN in its current form. And many more education academics oppose it than support it.

The education community is in the rare position of being almost entirely united.

NAPLAN is a dead test walking. It is past its use-by date well and truly. Federal Labor has committed to comprehensively reviewing NAPLAN if it wins government. Let us get on with the full national review so that our position can be confirmed.

As David Gonski and many others have imagined, we can do assessment and chart the progression of a child and a system much better than this. As a nation we are clever enough to reimagine assessment—assessment that closely reflects what goes on in classrooms as we work to the Australian curriculum, assessment that is sophisticated and can chart the progress of children against not only two of the general capabilities, literacy and numeracy, but the other five, which are equally important: information and communication technology capability, critical and creative thinking, personal and social capability, ethical understanding, and intercultural understanding.

Importantly, NAPLAN's replacement, when it inevitably comes, must have had educators and their unions up to their elbows in its formulation. NAPLAN and My School were done to us by the former federal Labor government, not with us. We will never accept that *modus operandi*. We demand that reform is done with us. We will fight like hell for professional respect and we will demand to be listened to.

THE CHAIR: Could I ask that you confirm you have read the pink privilege statement?

Mr Fowler: Yes.

Mr Gorman: Yes.

THE CHAIR: You have called for My School data to be removed from the website. What is that data currently being used for?

Mr Fowler: Since its creation the My School website has allowed for unfair comparison of schools. This whole exercise is predicated on the idea that choice and competition are what matters in education. This is now an idea that has been rejected even by the OECD. So we do not accept that making schools compete against each other on external standardised tests is the answer to school improvement.

THE CHAIR: In terms of the information that a teacher would get back from NAPLAN tests, how would a teacher use the results of a NAPLAN test to inform their teaching?

Mr Gorman: I would like to answer that. The only way that a NAPLAN test or result would be used at all is to reflect on the teaching that happens in a school over a period of time. For example, NAPLAN is a test that is sat in term 2; so the present teacher actually has not had much impact on that student to that point. It is actually measuring the teaching and learning that has happened up to that point. We get it so far after that that you cannot use it for any of those students because in the meantime they have moved on. Look, to be quite honest, in each school I have been in I have not used that because I have had much better data to guide the practice in the school than NAPLAN provides.

The only way it is used by a school is to look at, for example, "Oh, we do not seem to

be doing so well on multiple choice, so we need to get students to practise multiple choice.” That is not actually a skill that they are going to go into a workforce with and say, “Yes, I am really good at multiple choice.” It gives us that sort of data—how to sit the test better, which then creates all sorts of stresses on students.

If we start with teachers, it creates stresses on teachers because teachers figure that they and the school are being judged by this test. So teachers naturally want to put a lot of time into preparing students to do well in the test. In preparing them to do well in the test, they are taking time out of the actual teaching that they should be doing.

If you can bear with me to understand what I mean, I need to explain what teaching and learning should look like. Really basic teaching philosophy is that students need to feel engaged in their learning. They need to feel that they can achieve the next step. So the next step needs to be the next small step in their learning. If a kid comes in and says, “Yes, I want to learn. I want to learn to read because I want to read Harry Potter,” you have to say, “We need to put the Harry Potter book away for the moment. We need to start with this. Your next step is this.” You cannot aim to achieve those big things.

The NAPLAN is going to tell them how good they are at reading, but it is not diagnostic. It does not tell them what the next step is. Something like reading is quite in depth. When we look at a word we do not know, there are a whole lot of strategies that we, as adults, if we are good readers, put in place to work out what that word is.

Students need to understand those strategies, have those articulated, learn those strategies and learn how to put them in place. As a teacher, I need to know which strategies my student—a student—is using because for me it is going to be different from every other student in the class. I need to be able to say, “Okay, they are using these one or two strategies.” A simple strategy that most people who are not familiar with education, teaching and learning would think is appropriate is that you sound the word out. But when you get to a word like “pharmacy”, you cannot sound it out. It does not work.

If students are doing a really good job of reading and say, “When he got home he went straight into his horse,” that is so close but, no, it is totally wrong. If they do not understand that you are reading for understanding, they would just read that and go, “I got it right.” They are very close to right. But “horse” and “house” are very different.

There are a whole lot of strategies that they need to use. The NAPLAN test will tell somebody where they are at with reading, but it is not diagnostic to tell them what the next step in their learning is. If a student reads out a sentence that says, “When I got home I walked straight into my horse,” then the teacher would be noting, “Okay, the problem is that they are only using sounding out.” They sounded it out and they went “horse” instead of “house”. So I know that is what I have to work on. I have to work on both how they are going to decode that word and how they are going to listen to what they are actually reading so that they think, “Go straight into my horse. That does not make sense.”

It tells them in that one on one, and it has to be one on one, what the next step for

learning is. We can do whole class teaching in those strategies. Some kids pick it up like that and they will move on with that strategy. Other kids will need extra help, but you need to know the strategies and you need to work with the child individually to assess what that next step is.

I could give you millions of examples around maths and whatever else, but as long as you get that as an example. When it then comes to thinking that NAPLAN is really important, the teacher thinks, “Wait, I have to teach them how to do multiple choice. I have to teach them how to dissect a question and understand what the question is asking.” That is a good skill, but not for a test. That is just a good skill to have for reading. I have to make sure that we have all of these things in place, and I am stressing about NAPLAN because it is going to tell the whole world and the parents and, more importantly, this kid how well they read.

When they do that, they take time out of the teaching and learning as we know it, which is to sit with the individual student or guide the individual student to work independently on, “I have to re-read the sentence and listen to my words to make sure that makes sense,” if that is the strategy. But we have to take time out of doing that to do some other stuff to prepare for a test. I hope that makes sense.

The other part of that is that students get results. Those results will tell them that they are good readers—well, their teacher could have told them that and does tell them that. It tells them where they are up to with reading, but it does just say, “You are a great reader. You are reading a year level above your classmates or your average.” The teacher would actually be saying to them, “You are a really good reader, but this is the next step.” This is because you do not ever want a student to think, “I am a really good reader. I do not have to do any work,” because they disengage with learning.

You always have to be setting that next challenge that is appropriate for them. For some students those challenges might not work. We keep working with the student. We say, “You have to hear what you are saying in the sentence to understand whether it is ‘house’ or ‘horse.’” If they do not get it, we try another strategy. The next strategy might be around better ways of decoding that particular word. If any person keeps trying to learn one thing and they are not learning, what do they do? Adults and children are all the same. We give up. We feel like failures. That is really important too. We do not want students to feel like failures.

NAPLAN either tells them that they are really good, and that is meaningless without knowing the next challenge; that they are mediocre, and that is meaningless without knowing the next challenge; or that they are not anywhere near where they should be as average, and that is incredibly damaging. Well, they can all be damaging. I just explained why for the high-flier it would be damaging. But it is incredibly damaging for a kid who finds out, “I just cannot read.” But if you give them the next strategy and they learn that next strategy and you celebrate that achievement, they are feeling good about themselves and they are ready for the next strategy. So that is really important. A lot of people do not get that because they take reading for granted.

Spelling is another one. We take it for granted if we are good spellers. If you are not a good speller, there are a whole lot of strategies that you use that those of us who are good spellers naturally use all the time—so naturally that you do not even think about

what your strategies are. As an example, it might be a strategy—I am sure you have done it—where you look at a word and think, “It does not look right.” Students have to understand that if it does not look right, that is a strategy. They have to work out why it is not looking right. But people think there is only one strategy, and that is sounding out.

That is a bit about the student. Unfortunately, parents think that it is the be-all and end-all because it tells them where their student is at compared to everybody else. But that is not helpful. The data that we could give them and that we do give them tells them where their child is at in reading. It will tell them where their child should be at, the strategies they have to learn and the supports they have to put in place for the student to get there. Parents often think it is great, which is why not all of them agree, but it is actually not effective and schools do that job anyway.

I have talked about why it is not good for teachers. It can end up being such a stress for students. I had one student one time—this is the most extreme example for sure. I am a school principal. This is one of my students. It is extreme enough that I would never do it again to a student. His mum wanted him to do the test. He was a well below average kid. This was several years ago. His mum wanted him to do the test because she wanted to understand where he fitted with everybody else.

I actually tried to talk her out of doing the test, as we are not supposed to do. I could lose my job over that. I tried to talk her out of it because I said, “We can talk to you. We can show you where he is at. He does not need the test. That will stress him.” I knew that for a bunch of reasons. The kid had mental illness. The parent did not understand the stress that this would create.

I am likely to get emotional. Halfway through the test, this kid got up and walked out. Teachers are thinking, “That is better than interrupting him; that is great. But we had better find out where he is.” He had written a note and he was over at a tree with a skipping rope. He was going to end it; year 5. People do not realise the stress it puts on kids. That is my school, where I try and take all the stress off teachers. I try to make NAPLAN something—“No, do not worry about it. We are just going to walk in; we do this test; we walk out; we get on with school.” No stress; no stress for teachers. I tell them, “I do not use the data. We do not need the data. We have other data that does that.”

That happened in my school, where I am trying to create no stress about NAPLAN. I hate to think what happens in other schools where it is high stakes. I actually had a student knocked back to get into a private school—I am sort of pleased they did—because their NAPLAN test was not good enough. The parents came and told us that their NAPLAN test was not good enough, so they did not get into that private school. It is appalling. That puts pressure on teachers and it puts pressure on kids to do well. I do not know whether you have heard of the Stanford prison experiment.

MRS KIKKERT: No.

THE CHAIR: Yes.

Mr Gorman: You have?

THE CHAIR: Yes.

Mr Gorman: It was in 1971. In a nutshell, it was an experiment that they did in Stanford prison and it was a psychology—

THE CHAIR: Stanford University.

Mr Gorman: Stanford University, sorry. Yes, it was like a prison.

THE CHAIR: You are believing it as well.

Mr Gorman: It was a psychology experiment. They basically got a lot of people to come in and volunteer. These people were all a group of friends. They were all at university together. They got some of them to be the cruel, nasty prison wardens and they got some of them to be the inmates.

When certain inmates did things, there were voices that told the wardens that they had to punish the inmate. They had to do things like give him an electric shock. Of course, they did not do that, but they had the person—this mate or at least a colleague—sitting across from them as if they got an electric shock. Then they said, “That is not enough. Increase it. That is not enough. Increase it.”

These people who know each other are sitting opposite each other. They know they are good people who are actually university students sitting opposite them pressing a button that they believe is giving them an electric shock. They proved that if pressure is applied, if you are given instruction with no question in the way it is delivered, you will do things that are inhumane. All of those people afterwards had to be debriefed. It took a lot of time to get out of it.

I feel as a principal that I am part of that experiment. I am forced to go in and do that to my students—and to the teachers and to the parents, but I do not care so much about the teachers and parents. I do care about them, but it is the students. I am forced to go in and do things that I know are really bad for them psychologically and I know are really bad for them for their learning, for them as learners. When those test papers arrive in their box every year, I am tempted to take them—steal them—and get rid of them.

MRS KIKKERT: Burn them or something?

Mr Gorman: Yes, in a way that it does not implicate me and they just do not appear—“Oh dear, we cannot do it”—because I feel like I am part of the Stanford prison experiment.

THE CHAIR: Thank you for sharing some of these personal experiences; the committee appreciates it.

MR WALL: Mr Gorman, you mentioned that NAPLAN testing is seen as a high stakes assessment. Why does NAPLAN differ from any other form of assessment that is carried out in school? What puts it on a pedestal?

Mr Gorman: We have different sorts of assessment. We have assessment that we call summative assessment, and that is assessment you do at the end of a piece of work. That is the sort of test that, if you are my age at least, you would know because you do it at the end of a subject. Even if it is a section in a subject you do that at the end and it tells people how much you have learned and then it is full stop. You cannot improve it; you cannot learn any more; that is the end.

We as educators know now that that is not a good approach because there should always be ongoing learning. So we have formative assessment, which is what you do in the classroom as the learning is happening. It feeds the next step in learning without taking time out of learning.

It needs to be heavily resourced because it is difficult. With that reading example, the teacher has to actually sit with the student, understand what strategy they need to learn next and support them to learn that strategy and not just leave them till they do. If it is a week or two and they have not learned it, you need to change it because you do not want to reinforce that they are not learning.

It is those sorts of things that make it high stakes. Then there is the fact that it goes onto a website, the fact that another school uses it to decide whether this kid is going to get in, the stress that it places on students and even the stress that it places on principals and schools. I have been a principal in a couple of schools and I have made significant changes in those schools and turned them around. The NAPLAN results do not show hugely yet, but the school is a different place to work in. Students love it.

Mr Fowler: What puts it on a pedestal is that it is a high stakes test. There are higher stakes tests in the world; we could end up like the UK or the US. In the US kids are in danger of absolutely turning off school. They say that a child will do a standardised test 112 times in some cases during their school years, to the point where former President Obama said kids are in danger of hating school.

The United States has ended up in the situation where, based on external tests, teachers are ranked in newspapers from one to 6,000 and there have been suicides and things as a result. We have managed to keep a bit of a lid on some of the more adverse effects of standardised testing in this country, but the test as it stands is fatally flawed.

We have no problem with testing; we test all the time. We test on what we have delivered as part of the curriculum. We have no problem with low stakes standardised tests. Before NAPLAN we had our own version here in the ACT called ACTAP. No-one talked about it because no-one reported on the data; the data was used by educators.

In the first two years of NAPLAN, in 2008 and 2009, before the creation of the My School website, there was very little interest in the NAPLAN test. The PISA test is the one by which countries in the OECD are ranked. That is sample testing. That is a small number of students where they can determine trends. We have no problem with sample testing—standardised tests that a sample of students do that give you the trends.

I was having a conversation with colleagues in the independent and Catholic sectors today, and their union, and the issue is the high stakes nature created by census-driven mass standardised every-child testing. That creates its own pressures which are unhelpful and damaging because they disproportionately prioritise testing in literacy and numeracy. There is much more to education than that. Of course it is important, but there is much more to education than that.

I have already mentioned the other five of seven general capabilities under the Australian curriculum which are not tested and not reported on, and I would argue that they are as important as literacy and numeracy. So the pedestal has been created by mass testing and by the My School website.

Obviously we have had some success over the years in getting rid of those despicable *Canberra Times* league tables. We now end up with a list of some high gain schools—not denigrating anybody at the bottom but picking 20 that in a particular year have had a high gain on NAPLAN. I give that little credibility, but that is less offensive than what used to happen. The My School website can continue but without the NAPLAN data. That is one goal we are seeking, and the other one is to take the heat out of this national test by considering sample testing.

Gonski talks about learning progressions. We are very happy to have sophisticated instruments to really know where a kid is at in all elements of their learning going forward, but at the moment we have this—which is exciting and we have open minds about what the future looks like—and at the same time we have NAPLAN hanging over our heads. We need to move on from NAPLAN and we need to consider what the future of assessment looks like.

We have had ten years with no improvement in student results and myriad perverse outcomes. Shane has described some of them. We could be here all day describing the perverse outcomes of NAPLAN, but you have some of them in our submission.

MR WALL: You keep talking about the comparisons and the league tables. We have heard from you and other witnesses that the ACT is a unique example, being a small jurisdiction, so it is easy for a journalist or another person to go through the My School website and create the table. So if the My School site was shut down and the test maintained as is, would that go a long way to addressing the concerns your members hold?

Mr Gorman: It would go this far. I think the point Glenn made—

MR WALL: Randomised sample testing against testing of the whole cohort—there are statistical anomalies if you walk into a class and pick five kids out. There is also the opportunity for them to say, “Why was I one of those kids?” or “Why wasn’t I one of those kids? How were they picked?” If everyone does it, everyone is on the baseline and you take out a lot of the heat of the comparison—the media hype, the publicity that comes out of the results, albeit months after the fact. I am just trying to get to the nitty-gritty of it, really.

Mr Fowler: I have never heard any doubts about PISA because certain kids are selected. The PISA data is what so many international discussions occur on, and what

we know from that is that Australia has plateaued in many respects in terms of its literacy and numeracy outcome as measured by a standardised test.

There are questions about whether we want to be like Singapore. Is that how we want our education system to be? If you pick up Singapore and empty it out and look at each element, there are elements of that education system that we would seek to avoid in this country.

If the My School website stopped reporting on NAPLAN data, that would absolutely be a step forward. We are comfortable with data being used to draw system conclusions. We are comfortable with kids receiving information about their progress in literacy and numeracy. The poison of NAPLAN is the competitive market it has created between schools.

Professor Perelman from Massachusetts rated 39 standardised tests across the world and said that after the first 38 there is daylight and then there is NAPLAN. So there are questions about the quality of the test. There are different levels to this, and if My Schools stopped reporting on the data that would be a start.

Mr Gorman: Glenn talked before about the sample testing giving you the trends, and I mentioned that the only way I as a principal would use NAPLAN data with my teachers and my school would be to look at the trends. So what we need you can get from sample testing.

I talked about formative assessment as opposed to summative assessment. Summative assessment just says, “This is who you are.” Formative assessment says, “This is where you are at; this is the next step. Good on you; next step. Good on you; next step.” So it supports everybody being learners, and we all learn in that way. Adults learn in that way. If it is too big, they cannot learn it either—or not many can.

Assessment needs to be dynamic. I would even argue that there are better ways of doing sample testing because, whatever students you select, it takes time out of their learning to sample. You can deliver questions that will give you the trends in other ways, and teachers are doing it all of the time.

You might want to have some that teachers need to apply in different year levels sometime in the year, because what are we checking? We are checking that we are doing a good job of teaching that. And if all of our students are not doing so well in that, we need to do some more work in the teaching of that. We need to reassess it. But it is not one size fits all. For the kid who can only read “horse” instead of “house”, there is no point in giving that kid an assessment piece we know they cannot do.

Mr Fowler: The way NAPLAN currently is, teachers are telling you we do not need that data, so who is the data for? Is it for oppositions to beat up on governments? Is it for overnight experts to beat up on teachers? Is it for newspaper outlets to make a story? Is it about third parties creating their own online products and the NAPLAN practice books that you buy at the bookshop?

There is a massive international economic imperative for companies to get involved in mass standardised tests, and we worry that ACARA, the mob that run these tests, have

been unduly influenced by those people, hence the ill-fated manoeuvre to push through online testing.

Mr Gorman: People think testing is what we do because we have all been through school, and we in this room have been reasonably successful at school, I guess, otherwise we would not be here.

MR WALL: Big assumption.

THE CHAIR: Yes, that is an assumption.

Mr Gorman: It is an assumption; I struggled as well. But it was not so long ago that you came into a job as a newbie and someone said to you, “You need to write a such-and-such report.” And you go, “Is there an example of that?” and you get an example of it. Then you talk to a couple of colleagues about, “Okay, how do I do it? What has it got to look like? I’ve got the sample of what this one looked like,” and you use that to create one. You probably get to a stage where you go, “Okay, I can create the next one now because I can base it on that and I just need to change the bits I need to change.” And you work collaboratively with your colleagues to do it. It is still your work, but you work collaboratively.

That is what we teach in schools—how to take a model and how to learn from that to create your own and how to work collaboratively to extend your learning in a supportive environment. That is what we do in a workforce. NAPLAN does the opposite. So this is part of the high stakes.

Kids know it is high stakes because they sit there, just them, a pen, a piece of paper or the computer if it is online, not allowed to speak to anybody. If they speak to anybody the teacher has to take them out. The walls we have around the room that have the things on it that support students like the spelling wall et cetera—which is quite reasonable because if you do not know how to spell something you look it up—are taken out when they are in this environment, so it is unreal. We have to clear everything off the walls.

We cannot have desks like this, because this says collaboration. They have to be lined up with all the students facing the same way, with a big enough gap between you that you cannot look at this. It is foreign. So we make the kids walk into this foreign environment that does not say, “This is the fun learning place where you feel success.” This is a foreign environment. Does that paint a picture for you?

Mr Fowler: And it is kids as young as seven.

THE CHAIR: You were talking a lot about assessment. Something that has come up from numerous administrative inquiries is the A to E reporting. I was wondering if you had a view on A to E reporting.

Mr Fowler: The issue of A to E reporting is one which we do not have a strong position on. There will be different views within our membership. But what the AEU are doing at the moment, because we envisage that at some time soon we will have a role in working with government to set a new agenda around assessment in this

country, is busily clarifying our set of principles with regard to assessment. A to E reporting is not something that the profession is contesting at the moment. Certainly within our membership there are pockets, and quite significant pockets, that would object to that way of assessing.

Shane has talked to you today about a dynamic view of assessment that is not constrained by artificial barriers. And this is the sort of stuff that came up in the latest Gonski report about charting better the progress of individual students as they go forward and not using this blunt instrument that we have had for almost a decade. What we do know is that there needs to be a direct relationship between pedagogy, the curriculum, the delivery of that curriculum and the assessment of learning for the purpose of facilitating future learning and meaningful reporting.

Mr Gorman: And it is meaningful reporting.

Mr Fowler: That is right. There must be a rejection of NAPLAN. It must be replaced by tailored, on-demand assessments that allow for differentiation and adjustment and that assess what is being taught in individual classroom programs based on syllabus outcomes.

There can be sample testing conducted to determine system trends, to determine the nature of educational need and the priorities of funding and resource for educational communities, but data collected through testing processes should be stored and secured by public authorities within Australia. We believe that the data that is collected from testing must be available to educators and parents and not third parties.

Mr Gorman: And I would even caution parents—and I could throw a bit in there on A to E if Glenn does not get too annoyed with me—that you think about those things that I have said about the way learning works. It is not helpful to tell a student that they have got an E. It is equally not overly helpful to tell them they have got an A because they think they have achieved it and you have never achieved it. There is always more learning. In fact, in my school a teacher would have to have a damn good reason for giving an E.

But it is not productive to give them a D. It is just saying, “You are not very smart.” It is not even productive, I believe, to give it to parents. So the way I have tried to do it is: sneak it to parents and say, “Do not share this with the kids. Here is the meaningful stuff about where your child is at, how they fit in the average and what their next step is and we can work together on that to support them to their next step and their next step.”

Mr Fowler: Parents have the option of saying no to A to E, particularly in primary school. Many do. We did. Our kids did not have a grade until year 4, year 5. Eventually high school rolls on and it starts to become difficult. But I think certainly in the early years of learning many educators would have an issue with kids being defined as somewhere on an A to E spectrum. As kids age, I think there is probably a view that they can deal with it with more resilience, but I think that is an open question.

MRS KIKKERT: Thank you, gentlemen, for being here today; we really appreciate

it. I have a question on NAPLAN testing. Mr Fowler, you mentioned before what the NAPLAN test is for, whom it is for and why it is beneficial. I am a mum of five kids. All my kids are in public schools. When we receive the NAPLAN results in my household I look at the results and I say, “Okay, child 1 is not doing so great in maths. We need to sit down with the child and then help them with whatever maths problems or issues they might have.” As a parent that is what I do.

As teachers and as educators what is your responsibility when you receive the NAPLAN results? We have done it for many years now. When you look at it, what do you do, not so much to improve the results but actually to improve the child’s improvement in learning and loving to learn?

Mr Fowler: You might address the teacher bit, but in terms of the parent bit my question would be: what did parents do before 2008? I would also say Canberra has the highest withdrawal rate from NAPLAN in the country. My children have never sat NAPLAN and never will, but I know how they are doing because I talk to the teachers. I read their reports. I see where they are up to. I follow closely their assessment. When their assessment comes back, I read the comments.

We have a high degree of trust in our child’s teachers to let them know if they are stalling. I know that there are different views within the parent community about the necessity of these sorts of results. I would say there are many other results out there. There are many other ways of finding out how your child is going, but I think we have to listen to a growing number of parent groups.

I know the ACT P&C council—I think you have heard from them—are starting to see more and more opposition to this regime, and I know that a number of the state-based parent organisations are very strong, particularly in New South Wales. They have their own democracies and they come up with their own policy positions and I think that parent views on NAPLAN are very mixed.

Mr Gorman: By the time you have got that data it is several months later and it is too late. There needs to be really good communication between school and home about where a student is up to if they are not making progress. No matter what they are—A student down to E student, if we use that terminology to describe a student—if they are stalling in their learning we need to act quickly.

There needs to be an assessment that is done—and it is done, and that is why I use the word “assessment”, because it is different to a test—in a classroom each time. Teachers have incredibly intricate, clever ways of doing that that do not take time out of the learning. It might be, “Okay, everybody has got to write a checkout note of what you have learnt today,” and you put those on the wall. Then as the students go out they have done that and you can have a quick look and you can say, “These three have not got it and I need to work with them next lesson.”

There are other things too. Go, “Whack your hand up if you can tell me friends of 10.” You probably do not know all these things, but they go, “Seven and three.” “Yes, you are gone.” Keep going mighty quickly because you do not want some kids left going, “I do not get it.” But you would then say, if you have got six or eight left, “Okay, I need to help them. That is what they need help with.”

If you are waiting for those results to unearth the problem, you have lost several months. The teachers should be letting people know earlier than that if there is a problem. You have not just lost several months; the student has lost their confidence.

Mr Fowler: The majority of our members say they use the NAPLAN data rarely or never. They have far richer data.

MR WALL: But that data is not consistent against—

Mr Fowler: No, it is not.

MR WALL: I would say between classrooms, let alone between schools, between jurisdictions.

Mr Gorman: In a good school it would be consistent across the school and it would be progressive from one year level to another. In my school there would be a package for each student that moves on to the next teacher so that they know where they are at and what their next step in learning is. They will know what it was at the end of the year and the thing that the student and parents have to work on over the holidays so that they can pick up and keep going.

MR WALL: Perhaps in the school but certainly between schools, between systems, between jurisdictions?

Mr Gorman: Between schools, no. That is right and that is because there is nothing that is good and we would all have—sorry, that is not true. There are lots of good things.

MR WALL: Was that not the pure intent of NAPLAN, to give that measure?

Mr Fowler: Yes, but the problem is that schools are regarding the NAPLAN process very differently. Shane has already described that he does not—

MR WALL: No fuss?

Mr Fowler: It is no fuss and, bang, in it goes. There is no way that is happening in schools across this country. Some people will say the right things but do things differently. Some schools and school leaders are pretty shameless about it.

We talk about the perverse outcomes—and I did not want to get into the detail of that—but I have seen the newsletter go out bragging about results. I have seen the results being used on advertisements for schools. We have seen NAPLAN achievement ceremonies in certain schools. We know it is used. It was being attempted to be used by two states to qualify people for year 12 results. There are all these ways.

When you talk about a diagnostic test, this is the bastardisation of it. Results are already different school to school across this country because of the way NAPLAN is treated. As a country, if we wanted to produce good little test takers we could do it.

Our profession says education is about a lot more than that.

Mr Gorman: When it first came along and it was about improving your school, I went to a lot of professional learning about things that were suggested to improve your school data. Once we start talking about that we are removing that from—and I will explain why—improving student learning because they are two separate things.

On improving school data, they talk about the low-hanging fruit. I have heard talk of this in several professional learning sessions. “If you take this student who is really struggling down here and you work intensively with that student and move them to those other couple who are a little better—move that student—that will improve your data.” They called it the low-hanging fruit.

I cannot do that. I could not line families up and say, “I am going to work with your son or daughter and extend them because that will improve our school data. Sorry, you guys, your kids are not going to rate, no matter where they are, because that is not going to give me the bang for the buck.” I am going to work intensively with every one of those students that are in my school to make sure every one of them is making progress. If that means I do not get improved school data I do not give a damn because I am there about the kids. I think that is key.

One of the other strategies, just to let you know how silly it all is, is: on the morning of the day of a test give the kids breakfast when they come in. Give them milk, not coloured milk because that will hype them up. Give them milk. Give them a banana because that is the best brain food. And give them toast and then they should do better in the test. Really? If we think kids need feeding, let us resource the school and feed the kids if that is how they are going to learn. Sorry, you can tell my view.

MR WALL: In your statements you have said that there has been no gain in NAPLAN in years. We had a professor from the ANU here the week before last giving evidence on the report that he had prepared showing that performance in ACT schools is below that of counterpart jurisdictions or that the learning trajectory is a flatter line of improvement in ACT schools compared to like/like schools on the ICSEA socio-economic ratings.

We have agreed that NAPLAN is, from your statement, Mr Gorman, where students are at at that point in time. Reading was the example that you gave. Regardless of what we think of NAPLAN, it is a point in time test of where a kid is, compared to peers within their classroom and across the nation. Why is it that, as a whole, the ACT’s improvement in those students is not as good as that of other jurisdictions? What are we doing in the ACT that is different so that we are not seeing the outcome?

Mr Fowler: The assumption of that is that we want to do better in NAPLAN in the ACT.

MR WALL: It is not about improving the NAPLAN score in isolation. NAPLAN, as has been said by you today, is a measure of where that student is at at that point in time.

Mr Fowler: Yes, for some things. It does not measure collaboration or creativity.

MR WALL: Yes, I know.

Mr Gorman: It is a narrow measure.

MR WALL: We are measuring numeracy and literacy. Most people would agree that numeracy and literacy are some of the foundations that you need to survive in this world generally.

Mr Gorman: Well, we agree that it is important.

MR WALL: If you cannot read the difference between “cereal” and “Ratsak” you have got a problem.

Mr Fowler: Yes. We agree that those things are very important.

MR WALL: Looking, then, at the ACT across all schools, what is happening here that is different to elsewhere, the level of gain being slightly flatter than what we have seen elsewhere?

Mr Fowler: I cannot speak for non-government schools, but in government schools for some years now there has been an agreement in writing between the directorate and the union that communication will occur with teachers and principals along the lines of ACARA’s own advice that NAPLAN is not a test that should be prepared and studied for. So I would like to think that in the national picture we have actually de-emphasised NAPLAN to a relatively good degree compared to other jurisdictions, yet we still have the results that you have seen in our submission: people feeling that they are under undue pressure to perform in that way.

That study used only NAPLAN results. That would be the first flaw with that study. The argument is made that that is all we have got. That is our issue: that, whilst that is the only thing out there, it is a very unsophisticated blunt measurement, and if that is being used to draw pretty serious conclusions about ACT education then we have a problem.

As I read it, the suggestion as part of that submission was that we should contemplate a direct instruction trial in the ACT, which would be an absolute calamity and will not be supported by the profession in any way, shape or form.

Mr Gorman: It is prehistoric.

Mr Fowler: Explicit instruction—that is, very teacher-directed learning approaches—is used all the time by teachers when they see fit, but teachers will not be directed to provide that sort of learning all the time for kids. It is not good enough for African-American families in the US, where it has been used extensively. It is not good enough for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander kids in Cape York, where it has been used extensively. And it certainly will not be good enough for ACT students.

The ACT government is on a journey to explore exactly where we are at. Our position, which we see has been echoed right through the future of education process, is the

importance of equity bringing excellence. Equity does not mean we lose track of excellence. We say that if you improve equity you will bring on more excellence.

I feel like I have gone in a number of directions there, Mr Wall. Have I answered your question?

MR WALL: Not really, but—

Mr Fowler: What was your—

MR WALL: It was more specifically about why the ACT is not competing with its peers: like/like schools?

Mr Fowler: We just do not share that paradigm. We are interested in that suggestion but we do not believe the jury is in in terms of the ACT's performance versus kids in, presumably, Melbourne and Sydney. Is that—

MR WALL: It was actually looking at like/like schools. They have dissected the data and are comparing apples with apples, to use the colloquial term. They have looked at the ICSEA rating of schools and found schools that are comparable to those in the ACT. So you are not comparing a Geelong Grammar with a harder cohort in an ACT school. They are looking at schools that are coming from a similar background, similar educational appearance, similar income levels, and saying, "Okay, these are where the kids are starting." They start at around about the same point, but where kids in the ACT are ending up, at the year 7 and 9 levels particularly, is a vastly lower level of attainment in NAPLAN than what we are seeing in some of the other areas.

Mr Fowler: We do not know why that is happening. It is only NAPLAN. If you look at the ACT's year 12 ATAR results, you will see they have been on the climb. If you look at ACT retention rates, you will see they are on the climb. If you look at how ACT kids perform in the first year of university, you will see that those results have always been impressive. So we do not buy into the idea that the ACT is failing at all. We think there are many ways to look at school achievement. We also take note of a recent study by Save Our Schools that looked at motivation rates and the differences between kids doing year 9 NAPLAN and kids doing year 12. The reality is that kids are highly motivated to do well for their ATAR and they are not particularly motivated to do well in a year 9 NAPLAN test.

MR WALL: But that motivation level is going to be consistent across all year 9 students, regardless of which jurisdiction they are in.

Mr Fowler: Possibly, but there could be a range of ways of emphasising the importance of NAPLAN testing in your school, and I think that that would be variable across the country.

Mr Gorman: There is another part to it, too: what do we place importance on? I cannot speak for those other schools because I do not know. But if they are doing all of those things that prepare the students well to do well in NAPLAN then NAPLAN will improve. If I did that in my school, my NAPLAN would improve.

The reason I said “Well—” when you said literacy and numeracy are the most important things is that we have got kids in our school who we cannot touch literacy and numeracy with yet because we are actually teaching them how to interact with others and get themselves to a point where they are ready to learn. Then you can attack literacy and numeracy. When you are doing that, there are some things that, for a whole bunch of reasons, are at least equally, if not more, important than literacy and numeracy. I am not saying literacy and numeracy are not important. But if a student cannot engage with learning because there is stuff happening in their life, I am not going to force them into their literacy and numeracy learning now. We need to support them to become learners to then engage in literacy and numeracy.

They are the sorts of skills Glenn has talked about; they are the skills that you get and the skills that help you do well at university. The skills that make you lifelong learners are the sorts of skills that I have talked about that we teach in our schools. That is around collaboration. That is around taking that next step in learning because then, no matter what your approach, you can say, “I know I can learn that, because I have learnt this and I have learnt this. I know I’ve just got to take a bite at a time and I can learn it.” That is why people are successful, and NAPLAN does not measure that. So maybe we have more principals like me who just say, “There’s more important stuff than NAPLAN.” I do not know, though.

Mr Fowler: Our survey bears that out.

THE CHAIR: Thank you both for attending today’s hearing. You will be sent a draft of the Hansard transcript for correction.

The committee adjourned at 3.02 pm.