



The Tide is Turning

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This year is the 10th anniversary of the introduction of the National Assessment Program — Literacy and Numeracy, known simply as NAPLAN. And it's time to be frank.

For too long a culture of bullying has protected NAPLAN. Teachers questioning its efficacy and purpose have all too often been accused of trying to hide something from parents, or not wishing to be accountable, or scared of statistics.

In reality, NAPLAN was devised by politicians who deliberately set out to exploit parents' concerns and fears about schooling.

The implication was obvious: Teachers cannot be trusted to tell you, the parent, what you need to know about your child's progress.

It was never about gathering data to assess standards across the entire education system. Sample testing would be a much more cost-effective method if that was the aim.

It was never going to be diagnostic. A mass test that bears no relationship to the curriculum, which is marked externally with the results delivered months later, could not possibly be diagnostic.

Indeed, it is the use of medical metaphors such as this that has framed the debate in deliberate and unhelpful ways. The term diagnostic implies that NAPLAN is a scientific measurement just like a blood or urine test. Once the results are back the treatment can begin.

As experts such as Professor Margaret Wu have warned, the margins of error and large random fluctuations make it all but impossible to compare the performance of different cohorts from year to year or compare schools, let alone use the data to make any significant decisions about a child's progress at the individual or class level.

So, let's call it. NAPLAN is an unsophisticated, expensive and imprecise test that is developed under contract

by commercial interests.

Oh, let's not forget. It may, or may not, be marked by a qualified teacher. Or even an adult, it would seem. So crude and simplistic is the marking process, ACARA is keen to hand it over to robots.

But there are some politicians who are starting to listen to the concerns of teachers, academics and parents. This is a positive development.

At a recent meeting of the Education Council, made up of all state education ministers and the federal minister, some called for a review of NAPLAN.

NSW Minister for Education Rob Stokes had this to say in a recent ABC television interview: "The stakes have become higher in relation to NAPLAN testing to the extent that we've now got commercial interests publishing guides on how to pass NAPLAN and the whole focus among teachers, among parents and among students has created an environment of high stress."

His Queensland counterpart Grace Grace also shared her government's reservations.

"I think after 10 years of it being in place that it's timely for us to re-evaluate; Is NAPLAN delivering what it was set up to deliver?"

Another education minister, Susan Close from South Australia, also expressed concerns about the undue importance placed on the test.

"I think the high stakes of NAPLAN has come out of this obsession with reporting NAPLAN and judging schools on their NAPLAN results."

In contrast, the Federal Minister Simon Birmingham, only months after tearing up funding agreements with the states, delivered the predictable response about parents wanting more information. Of course they do. But poor data is not information.

The next Education Council meeting is in May and the teaching profession will watch with interest the outcomes of this meeting.

Should there be a decision to review NAPLAN, it is essential that such a review be led by the teaching profession.

Federation will continue to play a key role in the debate. To this end, we have commissioned Dr Les Perelman, former Director of Writing and Assessment at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), to write an academic paper about dismantling the existing NAPLAN regime and replacing it with assessment processes that respect teacher judgment, connect to the curriculum and which benefit all students and school communities.

In a few months, Dr Perelman will be visiting Australia. He will be giving a public lecture, Towards a New NAPLAN, on 4 May in the Teachers Federation Conference Centre auditorium, Surry Hills. All are welcome but bookings will be essential through www.stickytickets.com.au.

Ten years on, it is time for the vested interests, the large edu-businesses that profit from testing, to leave the building. In their place, let us invite back the real experts, teachers, to develop useful, quality assessment practices that the profession can share.