

Standardised Testing in ACT Schools

Standing Committee on Education, Employment and Youth Affairs



**ACT Council of
Parents & Citizens
Associations**

The parent voice on public education

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Executive Summary

The ACT Council of Parents & Citizens Associations (Council) is a non-profit, non-government representative organisation whose objective is to foster a quality public education system, provide support services for affiliates (P&Cs) and make representations to government on behalf of parents and carers from 87 public schools across the ACT.

Council believes that standardised testing provides parents and carers with information on student performance, particularly strengths and weaknesses considered alongside cohort averages. Reporting of individual student performance data assists schools as well as parents and carers to identify learning needs, which in some instances are not captured by other school reporting. This individual student performance data allows for individual and cohort learning needs to be identified and for appropriate strategies and resourcing to be allocated.

Although the release of data collected from standardised testing in ACT schools can be prolonged it can critically inform teaching and learning practices in the classroom for individual students and used to inform whole of school personnel and curriculum planning. Council encourages the ACT Government and the Education Directorate to continue to use standardised testing in ACT schools to provide greater opportunities for the identification of individual and cohort learning needs and ensuring these needs are met with appropriate resourcing and strategies.

Council would also like to encourage the Education Directorate to ensure that reporting of student performance to parents is accurate, timely and meaningful. Council strongly believes that reporting of student performance ought to celebrate individual achievements, encourage students to aim for high expectations, and reach their potential.

Should the committee require clarification or more information please contact our office on 6241 5759 or via email: contact@actparents.org.au.

Terms of Reference

This inquiry submission covers the terms of reference specific to parent and carer (member) experiences, as opposed to all terms of reference. Accordingly, the headings below clearly indicate the applicable terms of reference.

Collection of Data

Council provides the following input to the Standing Committee inquiry on *Standardised Testing in ACT Schools*, based on parents and carer (member) experiences feedback to Council through a variety of channels including; discussion at a General Meeting (26 June 2018), Facebook polls and comments, Council's *Future of Education consultation with members* and as well as informal feedback provided to our office by members.

1.c. Alternate forms of assessment and reporting (such as A to E reporting)

Council provides the following parent and carer feedback based on the current reporting of student performance in ACT public schools.

The ACT's recent change to a standardised template for public school reporting including allocation of A to E grading has resulted with dissatisfaction among many parents and carers. Specifically, the new template report drastically reduced the amount of detailed information available on student performance. Generally, parents find 'reporting language' ambiguous, unnecessary technical and not written in plain English, such that some parents and carers often find these reports meaningless. Council has requested the Education Directorate explore these concerns and will work closely with them to ensure school reports are meaningful and easily understood. Irrespective of these concerns, parents and carers find that information provided through standardised testing such as NAPLAN, provides more detailed information on components of student performance such as grammar, rather than performance for English overall.

While A to E grading provides parents and carers with a general overview as to how students are performing in a set area, it does not provide any information as to what students easily achieve and what aspects they are struggling with. Some parents and carers have raised the concern that A to E grading, results in 'at level' expectations being set at a 'C' rather than stretching and challenging students learning. Furthermore, parents and carers question the rigour of A to E grading, where some public schools adopt a bell curve approach, while others do not. Hence, parents and carers find that A to E grading is an insufficient assessment of student performance.

Consequently, parents and carers appreciate the detail of information giving a clearer picture of student performance from standardised testing in addition to reporting and A to E grading.

1.f. The impact on student wellbeing and mental health

Council provides the following information on wellbeing and mental health based on parent and carer feedback at a recent Council General Meeting.

Several of the 34 members (P&C representatives) present at the meeting raised strong concerns about the impact of standardised testing on student wellbeing and mental health, particularly student anxiety. It is well documented that more and more students are experiencing anxiety and related conditions at younger ages. Council and meeting attendees understood that standardised testing

like NAPLAN can cause some students to feel unnecessary pressure and stress. However, members present felt that this response although unfortunate was not characteristic of all students.

Council members acknowledged that ACT public schools manage standardised testing differently. Parents and carers specifically advised that in some schools standardised testing such as NAPLAN is a big deal, talked about frequently with lots of preparation, while other public schools treat standardised testing as just another day at school. Council considers these discrepancies in approaches between schools may partially account for the range in experiences of students.

Council also considers that tests are a part of assessment in education more broadly and in the workplace. Hence, standardised testing in school provides students with the opportunity to become familiar with testing and develop appropriate strategies and practices to manage this like skill. Council contends that the implementation of standardised testing in schools must be strategically planned and evaluated to reduce the amount of student anxiety, pressure and stress, especially for students susceptible to these pressures. Council strongly believes that the ACT public school system would benefit from sharing approaches to the implementation of standardised testing in schools which currently reduce the anxiety, pressure and stress of students.

2.b. The long-term trend of performance in the ACT

Council is concerned by the current trend in performance of the ACT in standardised testing. Factors positively known to influence student performance have been identified as educational advantages. In the ACT the level of educational advantage is compared to other States and Territories is quite high. The ACT is also a leader in public school resourcing, recognising that quality education requires quality teaching and resources. However, data from standardised testing over the past few years indicates decline in student performance, inconsistent with resourcing and educational advantage.

Council contends that this decline in student performance is related to the inconsistencies between ACT public schools, arising from the high degree of school-based management. Council's *Future of Education* consultation with members showed wide discrepancies between ACT public schools with some schools offer a wide variety of specialist programs while others struggle to provide a qualified teacher librarian and specialist language teacher. Council believes these discrepancies between public schools has created the perception of a two-tier public education system; creating strong demand for out of area enrolments and results in failure of the public to support local schools. Council has called on the Education Directorate to ensure that equity in education will apply to all ACT schools, making *every local public school a great school*, and to provide greater oversight of public schools to ensure performance of all ACT schools as an education system.

2.c. How the ACT Education Directorate uses test data to inform policy and teaching principals

Council contends that the data from standardised testing could be used both at the school level and within the Education Directorate.

Parent and carer feedback to Council suggests that Principals at some schools use the data from standardised testing for whole of school personnel and curriculum planning. This personnel and

curriculum planning is then used to inform teaching and learning practices within the classroom. However, Council is aware that this is not evident at every public school.

Furthermore, Council considers that the data collated from standardised testing is skewed by schools seeking to improve their performance by limiting the participation of a proportion of students. Parents and carers advise that this normally occurs by implication rather than on advice of personnel within the school. Council contends that this may explain the ACT's relatively high rate of withdrawal and provides a poor indication of student performance within some schools. Council believes that the Education Directorate could provide greater oversight of the implementation of standardised testing to ensure these challenges are addressed.

Therefore, Council considers that the quality of the data set is limited by the number of withdrawals. Given these students are usually who are struggling – the value of the data is questionable.

2.d. The measurement of learning gains in ACT schools.

While A to E grading and current reporting give an indication of where students sit compared to their peers in a given semester, there is very little in current public-school reporting which measures or indicates a student's learning gains over this time.

Measuring the learning gains of ACT students would capture the before and after measurements of all students, over given periods of time. Council considers this would give parents and carers, and students detailed information of the development is occurring. Council contends that the measurement of learning gains allows students to celebrate their individual success, irrespective of their grade. Parents and carers believe this is important to foster an individual growth mindset and teaches them to compare current performance with previous performance rather than comparison with other students. Council would encourage the Education Directorate to report on measurement of learning gains within semester reporting.

Council considers the only learning gains currently reported on to parents and carers in ACT schools are results from standardised testing such as NAPLAN, which only occurs in set years. However not all parents and carers find NAPLAN reports useful. When Council used a Facebook poll to ask parents and carers: *'is your child's NAPLAN report useful?'* only 22% of parents and carers responses felt the reports were useful, while 78% found they were not useful. The comments on the poll indicate the delay between testing and reporting is too long, rendering reports out of date. Some parents and carers find NAPLAN reports find unspecific, while some others received more information from parent/teacher interviews.

Parents and carers find the measurement of learning gains more informative of student performance than current ACT reporting and A to E grading. Council believes that parents and carers would want to see learning gains measured in addition to current reporting and grading.

2.e. How standardised testing results inform school enrolment decisions.

It is arguable that standardised testing results inform school enrolment decisions. However, enrolment in ACT public schools is largely driven by Priority Enrolment Area policy (PEA) and the capacity of a given school. Together, a strong demand for public school placement and policy limit the ability of parents and carers to select a public school based on standardised testing results.

Irrespective of these limits on school enrolment in public schools, Council conducted a Facebook poll to ask parents and carers: *'is NAPLAN an important influence in choice of school?'* Out of 60 responses, 59 indicated that standardised testing results such as NAPLAN did not influence the choice of school. Common among these responses were 'not at all' or 'can't choose school anyway – must use local school.'

Based on the responses captured by Council, it is acknowledged that school performance in standardised testing may inform a small number of parents and carers choice. However, Council considers this choice is likely to be limited by application of the PEA policy. At the same time Council recognises that standardised testing results may be indicative of other problems within some school's which parents may seek to avoid. In which case, Council calls on the Education Directorate to address concerns of parents and carers of ACT public schools.

3. ACT Auditor General's report No.4/2017 *Performance Information in ACT public schools.*

Council considers the ACT Auditor General's report an accurate interpretation of the challenges facing the ACT public education system. Council encourages the Education Directorate to provide assistance, monitoring and oversight of ACT public schools to ensure that data from standardised testing is used to inform resourcing, personnel and curriculum planning, to improve performance of ACT public schools.