

NAPLAN tests help champion equality in the classroom

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The AEU can play an important role in ensuring problems on the 'My School' website are addressed, writes Ben Jensen.

THE Australian Education Union needs to rethink its opposition to NAPLAN, the national testing program being introduced by the federal government. The union has confused the value of the tests with the problems that need to be addressed on the 'MySchool' website.

NAPLAN and 'MySchool' are different. Instead of outright opposition, the AEU should work to address the problems with the 'My School' website, and allow students to sit these important assessments. In doing so they will ensure the best outcome for students.

By throwing assessment and the 'My School' website into the same basket and opposing them both, the union is in danger of being portrayed as anti-reform. More importantly, this opposition will hurt students. Opposition to student assessment and transparency runs against best practice in education policy and harms Australian students, particularly those most in need. Parents are also hungry for this information.

NAPLAN is a system of national assessments that test each student's literacy and numeracy in years 3, 5, 7 and 9. It has been a significant development, providing important information on student performance and highlighting students most in need of development.

International research comparing education levels in different countries has shown that national assessments are features of high performing education systems. These systems have many students who do well and relatively few low-performing students.

Australian education is generally successful in having many high-performing students but we also have a comparatively large number of students at or below minimum levels of literacy and numeracy. Nearly one-third of Australian Year 9 students perform at or below only the very basic minimum level of writing literacy. We let too many students slide to or below these levels and, once they are there, we struggle to improve their skills.

The best education systems use student assessments to compare the performance of students and schools and allocate resources accordingly. This helps reduce inequality.

Low-performing students are identified and programs are implemented to bring these students up to speed. At the school level, this requires providing instruction that meets each child's developmental needs. These actions are then continually evaluated with national assessments that students sit over the course of their education. These processes ensure that the best education systems in the world have considerably fewer low-performing students than there are currently in Australia.

The national assessment program is designed to address these issues. Boycotting it hurts these students and prevents improvements for helping them.

But the 'My School' website does need to be improved. Its aim is to make the test results, along with other school information, transparent and available to parents and families. 'My School' presents the average test scores of each school's students. School performance is judged by comparing these scores with schools categorised into 'like-school groups'.

The information on school performance is prone to bias and there are clear problems with how schools are categorised into 'like-school groups'. The union's opposition is warranted in this regard — but they have conflated the value of NAPLAN with the flaws of the 'My School' website.

Instead of outright opposition, the AEU can play an important role in ensuring these problems on the ‘My School’ website are addressed and preventing the development of misleading league tables.

There are two main issues.

First, the erroneous methodology of the website. The ‘My School’ website compares school results within ‘like-school groups’. These groups have been created with census data that is used as a proxy for the socio-economic background of students. This methodology is flawed and has consistently been shown to produce erroneous results.

The Age has provided numerous examples of small Government schools serving disadvantaged students that are somehow in the same like-school group as wealthy exclusive schools. Information on each student’s background would ensure that schools are only compared with truly similar schools. We will not properly address inequality without accurate information on students’ background.

Second, student progress should be the focus of school performance on the ‘My School’ website. By focusing on this, value-added measures can be used to isolate the contribution schools make to their students. Value-added measures calculate the progress made by each student, and compare the progress made by similar students at different schools.

So, instead of measuring a school’s performance with the average NAPLAN score of their students in, say, year 9 numeracy, value-added measures focus on student progress between years 7 and 9 – the increase from a student’s score in year 7 numeracy to their score in year 9 numeracy.

Value-added measures of student progress have been supported by unions and teacher associations in numerous countries. They are the best method to counter misleading and simplistic league tables that concentrate on students’ raw test scores.

The school performance information provided by the Victorian Government, which is considerably better and more accurate than that provided by ‘My School’, would also benefit from these changes.

The national assessments that students will sit this year will provide the first opportunity to measure student progress over time. This will, for the first time in Australia, enable more accurate value-added measures of school performance to be created. An AEU boycott would prevent more accurate measures of school performance being calculated, thereby undermining the very changes that they have said are required.

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