

President's message

NAPLAN in the news – again

I write this whilst gazing out across a skyline dressed with a veil of milky clouds pierced by crisp autumn sunshine. It's times like this that give me the chance to pause and reflect on our place in the world and that of the future of our children; a future that will be brought into sharp relief of day to day reality as this week, here in Tasmania, we return to the normal school routine of early morning and tired children arriving home at the end of the school day. As night follows day in the middle of May we will see NAPLAN week once again arrive as the starting point of providing this year's data on the literacy and numeracy achievements of children in years 3,5,7 and 9.

As parents we seek the very best opportunities and life outcomes for our children and their future. This is especially poignant if we consider the fact that parents and families are, and always have been, the initial and ongoing educators of their children – a role that educators and their supporting bureaucracies, until recently, have possibly chosen to ignore. This is a role that our teachers complement as they deliver the learning opportunities and professional skill that allows our children to develop skills, knowledge and learning according to the Australian Curriculum for the eleven school years between Prep and Year 10. This is the same curriculum of learning that NAPLAN seeks to assess progress in learning – evaluating what is taught against what gain can be demonstrated.

Politics, policy, and our children

As we live in a Federation of independent nation states, with eight semi-autonomous governments and a single Federal one, it's vital that we have some sense of how our children are progressing. Australia has an extraordinary diversity of cultures, privilege and disadvantage, and one where each state and territory jurisdiction offers its own subtle interpretation of curriculum delivery within its schools. As parents we need to be assured that our children are thriving in their learning progress. As such, there has to be some form of unequivocal and wholly objective national measure that crosses the nation. Currently, the one we have had for the last ten years is NAPLAN.

There's always room for improvement with NAPLAN and its My School reporting portal, as our experience of its impact develops and as education policy and priorities evolve. You may, or may not, find it reassuring to know that they are under constant review, with scrutiny and comment from a wide variety of stakeholders. Most recently there has been a recent update of the My School website aimed at making its information more accessible - available [here](#). Whilst subject to constant review, it should be noted that the members of the COAG Education Council are currently considering terms of reference for a possible overarching national review – something that will be determined at its June meeting. This will undoubtedly be in conjunction with the recommendations of the Review to Achieve Educational Excellence in Australian Schools, or Gonski 2.0 as it is colloquially known.

What has been disappointing in the last few weeks and months is the escalating tension surrounding NAPLAN from activists representing the professional interests of educators. While we can understand their desire to lobby for better outcomes for their members in terms of policy, employment and working environment it comes as a surprise to see our children's sense of confidence and wellbeing being challenged for these ends. To explain this, as parents we welcome a rational and objective discussion of NAPLAN, and it has to be one that we can all enjoy after the NAPLAN assessment period has passed.

The use of emotive rhetoric such as 'high-stakes, league tables, failure, anxiety, robo-marking', etc. is becoming a self-serving and frustrating prophecy, creating anxiety in many students, their

families and their school communities that seek the best possible opportunities for their children in the days leading up to NAPLAN. The media streams naturally identify and report the possible points of conflicting opinion, thus driving further concern and apprehension in parents and their children.

As an education professional individual teachers and principals naturally have our children's best interests at heart and seek to ease the approach to, and understanding of, how the assessments work, and to ameliorate legitimate concerns of parents. It would be terrific to see this true professionalism being acknowledged.

Children first

Teachers' interests are represented by powerful and well-resourced professional bodies with significant political interests. For the benefit of our children we ask them to tone down their NAPLAN opprobrium until NAPLAN 2018 is done, dusted and put to bed. Please consider the impact of this angry rhetoric and overt activism on our children's wellbeing. NAPLAN has been here for the last ten years and is unlikely to disappear at any point in the near future. There is everything to gain and nothing to lose by supporting our children's participation in NAPLAN with compassion and true professionalism that are defining tenets of teaching – and save any activism for where it will have the least impact on our children.

Interestingly, during my role as ACSSO President I cannot recall any instance where an education professional's representative body has consulted with any parent body before developing and launching a campaign on behalf of it's members. There is however a tacit expectation that parents, and parent representative bodies at all levels will fall in behind any such initiative and offer their unequivocal and unwavering support. Perhaps this is an opportune moment to reflect that public education has surging enrolments that are now sitting at 2.53 million students with an expected growth of an additional 150,000 over the next few years. The detail within this and the changing pattern of enrolments by sector is discussed in a recent article by Michael Koziol available [here](#).

In terms of a powerful cohort of influence, it is illuminating to consider that we are currently talking about the school-age children of 1,400,000 parents who are the initial and ongoing educators of their children. This is a family cohort of close to 4 million people. If we were to then add in pre-school students and those in tertiary studies, together with their parents, we could be looking at more than **6.5 million** people; an extraordinarily powerful group for any government, opposition party and professional body to ignore at their peril.

Politicians, academics, principals and teachers don't always know best and as parents we welcome the opportunity to work in partnership with them and our children's teachers at all levels – it may be a wise move to acknowledge this.

Calming stormy waters

NAPLAN actually has the support of both the Commonwealth Government and Opposition as a nationally important tool to help teachers and schools be better at what they do. It also spotlights those students and communities that may need additional help and support – together with the resources necessary to enable this.

What is unfortunate is that some state and territory jurisdictions have chosen to incorporate elements of individual NAPLAN outcomes in their own formal assessment outcome measures - **an unhelpful and indefensible corruption of NAPLAN's intent.**

What is especially valuable in the reporting of NAPLAN assessments is that schools that have demonstrated significantly above average student achievement gains in reading and/or numeracy can be identified. In 2017 there were 330 such schools, each with a unique story as to the challenges they faced and how the schools' leaders and staff chose to address them.

What seems to unite them all is that there are no quick fixes – instead a dedicated and resolute focus on how the school, as a whole, sought to make a difference. Interestingly these schools demonstrate that improvement is possible. It's exciting to learn what has been tried, how an initiative has evolved and the results thereof.

There has been international interest with examples such as [Walcha Central School](#) that has received an invitation to present at an overseas conference to share this knowledge, thus proving the grass of education reform can be just as green on our side of the world as that of other nations.

The NAPLAN assessment period will shortly be with us and in the gathering storm of media interest, spurred on by activists and sectorial interests, the national parent bodies have come together to issue a combined statement offering what we hope is a calming perspective on NAPLAN's delivery, intent and opportunity. I have included it in this NAPLAN special for your interest together with an opinion piece in a similar vein by Rob Randall, the CEO of ACARA.

If your child is part of NAPLAN this year please be assured that there's nothing to prepare for as the very fact of being in one of our nation's fabulous public schools with highly professional educators will be more than enough for them to be the best they can be. It cannot be studied for, so please ignore those private NAPLAN tutors, the NAPLAN preparation packs in the shops, cramming courses and special breakfasts.

NAPLAN will come and go just as it always has and when the report comes out if you're not sure what to make of it please have a chat with your child's teacher - it's a chance to celebrate the strengths of your child in a truly holistic partnership.

Phillip Spratt

29th April, 2018