



# The Experience of Education: The impacts of high stakes testing on school students and their families

## A Qualitative Study

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May 2014

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Editing: The Whitlam Institute

ISBN: 978-1-74108-256-2

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# FOREWORD

I can see the headline now: *Students want NAPLAN scrapped*.

And it would be true – to the extent that the majority of the 70 students interviewed by our colleagues at Melbourne University's Youth Research Centre did say they want the Australian government to scrap NAPLAN. This research, however, deserves a great deal more serious consideration than such a headline might provoke.

The National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) has acquired a quite unique place in the educational landscape. It excites the passions and has spawned a small industry in coaching and in the production and sale of NAPLAN guides, sample tests and resources; it has generated an extraordinary level of public interest given the claims to its being a simple diagnostic tool.

NAPLAN has taken on a life of its own.

Over the last three years the Whitlam Institute has sought to examine the impacts of high stakes testing on school students and their families through a progression of studies beginning with the original international literature review (January 2012) and followed by two substantial surveys of teachers (November 2012) and parents (November 2013) respectively.

The report before you, however, is possibly the most significant, for it digs beneath the earlier findings. In 2013 Professor Johanna Wyn's team at the Youth Research Centre spent time in five communities (three in Victoria and two in NSW) speaking to Principals, teachers and parents. Most importantly, for the first time, they also interviewed students themselves.

While recognising the limits inherent in qualitative research, their findings read in conjunction with the body of earlier research provides a strong basis for the conversation we have to have not simply about NAPLAN but about the educational straightjacket it represents.

The latest research reinforces and deepens our understanding of the pedagogical impacts of NAPLAN, the lingering confusion regarding its purpose and the varying attitudes as to its value. It provides further insight into the associated anxiety and stress experienced by an indeterminate but evidently significant number of students.

This research also identifies a somewhat telling sense of resignation among Principals and teachers: "we do NAPLAN because we have to so let's make the best of it".

However, Professor Wyn and her team's most challenging conclusion is not so much that this research confirms the overall findings of the previous studies but that "NAPLAN is not in the best interests of young Australians".

There is no escaping the seriousness of this conclusion. Any educational reform, regardless of good faith or noble intent that is not in the best interests of the students themselves is a failed reform.

While there is more to be said, for the moment, I would simply suggest that there is a job to be done: it is time to open the debate to alternative approaches to ensure that the development of literacy and numeracy in our schools is assessed and reported upon in a way that enhances rather than constrains pedagogy, that evokes confidence and enthusiasm among educators rather than resignation, that challenges and encourages learning rather than induces widespread anxiety and stress among students.

Finally, I would like to take this opportunity to acknowledge and thank the Koshland Innovation Fund and the Hartline Fund who have generously and faithfully supported this project from its inception.

Eric Sidoti  
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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

## BACKGROUND

In July 2006, the Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs (MCEETYA) formally endorsed the introduction of national testing in Literacy and Numeracy. The National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) was developed during 2007 to provide a measure of (a) how individual students are performing at the time of the tests, (b) whether or not young people are meeting literacy and numeracy benchmarks, and (c) how educational programs are working in Australian schools. The first suite of tests, designed to assess attainment in Years 3, 5, 7 and 9, were distributed to schools by the Australian Curriculum and Reporting Authority in 2008. Schools have subsequently been required to organise, and participate in, the testing process on an annual basis.

## THIS RESEARCH

This research project sought to identify the impacts of high stakes testing on school students and their families, and the significance of these impacts for their learning environment. It fills a gap in the evidence base about students' experiences and perceptions of NAPLAN. Students' views and experiences reinforce and deepen the insights gained from other stakeholders: school Principals, teachers and parents.

During 2013 interviews were conducted with, Principals, teachers, school students and parents at five State Primary schools, five State Secondary Colleges, three Catholic Colleges and three multi-age Independent schools in five sites in Victoria and New South Wales:

- a North-eastern Victorian country town providing educational outreach to a sizeable rural enrolment
- two larger regional centres (one in Western Victoria, the other in South-western NSW)
- two metropolitan clusters (one in Western Sydney and one in inner Melbourne)
- additional interviews with school leadership at a third Independent school in inner Sydney.

Schools varied in size from 50 to 1500 students. Several of the schools cater for newly arrived or refugee students. One school serves one of the highest Indigenous student populations in the country. Some of the schools are in post codes rated by the Socio-Economic Indexes for Areas (SEIFA) as facing significant social challenges; others cater to a cross-section of the community and include sizeable numbers of students described as of High Socio-Economic Status (SES).

Interviews were conducted with 16 Principals/School Leaders; 29 teachers, 26 parents and 70 students (22 Grade 5, 25 Year 7, 23 Year 9).

The interview schedule ranged across 4 key areas:

- The impact on health and well-being
- The impact on student behaviour
- The quality of teaching and the curriculum
- The value of NAPLAN testing for students, parents and teachers

## PRINCIPAL AND TEACHER PERSPECTIVES

Principals and teachers shared many common views on NAPLAN, which are summarised below. There were also areas of divergence between Principals and teachers, which are also presented.

## COMMONLY SHARED VIEWS

- NAPLAN is seen as a significant event in the annual school calendar which impacts, to varying degrees, on every aspect of the school community: students, their families and teachers, the curriculum and the relationship between all of these.
- NAPLAN is regarded as a requirement that teachers and Principals strive to make the most of.
- The benefit of NAPLAN was seen to be a tool that may identify trends or gaps in skills and knowledge that the school may need to address.
- Teachers and Principals were especially concerned about NAPLAN's narrow focus on literacy and numeracy, its cultural insensitivity, its negative impact on 'best practice' pedagogy and its capacity to undermine students' self-confidence.
- Teachers and Principals acknowledged the fine balance and pressure associated with ensuring the welfare of their students, yet improving performance because of its relationship to funding decisions.

## DISTINCTIVE VIEWS BY PRINCIPALS

- Principals emphasised the value of NAPLAN for a cohort of students rather than individual students.

## DISTINCTIVE VIEWS BY TEACHERS

- Some saw NAPLAN as a broad preparation for the competitive aspects of 'real life.'
- Teachers were more divided than school Principals on the value of NAPLAN.

## PARENT PERSPECTIVES

- Parents were confused about the purpose of NAPLAN.
- 25% of parents were positive and saw test results as important.
- 65% of parents had reservations or scepticism, but nonetheless saw some value in an external assessment which identified a child's level of attainment.
- Reservations and concerns focused on NAPLAN's uncharacteristic formality, the unfamiliarity with test content, language, the lack of immediate feedback, the impact on the school curriculum and the pressure it placed on schools.

## STUDENT PERSPECTIVES

- Students disliked NAPLAN. The majority said it was just something you had to do and try your best. Many were unsure of its purpose, but observed that it must be significant because of the preparation and training that went into getting ready for NAPLAN testing.
- By year 9 students were generally disinterested in NAPLAN. Their school's internal testing regime made more sense to them.
- Students were engaged in both short term and longer term preparation in schools, and expected teachers to allocate time for NAPLAN preparation and practice sheets or tests.
- The majority of students consulted reported feeling some stress associated with NAPLAN. A smaller number experienced anxiety and stress related conditions such as insomnia, physical reactions such as hyperventilation, profuse sweating, nail biting, headaches, stomach aches and migraines.
- Students who were struggling in maths and/or literacy were generally anxious about whether they could cope with NAPLAN and expressed concern that they might 'fail'.
- The majority of students reported support from their parents in the lead up to NAPLAN.

## CONCLUSION

This study provides unprecedented insights into children and young people's experiences of NAPLAN testing. When asked what messages they would like to give to the Australian government about NAPLAN, a majority of students said that it should be scrapped. Many also had suggestions for how NAPLAN could be improved, including making the language more relevant to their lives and contexts and strategies for reducing the stress associated with this test. It is clear that students do not understand the aims of NAPLAN. Those who supported it saw it as a useful way to become good at doing tests. Many experience NAPLAN as an intrusive and foreign element in their education. Their experiences and views provide graphic illustration of the concerns raised by their school Principals, teachers and their parents.

The results of this study confirm the overall findings of the Literature Review (Polesel, Dulfer & Turnbull 2012) and the survey of teachers (Dulfer, Polesel & Rice 2012) that NAPLAN is a significant pedagogical intervention which has some positive uses, but is plagued by negative impacts on learning and on student well-being. While it may provide a diagnostic tool for some teachers to re-evaluate their approach and how they teach literacy and/or numeracy, there is a disconnect between the formal and inflexible style of NAPLAN and learning and teaching approaches that emphasise deep learning supported by student and teacher teamwork in a process that tailors learning to the student's needs. Resignation to NAPLAN was one of the most common responses by teachers and school Principals.

NAPLAN is (a) not universally regarded by educators as a useful tool and (b) has identifiable negative implications for the quality of education that children and young people experience in Australian schools. This undermines its explicit purpose of improving the quality of Australian education, and contradicts the goals of Australian education, as defined in the Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians and relevant policy commitments (MCEETYA 2008).

While Australian educational policies and laws do not explicitly refer to the notion of acting 'in the best interests of children' and young people, it would be expected that accountability reforms would address the best interests of children. We conclude that NAPLAN is not in the best interests of young Australians.

# INTRODUCTION

## NAPLAN

In July 2006, the Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs (MCEETYA) formally endorsed the introduction of national testing in Literacy and Numeracy. Part of the assessment and reporting strategy articulated within the Howard Government's National Goals for Schooling in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, the proposed national testing initiative, was to build on and supersede a range of state and territory-based literacy and numeracy assessment programs. Among them the pioneering NSW Basic Skills Testing Program (BSTP) and the more recent Victorian Learning Assessment Program (LAP) and Achievement Improvement Monitor (AIM). The National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) was developed during 2007 and the first suite of tests, designed to assess attainment in Years 3, 5, 7 and 9, were distributed to schools by the Australian Curriculum and Reporting Authority (ACARA) in 2008. Schools have subsequently been required to organise, and participate in, the testing process on an annual basis.

Students are assessed in reading, writing, language conventions (spelling, grammar and punctuation) and numeracy. National tests broadly reflect aspects common to the curriculum of all jurisdictions. Results are benchmarked against standards which are based on the *National Statements of Learnings* for English and Mathematics, which have been developed collaboratively by state and territory education authorities and other representatives<sup>1</sup>. For each of the assessments, results are reported on an achievement scale from Band 1 to Band 10, representing increasing levels of skills and understanding, with a national minimum standard defined at each year level. According to ACARA, the aim of NAPLAN has been to provide a measure of (a) how individual students are performing at the time of the tests, (b) whether or not young people are meeting literacy and numeracy benchmarks, and (c) how educational programs are working in Australian schools. In its Information for Parents brochure 2013 ACARA writes that, "*NAPLAN tests the sorts of skills that are essential for every child to progress through school and life, such as reading, writing, spelling, grammar and numeracy.*"

The introduction, roll-out and ongoing delivery of NAPLAN have been attended, since inception, by a 'Greek chorus' of community and media debate, educational activism and academic polarisation that has been described by the late Professor Jack Keating of the University of Melbourne as "*a lightning rod of claim and counter-claim and a battle-ground for competing educational philosophies*" (Polesel, Dulfer & Turnbull, 2012). These competing philosophies reflect different positions on the primary goals of education. One approach emphasises education as a tool for economic development and prosperity, and the other places the emphasis on the development of young people who are creative, civically-engaged and well (Wyn, 2009). This means that different initiatives tend to place an emphasis on one or the other of these dimensions. Six years after NAPLAN's introduction, there is ongoing concern about aspects of this

testing program and in September 2013, the second of two Senate Inquiries was conducted. Much of the concern about the way that NAPLAN impacts on education in Australia centres on the extent to which economic goals overshadow developmental and social goals of education.

Supporters of the program have emphasised the value of the tests as diagnostic tools that can (a) provide both ready statistical answers and information to parents and schools on a student's performance, (b) help inform parental choice, (c) enable parents and teachers to contextualise a child's performance on a national scale, and (d) potentially help to improve teaching standards. ACARA has argued that "*access to high-quality data allows teachers and principals to gauge the progress made by students, evaluate the effectiveness of teaching programs, and apply the results into a cycle of continuous improvement*" (ACARA 2013e p. 3). Advocates of the program (McGaw 2012a; Buckingham 2013; Northern Territory Government n.d.) maintain that national testing provides consistent information that has value for parents, teachers and Government.

Critics of NAPLAN counter these claims by questioning the value and reliability of the tests themselves, expressing concern at the potential for manipulation (through league tables), and arguing (a) that preoccupation with testing outcomes results in a narrowing of curriculum breadth and a decrease in student engagement ; or (b) that it impacts adversely on student well-being. It has been argued that the tests, as they stand, are at odds with the goals of education propounded in the Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians (2008), i.e. "*that young people should engage in educational experiences that promote creativity, innovation, cultural appreciation and personal values to ensure they become confident and creative learners equipped for a rapidly changing world as well as active and informed citizens*" (Australian Literacy Educators 2013, p. 2).

NAPLAN is a 'high stakes' testing regime. This assessment is based on a number of factors including its presentation by ACARA to parents as testing "*the sorts of skills that are essential for every child to progress through school and life*", the associated reporting and comparative League tables constructed from information available on the *MySchool* site, the pressure on schools to improve performance and the links with funding, and the emerging of NAPLAN scores/rating as a screening tool for access to secondary schools. The nature of its high stakes are explored and elaborated further in the latter section of this report.

## THIS REPORT

This report is part of Phase Two of *The Experience of Education: the impact of high stakes testing on school students and their families* project. The project is a multi-tiered research initiative of the Whitlam Institute within the University of Western Sydney that accords strongly with, and articulates, the Institute's commitment to enable better informed policy making regarding the Australian regime of high stakes testing throughout the school years from the perspective of what is in the best interests of children and young people.

<sup>1</sup> Parliamentary Library, *Measurement of student achievement: a quick guide*, Department of Parliamentary Services, Parliament of Australia 6 November 2013

In part this was because it is a piece of strategic research that goes to the heart of the question of the purpose of education. Equipping young people to be active participants in the economy is a critical educational objective. However education is and should be much more. NAPLAN provides a narrow set of measures that are focused on the function of education in giving children and young people utilitarian skills for employability and to ensure workforce preparedness.

This research tackles that question directly by examining a centrepiece of the contemporary educational landscape. It does so by intentionally looking at standardised external testing not in terms of educational performance but in terms of the impact on young people themselves and their families and on their school environment.

Impelled also by a relative paucity of quality research and in-depth analysis of high stakes testing as it specifically affects Australian young people and their families, the project acknowledges the need for systematic research that provides an evidence base that can influence better informed policy-making in the area.

This project has delivered four major pieces of research:

- Phase One, consisted of (i) a review of international and Australian research into student experiences of standardised testing, and (ii) an analysis of teacher perspectives on NAPLAN based on the results of a national online survey.
- Phase Two of the project consists of (i) a parent survey conducted by the Newspoll agency for the Whitlam Institute, and (ii) this report which reports on qualitative research conducted across a sample of school communities in NSW and Victoria. Drawing on data elicited through interviews and focus groups across a range of Government and non-Government school settings (16 schools in all), this report takes its context from the previous research (the literature review and surveys of parents and teachers), and synthesises all key findings to date.

In seeking viewpoints on high stakes testing across a range of State and Independent school settings and socio-economic and geographical contexts, this report has implications for state and federal policies on education. In particular, it has relevance to Goal 1 of the Melbourne Declaration, that commits to equity and excellence across Australian schools and to Goal 2 of the Melbourne Declaration that all young Australians become successful learners (MCEETYA, 2008).

## METHODOLOGY

This project was designed to provide in-depth qualitative data and exploration of issues in regard to high stakes testing, drawing on and augmenting findings of the literature review and quantitative analysis previously completed by the Education Policy Unit at the University of Melbourne's Graduate School of Education for *The Experience of Education: the impact of high stakes testing on school students and their families* project. The report also draws on relevant literature from the field of education, notably a survey of parents conducted for the Whitlam Institute by the Newspoll agency in 2013.

It seeks to address the key research question: *What are the impacts of high stakes testing on school students and their families?*

Interviews were conducted with Principals, teachers, children and young people, and parents at a range of State, Catholic and Independent primary and secondary schools across geographic and socio-economic boundaries in two Australian states.

For the first time in NAPLAN-related research young people have been provided with an opportunity to directly relate and reflect upon their experience of NAPLAN testing.

### THE SAMPLE

In seeking to elicit and record a diversity of experiences, interviews were conducted at schools in five geographical locales or sites in Victoria and New South Wales. Data has been drawn, specifically, from schools in:

- a North-eastern Victorian country town providing educational outreach to a sizeable rural enrolment
- two larger regional centres (one in Western Victoria, the other in South-western NSW)
- and two metropolitan clusters (one in Western Sydney and one in inner Melbourne).

In order to maximise opportunities to compare and contrast sectors, some data was drawn from additional interviews with school leadership at a third Independent school in inner Sydney.

Schools varied in size from 50 to 1500 students. Several of the schools cater for newly arrived or refugee students. One school serves one of the highest Indigenous student populations in the country. Some of the schools are in post-codes rated by the Socio-Economic Indexes for Areas (SEIFA) as facing significant social challenges; others cater to a cross-section of the community and include sizeable numbers of students described as of High Socio-Economic Status (SES).

The research provides an insight into the experiences and perceptions of key stakeholders within 16 schools in two Australian states: i.e. at five State Primary schools, five State Secondary Colleges, three Catholic Colleges and three multi-age Independent schools. In total, interviews were conducted with:

- 16 Principals/School Leaders
- 29 teachers
- 26 parents
- 70 students (22 Grade 5, 25 Year 7, 23 Year 9)

The sample was constructed to enable the researchers to interview students, teachers, Principals and parents in a range of schools. This is consistent with qualitative research approaches that aim to deepen and enrich understanding through the use of semi-structured interview schedules that enable research participants to introduce issues and provide examples that are relevant to them. This approach provides data on points of view about and experiences of NAPLAN testing that enables the identification of key and recurring themes. This deeper engagement with the research topic is intended to complement the survey of teacher responses (Dulfer, Polesel and Rice, 2012).

# FINDINGS: THE IMPACT OF NAPLAN ON STUDENT WELL-BEING

## PREVIOUS RESEARCH FINDINGS

An extensive literature review, undertaken by the Education Policy Unit and the Youth Research Centre at the University of Melbourne during Phase One of the *Experience of Education* project, confirmed the existence of a substantial international evidence base about the perceived impacts of high stakes testing on young people and educational systems. The international literature raised significant questions as to (a) the reliability, validity and accessibility of standardised tests, and (b) the possible impacts of test preparation on teaching styles and pedagogies, teacher expectations, parent-school relationships, the quality and depth of children's learning, and the breadth and depth of curriculum. For more than twenty years researchers in Britain, the United States and Singapore have expressed particular concerns about the adverse effects of test regimes on student health and well-being (See, for instance Perrone 1991, Stiggins, 1999, Gregory & Clark, 2003, Schroeder, 2006).

While some attention had been paid to the impacts of NAPLAN in, for instance, diminishing trust in teacher professionalism (Klenowski, 2010, 2011), undermining teacher creativity and student love of learning (Au 2007, Queensland Studies Authority 2009), or narrowing of curriculum (Ewing, 2011), Polesel, Dulfer & Turnbull (2011) identified a distinct shortfall in systematic Australian research that looked at connections between standardised testing and student health. The key exceptions cited in the Literature Review were:

- A national survey of Principals and teachers, conducted by the Independent Education Union that cited evidence of pressure on students and teachers as a result of the *MySchool* site, and expressed some concern at the impact of test preparation on regular classroom work (Athanasou, 2010).
- A draft discussion paper by the Queensland Studies Authority (2009) that examined the capacity of NAPLAN testing to impact adversely on the self-esteem and confidence of under-performing students.
- The published findings of the 2010 Senate Inquiry into NAPLAN that was informed by submissions outlining concerns at testing resulting in labelling of students, demoralisation of school personnel and placing pressure on students.<sup>2</sup>

The available research provides strong evidence on the impacts of high stakes testing on students with respect to their learning environment with particular reference to teaching practices and the curriculum. However, the review of international and Australian literature (Polesel, Dulfer and Turnbull, 2012) found that in Australia there has been little debate, and a lack of

research about the fundamental question of the impact NAPLAN might have on the well-being of students and their family circumstances (Polesel, Dulfer and Turnbull, 2012). Turning to the international research, the literature review established a consistent picture of serious concerns about the impact high-stakes testing regimes are having on student health and well-being, learning, teaching and the curriculum. The consistency of these findings raised legitimate questions and deep concern regarding the Australian experience.

The report *The Experience of Education: The impacts of high stakes testing on school students and their families. An Educator's Perspective* (Dulfer, Polesel and Rice, 2012) examined the views of educators in respect to NAPLAN testing within the broader context of the purposes of education. The methodology used an online survey instrument and attracted 8,300 respondents from educators nation-wide.

This report suggested that the NAPLAN testing regime is plagued by unintended consequences well beyond its stated intent, and added weight to the contention that NAPLAN does represent a shift to 'high stakes' testing. Drawing on the view of educators, the findings not only confirmed those trends identified in research conducted in the USA and the UK, but also provided substantial evidence about the impacts NAPLAN is having on the Australian curriculum, pedagogy, staff morale, schools' capacity to attract and retain students and more importantly students' health and well-being. It was evident that as the NAPLAN results become linked with funding and policy decisions, pressure for improving scores has significantly impacted on teachers, classroom practices and the curriculum. Educators are increasingly speaking out about the associated work pressures, higher workloads, narrowing pedagogy and diminishing time for quality teaching and learning. While for many schools NAPLAN acts only as a minor distraction from their teaching program, reports of 'teaching to the test' are well-founded, as practising-for-the-test programs take up space in the curriculum at the expense of rich and important areas such as history, geography, physical education and music.

Educators also reported that NAPLAN is having a negative impact on student well-being. Almost ninety percent of teachers reported students talking about feeling stressed prior to NAPLAN testing, and significant numbers also reported students being sick, crying or having sleepless nights (Dulfer, Polesel and Rice, 2012).

More recently, the release of the *Parental Attitudes and Perceptions Concerning NAPLAN* research report, prepared for the Whitlam Institute by Newspoll in 2013, made an important contribution to our understanding of NAPLAN and how students and their families experience it. Examining data from a Newspoll survey of Australian parents of students who have undertaken NAPLAN tests it looked at overall attitudes to NAPLAN among parents, along with their perceptions about the impact of NAPLAN on their children. It supplements the previous survey of educators though using a different survey methodology. The survey found that 56 percent of parents are in favour of NAPLAN with a substantial number (34 percent) also against it. While

<sup>2</sup> Also cited in the Literature Review was a themed issue of the Australian Education Union's Journal *Professional Voice* in which contributor Brian Caldwell expressed frustration at the failure of NAPLAN's creators to learn from international precedents. ("Many of the fears in Australia about the dysfunctional effects of national testing, an excessive focus on and unrealistic expectations for standards, the narrowing of curriculum, and high levels of stress for students and teachers have been borne out in experience in England"). Caldwell, B. J. (2010) 'The Impact of High-Stakes test-driven accountability', *Professional Voice* 8(1), p.50

teachers were divided as to NAPLAN's usefulness, around 70 percent of parents indicated they found the information useful. Parents were split as to NAPLAN's impact on their child's self-esteem. However, it is noteworthy that around 40 percent of parents reported some sign of stress or anxiety exhibited by their child as a result of NAPLAN.

This work has been cited, drawn on and supplemented by a number of subsequent research initiatives. Implicit in the development of these projects is acknowledgement that, while on one hand NAPLAN has become part of the school calendar, on the other it has continued to excite controversy within the educational and general communities. It is evident that the dramatic shift towards performance that NAPLAN has come to represent is having an impact on students, both in terms of their educational experience and, for a significant number, their personal well-being.

Concern about the impact of high stakes testing has resulted in a number of publications and reports subsequent to the review of literature on high stakes testing by Dulfer, Polesel and Rice (2012). These include a report commissioned by the Australian Primary Principals Association (APPA) (Canvass Strategic Opinion Research, 2013). This report, based on an online survey of State, Catholic and Independent Primary School Principals, found a divergence in the views of Primary Principals on the impacts of NAPLAN testing and speculated that this divergence appeared to be influenced by the school location, size and sector (i.e. Government, non-Government). It also found that the effects on student well-being are seen as the greatest impact of NAPLAN, with two-thirds of respondents describing that impact as negative (albeit, in some cases, only "slightly so"). Independent schools and very large metropolitan State schools appear to be under considerably greater NAPLAN-related pressure (than their non-government or non-metropolitan counterparts) because of parental expectations or competitive stress. Even so, more positive effects of NAPLAN are identified by larger and Independent settings than by their counterparts. This report confirms the negative impact of NAPLAN testing. Sixty six percent of Principals felt that testing impacted negatively on student well-being, and 50% cited instances of students being physically ill before tests. Half also said that stress and fear of failure are strongest in Grade 3 students. A quarter said that students often or very often showed signs of stress about NAPLAN tests and that the tests triggered anxiety, absenteeism, apathy or behaviour problems.

A different range of issues in relation to NAPLAN testing was exposed by a three-year study, based on surveys of teachers in Government and non-Government school teachers in South Australia and Western Australia on the effects of NAPLAN on school communities (Thompson, 2012). This study found that, rather than achieving the aim of improving transparency and educational quality, NAPLAN has alienated elements of school communities. However, like the APPA report (APPA, 2013), Thompson found that teachers believe that NAPLAN is not improving literacy and numeracy and that the tests themselves have little educative benefit for students, making the costs of test delivery, both financially and in terms of school time, difficult to

justify. Teachers felt that the pressure associated with the tests is resulting in negative classroom environments and teacher-centred pedagogies, and that these changes are lowering student engagement, and that the increased anxiety among students, parents, teachers and administrators, as a result of NAPLAN, is counterproductive to learning and the improvement of educational outcomes. A further contribution to debate about NAPLAN is made by The Grattan Institute report (Jensen, Weidmann & Farmer, 2013), challenging the idea that school competition results in improved student performance. This report also seeks to dispute claims that families are (a) utilising information on the *MySchool* website to select higher performing schools, or (b) changing schools based on NAPLAN results.

A Senate Inquiry in June 2013, convened by the Senate Education, Employment & Workplace Relations Committee in June 2013, examined the effectiveness of the National Assessment initiative with specific reference to (a) whether NAPLAN is achieving its stated objectives; (b) its impact on teaching and student learning practices; (c) unintended consequences of NAPLAN testing ; and (d) potential improvements. The findings included (a) confirmation that Australian research findings to date have been significantly more negative than positive as regards NAPLAN's impacts on student well-being; (b) evidence that reporting NAPLAN results on the *MySchool* website has served only to distort the picture and increase the perceived importance of the results; (c) the argument that student stress may be resulting less from the tests themselves than from the influence and reportage of parents, schools and media and the contention that efforts need to be made, in the interests of student well-being, and (d) the suggestion that NAPLAN tests be actively de-emphasised.

Recently, further debate on NAPLAN has been conducted in academic journals. For example, Thompson & Cook (2012), examine the impact of NAPLAN on teachers' work, public perceptions of their work and claims that some schools/teachers are cheating on tests because of pressure to perform within a highly competitive environment. They argue that manipulation of NAPLAN data is a logical response to the emergence of an audit culture in schools and a narrowing definition of teaching where only data counts (Thompson & Cook 2012). The important question of meeting accountability demands on NAPLAN without impacting negatively on the quality and equity of teaching and learning in Australia is raised by Klenowski & Wyatt-Smith (2012), who express concern that NAPLAN has spawned a multi-million dollar testing industry, including financial incentives for Principals to lift test scores, and "flying squads" monitoring perceived underperformance. This analysis highlights the unintended consequences of NAPLAN testing as perceived threats to jobs; neglect of students needing greater support; increased absenteeism of low-performing students on testing day; neglect by tests of higher order thinking skills; pressure on teachers / schools leading to cheating and prominence given to a narrow set of outcomes which tend to distort learning and teaching. Other research, including that by Brady (2013) and Davies (2012) also raise concerns about the challenge to teacher autonomy and inequities for students with disabilities.

In addition to the increasing volume of scholarly work on the impact of high stakes testing in Australia, there is a sizeable body of opinion-pieces in the popular media.<sup>3</sup>

## THE FINDINGS OF THIS STUDY

In reporting on findings from the teacher survey, Dulfer, Polesel and Rice (2012) highlighted the need for further research, aimed at supplementing the points of view of the teaching profession with feedback from parents and students themselves, into the uses, effects and impacts of NAPLAN (Dulfer, Polesel & Rice 2012). In reporting findings from the Murdoch University Survey of teachers, Thompson likewise acknowledged the need to contextualise teacher voices by eliciting other key stakeholders' perspectives on NAPLAN.

The current research, while including the perspectives of Principals, teachers and parents, has sought for the first time to consult directly with students about their experience and perceptions of NAPLAN, through face-to-face interviews. Students have the last word in this report. Although their views are central, they make most sense and have the greatest impact in the context of the experiences of their school communities – their school Principals, teachers and their parents. Students mainly aim to see the benefits of their school experience, including NAPLAN. However, overwhelmingly, student views and experiences provide the detail of what it looks like when educational practices are not in the best interests of children or young people.

The research was approved by the University of Melbourne Human Research Ethics Committee. It was informed by the question “Do the benefits and value of NAPLAN outweigh (a) its shortcomings and ambiguousness as a diagnostic tool, or (b) its unintended consequences, specifically the impacts on school students and their families, and their health and well-being?” The interview questions explored whether there was student stress associated with NAPLAN testing, the nature and level of stress where it existed, and more broadly, (beyond the interviews), the understandings about the purpose of education and the best interests of children and young people.

## PRINCIPAL PERSPECTIVES

In this section we provide a detailed analysis of the responses of school Principals to questions about the significance of NAPLAN tests in their schools, including the value of preparing for

NAPLAN tests, their impact on school staff, on students and on parents and strategies used to minimise stress and disruption.

### PRINCIPALS' PERCEPTIONS OF THE SIGNIFICANCE OF TESTS WITHIN SCHOOL YEAR

The analysis of interviews reveals that Principals differ in their perceptions of (a) the degree of impact NAPLAN has on their respective school communities (a finding that echoes APPA data), (b) the significance of the tests for that community, and (c) the value of the process and results. The most noticeable difference emerged in relation to the perspectives of some Primary school Principals, but it could be hypothesised that (a) they came from smaller school populations and tended to be more ‘hands on’ in their role and (b) they were working with much younger students who generally displayed the more obvious symptoms of stress in relation to NAPLAN testing. However, there were common themes which were raised about the overall impact of NAPLAN, particularly in relation to the pressures on staff and students, and its overall significance in the school calendar each year.

All but one of the 16 Principal interviewees described as either “significant” or “reasonably significant” the disruption caused to the annual timetable by NAPLAN tests. There was divergence, however, as to the overall impact of that disruption.<sup>4</sup> While this divergence did not appear to be sector-related, the data suggests that concerns are greatest at Primary school level. For example, the Principal of one small Victorian metropolitan State Prep-6 setting reported that departmental pressure on local schools to demonstrate improved NAPLAN scores had become an increasingly major annual pressure within an already very full timetable. His sentiments were echoed by the Principal of a similar-sized country setting who objected to the necessary timetable re-organisation:

*“It’s not as simple as just giving the kids the test. We have to take them – grade 5s – out of the group when they have to do the tests and it means they miss out on some other activity at school such as art, PE, specialist subjects. The kids don’t like that; they’re not happy to be missing out.”*

A third Primary school Principal felt that the disruptiveness of NAPLAN was accentuated by “*excessive rigmarole*” and red tape surrounding its delivery and compounded, in turn, by the need for “*frontline interaction*” between school leaders and Education Department bureaucrats over the results. (“*The State and Federal offices are committed to the use of the data ... It’s looked at to monitor the school’s progress*”). A fourth Primary Principal (in this case, head of a metropolitan NSW school) described the testing regime as both “*very significant*” and a source of considerable stress for teachers, parents (“*because of MySchool*”) and at least some of the students.

3 See, for example: Coulson, J. (2013) ‘NAPLAN? Na, not a great curriculum plan’, [www.thepunch.com.au/articles/naplan-na-not-a-great-curricu...](http://www.thepunch.com.au/articles/naplan-na-not-a-great-curricu...) (retrieved 12 Sept 2013); Cobbold, T. (2013) ‘Too much hitched to NAPLAN wagon’, *Canberra Times*, 12 Sept, 2013; Bantick, C. (2013) ‘This is one test that Labor will never pass’, *Herald Sun* (Melbourne), 14 May 2013; McGaw, B. (2012), ‘NAPLAN’s origins’, *Australian Financial Review*, 31 July 2012; Blake, S. (2013) ‘Testing times have NAPLAN under a cloud’, *Northern Territory News*, 13 September 2013.; Manocha, R. (2012). ‘We need to test NAPLAN for its effects on well-being’, [www.generationnext.com.au/2012/04/we-need-test-naplan-for-its-effects-on-we...](http://www.generationnext.com.au/2012/04/we-need-test-naplan-for-its-effects-on-we...) (retrieved 12 September 2013)

4 The single dissenter, Principal of a regional Independent school, insisted that NAPLAN was only one test among many used by a school that stressed holistic development of its students through Sports, the Arts, and Music. He did, however, acknowledge the value of NAPLAN in providing teachers with “clear bench-marked information” and expressed a wish that *MySchool* – “a very crude instrument” – “fade into oblivion”.

*"More and more ... we have to set our targets based on NAPLAN ... Every year the results have to be explained to the region ... NAPLAN is high pressure ... community expectation is much more than it should have been".*

*"It's taken seriously [here] ... the only results we have that are statewide and national", stated the fifth Primary Principal interviewee, "[however] it's not the be-all and end-all. I tell the students, 'If education is a big 44-gallon drum, [NAPLAN] is the little bit down the bottom ... a teacup".*

The level of concern by Primary school Principals may reflect the disruption that NAPLAN testing can present in the context of the holistic approach to education taken in many Primary schools, compared with Secondary schools. It may also reflect other issues, such as particular impact of testing regimes on children. For example, the research commissioned by the APPA found that grade 3 students were the most stressed by NAPLAN testing (Canvass Strategic Opinion Research, 2013). This is an area that would benefit from further research.

By contrast, each of the three Independent school Principals downplayed (in one case, very strongly) the significance/importance of NAPLAN, as definitely "... not something we go out of our way to prioritise". "In terms of the image of the school, I'd estimate it as pretty close to meaningless", expanded one of the Principals, highlighting that school's over-riding commitment to a well-rounded and holistic education. His counterparts described NAPLAN respectively as just one component in a suite of data and, ultimately, "a limited snapshot", the benefits of which were diminished by the gap between test and results.

Three Catholic schools were engaged by the researchers. In each case, school leadership identified real value in the tests as diagnostic tools that supported in-house assessment and underplayed reports of student stress (a finding at odds with the APPA finding that the Catholic sector reported more negative impacts on student well-being than did other sectors).

One Catholic school leader suggested that growing familiarity with the testing process over six years has rendered it less disruptive, and, indeed, that the overall NAPLAN experience has proved to be less negative than originally anticipated. Conceding that "[Now] we're used to it", he described 'NAPLAN week' as having become more "a signpost as part of the year" than a "determinant or driver" of what was being done at the school. He elaborated:

*"At first there was an increased level of anxiety about [NAPLAN] organisationally ... Particularly with our Year 7s ... In most schools there's been a good move away from written exams in the early secondary years so we had questions ... Would it cause them [the students] high levels of anxiety? Would they feel they were being judged? Would we need teams of counsellors? Would there be huge numbers of calls from parents insisting their [children] don't participate? How would it impact the curriculum? Would there be big pressure to teach towards the exams? ... With a few exceptions, most of that has subsided ... The sky didn't fall down. The school didn't close. The child's not in intensive therapy ... There's*

*a sense now [that] rather than regard it as a waste of time, how do we receive and interpret data and plan strategies to respond? ... We accept it's part of the landscape".*

These sentiments were echoed by:

- a rural State Secondary Principal who agreed that NAPLAN's mystique had diminished over time: having "done it before ... [the students] are used to it".
- another Secondary Principal (in this case, at a metropolitan NSW setting) who deemed NAPLAN relatively inconsequential in the scheme of things; the Higher School Certificate and the Year 8 Essential science Skills Assessment [ESSA] tests were seen as much more of a priority at the school in question.

At another point on the continuum, however, a third Secondary Principal (leading a regional NSW school catering to a large Indigenous cohort and dealing with significant social challenges) reported that the enormous logistical difficulties around just getting students to take the tests were compounded by worry at "how we're judged according to the data. We do lots of educationally sound things apart from practising questions ... but the reality is that the judgment's there in MySchool". Clearly proud of what her school was achieving through innovative pedagogies and philosophies, the Principal in question expressed considerable frustration at the potential for published results (confined specifically to Maths and Literacy performance) to reinforce students' negative self-images and the school's stereotyped profile.

*"We've been dogged by the local press ... really quite rude remarks about our results ... It's pretty depressing ... Does everyone want their laundry hung in public? Do we really want to trumpet that we have a lot of socio-economically disadvantaged students here who have a longer journey ... we have phenomenal growth from Year 7 to 9 – some years ... most years ... but nobody's really all that interested in the growth ... they're only interested in the end point ... [NAPLAN] goes against everything that we're saying at the moment about 21<sup>st</sup> century education, regarding 'muscle and bucket brain' ... and that idea of brain plasticity and that you can get better... and that some kids aren't ripe until they're about 24 ... Our kids come from disadvantage you couldn't imagine sometimes and some are resilient and some aren't ... For that reason I hate what's happened to NAPLAN and how it [has been] used ...".*

The Principal of a Victorian Primary school, also serving a lower socio-economic demographic, voiced similar concerns.

*"Our kids often come to school with low social experiences and development ... We're .83 on SEIFA. <sup>5</sup> A lot of kids come in without Kinder [and] just getting them into a routine takes months ... we need to look at academic learning and address their social-emotional experiences as well ... stuff that can't be measured in a NAPLAN test".*

5 SEIFA is an index developed by the Australian Bureau of Statistics. It is an index of socio-economic status by area and enables ranking by relative disadvantage.

## PRINCIPALS' PERCEPTIONS OF THE VALUE OF NAPLAN

School leaders differed in their assessment of the *value* of NAPLAN testing. On one hand, individual Principals acknowledged:

*"We place importance on it ... [on] seeing how we're improving – or not – in Literacy and Numeracy. We recognise that the standard needs to improve."* [rural Secondary Principal].

Or:

*"We use it [NAPLAN] as an informative process ... the data might be redundant [by the time it becomes available] but we still use it yearly to see how we're progressing ... Staff value it. If you're looking at overall patterns, that's the way to go".* [rural Catholic Principal]

School Principals generally acknowledged the merit of the tests as an indicator also of changes to literacy and numeracy levels within the school. In the view of some, NAPLAN data served a useful purpose in:

- Providing information that would enable teachers to develop more individualised approaches to teaching and learning.
- Helping school staff identify students who appear not to be progressing or identify particular areas *"we're missing in our teaching"*. (In this regard one Principal suggested that, in some instances, teachers rely overly on *"intuition about kids ... how well we know them"*, and that they need to be further informed by empirical data).
- *"Making visible what kids can and can't do ... as a profession we struggle with differentiation."*
- *"The results are valuable as a stimulus to further up-skill the staff ... this comes from the need to justify ourselves to parents and prospective parents."*
- *Providing data on both under-achieving and very able students.* (As one interviewee observed: *"Schools are used to providing for strugglers. Really able kids can be distracted because they're bored and the work's not extending them. Then you get behaviours ... kids knowing how to press buttons"*).
- *"Providing a snapshot ... It's something seen of as a means of benchmarking"*.

Several examples were provided of NAPLAN data being drawn on to effect specific changes within curriculum or teaching style. For instance:

- NAPLAN testing highlighted literacy deficiencies being played out in Maths (and not English) at one Catholic College, specifically student difficulty with the wording applied to a particular Maths question. The school subsequently responded by introducing additional specialised literacy instruction.
- At another school (also a Catholic College), a decline in Maths performance charted by NAPLAN results led to the appointment of a specialist Maths support teacher, working across Year levels.
- Two Independent schools reported that shortfalls in Junior School spelling and numeracy results (respectively) had prompted intensive staff in-service and re-examination of the syllabus. *"It was not a place we could afford to be"*.

While conceding that, in very small schools, a couple of student absences can substantially skew the overall data, one Primary school leader saw particular usefulness in the 'value add' aspect of NAPLAN data. *"Much more positive than just straight results"*). He was echoed by the Principal of a large Secondary College who acknowledged real potential in *"growth reports"* that identified which students had and had not progressed. Other Principals agreed that, at least in Secondary settings, the testing process may have value in acclimatising young people to formal testing situations.

By contrast, some Principals described NAPLAN matter-of-factly as either *"an obligation we have to carry ... intrusive but we move on"* or *"something we're used to"* that *"doesn't contribute much to our understanding of what kids can and can't do"*. One Independent school Principal frankly dismissed the NAPLAN process as:

*"... essentially a piece of nonsense which is political and which politicians use to try to justify to the electorate that they're doing something about standards ... as is usually the case with politicians, they're interested in appearances not realities"*.

Several interviewees questioned the annual cost of NAPLAN, suggesting that the money spent constructing, rolling out and reporting on the data, could be put to better use. Others were critical of the quality, style and content of the tests themselves. According to one critic:

*"NAPLAN tests a very narrow band of skills. It doesn't tend to provide much for the gifted kids, for the out-riders, to show their real capacity ... Some of the questions are probably fairly low on Bloom's taxonomy and a lot of schools that focus down on NAPLAN seem to us to effectively teach kids how to deal well on the test ... rather than understand the issues with which they're dealing"*.

Other interviewees expressed scepticism at:

- The language used in testing as often unfamiliar to the young testees, *"A lot of kids get stuck on the literacy needed on Maths tests ... the different language being used"*).
- The tests' employment of multiple choice questions (according to one Principal, *"the kids have a 1 in 4 chance of getting these end ones right, whether they know the answers or not"*),
- The limited focus of the tests to Literacy and Numeracy (*"I think NAPLAN is narrowing community perceptions about what schools do and what's important. When testing excludes Arts, crafts, languages, humanities and so on, it diminishes those other areas in the eyes of the people out there"*).
- The overall reliability of the tests themselves. One (Secondary) Principal argued:  
*"A different discourse operates in [different subjects] ... If one interrogates NAPLAN, then one has to be very careful of drawing any conclusions around a student's literacy beyond Year 7 based on NAPLAN ... it will give you a pointer but you would then need to see whether [the testees] 'spoke' some subjects better than others, whether that year the choice of NAPLAN, which might have had a Science flavour, did not support a student who had a really strong Humanities frame or whatever"*.

A recurring theme at interviews across the board was concern at the long delay between testing and delivery of results. This turnaround lag was compared, for instance, with the 3-4 week turnaround on ECIS testing:

*"By the time we get the results, the kids have moved on ... The exercise seems pointless. It's definitely not an accurate reflection of the students. Many teachers and Principals think the same way as me I know from talking to them around the traps".*

It should be noted that this criticism has been taken on board by ACARA. However the proposed solution, to move the NAPLAN to an online set of tests, is not scheduled to commence until 2016.

The Principals generally conceded *"teacher assessment together with parents spending a good amount of time talking with the class teacher"* as more productive. Only one Principal out of 16 said "Yes" when asked *"Would it be a loss if NAPLAN was stopped tomorrow?"* The dissenting Principal in question, head of a large P-12 Independent school, believed that NAPLAN is providing his staff with *"clear bench-marked information"*. He was adamant, however, that removal of the MySchool site – in his opinion a *"very crude implement"* – would be *"a gain"*. Interestingly, the Principal of a comparable Independent setting indicated that he would be *"delighted"* if NAPLAN disappeared.

Comments by other Principals included:

*"I'd give a big sigh of relief if the government stopped it".*  
*"It wouldn't be a loss ... We look at all sorts of data [that is more useful]".*  
*"It's a tool we used but it's not critical ... we don't really need that it adds to our workload for a term and a bit ... there's not enough value to warrant the input"*  
*"NAPLAN is a political tool fed by a gullible public which is fed lifestyle aspirational ideals".*

## **PRINCIPALS' PERSPECTIVES ON PREPARATION FOR NAPLAN TESTING**

Every one of the schools selected for the project reported having implemented some degree of pre-test preparation. At one end of the continuum, the Principal of a struggling rural Primary setting declared frankly that he encouraged his staff to *"train to the test"*:

*"If we don't we're leaving our kids behind. The nature of NAPLAN is to compare school to school so I'm looking at every opportunity to get the extra grade so the school doesn't look bad. I'll encourage parents not to do the NAPLAN and give reasons why so we only have the 'top end' do it. We'll bend the rule as to how much help and time you can give a child".*

Some school leaders highlighted pressure (explicit or implicit) from central Department or Regional level to demonstrate improvement over time. One (NSW Primary) Principal noted increasing community expectation over the years that she prepare her students:

*"We used to avoid [practise tests], say 'this is just a snapshot' – that's long gone".*

In general, however, preparation seems to have been motivated less by the desire to outperform or match competing schools than by very strong concerns for student welfare, i.e. the desire to help students avoid unnecessary anxiety over the unknown. It was generally recognised that unfamiliarity with the test instrument and/or the style, structure or language of testing would get in the way of students being sufficiently confident to *"show what they could do"*.

In some cases, preparation has been relatively limited, taking the form of (a) revisiting old NAPLAN tests, or (b) familiarising students with the language of testing, during the week or so before annual delivery. In other cases, preparation appears to have been much more intense. One Secondary school Principal admitted that NAPLAN preparation had driven the Years 7 and 9 Maths/English syllabus throughout Term One. In some cases, classroom exercises carried over into recommendations that students complete NAPLAN homework exercises.

Even at schools that claimed to minimise pre-NAPLAN preparation, Principals and teachers alike acknowledged the importance of ensuring that students had a degree of familiarity with such variables as different ways of wording a Maths problem or differentiation between text styles. (In recent years, schools have tended to focus more on the writing of Persuasive than Narrative text, for instance, juggling their curriculum in some cases to line up with NAPLAN). Most schools believed strongly that preparing the students mentally was in the child's best interests and, indeed, consistent with duty of care. One Primary school placed particular emphasis on getting children used to writing and finishing within a specific time limit. She noted, *"Knowing what they're up against ... getting past the front page is important. [Knowing the processes] makes them feel better in themselves"*.

## **PRINCIPALS' PERCEPTIONS OF THE IMPACTS OF NAPLAN ON SCHOOL STAFF**

Principals varied likewise in their assessments of the impact of NAPLAN on the school staff. According to one Primary school representative:

*"It always has had an impact – it impacts on the curriculum, it impacts on the school. Even when I was teaching in a rural school when [NAPLAN] first came out, it always has. It impacts on the staff ... When the results come out there is a comparison grade to grade, and then it becomes an issue. [Recently] one teacher felt she got the dud grade and it would reflect on her. I dealt with it by saying we don't compare, but privately I know that while we (staff) might not, parents do. They will talk to each other".*

One Catholic Principal expressed concern at its impact, in some cases, on parent-teacher relationships.

*"In the hands of some parents, the results are 'not helpful' ... parents can misinterpret data, creating an 'us' and 'them' situation. It feeds in small concerns that can become aggressive".*

Comments by other Principals included:

*“Our staff are stressed by it ... they feel anxious in the lead-up and anxious when the results come out”.*

*“The teachers see it as a set of data they may be judged on”.*

*“It always [entails] a bit of anxiety for the staff”.*

*“Our staff responses vary. Most of us have come to terms with doing it and want the school to do the best it can. The teachers try to support the kids. The problem is... a lot of kids you’d support differently [in the tests] and that causes some staff frustration”.*

In other cases, Principals cited instances of:

- Staff being “cross at having to break off what they’d like to be doing” in order to prepare for and supervise NAPLAN.
- On the other hand, staff expressing concern that the school is not sufficiently preparing students for NAPLAN.
- Students ‘picking up’ on staff negativity towards NAPLAN. (“Anecdotally ... [I heard that] different people were taking it at different levels of seriousness”). In this case, school management opted to ensure students received a consistent message about the tests by delegating full responsibility for NAPLAN to two senior staff “who go round, making sure each class gets the same spiel The more seriously [both] staff and kids take it, the more valuable the data”.

## PRINCIPALS’ PERCEPTIONS OF THE IMPACTS OF NAPLAN ON STUDENTS

All Principal interviewees acknowledged being aware of instances of student stress or anxiety related to NAPLAN testing. They diverged, however, in their level of concern at such impacts. Unsurprisingly, leaders of larger schools, Government or otherwise, reported considerably less personal knowledge of adverse student responses than did their counterparts in smaller settings.<sup>6</sup>

Several Principals hinted that reports of student anxiety might be somewhat exaggerated, suggesting that any stress expressed over NAPLAN was likely to be simply the “conduit” for anxiety over other issues in the young person’s life. One respondent (from an inner-urban Secondary setting) felt that the issues of test-related student stress and student fragility were sometimes over-exaggerated.

*“I don’t mind kids being put under stress. You know, in all our working lives there are moments when we just have to deal with it and I think giving kids those sorts of experiences is not actually a bad thing. You know, you’ve got to learn to deal with it. I think if we actually avoid that we might be doing kids a disservice”.*

Other Principals tended to downplay suggestions of student stress, making such observations as “I don’t think student stress is a big thing at [our] school”, “It’s not a big problem”, “Individuals react differently ... There’ll [always] be students who are anxious approaching any kind of testing”, or “The kids don’t

*get particularly stressed about it ... they’ve done it before ... they approach it with different levels of seriousness”.*

While conceding that negative impacts might be felt by only a minority, however, a rural Principal observed:

*“I’ve been in the game for a long time...when you’ve been around as long as I have you know when someone will be stressed ... we use the word ‘test’ so that in itself can be stressful for some students. I tell parents direct in those cases: I wouldn’t have my child do the NAPLAN”.*

Other Principals cited instances of:

- Primary students in tears in the days leading up to the tests because of parental expectation and media hype.
- One or two “serious cases” where Secondary “kids were not suited ... might burst into tears ... We withdrew them – usually supported by the parents. It’s a student welfare thing, not an attempt to cook the result”.

There was agreement among Primary Principals (reinforced through parent and teacher interviews, although not through interviews with children) that the “new” experience of NAPLAN tended to elicit more intense student anxiety at Grade 3 than at Grade 5.<sup>7</sup> As one Principal noted:

*“It’s the first real testing they’ve experienced and it’s foreign to how they normally learn ... especially the writing ... We wouldn’t normally work that way ... There’s a bit of parental expectation, the teachers probably put a bit of pressure on ... Some kids pick up on the negative press around NAPLAN”.*

Similarly, a consistent finding across the post-Primary schools was a distinct decrease in manifestations of NAPLAN-related stress after Year 7. (See teacher and student comments below).

There was likewise some speculation that gender might be a factor in this regard. Comparing Year 7 boys and girls, for instance, one Principal reported high levels of anxiety among girls that they were being judged, whereas with boys, it was more often “water off a duck’s back”. In regard to Grades 3 and 5, another Principal reported: “anecdotally, more girls tend to get upset”. Other Principals failed to see any connection between either (a) school level or (b) gender and level of anxiety, insisting that it all came down to “personality”.

Perhaps most tellingly, the Principal of a regional Secondary school serving a large Indigenous population noted that many of her students brought their histories of low achievement to the test situation, in a significant number of cases, refusing to attempt some papers.

*“Shame is a very big factor here ... In their minds, it’s better not to commit to a stupid answer in case somebody they’re never going to see looks at their choice and says: ‘How dumb are you?’ ... [particularly by Year 9] the attitude is ‘whatever’ ... ‘whatever’ might be masking ‘Do I really need a number to tell me how dumb I am?’”.*

<sup>6</sup> In larger schools, responsibility for NAPLAN generally falls on Teaching and Learning or Year level co-ordinators, with the Principal often several times removed from the process. Principals of smaller schools seem more likely to be “at the front line” in co-ordinating test dates or in dealing with parent or staff queries.

<sup>7</sup> This would seem to accord with APPA data with 50% of respondents maintaining that stress and fear of failure were more frequent at Grade 3 than at Grade 5.

## STRATEGIES USED TO MINIMISE DISRUPTION AND PREVENT STUDENT STRESS

Many Principals indicated that implementing the NAPLAN tests requires them to find the balance between student welfare and the pressure to improve performance at the regional and Federal level, particularly given the links to funding considerations. It was apparent from the Principal interview responses that all sample schools have seen the need to develop strategies aimed at minimising NAPLAN's disruption to school routines and (either explicitly or implicitly) addressing or counteracting student anxiety or over-reaction to the testing regime. Typical principal comments included:

*"We're working with the kids, letting them know what's going on"*

*"We try to avoid too much hype ... advise parents that they need to ensure a good night's rest and adequate nutrition [before the tests] rather than get extensive coaching ... We try to be reasonably relaxed while also taking the process seriously"*

*"We try to play it down ... sell it as 'this will tell us what you can or can't do and help us teach you better'"*

*"There are students who are anxious approaching any type of testing ... We try to ensure a secure, comfortable environment"*

Several Principals cited occasions when concern at potential negative impacts of sitting the tests has impelled them to talk with parents, sometimes advising that child not to attend on the day. In other cases, some leeway was allowed students stressed by the time factor, but who, when allowed to work at their own pace, knew the work and could therefore complete the test.

Interestingly, more than one Principal confided that the strategy of playing down the importance of the tests had potential to be counterproductive. One Principal admitted changing the school's low-key "softly softly" approach because a sizeable minority of students were refusing to take the tests as seriously as they could. (*"Now we are opting for formulaic, exam-like conditions ... we prep the students that it's valuable data"*).

## PRINCIPALS' PERCEPTIONS OF THE IMPORTANCE OF NAPLAN RESULTS TO PARENTS

*"It's always difficult to generalise about parents' responses"*, conceded a metropolitan Secondary Principal. *"Some families withdraw their kids [on ideological grounds]. Some see it as an external verifier of where the kid is at 'This is what's telling me the truth'"*.

Several Principal comments echoed the point made at the 2013 Senate Inquiry that the strong public profile of NAPLAN (nurtured by the media) was making students (and, in some cases, parents) over-emphasise its importance. According to one regional Independent Principal:

*"We have parents who are part of that older conservative group that thinks testing keeps the children busy ... the more the better ... We get strong annual representations by parents insistent that testing is a good way of keeping students focused and a good preparation for future*

*experiences ... Around 10% of parents in any one class see the results as important and that flows on down. The kids' perception [of the importance of NAPLAN] is probably dependent on the parents"*.

A Primary school Principal within the same geographical site reported instances of parents who saw the test results as a measure of teacher effectiveness or of importance because it was handed down by Government.

While they were quick to point out exceptions, most of the rural and regional State school Principal interviewees agreed that their parents were less likely to use (or may even have been unaware of) the MySchool site.<sup>8</sup> Principals interpreted this lack of concern as indicative that the parents were not unduly worried about NAPLAN results. One (rural) K-12 Principal assessed that 50% of his parents wouldn't know what was going on with NAPLAN. Of the others, around 25% might see it as important. He acknowledged that the schools' scores were unlikely to affect enrolments anyway, as the nearest State alternative was 40 kilometres away.

In this regard, a strong connection was drawn between the level of the parent interest in NAPLAN and SES. For instance: the Principal of a school in an area of significant social disadvantage compared low-level parental feedback on NAPLAN to his previous tenure at what he termed a 'middle class school' where parents were considerably more active. (*"When we offered to talk one on one about the NAPLAN results, they virtually all came and took up the offer ... Here three turned up"*). Other comments by these Principals included:

*"It matters to a smallish percentage. There's a bit of pressure on some kids from parents ... [However] I've never had phone calls from parents saying my child didn't do as well as he should"*.

*"We get a couple of different responses. Some families ... the kids just don't turn up [for the tests]. These are usually the strugglers ... Other families really want their kids to do it: 'You've got to be at school for NAPLAN'."*

*"Some conscientious parents monitor the results, but I get the feeling they don't see it as massively important"*.

In regard to SES, a somewhat different experience was reported by State metropolitan schools (Primary and Secondary) in both Victoria and NSW. Three of the school Principals described themselves as lower SES, catering to large communities of recent immigrants. In at least two of the four (arguably three), significant sectors of the student population came from aspirational and highly educated families accustomed to education systems where children received percentage grades. *"These parents want the results"*, reported one Principal. *"The kids are pulled out of excursions and extra-curricular activities [in the lead-up to NAPLAN]. The parents insist they work. If they had their way, they'd want percentages and place in grade on school reports. It's a cultural thing ... We have to work very hard to stop*

<sup>8</sup> Analysis of parent responses to a Newspoll survey found that only seventeen percent of parents had claimed to have visited the MySchool website in the past twelve months in order to compare the NAPLAN results of their child's school with that of others.

*them panicking and over-preparing the kids ... paying for their children to get 'A' marks".*

One Catholic school Principal found that, in terms of ranking schools, parents were generally more interested in VCE or HSC scores. This was affirmed by the Principals of two large regional Independent schools. According to one, the bulk of parents want academic achievement for their money but *"don't go overboard"*, usually also taking into account the school's social, community, arts and sports profile. The other regional Independent Principal quoted a recent Parent Satisfaction Survey which had highlighted the school's holistic approach as its greatest selling-point. (Of 1000 responses, only two had referred to VCE results; none to NAPLAN scores).

There was recognition, however, that both these Independent settings had the advantage of location and a lack of local competition.

*"NAPLAN has much less impact on us than it would have in some metropolitan areas ... It's not used extensively here to compare and rank schools. The metro situation is very different. You'd have parents in there with fingers tapping the table over results ... [some] parents with bright kids love seeing the little black dots at the top of the page ... Our parents are [also] more aware of the limitations than they used to be ... they realise it's a limited snapshot".*

This view was supported by the Principal of a third large Independent setting, this one a metropolitan K-12 school, who described NAPLAN results as more important to potential parents than to those whose children are already at the school.

*"It's regrettable, but some of our parents are heavily influenced by NAPLAN results ... more than that some prospective parents will probably not continue to engage unless the tables in MySchool speak well of us. [Once children are enrolled] we can talk a narrative about the minimal importance of NAPLAN in the scheme of things, and the educational failings of NAPLAN".*

In the interim, he conceded, strong NAPLAN results – publicly promoted – were crucial to the school's marketing.

## TEACHER PERSPECTIVES

We explore these under the headings of teacher's perceptions of testing, their understandings of the value of NAPLAN, their perceptions of the impact of NAPLAN on students and their understandings of parent responses to NAPLAN.

### TEACHER PERCEPTIONS OF THE SIGNIFICANCE OF TESTING WITHIN THE SCHOOL YEAR

Teachers across the board reinforced – and, in many cases, amplified – comments made by their Principals about the disruptive nature of delivering the NAPLAN tests. For example, they described the test period as *"a dead week"*, a *"headache to organise"*, *"a week out of the organisers' life each year"*. One regional Secondary school teacher summed up the process as weeks of planning and preparation that *"filter down into learning area program teams because we need to prepare the kids for it*

*... we speak to the kids early on and let them prepare for it. We speak to parents ... it's one of the big events of the year".* Implicit in comments by a number of teachers was recognition of the innate contradiction between intensive organisation because of the impact on school timetables, and the priority of attempting to ensure *"the kids don't see it as a big event"*.

While some interviewees speculated that NAPLAN had become less of a *"bogey"* through familiarity and streamlining of delivery over the years, one Independent school teacher noted that testing was, in fact, increasing in significance. He was strongly supported in this regard by two metropolitan State Primary school Principals who spoke of the annual challenge of explaining their data to regional personnel.<sup>9</sup> Reference was made to the increasing use by schools and parents of SMART data on the MySchool website.

*"The concept of comparing this child to this child across the nation assumes a level playing field. League tables haven't worked in England or America. Why here?"* [Victorian Independent school English teacher]

### TEACHER PERCEPTIONS OF THE VALUE OF NAPLAN

A strong cleavage in Teacher interview responses reinforced the findings of Dulfer, Polese and Rice's (2012) survey data which found that 50% of teachers saw NAPLAN information as useful. Similarly, interview data reveals that even some teachers who feel negatively about NAPLAN conceded it has some degree of usefulness. Typical of the responses were these from metropolitan State Secondary school teachers:

*"NAPLAN has value in identifying trends, in Maths for example ... [the results] place a bit of pressure on [the relevant] teachers when the data indicates trends that need to be addressed – that's not a bad thing".*

*"If it were to go – we'd probably look at replacing it with some other testing. In a sense, it's [currently] very easy for the schools".*

*"There's much debate about the value of NAPLAN. I dislike the politics as much as the next person, the MySchool website, the league tables, the superficial analysis BUT [I agree that if it's going to run] the school might as well make the most of it. We look at the information it provides".*

These teacher perspectives are closely aligned on this issue to that of the Principals. From the interviews there is a general sense of *"it is something we have to do. It has problems and creates a lot of additional work for us BUT if we are going to do it, we better make the most of it"*. Some teachers and Principals indicated that analysis of NAPLAN results tended to be of more benefit to their considerations about trends and issues for particular cohorts of the school population rather than individual students.

One State Secondary school teacher compared NAPLAN unfavourably with its predecessor AIM which:

<sup>9</sup> See also the Whitlam Institute's submission to the 2013 Senate Inquiry, p.1-8.

“...provided appropriately low key information for schools and parents. It had become part of the culture of schools and was just moving along. didn't have all the political rhetoric about it. The Rudd-Gillard Government inflated NAPLAN with so much importance that it made it controversial”.

Teachers at three Catholic schools spoke positively about the value of NAPLAN as “a reasonably accurate measure” that gave “a fairly good landscape of where [the students] are” and provided the school with “information re how we teach, what we need to teach, what our skills and strengths are”. Several of them saw value for Year 9 students in being exposed (pre-VCE) to formal exam situations: “Two hours in quiet conditions where you can't communicate with anybody and have to focus on a specific task”. In terms of his own professional development, one veteran English specialist acknowledged that the process of dissecting test results had made him look differently at what he taught.

Teachers in the Independent schools likewise enumerated the usefulness of an independent assessment tool, with one senior Maths teacher acknowledging: “The data has revealed a couple of blind spots ... Having been cynical about the way it was introduced, I find it helpful”. While expressing reservations about the limited focus of NAPLAN, a Primary teacher cited extensive research linking poor literacy skills to impaired well-being as justification that “what they're testing is OK. It's an important focus”.

However, these positive teacher perceptions were strongly countered – and ultimately outweighed – by teacher concerns, both at aspects of the NAPLAN regime and the impact of the regime on their workplaces and students. Recurrent themes, at all levels, included concern at:

- The **time-lag between testing and the provision of results** seriously undermined the diagnostic and informative worth of the process. “The results are potentially useful ... but they're so long delayed they don't have meaning”.
- The **middle class language employed by the tests** and the consequential disadvantage faced, accordingly, by students from lower SES backgrounds, recent migrants, and many ESL students. As a teacher in a Primary setting with a majority of ESL students commented: “Even our Aussie kids have limited experiences of the world. Some of them have never had a book until they come to school. You've got more rocks in your bag before you even get in the door”.
- The **“alien” and outdated style of test delivery and structure**. One recent Primary teaching recruit highlighted the essential contradiction between “throwing them into a room with no help, thrown out there by themselves and [the answers are] either right or wrong” and the key message from his University training that modern teaching was “all about scaffolding, building confidence up, assisting them”. The example was cited of “a kid coming through next year ... very gifted but slow. She'll get it all right but won't complete the paper. Having a time limit doesn't allow for an accurate result ... it puts the kid under too much pressure”. His comments were echoed and endorsed by an experienced older Primary teacher, in a metropolitan setting, who lamented “NAPLAN

goes against current educational philosophy of teaching and learning, working in teams ... [that] the teacher's not the enemy, but there to support you, help you move along”.

- The **narrow focus, inflexibility and length of NAPLAN tests**. According to two rural Secondary teachers: “We're only testing Maths and English ... [that's saying] social, artistic and life skills are not important. We don't care how well you relate or how well you communicate ... The fact you have to do [the tests] at this time, on this day, for this amount of time ... is really poor. It doesn't need to be that rigid. It doesn't need that level of security ... “[The length is] ridiculous. A maximum of 30 minutes would be great. Why can't we give them more time? ... Students are not used to sitting in a test situation for this length of time ... Quite a number of kids do part [of the paper] then give up. They're bored ... feel they can't ...”  
“A lot of students do one session then don't turn up for the next session ... it's a bit of a battle to keep them on task. Attention span is a problem. They're OK for a quarter of an hour, then kids start to tap pens, ask silly questions. No matter how serious you make it sound to the kids, their concentration is the problem. They can't last 45-50 minutes per session”.
- The **cost of the NAPLAN process**. “What does it cost the Government? Printing, sending it out, marking, auditing ... It's a huge amount of money that could mean extra staff in schools, doing individual testing to inform our teaching” [rural Secondary English teacher].

Other teacher interviewees highlighted concerns as:

- The inability of NAPLAN (a) to show where “low-ended children” were, in fact, making huge leaps in the classroom (albeit still functioning below expected on NAPLAN, or (b) to provide more than Right/Wrong responses. “I can have two children sitting the same test in Spelling. For the word HIP HOP, say, one writes HP, leaves out the 'O'. The other writes STVX ... both get the same score ... Wrong. All it gives me is a zero ... doesn't take into account development of spelling skills.”  
“Testing just gives a score that's a figure ... No feedback, no differentiation. The child might have gone through the right calculations and miss the end step. Other kids just guess. How do you measure the guesser's understanding? ... I get upset about how much power this piece of paper has” [two Victorian metropolitan Primary teachers].  
“It's just an hour out of one particular day ... I'm more likely to stress over a bad result on a test that I set than I would be about NAPLAN” [rural Catholic Maths teacher].
- The reliability and accuracy of the test questions. (“In some cases we've asked: 'Is this question really suitable for their age? Some questions we're debating whether the answer is actually the right answer” [NSW Metropolitan Secondary teacher].

A young Maths teacher at a NSW secondary school that was enjoying considerable success in programs not tested by NAPLAN expressed the fairly general sentiment that “It's a tool we use, but it's not critical ... we don't really need the [pressure] it adds to our workload for a term and a bit. There's not enough value in NAPLAN to warrant the input”.

## TEACHER PERCEPTIONS OF THE IMPACT OF NAPLAN ON STUDENTS

In its submission to the 2013 Senate Inquiry, the Whitlam Institute drew on data from Phase 1 (stage 2) of the current project to confirm that “almost 90% of teachers [have] reported students talking about feeling stressed prior to NAPLAN testing and significant numbers also [have] reported students being sick, crying or having sleepless nights”<sup>10</sup> Teacher interview responses have echoed survey findings. It is worth noting that overall, teacher interviewees saw student anxiety as a more intrusive factor than did Principals (presumably because teachers are in closer proximity to the so-called ‘coalface’). There was, however (in common with Principal feedback) diversity of opinion as to the extent and profundity of NAPLAN’s effects on student well-being. Further, in the Newspoll survey around forty percent of parents reported that the last time their child undertook NAPLAN testing, the child exhibited some sign of stress or anxiety as a result of NAPLAN.

On the one hand, a Metropolitan State Secondary year level co-ordinator who had carried NAPLAN responsibilities at both rural and urban settings, insisted he had never come across a student who had been distressed by NAPLAN. In his view, it was much more likely to be treated by students with disdain. (“There’s a general attitude ... it’s a waste of time”). Another teacher (from a Catholic setting) however insisted: “I haven’t seen kids worried [by NAPLAN], even kids who tend to be more anxious pre-[other] exams. We don’t make it out to be major”.

Two other teachers spoke wryly of having to try to counter “a lack of seriousness” about NAPLAN, particularly within Year 9.

*“The bulk of [Year 7] kids are fairly switched on ... however, there’s always one or two that might upset the flow, treat it like a bit of a joke ... By Year 9 they’ve become relatively blasé ... That they don’t have high regard for NAPLAN reflects their overall work ethic – which leaves a lot to be desired”.*<sup>11</sup>

One teacher felt that a greater concern than student anxiety was the drop off in exam attendance/completion at Year 9. “If you’re going to do it all, you need as much data as possible. The

10 Whitlam Institute submission to 2013 Senate Inquiry, Interim Report, p.15.

11 Although there were clear exceptions, the relative lack of stress among Year 9 students, reported by teachers, parents and some students alike, was a common thread throughout the interviews. It was suggested that a comparative lack of concern reflected the stereotyped Year 9 “whatever” approach to schooling in general. Other interviewees suggested that, by Year 9, students had typically survived the NAPLAN experience several times and were cognisant that it would not impact on their overall school assessments.

*“By Year 9 the results are so un-associated that families and kids don’t see them as important ... they don’t place any importance on the results ... They’ve done Years 5 and 7 without being brought up before the Principal”*

In one instance, a rural Secondary teacher drew a linkage between greater Year 9 test resilience and growing emphasis in Secondary education on innovative Year 9 experiences:

*“We do a lot of work at Year 9 on self-esteem ... a lot of work as a group ... more pastoral care. [Perhaps they stress less because] they are just feeling happier with school in general and therefore [are] better able to cope with stressful situations”.*

*most valuable data is the matched cohort data, comparing Year 7 to Year 9. How the kids have shifted. If there’s a significant drop-off at Year 9, the data is that much less valuable. For three days a lot of resources are committed to running the tests. It’s an enormous input so we might as well get data we can use”.* He was supported by a rural Catholic Maths teacher who was adamant that “allowing kids not to do the tests defeats the entire purpose ... as an educationalist, I think the whole point is to give as succinct and as close as possible a picture of where kids are at ... it’s unfair that people can opt out”.

These comments and sentiments were strongly outweighed by multiple teacher reports of student anxiety before and during testing. By way of example:

*“The kids get all panicked ... It’s a big thing ... the word NAPLAN ... at school, at home .... NAPLAN in the media. The word’s in capital letters ... Grade 3 haven’t done it [before]... it’s a big scary thing. There are special books, special pencils to use. You have to fill your name in a certain way ... The time is on the board ... It’s completely different to collaboration, problem solving with someone else ... It doesn’t take into account 21<sup>st</sup> century learning skills ...”* [Grade 5 & 6 teacher, regional NSW Primary].

*“[I know of] one or two serious cases where the kids were not suited to [the test situation] .... They might burst into tears”.*

*“Certain students – because of the public pressure – feel it’s bigger than it is, that it somehow reflects in their school grades and reports. This is more likely to be at Year 7. By Year 9 they’re usually very blasé. Year 7 will find lots of things more onerous ... They’re worriers ... camp is a big deal, having injections is a big deal, going on excursions ... NAPLAN’s something else for them to worry about”* [teacher, Victorian metropolitan Catholic College].

*“Some kids worry ... pressure from home ... parents don’t understand it’s just a snapshot ... A couple of our parents won’t let their child do it because they know the child would get stressed in that situation. If we see a child looking distressed during the tests, we intervene”* [teacher, Victorian State metropolitan Primary school]

*“We’re asking kids to do something so opposite to the normal run of the classroom ... even if the child is crying ... When you pop your head in you can see some of them [the kids], they look really, really distraught and the teacher sometimes looks distraught because, again, it’s a conflict from your normal sort of nurturing, drawing out their learning, that you can’t do in a test”* [teacher, Victorian State metropolitan Primary school].

The majority of teachers interviewed for this project insisted that some degree of exam preparation was essential to (a) ensuring that students optimised their chances on the test, and (b) to helping minimise student stress and concerns about the process.

Teachers at a lower SES Secondary setting spoke openly of the duty they felt to “prep the kids” in a bid to compensate for variables associated with social disadvantage (such as more limited world knowledge, limited vocabulary). “We can’t get out of it. Even so, they’re below where they should be”. These

teachers expressed strong frustration at the narrow conception of success being perpetuated by the tests.

*“For us SUCCESS might be just a kid attending ... not giving up on a problem. NAPLAN doesn’t show our WANNICK program or our program for disengaged boys ... To be judged on a number that a kid gets in 40 minutes on one particular day is ludicrous”.*

The same teachers voiced concern at the capacity for tests to induce student frustration in the shape of “meltdowns”, “throwing in the towel” or behavioural issues related to boredom, feelings of inadequacy or discontent because of cancellation of excursions, favourite classes (Art, PE) for example. (“We deal with the ‘reptilian’ ... it affects kids in different ways”).

Teachers at other schools with culturally diverse Lower SES populations highlighted the pressures faced by their peers in ensuring that students went into tests armed with basic exam skills.

*“We have 39 cultures here ... lots of new arrivals, some kids from refugee background who don’t understand English and [are] then expected to write persuasive arguments ... Apart from just helping them learn how to write persuasive tests, we need to teach children the basics of test-taking. Fill dots. Take the tests in the time-frame without being able to ask for assistance. It’s a monumental ask. The techniques are not needed in other school testing”.*

Principal recognition of the imperative of developing strategies to counter both program disruption and NAPLAN-related anxiety were echoed, across the board, by teachers. For example teachers at a regional Secondary setting saw particular value in:

*“Testing the Year 7s together ... as a formal occasion ... a common experience ... We withdraw some kids not up to the challenge with parental consent ... We treat it like an exam. Names on desks ... getting them used to the process. Kids love structure. Knowing the process removes a lot of anxiety”.*

Other interviewees were scrupulous “not to hype it up” (“We keep the kids informed ... give them practice tests, but we’re clear we’re not a NAPLAN school”) or committed to ensuring exit strategies for overly anxious students (“We’ll withdraw them ... usually supported by the parent. It’s a student welfare thing not an attempt to cook the books”). In other instances: “We tell the kids it’s mainly for the teachers’ benefit – to get information. It’s not about them.”

## **TEACHER PERCEPTIONS OF THE IMPORTANCE OF NAPLAN TO PARENTS**

By and large, teacher perceptions of the importance of NAPLAN to parents echoed Principal responses, a consistent theme being greater support for/interest in test results among better-educated and aspirational parents (regardless of SES). Even so, each setting reported a diversity of parental responses. A teacher in an Independent setting cited instances of parents becoming

anxious about results because of their own misunderstanding of the tests and what they are meant to do. A State Secondary teacher contrasted strong ideological parental opposition to NAPLAN with pressure when the 2013 results were delayed: “I get e-mails, where are the results? They want to know their kids are doing well”. Other teachers suggested that parents were becoming increasingly sceptical about NAPLAN based on negative media coverage. (“They’re then able to dismiss it as not mattering”).

## **PARENT PERSPECTIVES**

Parents surveyed by Newspoll were asked questions to identify the extent of their support, or otherwise for NAPLAN, the usefulness of the information it generated about their child’s results, the perception on whether testing had an impact on their child’s self-esteem, observations about whether their child experienced stress and the use by parents of the *MySchool website*. The polarisation of parental views about aspects of NAPLAN revealed by the survey, were replicated, albeit on a smaller scale, in the interviews with parents conducted for this project.

### **PARENTS’ PERCEPTIONS OF THE VALUE/IMPORTANCE OF NAPLAN**

A lack of clarity surrounding the purposes and uses of NAPLAN was underlined by submissions to the 2013 Senate Inquiry. A number of parental comments echoed accusations of “blurriness” surrounding test rationale and tabulation of results. It was described variously as “a diagnostic tool”, a means of determining “just where your child sits in relation to the state” and “information the Government wants”.

Typical of contrasting perceptions of its purpose(s) were those offered by parents at a regional Catholic College. One parent regarded NAPLAN testing approvingly as “a reflection of the Government’s interest in providing good education ... good for finding out they are where others are”. Another bluntly dismissed it as out-of-date in its focus on the 3RRRs and “not a valid indicator” of her child’s skills.

A third parent at the school stoutly criticised the political implications of the whole National Assessment Program. “NAPLAN arrived with a great flurry via school and the media ... a huge political thing, brought in by Howard.... We were told it was meant to be a diagnostic tool ... it was coming in hell or high water. It was clear the ... ones having to do the work would be the kids ... what [were] they going to get out of it? I still think they get nothing out of it”.

The lack of clarity around NAPLAN notwithstanding, the Newspoll survey of Australian parents, commissioned by the Whitlam Institute and conducted in 2013, indicated that:

- 70% of parents surveyed believed the information provided by NAPLAN to be “useful”; and that
- More than half the parent respondents viewed NAPLAN positively.

Overall, the Newspoll data demonstrated significantly greater support for NAPLAN among parents than among teachers. Interviews conducted by the research team with 26 parents from a diversity of socio-economic, cultural, ethnic and geographical backgrounds, tended to echo these findings.

Parental perceptions of NAPLAN fell within the following broad categories or clusters.

Approximately one quarter of parent interviewees spoke very positively about NAPLAN and viewed the test results as important. While these parents were socio-economically, culturally and geographically diverse, as a general rule they had strong educational backgrounds (in some cases, acquired prior to arrival in Australia). In most cases they had strong educational aspirations for their children and reported that their children had performed well on testing to date.

One mother (in a rural State Secondary setting) recalled having heard about NAPLAN on TV and immediately advising her children to begin preparing:

*We downloaded practice tests off the Internet and I got them practising over the school holidays ... One [of them] had a cold this year. I said: 'You can't have the day off – you've got to do NAPLAN'. [Now] they're using argumentative writing at home when they want to get their own way.*

Conceding that her children have done well to date at school – “therefore I'm happy with the results” – this mother emphasised the importance of seeing whether her children compared with “where they should be”.

A State Primary school parent described the tests as “really good”, insisting that her two boys loved to do the tests and had done very well. Through an interpreter, she expressed concern at speculation in the media that NAPLAN might disappear. In her view NAPLAN superseded any other testing because it was national and Government-sanctioned. Noting that one son's under-performance on the Grade 5 tests in Literacy had prompted her to access additional tutoring, enabling him to gain entry into Melbourne High School, the mother argued that NAPLAN should be run in Grade 6 also.

A second parent at the same Primary setting, the mother of an autistic son, highlighted the importance to her of knowing his attainment level. “Maybe it's the Asian approach”, she ventured.

*“This has been a good country for us ... I've worked hard to get the best opportunity for my children ... In Grade 3 the school advised me not to make him do [NAPLAN] but I said 'No, I would like to see where he's at. After that ... I sat with him and we went through the tests together ... it motivated him and he did well in Grade 5...”.*

For the mother in question, improved NAPLAN results are concrete validation of her determination to normalise and maximise her child's education as much as possible.

*“[In our community] parents compare notes and get embarrassed 'How did your child go in NAPLAN?' ... If the child hasn't done well, there's a sense of shame ... My husband still doesn't talk openly about our son's condition*

*... Comparing notes makes [some] parents feel bad Most [of them] are really busy ... and there's the language barrier ... they can't help their children ... don't know how to read the results ... don't know how to check homework ... I'm looking forward to seeing my son's [next] test results ... they'll tell me 'You're doing right ... all your hard work is paying off'”*

A second grouping of parents (approximately one third of the interview cohort) expressed some reservations or scepticism about NAPLAN. Even so, they were positively disposed to the value of some form of external assessment of their child's level of attainment. While querying the impact of testing preparation within an already tight timetable, one regional Secondary parent stressed the need for empirical data. “If they got rid of NAPLAN, I'd still like an alternative ... Previously we relied on teacher opinions ... teachers are now more vigilant in collecting an evidence base”. Most of this group of parents cited the usefulness of NAPLAN in confirming school-based assessment. For example:

*“If I put the school report next to NAPLAN, I find it matches up. It's not telling that different a story ... As a parent I want to see the Government measuring National curriculum ... I'd hate to see no measure”.*

The remainder of the parent interviewees expressed varying degrees of discontent and concern at the NAPLAN process. One parent of three students, also a long-serving State school teacher, reported:

*“My kids never did it. Why? Because I don't agree with it. Not so much whether it would stress my kids or not, but I just don't agree with it; it's not the best way of assessing how your kid is going at school. When my kids went to secondary school I signed the form so they didn't do it. One secondary school still made my kid do it, but I know the rules so I went to the school and made them tear it up in front of me”.*

Parents within this grouping expressed strong reservations about aspects of NAPLAN delivery and content. Particular reference was made to:

(a) The **uncharacteristic formality** of the experience:

*“In younger years the kids don't sit down in that very formal setting only with a pencil, with no gadgets in a completely quiet room. It's a very sterile environment compared to how they normally function at school. That's their first introduction to an exam-type setting and that's enough to cause them stress” [rural Secondary parent].*

Comments of this sort align closely with the views and concerns of many teachers interviewed that the regime of NAPLAN testing contradicts the underlying principles of a welcoming learning environment and one in which the student can ask questions, seek guidance and talk and work with other students. The concerns of some parents in this regard are in direct contrast to those Principals, teachers and other parents (and to a far lesser extent, students) who saw the value of NAPLAN in training children/young people in the formality, rigour and ‘rules’ of formal testing.

(b) The tyranny of the **time limit**. More than one parent suggested that an open-ended timeframe would diminish mistakes made by children who felt under pressure to race through sections of the papers.

(c) The **language used in the tests**

*"Kids become accustomed to the teacher's style ... then they find [another wording] a challenge ... If a child reads the first question and says I don't understand' ... that puts them off for the rest of the test"* [regional Primary parent].

*"They don't even know where to start ... You're not testing what they know if they're battling with how to do it"* [rural Catholic College parent].

(d) The **lack of immediate feedback**. Parents expressed concern at the four month time lapse before test results were provided to schools and families. There was particular concern that their arrival in the latter part of the school year was too late to assist teachers in addressing any individual learning needs highlighted by the tests.

(e) The **impact on the school syllabus**. One regional Secondary mother expressed strong concern that test preparation could block out weeks of the curriculum, limiting the variety and depth of thematic learning, ignoring student differentiation, and impacting on the capacity of classes to integrate students with disabilities effectively.

(f) The **general pressure on the schools**. Some parents believed teachers and schools were already dealing with pressures to respond, at so many levels, to multiple needs, and that the resource-intensive preparation and administration of NAPLAN added to the general pressure facing schools.

## PARENTAL PERCEPTIONS OF THE IMPACT OF NAPLAN ON THEIR CHILDREN

Approximately half of the parent interviewees quoted personal experiences when discussing the impact of NAPLAN on their child's well-being. The parent of a Year 9 girl in a metropolitan Catholic College reported:

*"NAPLAN has been horrible for my daughter ... she stresses out so much. The pressure to get a high score takes away from her natural learning because she's studying for NAPLAN. She panics ... She stresses for any exam but six weeks [preparing for the tests] adds to the pressure. Her bad moods impact on the family ... Dad notices [and recognises] 'she's just going through NAPLAN'"*.

The mother of a Year 7 student at the same setting recalled:

*"It was too much for [my child] ... she has a learning difficulty ... [NAPLAN] puts my child in a situation that's not related to the way she's been learning ... [It induces] stress, anxiety ... she comes home crying because she doesn't know the questions [while] other kids seem to have flown through it ... It was like she was blinded ... she looked at one question and thought 'What are they asking?' Where do I start?' ... She was waiting for the report to come in. We tried to explain 'It really doesn't matter' but she was just focusing on the results ... Crying, lying on the couch, the usual 'I'm really dumb'*

*... Some of the kids over-emphasised it ... 'A\_ didn't know how to do it. She just sat there' ... In Grade 5 I didn't let her do it ... [then] she copped a lot of 'Why weren't you here yesterday?' from the other kids"*.

A parent interviewed at a regional State Secondary school cited the contrasting impact on her two children, one of them "quite worried about it [and] sick of all the practice for it ... not engaging work at all". In her view, the school's emphasis on practice for testing served only to further stress her child. "I told her 'you'll be OK, take deep breaths, you're up to it'. On the other hand, my [son] wasn't at all worried ... he should have been more so ... he needed to be made aware that he needs to try his best".

Elsewhere, two parents at a metropolitan Primary school reported, respectively:

*"In Grade 3 it was an unknown and therefore not such a big thing. [My son] was stressful about it in Grade 5. I had a stressful time with him ... Because there was such an emphasis leading up to it, his anxiety levels came out big time. He didn't want to come [to school]"*.

*"My son was bringing home work saying 'Mummy, Mummy we've got to do a bit of this for NAPLAN ... He wasn't too phased about it, then about a week before NAPLAN, bed-wetting set in again ... he was stressed but not stressed enough to say 'OK I'll find out if we can't do it'. ... He's weak at English [and there was] no help during the test. The kids are used to being guided by the teachers [and they're] left in an unusual space where they've never been before. The teachers say 'Don't worry – no reason to panic or worry' but telling him [that] didn't help him. My son does worry and it is different ... My chatting with the teacher who said 'We need to get him started on something – preparing for it' put more pressure on me as a parent to try and put more pressure on him ... When I did open the report I was totally devastated – it was not the child I had or not the educational level he was at ... well below what I expected"*.

The mother of three children attending Catholic Primary and Secondary settings in a country town described her family's experiences:

*"I don't know whether they [all three] just don't care or because they think it's a waste of time or none of it's relevant ... My eldest said 'I'm not doing it'. He's a kid for whom pressures aren't good ... My daughter does well at school, but never on NAPLAN. In Grade 5 she did the English test but not the Maths ... they recommended she didn't do the Maths ... When they said that, she wanted to [do it] ... 'Am I that dumb that I can't do it?' She eventually dealt with it, but it made her think, once again, 'I'm stupid'. It was a learning experience and may have made her a bit stronger because last time NAPLAN just came and went"*.

Another parent at the same school recalled:

*"The kids get asked questions they know nothing about. It just causes them distress ... When your kid gets ordinary test results anyway, NAPLAN's just another kick in the teeth. [My child is ] more than gifted in the work-force [but] NAPLAN doesn't show any of that ... He sees he's below average*

and thinks 'I'm really dumb ... God, I can't do anything'. You spend all your time building his confidence up. Doing NAPLAN and worrying are just a waste of time".

In discussing the value and importance of NAPLAN testing, several parents (and teachers) offered anecdotes about other parental responses to NAPLAN. For example:

- One parent spoke of a friend, a Maths/Science teacher himself, "buying all the NAPLAN preparation books available and working with his [Year 7 daughter] every night, preparing for NAPLAN" and insisting on the importance of her results being "up there ... for her confidence and the way she was viewed by teachers".
- A teacher in an Independent school cited the instance of a parent who used a slight dip in one part of NAPLAN Maths average ("on one day") as evidence that the overall Maths teaching at the school had deteriorated that year. (The same school speculated that any NAPLAN-related stress tended to emanate from parental misunderstanding of the tests and their purpose).
- Teachers at a metropolitan NSW Primary setting cited numerous instances of parents who viewed NAPLAN "uncritically" and placed "undue pressure on kids" to do well. Noting the nexus between growing educational expectations and changing cultural mores within the largely immigrant school community, one teacher reported: "Approximately 10% in each class report getting smacked if they don't do well enough, or coming and saying 'I'm so nervous because mum's going to be angry' ... Some parents see it as an end-all. Some families have been studying for NAPLAN from Year 1 ... sometimes we need to talk to the parents [about] over-preparation, kids studying all weekend".

This response of smacking was not reported as an issue by teachers at other schools, nor more directly by students during their interviews. It may relate to a particular cohort, but the researchers do not have sufficient information to extrapolate further.

Analysis of parent responses in the Newspoll survey indicated that:

- One in two parents do *not* perceive NAPLAN to have any impact on their child's self-esteem, with the balance equally divided between those who believe it has a *positive* impact (23%), and those who believe it has a *negative* impact (23%).
- Approximately forty percent of parents reported their child exhibiting some sign of stress or anxiety as a result of NAPLAN. This included symptoms such as 'freezing up' during the tests (20%), a fear of parental reaction (13%), feeling sick or sleeplessness (13%), crying (6%) or 'other' (30%).

## STUDENT EXPERIENCE AND PERSPECTIVES

A total of seventy students were interviewed individually, or more commonly in small focus groups, across the five locations selected for the project. A Primary school was included at each site and in this instance all of these were State/Public schools as some difficulty was experienced in recruiting Primary Catholic

schools and Independent schools which included Primary year students. A total of twenty-two Primary school students participated in the interviews.

Of the forty-eight Secondary school students who participated in interviews, twenty-three attended State/Public Secondary schools (5), twenty attended Catholic Secondary schools (3) and five attended Independent Secondary schools (2).

The children and young people who participated in the consultations provided the research team with a reasonable spread of socio-economic backgrounds and cultural and linguistic diversity. At least one school in Victoria and one in New South Wales had significant populations of new arrivals including refugees, with a third Secondary school having a high percentage of indigenous students in their enrolment profile. With two exceptions, all young people had participated in a minimum of two NAPLAN testing rounds over the past three years, with the majority of year 9 participants having completed four NAPLAN rounds. In relation to the two exceptions, one young student had been in Australia less than one year, and the other student had not participated in previous NAPLAN testing in Primary school because of parental concern related to the young person's learning difficulties.

The students were asked a number of questions related to their experience of NAPLAN. These included consideration of individual, peer, family, teacher/s and school factors and the children and young people were provided with an opportunity to tell their story and reflect on any messages they would like the researchers to tell the government about NAPLAN. The discussion which follows outlines the key themes and issues which emerged from analysis of these consultations.

### UNDERSTANDING OF THE PURPOSE OF NAPLAN TESTING

Students in Primary schools were generally unsure about the purpose of NAPLAN, with a number citing confusion about issues such as why it only happened in certain years and uncertainty about what it meant if they performed poorly. A number expressed sentiments such as "you have to do it because it's for the government", "everyone in Australia has to do it; you can't get out of it" or "to show you if you're good or bad at your work" and "to help our teacher help us better". One young student who later expressed high stress levels related to NAPLAN said "It's just to make you stress out. It really messes with my head and freaks me out. I don't get it...I don't think it has any good purpose". A small number of Primary students across different locations, and more commonly those who self-reported as high achievers in school ("I do pretty well at school; maths and literacy are easy for me", "I'm good at writing and reading 'cause I'm creative; that's my thing"), made reference to "seeing how you compare with others in Australia" or more specifically "...if I'm in the top group. I would worry and be upset if I wasn't".

There was a variation between the two states however on this issue as high achieving or aspirational year 5 students in NSW schools referenced the role of NAPLAN scores and individual performance as a significant consideration in gaining access to a 'selective' or 'partial selective' Secondary school in their area.

As one student remarked, "You gotta do really well...the Maths you get in NAPLAN year 5 goes to your selective school mark. Half the marks go to your selective score." Another advised that: "You should work really hard. Your year 5 NAPLAN and your year 6 Term 4 report and how you do in your selective test really counts. They combine these. It's important you do really well in NAPLAN". Finally one young student stated that "Lots of Australians want their children to succeed in something and a good NAPLAN score would help".

Secondary students were generally divided in their understanding or interpretation of the purpose of NAPLAN. While some students perceived it as a nationwide test which set standards that you could test yourself against, others expressed quite strong statements that "It's nothing to do with us – the students. It's not for our benefit. It's so the schools can say how good they are...or to try to get more money for the school". A third group expressed the view that they had "absolutely no idea what NAPLAN is about; what it's for...it is just boring and seems like a big waste of time" or "Don't know; it has nothing to do with my exams and how I'm going and it never tells me anything I don't already know. What's the point?"

## PREPARATION FOR NAPLAN

Students at all sites reported the use by teachers of practice sheets, practice tests and/or practice questions in the period leading up to the NAPLAN testing day/s. The emphasis placed on this by schools varied considerably. Based on this reporting it was apparent that some schools downplayed NAPLAN testing with limited practice and revision in the week or day/s prior to the NAPLAN test week, while others discussed NAPLAN very early in Term 1 and instituted an intensive preparation program from week three or four of the first term (NAPLAN is held in May, Term 2). On occasion these were in variance to a consultation with a teacher or Principal at their school who may have advised that the school spent little time on preparation for NAPLAN. In other words, practices within schools are not always consistent.

While the interviews with the year 5 students were primarily intended to focus on their experience of preparation and testing in 2013, a number of students in at least two Primary schools (in Victoria) had very strong memories of their first testing round in year 3. In both schools students expressed concern that they had done a lot more preparation in year 3 and that that had made it much better and less stressful.

*"This year we had no practice. Made it a bit more hard...oh, what are the questions going to be?...be a bit harder without the practice...we need the practice. We did do a very small maths practice".*

*"We got 3 or more practices, but lots more in grade 3....there were practice sheets.....also did paragraphs with persuasive texts...but we had to do heaps of them and it got annoying as we did heaps of them...but it really helped me feel better to do the test".*

One student who was concerned about the lack of preparation advised that, "I went to a tutor; like a homework club". In relation to year 3 and homework one student told the researchers that, "This year you got a chance to do practice tests in Maths and

*Literacy. I gave my practice to Mr X and he said I did OK. We did practice for 5 or 6 weeks. ....not practice at home this year, but at my old school in grade 3 – Yes – we did lots of practice" (Catholic Primary school).*

One focus group consisting of students from two different classes with some group members bemoaned the fact that they had Mr Y who was lovely, but just new to teaching and so did not understand that the teacher had to prepare students for NAPLAN. Students from the other year 5 class talked about how their teacher really helped them and that while NAPLAN was still a bit scary, they were less anxious going into the tests this year than their friends from the other class.

A number of Primary and Secondary schools used practice sheets that replicated the format of NAPLAN test papers, and worked through areas of difficulty either as a class or at a one-to-one level. Only two schools appeared to formally set workbooks or sheets as homework for NAPLAN, with the majority concentrating on revising or training at school. Students consistently commented on the content of the tests as "really hard to understand because they use strange language. It's hard to understand the questions." Teachers and a number of parents participating in this project had also noted their concern about the inaccessibility of the language, with more than one teacher reporting that they specifically trained their students about 'typical NAPLAN language' to ensure these children were not disadvantaged in the tests, even when they had good knowledge of the content being tested.

When the research team visited the NSW schools, particularly at the year 5 level, it quickly became apparent when interviewing all key stakeholder groups including students, that a more intensive preparation program was established in these NSW primary schools. Year 5 students at one school talked about their preparation in terms of process and technique rather than specific content. For example, "Our teacher said we would have it (NAPLAN) later in the year and taught us how to do working out about questions and how to focus".

Students talked with confidence about being drilled and being taught to memorise processes, for example, for writing a story or selecting the most likely answer from a multiple choice list. They were very appreciative of their teacher's efforts and reported that, despite some natural anxiety going into a formal test situation, they had almost without exception been able to apply their learning to the problems posed in the NAPLAN tests.

*"We did sheets mostly; she gives us a paper and teaches a particular topic for 2 weeks, then we do a test about that topic. If a few (of us) got the same one wrong we'd do it together as a class. Some of the questions she taught us were on the NAPLAN...We practised with the timer using QuickSmart. We had big sheet of times tables and had to finish in the time to help us push quicker and finish in the time. Our teacher gave us lots of advice. I didn't expect this from a teacher. She helped us so much...I wondered why she was pushing us, but then I found out about how you need it for selective, then I understood why and what a great teacher she is to help us so much".*

The thoroughness of this preparation included extending the vocabulary of the children in relation to the rather sophisticated or alien language reported as dominating both the English and the Maths NAPLAN tests. For example, the students talked about commonly using the term 'times' in class for multiplication, but having been taught additional words such as 'product' prior to NAPLAN. This further reinforced by being included in their weekly spelling tests, as the following Year 5 student explains:

*"I knew what to do...some work we did a long time ago... our teacher taught us all these maths words ...so by problemsolving we could work out what to do eg. product means times. In our spelling tests she gave us the words of NAPLAN. And also like hard, like really tricky words like 'exposition', 'narratives,' 'high modality' words like 'crucial', 'critical', 'vital', 'necessary'... 1x3 and 3x1 it's the same thing... it's really easy if you think more hard and deep. (high, medium, low) Our teacher would do anything for us, to help us get good marks".*

Another year 5 student reported that:

*"On the day when I got (saw) the topic (on the NAPLAN test) I got shocked, like you don't know the topic and don't know what you will do BUT ...She gave us a 4 stage procedure to use eg introduction and orientation, 1<sup>st</sup> para 3<sup>rd</sup> word of 3<sup>rd</sup> line, argument, reason, conclusion... I expanded and made a little movie in my head and expanded it into a story. So we practised a technique; we know it. She pushes us hard; she said 'You've got to know it off by heart' so we know it. We did a lot of practice".*

This was in stark contrast to an inner west Primary school in Melbourne with a large population of refugee students who, quite apart from suffering trauma from their experiences prior to coming to Australia, had low levels of functional English or in some cases little recent experience of schooling. As one teacher had remarked when being interviewed, *"We tend to focus on explaining basic instructions such as what 'colour in the circle' means at this stage. The language used in NAPLAN is another whole ball game."*

There was considerable variation at Secondary schools. Based on student reporting, as a general rule it appeared that Maths teachers were more likely to utilise practice sheets and previous NAPLAN tests than English teachers. Many students noted that there did not seem to be as much preparation in secondary school for NAPLAN as there was in the primary school years. This appeared to unsettle some year 7 students in their transition to Secondary school. In a few instances the student and/or the parent had sourced other NAPLAN testing or preparation materials from commercial outlets, or online, or those recommended by a teacher, if this occurred.

*"We were given an old NAPLAN Maths test to practise at home. After this I talked to Mum about it and we found another one online so I could practise the sorts of questions I found a bit harder. But you had a choice whether you decided to do any work on this at home or not."*

*"In maths yes we did a few of them for a couple of weeks before. It was useful because to see what we have in store for us. Just in class."*

As a rule year 9 students generally advised the researchers that although some minor revision with practice sheets and one or two past NAPLAN tests may have been used in class, their (students) focus and priority was the internal school exams which they saw as being far more important. A number of students indicated that after four NAPLAN testing rounds, which in the latter years they had sometimes found boring, they were simply happy to have finished the NAPLAN examinations.

## **INFLUENCE OF TEACHERS, THE SCHOOL AND PARENTS**

Despite a number of schools reporting that they tried to downplay NAPLAN with their students, the majority of students – with the possible exception of year 9 students across State, Catholic and Independent schools – reported that it (NAPLAN) was important. When these comments were explored further students would cite examples of how they had determined that NAPLAN was a significant event. Some of these have been referenced under other sub-headings in this section, but children and young people talked about the following indicators:

- Their teacher or teachers explaining that this was a 'NAPLAN year' and that they would have to work very hard to ensure they achieved good marks, but *"Try not to worry or get stressed"*. One Secondary student explained that she had tried her hardest and thought she had performed OK until her Maths teacher asked her a number of times if she thought she had gone OK. This had sent her spiralling into a panic;
- The systematic introduction of a program of preparation for NAPLAN, sometimes months in advance of the testing timetable;
- More specifically, the emphasis their teacher/school placed on NAPLAN. *"All of a sudden our homework and worksheets in school looked more and more like NAPLAN tests do"*. (As an aside, the research team noted that almost every child or young person who participated in interviews openly talked about common NAPLAN terms such as 'persuasive text' as if it was part of their normal peer group vernacular).
- Even when the preparation and practice was only for a period of weeks, some students noted that other project work or activities were sometimes temporarily rescheduled as NAPLAN preparation became the apparent priority;
- In NSW in particular, year 5 students referred to the potential impact NAPLAN test results could have on their future education pathway, specifically in relation to access to 'selective' or 'partial selective' Secondary schools;
- A small number of students noted that in some instances their parent had been approached to consider whether their child should/should not participate in NAPLAN;
- At one school the Principal took sole responsibility for all aspects of the NAPLAN preparation and implementation of the all NAPLAN tests. All sessions involved the students being removed from their mixed grade class and practising both process and content in a special NAPLAN room.

The school culture and its approach to NAPLAN very often seemed to set the tone for the student and his/her family's response to NAPLAN.

Parents also appeared to play a critical role in the how young students approached NAPLAN. During interviews there were numerous students across all age groups who reported that, "My Mum just says to do the best you can, that's all you can do", "My Mum and Dad said that if I try my best that's all they can ask", "My Mum said try hard, if you make a mistake so what? We all make mistakes; that's ok" or sentiments along a similar vein.

A smaller number commented that "To be honest my Mum wouldn't know what NAPLAN is. She's hopeless. She doesn't remember or get anything" or "My Mum and Dad aren't really interested in all this stuff. As long as I go to school every day and do all my work they'll be happy" and "My Mum, seriously she didn't even know about NAPLAN, and if she did she'd say 'Who cares?', seriously!".

Some students cited examples of their parent/s buying NAPLAN-style books or programs for them, with one buying a NAPLAN App for her daughter's mobile phone so she could have a fun way of practising. One year 5 student said that his father took a keen interest in his schooling buying him two maths books to practise in. He recounts the following: "My Dad says that school is like a running track. You start in Term 1 and Term 4 is the finish line. If you push yourself and run faster, not slow down, then you'll win".

However, there were also some parents whose expectations appeared to weigh heavily on their children. One year 7 student at a regional Secondary school seemed a little nervous at the beginning of the conversation. As the discussion continued and she relaxed somewhat she touched on the importance of NAPLAN and all tests to her parent who was a solicitor. The young person explained that no matter how well she did in NAPLAN the current NAPLAN test was followed by the next two years of daily practice of NAPLAN activities for the next level she would face. For example, if the student had just completed year 5 testing then she would immediately start on the year 7 level workbooks. She did this homework most nights after school. She then explained that she also had very high expectations about her performance and would hate to let herself or her parent down. During this conversation the young person also referred to the severe migraines she regularly suffered, particularly in the period leading up to and including NAPLAN test week. This story was in stark contrast to the stories of parental support shared by the majority of students.

## THE NAPLAN TEST AND TESTING REGIME

Students were generally consistent in their messages about the NAPLAN test and testing regime. Their feedback fell under two categories (a) process and (b) content. With the exception of year 9 students, the majority of students disliked the formality of the testing regime. Working in silence without the normal exchanges of team work and discussions with the teacher were daunting and quite alien to many students. Some commented that it was the exact opposite of how their class and school usually operated and "didn't feel very friendly or helpful". Students who

were experiencing difficulties with Maths or Literacy at school were anxious about participating in a situation where they could not ask for help, and where there was no confirmation if they were on the right track or not. The teacher was merely a supervisor rather than a mentor and helper. For example, in the words of one student "... Teachers say they can't even help us... they can just read out the question, but not help us..."

Adding to this potential stress was the application of time restrictions for the completion of the tests. The majority of students cited this aspect of NAPLAN as highly stress-inducing, particularly in the latter stages of the test as the time was ticking (and slipping) away.

*"Sometimes (the clock is) a bit helpful, but as the time starts decreasing you get a bit more anxious...in English I finished early, but the maths test took me longer... I wasn't anxious as I finished the test 20 minutes early... but then I started to worry that I must have got them wrong if I finished that early".*

*"As it gets lower you start to worry and race, but they still say 'Make sure you finish them all. If you've left out one, have a go".*

*"In the persuasive text I usually like to take a lot of time to write stories, but I started freaking out as I looked at the time...so that limits our ability to do the best we could. No time for usual trial and error. You end up writing the best you could do on a first draft".*

*"I was looking at the time a lot. I can answer the questions, but it's more the timing...I was stressing out in maths...I finished most of them, but one question I just couldn't do in the time so I ended up leaving that out...It felt bad."*

*"I thought they were supposed to be testing what we know; not how quick we can do stuff. It doesn't seem like that's right to me".*

At more than one Primary school year 5 students advised that their teacher just wanted them not to rush or get upset as the most important thing was to finish the paper. In some instances students recounted stories about being able to finish their test in a small group in a quiet room after the main testing session had finished. This was appreciated by these students.

In relation to the content of NAPLAN tests the most common concern by students was the inaccessible language in both the English and Maths tests. This was consistent across all year levels. A number of students were confused by the use of unknown "long words" while others were angry that they could not even start to think about the solving the problem posed because they could not make sense of the question. (This assessment by the students was also reiterated in interviews with teachers). One student from a CALD community commented that it had been difficult enough to learn English in the past nine months, but that she felt terrible because she had thought she had been progressing well, but she could not understand many of the terms used in NAPLAN testing. This was raised by many students as a significant stressor during the testing round.

A small number of students commented that the tests had also included work they had never been taught or work that they had done two years ago which had not been revised since that period and therefore had very little relevance to their current learning. These comments tended to be made by students who reported that they experienced difficulties with at least one of the areas which fell under the testing regime – literacy or maths – and in some instances that they could not remember work that they had done in the past, particularly if it was in previous school years.

## STUDENT HEALTH AND WELL-BEING

While NAPLAN appeared to be something ‘you just had to get on with’ for many students, a surprising number of their peers, particularly across years 5 and 7, quickly identified the stress they associated with NAPLAN. Regular reference was made to Mum “telling me to calm down and not to worry about it” or similar. The ‘milder’ (but not healthy nor desirable) experiences usually involved some degree of anxiety the night before and/or on the morning of the test.

*“I was tired...I can’t get to sleep the night before because I worried. ...Awake late at night... got up and got a drink and was so worried....I always try to get a good night’s sleep, but I was still a little bit anxious.”*

*“I had thoughts in my head that I can’t do this, but I tried to talk to myself to take a deep breath and calm down....I try to hide my anxiousness away, but I felt real panic with the time limit....I want to ask sometime a question about what that means, but you can’t...you don’t know the question and my head just stops and I get wheezy when I get stressed like when I did the NAPLAN.”*

*“For me, I pretty much got worried since the start of the year when I knew this year was a NAPLAN year. I got really worried... all the grade 6s say you have to do NAPLAN and tease you, and you have no time for games.”*

*“Thinking about it, but I couldn’t sleep the night before and I’m only new to Australia.”*

Unfortunately for some children and young people this escalated to other symptoms including difficulty breathing (hyperventilating), breaking out in heavy sweats, biting fingernails or feeling faint and dizzy.

*“I stress and start biting my nails as I don’t recognise the questions. It just freaks me out....”*

*“I start getting too hot...heat through my body (when doing the test)... When you turn the page. All these questions build up in you and you start to really worry...”*

*“I wasn’t crying but I felt like it inside... oh my god, what am I gonna do, I don’t know how I went... plus the pressure of the time and all that pressure, and also you can hear the clock ticking and you want to pull out the batteries and say stop!”*

*“I was feeling sick in my stomach and had a sort of throbbing in my head.”*

There were isolated incidents retold by students of crying, onset of a heat rash or in the case of one young person, severe migraines. What was particularly striking was the care young students displayed for the well-being of their peers.

*“What about poor M; he used to sweat terrible and all his clothes got really wet.”*

*“It’s also bad for people who have just come to Australia and they don’t know what the words mean. She probably got them all wrong; that would make her feel bad.”*

*“Yes X was a refugee, she stayed one term and she did the NAPLAN. It was hard for her, she had a bit of difficulty in writing and left the school because it’s not helping her.”*

*“Well my friend gets really worried – takes them really seriously; stressed even if passes, but not in top band.”*

*“Kid in my year with ADD. He’s really bright but he can’t sit still for too long...makes it hard to do NAPLAN.”*

*“Her Mum’s a doctor. She was very worried about her English in year 3 and got tutoring. Her Mum is very strict on her as she wants her to become a doctor. She doesn’t sleep or eat very well and she studies into the early hours of the morning and she loses weight and her Mum sends her to doctors each time. She believes that she must live up to their (parents) expectations.”*

The experience of stress was not isolated to the occasional child or young person. There were students in every focus group or interview who reported some negative health and well-being symptoms associated with their participation in NAPLAN. Those who reported experiencing stress generally referenced one or more underlying factors such as the significance placed on performing well by a teacher, school or parent and/or concerns that they were “not good” at maths or reading/writing and would not be able to complete the test and would “feel pretty bad and not stop thinking about it even after the test is over.” Even one very high achiever in year 9 from an Independent Secondary school reported that she and her parents set very high standards and it would “not be good for me if I fail or don’t get above the bar.”

To varying degrees NAPLAN did worry students in year 5 and year 7 (and a number of year 5 students reported it had also really worried them in year 3). The majority of students reported that they did not like NAPLAN, but advised that they generally got through it without too many issues and seemed assured by parents saying things like “As long as you try your best; that’s all you can do.” Those year 5 and 7 students who did well in literacy and numeracy in school more generally reported feeling only a little anxious on the first morning of the NAPLAN, but pleased that they seemed to get through it very easily and were hopeful of achieving high scores in their NAPLAN results.

## VALUE OF NAPLAN

Students were polarised in their opinions about the value or otherwise of NAPLAN<sup>12</sup>. Younger students generally expressed some anxiety about participating in such a strict testing regime, and were unsettled when the tests contained work they believed they had never been taught at school. As one student said, “I

12 Some of this is further referenced under the next sub-heading *Messages to government about NAPLAN.*

asked others about the question and how they went ...most people I asked didn't know it...if most people don't know the answer why is the question in there?" Other students could not see any value in NAPLAN, and despite one or more peers in the focus group sometimes expressing a more positive opinion about NAPLAN, would get quite vocal and repeatedly assert "But I'm just not sure what the point of it is! It doesn't make sense and it's nothing like what we do in class". Another critic of NAPLAN outlined how he had always been in the top group at maths and loved maths, but when he got his NAPLAN results it indicated that he had performed poorly. In this instance the student was scathing about the validity and accuracy of the test.

Students who supported the retention of NAPLAN, usually in year 7 and sometimes year 9, saw it as either (a) a useful training exercise to get the student used to the formal processes and regulation of examinations, (b) a barometer of the student's performance against the rest of Australian students at their year level and/or (c) a way of finding out not only the student's strengths, but also areas where they might need help.

Comments included:

*"(it's) Useful in some areas ie. gets you used to doing tests".*

*"I think there is value in the test, but it can vary depending on what's on someone's mind that day. But it is good to test some of the skills you've learnt in the year".*

*"It's alright...It's important to do NAPLAN so that you and your family and school know how you do in school and if you need help..."*

## MESSAGES TO GOVERNMENT ABOUT NAPLAN

Students of all ages welcomed the opportunity to voice their opinions to government about their experiences and reflections about NAPLAN. Their feedback basically fell into three categories: those who wanted to get rid of NAPLAN, those who did not have an issue with NAPLAN (minority) and those who believed NAPLAN could have some value, but suggested strategies to improve its operations or content. Those who did not support NAPLAN were unequivocal in their stance, most commonly citing stress as a key issue. Supporters of NAPLAN were either interested in their progress and how they compared to other students or felt it was good practice for exams. Those who sought improvements in NAPLAN suggested, among other things, that it could be shorter, use more accessible language and perhaps be optional for some years.

Critical comments

- *NAPLAN – no-one improves anyway, you just get worse... NAPLAN is crap. Stop it now!* (Year 5)
- *It's stressful and annoying and takes up your time and I hate it. Get rid of it please!* (Year 5)
- *Stop NAPLAN because it stresses too much children or just reduce the number of questions. It can cause stress rashes for some children* (Year 7 State Secondary College).
- *Get rid of it! People get too worked up about it and kids think it's a big part of the year and it shouldn't be. With other tests at school they either just land it on us on the day so you don't get a chance to stress out or they give you tests about things you've been doing revision on* (Year 7 State Secondary College).

- *NAPLAN is bad. It just stresses people out and not help them much. Just get rid of it!* (Year 7 Independent school)
- *Get rid of it now! If you look at some of your school exam results they can be completely different to NAPLAN. It can be really weird; you can't just take the results of your NAPLAN as they can be wrong or you were having a bad day.* (Year 9 State Secondary College)
- *It's not really worth it, a waste of time. I don't see the point of it. It's not accurate anyway because people try and then they don't get anything back, no mark, so next time they make patterns with the circles (multiple choice section)...I don't see the point. It just puts unnecessary stress on some people... does more bad than good.* (Year 9 Catholic Secondary College)

Positive comments

- *Most will probably disagree, but I think we should keep NAPLAN. It tells me how I'm going and gets me used to tests.* (Year 5)
- *I don't think they should really stop it. There is some value: you can have practice for doing exams later on.* (Year 9 State Secondary College)

Suggestions for improving NAPLAN

- *NAPLAN should be in other languages. They should ask which languages you need for your school.* (Year 5)
- *You should always get a note home to ask if your child can do it or not. This year you had to ask at the office for a form if you didn't want to do it.* (Year 5)
- *About the Writing tests – it's better if they gave you a bit more description about what sort of writing and a bit more of a topic. It would also be good if they changed it from year to year (topic) rather than the same old topic (My Hero). Also argument or narrative? Mix it up from year to year.* (Year 7 State Secondary College)
- *Smaller tests please so you don't have to rush and leave any parts out* (Year 7 State Secondary College)
- *Make it a bit shorter, but (it's) still worth doing... it's kind of a big test you gotta work up to and a big accomplishment. (It's) Good practice for later on.* (Year 7 State Secondary College)
- *If the school knows NAPLAN is coming then they should teach us more strategies to use, to help us do the tests, then it would make it less stressful.* (Year 7 Independent Secondary College)
- *NAPLAN is maybe OK to tell you what you have to do more work in, but it doesn't show all the other things that we get involved in at school that are important. Like in science at our school years 7 and 9 work together, like a community. Our year 10 students are being taken to university for science. We also have stuff for indigen(ous) students to get their word out, hip hop, drama club, musical plays. Not just sitting down; that's boring.* (Year 7 State Secondary College)
- *Make year 9 an optional year and include an optional year 11, but keep years 3, 5 and 7 compulsory to ensure there is a good transition to secondary school.* (Year 9 State Secondary College)
- *I think that it's good for people to see where they are and things they are good at, but lots of people have trouble with it so if it (NAPLAN) stopped it would help them. Why don't*



*you change the name to the Nice and Easy Test so it sounds friendlier or just the 2013 Test. It's just a test – otherwise you think "Oh No; it's a test for the government."* (Year 9 Independent Secondary college)

- *Change the rules so the teacher can explain it to you; like how they use big words you've never heard of is a problem.* (Year 7 State Secondary College)
- *Make it one day. Get it all done in one day would be better.* (Year 9 State Secondary College)
- *Give chances to people who have difficulties (learning or cultural diversity) by giving them a separate NAPLAN test to suit them so they can still do what all their friends are doing. Otherwise you'd feel excluded and left out.* (Year 9 Independent Secondary College)
- *Also get rid of the fancy words that no one uses – for everyone, not just for people with language difficulties.* (Year 9 Independent Secondary College)

As the comments above testify to, NAPLAN is of vital interest and concern to young people. Their comments reinforce many of the points made by school Principals, teachers and parents. Some can see benefits of the NAPLAN tests and there are concerns, most of which revolve around their negative impact on well-being, the quality of relationships in schools and a failure to see their benefits. Nonetheless, the young people emphasised how NAPLAN testing could be made more inclusive, effective and productive for them. Their views provide important insights into the risks of a high stakes testing regime.

# DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

*The Experience of Education: the impact of high stakes testing on students and their families* research project has been framed by the understanding that the best interests of children (and young people) would be a major consideration in educational policies and laws. The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations 1989) states in Article 3(1) that the best interests of the child will be a primary consideration in all actions concerning children in public or private social welfare institutions, courts of law, administrative authorities or legislative bodies (United Nations 1989, p. 2).

As Cumming and Mawdesley (2013) note in their review of research on how Australia legislation and policy addresses the best interests of the child in determining directions for education provision and the nature of quality education, Australian educational policies and statutory laws make very little reference to the best interests of the child. This lack of reference to the best interests of the child in Australian educational policy and law is reflected in the relative paucity of research and debate in Australian education on the interests of the child with regard to NAPLAN. Research on the impact of high stakes testing of students in Australia has tended to be framed instead by the use of these tests, their reliability, validity and accessibility, and the possible impacts of test preparation on teaching styles and pedagogies, teacher expectations, parent-school relationships, the quality and depth of children's learning, and the breadth and depth of curriculum. There is however a strong international literature on the adverse effects of test regimes on student health and well-being.

Cumming and Mawdesley's analysis includes a review of education indicators valued by parents (Cumming & Mawdesley 2013). Drawing on research by Hobsons (2013), they find that there is a significant level of agreement amongst Australian parents in highly valuing a positive atmosphere that will encourage their child's intellectual and emotional growth (2013, p. 299). Research on what parents value in education reveals that they place a high priority on a fully-rounded education over achievement oriented indicators. This is reinforced by a study of Australian Parent Schools Councils which found that the happiness of students was ranked most highly and while achievement outcomes were ranked fairly highly, emotional well-being and the quality of the relationships between staff and students were more important (Muller & Associates 2008). Cumming and Mawdesley conclude that "Research on implementation of the educational accountability and public reporting reforms, intended to attain quality of education, indicates that such reforms may not be in the best interests of the child; indeed they may have a negative effect on the values of quality education parents value" (2013, p. 301).

This research project (*The Experience of Education: the impact of high stakes testing on students and their families*) comes to a similar conclusion about the impact of NAPLAN. NAPLAN is intended to be used as a diagnostic tool to inform educators' knowledge of the extent to which education programs are working in Australian schools; to benchmark the literacy and numeracy achievements of Australian students nationally and to measure the performance of individual students. However, this

research provides evidence that NAPLAN is a) not universally regarded by educators as a useful tool and b) has negative implications for the quality of education that children and young people experience in Australian schools.

The focus on the experiences of young people, their families and of teachers and school Principals in this report fills a significant gap in the literature and research on NAPLAN testing, through its focus on the experience and impacts of NAPLAN tests on the *quality* of students' educational experiences, which is seldom considered. It also contributes to the understanding of the impact of NAPLAN testing on teachers, which has previously had little attention. Our findings place doubt on the extent to which NAPLAN is being conducted in the best interests of Australian children and young people, and suggest that it is undermining the quality of education received by young Australians. This is in part because NAPLAN tests reflect a narrow vision of education (for example, absorbing a significant amount of time and effort to measure literacy and numeracy) and do little to inform parents and communities about the indicators on which they place a high priority: how well a school is achieving the broader outcomes that reflect the best interests of children. Our research documents that in many (but not all) instances, NAPLAN tests contradict the key elements of quality education. For example, our research reveals that NAPLAN creates anxiety and a sense of exclusion and failure when quality education according to the Melbourne Declaration fosters "a sense of self-worth, self-awareness and personal identity" (MCEEDYA 2008, p. 9); it undermines pedagogical approaches that encourage students from lower socio-economic backgrounds and those for whom English is not a first language to engage with learning through its use of difficult language and the rote learning, when the Melbourne Declaration aims to encourage "all students to become successful learners, confident and creative individuals" (MCEEDYA 2008, p. 8). In the next section we explore the challenges of NAPLAN in more detail.

## WHAT IS NAPLAN DOING AND FOR WHOM?

NAPLAN tests have a significant imprint on the majority of the schools that participated in this study. In answering the question, what is NAPLAN doing and for whom? we identify three key areas: what it is doing for teaching and learning, what it is doing for relationships and well-being and finally, its uses and misuses.

### *Teaching and Learning*

NAPLAN test results can be used as a diagnostic tool that enables teachers to identify blind spots in their approaches and to re-evaluate the way that they teach literacy or numeracy. However, a significant amount of feedback from Principals, teachers and students related to the lack of connection between the learning strategies used in schools and NAPLAN. There is in particular a disconnect between learning and teaching approaches that emphasise deep, supported learning, student and teacher team work and relevant content and the 'one size fits all', individualised approach of NAPLAN. The formal and inflexible style of NAPLAN tests undermines their relevance to students who find NAPLAN to be 'alien'. The response by some schools to this challenge, which is to invest in NAPLAN practice tests so that this form of pedagogy is not foreign to

them, amplifies its disruption to good educational practice by expanding the investment of time in test preparation. In schools that have significant proportions of students who are from poor families or families in which English is not spoken at home, NAPLAN tests simply reinforce the effects of disadvantage, taking valuable time that could be spent scaffolding their learning.

Some degree of test preparation is universal in schools. In some cases, this preparation is confined to completing sample work sheets; in other cases, it may take the form of instruction in the language and style of testing. In several cases, teachers and students reported subject content being sacrificed to test preparation throughout Term 1. Such findings reinforce earlier research, including data collected by Murdoch University (Thompson, 2012) that cited strong teacher concern at (a) time taken away from other curriculum areas by preparation in the testing disciplines; (b) preparation tending to lower student engagement; (c) the obligation to prepare for NAPLAN resulting in teachers feeling forced to give dull, repetitive lessons.

#### *Relationships and well-being*

NAPLAN has an especially strong imprint on the quality of relationships in schools and on the relationship between schools and their communities. The complex interrelationship between student well-being and learning is increasingly being acknowledged in educational literature. Over the last 10 years, schools have increasingly focused on creating inclusive and engaging environments, implemented whole school approaches to student (and staff) well-being, and acknowledged the role that schools play in addressing anxiety and social exclusion. Across all systems and states in Australia student well-being is regarded as an integral aspect of educational policy and practice, because of the strong association between well-being and learning. While many students are comfortable with NAPLAN tests, the evidence from this study reveals that NAPLAN tests also contribute significantly to anxiety and to student alienation from learning. This research indicates that NAPLAN testing is incompatible with approaches to learning that emphasise engagement and student-focused approaches that promote well-being.

NAPLAN creates a range of stressors for children. For example, the need to do well on the tests is reinforced in schools which have an active preparation program of practice tests and specifically focussed sessions in the weeks (and sometimes months) leading up to NAPLAN week. In one or two cases schools and/or teachers are suggesting the purchase of suitable NAPLAN-styled practice books which are commercially available. In schools that are student-focussed and place a high priority on the well-being of vulnerable students, additional actions are taken to support students through allowing supervising teachers to extend the time allocation for the test to enable a child who is capable but struggles to perform against the clock, to complete the test; or, in isolated cases, the decision to remove a young child from the test situation to avoid escalation of emotional distress.

This study supports the survey research on teachers by Dulfer, Polesel and Rice (2012) who found that NAPLAN testing

impacted on teacher practice and narrowed curriculum and time spent on quality teaching and learning, placing unnecessary pressures on schools and teacher workloads. The interviews with teachers also revealed that some of the elements of NAPLAN (for example, the stress and pressure of the test situation and the requirement to complete a 45 to 50 minute test session without a break) were seen as regrettable but valuable life lessons, that would teach students about the 'real world'. This is a misuse of high stakes testing as a preparation for life.

#### *The uses and misuses of NAPLAN*

Resignation to NAPLAN by school Principals and teachers was a common theme. Teachers recognised that "we do NAPLAN because we have to" and there was a common view that "given it's there, let's make the best use of it". But what is the 'best use'? Many interviewees, (teachers and parents) were concerned at the disproportionate (and increasing) importance being attached by educational bureaucracies to NAPLAN as a data source (over and above its original intention) and the linking of NAPLAN results to school funding. These views were most apparent in NSW State settings where reference was made also to the use of NAPLAN results in determining entry into Selective High Schools. However, although not as numerous, similar concerns were also expressed in Victoria where particular concern was expressed at the potential for NAPLAN results to impact on the teacher performance review system currently mooted by the Napthine Government in Victoria.

Interview data supports earlier research findings on teacher and parental perceptions of the usefulness of NAPLAN results (for example, the survey conducted by the Whitlam Institute found that 50% of teachers and 70% of parents describe the process as "useful"). In some cases, having successfully absorbed NAPLAN into the school year, Principals and teachers are looking at how the data can be used. (At one setting, for instance, it has provided evidence needed to employ a Maths specialist; another [Secondary] Principal cited the value of test results in highlighting literacy deficiencies being played out in Maths). In their view, the NAPLAN instruments are seen as having greatest value as a means of identifying trends/gaps in skills and knowledge that the school needs to address.

One purported use of the NAPLAN testing regime cited by a number of Principals, teachers, and to a lesser extent, by parents and students, was exposing young people to a formal exam situation. However, this was never part of the intended role or design of NAPLAN, and one would have to question whether this is the most effective training for the rigours of formal examinations, and whether in fact it might be counter-productive when it is introduced at such a young age (years 3, 5 and 7).

Teacher responses to NAPLAN range from regarding the tests as valuable to finding them disruptive and ineffective. However, overall, the responses by teachers in this study support the Murdoch University finding that 80% of teachers believe that NAPLAN "does not promote a socially supportive and positive classroom environment". The survey of educators, undertaken for this project (Dulfer, Polesel & Rice, 2012) found that teachers were evenly divided over whether the NAPLAN tests were useful.

Secondary Principals and teachers emphasised that NAPLAN is only one source of data and that as much, if not more, attention needs to be paid to other testing. Strong reservations are expressed across interview cohorts at (a) the test content, (b) the language of testing, (c) the rigidity of the testing process (including time limit)s, and (d) the 'lag' between testing and results. With regard to test content, particular concerns have been expressed at the culturally-bound (and culturally-specific) nature of the instruments and the impact of the content, style and language on ESL students, recent immigrants including refugees, Indigenous youth, students with disabilities, students with learning difficulties and students from disadvantaged backgrounds.

The level of parental interest in the NAPLAN data varies across sectors. (At the rural State Secondary, for instance, around 25% of parents were likely to have an interest in the data. Significantly greater parent interest was cited at the two Catholic schools). While the data lends some support to APPA findings that link parent perceptions of the usefulness of NAPLAN to SES, it also tends to suggest that there are stronger linkages to parental education levels or aspirations. A frequent parental response was *"I want to know where my child sits compared with others his/her age"*.

Otherwise parental responses range from strong endorsement of the tests (most noticeably in cases where the children are doing well) through qualified acceptance of the tests as a means of contextualising a child's performance against the national standard, to strong criticism of their relevance and value. (A significant number of parents are critical of the pressure NAPLAN places on students and schools, and of factors such as formality, time limits, and inequities associated with the tests being a snapshot on a particular day they may not be indicative of a student's knowledge and skills).

There is however widespread concern about the misuse of NAPLAN data. Appearing at the 2013 Senate Inquiry on behalf of the Whitlam Institute, the University of Melbourne team (Polesel, Rice & Dulfer, 2012) cited the Gonski Report (2011) in decrying the disproportionate influence of the tests as (for instance) a key measure of the National Education and Reform Agreement (2013) or as a basis for the Commonwealth to determine the School Resourcing Standard (SRS). (In the latter regard, the APPA has contended that the use of test data *"privileges NAPLAN ... to an almost unbelievable level"*) (Effectiveness of the National Assessment Program – Literacy & Numeracy 2013).<sup>13</sup> Polesel, Rice and Dulfer (2012) concluded that NAPLAN has been *"plagued by unintended consequences well beyond its stated intent."* The Whitlam Institute team concluded its Senate submission by declaring that, given the multiple uses to which NAPLAN is being put, *"it is difficult to sustain an argument that the stakes associated with NAPLAN results are anything other than very high indeed"*.

It is clear that NAPLAN has implications and consequences that were not intended. Insisting (in 2012) that NAPLAN tests

are not in any way *"onerous"*, and are primarily intended to provide parents with information on how well their children are developing fundamental literacy and numeracy skills, ACARA chair Professor Barry McGaw dismissed criticism of NAPLAN as high stakes testing, arguing that *"if NAPLAN is being made high stakes for students ... this is due to teachers transferring stress to their students"* (McGaw 2012c).<sup>14</sup> ACARA reinforced its argument in its submission to the 2013 Senate Inquiry, drawing attention to the capacity for schools to *"influence the attitudes of the parent community ... setting the tone and expectations around NAPLAN tests"*, and effectively blaming Principals and teachers for creating pressure on students that have led to *"false perceptions"* that NAPLAN is high stakes (Hurst & McNeilage 2013).<sup>15</sup>

This argument has been soundly rejected by, among others, the NSW Teachers Federation (which dubbed online publication of NAPLAN results and the development of League Tables *"an adult spectator sport"*), Greens education spokesperson Penny Wright (who decried ACARA's *"head in the sand"* stance in light of *"overwhelming evidence"* to the contrary), and the Australian Education Union (which highlighted ongoing and escalating pressure on students and parents). The AEU expressed further concern that that purposes of NAPLAN have expanded over time (partly because the data is the only nationally consistent resource of its kind), and that incorrect use of the data has likewise contributed to the high stakes associated with the regime (Whitlam Institute Submission to the State Senate Inquiry, 2013).<sup>16</sup> However, most importantly, the evidence of the impact of NAPLAN on all stakeholders, and the consequences of its unintended uses needs to be taken seriously.

This analysis of the impact of NAPLAN testing on students, families and schools reinforced these conclusions. Although NAPLAN testing is designed to improve the quality of education children and young people receive in Australia, its implementation, uses and misuses mean that it undermines quality education, and it does harm that is not in the best interests of Australian children.

<sup>13</sup> Effectiveness of the National Assessment Program – Literacy & Numeracy, 2013, Interim Report. , p.8

<sup>14</sup> McGaw, B. (2012c) NAPLAN myths: it's not a high-stakes test, The Conversation, 30 November 2012, <http://theconversation>

<sup>15</sup> Hurst, D. & McNeilage, A. (2013), NAPLAN agency blames teachers, principals for turning NAPLAN into high-stakes test, Sydney Morning Herald, 19 June 2013

<sup>16</sup> Whitlam Institute submission to the Senate Inquiry, 5 June 2013.

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