



## Public submission made to the Review to Achieve Educational Excellence in Australian Schools

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Submitting as a: Academic person or institution  
State: Vic.

### Summary

- Moving beyond what is easily measurable
- Defining the purpose of education as a cornerstone of creating engaged and active citizens - understanding 'excellence' beyond test scores and international league tables.
- Changing the public discussion about schooling to acknowledge the validity and reliability errors inherent in the measurement systems we currently use such as NAPLAN and PISA.

### Main submission

My submission responds to questions about how targets and standards, and accountability and transparency can be improved to help drive educational achievement and success.

I argue that we need to move beyond an emphasis in Australian schooling on what is easily measurable and understand our role as education systems and educators in creating global citizens who will be equipped and engaged in the process of building sustainable communities where equity and social justice are cornerstones.

This focus on measurable outcomes is evident in the challenges being faced by schools in their pursuit of school improvement, a focus for schools and systems around the country.

Principals in my own research projects have told me that autonomy is outweighed by heavy external accountabilities. While the rhetoric is that principals can and should make decisions based on their local needs, in actuality they are being governed by data, guided from a distance to focus on certain elements of education because of public pressure with each release of NAPLAN results. Research has identified concerns about the resulting narrowing of educational focus to that which will directly impact on testing results (1). Redefining the education narrative to move beyond these notions of achievement may provide principals with the power to

focus on their school needs beyond testing results, knowing there is a public understanding that there is more to school than these aspects of education. Certainly, many principals are already doing this, but it is undeniable that our school leaders and teachers are feeling pressured (2) by these accountabilities, and may be adjusting their practices as a result.

Collectively defining the purpose of schooling, and focusing on more than just testing results, may also help empower teachers to address some of the concerns that have been raised in recent years about the direction of schooling. Evidence tells us that the emphasis on standardised testing may actually diminish student achievement and that teachers may feel constrained in their planning and teaching (3).

Anecdotally, teaching colleagues have told me that they feel the goal of instilling a love of learning in children (4) has been lost. Redefining the narrative around schooling could begin to help redress this.

### Transforming the Narrative for Students

When the education narrative is so heavily focused on measurement of student achievement, it's easy to think this is the purpose of schooling. It goes without saying that we all want our students to succeed and to achieve their goals. However, the focus on measurement and the associated pressures on students has reached a point where students exposed to high stakes testing are experiencing anxiety (5) and are being told from the early years that they are failing to meet benchmarks and targets (6). Concerns have been raised that an overemphasis on these facets of education could fall short of providing students with a holistic understanding of the world around them, including meeting the goals of the Melbourne Declaration to create 'active and informed citizens' (7).

Therefore, as a society, we need to have a shared understanding of the purpose of schooling (8). Is it to prepare students for jobs or to be competitive in a global marketplace? If so, then perhaps the continued focus on literacy and numeracy in accompaniment with testing is appropriate. As noted earlier, this focus has been identified as narrowing the curriculum (9) and placing less emphasis or focus on creativity, the arts, and the humanities. Evidence suggests that students who have specific learning needs might disengage and lose confidence in themselves in these testing environments (10). Therefore, if we do decide that our key focus is producing the next generation of workers, then we need to ensure we meet the needs of these students.

Alternatively, is the purpose of schooling about creating global citizens who love learning, who want to attend school and engage with their communities? Can we define excellence in our education systems not just by the measurable skills and knowledge that our students exit our systems with, but on these measures as well? Does schooling need to educate for a holistic world understanding and empathy so

that our students – the leaders of the future - can address some of the issues we're seeing in the world today?

### Solutions and Starting the Conversation

To define and pursue excellence in schooling, we need to determine as a wider community what the purpose and focus of schooling is, because the current emphasis on measurable outcomes has resulted in perverse effects where educational practices are skewed towards achievement on these outcomes to the detriment of other aspects of education.

In addition, evidence shows that these data and measurements are not as valid as they are reported to be. I propose that part of the public discussion about the purposes of schooling needs to include a clearer understanding and acknowledgement of the validity and reliability errors in NAPLAN, and the volatility of the PISA rankings which guide much of the politicking around education and resulting policy needs to be made clear so that the public is informed about these issues. Evidence of these reliability issues can be found in Lingard, Thompson & Sellar (2016) (11) and Sellar, Thompson & Rutowski (2017) (12) as a starting point. These key pieces of literature can be communicated to the wider public as a starting point for reconsidering 'excellence' and working towards a more holistic definition of successful Australian schooling.

### References / links to evidence:

- (1) <http://eprints.qut.edu.au/86161/>
- (2) <http://espace.library.uq.edu.au/view/UQ:307547/ALogicofAppropriation.pdf>
- (3) [http://www.westernsydney.edu.au/\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0008/276191/High Stakes Testing Literature Review.pdf](http://www.westernsydney.edu.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0008/276191/High_Stakes_Testing_Literature_Review.pdf)
- (4) <http://education.qld.gov.au/corporate/qse2010/pdf/purposesofed3.pdf>
- (5) [http://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary\\_Business/Committees/Senate/Education and Employment/Naplan13/Report/index](http://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/Senate/Education_and_Employment/Naplan13/Report/index)
- (6) <http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED504839.pdf>
- (7) <https://www.oecd.org/australia/48519807.pdf>
- (8) <http://eprints.qut.edu.au/44173/1/44173.pdf>
- (9) <http://eprints.qut.edu.au/47882/1/47882.pdf>
- (10) [http://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary\\_Business/Committees/Senate/Education and Employment/Naplan13/Report/index](http://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/Senate/Education_and_Employment/Naplan13/Report/index)
- (11) Lingard, B., Thompson, G., & Sellar, S. (2016). National Testing in Schools: An Australian Assessment. Abingdon: Routledge.

- (12) Sellar, S., Thompson, G., & Rutowski, D. (2017). *The Global Education Race: Taking the Measure of PISA and International Testing*. Canada: Brush Publishing.