



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

Submitter: NSW Parents Council
Submitting as a: Parent or community organisation
State: NSW

Summary

NAPLAN results should be restricted to schools, teachers, students and parents.

68% of NSW Year 9 students failed to reach the government's pre-qualification in NAPLAN literacy and numeracy.

ABS surveys indicate that 44% of Australian Adults are functionally illiterate, which is to say they would struggle to complete a credit card application.

Simple jobs are being eliminated. The new jobs will require higher order skills.

There is no evidence that current curriculum is designed address these challenges.

The Mission Australia/Beyond Blue 2016 survey of 21,000 students indicates that one in four are at risk of serious mental illness. They list "school and school study problems" as the second highest of their top ten most serious issues.

The 2016 Headspace research indicates that eight of our young people are suiciding every week.

Politicians do not consider these disturbing realities when they keep piling more high stakes testing on our children.

There is no evidence that curriculum planners give consideration to these disturbing realities.

The curriculum is dangerously overcrowded in terms of each subject and the number of subjects.

Very little is done to address learning deficits, which compound each year as the next year of overcrowding confronts our children.

Education authorities are addressing these challenges, at a level significantly below the scale of the literacy and numeracy challenge.

Schools should be obliged to list learning deficits for each child each year and state their plan to remediate the deficit.

Main submission

NSW Parents Council

Submission to

The Review to Achieve Educational Excellence in Australian Schools

Literacy and Numeracy Crisis in our Schools

As a community here in NSW, and for those of us who are parent representatives, we have a series of questions to address regarding literacy and numeracy in our schools.

After an intense year of “**teaching to the test**”, why is it that a staggering 68% of our Year 9 students still failed to prequalify for the government’s own minimum standard by failing to achieve NAPLAN Band 8 in literacy and numeracy.

Additionally, why is it that the ABS surveys indicate that a staggering **44%** of Australian adults are functionally illiterate, which is to say that they would struggle to complete a credit card application.

Our answer to my own question – our **curriculum from K to 12** is dangerously overcrowded and this is unfair to teachers, unfair to students, unfair to parents and unfair to the community.

We are regularly told that all the simple **jobs will be automated** in the near future and we see regular evidence of this trend with every passing week with more and more jobs being lost.

We are also told that some of these jobs will be replaced in the emerging economy but that they **will require much higher levels of skills**.

This Minimum Standard policy will mainly disadvantage the children in the middle and the bottom – the very children that it should have been designed to help.

So given that we are producing such disturbing results in the two core school disciplines, **how can we as a community, claim to be preparing our children for this brave new automated world?**

Health and Well Being

It seems reasonable for us as a community, to ask **if our education authorities are factoring in the mental health and well being of our children** in terms of what and how they are taught in all our schools.

In 2012, at the instigation of the Whitlam Institute, the Universities of Melbourne and Western Sydney produced a NAPLAN literature review citing 82 reports, from all around the world, produced over a 20 year period. The review indicates that as soon as a testing system is moved into the high stakes arena, where results are available to politicians and the media, then children's related **anxiety levels are dangerously exacerbated. This in turn leads to stress, depression and a whole range of physical ailments.**

As parents, we welcome external testing, but only when the results are not to be made available to politicians and the media, with the resultant damage to our children's mental and physical health.

The 2017 Year 9 class did NAPLAN in Years 3, 5 and 7 so if NAPLAN is such a great panacea, then how come 68% of NSW Year 9 children failed to achieve the government's own minimum literacy and numeracy standard. As parents, we were told that NAPLAN would reveal any literacy and numeracy learning shortcomings so the these shortcomings could be remediated. **The NSW 68% failure rate exposes NAPLAN as the Big Lie of Australian school education.**

This ill conceived Year 9 **Minimum Standard has put the numerous negatives of NAPLAN on steroids.**

It is universally recognised **that year 9 is a challenging year for teenagers** in terms of their physical, social and mental development. As such it is decidedly odd to want to ramp up the pressure on these students when they are navigating such a challenging year.

The Education Minister's Council has had its collective **head in the sand about NAPLAN's known damage to our children's mental and physical health** for 10 long destructive years. They know how destructive it is but they take no action to protect our children.

NSW has had a stated ambition to reduce stress as part of its reform of the HSC – this decision has markedly increased HSC stress and extended that stress from two years to four years.

The children are referring derisively to themselves as the "68ers".

We are getting an avalanche of reports from parents who are indicating that their children are now giving up and asking that they be taken out of school at the earliest possible opportunity.

What a deeply disturbing Outcome!!

Mission Australia's 2012-2016 Survey of Mental Health of 15 to 19 year olds shows that **one in four of our young people are at risk of serious mental illness**. The Survey listed the *Top Ten Issues of Concern* to young people with a probable serious mental illness. 'School or school study problems' was the second highest issue of concern. Over the five years of the Survey, an average of 61% of young people listed school or study problems as a top issue of concern.

In 2016, Headspace research revealed the profoundly shocking fact that eight of our young people are dying by suicide every week.

Why are we running our schools in a way that exacerbates these disturbing realities?

As a community we all have a duty to **protect the mental and physical health** of our children.

A more **positive, constructive and productive approach** is urgently needed.

Question - There is an avalanche of research that irrefutably indicates that high stakes tests like NAPLAN are a serious threat to the mental and physical health of our children, so the question is what plans are in hand to protect our children from this well documented threat?

Overcrowded Curriculum

If you put 20 maths teachers in a room and ask them to devise a curriculum the temptation they experience, to put way too much in the bucket, is patently overwhelming. **Over-egging the curriculum pudding is irresistible** – its just human nature.

Then there is the riciously high number of subjects - ten – that Years 7 to 9 are required to take on.

Additionally, the one size fits all approach has helped to produce the unsatisfactory Year 9 NSW NAPLAN results.

As a community, we need to devise a mechanism to **add broader expertise and stakeholders** to the curriculum creation process. A great deal is now known about how the brain learns and retains new data. This knowledge needs to be applied to **ensure that curricula are relevant, imaginative, engaging and above all, achievable** at various levels of aptitude. Most importantly the curriculum needs to be engaging across a range of children's aptitudes and learning styles.

Our children come **out of primary school, with two thirds of them having literacy and numeracy levels below minimum standard** and our response is to **clobber them with ten subjects taught by ten different teachers. And none of these subjects are addressing their pressing literacy and numeracy needs.**

How have we managed to create such a Kafkaesque scenario?

We need to **teach core literacy and numeracy skills to a level of quality rather than to the current level of mediocrity.**

The Curriculum as a Juggernaut

As a community we have developed what is perhaps an **unconscious bias in favour of the top third of students** while failing to focus on the other two thirds of students in the middle and the bottom.

The **overcrowded curriculum is like a mindless juggernaut.** As our children move from one year to the next, no attempt is made to ensure that each child has mastered the core elements of that year's curriculum. No assessment occurs that tells parents exactly where their child sits against the curriculum requirements for that year. So if a child has a learning deficit for the current year they are then thrust into the new year where the next year's overcrowded curriculum is guaranteed to leave them floundering, frustrated and feeling just plain dumb.

Each year the system, or lack of system just charges ahead with no attempt to quantify and qualify what has been learned and what has not been learned and then **in the next year they are subjected to more and more new material with out having the knowledge base necessary to take in all the new year's material.**

We are in too many cases, unsuccessfully trying to teach our children trigonometry and algebra – used by less than 1% of the population – while it is estimated that **between two thirds and three quarters of Australians have no real understanding of how to effectively manage their personal finances.**

The current curriculum is unsustainable.

In NSW we have a Literacy and Numeracy Strategy developing specialist new materials but what value are they to our teachers who are already hopelessly overburdened by our overcrowded curriculum?

To do the right thing in terms of the educational needs of our children, we need to undertake an **urgent review of our dangerously overcrowded curriculum.**

Question - Given the huge number of our children who are falling through, what are obviously some very large cracks, what changes to the curriculum are planned to allow an additional focus on literacy and numeracy within the formal framework of the curriculum?

School Reporting

When literacy and numeracy shortcomings against the curriculum are identified, in any given year from K to 12, consideration should be given to schools indicating **what the school intends to do to remedy these shortcomings in the coming year, together with advice as to how parents can contribute.**

University Teacher Education Courses

Given the NSW outcome it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that university sector is not effectively teaching undergraduates how to teach literacy and numeracy.

The big question is what are the universities doing to address this shortcoming?

Additional matters that do not seem to be adequately addressed are:

- Classroom management
- Training in the teaching of phonics
- Scope and sequence of maths teaching
- Handwriting
- Writing
- Parent engagement
- The duration and quality of classroom practicums

This is a debate that needs to happen as a matter of priority.

Greg Whitby, Executive Director of Schools, Catholic Diocese of Parramatta

“We need to rethink the role of assessment. If assessments are going to be meaningful, they have to be more than a grade or a mark.

Giving feedback to students that motivates them to take greater control of their learning should also be part of the assessment process.

Relying on assessments that are predictable, narrow and pitch students against each other is cheating many of the opportunity to do more and be more.”

Call to Action

We must ask ourselves, are we up to addressing the challenge of ensuring that we **create a curriculum that meets the needs of 100% of our children** and not just the top third.

What is our plan?

What is the immediate action that we, as a community, are going to initiate to address the current curriculum, which is now exposed as demonstrably failing to meet the challenges of 2017 and beyond?

What are we, as a community going to do to **create a curriculum that will address our children’s real world future**, as opposed to a world that is rapidly disappearing?

Like the future, our children’s education is happening now. They need and deserve our action **now** – we must ask ourselves – **are we up to the challenge. They do not need our action, at some nebulous point off in the future – they need our action now.**

This whole situation represents a target rich environment for positive policy development.

This is the biggest school education issue we have confronted for many years.

We, as a community, have a wonderful opportunity to make a marvellous **improvement to across the board academic achievement while also dramatically improving the mental and physical health of our children.**

It is uncommon to be given such an opportunity.