



17 November 2009

The Hon. Julia Gillard MP,
Minister for Education
PO Box 6022
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

Dear Minister

As parents, teachers and principals we welcome the Australian Government's commitment to lift the achievement of all our students through the provision of quality education in schools.



In striving to meet that commitment, we all recognise that it requires strong evidence-based policy decisions around quality teacher training, skilled teachers in all schools, the provision of a curriculum which meets the needs of all students, and support for school communities as they work to provide the very best education for their children. Any change must be managed with care and driven by sound evidence.

We are writing to you because of our shared concern that one aspect of your program threatens to harm the future opportunities of Australian students. There is, we believe, a serious risk to school communities – students, staff and parents – through the publication of school data by ACARA.



NAPLAN testing provides a snapshot of academic achievement in a small, yet significant, part of the curriculum. Parents receive a picture of their child's skill development in literacy and numeracy and it gives teachers and principals a reference point for evaluating professional practice in their school.



Important as NAPLAN may be, its limitations are considerable and include the following.

- NAPLAN was not designed for the purpose of measuring school performance and certainly is not able to reliably measure overall year-to-year student improvement.
- There are large margins of statistical error evident in tests such as NAPLAN.
- Combining individual student results into a school average does not provide a sound basis for comparing schools.
- The complexities found within a school population – social, economic, etc – do not allow reasonable comparative data to be gained through the administration of one or two brief tests covering a very limited part of the curriculum.



There is considerable evidence that the inappropriate use of data to compare schools can have serious negative impacts, both on the testing itself and on the very schools and children it was intended to help. Allowing student data to be inappropriately or mischievously used for the creation and publication of league tables could exacerbate the difficulties of the communities concerned, narrow the school curriculum and risk the testing process itself becoming corrupted.

The United States and United Kingdom experiences of league tables offer a clear and definable warning to the Australian Government and to all education decision makers. Whether it be the narrowing of curriculum, a deepening inequity across schools and school systems, an unhealthy segregation of schools, or all of these, the research and evidence is clear and well documented.



Minister, you recently stated that the ability of “governments to look at comparable schools and their resultswill allow extra resources and efforts to be targeted to where they are most needed so that schools are supported.” The publication of school comparisons and rankings is not necessary to identify schools in need of additional support. The information needed is readily available.

In order to address our collective concerns we seek the following.

1. What is the conclusive evidence by which the Government decided that the publication of comparative school data will assist, rather than impair, school education in Australia?
2. As the Minister responsible for ACARA, what steps will you take to ensure that simplistic league tables or other inappropriate comparisons of schools will not be published?
3. What risk management processes will be in place to ensure that national testing and reporting will not have unintended negative consequences for our schools?

Minister, it is within your power to stop the damage that would be done through invalid school comparisons and the creation and publication of league tables.

Yours sincerely



Peter Garrigan
President
Australian Council of State School Organisations



Angelo Gavrielatos
Federal President
Australian Education Union



Norm Hart
President
Australian Government Primary Principals Association



Ian Dalton
Executive Director
Australian Parents Council



Andrew Blair
President
Australian Secondary Principals Association



Chris Watt
Federal Secretary
Independent Education Union of Australia