

# Position Paper:

## National Student Assessment Programs

QASSP supports the adoption of high academic standards. It recognises the importance of routinely acquiring evidence in regard to the performance of students. QASSP therefore supports the national sample testing of students on a cyclical basis that is currently being undertaken under the auspices of MCEECDYA.

QASSP also supports the participation of primary schools in the TIMSS assessment program as a way of benchmarking the performance of Australian children against international benchmarks.

However, QASSP urges governments and their education officials to exercise caution when commenting on the results of international testing programs, as the factors that contribute to differences among the jurisdictions in Australia are extremely complex; explanations of differences are therefore largely speculative.

### **National whole-cohort testing**

QASSP notes that the Queensland Government has supported the annual assessment of Literacy and Numeracy of all children in Years 3, 5, 7 and 9. This policy raises some important issues in regard to the use of the results from this testing program, since they are aggregated and reported on a school-by-school basis.

QASSP members find the use of the results of these tests to be a useful indicator of their performance. However, QASSP is concerned about a growing tendency to use school performance data as the only indicator of educational excellence. Summarising the whole of the educational program of a primary school in terms of literacy and numeracy average test scores grossly understates the broad achievements of primary schools.

School leaders know that the performance of schools on national tests is generally associated with the socio-economic background of the school's student intake. The performance is also related to the level of resources available to the school. There are many additional factors that could explain a school's exceptional performance. Public reporting of results can therefore lead to unfair inferences about the work of primary school staffs.

Excessive emphasis on test results, published in league tables can also narrow the curriculum so that undue emphasis is given to those aspects that are tested while neglecting the less tangible aspects of primary education that are not measured.

Experience from overseas indicates that where serious consequences are attached to performance on high stakes tests, a large part of the school year has been allocated to preparing students to perform well on the tests. This is in part because teacher and principal employment contracts, salary increases, and promotional opportunities are tied to the school's performance.

QASSP opposes for three reasons the public release of league tables of individual school results that show purportedly 'good' schools and 'failing' schools.

First, league tables tend to assign sole responsibility for the performance of schools to school staff members even though education authorities and governments also share responsibility since they control the policy and resourcing levers. The league tables therefore lead to a form of school scapegoating by attributing blame to the school level.

Second, league tables do not fairly report the performance of schools. Many factors contribute to a school's relatively good or bad performance – the contribution of staff members is obviously important but so are other factors, particularly the background of students. Though there is talk of 'value added' reporting, there is no available model that fairly attributes responsibility to schools for their performance.

Third, insofar as student performance data is used to hold schools accountable, control of the data should rest with authorities that have operational responsibility for the schools. They are in the best position to use the data judiciously. A blanket release though a published league table can have a negative impact on the morale of a low scoring school in which staff and community members are working hard to turn the situation around.

Though opposed to league tables, QASSP supports national assessments of literacy and numeracy and sample assessments of other outcomes.

## Transparency and Accountability

- QASSP is committed to a fair deal for every child and every school being a good school.
- QASSP supports the principle of transparency of school performance data, on the understanding that appropriate safeguards and protocols are put in place to ensure that the release of information about schools and students has a beneficial impact on primary education and that the potential negative effects have been nullified.
- QASSP supports the use of NAPLAN (National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy) to provide schools and system authorities with information about the performance of Queensland primary students in literacy and numeracy.
- QASSP accepts, with some important qualifications and caveats, that NAPLAN results should be one of the sources of information for comparing the performance of schools, provided their use for that purpose leads to an enhancement of the quality of schooling. (See National Student Assessment Programs Position Paper).
- QASSP is opposed to NAPLAN test results being used for purposes for which they are not fit.
- QASSP agrees that the community should be able to access relevant, meaningful information about schools.
- QASSP does not support league tables and expects our Premier and our Minister to be publicly strident about their opposition to them.

- QASSP understands the purpose of grouping schools with some particular characteristics in common for the purpose of identifying and reporting best practice. However, we don't want individual school performance reported on the basis of comparison with schools in any one particular group, because not all schools in any group have all characteristics in common.
- QASSP agrees that any data provided must be able to be interpreted through the school's context and its narrative.
- QASSP agrees that schools with low NAPLAN scores should be provided with a range of support to address their issues.



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**Queensland Association of State School Principals**  
**t: 07 3852 3411 | e: [qassp@qassp.org.au](mailto:qassp@qassp.org.au)**