



A back down by any other name

The Australian Education Union (AEU) in May lifted its ban on the administration of National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) tests. The AEU threatened to disrupt the administration of this year’s NAPLAN tests because of concerns about the My School website managed by the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA).

AEU Federal President Angelo Gavrielatos said the decision followed an offer by Deputy Prime Minister and Commonwealth Minister for Education Julia Gillard to form a working party of educational experts, including representatives of the AEU and the Independent Education Union of Australia (IEUA) to provide advice on the use of student performance data and other indicators of school effectiveness. The IEUA has not supported a ban on NAPLAN but remains opposed to the misuse of data for the purpose of constructing league tables.

‘The working party will provide a way to advance and address the profession’s educational concerns relating to the misuse of student test data including school league tables,’ Gavrielatos said. In a letter to the AEU, the Minister for Education emphasised her opposition to the misuse of student performance data for the purpose of constructing league tables and invited the AEU and other education experts to provide advice through the working party, but also pointed out that ‘the My School website... will include the 2010 NAPLAN data.’

Testing times in May

WHEN A MILLION STUDENTS IN YEARS 3, 5, 7 AND 9 SAT THE NAPLAN TESTS IN MAY, ATTENTION TURNED TO CHEATING.

STEVE HOLDEN REPORTS.

A million or so students in Years 3, 5, 7 and 9 sat the National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) tests in May, and everyone got excited. Teachers were allegedly caught tampering with tests. Students claimed posters that were effectively cheat sheets were on classroom walls during tests. Teachers allegedly coached and excessively drilled students prior to the tests. Students with learning difficulties were allegedly told to stay home from school rather than sit the tests, presumably to avoid the risk of lowering their school’s averages.

Candice Keller and Lauren Novak, in the Adelaide *Advertiser*, named a St Leonard’s Primary School teacher who was allegedly caught making changes to Year 7 reading test answers by another member of staff, who reported it to the school’s principal. Keller and Novak also reported claims by students that the teacher advised them to erase answers during the test that ‘weren’t neat enough’ and indicated replacement answers.

South Australian Education Minister Jay Weatherill described the alleged incident as a ‘gross breach of professionalism’ – despite the fact that the allegation of tampering had yet to be proven. The teacher was stood down while SA Education Department undertook a full investigation.

The *Courier Mail*’s Tanya Chilcott reported a Gold Coast parent’s allegation that posters displaying basic mathematics information were on display during the numeracy exams at Merrimac State High School. A teacher at the school is also under investigation for allegedly helping at least one student. According to *ABC News*, Education Queensland is also investigating an allegation that a principal knew a topic in one of the tests a week before the tests took place.

ABC News also reported an allegation by a parent that Year 9 students at a Brisbane high school were allowed to take an unsupervised lunch break in the middle of a NAPLAN test. ‘The kids that didn’t know the answers to the difficult questions went and saw all the smart kids, got the answers, then they were allowed back into the hall and they were able to do part two. A lot of the kids were updating the first part of the exam,’ the parent told *ABC News*. The Queensland Education Department’s initial investigation found supervision was adequate and there had been no cheating.

ABC News also reported that the Western Australian Education Department is investigating two allegations of cheating in the NAPLAN tests. In New South Wales, meanwhile, students in three schools were given the wrong Year 9 reading test.

AUSTAR for schools is a FREE subscription of 24 educational channels on AUSTAR

Any primary, secondary or special school in the AUSTAR service area is eligible to receive this service. The channels included in the AUSTAR for schools package cover a diverse

cross section of key learning areas and support the curriculum.



BER: complicated, time-consuming and expensive

THE COMMONWEALTH AUDITOR GENERAL FINDS 'SOME POSITIVES' IN THE GOVERNMENT'S BER PROGRAM, BUT ALSO IDENTIFIES PROBLEMS. STEVE HOLDEN REPORTS.

The report of the Commonwealth Auditor General, Ian McPhee, into the Building the Education Revolution – Primary Schools for the 21st Century (BER P21) program has found that, 'Overall, there are some positive early indicators that the program is making progress toward achieving its intended outcomes, despite the slower than expected implementation.' Deputy Prime Minister and Commonwealth Minister for Education Julia Gillard unsurprisingly welcomed that qualified thumbs up.

According to Shadow Commonwealth Minister for Education Christopher Pyne, though, besides examining the administration and reporting processes of the program, 'There is a clear need to investigate how much money has been lost due to the reported inefficiencies, cost overruns, payment of secret fees, preferential treatment and misallocation of resources.' The Liberal Opposition says the roll out of the program has encouraged roting, price gouging, waste and mismanagement.

Given his limited terms of reference, the Auditor General steered clear of those issues, but did find other problems. One is that the program is behind schedule. 'Of the 10,700 approved BER P21 projects, 1,995 projects (18.6 per cent) met...construction commencement milestones,' the Auditor General found.

The Auditor General also examined the funding blowout – program costs jumped

\$1.5 billion from \$14.7 billion to \$16.2 billion last year. According to the Deputy PM last August, 'We budgeted on the basis that 90 per cent of primary schools would take up our offer.... As it's turned out...almost 100 per cent of primary schools have taken the opportunity.'

In his examination of funding, the Auditor General found otherwise. 'The need for the additional funding provided by the government in August 2009 arose from most schools having sought the maximum payments available. It did not flow from any deficiencies identified in the procurement processes or other activities of education authorities in delivering the program, nor was it the result of more schools seeking to participate than had originally been forecast,' he found.

The Auditor General also noted that the program-specific rules and delivery requirements of the Commonwealth Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR) were out of step with recent reforms to the delivery of inter-governmental programs to reduce prescriptive rules on how services are delivered.

'While designed to give effect to the objective of the stimulus package, the approach adopted by the department (DEEWR) has reduced the capacity of school systems to take account of system priorities and the differing needs of schools in their systems,'

he found. 'Additionally, some of the administrative arrangements put in place by the department were unduly complicated and time-consuming for education authorities.'

The big question, of course, is whether BER P21 is delivering value for money. The Auditor General left that question unanswered, noting that, 'Under BER P21, education authorities are responsible for service delivery, which includes responsibility for achieving value for money,' but did observe that the compressed timelines for BER P21 had caused problems. Further, he noted, 'Concerns about value for money predominantly arise in the case of schools that have had the design and construction of BER P21 works procured by their education authority, rather than those who procured these services themselves,' adding that, 'In many cases, concerns from principals and community members about value for money relate to a misunderstanding of the building standards education authorities are expected to adhere to in building education infrastructure.'

The Deputy PM said questions around value for money were being examined by an implementation taskforce led by Brad Orgill, the former chairman and chief executive officer of UBS Investment Bank Australasia.

Read more on auditing the education revolution in the Grapevine, page 66.

A dedicated AUSTAR for schools website provides schools with educational resources that support the school curriculum

For further information on programs, resources and events or to download newsletters and teaching guides visit www.schools.austar.com.au

