



***The Inquiry into Standardised Testing in ACT  
Schools (July 2018)***

Submission by

The Association of Independent Schools of the ACT  
(AISACT)

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## **Association of Independent Schools of the ACT submission into the *Inquiry into Standardised Testing in ACT Schools***

The Association of Independent Schools of the ACT (AISACT) welcomes the opportunity to provide a submission to the Standing Committee on Education, Employment and Youth Affairs of the ACT Legislative Assembly into its Inquiry into Standardised Testing in ACT Schools. This submission addresses most of the Terms of Reference provided and notes the Chair of the Committee, Michael Pettersson's (MLA), statement that, "*the Committee [is] resolved to inquire and report on the purpose and use of standardised testing in ACT schools including consideration of how the results inform teaching ... [and] how the ACT is performing against equivalent schools in other jurisdictions and over the long term.*"

This submission reflects the professional and considered opinions provided by representatives from a range of independent schools, and staff from the office of the Association of Independent Schools of the ACT.

### **AISACT Position Statement in regards to Standardised Testing**

Overall, AISACT schools agree that this inquiry provides an opportunity to shape the educational narrative around standardised testing to focus on **growth in student learning**, rather than normative referencing. Standardised testing, when triangulated with a range of other micro and macro assessment sources, is beneficial. A rich triangulation of data:

- highlights educational trends, strengths and gaps
- informs teaching and learning programs and pedagogy to best meet student needs
- creates valuable professional learning conversations centred on student progress, implicitly conveying a continuous improvement message to all stakeholders
- informs strategic planning and professional learning directions

It is essential that all teachers, both pre-service and substantive, be supported to develop competent data literacy skills and knowledge. The analysis of data from a comprehensive range of sources, only one being standardised tests, enables teachers to better plan for targeted teaching of their students.

Consistently communicating a 'growth in student learning' mindset to stakeholders (be they students, teachers, parents, carers, the wider community, the media, and/or political parties) might assist in shifting public messaging away from a mindset of competitive ranking between schools, irrespective of sectors.

Educators are cognisant that the primary purpose of assessment is to promote learning and, as Lyn Sharratt purports, put *faces on the data*. Additionally, increasing awareness of the importance of 21<sup>st</sup> Century skills needs to be considered in conversations around standardised testing. Professor Bill Lucas in his recently released paper *Capabilities in context: A snapshot of historic and global approaches* states, 'Education systems are responsible for more than developing knowledge and skills – they also need to equip young people to become capable all-rounders. ... Calls to embed capabilities in schools are gaining prominence in Australia. Education policy discussions are increasingly focusing on how capabilities can unlock potential in young people – preparing very young children for school, improving assessment scores at school, supporting transitions through education and preparing young adults for work.' (Mitchell Snapshot 01/2018)

Responses to the Standing Committee's Inquiry Terms of Reference:

## **1. The use of Standardised testing in ACT Schools, including but not limited to:**

### **a. The purpose of standardised testing:**

The purpose of standardised (or norm referenced) testing is to report a student's achievement in comparison to other students, using the same materials and administrative procedures for all students. As such, it is a valuable diagnostic tool; an additional piece of information in the jigsaw of summative and formative assessment. It should not be an 'add on' but an 'add in' to assist in the identification of areas of growth and need, and, in turn, driving priorities and targeted professional learning.

Standardised testing is most valuable when diagnostic data is returned promptly; is easily accessed; and, when all stakeholders have competent data literacy skillsets.

### **b. The current use of standardised tests including:**

#### **i. National Assessment Program - Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN)**

When used well, NAPLAN data can inform both student and school growth. The AISACT view is that NAPLAN Online testing provides an opportunity for 'just in time' feedback that has value in informing school and student programming, when triangulated with other assessment data. Comment was made that there is limited use of NAPLAN data at a classroom level. This is perhaps reflective of a lack of teacher data literacy analysis skills, lack of time, lack of ease of access to data, and/or a combination of factors.

#### **ii. Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA)**

The AISACT view is that the random 'cohort selection' process limits this assessment's value regarding school and student growth. Its value lies predominately in offering comparative data at an international level and offers little to the classroom teacher and school planning.

#### **iii. Trends in Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS)**

The AISACT view is that the random 'cohort selection' process limits this assessment's value regarding school and student growth. Its value lies predominately in offering comparative data at an international level and offers little to the classroom teacher and school planning.

#### **iv. Performance Indicators in Primary Schools (PIPS) - useful as a diagnostic tool**

The AISACT view is that PIPS has value as a diagnostic tool for the classroom teacher and school planning.

#### **v. Other relevant standardised assessment models:**

AISACT Member schools use a range of standardised tests to provide diagnostic data (see below). In turn, a range of standardised test data is triangulated with other assessment avenues conducted at a

classroom, year level and school level. There is an increasing awareness of the importance of 21<sup>st</sup> Century skills and the rhetorical question regarding how these might be measured. Other standardised tests used include:

- ACER's Progressive Achievement Tests (PAT): used in most schools as diagnostic tools and has a prompt turnaround of data: deemed of value when triangulated with other data.
- Allwell Tests - provided by Academic Assessment Services: used in a number of schools and deemed of value as it looks at potential as well as performance for students. It offers an 80+ item test, which leads to greater confidence in its diagnostic capacity. Cost is an obstacle to its wider use.
- CoGAT (Cognitive Abilities Test): used in some schools and deemed valuable as it assesses students' reasoning abilities by measuring three separate cognitive domains. It was noted that this test provides a broad perspective on a student, identifying strengths and weaknesses other instruments would miss.
- ICAS (Digital Technologies, English, Mathematics, Science, Spelling, Writing): used in most schools as diagnostic tools
- OLSAT (Otis-Lennon School Ability Test – thinking skills): limited use
- AGAT (ACER General Ability Tests): limited use
- MYAT (ACER Middle Years Ability Test): limited use

**Year 12 testing:**

- The ACT Scaling Test (BSSS)
- International Baccalaureate

**c. Alternate forms of assessment and reporting (such as A-E reporting):**

A-E reporting against the Australian Curriculum Achievement Standards (twice annually) is the norm in Independent schools. Noting this, the following comments are pertinent:

- Reporting student growth would be better; there are challenges associated with using an A-E paradigm to demonstrate student growth
- Parents/carers, having been shaped by their own educational experiences, can misinterpret reports - eg 'C' is not good enough. Therefore, clear communication is key.
- Some schools are using annotated portfolios as adjunct forms of reporting to parents/carers
- Online feedback for assessment tasks is being trialled; students and parents/carers receive data immediately and growth is tracked over time
- Student led conferences for reporting provide opportunities for student voice, agency and engagement
- Some schools incorporate student designed and led exhibitions (of projects, etc ...)

Note: There was agreement from Member schools that the range of assessment, sub-types and strategies listed in Attachment 1 of the *ACT Teachers' Guide to Assessment* (updated 2016) is valuable. (Attachment A)

**d. How [standardised] test results are used to inform teaching on an individual basis and as a cohort.**

Standardised testing, when triangulated with a range of other micro and macro assessment sources, is beneficial. A rich triangulation of data highlights educational trends, strengths and gaps; informs teaching and learning program development and pedagogy to best meet student needs; informs contextualised strategic plans and professional learning.

**e. The amount of time devoted to preparing for and conducting these [standardised] assessments.**

In relation to NAPLAN Online, the mechanics of preparing for and conducting the assessments have been anecdotally reported as varying from school to school and is different in primary and secondary contexts. The majority of participants stated that the time component was found to be excessive due to the demands of practice tests, staff training, changing timetables and IT support.

It is anticipated that the impact on time will be reduced over the next couple of years as processes become streamlined.

**f. The impact [of standardised testing] on student wellbeing and mental health.**

Anecdotal feedback is that the majority of students comply with the conditions associated with the tests, with variable levels of application. Schools encourage all students to participate as required; however, student engagement remains their respective choice. An observation is that cultural values and beliefs do impact student attitudes and effort.

[Please see data from the 2018 NAPLAN Experience Survey captured from Daramalan College. \(Attachment B\)](#)

**g. The effect [of standardised testing] on teacher morale and professional autonomy**

There appears to be no direct link to the effect of the use of standardised testing on teacher morale and professional autonomy.

**h. The efficacy of current testing materials.**

Standardised tests that are aligned with the Australian Curriculum and provide granular diagnostic data are of value. PAT and Allwell tests are commendable; NAPLAN has increasing alignment, however, the diagnostic granulation afforded can be difficult to access at a classroom teacher level (see 1.b.i). It is anticipated that the adaptive capacity of NAPLAN Online testing will provide enhanced diagnostic granularity and the new Scout platform will 'speed up' the process of accessing data. It is noted that changing of the Writing Task from narrative to persuasive was not useful in gathering valuable diagnostic data or measuring individual student growth.

**i. The cost of standardised testing.**

There are indirect costs for administering some standardised tests. These can include: the reallocation of teacher roles to address timetabling, room preparation, training, computer compatibility, etc...

Other standardised tests require a school commitment and can be costly to purchase but are valuable as data sources - eg. CoGAT.

## **2. The ACT's performance in standardised testing, including but not limited to:**

**a. The level of achievement of ACT schools compared to similar counterparts nationally and internationally.** Much of this information may be available from ISCA or the ACT Education Directorate.

**b. The long term trend of performance in the ACT.** Much of this information may be available from ISCA or the ACT Education Directorate.

**c. How the ~~ACT Education Directorate~~ AISACT schools independently use test data to inform policy and teaching principles.**

Test data is valuable to:

- inform professional learning directions and planning
- target needs of individual students
- identify and track trends
- inform Literacy and Numeracy plans
- support whole school teaching and learning frameworks and pedagogy
- stimulate rich professional discussions that are student centred

**d. The measurement of learning gains in ~~ACT~~ AISACT schools.**

The triangulation of multiple assessment tools assists in identifying false data for respective students.

**e. How standardised testing results inform school enrolment decisions.**

There was absolute clarity that Member schools do not filter enrolments based on standardised testing results. It is noted, however, that there appears to be an increasing number of parents who are influenced by what is publically available in regards to ACT NAPLAN and ATAR results, as reported by the media and available on the My School website, to inform school enrolment decisions. Representation of data on the My School website encourages a comparative and competitive narrative which activates the opposite of what NAPLAN was designed for in the first place; that being its diagnostic capabilities.

The Association notes that at the 22 June 2018 Council of Australian Governments (COAG) meeting, a review of the current approach to presentation of NAPLAN data, including information published on the My School website, was requested.

### **References:**

Lucas, Bill. (2018) *Capabilities in context: A snapshot of historic and global approaches*. Mitchell Snapshot 01/2018, Vic., Mitchell Institute.

Sharratt, L., & Fullen, M. (2012). *Putting faces on the data*. Moorabbin, Victoria: Hawker Brownlow Education.

### **Attachments:**

[Attachment A: The ACT Teachers' Guide to Assessment \(updated 2016\)](#)

[Attachment B: Student NAPLAN Experience Survey: Daramalan College, Semester 1, 2018](#)