
From the President

Dr Jim Watterston FACEL



Nature hates a vacuum

I'm no scientist but I mostly understand the everyday application of a number of scientific principles. In particular, I am intrigued with the idea that *nature hates a vacuum*. This principle or scientific law is one that resonates with me through my work as an educator. The vacuum to which I refer is in relation to school customer satisfaction or consumer confidence. I want to argue in this article, that throughout our history in Australia, schools have struggled to adequately or effectively explain their quality of performance to stakeholders in order to reassure that achievement standards are acceptable.

I assert that since formal education began in Australia in 1792, parents have wanted reliable and comparative evidence about the quality and performance of their children's school. How do we know that the school that we selected is a better fit for a child than the institution down the road? Nowadays hospitals publish their performance standards, nearly all businesses have specific measures in their annual reports, shareholders and boards scrutinise company performance, airlines and rail systems have their performance to meet timetable deadlines published ... and I could go on. Is it too much to ask if my local school is up to the mark?

I have to admit that I have never been fully convinced of the consistent internal capability of the institutions that have guided my own children (even though in one case I was the Principal). Don't get me wrong, I know how hard the work is but I also know how variable the quality of teacher and leadership performance is and I didn't want my kids to have to rely on the luck of the draw in terms of the quality of the education they get.

Then along came NAPLAN

Let me state up front, I fully support the National Assessment Program for Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN), even though it has become fashionable in our more 'enlightened' times to pour criticism and vitriol onto these test results in the hope that they will eventually go away or they can be discredited. This was certainly the case recently in a *60 Minutes* segment, where it was claimed that teachers and students abhor the testing and that it is the cause of immense stress and is undermining quality education.

NAPLAN has now filled one of education's black holes. In the past parents like me have always had to rely on those narratives that every school so skillfully develops...

you know the one where they tell you that this school is about the 'whole' child and that they don't want to be defined by narrow measurements such as national literacy and numeracy tests which neglect to identify the other key learning areas. They then move on to the bit about the affective domain and all of the community building and social capital they create. I was a principal of four different schools so I too became an expert on how to tell the story of how well our school does... it goes something along the lines of:

"Our school does more than just simply teach literacy and numeracy. We focus on 21st century learning skills and we create lifelong learners who will be able to adapt to rapid cultural and social changes that mean that they will be able to transcend the professions of today that will hardly be relevant when the students graduate into the unknown world of tomorrow. We build reliance, adaptability, confidence and self esteem in our digital natives. Our school is a safe and happy environment where teachers care for their students and we all demonstrate values that will ensure that every graduate is a worthy, altruistic and informed citizen."

If all of the above is true (and in a number of schools it is) then why have we been unable to prove it? Why has it taken until 2007 when NAPLAN results were published before we began to debate the issues around how we tell a good school from a bad school? Up until the publication of national testing results we have mostly relied on uninformed conversations across the back fence to determine which school is better than the other. Now we at least have some comparative data to argue about but still many stakeholders are not in agreement or supportive of our capacity to measure school performance.

In recent years the organisers of a *Say No To NAPLAN* campaign, that developed their own website, produced a letter which was signed by around 100 academics from across Australian higher education establishments condemning the national testing regime. The site notes that, *"To date there has been little informed debate in this country about the use of NAPLAN as a measure of student (and teacher) academic achievements. These tests have little merit given that they focus on assessment of learning rather than assessment for learning and they are being misused for a variety of political agendas."* Nowhere in the letter from these academics or on the website does it suggest alternative vacuum fillers to demonstrate the quality of outcomes being delivered in Australian schools.

As a regular visitor to classrooms, I can assure these

learned educators that while NAPLAN may have perceived faults, the testing regime has had an important impact on nearly every teacher in all schools that I have visited. I now universally see teachers developing reliable and defensible evidence in order to be able to monitor progress.

I contend that the debate should not be about the efficacy of NAPLAN testing but about additional measures we could be adding to the picture so as to convince parents who spend \$20,000 or more that they can't afford, or who have chosen their local government or Catholic school for their child's education, that they have made the right decision. Our schools have had, in some cases, over more than 100 years to figure out how to satisfy their customers and to prove that their products represent value for money or a return on investment.

NAPLAN testing is not the total answer but it is a good start. I understand that it is just one test on one day, but

for many, including me, it is the impetus to ask questions. Is my child's performance acceptable? Do you have more authoritative evidence that my son or daughter is doing better than these results indicate? What is the school doing to improve literacy and numeracy? What should I be doing at home to support the learning? Are the school's results reliable and acceptable? Is there a whole school literacy policy and do all teachers understand their obligations to commit to this direction? Where can I go to get additional help for my child?

NAPLAN is a start but all schools should be challenged to provide additional measures in order to provide greater breadth or triangulation. Forget about denying the data and get on with work around ensuring consumer confidence. We expect and demand it in every other aspect of our lives so can't we have it for the most important human beings on the planet... our children?

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