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National Education Evidence Base
Productivity Commission
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Inquiry into the further development of the national evidence base for school and early childhood education

Background

The Australian Primary Principals Association (APPA) represents over 7,000 principals who lead primary schools in the Government, Catholic and Independent education sectors in every Australian state and territory.

APPA contends that nationally consistent, accurate, timely and comparable data sets are necessary to ensure primary schools are provided with the resources (human, pedagogical, curricular, technological, physical and financial) required to achieve student learning outcomes expected by parents, the wider community and Australian governments. While recognising that the national education evidence base plays a significant role in achieving best education outcomes, APPA also places great value on transparency and accountability.

However, gathering data 'distracts' teachers from their work. Regardless of the value in coordinating the national education evidence base, primary school principals would be deeply concerned if teachers and students were to be forced to expend additional time and energy on the data collection task. The provision of additional resources to ameliorate this expenditure would not alter the finite nature of contact time between students and teachers at school. APPA believes classroom time is precious and should be devoted to student learning.

Our response below is organised under headings broadly drawn from those of the Issues Paper.

Section One: What has the Commission been asked to do?

Scope of the evidence base

The concept of early, targeted and sustained intervention, which APPA advocates, best serves the needs of Australian students and should begin as soon as those needs can be identified. Therefore, the benefits have the greatest potential when the collection of data begins at birth.

Provided there are no privacy or ethical concerns, where data exists or where useful data can effectively be collected, it should be form part of the national education evidence base regardless of children's age or enrolment status. For example, to ignore a growing number of home-schooled

children from a national education evidence base may well detract from its accuracy and worth. The capacity to identify interventions to support their learning might also be compromised. Home schooling data and results should be included in census data and pro rata in sample data.

Section Two: Objectives and Framework

National education objectives

The prime objective of the national education evidence base must be to improve education outcomes. The collection of data takes teachers, school leaders and administration staff away from the core purpose of primary school; that is, teaching and learning. When not carefully targeted, the collection of data becomes an intrusive task. Historically, adequate additional resources and time provision has not always accompanied the imposition on schools of additional data collection. At times, schools are asked to undertake the task of data collection with no clear beneficial impact on student learning. At other times it duplicates other data collection. There should always be a clearly articulated purpose for data collection in schools.

While many, if not most, student outcomes can be measured, there is little material benefit to students, teachers or schools in collecting individual or specific data in isolation or without the linkages to the broader evidence base. We need also to acknowledge the wide range of school context and location where data collected will only be relevant to the specific location or context. The time and energy expended on gathering such data may not yield sufficient insight into student achievement as to make the 'light worth the candle'.

Data and the associated costs and benefits

The collection of any census data is disruptive, time consuming and costly. An APPA report, *Primary Principals: Perspectives on NAPLAN Testing and Assessment*, surveyed 1,353 primary principals and was published in 2013 made these findings:

- Disruption – “The impact is slightly higher in terms of hours lost teaching non-NAPLAN subjects. Sixty per cent say their school spends less time teaching these subjects in the run up to NAPLAN.”
- Time lost – “Two thirds of respondents say that their schools do allocate class time to NAPLAN preparation.”
- Cost – “Half the respondents say that, generally speaking, NAPLAN does have an impact on the school budget.” (Page 7).

These negative impacts on student learning and the good running of primary schools should only occur in those circumstances where the data gained is critical for improving education outcomes.

That said, primary school principals know classrooms in the schools they lead are data rich environments. Teacher professionalism ensures that pedagogical approaches and curriculum offerings are constantly adjusted on the basis of evidence of student achievement. APPA has actively considered methods, including the University of Western Australia’s Brightpath program, to aggregate classroom data to inform considerations of student achievement more accurately.

In the above-mentioned report, primary principals were asked a series of questions regarding assessment practices. Two questions, “Which assessment practices used by your school provide aggregated data for your school?” and “Of those, which (if any) would you recommend for use across Australian schools and why?” resulted in voluminous information from respondents. They listed forty-one commercial standardised tests, seventy-six commercial scales and inventories, twenty-one school based tests, sixty-seven other school based assessments and twenty-seven unattributed assessment tools. (Pages 28 -29)

Aggregated into data sets, these student assessments, collected in the normal course of teaching and learning, could add significant value to a national education evidence base. Further research work in this area would prove beneficial.

Administrative records are generated continuously by Australian primary schools. Generally, this large quantity of data is stored digitally. Regulations and protocols to ensure national consistency in how data is stored and presented would be helpful. For example, it is difficult to examine student attendance patterns at a national level because the codes for student absences and reporting arrangements are not uniform across states and territories.

The challenge for school principals and teachers in accessing current information on student achievement is exacerbated when individual students change schools across systems or jurisdictions. Schools are reliant on parents to provide much of the information about their child. It is relatively common for teachers to spend time assessing newly arrived students knowing that this information was already held, if not available, in the child's previous school.

Expanding the Unique Student Identifier (USI) nationally is worth consideration. Information, such as academic achievement, custody arrangements, behaviour records including school disciplinary absences, family circumstances and biographical information does assist schools in determining best practice transition, especially for the more transient student and family.

Above said, this is not a straightforward issue for schools and school systems, especially when considering the ability of schools to ensure secure holding and passing on of sensitive information or data. Issues include:

- What common and workable regulations and protocols to protect privacy should be in place?
- Who has access to sensitive and personal information within the school and when such information is received?
- What information can be passed on to another school?
- How can information be securely forwarded to another school?
- What information does the school retain and how is that information secured?
- What information does the school expunge?
- How does the management of information and data impact on the school?
- What resources are required to ensure compliance?

APPA would welcome the opportunity to participate in any discussions or development of protocols around a USI.

Section Three: What do we have?

The Productivity Commission Issues Paper makes the point that the data collections listed in this section are not exhaustive. Unfortunately, in the public debate about Australian schools only one data collection is universally recognised. There is a danger that the student outcomes efficiently collected and collated into that data set, commonly known as NAPLAN, will be used as proxies for primary school effectiveness and thereby disregard other equally important measures. For example, some schools in Australia will work particularly hard to enrol and engage students who require additional resources because of disability, social disadvantage, behavioural or other circumstance. When these schools are successful their NAPLAN scores (too often viewed as a direct measure of school effectiveness) may, in fact, decline as students with little prior knowledge and rudimentary skills engage or re-engage with classroom learning.

One relatively common view is that the collection of education outcome data has been strongly influenced by a perceived parental demand for increased accountability and transparency. APPA contends there is a need for research with school-based professionals on the impact of data collection to ascertain if the process places unreasonable demands on students, teachers and schools. It is said by many principals, for example, that the introduction of NAPLAN and the publication of results on My School have created a 'competitive' culture in schools and jurisdictions. It is further said that this has led to a narrowing of the curriculum, test manipulation, gaming and a general mistrust of how the data is reported. Again, the APPA report cited above supports this contention.

Section Four: Issues and opportunities

Data sharing

As previously mentioned, there are possible benefits to schools from a national Unique Student Identifier. This will have even greater utility for primary school principals when the National Disability Insurance Scheme is fully implemented and the support for students with disabilities has to be negotiated with another national agency.

Also, streamlining the accurate collection, recording and sharing of a wide range of administrative records may be better facilitated by the introduction of nationally accepted protocols for a USI.

Primary schools have seen a steady increase in the number of external agencies seeking to collect school and student learning data to inform comparative studies, surveys, case studies and other research activities. Research agencies should contribute to the resources required to collect and manage the data.

Education data collected for analysis at the national level needs to provide insights relevant to schools. Schools should not become the repositories for data collection, particularly if the perception is that schools are readily open and capable of providing data for research, provision of services, etc. Continually calling on the goodwill of principals and teachers for a purpose, however worthwhile, does take them from the core business of teaching children.

Privacy

Student privacy is compromised annually when school 'league tables' and other forms of comparison of primary schools are published in the media following the release of NAPLAN results. Such publication leads to a labelling of particular schools and therefore the students attending that school as members of a school performing poorly in academic terms. All students are labelled and stereotyped as members of a 'good' or 'bad' school. APPA advocates for the publication of school NAPLAN results on school websites only thereby making this practice virtually impossible. Accountability and transparency remains as anyone can visit the school or its website.

A 2014 APPA publication, *School Autonomy in Primary Education*, reports the views of 804 primary school principals on many aspects of this issue. Survey Question 18 asked respondents about their freedom to share information with other schools or third parties. Their responses were correlated with their school's student achievement. The finding, "There is a clear trend towards higher learning outcomes as the degree of freedom to share information with other schools or third parties increases," leads APPA to the conclusion that an opt-out rather than opt-in option for parents and students in regard to data sharing is desirable.

Data comparability

Primary principals, particularly those in systemic schools, are quite often required to submit data in a different format to that previously submitted in a routine return. This is frustrating and time consuming. While state and territory professional principals associations work with their systems to

reduce such duplication, if a nationally consistent approach was considered, with enabling regulation and protocols, APPA would be very supportive.

Data capture, processing and management

PISA, TIMMS, PIRLS and ICILS are all highly regarded international student assessment programs. The same can be said in Australia of the National Assessment Program (NAP) sample assessments in science literacy, civics and citizenship, and information and communication technology (ICT) literacy. All of these programs utilise representative sample student populations to accurately report on the aspects of student achievement they assess.

APPA endorses the use of sample testing as a more effective way to measure student achievement and then allocate resources. Benefits include much lower stakes than those associated with census testing (such as NAPLAN) and more accurate data and therefore a better foundation for school education policy development at the macro level. Furthermore, primary teachers now focus on individual student programs and assessment. Mass testing of all students is not reflective of assessment practice in primary schools today.

Technology

Teachers are increasingly using more sophisticated data collecting tools. For example, apps, databases and software connected to mobile devices all capture real time data. This immediate access to data enables teachers to make decisions quickly on the learning tasks required to move students to the next level or to achieve the next objective. Primary school classroom assessment technology is often sophisticated and teachers expect to utilise it.

NAPLAN data is useful. However, while it provides very detailed information about a narrow band of literacy and numeracy achievements, it is currently a snapshot of a previous point in time. Schools use this data with current school based information to build a picture of the learning progress of the students, cohorts and school.

Moving NAPLAN online comes with concerns for APPA. Schools will be disrupted for up to three weeks instead of three days. Schools will need to supply sufficient devices for all students to access the test and then ensure connectivity is reliable. (The recent Telstra outages point to problems.)

Under NAPLAN Online, student writing will be tested using a technology platform, something that is not common practice in many primary schools. In particular, the move to online writing testing and automated marking is patently different to assessing tasks completed using pencil and paper. The opportunity to have writing assessed and results returned within a few weeks may come at considerable cost to student confidence and achievement, particularly in Year 3. There are also significant implications for teaching practice in Foundation to Year 2 should the teaching of typing skills to those students be seen as a critical aspect. Improving keyboard skills in preparation for NAPLAN will prevail. Additionally, regular daily access to devices for these younger students will impact on technology resourcing in other years.

APPA recommends a review of the move to NAPLAN Online tests for Year 3 Writing. As with other 'initiatives', education authorities should investigate the educational implications for students and schools, and whether any 'hidden costs' outweigh the benefits.

Analytical and research capability

The above cited *Primary Principals: Perspectives on NAPLAN Testing and Assessment* asked respondents about levels of parental interest in NAPLAN results, both for their own child and for the school. Fifty-one per cent of parents had a high or very high interest in their own child's results while a much lower twenty-four per cent had a high or very high interest in the school's result. Upon enrolment in a new school, respondents reported thirty-two per cent of parents cited the school's

good NAPLAN results as a relevant factor. The figure was higher as ICSEA scores increased.

These results indicate that most parents are not overly concerned about school NAPLAN results and, while parents might access My School, in the majority of cases it does not play a significant role in primary school selection.

Notwithstanding parents' confidence in their children's schools, professional development and preservice courses are required to ensure the understanding of, and ability to use, data and evidence are components of every contemporary teacher's repertoire.

Section Five: Institutions, data governance and prioritising reform

Data governance arrangements

A single, coordinating agency that manages and monitors national education evidence may provide a realistic avenue for building Australia's school education capability.

Such an agency could also:

- link school data to other data collections;
- control research using school data;
- communicate evidence of effective practice to schools;
- manage access to the evidence base by media;
- deny access to the evidence base to those whose purpose is not to improve education outcomes in Australia;
- communicate appropriate information about the evidence base to intended audiences; and,
- inform the Australian people about education trends and achievements.

Assessing costs and benefits to prioritise reform

Reforms that focus upon clear and directed use of the national education evidence base have the potential to reshape Australian education. With appropriate nationally consistent regulations and protocols, such reforms will provide the evidence of what works in schools and school systems. Most importantly, the opportunity is there for long term planning that takes school education beyond election cycles, crosses state and territory borders, and sees programs and practices that work implemented in schools. In this way, schools are better positioned to meet their aspirations, utilise resources effectively and build the communication networks across schools, systems and jurisdictions.

APPA strongly recommends close and comprehensive consultation with the profession at every stage of any reform development.

APPA would welcome questions from the Commission on its submission.

Yours faithfully


APPA President