

23 April 2019

Mental Health Inquiry
Productivity Commission
GPO Box 1428
Canberra City, ACT 2601

Re: Submission to the Productivity Commission regarding the impact of the policies and culture of the education system upon the mental health of students

The following entails a submission to the Productivity Commission relating to the impact of the education system upon the mental health of students.

This submission is structured into three parts:

1. Personal background and lived experience of mental health conditions
2. Analysis of the education system in Australia
3. Recommendations

Part 1: Personal background

I am a high-achieving person who excelled academically throughout their school life. As a student at a selective school, most of my friends were similarly high achieving, with high personal standards of success.

I have lived experience of mental illness (mood and anxiety disorders) both personally and by association. During my final schooling year, I became intensely unwell with severe anxiety which was closely linked with pressures from school. A large number of my friends during this period were also mentally unwell, with three being hospitalised for attempted suicide during our final school year.

I completed my final year exams with special considerations from the Department which took my illness into account, as did a number of my friends. Even with special considerations, a few friends were unable to complete the final year exams due to mental health problems being exacerbated by the stress of studying and exams.

This is not a unique story, yet instead reflects the tsunami of mental health problems amongst high-achieving high school students.

Part 2: Australia's education system

It is a well-documented phenomenon that the education system nationally is increasingly becoming focused on test results for students (including increasingly younger students).

A prime example of this is the NAPLAN test, an annual national assessment for all students in years 3, 5, 7 and 9. Whilst data from such tests is undoubtedly useful to an extent for measuring the equivalent standards and progress of schools at a national level, the test is plagued with accusations that it places unreasonable amounts of stress on school students.

This issue has been thoroughly canvassed in the media, with teachers and researchers pointing to the negative impacts of NAPLAN upon student mental health. It is concerning that (in one extreme case), NAPLAN stress is noted to be a contributing factor leading to a year 5 student's attempted suicide (as reported by the ABC, 24 September 2018).

NAPLAN is not the only test which causes significant stress to students, with final year exams such as the HSC also being notorious for being highly stressful exam periods. However, unlike the HSC, the NAPLAN is not an exam which was designed out of necessity as a method of determining entry level requirements for university education. The purpose of NAPLAN is instead primarily for the benefit of education departments and policy makers, to provide transparency regarding school performance across the country, and to enable poorly performing schools to be targeted to encourage improved outcomes.

Surely, there must be another way for this data to be obtained? At what point was it decided that statistics for the education department was more important than the health of students? It seems to be perverse when the education department cares more about numbers than about the people those numbers represent. Ironically, increased stress for students also decreases students' capacity to effectively learn and perform academically – what if the NAPLAN itself is discouraging the very progress that it seeks to pursue?

There is further a strong focus in the current education system to continually improve performance, with consistent test scores being seen as a mark of failure of schools to appropriately teach students. It may be that this tendency arises from politics within the education system – no education minister wants to stand up and say that they have produced the same result as the last person.

I appreciate that wanting to improve test scores is a logical and admirable goal for disadvantaged and/or otherwise poorly performing schools. However, what about top performing students in selective schools? What about students who can't seem to improve on consistent high distinctions? It seems that the current ethos of the education department is 'improved test scores' – but what impact does that message have on students who consistently achieve excellent marks, only to be told that they got the same marks last year and it simply isn't good enough? It's no wonder that students develop unrealistic expectations of what 'success' looks like, when society itself seems to have an unrealistic expectation of 'success' for a school student.

Part 3: Recommendations

It seems as though the current culture of test-driven, result-focused education systems in Australia are the symptom of the limited scope of responsibilities of education departments.

The goal of the education ministers, and the education system, is to improve education alone. In the context of the limited scope of these objectives, the introduction and reliance on tests such as NAPLAN make sense.

However, given the extremely high rates of mental health problems in Australia, particularly amongst young people, it is not realistic that the education department can be void of any roles or responsibilities associated with the protection and promotion of good mental health amongst school students.

I therefore recommend that protection and promotion of mental health is included as a key objective for education departments across Australia, and one of equal importance to education outcomes.

In other words, if a program is introduced which would improve test scores but has a high probability of decreasing student mental health, then the program must be considered to be in contravention of the department's key objectives.

In the context of this recommendation, education departments would not be solely responsible for the management of mental health, nor would the department necessarily need to achieve 'objectives' or 'outcomes' with regards to mental health improvements (the last thing that school students need is more tests).

Instead, I recommend that promotion and protection of mental health objectives be included as process-based requirements within the departments. Examples include:

- Requirements to undertake meaningful consultation with relevant health departments and/or mental health experts in the development of, and prior to the implementation of, any relevant education policy or program
- Establishment of a board of mental health experts to regularly review existing department programs and policies
- Implement internal processes and lines of communication by which on the ground staff (principals, teachers, etc) can report mental health concerns associated with education department programs and policies (for example, it would be good for education departments to have a central point to which teachers could report (without fear of being penalised) concerns regarding student stress associated with NAPLAN)

I thank you for the opportunity to lodge a submission and look forward to seeing these concerns addressed.