

**SAVE OUR SCHOOLS**

**Education Policy Brief**

**Rorting and Cheating of School Results is the  
Future Under My School**

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## **Introduction**

The revelations about rorting and cheating on the NAPLAN tests held last week (week beginning 10 May 2010) chart the future for reporting school results in Australia. A raft of examples were revealed about schools encouraging low achieving students to stay home during the tests, outright cheating, improving results by intensive test practice and enrolling students on the basis of their NAPLAN tests results.

These incidents have already seriously eroded the credibility and reliability of the My School website. They will all artificially raise school test results. It means that the many school results to be published on My School later this year will not be reliable and will mislead parents and the public about school performance.

This is just the beginning. Education experts warn that the "high-stakes" tests are forcing schools to hide problems and manipulate data to improve their results. The head of the School of Education at the University of Queensland, Professor Peter Renshaw, said that teachers are under incredible pressure to deliver good results and this leads to rorting of results.

I think that kind of game playing comes in when you move from using tests to diagnose issues or just to see how the system is going in general and to redirect resources....So I think what's happened with NAPLAN is that once it's gone public, everybody's in a competitive mode for this across states and across school systems...I think people try to find ways of getting round the system and doing better than they might have thought was possible. [ABC News, 14 May]

The longer it goes on the more institutionalized will rigging and rorting of school results become. This is exactly what has happened in the United States where "gaming" school results, as it is called there, has become endemic.

## **Encouraging low achieving students to stay at home**

A standard practice used overseas to improve school results is to find ways to exclude low achieving students from tests. This is done mainly by exempting some students from the tests by re-classifying them as special education students and by encouraging low achieving students to stay away on test day. In some places, student suspensions are known to increase on test days.

The manual of procedures issued for NAPLAN is explicit about exemption of students from the tests. All students are encouraged to participate in the tests but students can be exempted on three grounds: students with a significant intellectual disability; students newly arrived from overseas and at the request of parents. In each case, the decision lies with parents and they have to apply for exemption.

These provisions have created loopholes for schools to exploit and they were used all around Australia during the NAPLAN test period. In some instances, they were pushed open even more. Schools are using these provisions to take pro-active action to encourage parents of low achieving students to apply for exemptions or to exercise their option not to have their children participate in the tests.

There were many reports last week of parents of low achieving students in Queensland and Victoria being told by schools to keep their children home from school over the three days of

NAPLAN testing. The Melbourne *Herald-Sun* said that dozens of parents and teachers had contacted the newspaper telling of schools that had put pressure on children to stay home and not "drag down" the school averages [*Herald-Sun*, 12 May, 13 May].

One Melbourne teacher told *The Age* he was aware of parents of failing students being told during parent interview nights there was no educational benefit for their child to sit the NAPLAN test [*The Age*, 13 May].

*The Herald Sun* was told four grade 3 students at a school in the Loddon Mallee region were told not to sit the NAPLAN test because it might bring down the school's results. Their parents signed forms exempting them from the test and they spent the day with grade 4 and 6 students, who did not do tests.

The President of the Queensland Teachers Union, Steve Ryan, told *ABC News* [11 May] that he was aware of several cases of schools encouraging students to stay home on the test days.

It's leading to all sorts of unnecessary practices in schools. I have heard of it happening in schools where they've deliberately taken a stance that they don't want below-average students doing the tests and dropping their scores, which probably shows less of an understanding of what the NAPLAN tests are designed to do rather than anything else.

A parent at Mount Cotton state primary school in Queensland said she was told her son was exempt because of an intellectual disability and he would either be put in a grade 2 class while the tests were on or she could keep him at home [*ABC News* 11 May, 13 May; *The Australian*, 12 May].

The father of a struggling year 7 student at Vermont Secondary College in Victoria said his son was told he did not have to sit the NAPLAN tests and that his wife was contacted by a school co-ordinator on the night before the tests started and told their son did not have to sit the test.

My son is a C and D-grade student - he doesn't receive A's. I couldn't believe it ... schools are obviously trying to get themselves to look better than they actually are and that's wrong. You can't fudge the figures - it's fraudulent. [*The Age*, 12 May]

The parents of a Year 9 student at Leongatha Secondary College were contacted by the school half an hour before the first test was due suggesting that their son not sit the tests [*Herald-Sun*, 13 May].

These incidents demonstrate that many schools have not followed the spirit or the letter of the NAPLAN administrative guidelines. Schools have taken a pro-active stance to encourage some students not to sit the tests rather than to encourage all students to participate and to leave it to parents to decide whether to seek exemption for their child.

One school principal defended the school's action in contacting parents to withdraw their children on the grounds that the student concerned "may find doing the test sitting for that length of time frustrating" [*ABC News*, 13 May]. The President of the Victorian Association of State Secondary Principals said:

There's not much point in a child with an intellectual disability sitting there doing a test where they could do five minutes of the test and they're sitting there for an hour ... nobody's gaining out of that. [ABC News, 13 May]

The acting principal at Brauer College in Warrnambool defended asking the parents of some students not to sit the tests because the students may find the tests daunting:

There were students who we thought would be distressed by doing the tests and they are for the most part students in the disability program or with reading ages that are hugely below expected.... We then contacted their parents and if the parents wanted them excluded then that's what we did." [ABC News, 13 May]

These are not grounds for exempting students. They are not provided for in the administrative guidelines for NAPLAN and amount to bending the rules. If such action is not stamped out by education officials more and more schools will resort to the loophole to improve their school results. More and more schools will pressure parents of low achieving students to withdraw their children from the tests as a way of improving school results.

The response of the Federal Education Minister, Julia Gillard, to these incidents verged on the complacent. She told *The Age* that school participation rates in the national literacy and numeracy tests would be published on the My School website: "If there is an unusually low number of children participating in a school, that will prompt questions and it will be investigated," she said [*The Age*, 13 May].

Such investigations are likely to prove ineffectual. There will be variations in participation rates in NAPLAN from year-to-year, and it will be impossible to determine whether any reductions are due to schools initiating exemptions or whether they are due to parents deciding on their own to seek exemptions.

Changes in participations rates will also be affected by differences in the incidence of illness amongst children from year-to-year. Also, high rates of mobility between schools may also lead to changes in participation rates if a new influx of students has a higher rate of absenteeism.

Schools will be able to strategically exclude low achieving students without triggering a large reduction in participation rates which would attract an investigation by from education officials. A small increase in a school's exemption rate may produce a large impact on school results if it is targeted at the lowest achieving students.

## **Cheating**

Already, we are seeing allegations of cheating in Australia in the first national literacy and numeracy tests since My School became operational. Allegations have been made in several states. They involve the leaking of tests beforehand to alert teachers about questions and teachers helping students with answers and changing answers. An innovative method revealed is leaving posters on the walls of classrooms that students can refer to while doing the tests.

The Western Australian State School Teachers Union said it has evidence that schools around Australia have opened the NAPLAN tests early and prepared their classes accordingly [ABC

*News*, 13 May]. It has called for an inquiry to claims that some schools are cheating on national literacy and numeracy tests to boost their ranking [*ABC News*, 12 May].

The head of a prestigious Perth boys' school warned that the possibility of cheating on national literacy and numeracy tests makes them too easily corruptible to be an effective tool to measure school performance. The Christ Church Grammar School headmaster said rumours had circulated that teachers who received test papers several days before students sat the tests were using their knowledge of the contents to prepare their classes. [*West Australian*, 12 May).

In the week of the tests other rumours exist of teachers being in possession of the test papers prior to the day of their implementation and using this knowledge as last-minute test preparation with classes....It's a totally corruptible tool the Government has now put in place.

The WA Education Department said it was investigating two allegations of cheating [*ABC News*, 15 May]. It subsequently found no evidence of cheating [*ABC News*, 20 May].

NAPLAN test materials were allegedly leaked in Queensland in the lead-up to the tests. Evidence of alleged cheating was cited in a letter sent to education authorities one week before the tests started which warned that some of the writing test items had been leaked for students to practice before the tests [*Courier-Mail*, 12 May]. The *Courier-Mail* also reported that a teacher had contacted the newspaper alleging items from the writing test had been leaked to schools.

The Queensland Department of Education said it was aware of three possible breaches of the testing process [*ABC News*, 13 May]. It was also reported that a question from the spelling, punctuation and grammar test was leaked in NSW [*The Australian*, 12 May].

The New South Wales Department of Education allowed some schools to schedule their tests over two weeks which created the potential for students and teachers in schools which did the tests in the first week to pass on questions to those in schools doing the test in the second week [*The Sydney Morning Herald*, 11 May].

A teacher at a South Australian state school, St. Leonard's Primary School, was suspended after admitting to altering students' answers on the tests. One report said the teacher was caught making the changes on the year 7 tests by another member of staff [*ABC News*, 13 May]. Another reported students saying that the teacher stood over them instructing them to erase the answers because "they weren't neat enough" and then indicated which answers to remark [*The Advertiser*, 14 May].

Two other allegations of cheating in Adelaide schools have also been made [*ABC News*, 17 May; *The Australian*, 18 May; *Adelaide Now*, 18 May]. A teacher at Elizabeth Vale Primary School is accused of providing what state Education Minister Jay Weatherill described as "inappropriate assistance" to Year 3 and 4 pupils during NAPLAN tests. The teacher has been stood down but denies any misconduct.

In the other case, a Year 5 class at the prestigious Catholic school, Rostrevor College, was allegedly given advance notice of the writing test topic. The Catholic Education Office has confirmed that a teacher has been stood down, pending an investigation.

A father of a student at Brisbane State High School told the ABC that grade nine students were not supervised during a lunch break in the middle of the tests and were able to compare answers and change them after the break [*ABC News*, 14 May].

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 with the answers that they got from the smart kids at lunchtime.

It was also alleged that a similar incident occurred at All Hallows School, a private school. An investigation into the allegations has been launched.

A teacher at the Melbourne school, Debney Park Secondary College, is being investigated for helping a student with a question during the Year 9 numeracy test [*Herald-Sun*, 19 May]. It was reported that the teacher suggested the student change the answer and other students reported it to senior staff at the school.

An innovative method of cheating was also revealed in southern NSW and the Gold Coast.

*The Canberra Times* [19 May] reported that students at a NSW school in the Canberra region were told by teachers to look at grammar and spelling charts pinned to the walls of the classroom during last week's NAPLAN tests. A parent at the school claimed that several large laminated grammar charts with explanations and spelling lists were pinned to the walls and written on boards.

The parent complained to the school principal and the material was taken down while the tests were in progress. Similar materials for mathematics were also removed before the numeracy tests taken. The NSW Department of Education is investigating the case.

A former teacher at the school told the *Canberra Times* that similar posters had been in place during the national literacy and numeracy tests in previous years:

I can categorically say that since NAPLAN's inception in 2008, [the school] has given students an unfair advantage over other schools by leaving classroom learning charts on the wall – from spelling to grammar to maths.

A similar case was also reported at Merrimac High School on the Gold Coast [*Courier-Mail*, 19 May]. It was claimed that posters providing basic mathematics information were on display in classrooms during the numeracy tests.

These examples herald what is likely to become more common in the future.

In the United States, there are cheating scandals every year as schools resort to helping students with answers in tests or changing their answers after the tests under the pressure to improve school results. For example, last year a survey of public school teachers in Chicago by the *Chicago Sun-Times* revealed that one-third of all teachers had been pressured in the last year by principals and school boards to change student grades. Twenty per cent said that they had actually raised grades under this pressure. Earlier this year, nearly 400 schools in the

US state of Georgia were under investigation for changing student answers on test sheets or were facing increased monitoring during tests.

Schools and teachers in Australia now face immense pressure to improve school results and their ranking on school league tables published in the media. School reputations are at stake. Careers are on the line. The Federal Education Minister has threatened principals and senior staff with the sack if schools fail to lift their results. She wants parents to confront teachers on poor test results.

WA Primary Principals' Association president Stephen Breen said the higher the stakes, the greater the risk that cheating could occur [*West Australian*, 12 May]. Queensland Teachers Union president, Steve Ryan, warned that cheating "is inevitable" because of the way governments are promoting NAPLAN [*Courier-Mail*, 12 May]. Flinders University literacy expert Dr Barbara Nielsen said it was "just a matter of time" before this type of cheating occurred because of the high stakes now involved [*Adelaide Now*, 18 May].

It is not surprising that some succumb to this pressure by cheating. The principal of Rostrevor College, where one teacher has been accused of cheating, said that primary and junior secondary school teachers in his school were feeling "quite significant pressure" because of the NAPLAN tests [*The Australian*, 18 May]. The SA state President of the Australian Education Union said that the teacher at St. Leonard's Primary who admitted cheating felt under pressure because the results were used to assess the performance of schools [*The Australian*, 15 May].

The security surrounding the NAPLAN tests is totally inadequate. It is now far too easy for schools to cheat. Test booklets are delivered to schools a week or 10 days beforehand and there is little to stop an unethical principal or test co-ordinator from opening them and alerting teachers about questions to practice in their class.

Tests are mostly supervised alone by teachers in the classroom and there is no monitoring to stop teachers helping their students with answers. There are also ample opportunities available after the tests are taken to change answers or fill in unanswered questions by students.

The Federal Education Minister should commission a review of the security of NAPLAN. The stakes are now so high that the only real solution to stop cheating increasing is independent supervision of NAPLAN as is done with Year 12 exams in most states.

### **Intensive test preparation to improve results**

There were also several reports following the NAPLAN tests of schools spending inordinate amounts of time on test practice to improve school results to the detriment of other areas of the curriculum.

Some schools have been "preparing" for the tests for longer than six months. Numerous teachers told *The Courier-Mail* they have spent more than half of their class time this year on exam preparation and practice questions [12 May]. The *Canberra Times* reported that some ACT schools had spent up to 90 minutes a day over two weeks practicing for NAPLAN [11 May]. Several parents at a south Canberra school said that students had to sit for two practice tests a day in the lead-up to the NAPLAN tests.

Several newspapers cited students saying they spent a lot of time in class practicing for the tests. For example, one Victorian eight year old said: "We did lots and lots of practice tests...Once you do lots they start to get boring" [*Herald-Sun*, 12 May]. Many parents say their children received excessive coaching to boost their performances in the tests [*ABC News*, 13 May].

In a report analysing last year's national test results, the Queensland Studies Authority warned teachers about over-practising for the writing exam. *The Courier-Mail* reported that test markers felt that Queensland students had "over-practised" for the 2009 NAPLAN writing task.

The Queensland Teachers Union president Steve Ryan said schools are spending too much time grooming students in an attempt to make them perform better in the NAPLAN tests.

We've got the ridiculous situation of schools just setting aside a whole range of good curriculum offerings just to concentrate on NAPLAN so the school would be seen to be in some way better than the school next to it. [*ABC News*, 11 May]

The principal of one Perth private school said that it was a "sad week for education":

The NAPLAN tests are now almost completely useless as a diagnostic tool for individual student performance as different schools choose to prepare so differently, many coaching to the test to avoid potential public humiliation...Stories already abound of a narrowed curriculum filled with NAPLAN lessons from day one, term one from Year 2 onward. [*West Australian*, 12 May]

The President of the Australian Secondary Principals Association, Sheree Vertigan, said that most students were spending "a lot of time" in class preparing for the NAPLAN tests and that it was "defeating the whole purpose of the tests in the first place" [*The Australian*, 10 May]. She said encouraging students to study for NAPLAN tests was "manipulating" the data and was the main catalyst for "narrowing the curriculum".

The executive director of the private schools Australian Parents Council, Ian Dalton, said there was an "element of concern" with teachers encouraging students to study for the tests. "What teachers are doing is masking the areas of need. . . which is not in the best interest of students" [*The Australian* 10 May].

Intensive practicing of tests has a distorting effect on the school curriculum. It narrows the curriculum in two ways.

First, it takes away considerable time from other key curriculum areas. It means that science, history, social studies, languages, arts and music, physical education and health receive get less attention because results in these areas do not contribute to school results published on My School. There is even evidence from overseas that recess and lunch breaks get cut to enable more practicing of tests.

Second, intensive test practice tends to emphasize memorization and recall over understanding and inquiry. Students also get drilled in test-taking skills rather than deeper learning skills. Studies show that teachers often prepare students for standardised tests by spending much time on practicing on old test questions and drills based on memorization and



recitation. Extended writing, research and investigation, and analytical skills get de-emphasized.

The outcome is a less well-rounded and balanced education.

### **Selection of students**

There is extensive overseas evidence of schools selecting high achieving students and denying entry to low achieving students in order to boost school results and league table rankings. Already, there is evidence of this happening in Australia.

According to the *Herald-Sun*, the spokesman for Independent Schools Victoria, Brian Peck, said it was common practice to use NAPLAN tests for assessments for entry to private schools [12 May]. The report cited the example of Mentone Grammar School whose website states: "Parents are requested to bring along to the interview copies of your children's last two school reports, NAPLAN test results and any other relevant information or assessments you might have."

One mother told *The Courier-Mail* last week she had practised the NAPLAN tests with her daughter to help her do well, given high schools were now deciding enrolments using NAPLAN [12 May]. According to the newspaper, many parents told Brisbane talkback radio their children's NAPLAN results had been required when they sought to enrol their children in a private school.

It is only private schools, and selective and high demand government schools, which can exert control over their enrolments. This control gives them greater opportunities to select higher achieving students and obtain a higher position in league table rankings.

### **Playing the rorting and cheating game is now the rule**

The NAPLAN tests this month demonstrated emphatically that Australian schools have entered a new era. Rorting and cheating on NAPLAN are now set to be the rule for the future, under the pressure created by My School and school league tables.

Encouraging low achieving students to stay at home while the NAPLAN tests are on at school, cheating by changing student answers on tests, leaking questions before the tests, intensive practicing of tests and selective enrolment of high achieving students were all used by some schools to artificially inflate their results.

Julia Gillard dismissed the incidents as only a small number. However, they are just the beginning. We can expect schools to resort to rorting and rigging of their results on a grander scale under the pressure to improve or maintain their ranking on school performance tables.

School performance reporting and league tables create pressures and incentives for schools to fudge their results. When testing is simply used as a diagnostic tool, there is no reason for teachers or schools to trick or cheat. This only comes when "high stakes" are attached to the results, such as affecting school reputations and the careers of teachers and principals.

What we saw during the NAPLAN tests was the beginning of a system of fraud – a system in which school results are systematically rorted and rigged. It means that parents and the public will be misled about actual school results. It will not be possible to trust the results posted on My School or the rankings of school league tables as a guide to school quality and progress.

It also seems that Gillard and other education ministers are prepared to live with fraud and the misleading results published on My School. They have dismissed concerns raised by many about the inadequate security arrangements in place for NAPLAN.

To see the future, we need look no further than the system of school reporting so admired by Julia Gillard – that of New York City and her mentor, Joel Klein. Here fraud and distortion are endemic. Diane Ravitch, Professor of Education at New York University and former US Assistant Secretary of Education, calls it a system of “institutionalized lying” which produces “rigged and fraudulent” results.

Ravitch says that in the US testing and reporting school results has corrupted testing so much that:

I fear that American education has now entered into a twilight zone, where nothing is what it appears to be, where numbers are meaningless, where public relations and spin take the place of honest reporting, where fraud is called progress.

We could also look at the experience in Texas over the past 20 years. The Texas school accountability system was the forerunner of many school reporting systems in the US, including the No Child Left Behind Act. Ever since it was introduced, it has been plagued by reporting and cheating of school results which has continued to this day.

Just recently, the *Houston Chronicle* (25 May) reported that a Houston school district found evidence that teachers had changed some fifth-grade students' answers on the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills exam and helped students correct wrong answers. Other evidence shows that some teachers had access to the exam answer sheets and possibly the exam questions before test day. A principal, deputy principal and three teachers have resigned as a result of the investigations.

Reporting and cheating on school results are not going to go away. They are here to stay as a result of My School and school league tables published by the media. This is the Rudd Government's legacy.

Competition for higher rankings forces schools to “play the system” to show improvement even where there is none. Playing the system is the quick route to better results.

It is an example of a well known phenomenon in social science research called Campbell's law. Campbell's law states:

The more any quantitative social indicator is used for social decision-making, the more subject it will be to corruption pressures and the more apt it will be to distort and corrupt the social processes it is intended to monitor.

When this law was first formulated, its author specifically applied it to education testing:

Achievement tests may well be valuable indicators of general school achievement under conditions of normal teaching aimed at general competence. But when test scores become the goal of the teaching process, they both lose their value as

indicators of educational status and distort the educational process in undesirable ways.

The outcome of such practices is “test score inflation”, the phenomenon of ever-improving test results. Testing expert, Daniel Koretz, Professor of Education at Harvard University, says that test score inflation is the “dirty secret of high stakes testing”.

Scores on the tests used for accountability have become inflated, badly overstating real gains in student performance. Some of the reported gains are entirely illusory, and others are real but grossly exaggerated. The seriousness of this problem is hard to overstate. When scores are inflated, many of the most important conclusions people base on them will be wrong, and students – and sometimes teachers – will suffer as a result. [*Measuring Up: What Educational Testing Really Tells Us*, p.233].

Test score inflation gives the illusion of progress, the illusion of higher student achievement.

This is what we can now expect with My School – ever improving test scores as schools learn to play the system by rorting and cheating and more and more practising for NAPLAN tests in class. The whole national assessment and reporting system will be corrupted.

It means that My School will mislead rather than inform and it will not be possible to tell which results are legitimate and which are bogus. Far from improving transparency and school results, My School will lead to greater opaqueness and manipulation of school results.