

# NAPLAN nightmares

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**Is the high stakes testing regime having a psychological impact on young children? Some parenting experts think so, while UK educators warn Australia of the lessons they've learned. Darragh O Keefe reports.**

It's usually by week three of the new school year that the emails from parents start flooding Maggie Dent's inbox.

Worry and stress caused by the impending NAPLAN test isn't exclusive to the parents of children in Year 3, says Dent, the noted author and parenting expert. In the few short years that NAPLAN has been in operation its impact has already infiltrated the earlier years. She says it's not uncommon to hear of Year 1 and 2 teachers practicing NAPLAN tests with their students.

The unintended toxic side effects of national testing and the subsequent publishing of results on My School is manifesting in stressed out students, worried parents and teachers under pressure, she says.

Dent contends that the stress caused by the NAPLAN testing regime can hinder some young children's academic and emotional development.

She says she is hearing reports of children in Year 3 returning to bed wetting, anxiety disorders, hair pulling and suffering "night terrors".

"Look at the number of books and sample test questions on the market aimed at parents of Year 3 students. I mean, we're stealing childhoods here. This is all disturbing the developmental needs of children. We're pressuring them.

"If you have a strong child it's not such a big deal. But if your kid gets sucked into all the pressure, well there's plenty of evidence now to say that's not good."

Dent says that parents are increasingly aware of the some of these unwanted impacts of NAPLAN and, in growing numbers, are withdrawing their children from the tests.

Justin Coulson is one such parent.

The parenting and family researcher at the University of Wollongong has five children, three of whom are in school. None of them any longer sit the NAPLAN test.

"I send a letter to the school saying they won't be participating, and the school accepts that," says Coulson. "I keep the kids at home on test days, because if they went to school they might feel different when everyone else is doing the test."

Coulson says he is hearing stories of other parents doing the same, but he also questions how widely known it is among parents that sitting NAPLAN is optional.

"And, some want to know how their kids are going and think NAPLAN will be a good indicator. They don't realise NAPLAN won't tell you anything more than a good conversation with the teacher would."

Much like Dent, Coulson is vocal on what he perceives as the major downsides to NAPLAN.

"We're seeing a great deal of stress, anxiety, and concern among kids who are being kept in at lunch, being asked to sit practice tests on weekends and during holidays, and who are under increasing pressure to perform because the teachers and the schools have so much riding on the children's performance."

He says that in the days leading up to NAPLAN he went on to Twitter and followed the NAPLAN feed and "there seemed to be significant stress and a lot of panic".

A lack of large scale research into the impacts of NAPLAN on young children and their developing minds muddies the waters. However, the experience in the UK, where national testing has been in operation for two decades, would appear to corroborate the anecdotal reports from Coulson and Dent.

Karen Robinson, head of education with the National Union of Teachers, tells *Education Review* that students, particularly those aged 5 to 11, have been proven to suffer detrimental effects in their attitudes to school due to pressure of testing.

"As far back as 1996, it was reported by Professor Kathy Sylva that the association between formal teaching, higher anxiety and lower self esteem has been found. More recently this view was supported by Dr Sean Neill's research into pupil behaviour, on behalf of the NUT, which found that 'increasing curriculum regulation and inflexibility prevented teachers from adapting their teaching to the interests of potentially disruptive children'," she says.

Robinson also points to a survey carried out by the Liberal Democrats, which reported that a significant proportion of both Year 2 and Year 3 children showed symptoms of stress. However, a higher proportion of Year 2 children showed these symptoms during the summer term when the tests were taken, with 40 per cent of parents saying that their child's symptoms of stress occurred either in the run up to or during the summer term.

"This demonstrates a clear link between pupil stress and tests. A study by the Institute of Public Policy Research found that pupils' mental health problems were directly linked to pressures connected with testing and recommended that the Government should take a less prescriptive approach if it was to halt the increase in mental health problems in schools. It found that 'there are now well over 1000 primary aged children being treated for psychoses, severe depression and eating disorders'," says Robinson.

Coulson also points to the overseas experience, saying it has demonstrated that with standardized testing, teaching to the test becomes common.

"Poorer performing students are invited not to show up on testing days. And there's more pressure on the teachers; and more competition. Campbell's law says that when you put incentives in a system, people will cheat. We've already seen examples of cheating, teachers putting up posters with information."

The effects of all this is that it stops the learning process and puts a focus on the test. Instead of being interested in learning, being curious, students focus on the tests and the results. The focus moves from what matters, like a broad education, to the less important, like how you perform on a standard test, says Coulson.

The Federation of Parents and Citizens Associations of NSW, which recently surveyed parents on their child's attitude to NAPLAN, says there are mixed opinions among parents.

"We had parents who had children very stressed by the idea of the assessment, let alone the actual conducting of the testing," says federation president Helen Walton. "We had students who were quite laid back about the tests and appeared to have no problems with them. There were families where it was suggested that their child may not wish to sit the testing due to the affect on them - often these were students with academic challenges or disabilities. And there were children who attended school during the testing period even though they were sick because the school had felt they would benefit from knowing the results - these were usually the more academically capable students."

Walton says that anecdotal information indicated school 'prepared' their students for the testing for weeks and the federation was aware of "an industry developing where the major selling point to tuition and books is the improvement in the NAPLAN results for the child".

Indeed, *ER* found numerous resources and books, particularly on websites and blogs aimed at parents, even those of Year 3 children.

"My daughter has started Grade 3 this year," writes one mother on the kidspot.com.au site. "Over the holiday break her school sent us a link to a website asking us to do practice tests in preparation for the NAPLAN. The site gives me her score, compares her score to other kids in the state and nation. It also records her improvement. I was a little surprised to receive this letter from the school because I wasn't thinking of doing anything specifically in preparation for this test."

Another parent wrote in response: "Hi, my son is doing NAPLAN this year, I know he is preparing for it at school, but I would love to do a little bit at home, even 15 minutes a day. Can you share the link with us?"

Online, many parents referred to the Excel Test Zone website, which sells practice NAPLAN tests for Year 3, 5, 7 and 9, as well as resources for teachers.

Other practice tests being marketed to parents include Maths POWER, English POWER and NAPLAN tutor.

A growing performance culture isn't surprising. Walton says that since NAPLAN was introduced, there has been an increasing dependence on the data to indicate school and staff success.

"From the extreme concerns expressed by many key stakeholders - parents, teaching staff, principals - around the use of the data to develop league tables for naming and shaming schools, to the recent reported use of results to exclude students from schools, there are continued concerns about what is happening with the assessment, the data and the implications for student, schools and families," she says.

Consider, also, that the government has already indicated that NAPLAN will feature among the metrics to be used in awarding the bonus payments for teachers and the school improvement monies. The stakes are about to get even higher.

Robinson, meanwhile, offers a final word of advice from the UK.

"High stakes testing is not a panacea for a country's education system - the 'unintended consequences' of the system we have in England have been numerous and far-reaching and have not led to any real improvements in teaching and learning," she says.

"In fact, they appear to have damaged the quality of teaching and learning overall. The cost of the testing system to the public purse could be used far better to support children's learning directly. Schools should be accountable to parents and to the wider community, but using test results as proxy data for school quality is not the way to do it."

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