

**AUSTRALIAN COUNCIL FOR THE DEFENCE OF
GOVERNMENT SCHOOLS
PRESS RELEASE 878
STANDARDISED TESTING IS GLOBALISED
BIG BUSINESS LINKED TO PRIVATISATION
OF EDUCATION
11 February 2021**

Since 2009, NAPLAN standardised testing has been a requirement for Australian students in Years 3 (8-year-olds) and Years 5, 7 and 9, and the Liberal-National government have wanted to extend it to Year 1 students (6-year olds!). Its questionable effects have been far-reaching. Many students suffer from anxiety while others cannot see its relevance. It has the effect of narrowing the school curriculum with emphasis upon testing prescribed tasks rather than broad based learning.

Everything from student performance, school-funding, teacher pay and performance and the viability of individual schools is increasingly being determined on the basis of the NAPLAN test results. It has replaced the inspectorate and tends to have a punitive rather than development effect.

In 2017, the New South Wales government (in Australia's most populous state) ramped up the test's punitive effects by requiring Year 9 students to achieve a high level Band 8 in order to qualify for the Higher School Certificate (HSC) examination. This is a requirement for university entry. But it is expected that more than 50 percent of students in the state's schools, predominantly students in working-class areas, will fail to achieve this level.

As in the case of the US and the UK (which has opened up its public education system to similar market mechanisms) these measures have been implemented despite widespread opposition from teachers, parents and students.

The Commercialisation of Schooling Report

The New South Wales Teachers Federation (NSWTF) responded in 2016-17 with a commissioned report, *The Commercialisation of Public Schooling*. The conclusions of this Report are a further damning indictment of the public school privatisation movement.

The Report was written by Dr Sam Sellar is Reader in Education Studies at Manchester Metropolitan University; Dr Bob Lingard is a Professorial Research Fellow in the School of Education at The University of Queensland; Dr Anna Hogan, a lecturer at The University of Queensland; and Dr Greg Thompson, Associate Professor of Education Research at Queensland University of Technology (QUT).

DOGS quote from this Report:

“ There has been considerable academic research and literature on the privatisation of schooling, set against the effects of globalisation following the end of the Cold War.

Research now has moved to focus on commercialisation in schooling as an element of transition to a new phase of neoliberalism reflective of new state structures and relationships between the public and private spheres. The literature documents how commercialisation in schooling systems and schools in the Global South works largely in respect of low fee for-profit private schools while in the Global North, commercialisation and increased involvement of large private corporations has worked largely in relation to what Sahlberg (2011) has called the Global Education Reform Movement (GERM). This has seen the introduction of top-down, test-based accountability, the introduction of market competition between schools, the use of private sector managerial practices, and an increasingly standardised curriculum that focuses on literacy and numeracy. We might speak more accurately of GERMs, as this largely Anglo-American derived educational reform movement has been taken up in vernacular ways in different societies. GERMs, with their focus on tests and related accountability infrastructures, have opened up the space for edu-businesses to offer a vast array of new products and services at all levels of education.

At the same time we are experiencing the datafication of the social world, which has been facilitated by enhanced computational capacities and new capabilities to translate various aspects of everyday life into quantitative data. Data infrastructures have become more important in the structuring and governance of schooling systems and enabled the growing involvement of private commercial interests.

The move to big data in the work of schools and schooling systems will also open up further opportunities for edu-businesses, particularly in terms of computer-based assessments and adaptive learning technologies .The increased role of private companies and edu-businesses in respect of these various changes has resulted, to some extent, from the down-sizing and restructuring of the state bureaucracy, first under new public management and more recently through network governance .

The reduced capacity of the state has opened up spaces and opportunities for edu-businesses to expand their role in schools and schooling systems, largely on a for-profit basis. Private corporations have also sought an enhanced role in all stages of the policy cycle in education (from agenda setting, research for policy, policy text production, policy implementation and evaluation, provision of related professional development and resources) in what has been referred to as the ‘privatisation of the education policy community’. We have written about this in respect of Pearson and News Corps.”

What is Happening?

There has always been testing in schools, but a transformation is now quietly taking place within school education.

Seen for over a century as a function of the nation-state, education has become a globalised industry. The expansion of the Global Education Industry is “based upon the idea that education is the key means to national economic competitiveness and success” and such “success” is gauged within a global education market-place. The GEI pits each nation in a race against others, with comparative assessments such as the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) and the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS), used as evaluative methods for identifying “winners” and “losers.”

Standardised tests and test scores have thus become the basis for identifying “winning” and “losing” nations, as governments slash education spending and dismantle their education bureaucracies. In so doing, they have opened the door to private providers and “edu-businesses” to make a fortune from their increased role in all aspects of school education, “from agenda setting, research for policy, policy text production, policy implementation and evaluation, provision of related professional development and resources.”

According to Anna Hogan, one of the report’s authors, contractors are used for eight of the nine stages of developing Australia’s high stakes test, NAPLAN. In 2012, the cost of these contracted services totalled over \$4 million. In every state except Queensland, the printing and distribution of NAPLAN was contracted to Pearson. In NSW, Victoria and the Australian Capital Territory (ACT) the subsequent marking of the test was contracted to Pearson, making that company a central agent of the NAPLAN policy network. Last month, the *Sydney Morning Herald* reported that the NSW Education Standards Authority had signed two agreements with Pearson for marking and reporting on NAPLAN results worth a total of \$51.9 million. Another private company, the Australian Council for Education Research (ACER) is currently being paid \$7 for each of the 2.5 million students who annually sit its Progressive Achievement Tests in Maths, Reading and Science- i.e. \$17.5 m!

We are talking about large swaths of taxpayers money going to private corporations so that our children can be categorised as sheep or goats here.

Trevor Cobbold Questions the Value of PISA tests

But what do the Australian NAPLAN and the PISA international tests really tell us? Trevor Cobbold of *Save Our Schools* Australia, has recently produced a paper entitled [Beware False Idols of Education Excellence](#) which questions PISA results because they do not take into account either the motivation, interest or dissatisfaction of students with their schools.

So much for ‘child-centred’ education.

Teachers at the front line, teaching our children in public schools could have told us long since, the true effects of testing and the progress of their individual students.

The Cost of the Higher School Certificate

Meanwhile, in [The Age of 4 February 2021](#) there is some evidence that at least teachers are receiving some remuneration for marking the HSC, no doubt topping up their inadequate salaries. But their efforts are only worth one third of the total cost. But even the involvement of educators and the State in the HSC is being questioned.

In 2019, the cost of running the HSC exams in NSW alone was \$98 million, NSW Education Standards Authority (NESAs) figures obtained by *The Sydney Morning Herald* under Freedom of Information laws show.

One-third of the cost – almost \$33 million – involved paying teachers to mark papers. One-fifth involved logistics, while exam supervisors cost \$8.7 million and the writing of the tests and marking criteria added up to \$6 million. Other costs - including IT, administration and human resources – were \$29.9 million.

THE DEBATE RE HSC

However, Greg Whitby, the head of the Catholic Education Diocese of Parramatta and a critic of the HSC, described the cost as exorbitant. “Some proponents argue this outdated system of assessment is gold standard,” he said.

“It would want to be gold-plated. The HSC is a bloated credential that is no longer relevant. A clear-sighted skim of school rankings, socio-economic status data on selective schools, and so on shows that the HSC is not the great leveller defenders of the status quo would like to pretend it is.”

Mr Whitby will debate the merits of the HSC with Mr Alegounarias at an Australian College of Educators event next month. But in the Comments of the Age, the following readers expressed some interesting viewpoints.

Dan Cullen

The reality is the HSC gives us a number, that also acts as a somewhat vague indicator of a students commitment or lack of commitment to achieving a result that will probably determine that students opportunities in the years immediately after leaving school. However as far as giving insights a students future potential, capacity to problem solve, level of curiosity and collaborate it has virtually zero value. All of these of course are critical skills in the work of work in the 21st century. So it has limited value. However as a marker of commitment, a means by which students are working toward an outcome and as a tool for teachers professional development it has value. After all in 2018 the NSW government spent \$1.8 billion on consultants. I would say the HSC is cheap and of value given what it does achieve despite its limitations.

I for one

Ah Mr Greg Whitby. I am always interested to hear what you have to say, considering it comes from someone who themselves hasn't been in a classroom for decades.

Tony's Fridge

I've taught to the HSC level since 1977, had students top the state in their subject and/or figure in the top 10 their subject and yes, it costs money to run high quality exams. I've been on subject exam committees and marked two subjects at HSC level so I know where the costs come from.

Don't tell me the people who see fit to test Kindies before they even start are getting cold feet about the cost of their beloved testing.

I stopped marking when computer marking came in.

Do we want a highly rated assessment tool or not?

Doug6

Maybe Whitby should hand back some of the exorbitant funding Catholic Ed received, or importantly clearly publish the funding allocations and stop the rural and isolated systemic Catholic schools subsidising the rich colleges based in Sydney

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