

# What's all this fuss about NAPLAN?

*In this week's editorial we take a look at NAPLAN Tests – the benefits and the difficulties. Next week I'll move onto a more specific look at how NAPLAN, comparative data on supposed school performance and the new federal government's My School website will work. This is the controversy over 'League Tables'.*

Just before the last holidays, parents of Year 3, 5, 7 and 9 students would have received their child's NAPLAN test results. These tests occurred in all schools across Australia. They provide parents with a view of how their child is going against national benchmarks in areas of literacy and numeracy.

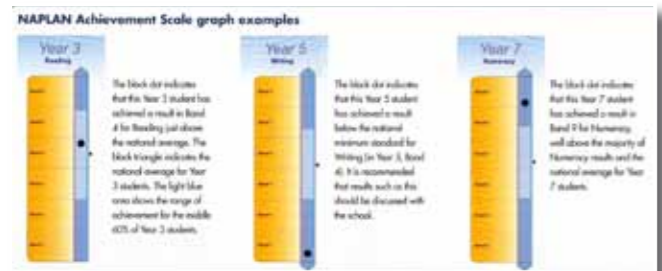
## The growing trend of national testing

Why have we seen a far greater dependency and use of this form of testing over recent years? Educational policy across Australia has been moving increasingly towards forms of centralisation and common approaches. 'Wall to wall' Labour governments have seen far greater agreement to act cooperatively through the Council of Australian Governments (COAG). At the same time there has been the goal to increase school's transparency and accountability through the use of hard data (or what is called evidence based decision making in education).

In 2008 we saw the first nation-wide national testing. When compared with other OECD partner nations, our government was embarrassed that up until that time we didn't have national testing; and then once they started testing, they were further embarrassed that our results weren't as good as they thought they'd be. The Federal Government started cracking the whip. If you defuse the spin, the basic message was: we want clear and comparative hard data; it's going to be put out there for all to see no matter which system you're in; if you don't lift your game there will be funding consequences; we are going to 'fund' the trouble spots and then check that it has had impact.

## Why is it useful?

**Parent simplicity** - One of the great strengths of NAPLAN testing is that it presents parents with an 'easy to understand' profile of their child against some broad categories: their age group; where the average is; and expected minimum standards. Parents generally find it a much easier means for understanding their child's literacy and numeracy strengths, over against most school report cards. (By way of suggestion



Martin  
MECS Principal

*We are about a holistic education – being an educational community that seeks to develop the whole child*

to MECS parents, please retain your child's NAPLAN report in your provided student report folder.)

**Educational Assessment (Teacher) Tool** - School's also receive the NAPLAN data for their students. Teachers can view the results and study the data. Section Coordinators and Jo Miller, our Educational Support Coordinator particularly analyse the results. Used as a diagnostic tool the data presents a wealth of information for us to work through. One of the best uses is by tracking students over 2 or 4 or (now) 6 years. For example, a student who might show up as being weak in writing might receive some extra assistance. Two years later we look at how they're going.

The school based diagnostic data is becoming increasingly accessible and we are learning how we can make better use of it. For example, our Teacher's Meeting on December 1 is a PD session for teachers on how we might improve our use of NAPLAN data.

## Are there any problems?

**Teaching to the NAPLAN** – The focus on data and results can tempt teachers to teach merely, pragmatically - to the NAPLAN test or to the VCE. It is quite possible to coach your students in NAPLAN skills so that their outcomes are a distorted picture of what they might ordinarily achieve.

It's not the form of holistic education that MECS seeks to provide. We will resist the 'game' of teaching to the test or setting curriculum to it. However, that doesn't mean that we send our students in cold. There is a clear difference between preparing students by giving them a practice NAPLAN test the week before and spending most of the preceding term drilling students on NAPLAN type skills.

The concern many educational commentators have been expressing in the media is that when a school's NAPLAN results are publicly advertised in a comparative 'league table', schools can very quickly turn from being places of holistic and collaborative learning to highly competitive institutions whose major goal is to beat their neighbouring school. The comparative forum shifts the emphasis from a diagnostic one to a summative one, ie you'll be judged by your raw results.

**A limited test** – Some parents who choose not to allow their children to undertake the test (whether out of principle or protection), do so primarily because they view the test as a very narrow and therefore, unhelpful measure. Non-traditional curriculums, like that offered in Steiner schools, are particularly concerned about this. MECS' school-based curriculum (we don't specifically teach the state syllabus – VELS) appears to more than adequately cover the skills being tested by NAPLAN.

# School Notes

from the Principal

## What a great last day - Year 12s

A big congratulations to our wonderful bunch of 50 Year 12 students who conducted themselves so well last Thursday. The 'muck up' components went really well as did all the celebratory parts. Thanks to all the parents who joined in on the assembly and other events. We finished the day with a luncheon and reflective story telling until 4pm. Clean up hadn't quite been finished earlier in the day, so we went back and finished that too. Well done guys! The next big Year 12 dates are Nov 17, (last exams) and Nov 19, the Graduation Dinner.

## Year 12 exams and prayer time

It's not that divine intervention is needed. It's just good to continue to surround our senior students with prayer and support. This morning at 7:30am in the Senior School, we had prayer time together as parents and staff. Please continue to pray for all of our students sitting exams over the next few weeks. The English Exam is tomorrow morning (Friday).

## Association Meeting - what a great night!

You know how these sort of meetings are supposed to be dull and boring and we just do them because they're required? Well that's not the case with MECS Association Meetings. They are interesting, well organised and most people tell me as they're leaving, what a pleasant evening they have had. Congratulations to the Board and others involved in organising this event. The next one is in May where we view the Annual Report (2009) and view the completed accounts for 2009.

## An early Staff Celebration Dinner

Last Friday evening up at Sky High restaurant the staff and their spouses/partners/friends celebrated the year that's been. It was a smidgeon early than most break-ups, but we went early because of the difficulty of overcrowded calendars in December. It was a delightful evening of celebration together.



## Some Big Primary events

This Thursday and Friday our Junior Primaries head off for camp staying at Belgrave Heights and spending time down at the Bay. This is in conjunction with their theme of 'Water: Under the Sea'. Next week is the big Primary Concert with performances on Thursday and Friday afternoons and Friday evening. We look forward to seeing this spectacular.

## Cup Weekend

Don't come along to school next Monday. The MECS calendar will show Nov 2nd as coloured in purple which means we give it off as a holiday. This is unlike our state and Catholic colleagues who have school on Monday, but with classes usually about half full. A long time ago we made the change and encourage families to have a nice loooong weekend.

# Editorial Continued..

**What's schooling all about?** – Whilst national testing can have its place (hard data mechanisms that establish core academic results can be useful), a question that should arise is: What are we really testing? Is our schooling just about measuring literacy and numeracy, and possibly down the track Science and History? Are these the essential ingredients of what is successful Christian education? I'd suggest not.

We are about a holistic education – being an educational community that seeks to develop the whole child – emotionally, physically, aesthetically, mentally, morally, spiritually and so on. These attributes are not measurable in a NAPLAN test, but they are pivotal to our cause. Holistic formation is about nurturing well-rounded, well-integrated young people who seek to be what God would have them be.

**When used as a crude comparative measure** - Whilst the assessment tool itself can be very useful for parents and teachers, when used as an indicator of school performance (summatively), many problems emerge. Measuring effectiveness by using crude statistical comparisons is risky because parents, the media and governments can all make shallow judgements about schools. It's not that judgements can't be made; rather judgements of a comparative nature should be fair.

Australian schooling has some key features that shape a school's performance that have nothing to do with staff efforts or the school's level of diligence. These must be factored into any system used for comparative measure. I will address this topic next week.

# Association EGM

The Association General Meeting last Thursday was a lovely evening, with over 60 people attending. We enjoyed a delicious meal prepared by Sue and Deb. During the course of the evening we heard Roger tell us what Christian Education means to him; Gerry presented the draft budget in a way that most of us could understand (minus the footy jokes!); Hugo gave us an overview of the role of the Board and Association and we welcomed 3 new members into the Association.

We are blessed as a school community to have a healthy Association that not only includes current staff and parents but also past parents and staff, grandparents and founders of this school. If you haven't been to a meeting for a while can I encourage you to come to our May or October meeting in 2010, (the dates will be in the newsletter early next year) They are an informative and enjoyable evening and a great way to keep updated on what is happening at MECS.

Nicole  
Community Relations Officer

