

Informative Assessment: A Position Paper

An examination of research and response to the concerns of Western Australian school leaders.



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PRINCIPALS' ASSOCIATION**

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Informative Assessment: A Position Paper

In the *Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians*¹ (*Melbourne Declaration*), Australia's education ministers made a commitment to strengthening accountability and transparency. As part of this commitment they agreed that:

Assessment of student progress will be rigorous and comprehensive. It needs to reflect the curriculum and draw on a combination of the professional judgement of teachers and testing, including national testing.

To ensure that student achievement is measured in meaningful ways, State, Territory and Commonwealth governments will work with all school sectors to develop and enhance national and school-level assessment that focuses on:

- » *Assessment for learning — enabling teachers to use information about student progress to inform their teaching.*
- » *Assessment as learning — enabling students to reflect on and monitor their own progress to inform their future learning goals.*
- » *Assessment of learning — assisting teachers to use evidence of student learning to assess student achievement against goals and standards (p. 14).*

As a consequence of this decision, the Australian government introduced Australia's National Assessment Program — Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN), the *My School* website and a requirement for schools to report student achievement using grades.

These initiatives have been in place for sufficient time for people to review their contribution to education. While some point to the positive impact which NAPLAN has had on learning in many classrooms and schools, others have questioned whether it is cost effective. While some have used the data to identify trends and issues, others have highlighted the limitations of the tests and the caveats on the data, and decried its use by politicians and bureaucrats to argue uninformed interpretations of the data and make inappropriate claims. And while some have argued that statistical standardised test data is the only worthwhile assessment data, others have highlighted the value of other assessment strategies and information and sought to reclaim assessment as a tool of teachers, rather than of governments. The discourse has identified a number of unintended consequences which concern many educators and which are described in this paper.

Because of these issues, WAPPA encourages schools and systems to review their assessment understandings and practices and to implement assessment policies and practices which are consistent with sound research. WAPPA is committed to supporting schools and their leaders in this task, and to making representation to system leaders and academia to influence the decisions and discourse about assessment which negatively impact on schools and teachers.

In this context this paper has these purposes:

1. To provide clear assertions about sound assessment practice in primary schools.
2. To highlight WAPPA's concerns about inappropriate assessment practices and use of assessment data by governments, systems and schools.
3. To assist school leaders to provide leadership in the area of assessment and to encourage them to align the school's assessment policy with sound research and practice.
4. To enable WAPPA to identify ways in which it might provide practical assistance to school leaders in this task and ways in which it might influence the thinking and decisions of systems, governments and others concerning assessment in schools.

¹ *Melbourne declaration on educational goals for young Australians*, Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs, Melbourne, December 2008.

What is assessment?

Learning is a neurological change which cannot be seen. Assessment makes learning visible, providing evidence of what a student knows, locating them on the underlying developmental continuum and identifying the next step in their learning. Therefore, assessment is an ongoing process by which teachers continually monitor the learning of individual students and the effectiveness of their teaching, and use this information to advance student learning.

Some would argue for a distinction between assessment, the process of gathering information about student learning using a range of strategies, and evaluation, the process of interpreting the information to draw conclusions about past and present influences and determine possible future actions. In this paper, both of these processes are included within the definition of assessment.

Assessment data is information obtained to show evidence of learning. It includes quantitative information, which is expressed numerically and describes quantities (how much or how many); and qualitative information, which describes qualities or characteristics. Qualitative data includes verbal responses to test questions or surveys, anecdotal records, samples of work, records of presentations, performances and so on. It is important to emphasise that assessment data need not be numerical and that numerical data is in no way superior to other assessment data. The preferred form of data will depend on the purpose and context of the assessment.

In this paper, assessment data and assessment information are used synonymously.²

What does WAPPA believe about assessment?

A number of writers have researched and defined the key principles of assessment. Some sources are listed at the end of this paper, including the School Curriculum and Standards Authority (SCSA), which oversees the implementation of curriculum in Western Australian schools. While the writings vary in their language and emphasis, there is clear agreement between them.

WAPPA has examined the research and responded to concerns by its members to identify a number of assertions about assessment. These are encapsulated in the following Overview and then elaborated.

² Although 'data' is historically a plural, it is now accepted as singular or plural.

Assertions

WAPPA believes that improvements to the quality of teaching and learning go hand-in-hand and that the skilled use of assessment by teachers and schools is essential to improve the quality of teaching, the quality of learning and the achievement of learning outcomes.

As such, WAPPA asserts that the following are fundamental understandings about assessment.

1. The purpose of assessment is to improve teaching and learning.

While education stakeholders each use assessment for their own purposes, the fundamental purpose of assessment is to improve the quality of teaching and learning. Informative assessment informs this process.

2. Assessment requires skilled professional judgement.

Classroom teachers make valid and skilled professional judgements about student learning. The most common strategies teachers use to make learning visible are moment-by-moment oral questioning, observation and short-term tasks. They support and confirm their judgements with occasional 'formal' tests. Assessments should be moderated within the school to create a shared understanding of standards and the ways in which learning can be demonstrated.

3. Assessment is an integral part of teaching and learning.

Assessment provides the information which teachers use to inform and improve their teaching, and to provide targeted feedback to students.

4. Students are participants in the assessment process.

Students must understand the learning goals and how they are expected to demonstrate their learning. They require self-assessment skills which enable them to take some ownership for their learning.

5. Assessment information should be obtained from a range of appropriate strategies.

Assessment information obtained from a range of strategies and contexts provides a multi-dimensional image of the learning. Over-reliance on one source of information to answer a range of questions can result in insecure conclusions.

6. All assessment strategies and instruments have strengths and limitations.

Assessment information must be obtained, interpreted and used cautiously because all data, including numerical data, contains unavoidable errors. The complex analysis of data is often unhelpful and can result in misleading interpretations.

7. Assessment is a professional skill and responsibility.

Effective teachers are assessment literate and share a common language of assessment within the school to rigorously discuss assessment with colleagues and to describe assessment in appropriate terms for students and parents. Educators must be active in the community dialogue about assessment.

8. Assessment informs school improvement.

Analysis of school assessment information can identify trends and patterns and inform school improvement strategies.

These assertions are elaborated in the following discussion.

Assertion 1: The purpose of assessment is to improve teaching and learning.

Governments, education systems, schools, teachers, students, parents and others gather evidence of learning and use it for their own purposes.

- » Governments and systems use assessment to determine the success of education policies, programs and resource allocation, and to inform future plans. Systems use assessment to evaluate the success of individual schools, and, by inference, the competence of principals.
- » Schools use assessment to determine the success of their policies, programs and resource allocation, to evaluate the effectiveness of teachers, to identify where improvement should take place and to inform future action.
- » Teachers use assessment to locate each student's learning on the continuum in order to inform each student's 'next step' learning, and to ascertain the success of their teaching strategies and to inform their 'next step' teaching.
- » Students use assessment to motivate and focus their learning, to better understand what they are required to learn and to demonstrate their learning.
- » Parents use assessment to review their child's progress and to make judgements about the quality of their child's education.

There are tensions created by apparently competing purposes of assessment and uses made of assessment information. However, for all stakeholders, the fundamental purpose of assessment is to improve the quality of teaching and learning.

It is helpful to use the term *informative assessment*, which focuses attention on how any assessment, whatever the context, might be used to inform teaching and learning.

The assessment information available to teachers, schools, systems and governments should be used to create priorities, policies, procedures and practices which have a demonstrable impact on the quality of teaching and learning.

WAPPA is concerned that NAPLAN data is often used by governments and systems to form judgements and make decisions which are politically motivated, ignore or over-simplify the realities of the classroom and school context, and focus on identifying faults, allocating blame and lamenting the lack of progress. Rarely is it made clear how NAPLAN data has informed government decisions which have improved learning outcomes.

While there is a need for systems to seek information about student learning and to hold schools and teachers accountable for the results, that need must not dominate the assessment landscape. Its unintended consequence is to cause systems, schools and teachers to constantly look over the fence to see how well others are doing, and over the shoulder to see whether their job as bureaucrat, principal or teacher is about to be called into question.

The primary purpose of assessment must be to improve the quality of teaching and learning.

Assertion 2: Assessment requires skilled professional judgment.

Professional judgement is at the heart of any assessment strategy. A national testing program, a school-based cohort assessment and classroom observation each require judgements to be made about what should be assessed, how information about learning might be obtained, and how the information will be interpreted and used.

The people most qualified to make judgements about student learning are classroom teachers, working closely with students and familiar with their ability to articulate understandings, their prior learning, their developmental stage, the continuum underlying the learning area, the learning goals and expectations.

The purpose is not simply to judge students' knowledge as right or wrong, but to evaluate the quality of their understanding and the nature of any misunderstandings. They can then correct, reinforce or advance each student's learning.

WAPPA is concerned that many teachers have lost confidence in their ability to make judgements about student learning and that many school leaders have lost confidence in the acceptability — to their line-managers and the community — of teacher judgements and school-based assessments.

Teacher 'on balance' judgements are not only valid, but are the most valuable strategy for assessing the quality of a student's learning, diagnosing incomplete or erroneous understandings and determining the most appropriate intervention.

Teachers are skilled in this. Further, research has shown that when teachers use a process of pair-wise comparisons, as described by the *Brightpath*³ program, their judgements are equal in quality and objectivity to the data obtained from standardised tests. For this reason, WAPPA and SCSA both encourage the use of *Brightpath* to enhance teacher judgements.

There needs to be a shift in thinking, by governments, systems, schools and teachers themselves which acknowledges that the teacher is in the best position to make judgements about student learning and to use that information to assist student learning. There also needs to be acknowledgement that the judgements which teachers make are valid.

Effective teachers plan the focus of their questioning and assessment, although they are responsive to evolving student learning. Skilled teachers differentiate the teaching and learning to meet the needs of each student, and they differentiate the assessment strategies and instruments to elicit information about each student's learning.

They support their observations and oral questions with occasional 'formal' assessments — individual performance tests, class tests, school-based cohort tests, and standardised tests (normed against a large population of students). These provide the teacher with additional information to confirm or challenge their own judgements.

In most cases these will match. However, it should not be assumed that where there is a mismatch the teacher's judgement is incorrect. The questions raised by anomalies are rich in information about the teaching, the curriculum, the teacher's judgement, the test, the student's emotional state, and more. Timing is also a factor, because students are continually learning. Although NAPLAN data can be used to summarise a student's learning, delay between the administration of the test and the availability of data means that the information, when received, is no longer current.

It is important that school-based assessments are moderated within the school and between schools, to ensure that the curriculum assessed, the strategies used and the judgements made are comparable. The quality of moderation depends on the nature of the assessment information, the rigour with which practices and data are reviewed, and the receptivity of teachers to questions and challenges about their practice.

³ S Heldsinger, *Assessment practices in schools* (Brightpath), WAPPA, Leederville, 2014.

Assertion 3: Assessment is an integral part of teaching and learning.

Assessment reveals where each student is in their learning and provides information to assist their learning. That is the business of teachers and teaching, so assessment is central to classroom practice. Although assessment can be used before learning (to assess prior learning), during learning or after learning, it is integral to the teaching-learning process. It is not a separate activity.

The process of teaching and learning may be summarised as identifying learning goals or intentions, providing instruction and other learning experiences to help students to achieve the goals, assessing the success of the learning for each student, providing descriptive and instructive feedback to the student so that they understand the nature of any misunderstandings or incomplete understandings and how to correct them, then re-focusing the learning goal or setting a new goal. If viewed as a helix superimposed on a learning continuum, then the process of teaching and learning moves the student along the continuum.

Assessment informs the feedback provided to students, and the quality of feedback has a strong influence on learning. 'More of the same' learning is often unsuccessful because the student simply reinforces the same errors. Effective teachers ensure that feedback is specific, not generic and descriptive, not judgemental. It is instruction directed towards each student's needs, related to the purpose of the learning and success criteria, connecting new learning with prior knowledge, and containing specific suggestions on how to improve.

WAPPA is concerned that the over-reliance on NAPLAN and other standardised testing data impedes the provision of timely, specific, descriptive feedback to students. The most effective feedback is immediate, especially with children. Feedback based on a teacher's own observation is rich in insights about the student's learning.

When assessment is embedded in classroom practice, instruction and assessment form a feedback loop in which the teacher continually adjusts their teaching in response to information about how students are learning. The information is also used by teachers to evaluate their own teaching skills and strategies and to continually seek to improve the effectiveness of their teaching. While a range of variables will influence a student's ability to learn a particular concept, it is the teacher's responsibility to find ways to assist every student to learn. If there are misunderstandings among the students, then the teacher uses their knowledge of learning to teach this section of content differently. If students have grasped the learning, then the teacher uses their knowledge of the curriculum to move them to the next step.

Assertion 4: Students are participants in the assessment process.

Students are not the objects of assessment, but active participants in the process. Effective teachers use *assessment as learning* by sharing with students the learning goals; explaining how they will be expected to demonstrate their achievement of the goals (sometimes called success criteria); providing opportunities for students to demonstrate their achievement; encouraging students to assess their own progress; reviewing assessment information with students to help them recognise their progress and their challenges; providing feedback which helps students to understand the next steps in their learning and how to achieve them; and creating a classroom culture which uses assessment to inform each student's learning pathway. They exude a confidence that every student can learn, and give students incentive and responsibility for moving their own learning forward. This is the beginning of the path to lifelong learning: the acceptance of responsibility for one's own learning and the confidence to manage it.

This requires students to have skills of self-assessment. From the beginning of schooling, students are taught to review their own work, to identify what they don't understand, to practise or seek help, and to recognise whether their work meets the criteria the teacher has described. Older students may assist the teacher to define acceptable standards and evidence of learning.

The public, through the media, sometimes criticise teachers for 'teaching to the test'. If a test is competently designed, then it samples the domain of that area of the curriculum and reflects what teachers are teaching and what students are learning. Therefore, teaching to the test simply means teaching well.

The purpose of assessment is not to trap students into making errors, but to identify what each student knows and can do. Therefore, introducing students to the repertoire of tasks which the assessment will require them to perform, and allowing them to practise each format, prepares them to perform as well as they are able. This can be achieved through activities within the normal teaching program.

Because NAPLAN data is used to evaluate schools, many teachers and principals are anxious about the results. The *My School* website has put pressure on teachers to produce above average scores, despite the statistical fact that only half of the schools can, by definition, score above the NAPLAN average.

WAPPA is concerned that, in some schools, practising for NAPLAN dominates the curriculum. This has caused a distortion of the curriculum, with a bias towards what is nationally tested. Not only does this influence the teaching strategies used, it also impacts the wider curriculum. It is essential that NAPLAN is not permitted to dominate nor to narrow the classroom curriculum.

Nor should it determine what is assessed. *WAPPA is concerned that some areas of the curriculum are rarely assessed, and that this affects the perception of their worth.*

The *Melbourne Declaration* identifies the importance of developing successful learners, confident and creative individuals, and active and informed citizens. Other research affirms the importance of contemporary skills, sometimes called 21st century skills. These include intellectual skills (e.g. critical thinking), personal values (e.g. persistence), relational values (e.g. honesty), and spiritual values (e.g. a sense of purpose). Making student learning in these areas visible requires sophisticated tools and strategies. While relevant assessment instruments are available, the choice of skills and values and their operational definitions are often contextual, so there is a need to adapt instruments to the Australian context. The nature of these skills highlights the need for several assessment instruments to be used and the evidence triangulated.

It should be noted that assessment has socio-emotional consequences. When assessment focuses on identifying what students don't know, it may have a negative emotional and attitudinal impact, causing student anxiety, demoralisation, loss of self-esteem and sometimes affecting their peer group relationships. Assessment must motivate and focus learning and enhance students' self-awareness and self-esteem.

Assertion 5: Assessment information should be obtained from a range of appropriate strategies.

It is sometimes argued that only externally designed tests produce worthwhile assessment data. Although they provide only a snapshot of learning, such tests have their place:

- » They provide a check of the standards of the teacher, school or system against national standards. When the data is collated over several years, systems and schools may identify trends and issues.
- » They can show a student's progress over time, if the next test in a series is administered, or, as with NAPLAN, tests are equated from one calendar year to the next.
- » They provide numerical data which is perceived to be relatively easy to read and compare (albeit sometimes wrongly).

However, teacher assessment information in the form of 'spot checks', anecdotes, work samples, reports, checklists, rubrics and other records is rich in information and implication. Such information is more comprehensive than information obtained in a single snapshot.

It is important to gather evidence of learning using a range of strategies in a range of contexts, so that a multi-dimensional image of the learning can be obtained.

WAPPA is concerned that NAPLAN data alone is assumed adequate to answer a range of questions: Has this student understood this concept? How well is this teacher teaching? How well is this school performing? How well is this principal leading the school? Are the government's education policies succeeding? Should this syllabus be reviewed? Is this the best school for my child? Is my child learning as well as they are able?

While NAPLAN data has the potential to inform systems and sectors about overall education trends across schools, and to assist schools to monitor the progress of various groups of students, it is presumptuous to assume that numerical data collected from snapshots of student performance and aggregated across all schools can be used to evaluate the success of a government policy or the effectiveness of a specific teacher, principal or school.

WAPPA considers it inappropriate to use NAPLAN data to compare one school with another, to assess the quality of teaching and leadership within a school or to inform teachers about how to improve learning for particular students.

It takes time for the impact of high level policies to display credible trends, and those trends are influenced by multiple and complex factors and observed in a range of indicators. Similarly, the effectiveness of a school, principal or teacher is influenced by complex factors and observed in numerous variables. Student achievement alone is an inadequate measure. It is more appropriate to consider each question and to locate or create an instrument — or, more usefully, a range of instruments or strategies — to provide information which will enable that question to be answered with some confidence.

Assertion 6: All assessment strategies and instruments have strengths and limitations.

All strategies have limitations. It is simplistic to suggest that some assessment strategies are accurate and others are not. As such Assessment information must be obtained, interpreted and used cautiously.

WAPPA is concerned that the use of NAPLAN data to evaluate the performance of educators has resulted in an over-reliance by teachers, principals and system leaders (even an obsession with) standardised tests; a decline in teachers' confidence in using their own assessments; and a desire by teachers and principals to justify their performance with numerical data, no matter how inappropriately devised or analysed.

The accuracy of any measurement is affected by the quality of the instrument used to measure. Assessments, therefore, must be:

- » Valid - measuring what they claim to measure.
- » Reliable - inspiring confidence in the information they provide.
- » Fair and ethical - relevant to the learning intentions.
- » Practical and manageable - in terms of the time and organisation required to create, administer and mark them and to review the information
- » Worthwhile - producing information which teachers and students can use to focus their teaching and learning.

Teachers should review whether the assessment strategies and instruments they use fulfil these criteria and revise or discard those which fail the test.

In addition, the notion that mathematical analysis is always right or wrong, with no shades between, leads people to assume that statistics are unquestionably accurate, and numerical data unchallengeable. All assessment data contains measurement error. It is a consequence of the assumptions which underpin the assessment and the statistical manipulation of the data. Any assessment of learning should be treated as an approximation, subject to unavoidable errors.

Further manipulation of the data is likely to exaggerate statistical errors and conclusions based on the data must always be tentative. Conclusions based on average scores conceal critical information. Research has shown there is greater variation between scores within a school than across all schools. When schools are compared, they are graded on the curve. For every school which improves its ranking, another must regress. There will always be schools at the 'bottom' of the scale, although the particular schools may change from year to year. While standards of achievement may increase throughout the system, most schools, by statistical definition, are 'average'.

At government and system levels, statistical complexity may inhibit an appreciation of the caveats in the results, leading to misinterpretation or over-interpretation and, as a consequence, inappropriate conclusions and inappropriate policy decisions. Few people have high-level training in statistics and even professional statisticians often disagree on the accuracy of data and the appropriateness of conclusions formed from it.

WAPPA is concerned that the focus on statistical test data has led to over-complex data analysis by those seeking to argue a case at a level which few people can comprehend, let alone question. Further, WAPPA is concerned some academics encourage teachers to statistically analyse assessment data.

While an awareness of statistical error, effect sizes and other statistical concepts is helpful, it is not productive for school staff to make these calculations, nor to labour over their meaning. Test designers should provide data in a format readily accessed and interpreted by teachers.

It must be remembered, that class-based assessments and observations also have their strengths and weaknesses.

Teachers have profound and comprehensive knowledge of the curriculum and students' strengths. They are skilled in making judgements about student learning. Teacher-based assessments are far richer than standardised tests. They allow deeper analysis of each student's learning and provide clearer guidance for the next steps of learning.

Teacher judgements do have limitations when used to monitor trends across schools, cohorts or classes. If various teacher-based information is to be used, then a moderation process is needed to ensure there is comparability between assessment data and judgements made.

Assertion 7: Assessment is a professional skill and responsibility.

Effective teachers are assessment literate. Teachers must be able to read, interpret and critique assessment information, evaluate the relative merit of various assessment tools and strategies, and use assessments to assist students to learn and to improve their own teaching.

Each teacher must find ways to use assessments which fit with their teaching style, are appropriate to the age and nature of their students and are relevant to the particular learning area or content. Because most primary teachers teach across a range of learning areas, they may need to develop approaches specific to each learning area.

There is a difference between reading information and interpreting it. Effective teachers are able to distinguish between what assessment information shows (within the bounds of statistical error) and what it implies. They are able to form tentative inferences to explain the information, to use their observations and inferences to inform their teaching and school-based decisions, and to gather further evidence to review their actions.

School leaders may need to review the understandings and abilities of their teachers in this area and to find ways to enhance those skills. School-based models of professional learning, which include rigorous discussion, auditing of assessment practices, and peer modelling and observation, are likely to bring the best results.

Schools must be discriminating about the quality of the assessment data collected. More is not necessarily better and numerical information is not necessarily better than anecdotal and observational information.

Quantitative reporting to parents is not necessarily better than qualitative reporting. Numerical data is by no means transparent and parents are often confused by it: Does a grade of C or a score of 70% represent expected or inadequate achievement? If the class mean was 50%, does that mean my child is performing well, or the class is very average, or the teacher is unskilled? How can my school be in the top echelon of schools last year, based on NAPLAN data, yet well below that range this year, with the same teachers? On the *My School* website, do the red marks indicate that my school is failing, and if my school has red marks year after year, should I move my child to another school? If the government's policies are effective, will all schools eventually have just green marks?

WAPPA is concerned that the Australian Government's requirement that teachers report in grades, a process contrary to the philosophy of many early childhood and primary teachers, has resulted in teachers spending unreasonable time and stress trying to justify each measure and explain it to parents, rather than providing parents with a clear statement of the child's successes, struggles and progress.

Without resorting to 'spin', school principals should report school assessment data to parents in ways they can understand and explain what actions are taken each year to ensure students learn as well as they are able. They must also ensure that teachers are able to report effectively to parents in ways which tell parents what they want to know and what teachers feel they need to know, using language which parents can understand and illustrative assessment information (e.g. tests, rubrics, work samples, notes).

Assessment literacy means having a common language of assessment within a school, being able to debate assessment issues rigorously and articulately, and having the knowledge and language to describe assessment in appropriate terms for students and parents. It includes ensuring that parents and students are aware of the school's understandings of the purposes of assessment, the process, what information is gathered, and how the information is analysed, communicated and used.

WAPPA is concerned that the use of NAPLAN and My School is inappropriately shaping the community's understanding of what constitutes quality education.

The wider educational and community debate about assessment and standards should be led by school-based educators. In the absence of clear and articulate explanations by educators in language which parents can understand, journalists and politicians lead the discussion. Principals must teach all members of the school community about assessment through newsletters, parent meetings, assemblies, conversations and other means. They must also ensure that teachers understand the issues and are able to articulate them to parents, using shared and consistent language and making consistent assertions.

Assertion 8: Assessment informs school improvement.

Assessment information informs school-wide decisions, including interventions and initiatives. Analysis of assessment data, aggregated into classes, cohorts, genders and other groupings, charted over time, can identify trends and patterns. This enables the school to suggest explanations and test these by changing structures, school culture, expectations of students and staff, teacher skills, and so on. While many educators speak of 'data-driven' actions, it is perhaps more appropriate that decisions are 'informed' by (amongst other things) assessment data.

WAPPA is concerned that the accountability expectations of systems and governments have created a culture in which the collection of assessment data has become the dominant performance criterion for some schools and teachers.

WAPPA understands that some schools administer a plethora of commercially available standardised tests, and analyse and display the data in complex ways, in order to add credibility to their work and impress authorities. In such schools assessment is an institutionalised procedure, rather than a purposeful element of teaching.

Schools should regularly review what assessment data is being collected by teachers and the school, how often, the reason, the quality of the data provided, how accessible and useful it is for teachers, and what impact it has on improving teaching and learning. They should discontinue the use of those strategies which do not provide information which is useful and accessible to teachers and students and which do not demonstrably improve teaching and learning.

There are several challenges:

- » To locate the information, not just standardised test information, but teacher assessments and judgements.
- » To report it usefully, so that staff can see how the school is doing in various areas of the curriculum.
- » To identify where further information is needed.

Acquiring and interpreting information about student learning is the responsibility of the school, not just the individual teacher. While much assessment information will be obtained and used by a teacher as part of their own teaching, neither the assessment process nor the assessment information should be considered secret. Assessment practices and the use of assessment data should be defined by a philosophy and policy.

Data which has comparability between classes and cohorts should be reviewed by all or groups of teachers and used to inform a rigorous discussion about what the school as a whole, and teachers individually, might do to improve the learning — and not simply on what students need to do.

This requires conversations which are focused on improving student learning (not on apportioning blame), are rational and defensible, informed by data rather than feelings or personal interest and seek to move from observation to explanation to action.

In a sense, this returns the discussion to the first assertion, that the purpose of assessment is to improve teaching and learning, and to the *Melbourne Declaration* and its commitment to ensuring that assessment is rigorous and comprehensive, reflects the curriculum and draws on a combination of the professional judgement of teachers and testing.

Recommendations

This paper has identified a number of concerns about the collection and use of assessment information by teachers, schools, systems, governments and academics. As a result, WAPPA recommends that school leaders:

1. Develop a whole of school understanding around the meaning, purpose and implementation of assessment of learning, assessment for learning, assessment as learning and assessment for teachers.
2. Review, in collaboration with staff, the school's collective understanding and practice of assessment, asking such questions as:
 - 2.1. How do teachers use assessment in their classrooms?
 - 2.2. What does the staff collectively understand (or believe) about assessment?
 - 2.3. Are these understandings consistent with research and sound practice?
 - 2.4. In what ways do the actions of teachers and the policies and procedures of the school reflect the agreed understandings about assessment?
 - 2.5. What might the school change about its assessment policies and procedures?
 - 2.6. What would inhibit implementation of those changes?
 - 2.7. What might teachers change about their assessment practices?
 - 2.8. What would inhibit implementation of those changes?
3. Develop assessment literacy and capacity through professional learning experiences.
4. Encourage teachers to:
 - 4.1. Gather a range of information about student learning, using a variety of assessment strategies; use the information to inform and refine their teaching; and seek to continually refine their assessment skills as part of their professional toolkit.
 - 4.2. Ensure that students are familiar with what they are assessed on, how and why. This includes preparing them for the styles of questions used in standardised tests, and any other assessment strategies, but not allowing preparation for NAPLAN and other standardised tests to overwhelm students, nor to dominate or constrain the curriculum and limit effective teaching.
 - 4.3. Ensure that students are taught self-assessment processes, including how to provide evidence to show they have achieved each of the success criteria.
5. Explore open and visible ways to meet the curriculum assessment demands imposed by the system, while implementing practices that are consistent with the professional views of staff.
6. Adopt a policy that defines the school's shared understandings about assessment, defines a range of assessment strategies, and explains how assessment information gathered is used to improve teaching and learning.
7. Incorporate into the school's planning cycle a regular review (every two or three years) of assessment practices — including the collection, interpretation and use of assessment information — to ensure that all assessment is used to improve teaching and learning.
8. Continue to encourage classroom-based assessment as a primary tool to assist student learning.
9. Conduct moderation of student standards in a team environment, with the assistance of an appropriate facilitator, not only to moderate grades for reporting, but to maximise the opportunity for teachers to closely analyse students' work and better understand how students learn.
10. Use Brightpath as a tool to support moderation for reporting and for learning.

From theory to action: WAPPA's response

WAPPA has a significant role within the education profession, and specifically, among school leaders. One of the purposes of this paper was to indicate ways in which WAPPA might support school leaders in their leadership of assessment policies and practices within their school and work with governments and systems to improve the impact of large scale assessment programs on teaching and learning.

WAPPA is aware that the sources and structures of support available to schools have changed and believes that the level of support has diminished. As a professional association, WAPPA has committed to providing curriculum support to schools through school leaders, as resources allow.

WAPPA is receptive to requests and suggestions as to how the tasks might be accomplished. In consultation with a sample of school leaders, WAPPA will review this paper and respond by identifying and committing to a range of actions.

Further reading

School Curriculum and Standards Authority (SCSA), Government of Western Australia, *Principles of assessment*, updated 2015. <http://k10outline.scsa.wa.edu.au/home/principles/guiding-principles/teaching-learning-and-assessment-principles>

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