

School tests unfair for Indigenous students

Thirty recommendations made to help preserve Indigenous languages.

A parliamentary inquiry has found standardised NAPLAN assessments for Indigenous language-speaking students are unfair and should not be used in early school years.

The recommendation is one of 30 in a report on language learning in Indigenous communities by the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs.

The report – *Our land, our languages* – highlights the importance of recognising, encouraging and preserving the 18 most commonly used Indigenous languages still spoken by communities in Australia.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children who speak a traditional language or creole as their first language are currently tested using the National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN), which applies standardised tests across Australia.

The committee said this had a negative impact on Indigenous language-speaking students because it assumed they were already fluent in standard Australian English.

“These assessments are liable to make false assumptions about learning contexts and about age-appropriate knowledge of standard Australian English,” the report noted. “In addition to being misleading, in painting a negative portrait of learners, assessments that fail to take account of these issues impact negatively on learners’ sense of worth and ongoing engagement with formal education.”

Committee chair Shayne Neumann (Blair, Qld) said these tests may contribute to disengagement with formal education.

“NAPLAN does not adequately or appropriately demonstrate what Indigenous children with traditional first languages can do or what they actually know,” he said.

Deputy chair Sharman Stone (Murray, Vic) said the recommendation



TESTING TIMES: *Indigenous students disadvantaged by standardised tests*

to provide more meaningful tests would help prevent the negative consequences associated with receiving ‘unsatisfactory’ marks.

“If the children in the classroom don’t speak standard Australian English then we should not test them with an instrument that is meant to name, blame and shame the school and the teachers because the children have failed,” Dr Stone said, referring to the results being published on the *My School* website.

“That website is visited so often by family looking at how their school is performing, and it’s looked at by teachers considered going and teaching at that school, so it’s a very powerful symbol if the school looks to have failed. That’s not fair.”

Mr Neumann said the committee believed ramping up bilingual education would reverse decline in school attendance rates.

“We had strong evidence that bilingual education works – and works well – for children whose primary language is their mother language, a contact language or creole,” he said.

Dr Stone said one of the committee’s recommendations was to provide all children with a ‘first language assessment’ when they enter the education system.

“Teachers across Australia often encounter children coming to school without English. For any child when they arrive in their earliest formal education experience, they need to have their home language acknowledged, understood, and have that child learn from the basis of that language... not immediately be overwhelmed by English,” she said.

Dr Stone said it should also be compulsory for teachers to learn how to teach English as an additional language or dialect.

“It’s not new, it’s not rocket science: Australian teachers should have capacity to teach to a multilingual school group. We have ignored that basic fundamental need for a very long time,” she said.

Other recommendations include acknowledging Indigenous languages in the constitution; establishing a national interpreting service, especially for the health and justice systems; and opening up alternative career pathways for Indigenous language speakers who work alongside English speaking teachers in classrooms to receive formal teaching qualifications of their own.

The committee received 154 submissions and held 23 public hearings during its review. ●

LINKS

www.aph.gov.au/atsia
atsia.reps@aph.gov.au
 (02) 6277 4559