



RESEARCH REPORT SNAPSHOT



Why We Need NAPLAN

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The National Assessment Plan – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) is a crucial national assessment that covers four domains – reading, writing, language conventions (spelling, grammar, and punctuation), and numeracy – for students in Years 3, 5, 7, and 9.

NAPLAN tests have been the subject of controversy since they were first introduced by the Rudd Labor government in 2008, and particularly since the availability of school results on the MySchool website from 2010. The strongest critics have been teacher unions, while parent groups have generally been supportive.

What are the benefits of NAPLAN?

There are three major benefits of NAPLAN:

1. Tool to improve schools and teaching

NAPLAN results enable the identification of problems in the school system over time and a means for evaluating potential solutions, from the national level all the way down to individual students.

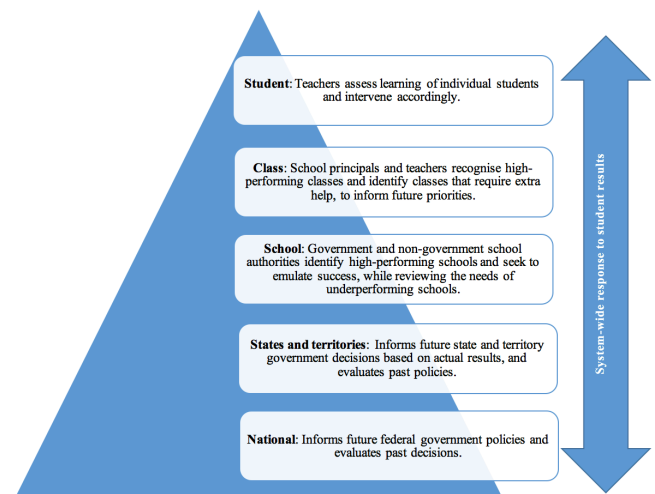
NAPLAN results – being objective, standardised data – help to improve literacy and numeracy on different levels.

2. Transparency

NAPLAN results are published on an aggregate national and state and territory level. This ensures there is transparency regarding literacy and numeracy results. If a particular state is significantly underperforming, for example, this is made public so all Australians have the same knowledge.

The MySchool website shows results at the school level. This transparency empowers parents to make decisions regarding their child's education, and ensures school-

Figure 1: Levels of use of NAPLAN data



based assessments are presenting an accurate picture of a student's performance consistent with national standards. If individual schools are underperforming, all parents have equal access to information showing that this is the case.

3. Accountability

NAPLAN holds governments and schools accountable for literacy and numeracy results. This is important, given the significant financial investment made in schools by taxpayers and parents.

Without NAPLAN, there would be no standardised data by which to measure literacy and numeracy nationwide in a way that holds governments and schools to account for their results.

What are the common criticisms of NAPLAN?

There are four common criticisms of NAPLAN:

1. No significant improvement since NAPLAN was first introduced in 2008

It is unreasonable to blame the NAPLAN tests for lack of further improvement, as NAPLAN identifies issues in the school system and does not solve them by itself. A test cannot be blamed for a lack of improvement — this would be analogous to blaming a thermometer for a hot day.

NAPLAN results have improved significantly in some states and assessment domains since 2008, and the overall trend has been positive, with the exception of writing skills.

Even if the measure of NAPLAN's success was the national trend in results — and there are good reasons to argue it is not — then it is incorrect to argue NAPLAN has failed on this basis.

2. Harms students

A frequent argument against NAPLAN is that it harms students and causes stress. This claim is based on surveys and small studies with serious methodological issues and conflicting findings. A strong conclusion cannot be drawn based on the existing evidence to date.

It is not clear that testing by itself harms students. Low-level student anxiety in preparation for any test is normal, and this is very different from serious mental health issues or even undue temporary levels of distress.

3. Publication of results on MySchool website harms schools

It has often been argued that publication of NAPLAN results on the MySchool website harms schools by making them focus excessively on doing well on NAPLAN tests

But there have been no rigorous studies of how parents use MySchool data, and no substantial evidence to suggest MySchool has a negative effect on schools. Academic

achievement is one of many factors parents use in choosing a school.

It is far better for parents to have access to objective NAPLAN data in their decision-making, rather than having to rely solely on other factors like school reputation, school uniforms, and school websites.

4. The NAPLAN tests are too narrow

Reading, writing, spelling, grammar, and numeracy are all necessary skills for students to succeed in later education and career paths. NAPLAN has been criticised for only assessing these areas and not broader skills, but it has not been established that general capabilities like creativity and critical thinking can be taught or assessed effectively.

It is appropriate for schools to focus on literacy and numeracy, given the large number of Australian children who do not have adequate skills in these essential areas.

The Future for NAPLAN

NAPLAN should be retained, because it has major benefits; and claims that it harms the school system have not been confirmed by reliable evidence.

The suggested alternative to NAPLAN of having a sample test would be inadequate. A sample test would not have the same major benefits of NAPLAN, could not be used as a tool to help individual students, and would not promote school transparency and accountability.

Moving NAPLAN tests online will have significant benefits, including providing more timely results to schools to facilitate earlier intervention and allowing for computer-adjusted testing that is tailored to individual student ability.

In the financial year 2015-16, \$55.7 billion of taxpayer money was spent in recurrent funding for schools, of which \$42.4 billion was spent on the government school system. NAPLAN is an important measure of the return on this investment, and provides valuable information for schools, teachers, parents, and students.

Box 1: What should a possible review of NAPLAN consider?

There are growing calls for a review of NAPLAN. A review could add value if it addressed the following five questions:

1. How can NAPLAN data be used more effectively as a tool to improve student outcomes on an individual, class, school, state, and national level? How can student gain data be combined with student achievement data to give a better measure of student performance over time?
2. What is preventing schools and systems from responding more effectively to low or static NAPLAN results to create improvement?
3. How can the purpose and benefits of NAPLAN be better communicated to stakeholders?
4. Can NAPLAN be administered better so as to minimize any stress or inconvenience for teachers, parents, and students?
5. Is NAPLAN testing currently too broad or too narrow? If so, how can NAPLAN questions be improved in future?

An independent review chaired by an expert panel with terms of reference like these could be beneficial for Australia's school system, and ensure NAPLAN continues to improve as an educational tool that also provides transparency and accountability.

But a review with terms of reference questioning the existence of NAPLAN is not justified by the evidence to date.

Author

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