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# Submission to NAPLAN Reporting Review 2019

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**The Centre for Independent Studies (CIS)**

**Blaise Joseph, Research Fellow  
Dr Jennifer Buckingham, Senior Research Fellow**



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## Executive Summary

- The Centre for Independent Studies (CIS) welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to NAPLAN Reporting Review 2019.
- NAPLAN provides a high quality school, system, state and national overview of student achievement in foundational educational skills.
- NAPLAN is a key element of government transparency and accountability
- There is very little evidence of widespread misuse or misinterpretation of MySchool.
- There is some evidence that high-achieving schools use NAPLAN data to track student progress and improve teaching over time.
- There is also evidence that Australian parents care about literacy and numeracy skills, and often find the NAPLAN results published on MySchool helpful.
- The availability of NAPLAN results on MySchool facilitates parents making an informed school choice if they wish; but there is no evidence of a dramatic effect on school enrolments.
- MySchool is generally easy to understand and has clear caveats regarding the interpretation of results. Only minor changes are necessary.
- A sample test instead of a population test would not have the major benefits of NAPLAN. In particular, it would not provide all parents with the option to receive individualised results.
- The transition to NAPLAN online is an opportunity to improve the timeliness and accuracy of results.
- The CIS published a research report examining the benefits and common criticisms of NAPLAN and MySchool, *Why We Need NAPLAN*, in May 2018.<sup>1</sup> This submission is based partly on the research report, which is attached as an annexure.
- NAPLAN and My School are valued by parents and the public, and should be retained. While there may be room for some improvements their benefits outweigh the alleged negative impacts.

# 1. Perceptions of NAPLAN and My School data, including the potential for misinterpretation or misuse of data

Does the NAPLAN data currently available on the My School website provide an appropriate balance between the right to high quality information and the possibility of misinterpretation or misuse?

There is very little rigorous evidence to suggest that the NAPLAN data currently available on MySchool is being misinterpreted or misused. Use of MySchool is voluntary — only parents who are interested in their child’s school’s NAPLAN results use it, and the website has existed since 2011 without any clear documented negative consequences. Furthermore, the website contains numerous caveats and presents the data in multiple formats, which reduces the possibility of data misuse or misinterpretation.

The evidence for misuse or misinterpretation of MySchool is mostly anecdotal. There have been no recent rigorous large-sample studies examining how the publishing of NAPLAN results on MySchool influence school choice. There have been some surveys and studies considering how MySchool data is used:

- A 2018 ACARA survey:<sup>2</sup>
  - Sample of 1,228 parents.
  - Found one third of parents have used MySchool.
  - Among parents who had used MySchool, a majority had used it to see how their child is performing in literacy and numeracy, to inform decisions in relation to their child’s education, and to fairly compare their child’s schools’ performance with similar schools.
- A 2013 Newspoll survey:<sup>3</sup>
  - Sample of 568 parents.
  - Found 17% of parents said they had visited the MySchool website in the past 12 months in order to compare the NAPLAN results of their child’s school with others.
- A 2013 Grattan Institute study:<sup>4</sup>
  - Analysed a sample of 1,361 schools.
  - Found a weak relationship between change in NAPLAN scores and change in school enrolments
  - Indicates that My School did not have a dramatic impact on enrolments.
- A 2012 survey:<sup>5</sup>
  - Sample of 1,062 school principals, based off on an earlier survey of all school principals with a response rate of 21%.
  - Found 67% of principals said the MySchool website had a neutral effect on their school, 24% said it had a negative effect, and 8% said it had a positive effect.
- A 2012 survey:<sup>6</sup>
  - Sample of 8,353 teachers.
  - Teachers were invited to participate in the survey through Australian teacher unions.
  - The survey response rate was only 4%.
  - The survey has serious methodological issues, with all participants being from teacher unions, a very low response rate, and probably teachers who had strong negative perceptions of NAPLAN and MySchool were far more likely to respond to the survey.
  - Found 72% of teachers said the purpose of NAPLAN is to rank schools and 46% said it was to assist parent choice.

- Found 93% of teachers said poor results would negatively impact a school’s ability to attract and retain students, and 65% said poor results would have a negative impact on a school’s ability to attract or retain teachers.
- It is problematic to rely on teacher responses alone regarding how parents generally use NAPLAN data published on the MySchool website, as their perspective tends to be from inside of the school system.
- A 2012 study:<sup>7</sup>
  - Small case study of just five families.
  - Found the participating families did not use available data on the MySchool website in the process of choosing a school.
  - Given the very small sample size, few conclusions can be inferred from this study.
- A 2014 survey:<sup>8</sup>
  - Conducted by Independent Schools Queensland; sample of 1,048 parents across 67 independent schools.
  - Found just 5% of parents accessed the MySchool website when considering school selection.
  - Strong academic performance was only the ninth most important factor for parents in choosing a school.
  - The survey is not of a random sample and is not intended to be a scientific study, so limited conclusions can be drawn from it. But it does challenge the perception that parents are excessively concerned with the published school results on the MySchool website.

The small and limited amount of existing evidence does not enable a strong conclusion regarding how MySchool data is used by parents or the overall impact of the website on schools. Based on the available evidence, however, it appears MySchool data is only one factor among many considered by parents in choosing schools and the availability of NAPLAN results does not seem to have a significant effect on enrolments. It is obvious parents will make a school choice based on all available information, and data on academic achievement are one factor. Therefore, the evidence for widespread misuse or misinterpretation of MySchool is weak.

### Is there anything you find difficult to understand or is there any different NAPLAN information you would like to see included on My School?

The NAPLAN information on the MySchool website is already made easy to understand through the presentation in multiple formats — both numbers and graphs — and the use of colour-coding to designate above or below average scores.

One possible addition that could be considered is results from state and territory Year 12 assessments for high schools. This addition may be logistically difficult to include, but would have significant benefits. It would give parents information about the academic performance of a high school beyond Year 9, and also alleviate the concerns that the MySchool website academic achievement data relies too much on one set of tests. More comprehensive information on high school performance over time at a central information source would be helpful for many parents.

### Is the explanatory material on My School around “statistically similar schools” sufficiently explained, easy to understand and does this support fair comparisons for schools?

The explanatory material on MySchool concerning statistically similar schools is both easy to understand and sound from a statistical perspective. This is currently the default option when viewing NAPLAN results for a school, so it does support a fair comparison for schools.

It is important, however, to also retain the results for every school compared to the national average, not just the average of statistically similar schools. The ability to compare a school's absolute performance compared to the national average — rather than just its relative performance compared to previous years or other similar schools — facilitates a far more rigorous assessment of a school's results.

### What consideration should be given to comparisons over time and between schools while schools progressively transition to NAPLAN online?

Changes in national assessments create significant difficulties in comparisons over time and between schools. The trend line is essentially broken when a new form or mode of assessment is introduced, as it is not possible to completely obviate the impact of the change on student results.

One way to preserve a trend line for a population is to run a sample of the old assessment (e.g. paper-based NAPLAN) for several years concurrent with the new assessment (e.g. NAPLAN online) and report both sets of results. It may be too late to do this with the transition to NAPLAN online, but it would be advisable to do so.

## 2. How My School and NAPLAN reporting contribute to understanding of student progress and achievement

To what extent do schools and school systems use NAPLAN student progress and achievement data, including comparisons with statistically similar schools, to inform their school improvement strategies?

A recent CIS research project involved conducting interviews with school principals and staff at nine top-performing disadvantaged schools (based on NAPLAN data and ICSEA scores). All nine principals at these high-achieving schools indicate they use NAPLAN data to improve literacy and numeracy teaching, as an external benchmark against which the progress of the school or individual students can be measured. Examples include monitoring school-wide trends overtime, identifying particular areas the school needs to improve, determining the work of learning support specialists for the next year, having a comparison for teacher-written test results, and tracking individual student and cohort growth.

This provides some evidence to suggest high-achieving schools are utilising NAPLAN data to improve student performance over time.

To what extent is whole-population assessment data necessary to meet school systems' and governments' need for sound information to support school improvement?

Whole-population assessment data are necessary to support school system improvement over time. Collecting data on every student makes it possible to track progress from the national level all the way down to individual students, using an objective benchmark that is comparable between school systems and students. This also means greater confidence can be placed in conclusions drawn from the data.

A sample test — instead of a population test which assesses all students — has been proposed as an alternative to the current NAPLAN. But the main benefits of population NAPLAN would be undermined if it was a sample test:

- *Tool to improve schools and teaching.* A sample test would mean NAPLAN results could not be used as a tool to guide individual student or class or school teaching, because only a small proportion of students and schools would be assessed regularly, and the sample group would change each year.
- *Transparency.* There would no longer be transparency regarding student outcomes at the school level. Parents would not have any consistent objective data upon which to base their assessment of local school performance, and instead would be forced to attempt to assess performance based on a number of subjective indicators like reputation.
- *Accountability.* School systems, schools, and governments would no longer be accountable for literacy and numeracy results throughout all of primary and secondary school. Schools could be significantly underperforming while parents would have no knowledge.

International tests that are based on samples, such as PISA and TIMSS, are only sample tests because of necessity and practicality. It is unnecessary for the OECD's purposes to assess all school students in participating countries. But in contrast, it has already been proven for 10 years that it is possible and practical to conduct a yearly national test for all Australian students.

In addition, a sample test would inevitably include some biases compared to a population test. It would be difficult to find a random national sample of students that accurately assesses national performance, or state and territory performance. Governments could dismiss the results of such a test on the grounds of methodology, unlike a population test.

It is clear the alternative of a sample test would be completely insufficient for the purposes of a national literacy and numeracy assessment.



### **3. How schools use achievement data, including NAPLAN, to inform teaching**

What opportunities are there to improve the timeliness of NAPLAN reporting?

The transition to NAPLAN online should be seen as an opportunity to enhance the utility of the data by minimising schools' wait to receive results, and giving a more responsive and therefore accurate assessment of student performance. In the recent CIS research project cited above, involving nine high-achieving disadvantaged schools, principals mentioned they were looking forward to the transition to all NAPLAN tests being conducted online. The main benefit cited was that it will reduce the wait for test results from months to weeks, thereby making the results more timely and more useful for informing teaching practice — in addition to other benefits, such as lessening the administrative burden and allowing for testing catered to individual student ability.

## 4. How My School and NAPLAN data are reported to students and parents

To what extent do parents and families use NAPLAN data on My School to make informed judgements, make choices and engage with their children's education?

School choice is firmly embedded in Australia's school system. Over one third of students attend a non-government school,<sup>9</sup> more than double the OECD average of 16%.<sup>10</sup> This means ensuring parents have the data necessary to make an informed school choice is especially important in Australia.

There is some evidence that parents generally value the NAPLAN data on MySchool. The 2018 ACARA survey of parents mentioned above found a third of parents had used MySchool, and three-quarters of parents believed it is important for parents to access MySchool and the information it provides.<sup>11</sup> Among parents who had used MySchool, a majority had used it to see how their child is performing in literacy and numeracy, to inform decisions in relation to their child's education, and to fairly compare their child's schools' performance with similar schools.

News reports indicate a significant recent increase in the number of users on the MySchool website, rising from 839,000 in 2015 to 1.74 million in 2017.<sup>12</sup>

More broadly, Australian parents are concerned about their children's literacy and numeracy skills. A recent Monash University survey of more than 2,000 Australians found 70% of people think basic literacy and numeracy are the most important part of education, and 75% think maths and English should be prioritised.<sup>13</sup> The NAPLAN data on MySchool helps parents understand their child's progress in these key learning areas and provides a useful cross-check with teacher assessment of student progress.

It is preferable for parents to include academic achievement in their decision making. Using NAPLAN results to inform school choice — an objective measure of school performance — is better than the alternative of just relying upon school reputation, school websites, and school location. Parents being able to make choices based on the academic achievement of schools is a significant benefit of the MySchool website.

It is also likely that if future results were not published on the MySchool website, many parents would still use the last year of published NAPLAN results to determine school choice; which is an inferior measure to more up-to-date information. Given parents will make a choice of school regardless, it is better the choice is informed by all available information — including the latest NAPLAN results.

**What NAPLAN reporting information do students need in order to contribute to their own education?**

Individual student NAPLAN reports list the questions in each assessment that the student answered correctly and incorrectly. This allows students who are interested in knowing how they might have achieved a higher score to identify areas they may need to work on. Because NAPLAN online will provide this information to students with less delay than the paper NAPLAN, students will be able to respond to the results more quickly.

## About The Centre for Independent Studies



The Centre for Independent Studies (CIS) is the leading independent public policy think tank in Australia. Founded in 1976, our work is informed by a commitment to the principles underpinning a free and open society:

- individual liberty and choice, including freedom of association, religion, speech and the right to property;
- an economy based on free markets;
- democratic government under the rule of law; and
- an autonomous and free civil society.

The CIS works on aspects of social and economic policy affecting Australia. The Centre prides itself on being independent and non-partisan in its funding and research. It is funded by donations from individuals, companies, and charitable trusts, as well as by subscriptions and events.

‘Independent’ in our name means:

- we are politically non-partisan;
- our research is not directed by our supporters; and
- we are financially independent of government.

## Endnotes

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- <sup>1</sup> Joseph, B. 2018. *Why We Need NAPLAN*. The Centre for Independent Studies. <http://www.cis.org.au/publications/research-reports/why-we-need-naplan/>
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- <sup>10</sup> OECD. 2016. *PISA 2015 Results, Policies and Practices for Successful Schools: Volume II*. <http://www.oecd.org/education/pisa-2015-results-volume-ii-9789264267510-en.htm> p. 124
- <sup>11</sup> ACARA. 2019
- <sup>12</sup> Courier Mail. 2018. *Parents in support of NAPLAN*. Print edition, 4 April 2018
- <sup>13</sup> Leahy, D., & Selwyn, N. 2019. *Public opinions on Australian schools and schooling*. Monash University. [https://www.monash.edu/data/assets/pdf\\_file/0005/1653548/Education-Futures-Research-Report-Public-Opinions.pdf](https://www.monash.edu/data/assets/pdf_file/0005/1653548/Education-Futures-Research-Report-Public-Opinions.pdf) pp. 10, 12