

# Time to get schooled

It is unfortunate that there is so much contention surrounding NAPLAN in Australia. To make matters worse, there are ill-informed news articles and opinion pieces written on the topic. Do parents and society as a whole really understand why we participate in a national testing regime or are they merely forced onto the bandwagon of bad press?

A key takeaway from your university days as a teacher would have to be the 'Plan-Teach-Learn-Assess' cycle. Without assessment, we are oblivious to how students are progressing, and we are also ignorant of how we, as educators, can improve.

Principals also analyse classroom data. Their outlook is that from a whole school perspective:

- Why are spelling results weak across the school?
- Students have shown little progression in numeracy – what's going wrong here? Etc.

Data keeps schools and systems accountable. Catholic, Government and Independent Education systems need to analyse strengths and weaknesses to make strategic plans for improvement. Perhaps funding needs to be dedicated to up-skilling teachers in numeracy, or maybe the school needs to invest in a spelling intervention program. These questions can't be answered without assessment data. Student assessment is as much about teacher improvement as it is about student improvement. NAPLAN Data is about national improvement – the same principle, but on a grander scale.

## WHY IS THERE NAPLAN TESTING?

NAPLAN testing is Australia's only form of national testing. This data helps school systems and the Government identify areas for improvement. It is because of NAPLAN that we can participate in the OECD's PISA (Program for International Student Assessment) and compare student performance against other countries. Have you seen those news articles about Australia's literacy and numeracy rankings compared to other countries? Well, it is because of our participation in national testing (NAPLAN) and the PISA program that

we can measure this. Australia's results in the PISA program draw attention to our educational celebrations but also to our deficits. By participating in PISA, Australia's political stakeholders can make well-informed decisions about a wide variety of educational reforms, including investments in education initiatives. NAPLAN data also provides parents with information about local schools via the My Schools website. Do parents like having access to this information? If so, thank NAPLAN.

## WHAT ABOUT THE KIDS?

Parents and schools should make as little fuss as possible about the NAPLAN tests. They should be treated like any other school test; simply try your very best. This is a great life lesson. Your child is bound to encounter many 'tests' in the future, more than likely from their real-life workplace. Let's put NAPLAN into perspective:

- NAPLAN testing occurs in May and schools don't receive results until September.
- Your child's NAPLAN results have no bearing on their academic reports. I acknowledge that some high schools ask for NAPLAN results upon enrolment, but it is an individual school's choice.
- NAPLAN tests occur only four times over your child's 13 years at school.
- Do schools conduct practice tests? Yes, some do. This is mainly to teach primary students how to complete a test of this nature, e.g. read all the questions carefully. It is mainly so that simple errors aren't made on the day.

## WHY ALL THE PRESSURE?

There is very little pressure on students during this time, other than to treat the tests with integrity, and do their best.

There is, however, a lot of pressure on schools and teachers. This is because NAPLAN data is a reflection of the quality of education in Australia. If we do not measure the quality of our education system, how are we expected to improve?



As stated on the ACER website, "By participating in the OECD's PISA, Australia receives an opportunity to compare student performance on a global scale, independently of school curriculum, providing insights to help continually improve our own education system both in comparison to other countries, and in relation to previous results – ensuring we strive for ongoing improvements in equity and learning outcomes for all future Australian students."

Australians should be proud that we are one of the 72 countries that participate in the PISA program. It's about raising the quality of education in Australia through informed judgments.

There is a great deal of propaganda about NAPLAN. Tests don't improve student outcomes, teachers do. NAPLAN is not the big bad wolf. The focus should not be on whether we should, or should not, participate in the PISA program. Let's shift this discussion to one where we talk about how we can improve NAPLAN tests, how we can help students feel less anxious or stressed, and how we can better educate parents about the purpose of national testing. Let's look at how we fare as a country and have serious discussions around how we can support schools, and teachers, to raise the bar in education in Australia.

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