

THE NEED FOR THE REFORM OF NAPLAN

The National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) has been a cornerstone of Australian education for 17 years, yet evidence from numerous national agencies suggests that its current format is not serving students, teachers, or schools effectively.

Despite its intended benefits the current purpose of this assessment is unknown. Yet NAPLAN has contributed to increased student stress, a narrowing of the curriculum, and an undue emphasis on high-stakes testing, while failing to improve academic standards. Research highlights the negative

consequences of such assessments, raising serious concerns about their impact on student wellbeing and educational quality¹. NAPLAN, in its current format, should not continue and must be replaced with a more effective, equitable, and supportive assessment system.

CHALLENGES OF NAPLAN

1 Narrowing of the curriculum

Schools often shift focus toward NAPLAN preparation, prioritising literacy and numeracy at the expense of other vital subjects such as science, the arts, and physical education². This limits students' exposure to a well-rounded education.

2 Increased student stress and anxiety

The high-stakes nature of NAPLAN creates significant stress for students, leading to negative effects on mental health, self-esteem, and motivation³. Reports show that many students experience anxiety, sleeplessness, and physical symptoms in the lead-up to the tests.

3 Teaching to the test

Schools face immense pressure to produce high scores, leading to a reduction in creative and critical thinking approaches in the classroom⁴. Rather than fostering deep learning, the emphasis shifts to rote memorisation and standardised responses.

4 Equity issues

High-stakes testing disproportionately affects students from disadvantaged backgrounds, as they often lack access to the same resources and support systems or life experiences as their more privileged peers⁵. As well, NAPLAN documents demonstrate a conspicuous absence of reporting about students with disability that further exacerbates existing educational inequalities⁶.

5 Negative impact on teacher morale and school reputation

The publication of NAPLAN results on the MySchool website has led to unhealthy comparisons between schools, often misrepresenting their quality and effectiveness⁷. Teachers report feeling undervalued and constrained by a system that prioritizes test results over holistic student development⁸. ▶

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RECOMMENDATIONS FOR REFORM

Given these challenges, it is imperative that a thorough review of NAPLAN's effectiveness since its inception in 2008 is undertaken to determine its true value and whether alternative assessment models would better serve Australian students (APPA, 2025). APPA advocates a move away from NAPLAN in its current form and the adoption of a more effective and equitable assessment model.

The following reforms are essential.

- 1 Move to sample cohort testing**
Instead of subjecting all students to NAPLAN, a representative sample should be assessed to fulfil national reporting requirements. This would reduce pressure while still providing valuable data for educational policy (APPA, 2019).
- 2 Eliminate public ranking of schools**
Removing NAPLAN data from the MySchool website will prevent misleading comparisons and allow schools to focus on genuine improvements rather than competition (APPA, 2014).
- 3 Develop contextualised assessments**
Future assessments must respect cultural, language, and First Nations perspectives, ensuring that testing is fair and inclusive (APPA, 2019).
- 4 Implement formative, school-based assessments**
Schools should have the autonomy and resources to develop pedagogically sound assessments that focus on student learning rather than external ranking systems.

“ APPA calls for the implementation of a fairer, more effective alternative that prioritises learning over ranking. ”

SUMMARY

NAPLAN, in its current form, is failing to support the educational growth and well-being of Australian students. While the intent is unclear, the current format creates a means of comparing all students on a single measure, NAPLAN's high-stakes nature contributes to unnecessary stress, narrows the curriculum, and negatively impacts teachers and schools. **Rather than continuing this flawed system, APPA calls for the implementation of a fairer, more effective alternative that prioritises learning over ranking.** By embracing sample cohort testing, removing school comparisons, and fostering school-based assessments, we can create an education system that truly supports student success.

- 1 Polesel, J., Rice, S., and Dulfer, N. (September 2014). 'The impact of high-stakes testing on curriculum and pedagogy: a teacher perspective from Australia.' *J. Educ. Policy* 29(5). DOI: 10.1080/02680939.2013.865082. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/264090414_The_impact_of_high-stakes_testing_on_curriculum_and_pedagogy_A_teacher_perspective_from_Australia
- 2 McGaw, B., Loudon, W., and Wyatt-Smith, C. (August 2020). 'NAPLAN Review Final Report.' https://naplanreview.com.au/pdfs/2020_NAPLAN_review_final_report.pdf
- 3 Roberts, P. and Barblett, L. (September 2024). 'Young student's views of NAPLAN: impact on wellbeing through drawn responses.' *Frontiers in education*. DOI: 10.3389/feduc.2024.1443563. <https://www.frontiersin.org/journals/education/articles/10.3389/feduc.2024.1443563/full>
- 4 'NAPLAN's covert influence on teaching and learning – research.' ACU News (30 November 2023). Accessed 28/04/2025. <https://www.acu.edu.au/about-acu/news/2023/november/naplans-covert-influence-on-teaching-and-learning-research>.
- 5 Hunter, J. & Parkinson, N. 'The new NAPLAN results make for grim reading.' *GRATTAN Institute*. Published in *The Australian Financial Review* (14 August 2024). <https://grattan.edu.au/news/the-new-naplan-results-make-for-grim-reading/>
- 6 Richardson, K. and Rollo, G. (June 2024). 'The invisible cohort: Reporting of students with disability in NAPLAN.' *Australian Journal of Education*. DOI: 10.1177/00049441241242520. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/00049441241242520>.
- 7 Longmuir, F., Wilkinson, J., & Heffernan, A. 'Learning from disruption: Why we should rethink the place of NAPLAN in our schools.' Monash University (May 2021). Accessed 29/04/2025. <https://lens.monash.edu/@education/2021/05/10/1383196/learning-from-disruption-why-we-should-rethink-the-place-of-naplan-in-our-schools>
- 8 'An Educator's Perspective: The impacts of high stakes testing on school students and their families.' Whitlam Institute (November 2012). Accessed 28/04/2025. <https://www.whitlam.org/publications/2017/10/17/an-educators-perspective-the-impacts-of-high-stakes-testing-on-school-students-and-their-families>.

Published – May 2025