

# Too much NAP, not enough PLAN: Implications of the latest NAPLAN results

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The latest NAPLAN results tell an all too familiar story: in most states there has been little or no improvement in literacy and numeracy and too many children are failing to achieve even a basic level in the fundamentals of educational achievement. Changing this will require a relentless focus on effective instruction, especially in the early years, and adoption of teaching methods backed by the best evidence.

The statistics for Australia suggest that around 5-6% of primary school students were below the National Minimum Standard (NMS) on average in 2016, and this figure has barely shifted since NAPLAN began in 2008. Another 8-10% are just on the minimum standard. But it would be a mistake to assume that this figure represents the situation in individual schools. The My School website shows that there are suburban schools where 50% of students have reading skills at the bare minimum or less.

If that is not bad enough, the NAPLAN minimum standard is well below what would be considered an adequate standard in international tests, meaning that it underestimates the true number of children struggling with basic skills. In the Progress In Reading Literacy Study 2011 (the most recent report), 24% of Year 4 students were below the acceptable benchmark for reading literacy, compared with 4.9% of Year 3 students below NAPLAN NMS and 6.9% of students below Year 5 NMS. These NAPLAN percentages have barely shifted in the last nine years. This suggests that the NAPLAN NMS measure severely underestimates the number of children struggling with basic reading literacy. The Grattan Institute's Peter Goss has suggested that a new benchmark be added to the NAPLAN reports to account for this discrepancy.

The reason so many students cannot read at a proficient level depends on who you ask. Some say that insufficient resourcing of schools with large numbers of disadvantaged students is to blame. Billions of dollars of extra funding has gone into schools in recent years, especially since the 'Gonski' funding package was introduced. Yet there appears to have been little pay-off in what should be the core job of schools – teaching children to read, write and do maths. This is because extra funding has little impact on student achievement if teachers are not using the most effective teaching methods in the classroom where children spend most of their school day.

The NSW Government's Early Action for Success (EaFS) program is an example. Its central literacy program, called 'L3', was not properly trialled and tested before being implemented to over 400 schools across NSW, and does not meet the criteria for evidence-based reading instruction identified in scientific research, including systematic phonics instruction. According to the latest published report on EaFS in 2014, as many schools had negative movement in their NAPLAN reading scores as positive. Funnelling more money into programs that are not truly evidence-based will not help children achieve higher literacy levels.

Some say that teaching quality is the main contributing factor, including the trend toward low entry scores in initial teacher education (ITE) courses. In 2005,



256 school leavers entered ITE courses with ATARs of less than 60. In 2013, it was 979. This may be a small proportion of the overall ITE cohort, but it is still a lot of new teachers whose academic aptitude is relatively low according to their Year 12 performance.

Just as questionable is the quality of the ITE courses they complete. A number of studies has found that Australian ITE students and graduates have poor knowledge of the structure and rules of the English language. According to Professor Pamela Snow from La Trobe University, there is an ‘intergenerational effect’ whereby new teachers are themselves the product of teaching methods that have not provided them with the linguistic knowledge necessary for explicit instruction in reading, spelling, grammar and writing, and their ITE courses have neglected to fill this gap.

Typically, there has been no measure of how well prepared ITE graduates are to teach, but school principals seem to have a low opinion. In the Staff in Australia’s Schools survey, approximately one-third of principals said they thought recent teacher graduates were well prepared to develop strategy for teaching literacy and numeracy. New ITE accreditation standards have been developed by the Australian Institute for

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Teaching and School Leadership to try to rectify this problem.

On the same day as Australian newspapers and talkback radio waves were full of NAPLAN stories, it was reported in the *New York Post* that the city’s schools made large gains in the state literacy and numeracy tests, and that charter schools – which enrol mainly low income and black and Hispanic students – were largely responsible. Across the city, 76% of charter schools outperformed their public school districts in maths and 71% in English.

Charter school quality varies but some have remarkable results. High-performing charter schools tend to have some common characteristics, including selectively recruiting the best teachers and investing their instructional efforts heavily in literacy and numeracy. Many, if not most, use traditional teaching methods, including direct instruction. And their strong results can’t be attributed to higher

funding – New York state charter schools, for example, are funded at a per pupil rate 30% lower than district public schools.

Charter schools in the US and high-performing, low SES public schools around Australia show that social background need not be a barrier to literacy, but more funding will not automatically lead to better outcomes. Only with effective, evidence-based instruction, including systematic, synthetic phonics, will all children learn to read.

The NAPLAN reading assessment is a broad measure that only flags that a student is having difficulty, but not why. The Year 1 Phonics Screening Check (PSC), proposed by the Australian Government, will be an early marker of which children are struggling with this fundamental skill and which schools are not teaching it well. Since the Year 1 PSC was introduced in English schools in 2012, the failure rate in Year 2 reading comprehension tests has declined by 30%. We can only hope it will have the same effect in Australia.

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