

Ticks and crosses for NAPLAN

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NAPLAN has provided 'a relatively painless snapshot of student achievement'. Picture: Cameron Richardson *Source: The Australian*

THREE weeks ago almost every Australian student in Years 3, 5, 7 and 9 sat down to complete the sixth iteration of the national literacy and numeracy tests known as NAPLAN.

In comparison to other countries' attempts at national testing, NAPLAN over the years has provided a relatively painless national snapshot of student achievement and progress. As a national audit and report card, to what degree has it done what it set out to do?

NAPLAN evolved out of the various state government basic-skills-type testing programs. In the 1990s, these tests were corralled to identify students at or below the national benchmarks, a set of standards of minimum achievement to identify those students deemed at risk of falling behind.

This minimum standards agenda had a significant influence on the shape of the NAPLAN tests, with a tendency to focus on the bottom end of the scale. A big impetus was the obligation of the various jurisdictions to be able to demonstrate to the Commonwealth that they were making progress with the so-called students at risk.

But the problem is that if you focus your tests too much on the bottom end, there is the potential to make them too easy. This makes it difficult to demonstrate progress at the top end.

It appears the simple solution in 2011 was to make the tests more difficult at the top end. Problem gone, but replaced by a new one: scale score averages from 2011 to 2012 are in retreat and now there is a backlash against the perception that, overall, our students are suddenly moving backwards.

Leading educators roundly reject this assertion and they are probably correct. Whatever evidence there is of a drop over two years does not mean national standards have fallen. More likely it is that the tests are harder at the top of the scale. But it would seem to be a no-win situation: make the tests harder and appear to be going backwards or keep them too easy and maintain their ineffectiveness at the top end.

For these reasons, the NAPLAN results and the My School reporting have caused higher-achieving schools some grief. The tests have not been effective instruments for measuring higher-level achievement. The tests themselves are not available to public scrutiny and therefore not open to objective critique. But teachers who administer the tests have been reporting there is an increasing emphasis on assessing higher levels of competence.

So how useful is NAPLAN to schools? There are many positives for those making the effort to drill down into the wealth of diagnostic and historical data. Those schools are making dramatic improvements in their NAPLAN results. Despite the harsh criticisms from a range of experts, those schools making significant progress in their NAPLAN results are carrying that through to their year 12 results. Surely if the critics were correct, all the time-wasting over NAPLAN would have a detrimental effect on overall student achievement.

Ballarat Clarendon College in Victoria, the highest performing regional school nationally in both primary and secondary categories, is a case in point. The school systematically uses its NAPLAN data as early as possible to identify its weak points and refine its teaching programs accordingly. Rather than being the waste of time that critics would have us believe, this strategy is having a dramatic flow-on to the college's overall academic achievement. Last year, for example, half of Ballarat Clarendon's Year 12 students were in the top 10 per cent of the national university entrance rankings.

So back to the report card: a tick that the NAPLAN tests are valuable diagnostic instruments with a potential wealth of data; a cross that the way the data is reported to schools is somewhat impenetrable.

A tick that the tests are better able to measure a range of academic competencies across a range of student abilities; a cross that they are making things look bad when that is not necessarily the case.

A very big cross for the fact that it takes five months to process and report the results to schools. It would appear that the solution to this problem is to move to online testing. There is a 2016 timeline on this solution but we shouldn't be holding our collective breaths.

By far the most significant achievement of the NAPLAN tests has been the successful development and implementation of a national measurement scale. Until 2008, Australia did not have a means of measuring academic progress across the key years of schooling common to all states and territories. The NAPLAN scale has proven to be both robust and reliable and has been a cohesive force in schools being able to stitch together other valuable sets of assessment data to enhance the diagnostic value of the tests.

As far as national testing programs go, NAPLAN is up there with the best. It is a powerful educational measurement instrument and, technically speaking, something to be proud of.

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