



NAPLAN REVIEW 2020

Victorian Student Representative Council and Parents Victoria
joint submission

Introduction

Parents Victoria (PV) is the peak body for parents of students attending government schools in Victoria and Victorian Student Representative Council (VicSRC) is the peak body for school aged students in Victoria.

While neither organisation is against testing on a national level to evaluate the effectiveness of teaching and learning, both organisations have concerns around the way NAPLAN data is used by schools and systems as well as the impact on student and families' mental health.

VicSRC and PV hold strong policy positions that any testing on students should be to develop their learning and to provide feedback to teachers on their effectiveness and that literacy and numeracy should not be regarded as the sole indicators of school performance. Literacy and numeracy are fundamental outcomes for all students but we believe NAPLAN is dominant over other tests and does not provide the most effective data for improving individual or school outcomes.

The main concerns that both organisations have, relate to the following areas:

1. Mental health implications
2. NAPLAN data at the school and system level
3. NAPLAN data's impact on teaching and learning

This submission will address these key areas in detail and provide recommendations for improvement.

1. Mental health implications

Many students reported to VicSRC that the stress placed upon them in the lead up to the test was significantly greater than the impact of the results. Students reported that the pressure to do well came from parents, schools and themselves as they considered NAPLAN to represent their best efforts in literacy and numeracy. Some students reported consequences from schools and parents for not achieving positive test results, but a number of students also reported that the pressure to do well was internal rather than external.

"I hate tests, it makes me really anxious because I don't like to fail." Student, Year 10

"NAPLAN is a stressful time for students, teachers and parents. The weight that is put on how well you do in NAPLAN is something that I would say a large group of students feel. The hours of worry about what the test means for me and the outcome were something that I focussed on too heavily. Most students take the test and are placed where they should be for their age and it makes sense for them. Being a student with a learning disability, my results never mirrored where my teachers were putting me at the end of that semester. The test is designed for students who don't have problems learning in a school environment or processing issues. Teachers tell us not to worry about the results and just do our best in the test, but for students who feel that they are already behind, it can lower their self esteem. The NAPLAN system is broken to students with learning disabilities. It doesn't show where they actually are in their schooling, it shows them that they are already behind." Student, Year 11

Victorians believe that young people's wellbeing should be as important to schools as teaching students to read and write. They know that good teachers and good schools do more than just teach literacy and numeracy: they actively support the wellbeing of students. i.

The mental health considerations also extended to students who did not sit NAPLAN. Students spoke about friends and siblings who chose not to take the test due to learning difficulties, disabilities or as a preventative mental health measure. Some of these students felt excluded by not taking NAPLAN, particularly at those schools that did a lot of preparation for the test in the lead up.

The stress felt by students was also felt by families. One parent of a primary school aged student reported her grade five student in tears the night before NAPLAN due to the pressure she felt to do well. This was despite the school and family communicating the intention of the test is to give an indication of the school and the individual student at the time of the test rather than a measurement of their overall ability in literacy and numeracy. Some parents reported they feel pressured to withdraw their children who are deemed in the above categories. Added to this, there are parents who have poor literacy skills and left school at a very young age so do not have a good understanding of what happens or why their children are so distressed about NAPLAN.

Additionally, we need to consider the impact on the teaching profession itself, there is constant criticism and public debate in regard to parents' lack of confidence in teachers and equally teachers feeling parental expectations are unrealistic. Commentary around negative NAPLAN data results, further fuels this divide and diminishes relationships.

2. NAPLAN data at the school and system level

Few students could identify the links between their test results and teaching practices at school but many had an understanding, although could not provide a detailed analysis, that the data from NAPLAN was linked to the funding schools received and the reputation of schools.

VicSRC and PV are opposed to any National or state-wide assessment programs which would seek to rank schools rather than benefit children and assist their learning. NAPLAN applies unnecessary stress to students and families for no direct educational benefit. As such its continuance must be closely considered. Its initial purpose – to facilitate fair and appropriate funding for schools with identified needs for further teaching and learning resources – can be facilitated in other ways, including via a needs-based equity funding model.

Student data should remain private within the school (with the consent of the learner and family) and used for the school to assess internally to determine learning strengths and devise strategies for improvement.

“From a school council point of view, NAPLAN results can be really helpful in looking at what is needed at a school level to help students learn and improve for VCE.” Student, Year 11

NAPLAN results have been made publicly available as part of the MySchool website for each individual school compared with schools with similar backgrounds for the past six years. Results should not be in a public forum that leads to an environment of competition where successful practices may be hoarded and not shared.

While crucial learning areas, this narrow focus on NAPLAN results in numeracy and literacy, does not provide any insight into teaching and learning practices at the school. VicSRC and PV do not see any value with these results being publicly available. These results encourage families to compare schools based on data that was not intended to be used for this purpose. The only data for individual schools which should be publicly available is that which shows the growth of each cohort. This is the “value-add” of the teachers and schools, and is a much more valuable comparison data.

“As a parent, the continual assessment and feedback received during the year from my children’s teachers is much more valuable than NAPLAN results. To both myself and my kids. NAPLAN results really arrive too late in the year to be of any benefit in addressing areas of additional need. And NAPLAN results only concentrate on literacy and numeracy - my kids’ learning involves much more than those areas.”
Primary school parent response

VicSRC and PV believe that assessment should not be used to stream students or be comparative and/or competitive as these approaches will deny a holistic approach to learning that takes into account different ways of learning and flexible assessments.

Students reported individual data from NAPLAN being used for ranking purposes including:

- Requested as part of independent school scholarship applications
- Forming the basis for skill level groupings in class

Schools are preparing for and delivering the test inconsistently, so it is not an accurate snapshot of literacy and numeracy across Victoria. Some schools spend a lot of time preparing students and some schools spend very little time. Books that are aimed at helping parents prepare their children for NAPLAN support the idea that this is a ranked test such as those used for select entry schools and scholarship tests. VicSRC and PV do not support the promotion of these books and this type of preparation is a barrier to authentic student agency as there is no purpose to learning other than preparing for the test.

There is a high level of financial investment in NAPLAN and according to reports we remain uncertain of its improvement impact for students and teachers. The NAPLAN data is regularly used by the DET and other education groups to assess school performance and teaching effectiveness but the narrow focus on writing, reading and maths has led some schools to prioritise these areas to improve NAPLAN results over other important aspects of schooling such as student wellbeing. Particularly problematic is that the paper test is based on a standardised level but not all students are at that level which can be encouraging schools to teach to the test to raise results but not skill level.

“NAPLAN currently tests, successfully or otherwise, the teaching effectiveness of schools in only two curriculum areas. It does not test on a level playing field, as there is so much difference in the equity of teaching and learning in Australia. There’s a huge difference in equity between sectors, but also between schools within the same sector. This inequity is amplified by testing with such a narrow area focus, and does very little to help unlock the potential of students learning in our toughest conditions.” ***Secondary school parent response***

In secondary schools, the NAPLAN data from year seven is not useful as an indicator of the current teaching effectiveness. The test is held in second term so can only be used as an internal assessment of where a new cohort of students are up to with numeracy and literacy. A major concern is that due to many students reporting a lack of interest in the test at year nine, the results for secondary schools are not useful at the systems level or at a local school level.

"I don't hate it, it's just pointless. I don't see why we have to do it and I certainly don't see any benefits from doing it." Student, Year 9

VicSRC and PV feel that the data is used too broadly as an indicator of teaching and learning without appropriate analysis of variables such as test conditions, levels of preparedness and student absences, all of which would impact the results.

3. NAPLAN data impact on teaching and learning in school

PV and VicSRC feel that NAPLAN focuses on teaching effectiveness more than student outcomes and therefore seems to be a test for teachers rather than students. The test has become more politicised due to its link to funding for schools and because many schools use their NAPLAN data as a marketing tool. We know, however, that some of these schools discourage certain students from participating, to skew their results in a positive direction. This means NAPLAN data is not a true reflection of a school's teaching effectiveness.

“A waste of time and unnecessary stress and anxiety. I got through by believing it was an assessment on the teachers and how they were teaching the curriculum.” Student, Year 12

Students, particularly at the secondary level, did not have a consistent understanding of how their test results were used to influence teaching practices at their schools and so could not see the value in NAPLAN. The lag time between students taking the test and getting results is too long to influence individual learning.

“I think it is a waste of time. I have not learnt anything from doing NAPLAN, in fact what we have been asked in NAPLAN has nothing to do with what we have learnt in class. I have never needed to use anything from NAPLAN testing in my normal school classes. They should get rid of it.” Student, Year 10

A parent of primary school aged students reported the school clearly communicating numeracy and/or literacy programs that had been developed as a response to low NAPLAN scores but her children attending the school did not make the connection.

“I thought that I would learn about the things I got wrong in the test but I still don't know.” Grade 4 student reflecting on the Grade 3 NAPLAN test

VicSRC and PV believe that assessment and reporting techniques should be based on teacher judgement and should map student progress and achievement over a period of time. Assessments should also be analysed in consultation with students and families to ensure they have a voice in teaching and learning decision making. Standardised national testing programs are rejected as a means of assessment because of their unreliability.

“If the government is going to keep making NAPLAN compulsory for schools, it needs to look outside the majority of students. The government needs to look at the students who have disabilities or mental health problems and address what these students need if they have to take these standardised tests. It doesn't mean just looking at the test as an isolated event in their schooling. Look at how these students learn, give teachers the resources they need to help these students, give schools the funding to help these students. From a student who is allocated extra time due to her dyslexia, extra time doesn't give me the answers or the tools to get them.” Student, Year 11

Students can play a key role in shaping and improving the learning and teaching practices of a school. Students can collaborate with teachers to refine learning and teaching practices through providing continual formal and informal feedback. ii Students can evaluate learning and teaching

approaches or other aspects of their school through participation in focus groups, by collecting new data, by participating in 'students as researchers' initiatives, in reviews by external authorities and in reflection on annual surveys of school data – where they draw on the particular experiences and knowledge that students have about the impact of school approaches. All of these methods help schools focus on students and ensure they are central to the school's decision-making ethos.

Assessment methods must be consistent with collaboratively developed state guidelines, reflect the shared aims of the school community, and be seen as part of the support and evaluation of education programs. Student difficulty in reaching learning goals should lead to a review of teaching and learning methods, thereby providing support in school evaluation and avoiding a sense of failure in the students. The assessment of students should be one of many tools to assist in developing appropriate curriculum and responsive teaching, rather than an end in itself.

“Given the results of these tests are used as a performance measure of the existing educational framework, I would question validity with respects to my children. Generalised anxiety, sleep, room temperature, acoustic noise, food intake and time of day; are all variables that would impact on results significantly. Given the justification for the test, I would like to see an individualised scale of development overtime, whereby a true and accurate measure of position and progress could be identified. It is my opinion that as a standalone measure, the weighted importance placed on compiled NAPLAN scores, fail in validity as these outcomes are not a true reflection of capability”. Primary school parent response

VicSRC and PV believe that assessment and testing in schools should be directed towards improving the teacher's ability to teach the individual child and be focused on developing a holistic approach to skills required by students now and for their future. Today's students will enter a workforce in which a career will involve changing jobs and directions frequently and managing multiple pieces of flexible work at the same time. In addition, almost all jobs in the future will require digital literacy and many will demand skills in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM). iii

To succeed in the work environment of the future, young people will need a variety of personal attributes. They will need to be effective problem solvers and financially literate. They will need to be tech savvy and enterprising, with the ability to manage their own careers. It will be important for them to be flexible, able to manage transitions and resourceful when faced with change. Confidence, agency, critical thinking and communication will help them succeed in this world, as well as project management and teamwork skills, enthusiasm for learning and the ability to work cooperatively with others. Schools have a key role in preparing young people with these skills and abilities to enable them to thrive in this new environment. iv

Assessments of the child's progress should take into account personal and creative qualities as well as academic achievement and NAPLAN does not provide any insight into these aspects.

VicSRC and PV have identified the following recommendations for NAPLAN:

1. NAPLAN data should be only shared with individual schools and not be publicly available, including on the My Schools website.
2. NAPLAN data should not be linked to funding for schools.

3. NAPLAN does not provide suitable data to be a useful measurement for systems but could be useful for a whole school approach to teaching and learning if the data is received in a shorter time frame and analysed alongside other data including the Attitude to School Survey and the August Supplementary Census.
4. NAPLAN data should not be used by schools to select or stream students.
5. Deliberate preparation for NAPLAN disconnects teaching and learning from purpose and meaning and contributes to the unreliability of the data. Such preparation should be actively discouraged.
6. If NAPLAN continues, the purpose, cost and impact needs to be clearly communicated to the Australian public.

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i This was a key finding of community consultations conducted by the Department of Education during preparation of the *Education State* policy. Department of Education and Training (DET), *Education State: Schools*. Victorian Government, Melbourne, 2015, p.7.

ii Harris, J, Spina, N, Ehrich, L & Smeed, J, 'Literature review: Student-centred schools make the difference', Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership, Melbourne. Prepared in partnership with the Queensland University of Technology. Melbourne, 2013, p.35.

iii Seventy-five percent of jobs will involve Science, Technology, Engineering and Maths (STEM) according to Jeanette Pope and Rachel Mutch (2015) 'How Are Young People Faring In The Transition From School To Work?', Foundation for Young Australians, Melbourne, 2015. p.1-3.

iv Jeanette Pope and Rachel Mutch (2015) 'How Are Young People Faring In The Transition From School To Work?', Foundation for Young Australians, Melbourne, 2015. pp.1-3.