

NAPLAN system haunted by underlying conflicts

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NAPLAN testing begins this week, with virtually all Australian students in years 3, 5, 7 and 9 sitting standardised literacy and numeracy tests.

We are into our seventh year of testing and for many schools it is still a difficult time. They struggle with the conflict that continues to surround -NAPLAN.

So it is important to understand the three underlying issues that explain the conflict. First, a fundamental reason for the development of NAPLAN has been hard to accept for many people. For most of our history, we have not benchmarked the performance of Australian schools and school systems. NAPLAN (and international testing) changed this and showed how different schools and students were progressing (or not). At times we have been stunned by the results.

Less than 18 months ago, we were shocked to learn from international student assessments that we have some of the poorest primary school reading literacy results in the developed world, and a quarter of our Year 4 students do not meet international minimum literacy standards.

It is difficult to hear these -results. We had always thought our primary schools were operating at a much higher level. Just as it was difficult for Queensland when the first NAPLAN tests showed how far behind their -students were. Queensland res-ponded positively, but it is hard when we find out we're not as good as we thought.

Second, NAPLAN (and Myschool) has significantly increased school accountability. Few people in any sector welcome performance accountability measures, particularly in education, where it has historically focused on compliance.

Third, a significant group of educationalists are opposed to standardised testing of virtually any kind. They want to keep the status quo and disregard the results of national and inter-national assessments because they believe it encourages "teaching to the test", doesn't assess "what really matters" and believe it is unfair to compare schools or school systems.

As we know, conflict always draws a political reaction. This week, the Greens announced that NAPLAN testing should move to the start of the school year to reduce the amount of "teaching to the test" in schools. This plays into the conflict surrounding NAPLAN and therefore doesn't help schools.

In fact, it will result in lower NAPLAN scores for schools in poorer communities. Research shows that students from all socioeconomic backgrounds generally progress on an upward trajectory over the school year, but significant differences emerge over the summer holidays. Students from privileged communities continue their upward learning trajectory (or at least remain steady) while disadvantaged students fall behind.

Put simply, the gap between rich and poor grows over summer when school leaders and teachers are not there to help. There have been some fan-tastic school improvements in poorer communities.

Indigenous students, refugees, and high--unemployment communities have benefited greatly. Moving NAPLAN tests to the start of the school year will make it even harder for these schools to show what they achieve during the school year.

The main issue with the timing of NAPLAN is how long it takes the results to be made available to schools. The longer it takes, the less NAPLAN can be used by teachers as a diagnostic tool to improve instruction. Currently, it takes about four months, which is too long to be useful.

The move to computer-based instruction in the coming years will reduce this time lag. Unfortunately, these improvements will not end the conflict. The underlying issues won't go away. The conflict makes it harder for schools to use NAPLAN to improve teaching and learning.

Some schools respond negatively, placing pressure on students to perform in the NAPLAN tests (even though NAPLAN has no impact on how most students progress). Very few schools do this. But when it happens we should support the students and families who are suffering and call to account those schools placing undue pressure on students.

Negative reactions in schools will continue unless we help school leaders deal with the conflict and its underlying issues. This includes addressing the mistake made with the introduction of NAPLAN: school accountability was increased with-out developing school leaders to deal with the increased accountability.

Better training for our school leaders would enable them to use NAPLAN effectively, ignore the political conflict and, more important, provide a huge lift for our schools.

Link to article in *The Australian*

<https://www.theaustralian.com.au/national-affairs/opinion/naplan-system-haunted-by-underlying-conflicts/news-story/648397158be16a6341c8f1bf61fb5706>