



everyone's family

NAPLAN Reporting Review

Education Council, COAG

March 2019

Anne Hampshire
Head of Research
and Advocacy
The Smith Family
Level 9, 117
Clarence Street
Sydney NSW 2000

Telephone: 02 9085 7249
Anne.Hampshire@thesmithfamily.com.au

Overview of The Smith Family

The Smith Family is a national charity founded in 1922 to improve the lives of disadvantaged children and young people in Australia. Our vision is a better future for young Australians in need. Our mission is to create opportunities for young Australians in need by providing long-term support for their participation in education. This mission is founded on the belief that every child and young person deserves a chance.

Our mission guides every element of our work, including program development and delivery, research, advocacy and fundraising. The Smith Family delivers programs in each state and territory in Australia, in over 90 communities, including many regional and rural communities.

In 2017-18, The Smith Family supported more than 170,000 disadvantaged children, young people, parents, carers and community professionals through its education-focussed programs. This included over 140,000 children and young people. We are supporting 45,000 financially disadvantaged children and young people on our largest program, the *Learning for Life* educational scholarships.

We have a unique longitudinal dataset of young people participating on *Learning for Life*. It includes demographic, administrative and outcomes data. We are tracking the school attendance, achievement in English and Maths, school completion and post-school engagement in work and/or study, of all young people on the program. We are also analysing this data in a systematic way in order to contribute to building the Australian educational evidence base.

1. Introduction

The Smith Family welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) Reporting Review. The Review is both important and timely, given the increased focus on education policy in recent years in Australia. In particular, the Report of the Review to Achieve Educational Excellence in Australian Schools set out a national roadmap for schools reform, triggering in turn deeper examination of the future of education at the Commonwealth, state and territory level.

All Australian jurisdictions and educational systems and sectors have a focus on improving the educational outcomes achieved by Australian students. Access to consistent, reliable, accessible and transparent information and data is a foundation of any such improvement. Since its introduction in 2010, NAPLAN and the My School website have been an important part of that foundation and to improving understanding of the performance of Australian schools and students. The collection of NAPLAN data is part of creating a rigorous, credible and longitudinal Australian educational evidence base. NAPLAN has significant utility for governments, educational systems and sectors, educators, students, their parents and carers, academics, think tanks and community organisations like The Smith Family to name a few, even though its utility has yet to be fully realised.

NAPLAN has helped, for example, to show that certain groups of students are disproportionately represented among Australian students who are not making the desired progress in their educational journey. This includes students from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander backgrounds, from low socioeconomic backgrounds, and from regional and remote areas. This is an important first step when governments, educational systems and schools are considering relevant educational policies and programs.

The Review is an ideal opportunity to consider options to ensure NAPLAN is fit for purpose and can contribute to the educational data infrastructure required to ensure better progress is made by Australia's students. The Smith Family believes that Australia needs a suite of education data that is collected, analysed and used to:

- support individual student progress;
- identify areas of good practice and areas requiring more attention;
- help build an Australian educational evidence base; and
- assess national, state and territory progress against an agreed set of goals and outcomes.

NAPLAN gives a firm foundation upon which to build, and certainly more can be done to enhance its contribution to the above goals. This includes the following items:

- introducing a national unique student identifier to track every student;
- aligning NAPLAN data collection and reporting with learning progression and student growth;
- improving the transparency to schools of how NAPLAN tests are designed, and how results are communicated to key groups such as parents and carers;
- rethinking the approach to minimum standards to more accurately identify those students requiring additional support to progress in their learning;

- improving NAPLAN test participation rates, in part via better information to parents and carers regarding the benefits to sitting the tests;
- ensuring that during the transition to national online testing the results are communicated to stakeholders with caution; and
- developing NAPLAN reporting materials that are more accessible and easier to understand for different stakeholders; and
- better accommodating the needs of students with a disability in performance testing.

These points are further outlined below.

2. Importance of a national unique student identifier

The value of being able to track individual students through NAPLAN (and their whole school journey) if they remain in the same jurisdiction is clear. However, it is currently difficult to track the NAPLAN results of students moving across state and territory borders in the intervening years between NAPLAN tests. The issue of mobility particularly impacts disadvantaged students, as they are generally more adversely impacted by mobility than their more advantaged peers. The introduction of a national Unique Student Identifier (USI) would help track each student regardless of their mobility and leverage the value of longitudinal data collection. It would contribute to better understanding of individual students' educational outcomes over time, especially disadvantaged students.

The introduction of a national USI could also combine NAPLAN data with other educational data collected by different jurisdictions, to formulate a more comprehensive picture of individual student performance. An example is the Best Start assessment undertaken as children start school in NSW. This would in turn have a direct benefit for educational research undertaken within and outside of government. The Productivity Commission has previously noted the benefits of a USI, including the positive impact on education research.¹

Australian governments endorsed the establishment of a USI in 2009 and committed in 2018 to a rollout of the USI nationally over five years.² The Report of the Review to Achieve Educational Excellence in Australian Schools, *Through Growth to Achievement*, recommended accelerating the establishment of a USI.³ The current NAPLAN review provides another opportunity to urge for more substantive action to move Australia towards the reality of a USI.

3. Measuring learning progression and student growth

The Smith Family recommends that in the short term, NAPLAN be aligned with measuring learning progressions, individual achievement and student growth over time, and that more holistic reform of student testing be considered in depth for the long-term. There are several key

¹ Productivity Commission, *National Education Evidence Base*, Inquiry Report No. 80, 9 December 2016, p 11.

² Council of Australian Governments, *National Schools Reform Agreement*, p 9, 22.

³ Australian Government, *Through Growth to Achievement: Report of the Review to Achieve Educational Excellence in Australian Schools*, March 2018, Recommendation 22, p xiv.

recommendations, made by the Review to Achieve Educational Excellence in Australian Schools that set out the top priorities in this area:⁴

- Recommendation 4: Introduce new reporting arrangements with a focus on both learning attainment and learning gain, to provide meaningful information to students and their parents and carers about individual achievement and learning growth;
- Recommendation 5: Revise the structure of the Australian Curriculum progressively over the next five years to present the learning areas and general capabilities as learning progressions; and
- Recommendation 6: Prioritise the implementation of learning progressions for literacy and numeracy in curriculum delivery during the early years of schooling to ensure the core foundations for learning are developed by all children by the age of eight.

In the near term, an enhanced NAPLAN reporting system aligned with learning progressions, individual achievement and student growth would allow a more sophisticated understanding of each student's long-term educational journey to be developed. This would strengthen the value of NAPLAN for schools and professional educators as, NAPLAN data tends to be most valuable when it is triangulated with other performance data.⁵ This can include items such as teacher assessment of student performance, attendance patterns, participation data or other certified testing regimes such as the Progressive Achievement Tests provided by the Australian Council for Educational Research.

In recent years, the Grattan Institute has demonstrated the significant value of analysing NAPLAN data to more clearly measure students' years of progress. Its 2016 research showed the significant gap in educational performance for disadvantaged students compared to their more advantaged peers. For instance, even when capabilities are similar in Year 3, disadvantaged students fall between 12 months and 21 months behind more advantaged students by Year 9.⁶

By collecting and analysing additional layers of data aligned with the above recommendations, NAPLAN would become a more useful tool in the daily teaching of the curriculum, especially understanding the progression or challenges being faced by disadvantaged students. It would also help encourage both earlier identification of children at risk of poorer outcomes, and the deployment of appropriate intervention and support strategies to help them improve their performance.

In the longer-term, consideration should be given to the merits and feasibility of moving to a sophisticated testing regime centred on learning progression that comprehensively maps students' educational journey over time. Whilst such a regime could build on NAPLAN's strong foundations, it is anticipated it would ultimately replace the current form of testing. This would be a logical

⁴ Australian Government, *Through Growth to Achievement: Report of the Review to Achieve Educational Excellence in Australian Schools*, March 2018, p xiii.

⁵ Rooty Hill High School, *Public Submission to the Review to Achieve Educational Excellence in Australian Schools*, p 3.

⁶ Grattan Institute, *Widening gaps: What NAPLAN tells us about student progress*, p 2.

endpoint for the key recommendations from the Review to Achieve Educational Excellence in Australian Schools identified above.

4. Improving stakeholders understanding of NAPLAN tests and results

The way NAPLAN tests are designed, and the way results are communicated, should be improved. This is so professional educators, have a clearer understanding of the context within which the tests are developed and administered each year, and so parents and carers have a better understanding of the significance of the annual results.

There is a need for greater transparency on the design of NAPLAN tests, and improved communication of this design process to professional educators. This includes ensuring that proposed tests are carefully assessed against curricula norms across the country, to ensure that individual tests assess an appropriate level of knowledge for each student cohort across Australia. It also involves more clearly articulating the process for rescaling of NAPLAN results each year, which currently remain unclear to schools. Improved transparency along these lines will help schools to better compare test performance over time and as a consequence, improve their teaching to the curricula.

Additionally, it is difficult for key stakeholders, in particular parents and carers, to easily use NAPLAN reporting data to understand their child and school performance. The Smith Family believes that the quality of the information regarding NAPLAN results, and the support provided to analyse them, should be improved so that parents and carers have better knowledge, and can interpret and use NAPLAN results with greater confidence and ability. Given the significant discussion of NAPLAN within the media and wider community, there is also a need for a wider group of stakeholders to be better informed on NAPLAN.

The Smith Family believes that there should be better quality translation for parents and carers of what the results mean for student and school performance. Parents and carers want to understand their child's performance and overall development, including in the context of their peers, but this information needs to be provided in a more accessible format, as part of a suite of useful information that helps them understand their child's progress. This will help reinforce the overall importance and benefits of NAPLAN testing itself.

5. Minimum standards and progression

The Smith Family believes that the current focus on the National Minimum Standard (NMS) should be revisited in any recalibration of NAPLAN reporting. A sole reliance on the NMS can lead to Australia being lulled into a false sense of security regarding the extent of educational challenges we face across primary and secondary schooling.

The NMS does not give a complete picture as to which students require additional support in their learning. It captures a particular cohort who are performing very poorly, largely those with significant learning difficulties, who will require intensive, specialist support to adequately progress in their learning. Relying on the NMS as *the* key benchmark does not, however, help to identify students who are not making adequate progress in their learning and who need additional support from the classroom teacher, as opposed to specialist support.

The general utility of the NMS in helping to identify students performing poorly should be reviewed, and viable options for improving its value considered.

There are different mechanisms to address this issue. One potential way to address this would be to introduce a National Minimum Proficiency Standard in addition to the NMS. Such a proficiency standard would more clearly identify whether individual students are making acceptable gains in their learning, and developing sufficient, requisite skillsets and knowledge to progress in their education. Whilst there are assessment scales for each of the five domains in NAPLAN reporting, they do not offer this type of insight.⁷ There is precedence for a proficiency standard in NAPLAN, as a proficiency standard exists in each of the NAP sample assessments, where the standard shows what is expected of students at a year level and where students need to show more than the minimal skills.⁸

Alternatively the NMS could be based on the grade average for each year sitting the test, demonstrating the required standard to be met by a student to adequately progress in their learning.

The Review offers a good opportunity to re-examine the value of the NMS and determine a better way to identify all students requiring additional support to continue to achieve at school to an acceptable level.

6. Increasing participation rates in NAPLAN testing

One structural challenge to strengthening the rigour and value of NAPLAN is that participation rates vary noticeably across different state and territory jurisdictions, as well as across different school years within single jurisdictions.⁹

This dilutes the potential power of what can be learnt from NAPLAN and can result in comparisons between jurisdictions which may be unhelpful and inaccurate. The Smith Family recommends that an information campaign be implemented targeting parents, carers and professional educators, to increase NAPLAN participation rates across Australia. This would include clearer communication about the benefits of NAPLAN testing, as well as clearer communication of results. Strengthening participation rates will help ensure the potential of NAPLAN as a diagnostic tool and as part of an Australia's educational data infrastructure, can be maximised.

7. Transitioning to national online testing

Undoubtedly there are significant advantages of conducting NAPLAN tests online, in particular the speed at which results and analysis can be returned to parents and educators.¹⁰ Reports being

⁷ National Assessment Program, '[Scales](#)'.

⁸ National Assessment Program, '[NAP Sample Assessments](#)'.

⁹ See [ACARA reports](#) for further information, in particular comparison of different participation rates from 2008 onwards.

¹⁰ Calwell, Brian, *The Alignment Premium: Benchmarking Australia's student achievement, professional autonomy and system adaptivity*, Australian Council for Educational Research, 2018, p 224.

returned to students and schools within a week of tests being conducted, rather than the current situation of 3-9 months for results, will be hugely beneficial.¹¹ It will encourage more timely support for specific students where required, maximising the likelihood that such support can achieve its desired aim of improving performance. It will also enable more streamlined data analysis that over time will become less resource intensive. The ability to have a more personalised assessment through an online version is also a particular benefit.

However, there are some challenges, including but not limited to, ensuring that digital proficiency (or lack of) does not adversely affect student performance. This is a particular concern for certain groups of students, such as those from low SES groups. Students from low SES background tend to have less experience using digital technology than those from high SES backgrounds, and students with significantly less digital experience tend to perform more poorly on NAPLAN ICT Literacy tests.¹²

During the transition period from paper to online testing, a major challenge is getting clarity regarding what results are, and are not, comparable between the online and non-online versions. There have been mixed messages regarding this which can serve to undermine confidence in NAPLAN overall. A clearer, nationally consistent message, about the comparability or otherwise of NAPLAN results during this transition would be beneficial for educators, parents and carers alike, as well as broader community stakeholders, and help to avoid the spreading of misinformation about results. Similarly information regarding the benefits of NAPLAN on-line should be made available to parents, carers and educators, in highly accessible formats.

8. Disseminating NAPLAN analysis to stakeholders

The major research product published annually from NAPLAN at a national level is comprehensive, rich with analytical insight, and has been immensely valuable for education researchers within and outside of government. However, this product tends also to be voluminous and difficult to decipher, largely comprised of a series of data tables analysing results by different variables such as domain, jurisdiction, student characteristics, parental level of education and the like.

While the major report has value, there is much more that could be leveraged from this data and provided in a suite of useful publications and tools that would help inform a range of stakeholders. For example some of the materials provided by the NSW Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation (CESE) can be considered leading practice - they are valuable and more digestible for different stakeholders, such as teachers, parents and carers. Similar materials produced nationally for NAPLAN could help to better inform what happens at school and jurisdictional levels, and the impact of specific variables on students' and schools' performance, and be an important contribution to helping to build the Australian educational evidence base.

¹¹ Calwell, Brian, *The Autonomy Premium: Professional autonomy and student achievement in the 21st century*, Australian Council for Educational Research, p 67.

¹² Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority, *NAP Sample Assessment, ICT Literacy, Years 6 and 10*, November 2018, p 47-48.

The other major product is inclusion of information on NAPLAN performance for all schools on the My Schools website. Given the work of The Smith Family in multiple schools across Australia, we have found the material provided on the My Schools website to be of value, particularly where the longitudinal data has been used to track average and median student gains in NAPLAN results over two years.

9. Accommodating students with a disability

The Smith Family believes that any recalibration of NAPLAN needs to consider how to better accommodate the needs of students with a disability. This is especially the case for students with a severe or complex disability, who can be formally exempted from sitting the tests.¹³ It is important that students with a disability are fairly and meaningfully assessed to identify their critical skills and areas where they need further assistance, as part of their unique educational journey. The Review offers a suitable opportunity to address this overdue issue.

10. Conclusion

When it comes to the availability of consistent, quality, national reporting on the performance of students and schools, NAPLAN provides Australia with an important foundation. In a relatively short time, much has been learnt from NAPLAN, including those areas where its data collection and analysis can be strengthened, in order to contribute to a more sophisticated understanding of each school and each student's educational journey. It is timely to align NAPLAN with the priorities set out in the Report of the Review to Achieve Educational Excellence in Australian Schools, and to ensure that as we reform the way we teach school students, we continue to improve the way we collect, analyse and report data on their long-term performance.

¹³ National Assessment Program, '[Participation](#)'.