

NAPLAN means more information to improve student performance

By Robert Randall

Later this week the senate will conduct an inquiry into the effectiveness of Australia's annual NAPLAN tests.

The Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA), which develops the NAPLAN tests, has made a submission to this inquiry, as have dozens of organisations, schools and private citizens.

We think that it is important to respond to matters raised in some of those submissions.

There is all but universal agreement that literacy and numeracy, the basic skills which are assessed by NAPLAN, are at the heart of all learning, and that their mastery pays dividends within and beyond school. A young person who cannot read and write well or do mathematics will not be able to succeed in other areas of learning.

We believe that the best way to develop literacy and numeracy is through the delivery of a broad rich curriculum. Literacy and numeracy are used and developed when students are taught science, English, the Arts, mathematics, and all the other learning areas that make up a rich, well-rounded curriculum.

A narrowing of the curriculum to focus on test preparation will not improve NAPLAN results.

Assessment is a key element of quality teaching and learning and it is conducted in classrooms on a regular basis. Teachers and school leaders are well placed to work with young people and their parents to support them to engage with any new or challenging experience, including tests.

NAPLAN complements school-based assessment and adds national, state and territory reference points to assist schools to reflect on their achievements and plan for improvement.

Preparation for NAPLAN tests does not require extended use of practice tests. Some use of practice tests will assist students, particularly younger ones, to become familiar with the form of the test but overuse will be counterproductive.

At the same time it should also be acknowledged that students feel stress or experience pressure about any number of things, from the cross-country tournament to their presentation before the school assembly. Learning to manage nerves is part of growing up, and reassurance from parents and teachers can not only calm any lingering fears but also help young people build resilience.

ACARA acknowledges that schools take a wide range of approaches to NAPLAN. Most get the balance right, but a few probably build the tests up out of proportion to what they are, namely, a snapshot of student ability that takes just a few hours over a few days every other year.

ACARA is also working with other agencies and state and territory school and curriculum authorities to improve the nature of NAPLAN tests, which have been in the same form since 2008.

Over the next few years we will align NAPLAN to the Australian Curriculum and move the tests into an online environment. These online tests will be designed to draw from a greater range of possible questions, allowing not only for faster processing of results but also for tests that will be geared to each student's level of achievement rather than be one size fits all.

And in the meantime, NAPLAN means more information about students and schools for parents, teachers and the community.

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