

## Why NAPLAN's never been more important

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We already know that COVID made 2020 a year in which many of the standard approaches to education had to be shaken up.

COVID is by no means over, and who knows how long it will go on. Even when we are all vaccinated and the infections and deaths have stopped, the impact on all aspects of life will be felt for years. What of the educational effect? What have we learnt?

On the upside, COVID has led to a greater appreciation of our teachers' professionalism and dedication. But the disruption to NAPLAN created a blindspot for national comparative data at a time when our results from international assessments show how important that information is.

The data from this year's NAPLAN assessment is going to be particularly important in helping to show the impact COVID has had in terms of learning gain (or loss) in literacy and numeracy.

For parents, there is no nationally consistent point-in-time assessment for the 2020 cohort that helps them understand how their child is progressing against national standards in literacy and numeracy, and over time.

We know through ACARA's ongoing engagement with national peak parent representatives and through the many enquiries we have received from individual parents that the lack of data around suspected lost learning associated with the pandemic is a real concern.

Fortunately, many states and territories introduced their own check-in systems for this cohort, many using NAPLAN questions, but that doesn't replace a consistent nation-wide measure.

Next week schools from across the country will sit down to do their NAPLAN test either on paper or online; 70% of the nation's schools will undertake NAPLAN online, and next year it will be 100%.

The benefits of doing the test online are that the tests are more engaging for many students and they are also 'tailored', which means that parents will get a more accurate reading of their own child's level of achievement, especially for those students who are likely to do very well, and those who are likely to struggle.

For schools and education systems, the results will give a good picture of how school closures, and remote learning and teaching have affected student progress, and help them to plan for how to address any issues by identifying particular areas of concern.

The results also allow us to identify those educational practices that are genuinely working to improve student outcomes. This is an aspect of the tests that is often overlooked. To identify such practices, you have to look for schools that have consistently achieved a level of

progress that is above what you would expect, given the socio-educational background of the students.

Just focusing on overall achievement levels tells you very little that of value from an educational perspective.

Last year ACARA analysed the data and discovered that when you look at progress rather than just overall achievement, high-performing schools can be found right across the socio-educational spectrum. The things they tend to have in common are practices such as explicit teaching, good use of data about student learning and a collaborative approach to professional development.

Without NAPLAN, we would not have been able to identify these common practices of high-performing schools. NAPLAN data also helps education authorities identify schools where additional support and resourcing may be needed.

NAPLAN should not be a stressful experience for our students and they won't perform well if that is the case. Teachers and parents can help our children and young people prepare for NAPLAN not by 'cramming' and by making them do endless exercises from 'NAPLAN-style' books on sale in almost every newsagency, but by helping them relax and just encouraging them to do their best.