

## Minister Susan Close

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### NAPLAN – Part of Your Child’s Picture

Reading, writing and mathematics are essential, foundational skills in our society. No one will have a job in the future without them. Preschools and schools are where these skills are learned – and then built on to increasingly sophisticated levels of comprehension, expression and problem solving.

How are we to know how well our schools are teaching our children these skills? One way is to have a standard test given to all students, and to compare how well they do.

That is what NAPLAN does, and what it is for: to know how well schools are performing in teaching literacy and numeracy, in order to encourage schools to keep improving. Nothing focuses the mind like public reporting on your performance. The increased attention on foundation skills courtesy of NAPLAN is leading to improved results across our school system, in all three sectors. Schools know that it is one of the ways by which parents will judge them, and it is resulting in improvements year on year. Schools that demonstrate improvements year on year, or do better than schools of similar social background will be attractive to parents.

NAPLAN is a bit less useful for telling individual families how their kids are going – given the nature of the test conditions, it is likely to mask competence in kids who are nervous or find it difficult to produce accurate work under pressure. Because most NAPLAN tests are multiple-choice, there is also a statistical chance your child in any given test did a bit worse or a bit better due to luck. Talking to your child’s teacher, and report cards, are better guides to your individual child’s performance. NAPLAN forms part of the picture of your child’s performance.

The worst use of NAPLAN is the creation of league tables pitting school against school without taking into account the community the school sits in. Because they are not reporting on NAPLAN results – they just look like they are. They are largely reporting on parental income and parental education. We live in a country where those two factors are the strongest indicators of education success. That means where you find more kids with wealthier and better educated parents, you will, in general, get higher NAPLAN scores.

This inequality of outcome is something Australia must tackle head-on. Funding to student need (Gonski) and counterbalancing parental advantage is essential. We all need every kid to get the best education they can – not just our own kids, every kid. That is how we will have a prosperous future. The federal government walking away from funding according to need, and even threatening to stop funding public schools at all, would doom us all to being an economic backwater with a small number of wealthy people living behind gates to keep the rest of us out.

Education is the point at which we get to choose to value every child and give every child a chance at a bright future. Let’s not waste that chance, and let’s not be blinded by league tables in our quest for excellence for all.