

INSIGHTS

Does NAPLAN help children succeed academically?



NAPLAN is upon us again, arriving as it does every year, as Term 2 begins to build. And while many parents, teachers, and students are generally ambivalent and nonchalant about this “high-stakes” \$100 million plus test, others take NAPLAN very seriously.

For those who are focused on NAPLAN results, there are NAPLAN preparation books for sale in stores around the country. Learning time in class is being disrupted so students can practice taking NAPLAN exams. And to highlight how high the stakes are in some families, “I’m buying my daughter a puppy if she scores in the top band” one mother informed me.

But is NAPLAN useful for understanding your child’s academic capability? How helpful is NAPLAN when it comes to your child receiving an excellent education?

The short answer: not very.

The trouble with NAPLAN

Since its inception, NAPLAN has been contentious, for a number of reasons. Let me summarise, very briefly, some of the main concerns about NAPLAN:

1. There have been statistical and moral questions raised about the fairness, equity, reliability, and validity of NAPLAN for many years. (Too many to go into here, but important to mention.)
2. NAPLAN is a ranking system... but education should not be about ranking or competition. It should be about teaching and development, mastery and competence.
3. Kids get stressed about the test. While it’s true that kids get stressed about tests all the time – and they do need to learn to manage that stress – NAPLAN seems to create high levels of stress, and based on the points above, it’s unnecessary.
4. NAPLAN has been blamed for kids missing class learning, opportunities to perform musicals, sports, and more due to an ever-crowded curriculum and the push for better results.
5. It is not helpful to use NAPLAN diagnostically. The test is completed in May and results are returned at the year’s end. To know how your child is performing at school it’s more helpful to ask the teacher than to wait for a NAPLAN result.
6. You can actually guess how a school will perform based on the average income of the parents whose children attend.

Additionally, NAPLAN doesn’t tell us anything helpful about a school other than how its students scored on that test. It tells us nothing about the teachers and their involvement with students, the culture of the school, what happens on the playground, or how students feel while they’re at school.

For all of these reasons – and more – the Gonski Institute for Education issued a report last year suggesting that NAPLAN be scrapped!

If you want your children to thrive at school, NAPLAN results aren’t a useful measure. But fortunately we know what is.

Helping Children Thrive at School

The following factors generally matter most when it comes to your child doing well at school:

1. *Reading.* If there is only one thing that you do with your children for their education, read to them. This should start as young as possible and continue through toddler years, preschool years, and into big school. Read to them – and have them read to you – as they go through their early primary years. And keep books around right through high school. Reading is one of the best predictors of children’s academic success, and it is associated with increased resilience, particularly for kids from challenged or traumatic backgrounds.
2. *Be involved.* Research shows that parents who ask about school, check in on what students are learning, talk with the school teacher from time to time, and continue to monitor and stay up to date on what is happening at school have children who do better academically when compared with students whose parents are uninvolved. Getting involved shows you care.
3. *Relationships with peers.* Children who enjoy a sense of school belonging, according to Dr Kelly Allen at Monash University, do better at school. They also have higher levels of life satisfaction.
4. *A sense of progress and purpose.* These are two separate things, but I’m including them together because they often follow one another. When our children make progress, they feel competent and capable. This increases their motivation, and makes school feel purposeful. If parents can work to help children see the progress they’re making, it will boost desire for more progress, and the work becomes easier and more enjoyable.
5. *People who love them.* There is no way of getting around this fact: kids do well for those they love. When a student loves his science teacher, science becomes the best subject ever and he tries hard as a result. Same goes with PE, English, or any other subject. Helping children feel like they are known, numbered, and missed combined with teachers who are enthusiastic about their topics, helps kids do better at school.

Often people will say, “But what about my child?” So many parents are dealing with ADHD, autism, ODD, sensory issues, depression, or other additional health or developmental needs. My response is always the same: those points above become even more vital. Read, be involved, help them make friends, challenge them to progress and find purpose, and make sure someone loves them.

Your child may (or may not) be about to sit the NAPLAN test any day now. Let them know that it’s not about them. It’s for the school only. Don’t make a deal about their results when they show up in the post. It’s old news by then. And when it’s done, give them a hug, share a milkshake, and ask them about their friends, their teacher, or their favourite book to read... because those things will matter more for their education than their performance on this year’s NAPLAN test.



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