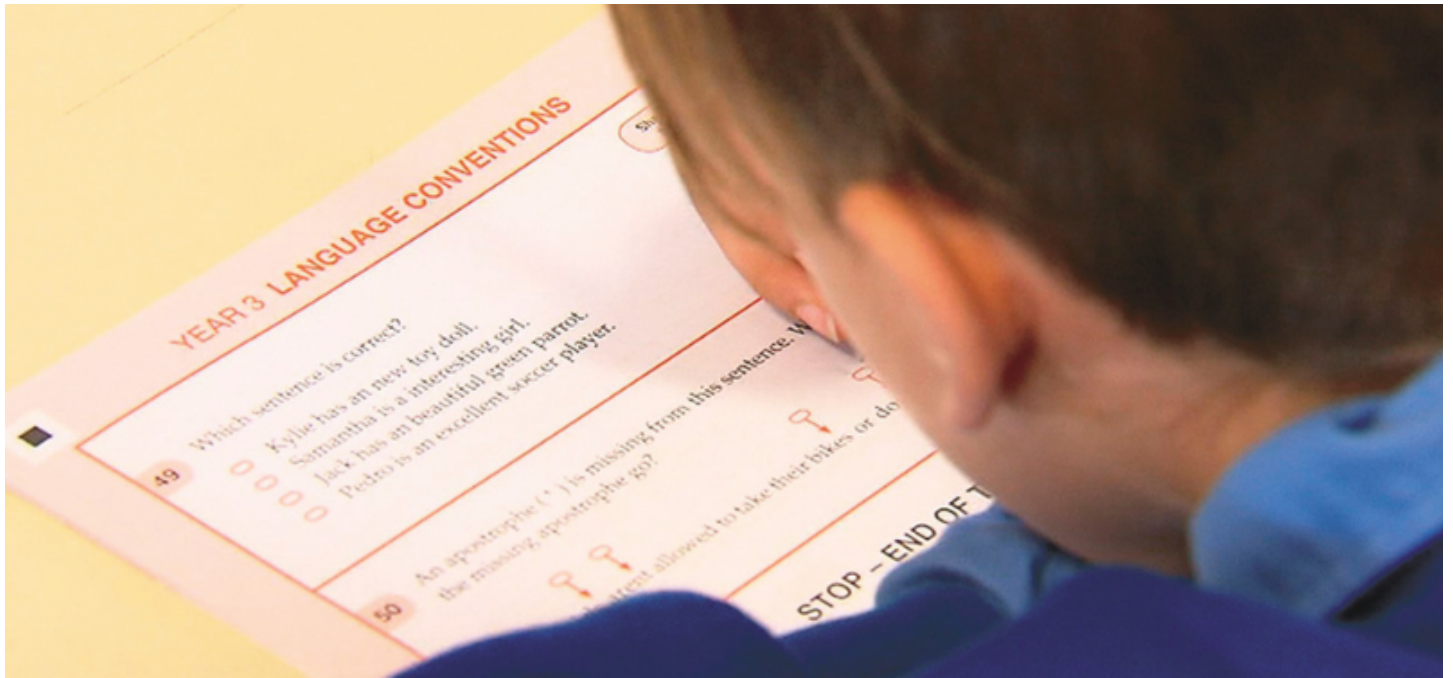


Are the latest NAPLAN results really an epic fail?



By Sally Larsen

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Last month, Australia woke up to a barrage of reports about the latest NAPLAN results. Media coverage described an “epic fail”, “plummeting” performances and a “bleak picture”.

Education experts spoke of “grim reading”, and Prime Minister Anthony Albanese called the results “alarming”.

But many of these analyses are misguided and unhelpful.

What were the results?

NAPLAN tests Year 3, 5, 7 and 9 students each year in literacy and numeracy. There are four possible achievement bands: needs additional support, developing, strong and exceeding.

In 2024 about one in three school students were into the bottom two proficiency bands, with the remaining two thirds were in the top two. About one in 10 students were rated as needing additional support.

These are very similar to last year’s results. The number of students identified as needing additional support also mirrors the proportions of students falling into the bottom band in the previous NAPLAN reporting system used from 2008 to 2022. Around 10 per cent of students (or fewer) were categorised as below the national minimum standard in every NAPLAN test year to 2022.

If we look at average results, some 2024 results in some year groups are slightly above those reported in 2023, and others are slightly below. As the national report notes, differences from 2023 are “either not statistically significant or negligible

in size”.

None of the differences were more than four points (on a 1,000-point scale), with the exception of Year 7 and Year 9 writing which both improved in 2024 (by 6.5 and 7.3 scale scores respectively).

These results reflect normal population variability and are what you would expect if you administered the same test to different groups of children from year to year, as NAPLAN does.

There's no long-term decline

As I have written previously, we need to be cautious about narratives that Australian students' performances in NAPLAN and other standardised tests are getting worse.

My study published earlier this year clearly shows no long-term decline in NAPLAN results from 2008 through to 2022. It even shows some considerable gains. In particular, Year 3 and Year 5 reading showed good progress at the population level over the 14 years of NAPLAN to 2022.

In 2023, some of the processes around NAPLAN changed. This included reporting results in four proficiency levels within each year, rather than the 10 bands used from 2008 to 2022.

Because there are fewer categories in the new reporting of proficiency, there are now higher percentages of students in each category. As is clearly evident from the news reporting, categorising students into fewer proficiency levels can be misinterpreted.

What does this mean?

Do the 2024 results mean Australian students' literacy and numeracy proficiency have precipitously declined in since 2022?

The answer is no – it means the test developers changed the way students are categorised. Importantly, in 2024 the proportions of students falling into the four proficiency levels for each test was no different from those reported for 2023.

There are, of course, enduring differences between different groups of the Australian population, for example students from Indigenous backgrounds and remote areas are much more likely to be in the lower categories on NAPLAN. These, unfortunately, are not new problems.

Fixation on NAPLAN, with the relentless annual reports of crises and catastrophes in our schools, and accompanying criticisms about teacher quality, is not healthy or helpful for our schools.

Of course, improvements can be made to students' literacy and numeracy achievement and progression. However, this is unlikely to happen in a school system that is inequitably funded and struggling to retain experienced professionals.

If state and federal governments are serious about resolving the problems in Australian schooling, a first step will be to accurately interpret the evidence about students' literacy and numeracy.

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