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Literacy and numeracy skills of students in Australia aren't improving

The literacy and numeracy skills of students across the country aren't improving, with NAPLAN test results plateauing, the latest summary data shows.

The writing skills of year 7 and 9 students are of particular concern, with a significant decrease in test results since 2011, the Chief Executive Officer of the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority, Robert Randall said.

"We are concerned that, on a national level, the results have shown no significant improvement across the domains and year levels from 2015," Mr Randall said.

"Plateauing results are not what we should expect or assume from our education systems."

Students sat the NAPLAN test in May this year and were examined on the key areas of reading, spelling, grammar and punctuation, numeracy and writing. The national results show that from 2015 to 2016, there has been no significant change in literacy and numeracy results.

"Literacy and numeracy are the foundations of learning in and beyond school," Mr Randall said.

"Literacy and numeracy achievement needs to improve to ensure the wellbeing of individual students and the country as a whole."

NAPLAN testing began in 2008 and, since then, there have been significant improvements across a range of domains.

Queensland and Western Australia have shown greater improvement than any of the other states or territories.

Year 3 students in Queensland recorded significant improvements in their reading and spelling, while Western Australia's year 3 cohort improved its numeracy skills, significantly increasing its mean scale score from 2008.

This result is in stark contrast with the trend of the last few years that has seen results plateauing, with writing skills not improving or getting worse in every state except for in

South Australia. Year 3 students there were the only ones with better results.

Experts call for NAPLAN test to be 'widened or abolished'

Retired high school principal and education expert Chris Bonnor told SBS that the flailing NAPLAN results aren't surprising.

"I think they were going to plateau anyway," Mr Bonnor said.

"When you introduce a new testing regime, it starts out with fairly low results, then teachers learn how to deal with the tests and teach to the test, if you like. Results go up but there comes a point where ... they do tend to plateau."

Mr Bonnor said the NAPLAN tests could be useful if they cast a much wider net of skills and interests.

"It's a narrow [testing] band that tests basic skills," he said.

"I'd either abolish the test or expand the range of test so greatly so you're tapping into all the things schools need to do."

Minister for Education and Training Simon Birmingham said the plateauing results are "not good enough," and has called on schools, families and education experts to focus on "evidence-based measures" in order to lift student achievement.

Minister Birmingham said despite "significant funding growth" from Gonski funding there haven't been sufficient improvements in student outcomes.

"We have excellent schools and teachers in Australia that successfully set the vast majority of our students up for life but we need to move the conversation on from just how much is being spent in schools to focus on how record funding can best be used for the benefit of students," Minister Birmingham said.

Commonwealth funding has increased by 23.7 per cent since 2013, yet the average percentage change in NAPLAN mean scale scores during the same time period have only improved by less than two percent in reading and numeracy, and has decreased by 0.20 in writing.

"We are dramatically over investing in schools with advantaged students and we are still under-investing in schools that enroll the stragglers," Mr Bonnor said.

“Unless we pick up those schools, unless we lift those schools, we’re not going to lift student achievement and we’re not going to lift the country.”

Students will receive their individual reports in a few weeks and more detailed NAPLAN data will become available later in the year. As the test moves online next year, the current three-month turnaround for results is expected to shorten to just a matter of weeks.

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Low literacy cannot be tolerated or excused any longer

The Drum

Opinion

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There are a number of key reasons why Australian students are not getting the best possible literacy teaching - and funding is not one of them, writes Jennifer Buckingham.

The levels of literacy and numeracy among Australian school students are a national disgrace.

The Grattan Institute's [new analysis](#) of results from the National Assessment Program for Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) provides yet more proof of [what reading specialists have been saying for over a decade](#): far too many children are not learning to read in the early years of school - and the longer they are at school, the larger the gap between the highest and lowest performing children becomes.

The Grattan Institute report released today proposes a new way of presenting literacy and numeracy levels - 'years of progress' - to show more clearly the gaps in literacy and numeracy attainment among children. It also supports the findings of [previous studies](#) that the national minimum standards set by NAPLAN for student progression are so low as to be meaningless.

It is unarguably good to have measures that help us to better understand the extent of under-performance, but it will not help us fix the problem. There is only one way to do that - better teaching. What the Grattan Institute report and many others like it do not say is that the reason so many children are failing to learn to read is that they are not getting the best reading instruction in the early years of school.

Forty years of scientific research has provided overwhelming evidence that [some teaching methods are more effective than others](#). The most effective method for teaching new complex skills and imparting knowledge is explicit instruction.

For children, reading is new and complex. They need to be shown in a methodical and

systematic way how to 'break the code' of written language (also known as ['synthetic phonics'](#)) and then be given plenty of supported practice to become fluent and proficient readers. This code-based instruction must be embedded in a literacy program that also develops vocabulary and comprehension.

All children benefit from this type of evidence-based teaching, but it is absolutely essential for children who come from disadvantaged backgrounds or have learning difficulties like dyslexia.

Demonstration of the power of explicit teaching doesn't just come from peer-reviewed journals and expert reviews. It also comes from Australian schools that have adopted these methods and shown that they lead to dramatic improvements in literacy levels.

[West Beechboro Primary School](#) is one example of a school which adopted explicit teaching methods to great effect. In 2008, 42 per cent of Year 3 students scored in the lowest two bands on NAPLAN reading tests. In 2015, following the school's change of approach, only 8 per cent were in the lowest two bands. Between 2008 and 2015, the school's NAPLAN profile on the My School website changed steadily from mostly red (below national and 'like school' averages) to mostly green (above national and 'like school' averages).

[A review of nine high-performing primary schools](#) in Western Australia found seven had adopted explicit instruction pedagogy across the curriculum, and all nine used explicit and systematic phonics instruction for teaching reading.

This raises the question of why children aren't getting this sort of teaching in all schools. There are a number of key reasons - and funding is not one of them.

Numerous studies have found that university students in teacher education degrees have [low personal literacy skills](#) and [insufficient knowledge of the English language](#) to teach it explicitly to children. Not only this, they are often unaware of the paucity of their knowledge. They do not know what they do not know.

In addition, many - if not most - [teacher education degrees](#) do not equip new teachers with evidence-based teaching strategies. Like at West Beechboro Primary School, they often discover them by chance. As a result of widespread deficiencies in teacher knowledge, many schools believe they are using the most effective methods when in fact they are not.

In additions, schools are using [government-developed and funded reading programs and policies](#) that do not reflect the evidence on effective teaching of reading. There is a chasm between research and practice - a persistent problem in education that the [FIVE from FIVE](#) project aims to resolve.

Whether or not a child learns to read should not be a matter of chance. Low literacy cannot be tolerated or excused any longer.

[Jennifer Buckingham](#) is a research fellow and director of the FIVE from FIVE project at The Centre for Independent Studies.

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