

The effectiveness of the National Assessment Program - Literacy and Numeracy.

Question on Notice: 6

It is apparent in the submissions to this inquiry is that there is confusion and inconsistent statements about the purpose of NAPLAN.

For example:

According to then ACARA Chief Executive Peter Hill (October 2010):

The purpose of national testing has been to get a snapshot of student performance for reporting back at different levels. That was the purpose from the beginning, and the purpose has never been diagnostic assessment.

According to ACARA Chair Barry McGaw (March 2011):

NAPLAN is not a test students can prepare for because it is not a test of content. The federal government's intention in introducing and reporting NAPLAN results was to provide a diagnostic tool for teachers and parents, identifying gaps in students' skills.

What is the predominant purpose of NAPLAN testing?

ACARA response

Purpose of NAPLAN

The National Assessment Program (NAP), including NAPLAN and the NAP Sample Assessments, is the means by which governments, education authorities and schools can determine whether or not young Australians are reaching important educational goals.

As the largest and most significant program within the NAP, NAPLAN provides data on student learning in literacy and numeracy and this data is used to inform the development of strategies to improve literacy and numeracy skills of students in all schools across Australia. This is the predominant purpose of NAPLAN.

Is NAPLAN diagnostic?

There is apparent confusion on this matter as a result of different understandings of the term "diagnostic" in relation to NAPLAN assessments. The conventional meaning of a diagnostic assessment is an instrument that measures the level or state of development of a student's knowledge and skills in a particular area. It is a guide to what they know and can do. This information is used to inform the content and strategy of a subsequent learning program. Sometimes this is referred to as the student's 'entry level'. A teaching and learning program or intervention will be much more successful if the activity is well targeted to the individual student's circumstance (the role of the diagnostic assessment). To this extent, NAPLAN is not a diagnostic assessment for the individual student and this is what Dr Hill was referring to.

However, there is another sense where the use of the term diagnostic assists a general audience to understand the principle of useful data to evaluate teaching and learning programs. Professor McGaw's comments refer to the use of NAPLAN data by schools to better understand the outcomes of their programs, and to inform future planning and strategies. In this sense therefore, NAPLAN is 'diagnosing' the strengths and weaknesses of schools' teaching and learning programs and informing future programs, by identifying gaps in student knowledge and skills.