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1. BACKGROUND
The National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) has been in place across Australia since 2008. At its commencement, NAPLAN was represented as a program to promote quality education in Australia through accountability and transparency.

Under NAPLAN, students in Years 3, 5, 7 and 9 participate in standardised tests designed and developed by the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA). In Queensland, the tests are administered by the Queensland Curriculum and Assessment Authority (QCAA).

Participation in NAPLAN is not compulsory. Parents/carers may withdraw their children from the test. Some students are exempted from the test based on language background or significant disability.

NAPLAN results provide a measure of performance in the areas of reading, writing, language conventions and numeracy. These results are used for individual student reporting to parents/carers, class and school reporting, and aggregate reporting by state and territory.

Since 2010, NAPLAN results at the school level have been published on the My School website. My School is administered by ACARA and provides access to information on approximately 10,000 schools across Australia. The site publishes comparisons between ‘like’ schools (i.e. schools that are statistically similar in terms of their student populations) and tracks student progress over time. School financial and other contextual data are also reported.

2. CONTEXT
It is ten years since the inception of NAPLAN and almost eight years since development of the My School website. During that time, there have been significant changes in education in Queensland and nationally. At the state level, a Prep year was introduced in 2007; the school starting age was raised by six months in 2008; and Year 7 became the first year of high school from 2015. At the national level, in 2014, all states and territories began to implement aspects of the new Australian Curriculum, Foundation to Year 10.

Given the changing face of the education landscape, and NAPLAN having been in operation for ten years, the Queensland Minister for Education commissioned a review of NAPLAN in the Queensland context.

3. TERMS OF REFERENCE
This report provides information to support the first stage of Queensland’s NAPLAN review. Drawn from consultation across Queensland, it details the views of parents/carers of children at school about their perceptions of, and experiences with, NAPLAN.

Specifications for this element of the review were as follows.

The review will identify, through a consultation process, the key issues being raised in the Queensland community, specifically by parents, on NAPLAN.

The review will consider parents’ views on six topic areas:
1. Impact of NAPLAN testing on students, including student wellbeing
2. Impact of NAPLAN testing on teachers
3. Value and benefit of NAPLAN
4. Unintended consequences of the current NAPLAN testing
5. Composition and content of NAPLAN tests
6. Usefulness of reporting of NAPLAN results

The review will engage in broad consultation with parents of children presently at school in Queensland and with parent organisations.

The reviewer will produce a final consultation outcomes paper (the ‘paper’). The paper will, at a minimum, detail the community perceptions and experiences with NAPLAN, key issues raised during the consultation, and a thematic analysis of key findings.

4. APPROACH TO THE REVIEW
The reviewers used a mixed-methods approach to identify the key issues being raised by parents. The sources of information were restricted to parents, carers and parent organisations. No secondary sources were used.

The review used the following mechanisms for collecting information from parents: an online survey; public forums; written responses; and unstructured interviews.

The online survey was a comprehensive and principally quantitative questionnaire. The sample frame was parents/carers of Queensland school students. These children may or may not have done NAPLAN. The survey did not collect identifying data; postcodes were used as the means of geo-locating the respondents.

The forums were held in diverse locations so that participants would reflect a range of parent views.

A question at the end of the survey gave parents the opportunity to supplement their survey responses with written responses emailed to a dedicated email address.

A second question at the end of the survey invited parents to volunteer to be interviewed should they wish to communicate more of their views.

Review coverage
The mixed-methods approach combines breadth and depth. The review achieved breadth through the online survey with over 7,500 respondents. It achieved depth through:

- four parent forums across the state
- more than 3,000 written comments
- a small number of targeted interviews
- consultation with parent associations.

This report balances a wide range of views from all sources.
Responses covered all schooling sectors. Allocating respondents to sector has the problem that parents with multiple children may send them to schools in different sectors. For simplicity, the review asked respondents what school their oldest child went to. Of the 7,064 who identified a sector, 60% (4,240) were state and 40% (2,824) were non-state.

![School sectors of respondents](Image)

**Figure 1. Identified sector of respondents**

Postcode analysis showed there was also a good coverage of parents from across Queensland, as illustrated by Figure 2.

![Geographical distribution of respondents](Image)

**Figure 2. Geographical distribution of respondents**
Representativeness of the survey sample
The review’s success in achieving coverage of sectors and geographical locations gives confidence that it has identified a broad range of views and reflects diverse parent types. Nevertheless, responses collated by the review should not be taken to be a valid statistical sample from which precise inferences can be made about the whole population of Queensland school parents.

Parents participated in the survey on a voluntary basis. By design, the reviewers made the survey public and then relied on parents becoming aware of its existence and choosing to respond. ‘Chain sampling’ was used, as parents were encouraged to share the survey link with their networks.

The questionnaire itself was comprehensive in scope, and there were more than 7,500 respondents. However, large numbers alone do not guarantee that volunteer respondents to a survey are typical of the general population.

The unrepresentativeness of the sample was manifested in several ways. First, there was an over-representation of Year 3 parents and an under-representation of Year 9 parents. Second, there was a higher-than-population rate of survey respondents whose children were withdrawn from NAPLAN. Third, respondents were predominantly female (over 80%). Finally, several questions attracted strongly divergent responses, indicating that parents responded to the survey because they held strong opinions one way or the other. Parents of moderate or neutral views may be underrepresented.

Structure of this report
The views of parents were recorded within a framework reflecting the chronology of the NAPLAN experience:

- **Before the Test** – wellbeing, attitudes and preparation
- **Days of the Test** – the testing experience and the test itself
- **After the Test** – test results, reporting and feedback.

This framework forms the basis of sections 5, 6 and 7 of this report.

In employing this framework with the methodology set out above, the review acquired rich information about the views of parents.

5. BEFORE THE TEST

Student wellbeing
The review explored perceived psychological effects of the NAPLAN experience on children through surveying parents about their children’s anxiety, motivation and attitude.

- **How positive was your child’s attitude to her/his NAPLAN experience?**
- **How motivated was your child to do well on the NAPLAN tests?**
- **How anxious was your child about the NAPLAN testing?**

(Although student wellbeing is discussed in this section about the period before the test, it is a theme that permeates all aspects of NAPLAN testing.)
Figure 3 presents parents’ perceptions of how their children were affected by their NAPLAN experience in 2018, with respect to the above three questions.

Figure 3 shows that, of all survey respondents, approximately 40% see their children as having a positive or very positive attitude toward the NAPLAN experience, and approximately 50% seeing their children as motivated or highly motivated.

However, a large proportion of parents (approximately 55%) see their children as being anxious or very anxious about NAPLAN.

Responses therefore show parents’ perceptions of high levels of both student motivation and student anxiety. When anxiety is taken to be concern about producing a good performance, a small amount of it is often regarded as positive (i.e. performance-enhancing), but it is regarded as a negative emotion when associated with fear and avoidance. To explore the kind of anxiety that seems to be operating here, the review looked at the correlations between the three ‘affective states’ – motivation, anxiety and positivity.

As might be expected, there is a moderate correlation ($r = 0.50$) between motivation and positivity.
At the same time, however, there is a moderate to strong negative correlation ($r = -0.65$) between anxiety and positivity, which indicates that the anxiety is not a constructive emotion. In support of this, there was no practical correlation between anxiety and motivation. In other words, the anxiety that parents perceive in their children is not the positive kind related to a concern for doing well, but the negative kind related to fear of failure or the conditions of the test itself.

Overall, it seems parents are reporting their children to be positive and motivated, despite many feeling that their children are anxious. This interpretation is borne out by a comparison of the patterns of survey responses (Figure 5).

![Figure 5. Distributions, three affective states](image)

**Test preparation**

The survey asked about schools preparing students for NAPLAN and the effect of this preparation on students. Again, the survey results show complex and nuanced responses from
parents. While some questions received divergent responses, others saw strong consensus (Figure 6).

![Perceptions of school NAPLAN preparation](image)

Figure 6. Parents’ views on schools preparing students for NAPLAN testing

With respect to the three affective states referred to in Figure 5, high motivation is associated with the view that students are well prepared, and a negative attitude is strongly associated with the view that schools spend too much time on NAPLAN preparation. There is no association between perceived motivation and the view that schools spend too much time on NAPLAN preparation (Figure 6).

Qualitative responses to the survey indicate that the preparation process itself produces stress and anxiety in students by sending a message that NAPLAN is high-stakes assessment – that how they perform on NAPLAN has serious consequences for them or their schools.

Survey respondents are divided about the importance of school preparation, with roughly equal proportions of non-neutral responses endorsing (42%) and not endorsing (44%) this view, as shown in Figure 7.
While there are differences regarding the importance of preparation, there is much more agreement about whether schools are spending too much time on it. 68% of survey respondents have the view that schools spend too much time preparing students for NAPLAN (see Figure 8).

This view is strongly associated with the view that excessive time on test preparation takes away from other, more important things that children could be doing, a view supported by 72% of non-neutral respondents (see Figure 9, and *Effects of test preparation* below).
Notwithstanding their view that schools spend too much time preparing students, most parents who completed the survey believe that students are well prepared for NAPLAN (see Figure 10), although there was a high neutral response. This may reflect an acknowledgment that even if some parents disagree with NAPLAN and the extent of preparation, they accept that schools are doing a good job of making students test-ready.

Not all parents believe that schools spend too much time preparing students for NAPLAN. One parent’s view of NAPLAN preparation is that it is ‘school-dependent’:

NAPLAN preparation is school dependent and at times is reflective of the student conditioning to the style of questioning not a child’s natural ability and therefore the actual motives for the testing are lost. My child did very well which resulted in no change to his teaching approach and nor do we feel the results would necessarily be mirrored if he was at a school with a more relaxed preparation for NAPLAN.
Parents often noted that their own school does not focus too much on the testing, again suggesting that the school attended is a factor in determining the nature of the testing experience, and that parents are sometimes basing their broader views on external information.

**Effects of test preparation on students**

Supplementing parents’ general views on test preparation, further questions specifically investigated the perceived effects of preparation on students:

Thinking about the effect on students of preparing for the NAPLAN tests, how much do you agree or disagree with the following statements?

- It is a positive experience for students;
- Students learn valuable skills;
- Students get unnecessarily stressed;
- Students miss out on other things;
- Students couldn’t care less.

In relation to all but the last question, parents’ responses indicated strong consensus.

![Perceptions of effect on students of NAPLAN preparation](image)

*Figure 11. Parents’ views – effects of NAPLAN preparation on students*
This consensus can be seen clearly by combining those stating Agreement (Strongly Agree/Agree), and those stating Disagreement (Strongly Disagree/Disagree) and removing the neutral responses – see Figure 12.

Some parents noted that the skills tested in NAPLAN are, by their nature, important. One forum participant made the point that:

Some say that it takes the students away from learning important stuff - how much more relevant can you get than reading/comprehension, maths and English skills?

The notion of ‘test-wiseness’ was raised by parents in written comments.

... preparation for NAPLAN ... should include helping students prepare for test conditions.

One parent’s written response gave a specific example of how test-taking skills are needed; in this case dealing with time-limited tests.

My daughter had no experience with time management for testing and was very upset that she ran out of time, despite her trying her hardest – the alternative? To rush and panic and guess?

Nevertheless, parents’ survey responses generally showed a strong view that NAPLAN preparation does not constitute valuable learning (Figure 13).
The dominant response is also a rejection of the view that NAPLAN preparation is a positive experience (see Figure 14).

The question of displacement of teaching effort – that ‘students miss out on other things’ has been mentioned above (Figure 9). There is a strong association between the view that students miss out on other things and the view that NAPLAN preparation is a negative experience. Parent responses were strongly towards NAPLAN preparation causing students to miss out on other things, and not being a positive experience for them.
Parents were also strongly in agreement that preparation causes students to become unnecessarily stressed (Figure 15). This response contrasts with the response to the question of the affective state of Anxiety above (see Student Wellbeing), which showed more divergence of opinion. It may be that parents differ more about whether their own children are anxious, but agree that students in general are unnecessarily stressed, or the difference may be attributable to the stress being ‘unnecessary’.

**Teaching to the test**

The question of whether teachers teach to the test was another example of strong consensus, with a dominant view that teachers do ‘teach to the test’.

However, different interpretations of the question may have been in play. From listening to parents in forums and interviews, the reviewers concluded that most parents see teaching to the test as bad practice:

Some schools are possibly wasting time on teaching to the test rather than just teaching.
Some parents, however, are of the view that a good test is worth teaching to, because ‘at least kids will be taught something’. The author of a written response to the open-ended question of the survey believes that curriculum coverage is not adequate in some schools or classrooms.

‘Teachers teach to the test’ is [a] misleading [statement]. Teachers teach to the curriculum, but in the lead up to NAPLAN they are compelled to prepare students for the test because some of the content of the test has not yet been covered ...

Another parent took up the notion of NAPLAN’s role in ensuring that their children are given the opportunity to learn a wide range of skills – it is not one or the other.

I want teachers to teach to the test AND teach other important skills. The importance of these skills in numeracy and literacy is a subset of all skills that students should acquire.

Parents may also believe that teaching to the test happens because, in the words of one parent:

If they don’t then kids aren’t ready and then they cop pressure from their admin teams about why the kids have done so badly.

Role of parents in test preparation
Most of the survey respondents (approximately 60%) feel that parents do not have a role to play in preparing their children for NAPLAN.

Of those who believe otherwise, the predominant view, as shown in Figure 17, is to do ‘nothing other than encourage their child to do well’. Thus a very substantial proportion of respondents (more than 80%) see parents’ role in preparation as either to do nothing, or nothing except encouragement.

Figure 17. Parents’ views – role of parents in NAPLAN preparation

Very few survey respondents believe in organising private tutoring for their children or having their child practise on sample tests.

Of parents who thought further preparation could be helpful, one (at a forum), also a teacher, expressed satisfaction with practice tests she had purchased for her child. Another, in a written
response, suggested how school and home in concert could do something to familiarise students with NAPLAN tests’ format and content.

Give sample tests as homework instead of normal homework in the weeks leading up so students are familiar with how the tests present and working within an allocated timeframe.

Sources of information
Parents who completed the survey reported that their principal sources of information about NAPLAN are educators or their own children, as Figure 18 shows. ‘Educators’ comprise school administration and ‘teachers’, which itself is a combination of their child’s teachers and other teachers they know.

Relatively few parents appear to get their information from the news media or government websites including ACARA and QCAA, nor is word of mouth (i.e. from other parents or social media) an important information source.

![Ranked sources of information about NAPLAN](image)

Parents who attended the forums described their information channels in the same way as did survey respondents.

Several parents’ comments were in line with the view that not all schools took on the responsibility of providing the most basic information to parents.

We were not given any information by the school about NAPLAN except when the children would be taking the test. I still don’t know what it involved or what it is for.

Mixed messages
From the views expressed, it appears that parents and students in different schools get different messages about the significance of NAPLAN testing. The positions signalled by these messages ranged, in the reviewers’ paraphrase, from ‘NAPLAN is nothing special, just another thing to do’ to ‘NAPLAN is very significant both for the school and the individual’.
Parents perceive mixed messages from schools, mainly from school administrators, with differing private and public messages. One parent suggested mixed messages are also borne out in other ways:

Some schools tell kids it is not a special deal and then put on a special breakfast before the test and send them to a special room for the test.

Where parents saw schools signalling a position that NAPLAN is nothing special, it appeared the experience generated less anxiety and less parent concern. It did not appear that these schools spent much time in preparation. By contrast, where parents saw schools placing great emphasis on NAPLAN testing in their messaging, they also believed they were spending a lot of time in preparation.

Parents say they are often told by teachers that NAPLAN is not worth doing because it is ‘not a good test’, with one parent indicating a teacher had described it as ‘an epic waste of time’.

Given the significance that parents place on the school as an information source about NAPLAN, this observation suggests a powerful role for teachers and school administrators in how NAPLAN is perceived and received.

The comment that follows is only one of many similar comments that illustrate how parents perceive the responsibilities for information-giving about NAPLAN.

The govt should invest in high quality communication materials and a campaign on the key messages around NAPLAN and how both schools and parents can best support children to participate in a healthy, balanced way. This could be a positive message and impact other areas of parental support for children’s learning and schooling, etc.]

6. DAYS OF THE TEST

Role of the media

Parents are concerned that media hype surrounding NAPLAN makes it difficult to protect children from the stress of these tests. They strongly criticised the role of the media, with 87% of survey respondents believing that the media gives too much importance to the NAPLAN results and, by extension, to the importance of the tests.

The media needs to butt out...

It is drummed up by the media so that parent and kids stress out about it before they have even given it a chance.

the media needs to stop all the negativity and hype.

The media should stay out of it, so the schools can focus on what is important! The kids

Media and social media have convinced the public that these tests are important reflections of a school’s performance...

There has been too much hype about it in the media, mainly negative hype. And most of the hype focusses on the ‘poor kids that struggle with the pressure’.

Media reporting on NAPLAN is the primary source of stress for students.
Even among those with positive views of NAPLAN testing, the media’s role in creating a negative climate was highlighted.

**School’s approach to NAPLAN**
The school’s approach to NAPLAN testing was considered to be an important factor in students’ test experience. When parents referred to the school, or responded to questions about the school, they could be referring either to the official message from the principal, the informal or formal message from their child’s teacher or teachers, the view expressed by the school’s parent body, or a combination of these.

> Our schools treat NAPLAN as a non-stressful activity. They support the children but don’t teach to the test as the tests are basically just testing the curriculum anyway.

**Student ability**
From parents’ statements, there appeared to be an association between having a positive view of NAPLAN testing and having a child who did well on the tests. Many parents made statements about their children in terms of their ability.

> We were pleased to know that our child was performing well compared to others generally.

> I have noticed many parents get upset about NAPLAN testing as their kids don’t do well, and it is stressful as a result. My kids do very well on NAPLAN, so they enjoy the challenge and the positive feedback.

**Aspects of the test experience**
The value in learning about and experiencing test-taking was a strong theme. Some parents commented that test-taking is a skill in itself, and that this was good preparation for exams in high school and beyond. Parents referenced both external assessment for the senior years and the Queensland Core Skills Test.

According to parents, not all children are fazed by the NAPLAN experience; some children take pleasure from it. One parent wrote:

> My children actually enjoy NAPLAN. Especially my Year 3 child. She was sad when it was over.

Another parent wrote about the enjoyment their child gets from NAPLAN and notes an absence of stress. This parent views assessment as part of the educational experience.

> My child loves NAPLAN. She enjoys it and never complained about being anxious or worried about it. Education is full of assessments and this is just another aspect of that.

**Appropriateness of NAPLAN at Year 3**
Many parents of Year 3 students are of the view that children aged 8 are too young to cope with standardised testing and endure anxiety at the levels reported to this review.

Forum conversations and written responses described standardised testing involving written multiple-choice questions as a novel experience for young children. There were concerns about how children need to be shown how to select the correct answer from a set of options and then shade one of (typically) four bubbles that corresponds with their answer.

> I feel like multiple choice is not suitable for an 8-year-old. A child is not familiar with multiple choice at that age. It’s a new concept for them.
In response to the common concern about answering multiple-choice questions, one parent suggested that:

Students in Year 3 should be allowed to mark the test book and not the answer sheet as they get mixed up colouring the bubbles in the right order and it’s foreign to kids that young.

Another written response on the topic of NAPLAN at Year 3 saw it as putting more stress on children especially a Year 3 child ‘who really doesn’t understand why they are doing it in the first place. Let our schools teach our children without having the extra pressure of worrying about NAPLAN and meeting the government criteria …’

At least for children in Year 3, there is a strong signal from parents who perceive that ‘teachers should know where their students are at, regardless of NAPLAN’.

Parents frequently shared the view that the most appropriate time to introduce children to NAPLAN is Year 5. One parent who had previously experienced the ‘Year 2 Net’ perceived that to be a better option for the early years. ‘All teachers should know where their students are at, regardless of NAPLAN’.

**Different attitudes to different year levels for NAPLAN**

A parent of four children who has experienced NAPLAN several times wrote about how she had perceived a change in the NAPLAN culture over that time – from a somewhat low-key assessment to high-stakes testing. Forum participants also had the view that NAPLAN ‘has become a high-stakes assessment, which is not the intention’.

Several parents commented on an apparent ‘lack of importance placed on NAPLAN in the high school setting compared with the primary school setting’. One parent who did not support NAPLAN for Year 3 students but responded to the survey as a Year 9 parent, did not view the testing experience in the same way for both years: ‘My answer to survey questions would have been vastly different if Year 9 child not Year 3.’

Parents in a similar situation – a child in Year 3 with siblings who had done NAPLAN in Years 7 and 9 – reported that they were ‘not as stressed because they had become familiar with, even accepting of, the testing program’.

Not infrequently, parents commented on the stress levels of other parents, often to ask whether parents’ stress levels contribute to their children’s stress level. One parent went so far as to say that parents’ stress levels and the media were the two main sources of student anxiety.

**Students’ confidence about the different tests**

The survey asked parents about their children’s confidence in doing the four NAPLAN tests (writing, reading, language conventions, numeracy).
As shown in Figure 19, results reveal disparate views about confidence regarding numeracy. Parents see the numeracy test as the one their children are most confident about (43%) - more than for the other three (literacy) tests. However, numeracy also appears to be a test for which parents believe children lack confidence (25%), although not as much as for writing (30%).

**Withdrawal of children from NAPLAN**

A significant proportion of students are withdrawn from NAPLAN each year. According to 2017 data, the withdrawal rates for Queensland rise from about 4.5% in Year 3 to about 6.5% in Year 9. Parents describe two avenues for withdrawal of a child from NAPLAN – suggestion from the school or request from the parent.

Many believe the reason for schools requesting a child stay home on test days is to improve the school's NAPLAN results and protect the school's reputation, because 'low-achievers' will not be in the calculation of the school average.

Some parents disapprove of the perceived practice of schools excluding low-achieving students and view it as a system problem akin to 'gaming':

> When schools start to pull low end learners students out of NAPLAN you know you have a problem in the system.

Parents say that parental requests to withdraw a child may be to eliminate pressure on their children, because they do not believe in NAPLAN or standardised testing in general, or because they see no value in the reports generated for individual students.

The withdrawal option for children with special needs came up in conversation at the forums. Parents of children with special needs are concerned that their children's exclusion is due to

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assumptions about the best way to respond to their special needs (if withdrawn) while, at the same time, being concerned that their children are being set up for stress and failure (if not withdrawn).

One parent wrote about a child’s emotional response to withdrawal:

...parents have been asked to withdraw their child from school while NAPLAN is on, due to child’s learning difficulties. This is NOT okay and needs to be monitored if NAPLAN is to continue. Devastating for the child and his/her parents.

Another parent wrote about the emotional response to NAPLAN of a student with a disability (not necessarily a parent who was considering withdrawal):

NAPLAN is very useful for the teachers to obtain data on their class and what their gaps in knowledge is. However, students with disabilities are inordinately stressed [by] the assessment.

**NAPLAN test content**

Parents appear to be aware of the four test strands that make up NAPLAN. In the forums and survey comments, many parents restated the view that NAPLAN covers only a sliver of the curriculum but, apart from that, very few were aware of the content of the NAPLAN tests.

One parent’s comment noted the difference between testing subject-specific knowledge and skills and testing basic skills in unfamiliar contexts.

I quite like the styling of testing and allowing to see results from ‘untaught’ work.

Another parent wrote of a perceived imbalance of numeracy and literacy.

The Government needs to ensure that NAPLAN is not so highly weighted towards literacy. At present it is an 80% Literacy test, with little emphasis on Numeracy.

Parents have strong views about NAPLAN – its worth, preparation, reports to name a few – but were not familiar with what is in the tests (i.e. items and item types) unless they had seen NAPLAN questions. Most parents who attended the forums were aware of the sample NAPLAN questions on the QCAA website. One forum participant had based her knowledge on practice tests purchased for her child.

On viewing a small collection of sample NAPLAN items, participants at forums expressed surprise at what NAPLAN items look like and were interested in studying them further. Subsequently, they worked on the items and came to understand something of what their children experience.

**Item features**

**Difficulty**

Although the parents who worked through the sample NAPLAN items did not necessarily agree on item difficulty, they discussed some features of items that made them difficult. Sources of item difficulty they encountered are discussed below.

There is a big load of reading before you get to the real question.

The questions are so ambiguous that it is all about deciphering the questions.
Sometimes you must do a lot of steps to get the right answer [in numeracy] [in multiple-choice questions].

Some of the written comments linked a child’s confusion when doing NAPLAN tests to the style or type of questioning. One written comment from a parent–teacher who prepares children for NAPLAN using sample tests/items indicated that:

The test often got some kids wrong and I could usually put it down to either the types of questioning being so confusing for them or they were stressed.

**Test format**

Many written responses drew attention to the multiple-choice format – its nature and how children record their responses. Below are two written responses and one comment from a forum participant. They are typical of those expressed by parents who admit to being confused.

The multiple-choice nature … puts ideas in my head [with respect to] grammar and spelling.

This is not testing a child’s ability but tests that a child can shade a bubble when the clock ticks down. This is true for both the bright careful children who take their time and the children who can’t read so that they just shade the bubble and hope for the best.

My son started writing on the drawings in the item because he thought that was what it meant to shade a bubble.

Parents also commented on training students in the skills they need to be able to cope with aspects of the test beyond the content of the test.

... preparation for NAPLAN (particularly at Year 3) should include helping students prepare for test conditions.

In the discussion about test preparation, parents saw ‘test-wiseness’ as ‘one arm of test preparation’.

**Time limits**

Parents do not view the amount of time assigned to NAPLAN tests individually to be an issue. However, some parents are of the view that the total time per year level for doing all four tests is too much. The following comment comes from a written response:

It is unfair to expect grade 3ers and grade 5ers to sit that sort of block examination. Kids need to be tested but quick quizzes or exams are suffice. Having young children sit for days doing exams is just cruel and unnecessary.

**The writing test**

Parents who wrote comments about NAPLAN at the end of the survey often mentioned the writing test. The first example is about the genre or style of writing that is required:

[Child] didn’t have a clue about organising a persuasive text… & I wish I’d been more clued up as I could’ve told him and also taught him some of the words ...from ACARA [sic]

Would’ve done brilliantly had it been a narrative question

Children are learning persuasive text as a priority over other text types comments.
Great authors aren’t given 5 minutes to plan with the expectation that a great story is written in 40 minutes.

The second example is about how the writing test is marked. Parents viewed marking schemes to be ‘out of touch with reality’ and that ‘thinking around language and communication is warped to accommodate NAPLAN marking criteria’. A perceived backwash effect on curriculum is that ‘all subjects seem to be tweaked to mirror the writing test’.

Quality of tests
As indicated above, parents took the view that some of the features of test items commented on in the forums are flaws that can get in the way of students being able to demonstrate what their skills. At the same time, parents at forums were not particularly concerned about the quality of NAPLAN tests. They said they trust those who develop the tests.

Standardised tests as national assessments
Large-scale assessments like NAPLAN are made up of standardised tests. A standardised test involves students across states or countries of the same year or age taking the same test under the same conditions, with results being reported in common format against common standards.

Standardised testing was often mentioned, without any prompting, in written comments and interviews. It was not clear whether there was a common understanding of the concept, but strong feelings were expressed about standardised testing and its place in education.

Standardised testing was often the subject of a written comment from parents who strongly believe that NAPLAN should be discontinued. When parents expressed a negative view about standardised testing, it was usually because they believed that other countries no longer do it or that ‘standardised testing does not benefit individual students’.

Some parents who felt that the information yielded by NAPLAN tests was valuable noted the benefits of standardised testing as ensuring students were taught the basic skills and the only meaningful mechanism against which to benchmark their child’s performance:

Data on student learning is never a bad thing.

NAPLAN is the only mechanism that allows me to see meaningful performance benchmarks about my child against a large sample size. Furthermore, it enables the child to experience the testing regimes that they will face later in life under a controlled and safe environment.

Some parents in interviews and written responses commented on NAPLAN’s function as a benchmarking test and an accountability tool for government.

Students have benefited from the increased accountability of schools to ensure that all students learn.

It was designed from a neoliberal ideology of accountability and effectiveness.

Schools and government need to focus on getting schools and teachers to take accountability and act on the results constructively.

Greater accountability does not improve results. It creates competition amongst schools.
7. AFTER THE TEST
Results from the NAPLAN tests are used for individual student reporting to parents/carers. Higher-level reports are also produced: class reports and summary results by school (school reports); aggregate reporting by states and territories against national standards, which generate ten bands for reporting; and a national summary report.

Parents are generally unaware of the full suite of NAPLAN reports. Most of their experiences appear to relate to the individual student report.

Sharing of the individual student report
Parents described a range of approaches to dealing with the student report. Some do not share the reports with their children or discuss the results with them. Some parents believe they do not need to read the report to know how their child is faring, or that the report is irrelevant.

I personally have never shown my children their individual results. I do not think it accurately reflects their abilities in any way. They are hands on, practical problem solvers. They do not test well in these situations but are more than capable in their day-to-day life.

Some parents say that they do not want to discuss the report with their children because it might upset them or because they cannot understand what is in the report.

Other parents wrote about how the family views the student report.

I think NAPLAN is great for students and parents as it shows the student (non-judgementally in our home) where they sit against students in other schools and nationally.

I think NAPLAN was a more useful tool when the overall school results were not available publicly through the My School website. Before this, I believe NAPLAN was a useful tool for parents to see how their children were going and useful for schools to target areas of weakness.

Understanding of individual student reports
Parents generally value reports from their children’s classroom teachers more than the NAPLAN student report. They believe that the school’s report card reflects much longer engagement with the child than does NAPLAN – a snapshot in time.

Parents at the forums understood most of the elements of their child’s NAPLAN report even if they did not share it and/or discuss it with them. However, they said they paid little attention to the band descriptors, which state what a child in a particular band knows and has achieved in the areas of reading, writing, language conventions, and numeracy. In addition, they were generally unaware of the underlying 10-band structure of the reporting, and hence of the capacity to track their child’s progress against benchmarks as well as against their cohort.

By contrast, other parents viewed the results as being useful because they provide a consistent benchmark both at a point in time and across time.

One parent wrote that NAPLAN is essential because it is a great indication of how your child fares against the national average, and good to see where we are failing as a nation and where we need improvement. Aligned with this opinion are parents’ practices in interpreting the student reports. Parents spoke about the elements of a report are important to them. The
important elements are the dot showing the child’s score and the solid triangle showing the national average because they want to see where their child stands relative to other students in the same year across Australia. Parents at the forums were not interested in the fact that the school average does not appear on an individual student report.

The term ‘inaccurate’ was used by some parents during the review to refer to NAPLAN tests and NAPLAN results. It may be that the comments were about how well (or not) the NAPLAN results aligned with their own perceptions of their child’s ability rather than on the reliability of marking or the generation of test results.

There were parents who were interviewed who saw their child’s NAPLAN result as validation of their own assessment of the child’s ability or as a confidence booster for the child.

Our child was Mr Average, we thought better of him compared with his teachers. He excelled at NAPLAN. NAPLAN helped our Sons [sic] teacher reset their expectations of our son.

Confirmed our feelings that our child is ahead. Results gave my child more confidence. Our child’s school continues to ignore ... academic achievements.

**Use of NAPLAN as an entry test**

Some parents mentioned some high schools using individual students’ NAPLAN results as a de-facto entry test.

I was ... surprised when as part of my son’s consideration for a high school, they wanted to see a copy of his NAPLAN results.

Many parents did not perceive this to be appropriate, as expressed in a written comment.

[High] schools should not be allowed to ask for individual test results.

One of the interviewed parents suggested that there was an important link between not withdrawing from NAPLAN and having results used for selection:

The only reason my children participated in the lower grades was to help them get into the school I had chosen for them.

It did not appear that all parents are aware of this phenomenon, but it was confirmed by parent organisations.

**Lag in provision of test results**

Many parents believe the time between test date and receipt of their child’s NAPLAN report diminishes the value of the results. The following comment is typical of the concern expressed in parents’ written comments.

The results are available so long after the test that the value to the teacher and individual student is minimal.

Parents at the forums were similarly concerned about the situation as it was too late for feedback or intervention for that cohort of students. At one of the forums, the lag was placed in a list of NAPLAN’s worst aspects. It was apparent that parents are unaware of what occurs between testing and release of results.
## General usefulness

The reviewers asked survey respondents about the use of individual students’ NAPLAN results for parents and teachers (see Figure 20). Answers indicate that the majority of parents surveyed do not perceive individual student results to be useful for teachers in working with advanced students or students who need assistance. The view is slightly better for the usefulness for parents, but still in the negative direction.

![Figure 20. Parents’ views – usefulness of individual student NAPLAN results for parents and teachers](Note: the shaded number on the axis is the proportion answered ‘neutral’ or ‘no opinion’.)

## Higher-level reporting

The reviewers found that parents were generally unaware of NAPLAN reports beyond the student report. Some were aware that summary statistics (which include the school average) can be found on the *My School* website, and that the media publish so-called ‘league tables’ based on values of the school averages.

The lack of awareness of the class- and school-level reports that was observed at the forums was not limited to parents with no other knowledge of the school system – even parents who were also teachers appeared unaware of those reports.

Hardly any parents were aware of the NAPLAN class report and its potential as a feedback tool. Many parents at the forums and in written comments stated that NAPLAN does not generate information that would be of any use. Parents were surprised to find out that the NAPLAN class report provides the information that they believe is needed:

> The results should be much more detailed like what questions were asked where kids didn’t perform and what are the areas of improvement.
In any case, many parents had the view that ‘teachers are too busy to give feedback’. Those parents who were aware of the class report appreciated how it can identify gaps in knowledge and skills and therefore act as a diagnostic tool.

Some parents were aware of schools where class- and school-level results led to changes in school approaches to teaching. For example, one parent mentioned a school that implemented a maths program, developed in a university research program, when NAPLAN class results showed a widespread deficit of skills in an area of numeracy.

Many parents perceive that school approaches to assigning resources to high-achieving and underachieving students as measured by NAPLAN are unbalanced.

There were many comments from parents about the pressure on students to achieve in the upper two bands. They reference some schools using resources to improve results of students near the top of the NAPLAN scale.

[schools]... identify students just under the top two bands then hotspot them, rather than students who really need help as they are underachieving ... in an effort to improve the percentage of students in the top two bands

Parents believe that schools who follow this practice are ‘gaming’ the system to enhance the school’s reputation. One parent’s written response is critical of how the ‘publication and collation of nationwide results has led to schools gaming the system for their own benefit’. S/he sees NAPLAN as a ‘potentially valuable tool but only if used properly to ...direct funding and specific assistance to students lagging behind, or to extend those who are exceeding expectations’.

As well as the example of resources being concentrated on students near the top of the NAPLAN scale, parents also gave examples of the opposite:

Teachers are inclined to ‘worry about underachieving students but tell high achievers they are OK and do nothing further’.

A final comment in this section on the feedback loop comes from a parent who supports the notion that student results are ‘useful to identify deficiencies to be worked on’. S/he highlights a difference in the NAPLAN experience between year levels that has implications for the nature and timing of feedback.

One of the major issues is the split between Primary schools and Secondary - Year 5 results are irrelevant as the kids will leave next year. Year 7 results are irrelevant as they reflect learnings prior to arriving at secondary school.

**Use of higher-level reports**

The survey presented five views (statements) on the use of higher-level NAPLAN results, especially school results (NAPLAN averages). Figure 21 presents the extent to which parents agreed or disagreed with each of those statements.
**Level of agreement that media gives too much importance to results**

Figure 22 below illustrates the strongest consensus of parents on any survey question. 87% of survey respondents feel that the media gives too much importance to schools’ NAPLAN results. Parents almost universally reject the notion of ‘league tables’ being published by the media. League tables, which are based on school averages, are seen to be unhelpful and part of a message system that increases the pressure on children to do well in the tests to improve or maintain the school’s reputation. This aligns with strong comments about the effect of the media on the student experience of the tests (see section 6 above – *Role of the media*).
Level of agreement that schools use results to market themselves and that NAPLAN results help parents choose best school

On the issue of schools using NAPLAN results as a marketing tool, 75% of respondents believe this practice takes place. However, less than 20% of respondents believe that parents use NAPLAN results when choosing the best school for their children.

![Perceptions of uses of NAPLAN results](image)

Figure 23. Parents’ views – various uses of NAPLAN results by various stakeholders
(Note: the shaded number on the axis is the proportion answered ‘neutral’ or ‘no opinion.’)

The response rates for the three questions discussed above (on media, marketing and choosing a school) were relatively high (92%, 86% and 84% respectively).

However, for the other two – ‘use by schools to plan their teaching’ and ‘help the government to allocate funds to schools’ – a high proportion of parents responded with ‘neutral’ or ‘no opinion’ (see Figure 23.) Only 73% of parents offered a view about schools using NAPLAN results to plan teaching, and only 68% of parents expressed a view about the use of NAPLAN results to inform government funding. These high non-response rates may reflect parents’ perceptions of how knowledgeable they are regarding those practices.

Impact on teachers

Relatively high non-response rates were also a feature of parents’ responses to questions about the impact of NAPLAN on teachers. Again, this may reflect parents’ tentativeness about stating uncertain views. Some parents, in conversation, needed to be assured that teachers themselves would have the opportunity to answer questions about NAPLAN’s impact on teachers within a larger review and that this present consultation was simply about parents’ perceptions of NAPLAN’s impact on teachers.
Apart from non-responses and neutral responses, some views were strongly supported. Parents agreed strongly with the notion that some teachers worry too much about NAPLAN. They also strongly agreed that teachers feel students’ results reflect their teaching, though this may disguise whether the respondent approved of teachers feeling this way.

On the question of whether NAPLAN makes teachers focus on teaching essential skills, non-neutral responses were strongly weighted to disagreement (Figure 25). This is perhaps congruent with responses to earlier questions, for instance parents’ agreement that NAPLAN preparation does not help students learn valuable skills (section 5, Test preparation).
8. IS NAPLAN WORTHWHILE?
This section examines parents’ views of the worth of NAPLAN in three ways.

1. Direct assessment: Survey question on value of NAPLAN to seven different stakeholders
2. Consideration of the positives and negatives from conversations at forums
3. Collating comments from written responses and interviewees that support NAPLAN, that do not support NAPLAN, and that give NAPLAN qualified support.

The value of NAPLAN to different stakeholders – what the survey respondents said

The reviewers asked survey respondents their views of the value of NAPLAN to various groups – students, parents, teachers, the school, the people of Queensland, and the state and federal governments.

The online mode for the survey gave the scale as a ‘slider’ where a respondent had to drag the response button to a numbered value from 0 to 10 (where 0 was ‘Not at all valuable’ and 10 was ‘Very valuable’). A significant proportion of respondents gave the extreme ‘zero value’ view of ‘Not at all valuable’, as Figure 26 shows.

![Proportions who say ‘zero value’ of NAPLAN to different stakeholders](image)

Figure 26. Proportion of parents assigning zero to value of NAPLAN to various stakeholders

To explore how the view about value might differ among those who did not take this extreme view, median value was calculated excluding the zero group. Effectively this addresses the question: ‘Among those who felt that there was at least some value, what was the value and to whom?’. The answer to this question is shown in Figure 27.
Figure 27 shows that the view of those parents who perceive some value in NAPLAN is that state governments, the federal government and schools benefit most from NAPLAN compared with other stakeholders, including students and parents themselves.

The best and worst of NAPLAN – what the forum participants said

Parents’ forum contributions amplify the analysis of survey responses above. An overall impression of the views of parents who attended the forums is that the impact of NAPLAN on students is negative, the unintended consequences are significant, and the utility of NAPLAN reports is questionable. On the views of this self-selecting group, NAPLAN is not worthwhile.

The reviewers explored parents’ views on the best and worst features of NAPLAN, as proxies for benefits and costs. Responses from forum participants are in Table 1.

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<tr>
<th>Perceived to be the best</th>
<th>Perceived to be the worst</th>
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<tr>
<td>Feedback on specific educational needs</td>
<td>Emotional cost and effect on student wellbeing</td>
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<tr>
<td>As an accountability tool</td>
<td>Fiscal cost</td>
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<tr>
<td>Not a high-stakes test, but helpful</td>
<td>Opportunity cost</td>
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<td></td>
<td>League tables</td>
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<td>Pressure on teachers</td>
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<td></td>
<td>The lack of observable benefits</td>
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<td>Teaching to the test</td>
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<td>Demoralising effect on lower-achieving students</td>
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Table 1. The best and worst features of NAPLAN according to forum participants

A consideration of parents’ views suggests they are more affected by concrete, local experiences, and less by abstract, global factors. The ‘worst’ features reflect the local level – what happens in the school and the experiences of children. The ‘best’ features were typically
at a level of abstraction (i.e. at a more systemic level). Notably, participants easily listed the ‘worst’ features but had to be encouraged to come up with ‘best’.

Having elicited these views, the reviewers did not ask participants to make an on-balance judgment about NAPLAN’s worth. However, the difference in eliciting the best and worst features allows the inference that, on this basis, NAPLAN lacks worth.

What changes should be made – what the written comments and interviews said

The strongest signal about the value and benefits of NAPLAN was negative. Parents in this majority group see little value in NAPLAN and advocate ceasing it. They cite, as reasons for ceasing NAPLAN, the issues that are common to testing – especially standardised testing – excessive test preparation, high levels of student anxiety, teaching to the test, and narrowing of the enacted curriculum. They are likely to refer to NAPLAN as being a waste of time and money, and criticise processes that in their opinion are a form of gaming. Many of them believe that tests like NAPLAN are no longer used in other parts of the world.

That NAPLAN has ‘lost its original purpose’ was another reason given for discontinuing its use: Parents perceive NAPLAN to have become a high-stakes test with many of the less desirable by-products – for example, excessive preparation in pursuit of the school’s reputation being enhanced (or at least not diminished) by students performing well on NAPLAN and being in the media spotlight due to league tables that the media compile and publish.

Other responses to questions about change were to expressly enhance the link between testing and the curriculum, and between NAPLAN results and funding.

Members of the minority group, whose overall attitude to NAPLAN is not negative, are likely to give their impressions of NAPLAN’s benefits and worth.

Parents need to be more aware of the value of the test and how it benefits their child with respect to overall learning.

Keep NAPLAN. Assessing school, teacher and student performance is important.

NAPLAN can be a positive real-world experience for children. Anything that makes parents care a bit more about their child’s education is a good thing.

Valuable longitudinal data

Objective measures of performance are essential.

How else do I really know how my child is going compared to his cohort?

Parents who are pragmatic have the sort of views encapsulated in the following written responses:

While NAPLAN has numerous flaws and is completely inappropriate as a ‘diagnostic test’ of children’s literacy and numeracy skills, my concern is that replacing it with something else ... could end up being worse.

What would the government do instead to track student learning?
Some parents suggested that NAPLAN delivers benefits in the form of benchmarking, tracking progress over time, producing data that can support learning, and producing the data for which the federal government established the NAPLAN testing program. A few parents viewed the analysis of data to show changes to standards in Queensland as beneficial.

Having examined comments from written responses and interviewees, the reviewers are able to identify but not quantify the responses that contain support for NAPLAN, that do not contain support for NAPLAN, and that give NAPLAN qualified support.

In summary

On the basis of the three-way examination of parents’ views of the worth of NAPLAN, it can be concluded that NAPLAN is not generally seen to be worthwhile. The reviewers observed that the majority of parents surveyed do not fully understand the purpose of NAPLAN and so their ability to fully judge its value and benefits is reduced. This is not the case when parents are judging other aspects of NAPLAN such as impact on students or composition of the test.

9. CONCLUSION

The consultation attracted an exceptional response from Queensland parents/carers. More than 7,500 individuals responded to the survey and many thousands of written comments were provided. Overall the survey and forums achieved good coverage of schooling sectors and geographical locations although the results of consultation are not guaranteed to be representative of the general parent population.

This report was structured to reflect the chronology of the NAPLAN experience – before the test; days of the test; and after the test. A separate section examined parents’ perceptions of NAPLAN’s worth.

While many parents reported that their child was positive and/or highly motivated towards NAPLAN, a majority also thought that their child experienced anxiety in relation to the test. The stress associated with NAPLAN was a significant issue. Parents strongly expressed the belief that too much time is spent by schools on NAPLAN preparation. They said that this is not a positive experience for students as it causes them to be unnecessarily stressed, they don’t learn useful skills from it, and they miss out on other things because of it.

Most parents surveyed did not believe they should involve themselves in test preparation or should only encourage their children to do well. Many believed time spent by schools preparing for the test narrowed the curriculum by requiring teachers to ‘teach to the test’, but some saw it as ensuring the teaching of essential skills.

A strong majority of parents surveyed were particularly critical of the role of the media in making NAPLAN a high-stakes assessment through publishing league tables and placing too much emphasis on school results. This view was put forward even among those parents with a positive view of NAPLAN testing. They suggested that media hype exacerbates students’ stress levels.

Parents were not generally familiar with the content of the tests and tended to be unaware of the full range of NAPLAN reports. Indeed, many parents felt they had not been given clear
messages about what NAPLAN is or what it is for. Many questioned the appropriateness of the test for younger students and felt that individual NAPLAN results arrive too late in the year to be useful.

Some parents believed the associated test-taking skills are worthwhile, that NAPLAN is testing important things and is an important accountability tool. However, a significant proportion of survey respondents rated NAPLAN as ‘not at all valuable’ to any stakeholders. Those who assigned some value to NAPLAN thought that governments and schools were the biggest beneficiaries. Value to parents and students was not ranked highly.

Overall, it appears that parents believe that the high-stakes nature of NAPLAN puts pressure on students, teachers and schools that is not balanced by benefits of using the data.