

# Labor's NAPLAN widens education inequality in Australia

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A recent analysis of National Assessment Program-Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) test results confirms that the gap between the richest and poorest school students is widening and growing faster in Australia.

The study, *Years apart: Australia's growing educational inequality*, by Dr Andres Molina of the Mitchell Institute at Victoria University reported: "In Australia, disadvantaged students can be years behind the Australian average across year levels, whilst advantaged students can be years ahead... socioeconomic learning gaps start in Year 3 and grow as students progress through Years 5 and 7, so the largest learning gaps are found among Year 9 students."

Molina noted that "many research studies and decades of school results tell us there is a 'learning gap' between advantaged and disadvantaged students in Australia." What his study revealed was, "how much and how quickly this gap is changing over time."

The report compared students' performance according to their parents' level of education and their occupation in the four years from 2023, when changes to NAPLAN testing and reporting were introduced.

In Year 3, the reading skills of students whose parents did not complete school were one year and ten months behind the skills of students whose parents completed a bachelor's degree or above in 2023. The gap has since widened to two years and two months—that is, by four months.

In high school, the gaps are growing faster and wider. For Year 7, they had grown from four years and eleven months in 2023 to five years and six months in 2026—widening by seven months. For Year 9s, the gap widened by eight months.

The study concluded that this was not due to learning gains among better-off students, but because disadvantaged students were falling further behind at an increasing pace.

According to the study, "Educational inequality in Australia is driven by policies at the system level... the implication is that schools and teachers working in disadvantaged settings are expected to fix what the system creates, while being dealt a more difficult hand that restricts

their capacity to meet student needs and improve outcomes."

The corporate media, the federal and state governments and the teacher unions have remained silent on the findings. To acknowledge that NAPLAN has exacerbated the inequalities it was ostensibly designed to address would be to expose the Labor governments and the trade unions alike as the architects of a calculated betrayal of working-class children.

The NAPLAN regime, introduced by the Rudd Labor government in 2008, was never about helping struggling students. It was an instrument for driving enrolments into private schools and preparing the ground for austerity.

When the then-Education Minister Julia Gillard launched NAPLAN, she pitched it as a diagnostic tool, "a means of improving outcomes for all Australian students" and "providing information for mums and dads." The Rudd government wrapped the program in the rhetoric of its "education revolution," promising transparency and accountability.

In reality, as the WSWs warned at the time, NAPLAN was modelled directly on the high-stakes testing regimes operating in the UK and US. The purpose was not to diagnose student needs but to rank schools, stigmatise those at the bottom and create "an education marketplace"—Rudd's own phrase—in which parents would be stampeded into abandoning public schools for private ones.

From the very first year of NAPLAN in 2008, teachers opposed it, recognising it as the local expression of a market-driven assault on public education that began with the UK Education Reform Act of 1988. Many understood that standardised testing would narrow the curriculum, turn classrooms into exam-coaching factories and entrench inequalities.

Faced with rising anger among their members, unions announced a boycott in April 2010, only to call it off weeks later without a single mass meeting or democratic discussion. The Gillard government offered union bureaucrats a seat on a working party to oversee the

MySchool website, which established league tables of school performance. The unions hailed this as a “victory” and instructed teachers to administer the tests.

The union leadership never had a principled objection to the testing regime. Its concern was only to manage teacher opposition and ensure its own place at the table. The Australian Education Union (AEU) told the Tasmanian Industrial Commission it was “broadly supportive of NAPLAN as a useful component of the broad range of assessment mechanisms continually undertaken in schools.”

Today the AEU continues to issue empty calls for NAPLAN to be “reformed” or “reviewed” while collaborating with the Albanese government’s further regressive educational measures, which included transitioning NAPLAN testing from paper to digital assessments in 2023, a cost-cutting move benefitting edubusinesses and further exacerbating systemic inequities.

NAPLAN has produced negative consequences that extend well beyond its failure to lift academic achievement. A 2014 national study of more than 8,000 teachers found that the test has narrowed teaching strategies and the curriculum, while damaging student health and wellbeing, staff morale, school reputation and their capacity to attract and retain students and staff.

That finding was reinforced by a 2019 survey of more than 2,400 teachers, one of whom summed up the widespread sentiment by describing NAPLAN as “one of the worst things we can do,” setting “school against school and parents against schools” and crowding out creative learning.

The toll on students has been especially severe. As early as 2012, a University of Melbourne study found nearly 90 percent of teachers reporting that students talked about feeling stressed before the tests. A 2017 Grattan Institute report found that 40 percent of students are disengaged from learning and falling one to two years behind their peers.

This disengagement reflects an education system that has ceased to be about intellectual development and has become a regime of ranking, sorting and credentialling for a labour market that offers most young people only precarious employment.

For parents, NAPLAN and MySchool have functioned as intended, driving a middle-class flight from public schools. Australian Bureau of Statistics data show that in the five years to 2025, enrolments in independent schools rose by 18.5 percent and Catholic schools by 6.6 percent, while public school enrolments grew by just 1 percent, despite a rising population.

Australia now has one of the highest rates of private school enrolments in the OECD, with more than 40 percent of secondary students in private schools.

While public schools are starved of resources—crumbling

infrastructure, chronic staff shortages, classes merged and cancelled—elite private schools charging \$50,000 a year in fees continue to receive tens of millions of dollars in public funding.

By branding public schools in working-class areas as failures, NAPLAN has been the engine of this transformation. Public schools are being reduced to what the Committee for Public Education has described as “dysfunctional rump institutions that serve only the most disadvantaged layers of the working class.” They are left with a grossly disproportionate share of students from low socioeconomic backgrounds—nearly 200 per cent higher than private schools—while being denied the resources to meet their needs.

NAPLAN cannot be “tweaked.” It cannot be replaced by “a new NAPLAN,” as proposed by a New South Wales Teachers Federation-commissioned academic paper in 2018. The entire regime of high-stakes testing, school ranking and the deliberate degradation of public education must be rejected.

This requires a break with the twin organisations that have enforced this agenda for nearly two decades: the Labor Party and the trade union apparatus.

Teachers, parents and students must take the struggle into their own hands. The Committee for Public Education (CFPE), initiated by members and supporters of the Socialist Equality Party, calls for the formation of rank-and-file committees in every school, democratically controlled by school staff, parents and students, completely independent of the unions, to organise a national boycott of NAPLAN and fight for public education as a fundamental social right.

This requires a political struggle against the capitalist profit system itself, and a turn toward a socialist program that would place the vast resources of society under the democratic control of the working class, making spending on education, health and human need the first priority.

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