

No, minister! Keep NAPLAN results away from student job applications

Written by Jessica Holloway, ARC DECRA Research Fellow, Research for Educational Impact (REDI), Deakin University

This year's NAPLAN results left many questioning the value of the test, as once again there has been [little change](#) in numeracy and literacy scores across most age groups.

But Victorian Education Minister James Merlino has [proposed](#) a radical solution to make NAPLAN more relevant.

He suggests linking Year 9 NAPLAN results to a performance certificate that could be used by future employers. His idea is that higher stakes will mean higher effort from students.

A dangerous idea

This policy proposal is misguided and dangerous. Not only has the minister offered no evidence to support his proposal, but [most research](#) shows that solutions involving raised stakes are built on false premises.

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First, NAPLAN was not designed to predict potential. It was designed to take the temperature of the Australian education system and for these data to [drive improvements in student outcomes](#) . Using the results in any other way is neither statistically sound nor ethical.

The test is [simply a snapshot](#) of a student's literacy and numeracy skills at a given time. It is meant to be interpreted alongside multiple measures of performance to get a full picture of a student's academic standing.

Under no circumstances do NAPLAN scores alone indicate a student's full potential. Suggesting

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would-be employers could use scores in this way is entirely inappropriate.

This is made worse by assuming a Year 9's performance on a single test at age 14 or 15 should follow them into adulthood. The potential negative consequences, such as reduced job opportunity, anxiety and the permanency of one bad test, far outweigh any possible benefit.

Another concern is the unintended consequences likely to come from attaching higher stakes to NAPLAN. We have decades of research, both [here](#) and [internationally](#), that show increasing the stakes for standardised tests does not improve student performance.

In fact, higher stakes are much more likely to produce perverse effects, as students and teachers scramble to avoid possible impacts of missing the mark. These can range from [teaching to the test](#) and [narrowing curricula to increased anxiety](#) about the consequences of poor performance.

Pressure on students

The extreme measures Merlino proposed should be avoided at all cost. They do little to improve student and teacher performance, and also risk imposing additional, and entirely unproductive, pressures on student learning and teacher practice.

The education students receive at school is critical to laying the foundation for their future success and happiness. Teachers, schools and the broader community make an incredible contribution to this education.

But as NAPLAN results bedazzle us for yet another year, it is important to remember a student's learning is not the same as their performance on a single standardised test.

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The more we conflate learning with NAPLAN performance, the more we risk making misguided decisions on schooling policy and practice. The notion that threatening the future of Year 9 students will “[encourage them to give their best efforts while sitting NAPLAN](#)” is dangerous and detracts from the meaningful work occurring every day in classrooms.

Even the organisation responsible for designing and administering NAPLAN – the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) – has reminded us that [“NA PLAN tests are just one part”](#) of the school program.

While it is natural for us to trust the supposed objectivity of numbers, it is critical that we understand the limits of such data. For these reasons, we strongly urge the minister to reconsider his proposal.

Jessica Holloway receives funding from the Australian Research Council.

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