

# ISQ Response to the NAPLAN Review Interim Report



March 2020



## About Queensland Independent Schools

**Community confidence in the independent schooling sector remains strong with more than 124,000 students enrolled in 213 independent schools across Queensland. These schools educate approximately 15 percent of the state's total school-age population and about 20 percent of all secondary students.**

The strength of the independent schooling sector lies in the rich mix of education choices and opportunities Queensland independent schools provide families. Independent schools are as diverse as the students and parents who make up their close-knit communities. Of Queensland's 213 independent schools: 198 educate children with disability; 105 cater for students for whom English is a second language or dialect; 197 enrol Indigenous students; 80 offer international education programs; 33 provide boarding services; and 19 cater specifically for students who have disengaged from mainstream education.

Common to all independent schools is their commitment to strong student outcomes, high standards of behaviour, and the welfare and wellbeing of students.

Over the past 10 years, enrolments at Queensland independent schools have increased by 21 percent. This growth is a clear indication that parents value an independent education and are prepared to invest their after-tax incomes in their child's schooling.

Independent Schools Queensland (ISQ) is the peak body representing Queensland's independent schooling sector. Independent Schools Queensland represents the interests of its member schools, fosters choice in education and protects the autonomy of independent schools. ISQ is a not-for-profit organisation and membership to ISQ is voluntary.

# Executive Summary of ISQ Response to NAPLAN Review Interim Report

ISQ acknowledges the concerns outlined in the interim report, however in general, member schools would agree NAPLAN still has a role to play in supporting system and sector wide school improvement. ISQ's 2018 'What Parents Want' survey found that 18 percent of parents considered the My School webpage in the top three sources of information when researching schools for their child. Independent schools work hard to balance the positive communication about the value of NAPLAN data for school improvement and against the perception that NAPLAN is a competitive and high stakes regime.

ISQ supports NAPLAN as an important mechanism to:

- measure student progress,
- provide parents with information,
- inform school improvement agendas, and
- provide snapshots of Australian student achievement trends over time.

Independent schools in Queensland already use a range of data instruments, including NAPLAN, to examine student progress and inform school improvement strategies. Increasing the capacity of schools to analyse NAPLAN outcomes in the context of driving school improvement would be a timely outcome from this review process. Schools require equitable access to training and data analytic tools to ensure leaders and teachers continue to accurately interpret results to inform teaching and school improvement agendas.

ISQ is also wary of the complexity of interpreting NAPLAN data accurately. The use of the Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage (ICSEA) calculations and starting point data to make comparisons with schools is constructive but needs to be understood in a context where schools have multifaceted environmental factors or unique philosophical approaches. ISQ appreciates the recent changes that have come to the My School website and wishes to reiterate the importance of monitoring the public's use of this data to see if the intended improvements do indeed materialise. ISQ does not support the use of NAPLAN to compare and rate schools, to develop league tables, or to limit the curriculum objectives of teaching programmes.

As schools move to online branch testing, ISQ is cognisant of several emerging challenges:

- that the new testing regime can push high achieving students beyond their ability level, which presents a cognitive experience that is quite different from standard school assessment (ISQ also notes that for low achieving students, however, branch testing provides opportunity to demonstrate their ability in a way that paper testing could not)
- that the comparability of online to paper-based scores is problematic due to the new capacity for students to now track well below and well above year level expectations
- that the technical skills required for students to focus their efforts entirely on literacy and numeracy, and not keyboarding or word processing, may not be appropriately or developmentally balanced particularly in the lower year levels

ISQ welcomes the review of the content suite covered by NAPLAN testing. An evaluation of the writing task is especially appreciated, though ISQ questions the value of removing the writing task

during this research phase. The suggestion to more directly connect the National Literacy and Numeracy Progressions to NAPLAN testing and reports is certainly something ISQ believes would benefit educators, however the inclusion of the General Capabilities is something that ISQ is cautious about. Individual schools already cover these learning areas in significantly contextualised ways that do not necessarily translate to a national standardised test that would unavoidably privilege certain issues and perspectives over others.

ISQ is supportive and open to a debate concerning a shift to sample testing, recognising that accurate trend data could still be gathered via this method. However, ISQ contends that this would limit the efficacy of the test for local school use and add complexity to the already difficult messaging around the test with the wider community, particularly if opt-in or opt-out permissions were adopted.

While not opposed, ISQ does not see substantial value in shifting the administering of NAPLAN from Years 3, 5, 6 and 9 to other year levels or combinations of year levels. There is genuine benefit, however, in resituating the timing of NAPLAN testing so that schools can enact targeted improvement practices in situ. Certainly, the timely reporting of results to schools as a result of online testing is a well agreed benefit to the change in test modality and this should continue to be a critical goal.

Optional formative assessment tools aligned to learning progressions in the Australian Curriculum may provide a better opportunity for students to engage in conversations with teachers and parents about their own educational progress.

ISQ wishes to acknowledge that in a grouping as diverse as the independent sector, some schools may seek to respond individually to the interim report with their own range of views and perspectives.

## Purposes of standardised testing

1. ISQ supports the view that the primary goal of standardised testing is that it assesses all students under the same conditions in order to produce a ‘point in time’ report of student progress in test-specific areas. Given a significant purpose of schooling is to facilitate growth in learning, it stands to reason that accurate and comparable progression tracking can benefit from a standardised measuring tool. ISQ members recognise the principle that national literacy and numeracy testing can provide both system, sector, school and individual information about student progress.

## Purposes of NAPLAN

### *Diagnostic purposes*

2. ISQ supports the diagnostic value of NAPLAN data, in that it can identify pockets of need and therefore inform government policy decisions and priorities to assist schools and students. The education of Australia’s students is a public good and where NAPLAN is used to support that goal, ISQ supports it. ISQ does not support the use of NAPLAN or other tools to compare and rate schools, to develop league tables, or to limit the curriculum objectives of schools.
3. ISQ agrees and welcomes the use of NAPLAN data to:
  - a. measure student progress,
  - b. provide parents with information,
  - c. inform school improvement agendas, and
  - d. provide snapshots of Australian student achievement trends over time.

### *Education of all parties*

4. For NAPLAN data to be used well, significant education of all parties is essential. A balanced and worthwhile interpretation of NAPLAN data requires an understanding of NAPLAN test design, reporting scales and ICSEA methodology, and presumes that these aspects are indeed fair and accurate. In particular, Queensland independent schools question the process of comparing statistically similar schools when the nature of individual schools can be substantially different both in terms of their environment (such as school size, income representation, and scarcity of background information) and philosophical approaches (such as, schools providing special assistance to disadvantaged students, schools operating under an alternative curriculum or schools who practice academic selection prior to enrolment). ISQ acknowledges that the My School webpage has been updated in 2020 to make improvements in some of these areas.

### *Equitable access to high-order analytic tools*

5. To support the accurate interpretation of NAPLAN results, ISQ advocates that more data analytic tools, alongside appropriate training, be made available to all schools. Many of our member schools make use of third-party providers to analyse and display NAPLAN data (often combined with other data sets, such as in-school assessment, demographic trends, and ACER’s PAT), however this presents an equity issue where the capacity to drive improvement is directly related to the school staffing expertise and budget constraints. ISQ has developed DataPAK as a tool to support Queensland independent schools analyse NAPLAN data – though the reach of this facility is limited by human and financial costs.

### *Data use by the broader public*

6. ISQ does not support school or system comparisons, league tables, or other misuse use of educational data to draw broad conclusions about school success. Pitting schools and sectors against each other, often for political purposes, has been made possible, in part, by the publication of subsets of NAPLAN data. ISQ acknowledges that changes to the My School website have been made to address these concerns. ISQ encourages ACARA to monitor how the public responds to and uses the reformatted data, and to adjust where necessary to protect the core purposes and value of NAPLAN.

## Current concerns identified by the NAPLAN interim report

### *Deficiencies in testing*

7. ISQ welcomes the decision by the review committee to check the robustness of the NAPLAN test suite, including the identified concerns around high-level and low-level items, and the design of the writing task.
8. ISQ wishes to draw attention to a critical difference between in-school assessment and NAPLAN testing. While individual schools often give students an opportunity to demonstrate proficiencies above their expected level, assessment items are not devised to force this. Conversely, NAPLAN, especially with the online branching model, is designed to direct high achieving students to their limit by increasing item complexity until students fail. It is contended by ISQ that this assessment-methodology difference is not well understood and may indeed contribute to the negative feelings reported around NAPLAN testing. That said, for low-mid achieving students, schools have anecdotally reported more positive test experiences due to the platform design being less confronting than a large paper test, and that the branching method gives opportunity for all students to demonstrate proficiencies in matching with their abilities.
9. ISQ is of the view that the move to online branch testing has significant implications for the accuracy of what data is measured. ISQ knows of schools that have, against their own pedagogical preferences, felt obliged to commence lessons on electronic devices in lower primary classes. ISQ understands there is significant debate concerning whether it is developmentally appropriate for very young children to be disciplined in the technical elements of online testing, however, to be 'NAPLAN ready' schools are under pressure to push in this direction. Schools that resist such coaching are also concerned that the cognitive load of handling an electronic device that students may be unfamiliar with may exert a negative influence on the literacy and numeracy levels they are usually capable of demonstrating.
10. ISQ wishes to recognise that no school that has moved to online NAPLAN testing have expressed, to our knowledge, a desire to return to paper testing. At first glance it appears that the benefits of online testing outweigh the challenges and ISQ is encouraged to see the current efforts being made by various bodies to meet those challenges. ISQ will continue to support NAPLAN's online model, albeit with some reservations about whether having the year 3 writing task online is developmentally appropriate.

### *The NAPLAN writing tasks*

11. ISQ agrees that the assessment of writing needs review in terms of the mode, genre and time restrictions. For one, moving the writing task online means that while the marking criteria sees the work being checked for things like punctuation, vocabulary and paragraphing, the reality is that students may find themselves spending considerable time on word processing and keyboarding, particularly in lower year levels. This cognitive load has potential to skew the complexity of writing demonstrated and therefore not give an accurate picture of ability. Furthermore, there remains a concern that the writing task may not value creative forms of writing (for example, where a student writes a debate script instead of a persuasive essay) and that the topic choices may drive students away from showing their best work (for example, the 2018 'My big idea!' task could cause a student without a big idea to compose a limited response, despite only one of the criteria actually assessing 'ideas'). ISQ understands that because the writing task is fundamentally about measuring student literacy and not the ability to replicate a generic writing formula, the work proposed by the interim report to finesse the task specifications is justified.
12. Though ISQ supports a review of the writing task, taking the entire writing item off the NAPLAN suite while research is conducted, seems unnecessary. The historic trend data that schools and parents have access to is of significant value and should be preserved even as a close review is being undertaken.

### *Stakes too high and curriculum narrowing*

13. ISQ is aware that the student experience of NAPLAN testing is a topic of significant public interest. Independent schools are working hard to balance the positive communication about the value of NAPLAN data for school improvement with the perception that NAPLAN is a competitive and high stakes regime.
14. While the publication of NAPLAN data has important utility, over time it has resulted in a disproportionate level of importance being placed on this one piece of school data, particularly by the media. While NAPLAN does provide a 'point in time' report of student progress in test-specific areas, it falls short in terms of displaying all the valuable outcomes schools are achieving for their students. The mining of the My School website by media outlets to rank school performance, with often inaccurate or weak analysis, puts pressure on schools to concentrate classroom learning on NAPLAN success at the expense of other critical elements of the Australian Curriculum. Consequently, the diagnostic worth of NAPLAN reduces the more 'high stakes' the test becomes.

### *Results too delayed to be useful*

15. ISQ agrees that the current schedule of NAPLAN testing reduces its efficacy in supporting real time improvement for students and classes. The timeline as is means that results come 'too late' to be acted on that year; this is a genuine opportunity loss for school leaders and teachers who want to enact targeted change. Queensland independent schools would, given access and training in appropriate analytical and reporting tools, make more tangible decisions if the results were made more rapidly available.



## Targeted improvements under consideration

### *Changing the timing*

16. ISQ supports investigating a shift from May to early March for the administration of NAPLAN in schools. ISQ recognises this may help ensure less time is spent 'teaching to the test' and, combined with the faster results turnaround due to online marking, give schools opportunity to action findings in the same year the test is taken. Furthermore, this may help change the narrative of NAPLAN being a summative instrument casting judgment on a school, to a formative instrument used to inform that year's teaching and learning decisions. However, consideration would need to be given to schools who invest in significant support for students who enter the school at year 7, in order to improve their academic outcomes by May.
17. While not opposed, ISQ does not see substantial value in shifting the administering of NAPLAN from years 3, 5, 7 and 9 to other year levels or combinations of year levels. The identified concerns, such as year 3 students being too young and Year 7 students being less secure in their secondary school environment, have been successfully managed by independent schools for some time.

### *Sampling*

18. ISQ has encountered a diversity of views regarding sample testing. ISQ recognises the arguments in favour of assessing only a sample of students for NAPLAN, while allowing an opt-in provision for schools not selected each year. From an education system perspective, adept sampling would mean that accurate trend data could still be gathered. However, a decision in this direction would have implications for the other purposes for which NAPLAN data is used.
19. Asking schools to manage their parent/carer communities, where opinions would be mixed on whether the school should opt-in or opt-out, is an additional supervisory burden no one is asking for. There are already widespread reports of complexity in convincing students and parents that NAPLAN is both 'low stakes' and 'important'; making the test optional will confound this issue further.
20. Under such a new regime, student-, class- and school-level data would be compromised, preventing school administrators and teachers from truly seeing where individual students fit in their community and national context. ISQ supports independent schools as they seek to interpret and use their NAPLAN data to improve context-specific practices; something that is partly achieved because every student in every school is expected to complete the test (including students who may have previously attended a different school).

### *Content changes*

ISQ encourages consideration of expanding NAPLAN's footprint to include connections to the National Literacy and Numeracy Learning Progressions as this would provide support to schools seeking to turn NAPLAN data into action. Linking literacy and numeracy 'gaps' with a consistent and understood framework would be of significant value to educators nationwide.

21. ISQ accepts that the General Capabilities could also be included, however we want to highlight that individual schools already cover Personal and Social Capability, Ethical Understanding and Intercultural Understanding in significantly contextualised ways that do not necessarily translate to a national standardised test. It is the view of ISQ that such learning around community and relationships is best enacted at a local level, not enforced through a standardised test that will inevitably privilege certain issues simply because it can only ask a limited number of questions.

### *Display on My School*

22. NAPLAN's real value for Queensland independent schools is in the access to their specific data via targeted packages, rather than via the My School website. Schools use a range of data instruments to inform decision-making, including NAPLAN data. Data assists school leaders to understand cohort trends and evaluate a school's progress towards targeted improvement priorities. Equitable access to detailed analytical services would provide more nuanced information and the opportunity to triangulate results with other assessments. The current lag between NAPLAN completion and data publication reduces its usefulness to inform teaching, as does the difficulty schools experience diving deeply into the current reports when they are looking to support individual students. Decisions around changing the data included and displayed in the My School website will have limited effect on the day-to-day improvement practices of schools and classrooms, though it may have significant impact on the tenor of the public conversation.
23. ISQ's 'What Parents Want' survey revealed that while parents are looking at the My School website for school information more now, than in 2010 (from 8 percent to 18 percent of parents identifying it in their 'top 3'), the school itself (47 percent) and people they know (67 percent) are by far the most valued sources of information about schools. While the rhetoric is that the My School website is useful to parents and the broader community, and there is evidence that the school profile page is being accessed, ISQ advises that many parents find the depictions of NAPLAN data complicated and of limited regular use. Queensland independent schools typically communicate NAPLAN results in a contextualised way to their community anyway – something they will continue to do regardless of how the My School website changes the way it displays data. The impression is that the bodies who would be most impacted by changes to the My School pages are media agencies and private interest groups.
24. ISQ recognises the importance of transparency and accountability to ensure the public has relevant and appropriate information about school education provision and outcomes in Australia. However, it is widely acknowledged that there should be a balance between transparency and responsible use of data. The existing measures to monitor school outcomes are adequate and the temptation for additional prescriptive national measures should be avoided. While there is some interest in removing data from the My School website, ensuring the accuracy and understanding of the current data publicised is of greater importance. While the Interim Report indicates there is interest in linking results to other measurement tools like PISA and TIMSS, ISQ recommends this work be done at an individual school level, preferably with support. ISQ maintains schools should be encouraged

to publish their standardised test results in meaningful and contextualised ways for their school communities.

25. ISQ's capacity to enact sector-wide support in response to NAPLAN data is hampered by lack of access. While the QCAA, Education Queensland, the Queensland Department of Education and QCEC receive their sector data, ISQ must request this information from each individual school. ISQ has an established track record concerning data security and should be considered for equitable access.
26. As schools move to online testing, accessible and thorough information needs to be given on the My School website so viewers understand the complexity of comparing paper-based and online results. Online testing's effect on a school's mean, as students are either branched down or up to their respective levels, is something a paper test does not do which may artificially increase or reduce a school's overall result. Furthermore, limited research has been undertaken on how online testing can exert a negative influence on student responses, especially as educators and students come to understand how the software works. For example, because of high attainment in the reading task, ISQ was made aware of year 3 students facing Band 9 questions in the first testlet of the Grammar and Punctuation test, causing them to make significant errors across the test due to the confidence hit. The cognitive effect of a high-achieving student confronting immediate failure in a test situation needs to be given careful consideration. That said, ISQ does not advocate for a return to paper testing, rather that the issues that have emerged since online testing commenced be addressed.

## Concluding statement

ISQ thanks the NAPLAN Review team for giving the opportunity to seek feedback and would be pleased to offer any further assistance where requested.