



Cut The Fat In The Curriculum

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The recent release of the 2022 NAPLAN results were met with a collective sigh of relief from governments and the education sector after the doomsday prediction of students suffering significant learning setbacks due to the Covid pandemic did not occur.

While it is undoubtedly a good thing that the damage to our students was limited from the catastrophic public policy failure that was Australia's pandemic response, the latest NAPLAN results should surprise and concern us all.

For example, the national Grade 3 reading results placed 95.5 per cent of students at or above the National Minimum Standard in 2022, compared to 95.9 per cent in the previous two tests in 2021 and 2019. Likewise, Grade 3 numeracy shows similarly consistent results with 95 per cent, compared with 95.4 per cent and 95.5 per cent in 2021 and 2019, respectively, and writing, equally consistent, with 96.2, 96.7 and 96.3 per cent of students at or above the National Minimum Standard.



Based on these figures it would appear that almost two years of lockdown made no difference to the Grade 3 cohort. The results also suggest that those parents of Grade 3 students – who during Covid were likely working from home, juggling family responsibilities, are unqualified, and lacked access to usual teaching resources – did just as well as their child's school could have.

But how can that be?

Given the knee-jerk lockdowns in Victoria, often announced with less than two-hour's notice, teachers were asked to perform miracles and provide a curriculum for parents to teach their children with no notice and achieved this by focusing only on the core items.

A Melbourne Prep teacher told the Institute of Public Affairs' *Class Action* program about her experience immediately after hearing her school would be forced to close due to a snap lockdown;

'I ran off heaps of worksheets for parents focusing on numbers and I gathered a selection of appropriate readers for each child and sent it all home in folders. It was pretty basic, but I knew it would do the trick. There's a lot in the curriculum kids can live without.'

The Grade 3 NAPLAN results are testament to the great job teachers and parents did and, yet again, reinforces that foundational skills are pivotal to setting students up for success.

Yet, the very same NAPLAN results also highlighted what happens when the basics are not taught to students. Of all Year 9 students, 23.5 per cent are at or below the minimum national standard and shockingly, almost 15 per cent of Year 9 boys did not meet the National Minimum Standard for reading.

Federal Minister for Education, Jason Clare, sought to dismiss these worrying figures by saying, 'It's not clear whether that's Covid, but I would suspect that's a big part of it.' Sorry Minister, the standard 'Covid caused it' excuse doesn't pass the test here.

While the current crop of Year 9 students has shown stable results in numeracy every year since they were first tested, their reading and spelling results tell a different story. The percentage of this cohort at least achieving the National Minimum Standards in reading when in Grade 3 was 95.1 per cent, in Grade 5 was 94.9 per cent which has now fallen in Year 9 to 89.6 per cent. Spelling shows a similar decline from 94.4 per cent when they were in Grade 3 and 5, which has now fallen to 91.8 per cent.

If the pandemic is to blame for these worrying reading and spelling results, as Jason Clare suggests, then why did these students' numeracy results stay consistent?

Could it be more fundamental? Could it be the teaching methods these students have been exposed to since the time they started their schooling?



This cohort of students have been exposed to the widely used teaching method of ‘*whole word*’ and ‘*inquiry*’ approach to learning to read and spell. These methods have rightly been criticised by many as the culprit of falling standards for failing to provide students with the necessary foundation and analytical skills required to understand more sophisticated language.

NAPLAN is sometimes criticised as a myopic view of a child’s development because it only tells part of their story, and there is some merit to this argument. However, what it does provide parents is an independent and objective radar for whether their child is grasping the basics, and the truth of the matter is that many students are simply not.

Just throwing more money into education as some teachers’ unions would like to see is clearly not the answer. Institute of Public Affairs research shows in Victoria, since 2014, spending on education has increased by 30 per cent, yet critical reading and numeracy results have not increased in a commensurate manner.

And Covid is definitely not the culprit the Federal Minister of Education would have us believe.

If we learn anything from the pandemic, it is that students need to be taught the basics if they are to have a solid foundation for future study. Under pressure to produce lesson plans before being locked down, many teachers recognised the amount of unnecessary fat in the curriculum and when given the freedom to dismiss it, achieved great results.

We need to get serious about fixing the curriculum taught to our children, and it’s time we got back to basics.

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