

## Data's just for starters

Published in *The Weekend Australian*, Page 13, Saturday 1 June 2013

*In the early years of school, children should spend a lot of time learning how to read. Most succeed and head further down productive and hopefully happy education paths. But for those who don't the repercussions are often severe, writes **Ben Jensen***

Yet the reason they fail is relatively simple. When children enter the middle years of their schooling they spend less time learning to read and more time reading to learn.

Their other subjects and key learning areas change so that they have to read to participate; they have to be able to quickly and accurately read the maths or science problem to solve. They must grasp longer and more detailed texts in English, history, social studies and many other subjects.

These students may be good at maths or science or history but they never get the opportunity to develop these skills because they can't read the text or the problem. These students don't choose to become disengaged. Their poor literacy forces them out.

All the evidence shows that students who read poorly are likelier to play up and to drop out. They are then likelier to be unemployed for long periods and get into trouble and even into crime. For too many children, it begins because they were not properly taught how to read.

Before the National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy was introduced, we had no national measure of students' literacy. We often didn't know how big the problem was, which students and schools were struggling, and which systems were most successful in helping these kids.

We have spent a lot more money on education (an increase of at least 40 per cent across the past decade), yet student performance has stagnated or declined on international student assessments. We have continuously spent more money but failed to evaluate its impact on students.

The introduction of NAPLAN puts the spotlight on children's literacy. It highlights problems and success stories, enabling evaluation of what works and what doesn't.

For decades, we have focused on input measures – the number of teachers and class sizes, for example – refusing to look at the impact of spending money in different ways in school education.

NAPLAN, and the increased transparency it brings, is starting to change this mentality. There is still a long way to go, the focus is still too much on inputs, but things at last are moving in the right direction. How money is spent to improve learning has been pushed on to the agenda.

We should not pretend for a second that NAPLAN will solve our problems or that it will increase literacy. It is a measurement tool. It is what we do with the data on student learning that matters.

Much of the criticism of NAPLAN misses this point. All measures in school education are imprecise. All fail to capture all there is in schools. All will be, in some sense, narrow. But at last we have some nationally common measures of student attainment.

We have a terrible history in Australian school education of letting too many children fall behind.

The latest international assessment of our primary school students showed that one in four performed below minimum literacy standards.

The latest NAPLAN data shows that not only do we fail to help enough of these students, more will fall below minimum levels as they progress to secondary school. We have not followed the examples of high-performing systems that have effective programs that help students as soon as they start to struggle.

We now have the data to target and then evaluate these programs in Australian schools. This is when NAPLAN will start to make a real difference for these kids.

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