

Analytical Insights Paper #3

NAPLAN participation: Post-COVID-19 improvements and remaining challenges

March 2025



The Australian Education Research Organisation (AERO) is Australia's national education evidence body, working to achieve excellence and equity in educational outcomes for all children and young people.

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Acknowledgement of Country

AERO acknowledges the Traditional Owners and Custodians of the lands, waterways, skies, islands and sea Country across Australia. We pay our deepest respects to First Nations cultures and Elders past and present. We endeavour to continually value and learn from First Nations knowledges and educational practices.

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The Australian Education Research Organisation (AERO)'s Analytical Insights papers provide concise, up-to-date analysis of educational datasets.

The insights in this paper are drawn from the latest National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) and Longitudinal Literacy and Numeracy in Australia (LLANIA) data to discuss student participation and engagement with the tests – factors that impact the quality and usefulness of the results. This paper is a follow-up to AERO's first Analytical Insights paper on NAPLAN participation. It provides the latest trends and highlights important considerations for the interpretation of students' results and future implementation of NAPLAN.¹

Key points

- NAPLAN participation has largely recovered since the pandemic, with participation rates in 2024 either higher (Year 5) or not significantly different (Years 3 and 7) to participation in 2019. There was a sharp increase in the proportion of students who were absent from NAPLAN tests in 2022 – most likely due to increased sickness and natural disasters in that year – but the spike in absence mostly disappeared in 2023.
- AERO's previous analysis (2023) showed students with lower performance were more likely to miss the tests. This analysis shows some subgroups of students (e.g., students in very remote areas and First Nations students) continue to participate at a considerably lower rate than the national averages. Taken together, these findings have implications for the accuracy and utility of NAPLAN data and highlights the importance of monitoring participation for subgroups of students who participate at lower levels.
- Reasons for non-assessment in NAPLAN vary across locations. For example, in 2024, around 85% of non-assessments (excluding non-attempts) among Year 9 students in the Northern Territory were due to student absence on the test day, while 51% of Year 9 non-assessments in Queensland were due to withdrawal by parents.
- Test engagement is another factor that can influence the validity and utility of NAPLAN results. For example, about one-fifth of students who achieved zero scores in Year 9 reading (2016 to 2021) performed well 2 years earlier in Year 7. This indicates likely test disengagement among some students in Year 9.
- Although participation in NAPLAN is important, the higher priority continues to be supporting the attendance and engagement of students at school. Improved school attendance across school days more generally may increase attendance on NAPLAN testing days, facilitating more accurate information about students' learning.

¹ This project (ID 18659) received ethical approval from Macquarie University's Human Ethics Committee and meets the requirements set out in the [National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research](#) (2023).



What is NAPLAN?

NAPLAN is Australia's national literacy and numeracy assessment for students in Years 3, 5, 7 and 9. It measures student outcomes to inform schools, parents and education authorities. Managed by the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA), in collaboration with states and territories, NAPLAN assesses student reading, numeracy, writing and conventions of language.

In 2023, 3 changes to NAPLAN were introduced. First, the testing window moved from May to March. Second, the assessment was conducted entirely online for the first time,² after online delivery was phased in over a number of years. Lastly, ACARA started reporting results across 4 proficiency levels – Exceeding, Strong, Developing and Needs additional support – replacing the previous 10 achievement bands.

Although the NAPLAN tests are intended to be taken by every Australian student in Years 3, 5, 7 and 9, not all students sit the tests. Students may be exempt from taking the tests (for reasons related to disability or being newly arrived in Australia with limited English language proficiency), withdrawn by their parents or absent from school on the day of the test.

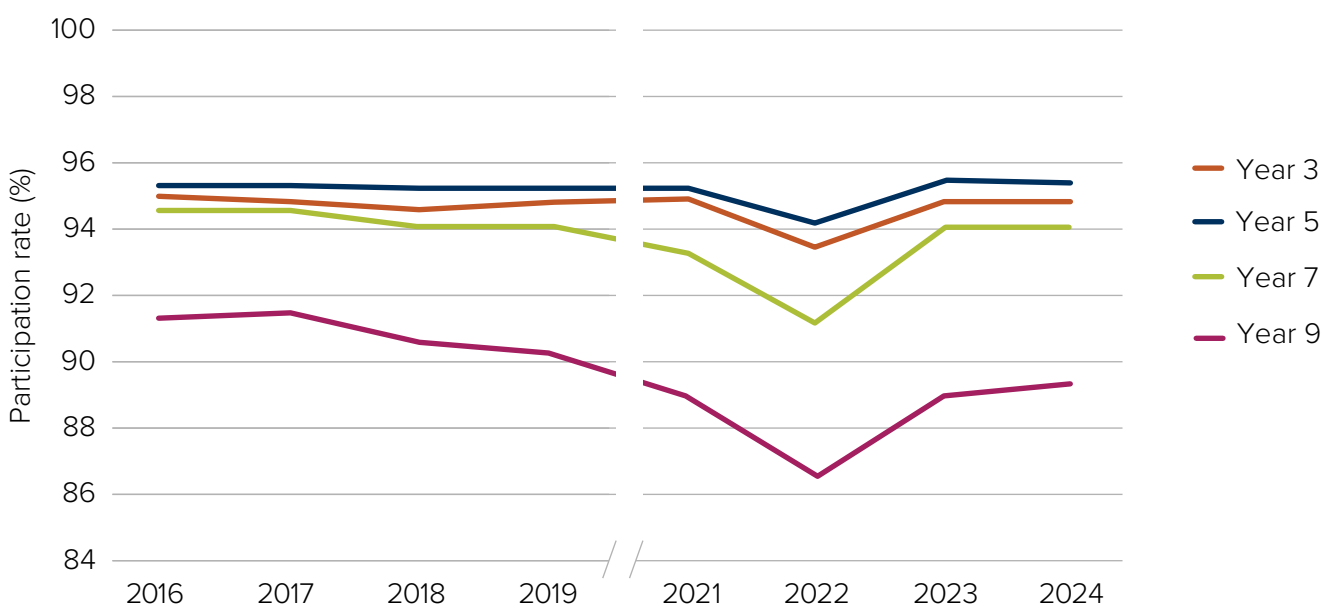
² The Year 3 Writing test is still completed on paper.

Insights

1. Post-COVID recovery continues

There has been a recovery in NAPLAN participation rates following disruptions to schooling caused by the COVID-19 pandemic (Figure 1). Participation rates in 2024 were no longer significantly different to the pre-pandemic rates of 2019 for Year 3 and Year 7 students.³ Year 5 students participated at a higher rate than in 2019 (by 0.14 percentage points), however, the participation rate for Year 9 students remained below the rate in 2019 (by 0.86 percentage points).

Figure 1: NAPLAN participation rate by year level – 2016 to 2024



Source: NAPLAN national results dataset (ACARA, 2024a).

Note: For each grade cohort, participation rates were combined across domains using simple averages

Another feature of the patterns shown in Figure 1 is a sizable fall in 2022 and subsequent rebound. The primary cause of the low participation in 2022 was student absence from the tests. [Figure 2](#) shows the proportions of students who were not assessed by NAPLAN (see [Rates of assessed versus rates of participation](#)) from 2016 to 2024, and whether the reason for missing the test was exemption, withdrawal or absence on the day. As can be seen, 2022 was marked by a sharp increase in the proportion of students who were absent on the day of NAPLAN testing (an increase of 1.8 percentage points from 2021, to 5.9%). This was likely due to the high rate of illness in the general population that year, together with several natural disasters during the NAPLAN testing period (ACARA, 2022b). The spike in absence largely disappeared in 2023, reducing to 3.7% – consistent with the level observed prior to the pandemic.

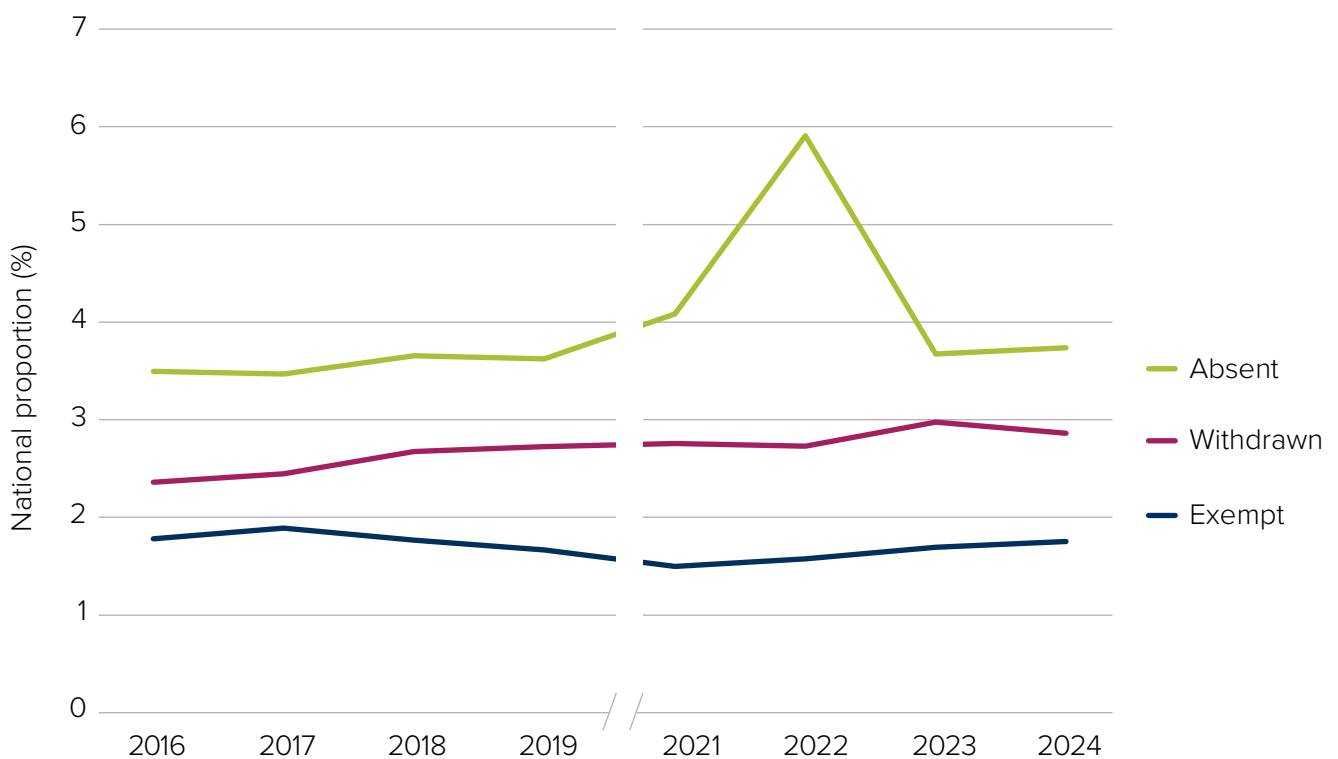
³ All comparisons of participation rates between calendar years made in this paper are based on statistical significance testing of the differences between the respective participation rates. That is, when it is stated that one year’s participation rate is higher or lower than another year’s, this refers to a statistically significant difference ($p < 0.05$).

Rates of assessed versus rates of participation

For the purpose of this paper:

- » *Rates of assessed* refers to students who were present at tests.⁴
- » *Rates of participation* include both students who were present and those who were exempt.
- » *Non-participating students* refers to those who were absent or withdrawn from the tests.

Figure 2: Proportion of students not assessed by NAPLAN by reason – 2016 to 2024



Source: NAPLAN national results dataset (ACARA, 2024a).

Note: Proportions were combined first across domains using simple averages for each grade cohort, and then across grades using weighted averages (weighted by student population in each grade).

⁴ ACARA (2024b) defines ‘non-assessment’ as including absent, exempt, withdrawn and non-attempts. In this paper, we define non-assessment as including absent, exempt and withdrawn, as non-attempt data is not available for all calendar years. In 2024, non-attempt rates averaged across domains ranged between 0.1% for Year 5 and 0.4% for Year 9 students.

2. Higher than predicted secondary Year 7 student participation in 2023 and 2024

Our previous analytical insights paper, [NAPLAN Participation: Who is Missing the Tests and Why it Matters](#), highlighted a persistent decline in secondary student participation over the period from 2010 to 2022. Figure 3 shows the most recent participation rates and the rates expected if historical trends continued (from 2010 to 2019, depicted by dotted lines).⁵ While the participation of Year 9 students was not significantly different from the trend line in 2023 and 2024, Year 7 students participated at significantly higher rates than predicted in both 2023 and 2024 – a potential early sign of a reversal of the historical declining trend.

Figure 3: Participation rate over time by year level, with 2010 to 2019 trend line



Source: NAPLAN national results dataset (ACARA, 2024a).

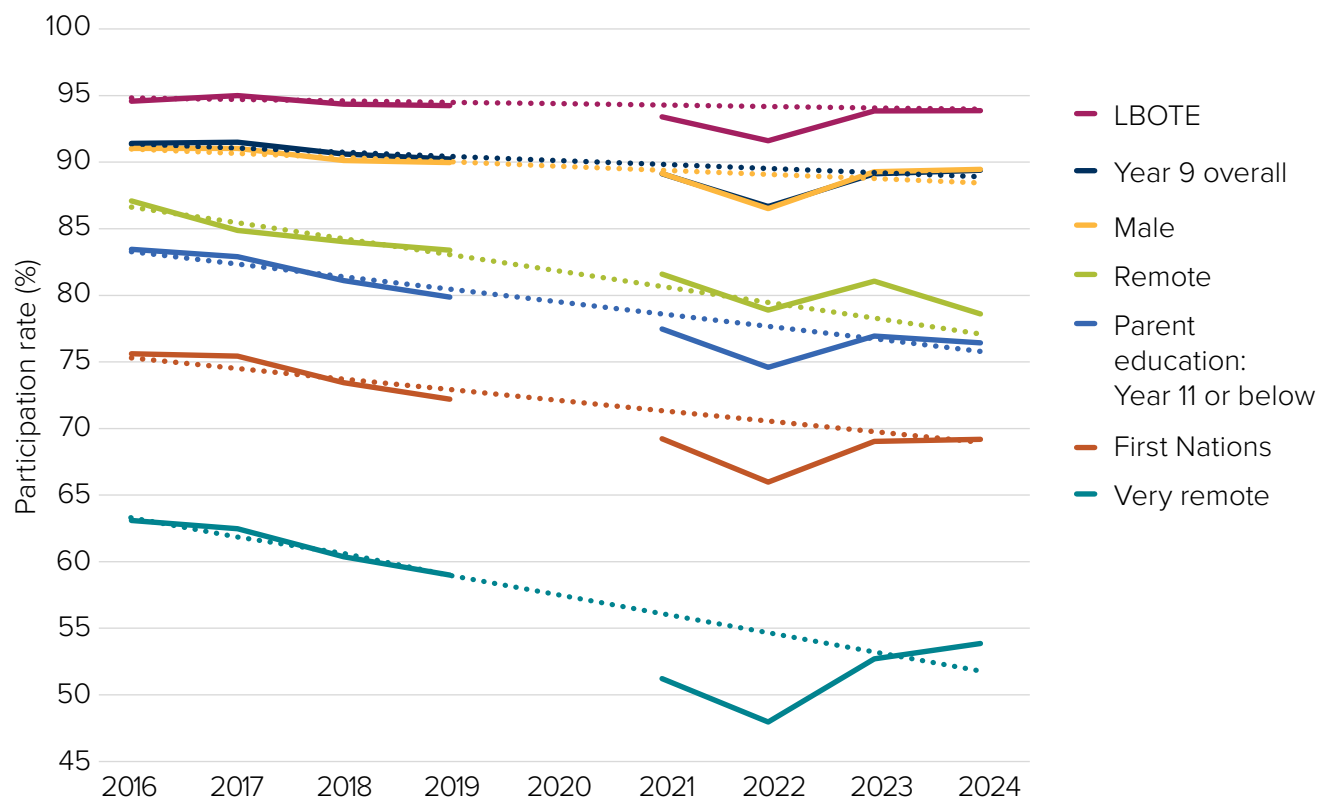
Note: Trend lines based on observations from 2010 to 2019. Participation rates were combined across domains using simple averages.

⁵ In this paper, all trend lines are based on a linear regression of 2010 to 2019 data, except remote and very remote student participation. Remote and very remote trend lines are based on 2016 to 2019 data due to a change in classification of geographic locations in 2016. Claims about predictions are based on 95% confidence intervals around relevant trend lines (estimated from the linear regression with Newey-West standard errors, which takes into account autocorrelation). Observed participation rate is identified as being significantly different to what was predicted if it fell outside the range defined by the upper and lower confidence bounds.

3. Priority equity groups continue to participate at lower rates than their peer groups

Participation in NAPLAN among priority equity groups⁶ of students has historically been lower than the national average. In 2023 and 2024, this trend persisted. Figure 4 shows, as an example, Year 9 participation over time for different student subgroups, including priority equity groups.⁷ In 2024, Year 9 students in very remote areas, First Nations students and those whose parents' highest school education level was Year 11 or below participated at 54%, 69% and 76%, respectively – much lower than the overall Year 9 rate (89%).

Figure 4: Participation rate of Year 9 students by subgroup characteristics – 2016 to 2024



Source: NAPLAN national results dataset (ACARA, 2024a).

Note: As students have demographic characteristics that can situate them in more than one subgroup, subgroups are not discrete groups of students but overlapping analytical groupings. Trend lines are plotted based on observations from 2010 to 2019 for all subgroups, except remote and very remote, which are based on 2016 to 2019 observations. Participation rates were combined across domains using simple averages.

6 Priority equity groups include First Nations students, students living in regional, rural and remote areas, students with disability and students from educationally disadvantaged backgrounds (Council of Australian Governments, 2021). Not all priority equity groups can be analysed through NAPLAN data. Students with disability are not reported on in this paper.
 7 Year 9 has been selected to exemplify the key insights that were consistently observed across all year level groups.

4. Priority equity group results more vulnerable to inaccuracies

Lower than desired participation⁸ can lead to a biased picture of student performance. Statistics like averages and proportions in various proficiency levels are likely to be accurate reflections of how a population group or subgroup is performing when only small amounts of data are missing and when the missingness is largely random. However, when there are more pieces of missing data and, crucially, when it is not missing at random, these statistics can be biased towards reflecting the participating students rather than the whole population of students, even if an imputation method is used to fill the data gaps. In many subgroups of the student population, NAPLAN data is not missing at random. For example, our previous [analytical insights paper](#) showed that students who performed poorly in NAPLAN in Year 7 were nearly 5 times more likely to miss the Year 9 tests than high-performing students. Non-participation is, therefore, related to performance.

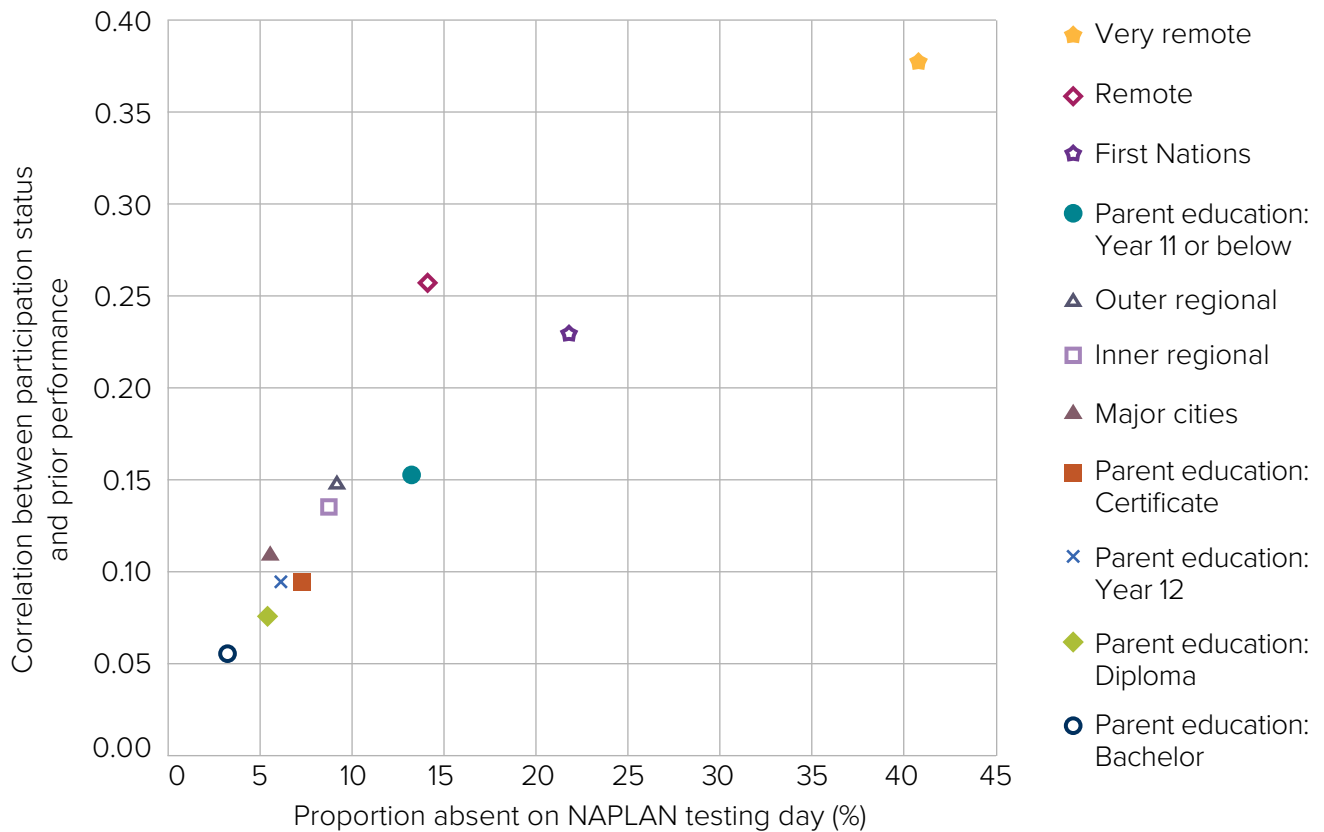
New analysis in this paper shows that the strength of the relationship between non-participation and performance differs across groups.⁹ [Figure 5](#) shows the strength of the relationship (correlation) between non-participation and prior performance on the vertical axis, and the absence rate (proportion of students who missed the NAPLAN reading test due to absence)¹⁰ along the horizontal axis. A larger positive correlation on the vertical axis indicates that low performance in the previous test round was more associated with low participation in the tests. Groups that have both a higher level of absence and a stronger correlation between participation and prior performance are particularly vulnerable to having statistics biased by non-participation. [Figure 5](#) shows that students in remote and very remote areas and First Nations students have a greater risk of inaccuracies in the statistics reported about their NAPLAN performance. Inaccuracy in statistics is important because an incomplete picture of literacy and numeracy performance can, in turn, lead to insufficient estimates of need, risking insufficient provision of support for students in groups who particularly need it.

8 A participation rate of 90% at the national and jurisdictional levels is the technical standard to ensure unbiased population statistics (ACARA, 2024b).

9 While the analysis uses the LLANIA dataset, which includes matched NAPLAN data from 2010 to 2022 (Wan et al., 2023), the relationships reported here for the subgroups are likely generalisable to student groups in 2023 and 2024.

10 The relationship between non-participation and prior performance for students who were absent on testing day is shown in [Figure 5](#). The groups that generally have high rates of overall non-participation tend to have a higher proportion of non-participation due to absences compared to withdrawals. For example, in 2023, 92% of very remote Year 9 students who did not participate in the Reading test missed the test due to absence rather than withdrawal (ACARA, 2023a).

Figure 5: Correlation between participation status and prior reading performance, sorted by absence rate for Year 9 students in various subgroups



Source: LLANIA dataset, 2010 to 2022 (Wan et al., 2023).

Note: The vertical axis shows the correlation between students’ Year 7 reading performance and their Year 9 participation status in reading 2 years later. Correlations were generated for each set of plausible values from Year 7 students in 2010 to 2019, except 2018, which corresponds to Year 9 in 2020 when NAPLAN was not held. The correlations were then averaged across the 5 sets of plausible values. Participation status is dichotomous, comparing students who have participated against students who were absent. While point-biserial correlations are used to show the strength of the relationship in this figure, standardised mean differences between participant and non-participant groups, which are not affected by unequal group sizes, were also larger for the students in the top right hand quadrant. The horizontal axis shows the average proportion of Year 9 students who missed the NAPLAN Reading test due to absence across 2011 to 2022 for parent education subgroups and First Nations students, and 2016 to 2022 for geolocations, due to data availability. Groups in the figure are not mutually exclusive groups of students but overlapping groupings as an individual student could be in multiple demographic groups.

5. Non-participation varies across states and territories

When we examined NAPLAN participation across states and territories, we found that in 2024, 6 had participation rates above 93%. The Northern Territory and Queensland had participation rates of 79.4% and 88.8%, respectively.¹¹

Queensland’s lower participation rate should be considered in the context of the high rates of withdrawals in that state. [Figure 6](#) presents the proportion of Year 9 students not assessed by NAPLAN across Australian states and territories as well as the reasons for the non-assessment. In 2024, Queensland had a rate of withdrawal from NAPLAN that was 5.3 percentage points higher than the next highest jurisdiction, and an increase on their 2019 rate.

¹¹ Participation rates were combined across domains using simple averages and combined across grades using population-weighted averages.

The lower participation seen in the Northern Territory is largely attributable to higher absence rates, with more than 80% of the Year 9 non-assessments there due to absence (Figure 6). This suggests that there are local factors present in the Northern Territory that are different to other jurisdictions. For example, in 2024, more than 1 in 5 (21.6%) Year 9 students in the Northern Territory were from very remote locations – a far greater proportion than Year 9 students in all other jurisdictions (less than 2%). Very remote students have the lowest rates of participation among the student subgroups (Figure 4) and the vast majority of non-assessment in very remote areas is due to absence. In 2024, 92% of non-assessed Year 9 students in very remote areas missed the test due to absence. In contrast, 78% of non-assessed Year 9 students in remote areas and 51% of non-assessed Year 9 students in major cities missed the test due to absence.

The variance seen in the reasons for students not participating in NAPLAN across states and territories indicates that local factors are important drivers for at least some of these observed trends.

There are also variations in how state and territory participation rates have changed since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic.¹² For example, from 2019 to 2024, Year 9 students in Tasmania, Queensland and the Northern Territory had an increase in non-assessment (2.9, 3.8 and 7.2 percentage points, respectively), while other jurisdictions such as Victoria experienced a decrease in non-assessment (-1.5 percentage points).

Figure 6: Reasons for non-assessment across states and territories for Year 9 NAPLAN – 2019 and 2024



Source: NAPLAN national results dataset (ACARA, 2024a).

¹² Comparisons of non-assessment rates against non-assessment at the start of COVID-19 were based on the 2019 data (ACARA, 2022a) as 2020 tests were not held.

6. Opportunities for increased student engagement with NAPLAN

In addition to missing data, students' level of engagement with the test materials is another factor that can influence the quality of data collected from NAPLAN. Highly engaged students attempt to complete the test to the best of their ability, while poorly engaged students may not, leading to results that don't represent their true capabilities. Poor engagement can diminish the accuracy and usefulness of NAPLAN test data.

Test engagement is a complex phenomenon, with many causes that can lie within or outside of a student's control. Examples of identifiable disengagement might be when students, in their online tests, attend the test but do not log in, or log in but do not answer any questions. In 2023, 860 Year 9 students in attendance at the NAPLAN Reading test did not log in and 162 logged in but did not answer any questions.¹³

Furthermore, [our previous analysis](#) showed that a significant number of students who received a score of zero¹⁴ in the Year 9 Writing test had performed at or above the minimum standards in previous NAPLAN tests. Our new analysis of NAPLAN data in this paper shows a similar phenomenon in the Reading test.

[Figure 7](#) shows the Year 7 Reading performance for students who received a score of zero in Year 9 Reading in 2016 to 2021. Approximately one-fifth (19%) of students who received a zero score in Year 9 (reported as achieving Band 5 or below), were already achieving Band 7 or above (Year 9 above national minimum standard [NMS]) in Year 7.

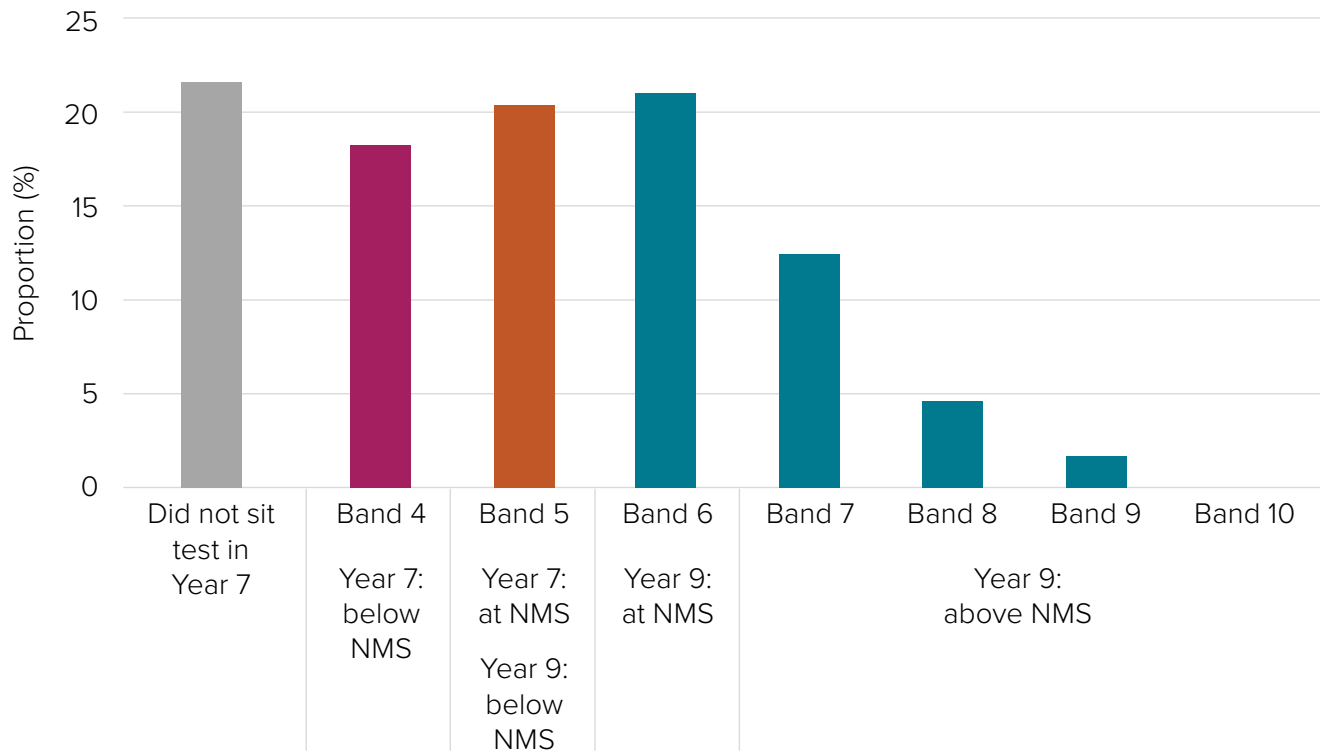
The fact that these students received a zero score in Year 9 could be explained by a regression in reading ability between Year 7 and 9, disengagement with NAPLAN, or both. Given their prior performance, it is likely that some of these students were more disengaged with NAPLAN in Year 9, reducing the usefulness of their test results for gauging their level of need for support.

Another observation is that of the Year 9 students who received a zero score, one-fifth (21.6%) did not sit the test 2 years prior. This means that, for those who were more likely to be disengaged with NAPLAN, less data exists over time to enable an accurate understanding of learning progress.

¹³ Figures were provided by ACARA for this paper.

¹⁴ The raw score students receive from a test. This raw score has a corresponding score on the NAPLAN scale.

Figure 7: Year 7 NAPLAN reading performance of Year 9 students who received a zero score in reading in 2016 to 2021



Source: LLANIA dataset 2023 (Wan et al., 2023).

Note: Prior to 2023, NAPLAN scores were categorised into 10 achievement bands, with one band defined as a national minimum standard (NMS) per year level. Students who received a 0 score in Year 7 would be in Band 4 (Year 7: below NMS). Students who received a zero score in Year 9 would be in Band 5 (Year 9: below NMS). A total of 1,816 Year 9 students received a zero score in reading in 2016 to 2021 (excluding 2020, when NAPLAN did not take place).

What do these insights mean?

NAPLAN is a national census assessment that aims to provide schools and school systems with data to identify student groups that need additional support, and to evaluate the effectiveness of educational approaches. NAPLAN results also allow teachers and parents to track student progress in literacy and numeracy and identify areas of student strength and need compared to their peers.

However, not all students sit the tests. Our first analytical insights paper showed that there had been a declining trend in participation for secondary students, and that the participation of students from remote and very remote locations and students with low socio-economic advantage¹⁵ were lower than average (Lu et al., 2023). The insights in this paper, while confirming the lower participation of these student groups, show that in 2023 and 2024, Year 7 students exceeded predicted levels of participation based on the historical declining trend. While this is positive news and worth acknowledging, the move in 2023 of the annual NAPLAN testing window from May to March makes comparisons difficult, as there may be differences more broadly in student attendance and engagement at these times.

Student participation in NAPLAN is important because lower than desired participation can lead to a biased picture of student population and subgroup performance. Previous analysis has shown that students with lower test performance are less likely to sit the tests (Lu et al., 2023) and are more likely to be withdrawn from the tests (Coelli & Foster, 2024). New analysis in this paper shows that the relationship between non-participation and performance differs across groups, with students from remote and very remote locations and First Nations students more likely to be absent from the tests and to have a clear positive correlation between absence and test performance at the previous NAPLAN test sat 2 years earlier. This is problematic because if NAPLAN data is not missing at random, statistics drawn from NAPLAN results may not accurately reflect the whole population or target subgroup. While an imputation method is used to reduce such bias, imputation alone may not fully remove the bias associated with missing data. Higher participation remains important for ensuring NAPLAN returns accurate, usable indications of how students are performing relative to curriculum expectations.

Analysis in this paper highlights the challenge of NAPLAN participation in remote and very remote locations, with participation in these locations much lower than desirable. This challenge is most strongly experienced in the Northern Territory, where there is a larger proportion of students in very remote locations than in other jurisdictions. Analysis shows that absence is the main reason for non-assessment in that jurisdiction. This is consistent with the observation that the school attendance rate in remote and very remote areas is much lower than in metropolitan areas (ACARA, 2023b). While some research has been conducted to understand the influence of remoteness on students' NAPLAN performance (e.g., Anderson et al., 2024), little has been undertaken to examine drivers that exacerbate non-participation in remote and very remote areas. More research is needed to understand the challenges of effectively engaging and supporting students across all parts of Australia, particularly those in remote and very remote areas. This, in part, will help improve the quality of national assessment data, enabling more accurate measurement of needs – and, in turn, more informed decision-making to better support students.

Engagement with NAPLAN is also shown to have the potential to impact the quality and utility of

¹⁵ Identified in NAPLAN data as students with parental education of Year 11 or below.

NAPLAN data. Our analysis showed that a considerable group of students who received a zero score in Year 9 reading (2016 to 2019) performed well 2 years prior in Year 7. However, test engagement is complex and may also be reflected in students not logging on to the test, or logging in and not answering any questions (this was observed for roughly 1,000 Year 9 students in 2023).

Changes in test design may lead to changes in participation and/or engagement levels. Early research by ACARA in the Northern Territory, which included schools in very remote locations, found that online tests provided a more engaging testing experience for students and allowed them to showcase their knowledge more fully (ACARA, 2014). Further analysis should be conducted to understand the impact of online testing on participation and engagement. Such analyses could focus on whether engagement has improved since online tailored tests were introduced, and if so, in which student groups, with the aim of enhancing the support of schools – particularly those in remote or very remote locations – to better facilitate online learning and testing.

Continued efforts to make tests more engaging to students are useful, as lower than desired participation and engagement with NAPLAN undermines the assessment's capacity to reliably inform policy decisions at national, state and territory, and school levels. In particular, it limits the ability of NAPLAN to accurately show the groups of students needing additional targeted support, as participation is often lower among identified priority equity groups. The learning achievement of priority equity groups needs to be accurately captured to enable the best decisions for resources and support to flow from schools and education authorities.

Although participation in NAPLAN is important for reasons already discussed, there is a higher priority sitting behind this – supporting the attendance of students at school. While students' experiences of schooling can vary significantly, when school environments are conducive to learning and personal development, school attendance can benefit students, families and communities in many ways (Groves et al., 2025). The reasons for student absence from school are complex, interrelated and often specific to the student, family, school and community involved. There is evidence, however, that certain approaches can support and improve school attendance (Melvin et al., 2025). Improved school attendance across school days more generally may also increase attendance on NAPLAN testing days, facilitating more accurate information about students' learning. But, most importantly, attending school and being provided with a positive school experience will allow for deeper and more consistent learning – an opportunity every student deserves.

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