



# Summary of NESA Report

2017



Office of the  
Advocate for Children  
and Young People

acyp.

## reference

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We wish to pay our respects to Aboriginal elders – past, present and emerging – and acknowledge the important role of Aboriginal people and culture within the NSW community. ACYP advises Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander readers this report may contain images of people who may have passed away.

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## **18 conclusions**

# Year 9 students' views on the NSW HSC minimum standard for literacy and numeracy

## recommendations

Based on the views of Year 9 students, our overall recommendation is that the new HSC minimum standard is ultimately separated entirely from NAPLAN to reduce stress and confusion.

In the short term, we suggest allowing students to opt in to having their Year 9 NAPLAN results count toward satisfying the minimum standard.

Alternatively, if Year 9 NAPLAN testing continues to be used as the first opportunity for students to satisfy the minimum standard, we recommend that:

- Students receive information about the different purposes of NAPLAN and the minimum standard and the reasons for using Year 9 NAPLAN testing as an early opportunity to satisfy this standard;
- Study guides and practice tests are made available to students to help them prepare;
- Detailed feedback is provided to students following their Year 9 NAPLAN tests so that they know the areas in which they need to improve; and
- Students who do not satisfy the minimum standard through Year 9 NAPLAN receive information about next steps and the supports available to them.

Other considerations arising from the consultations include:

- Coordinating the timing of tests and assessments to avoid overburdening students;
- Ensuring that school staff, students and parents/carers have access to timely and accurate information about the minimum standard and the supports available to students;
- Communicating test results and related information in a clear and sensitive manner, particularly for students who have not passed after multiple attempts; and
- Monitoring any unintended effects of the introduction of a minimum standard, such as heightened stress, the circulation of misinformation, or an increase in students leaving school without completing Year 12, as well as the potential for disproportionate impacts on particular groups of students.



# background

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In May 2017, NESA requested that ACYP conduct a series of focus groups with Year 9 students to seek their views and experiences in relation to the introduction of the new HSC minimum standard for literacy and numeracy. Focus groups were conducted after students had received their NAPLAN results in mid-August. All groups were held in late August-early September 2017.



# methodology

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Thirteen focus groups were held in five locations throughout NSW; two regional areas and three Sydney locations. In total, 154 Year 9 students took part in the discussions (68 males, 86 females). Students came from nine different schools; 2 Catholic and 7 Government schools. One Government school was fully selective.



Each focus group was conducted around the following questions:

1. What do you find most stressful about exams/tests?
2. How did you feel in the lead up to sitting the NAPLAN tests this year?
3. What do you know about the new HSC minimum standard?
4. Now that you have received your NAPLAN results, how are you feeling?
5. In what way, if any, did the introduction of the HSC minimum standard affect how you felt in the lead up to sitting NAPLAN tests this year?
6. What support do you think young people need to meet the HSC minimum standard?
7. What conversations have you had with parents and teachers about NAPLAN and the minimum standard?
8. What conversations have you had with other young people about NAPLAN and the minimum standard?

Groups were audio-recorded and then transcribed for analysis.

At the conclusion of each focus group, students were given a handout provided by NESAs with detailed information about the HSC minimum standard.

# findings

## What young people find most stressful about tests

Most young people, regardless of their level of academic achievement, reported that exams and tests create a great deal of stress and anxiety. Students worry about the exam environment, not passing exams, not achieving the best they can, being moved to a lower class, having to juggle study with competing demands, the fact that exams typically occur in one time block, competing with their peers and being judged for their performance:

*“My mind just goes blank.”*

*“Just feeling pressured to do really well.”*

*“Trying your hardest and then realising that you’re not doing as well as you think you are.”*

*“Because we have a bunch of exams all at the same time...and then we have to study for all of them at the same time. It’s stressful trying to remember everything.”*

*“Finding the time to study. Because people have extracurricular activities...part-time jobs.”*

Some young people linked the stress associated with exams to poor mental health:

*“It takes a toll on your mental health as well.”*

*“In the end, they’re just bringing up the rate of mental health and suicide that’s already a really high killer in teenagers.”*



## Where does the stress come from

Young people reported that they worry about disappointing their families, teachers and themselves if they do not achieve high marks in their exams and tests. They also reported feeling stress due to judgements from peers; in particular they worry that they will embarrass themselves in front of their class if they do badly.

*“Pressure from your parents....If I don’t do well on a test my parents are going to get pretty annoyed.”*

*“The teachers are always on your back about it. The week before exams they’re just so on your back about getting it right. They make it so important before that week of exams that makes it stressful.”*

*“Being in higher classes its more pressure, like teachers expect more.”*

*“Your peers because you don’t want to get embarrassed.”*

*“When peers get really good results, you like kind of want to push yourself to their standards.”*

*“It’s also the pressure we put on ourselves.”*

Students also reported that stress and anxiety has a contagious effect; they feel stressed when they see that their peers are stressed:

*“I also think that there’s a lot of second hand pressure that comes off from other people stressing out; then you think you also need to stress out about that.”*





## How young people felt in the lead up to Year 9 NAPLAN tests

Young people in all focus groups discussed feeling markedly more anxious in the lead up to their Year 9 NAPLAN tests compared with how they had felt in previous years. This was largely attributed to the introduction of the HSC minimum standard and their perceptions of the implications for sitting their HSC in Year 12 and going to university:

*“Its just hard, how one test might... you might not get into Uni, which then progresses onto your whole life.”*

*“It’s a little bit discouraging really, knowing that if you fail your whole life could be ruined.”*

*“Stressful because we knew that we had to do well to get into HSC..... that’s what puts pressure on all of us because if we don’t get the HSC then what are we going to do after school?”*

Many young people also described feeling anxious due to conflicting messages from different teachers:

*“We had one side telling us we had a million chances, and on the other side, we had teachers giving us thousands of practice tests and stressing how important it was....like they couldn’t pick a side.”*

*“No one really knew what was happening.”*

Some young people also discussed feeling stressed before NAPLAN as they were not able to prepare for the tests:

*“The stress too, not knowing what’s in the test, so you cannot study for it.”*

Students across nearly all focus groups commented that Year 9 was too early to start thinking about their HSC. They reported that introducing the HSC minimum standard in Year 9 has made them feel the pressure associated with the HSC before they are ready:

*“I feel like you put pressure on kids about the HSC three years before you should even.”*

*“They’re putting so much pressure on a Year 9 student when it shouldn’t matter in Year 9, like you’ve still got three years until you can choose what you want to do. It’s so much pressure just for that one test.”*

*“I don’t know why they’re making us determine whether or not we can get a certificate for it and do it in Year 9 when we’ve still got ages.”*

Many students discussed that Band 8 was too high a mark to achieve:

***“I guess it’s just very stressful for students because they don’t know if they can reach that mark. And they’re put under pressure. Sometimes that pressure can cause them to fail.”***

***“It’s not going to work. If the national average can’t even reach it, then how are the majority of students going to reach it?”***

As a result, students reported about feeling bad about themselves if did not achieve Band 8s:

***“With the NAPLAN, they kind of labelled us like “Not smart” and “Smart”. Not smart if you don’t reach it, and smart if you do reach it. And it’s just making us more upset and angry about who we are.”***

***“I know a lot of people that did not pass anything and they were told that they’re not good enough. And that adds so much stress onto people and it also makes people really upset.”***

For some students, the pressure associated with wanting to achieve Band 8s demotivated them as they did not think they were capable of achieving these results. Others described the pressure to achieve as having affected their performance:

***“I think most people gave up when everyone heard it was a Band 8, because they didn’t think they were smart enough to deliver. It makes you doubt yourself.”***

***“Some of us have done worse in this year than in any other year.”***

All focus groups reported confusion over why the minimum standard had been linked to NAPLAN. Their understanding of NAPLAN was that it was a series of tests to assess how schools were performing and did not impact on individual students. Many students were angry that this year NAPLAN did impact on them:

***“What’s kind of ridiculous about the NAPLAN thing, is it started as something to see what schools need to improve on.”***



## Understanding of the HSC minimum standard

*“During the start of NAPLAN our parents, our teachers, everyone has told us that our whole lives NAPLAN isn’t a big deal, it’s just a test that won’t go towards anything...and now all of a sudden they’re telling us it matters, you have to try harder, it’s just a big shock.”*

*“NAPLAN wasn’t meant to be part of HSC....its just meant to see how well the school was doing. I don’t think it should be part of HSC standards.”*

Most young people reported feeling totally confused about what the HSC minimum standard was prior to sitting their Year 9 NAPLAN tests:

*“We all went into the exam and we had no idea what we were doing. It was just a big mess.”*

*“It was just a whole big confusion.... we just knew from what we heard, like from the news and like online and everything, we didn’t actually have a clear idea of anything.”*

Before sitting their NAPLAN tests, many students thought they had to achieve the standard in Year 9:

**Student 1:** *I think the problem with all the stress and concern is we treated it as a Year 9 standard rather than a Year 12 standard.*

**Student 2:** *Yeah*

**Student 3:** *That’s because before this we didn’t know it was a Year 12 standard.*

**Student 4:** *Yeah that’s true.*



Students had also heard different rumours, which added to their anxiety and stress:

***“We were told that if we pass the NAPLAN already, it’ll be a lot easier than re-sitting the test multiple times.”***

***“You have to pay for the next test!”***

***“There was this rumour going around about this Band 8 and everyone was stressing and then someone heard it was Band 6 and for a while everyone was like, its alright.”***

As mentioned earlier, the connection of the minimum standard to NAPLAN created further concern:

***“Like it was confusing as well, why all of a sudden it counts, like it never counted before, we never had to worry about it.”***

Across all groups students talked about achieving Band 8s as a “pass” and anything less than that was not a pass. They reported that this had not been the case in previous years:

***“I feel great now that I’ve passed them all, but I’m still worried about some of my friends that didn’t pass.”***

***“They told us if we don’t pass we have to re-do the test.”***

***“They[friends] were worried, they thought they were going to fail everything, and they were all going ‘oh, we’re going to have to redo it, but we’ll probably still fail that.’”***

One girl described her mother opening her results and telling her that she got all Band 7s:

***“I ran back to my room, I didn’t let anyone in for about 4 hours. I was crying. I used about two boxes of tissues....I was depressed.”***

Another student conveyed similar feelings:

***“I was just beating myself, and I’m dumb, labelling myself on what society says.”***

There were students across all schools who felt that the minimum standard was fair and also a good idea; and some were not phased that it was linked to NAPLAN although they reported that Band 8 was too high. Others were in favour of meeting a minimum standard but not connecting it to the HSC:

***“I think the program is fair, you get, like, so many chances to pass the test.”***

***“I think it’s a positive change in the long run...It makes the HSC more valuable now. You have to be able to achieve something.”***

***“It sets that bar for everyone to achieve. It’s a little bit out of your comfort zone, but that’s the whole idea of life.”***

***“You need to have literacy and numeracy to be a successful adult.”***

***“I think the minimum standard is okay, just make it, not so high.”***

***“Don’t make it count towards your HSC, but you can keep the standard the same, or make it a little lower.”***

Other students thought that the minimum standard should be a Band 8 average across all tests:

***“I don’t think that there should be a Band 8 for each of those things. I reckon there should be a Band 8 average for all three of those areas. Because some people have different strengths.”***

Many students felt they had a better understanding of the minimum standard requirements now that they had received their results. Most understood that they would have to sit online tests if they had not achieved Band 8 in their NAPLAN tests and that they could sit these tests twice a year in Years 10, 11 and 12 and after school as well. Some students did report, however, thinking they could only sit the online test once a year.

There was still confusion, however, around what the implications were if students did not meet the standard by the time they sat their HSC. Most thought that they would not receive an ATAR and be unable to attend university. Students also reported confusion around the online tests:

***“We don’t know what it is, if it’s the same test. We don’t know anything about it, which I feel like the people who don’t reach the standard it would be more scary because you’re like ‘When am I going to figure out what to do, and what do I do now?’”***

***“I think more information should be given about the online tests.”***



## Supports young people need to meet the HSC minimum standard

Students had some ideas for how they would like to receive correct information about the minimum standard. Many reported that they would like a face to face session with a representative from NESAs to explain to schools, parents and students what the requirements were. Students said this session would give everyone the opportunity to ask questions to a person that had the correct information:

***“Also, like transparency. There should be a representative that came to our school and...this is the minimum standard, that it...maybe at the start of the year. So we actually know.”***

***“If they came in and told every school exactly why they did it and what it was, not just send it out on paper.”***

A community announcement on television was another idea put forward:

***“You know how on the TV there are ads about government and stuff? I was thinking about this before. The government says it’s for education and makes it clear for everyone.”***

Students were also very clear that they wanted to receive information about what was expected of them much earlier on; either in Year 8 or at the very latest, the beginning of Year 9.

Students that had not achieved Band 8s in their NAPLAN tests expressed concern over how they were going to be supported to meet the minimum standard:

***“Are the teachers going to help us when like, some people will pass and what about the other people? Do we just get left behind and we have to do a test that we might fail again because we’re not going to get help?”***

Many thought it would be helpful for teachers to be told what would be in the tests so that they could better prepare students:

***“The teachers don’t even know what we’re studying for because they haven’t seen the test....they have no idea until the day....and we could be studying for a topic that’s completely off it.”***

Students also reported wanting study groups in schools where students that needed help in the same areas could get additional assistance from teachers:

***“Study groups for a period or so and focus on the areas that we want to focus on...that way they can be collectively learning the thing and just one teacher can focus on teaching, helping those students get better at a subject they’re not.”***

Many students discussed that practice tests and study guides would be extremely useful:

**Interviewer:** *What supports do young people need to meet the minimum standard?*

**Student 1:** *A study guide*

**Student 2:** *Yeah, more resources.*

**Student 1:** *Explaining what's gonna be on the test.*

**Student 3:** *Yeah, so like actually have dot points on the questions and the subjects that the exam will be on."*

Overwhelmingly, students discussed wanting to get feedback on their NAPLAN tests so that they could learn from their mistakes and prepare for the online tests:

*"And then we don't even know what we need to improve personally, cause we don't know what we've done wrong."*

*"I think it would be really helpful if you got the exact questions you didn't get right back. You know what to look for in the future."*

*"I feel like we should actually get the NAPLAN back, not just the sheet... we should actually get our results back so we can actually say to the teacher... 'How can I fix this one next NAPLAN?'"*

*"Yeah, re-work it out and redo it and learn from your mistakes."*

*"If you want to help kids after this year, you should give them their actual tests back so they can learn from their mistakes."*

*"...Feedback...Every teacher I've ever had has always told me that you make mistakes and learn from them. But in this case, we're not going to learn from them. We need to see what we did wrong. So, I think that's really important for us to do better next time."*



## Conversations with teachers and parents about the HSC minimum standard

Some students reported purchasing NAPLAN study books from newsagencies only to find that they were very different to what was in the actual tests:

*“I found out they’re completely different to the actual exam. They’ve got different questions and the setup is different, and the questions are all mixed around and they’re more confusing, and they make it worse for you.”*

There were also students who wanted more counselling support throughout the whole process:

*“They could bring more counsellors in to sit down one on one with a student and talk about how they’re feeling about NAPLAN before it happens and after and during... in between the days when you’re not doing the test to make sure that you’re doing okay...so you’re not stressed out...any ways to calm yourself down through the test.”*



Students reported having had conversations with both teachers and parents about the minimum standard. Students conveyed there was confusion among their teachers with regards to what the changes meant:

*“I heard a rumour about it last year. And I remember speaking to the teacher, like ‘Is this true?’ She’s like, ‘It won’t happen. Don’t worry it will be fine.”*

*“All the different teachers had different opinions...I could ask one teacher something and another teacher something else and they’d all have a different opinion.”*

*“Different teachers will tell us different things and we don’t know which ones are true.”*

Some students said that their teachers did their best to keep them calm in the lead up to the tests; while others told students how important the tests were now that a minimum standard had been introduced:

*“My teachers were just like, ‘Relax, you can do it again if you need to. You can do it again.”*

*“One of the teachers said that ‘If you don’t pass this...you’re gonna have to keep doing it outside of school.’ It’s like nobody really wants to be doing NAPLAN once they finish school.”*



## Conversations with other young people about the HSC minimum standard

Some young people said that their parents just told them not to worry; while others felt pressured by their parents to do well:

*“I complained to my dad and he was just like ‘you know what, it doesn’t really matter and worst comes to worst you do it again. Sooner or later you’re going to get it.’”*

*“Every NAPLAN year is the same, my dad will just come up to me and give me a maths practise paper because he doesn’t want me to screw up.”*

*“My dad, he said, ‘Meet the minimum standard, you can do it...they’re preparing you for the real world. If you go bad in the real world, you’re gonna get kicked in the gut.’”*



Many students reported they had conversations with each other in the lead up to NAPLAN. These conversations were largely around how stressed they were about achieving Band 8s and that they were not in favour of the introduction of the minimum standard:

*“We would sit together and talk about it and freak out together about ‘what if we don’t pass? We’re all going to die!’”*

*“We would just talk about how stressed out we were about it.”*

*“I think we’re all upset about the minimum standard and we do say that to each other from time to time. We say oh, its stupid that we have to get this certain amount.”*

Students also reported having conversations with each other after receiving their NAPLAN results with them wanting to know their peers’ results.

*“As soon as we got our results back we like, ‘What results did you get?’ Or like, ‘Better luck next time.’”*

*“You go to school and like 30 people go, ‘What did you get on the NAPLAN? Did you pass? Did you pass?’ It’s like this massive comparing.”*

# conclusions

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From the focus groups that were conducted with Year 9 students it is clear that the introduction of the HSC minimum standard has caused a great deal of stress and anxiety. A great deal of this anxiety can be attributed to students not having a clear understanding of the process for meeting the standard. Many students were concerned that they would be unable to achieve Band 8 in their NAPLAN tests and consequently not sit their HSC or go to university.

While there were students in favour of the minimum standard, many did not like that it was linked to NAPLAN as it changed the purpose for what NAPLAN was originally intended.

Students had clear ideas of what supports they needed to meet the HSC minimum standard. The most frequently mentioned suggestion was for students to receive detailed feedback from their Year 9 NAPLAN test so that they knew where they went wrong and how they could improve.







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