South Australian Catholic school parents hold a diverse range of views on the National Assessment Program for Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) and the national testing carried out each year across Australia for children in Years 3, 5, 7 and 9.

This resource, written by parents for parents, is designed to answer a number of questions commonly asked by parents about the purpose and scope of NAPLAN.

Q. What is NAPLAN?

A. NAPLAN is the National Assessment Program for Literacy and Numeracy. The tests used in the NAPLAN measure a child’s literacy (reading, writing, spelling, grammar and punctuation) and numeracy (maths) skills at four points along their schooling journey – Years 3, 5, 7 and 9. The same test for each domain is taken by every child in each of these year levels across the country at the same time on the same day (although exemptions and adjustments apply if warranted and a parent can withdraw their child from sitting the test if they wish - see below). For more information go to www.nap.edu.au

Every Australian school’s average scores for each domain in each year level are published annually on the school’s profile page on the My School website. They are compared to the average scores of ‘statistically similar schools’ and the average scores for all Australian schools. Through My School, users can also see the proportion of students in each year level that are in each of six achievement bands, as well as the average gain in NAPLAN scores from one test to the next. For more information go to http://www.myschool.edu.au/

Q. Why do we have NAPLAN?

A. There are six main uses of the objective data generated from the National Assessment Program for Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN):

- To provide a nationally consistent measure of the literacy and numeracy skills of Australian school aged children at set points along their schooling journey.
- To provide nationally consistent and publicly available data on the effectiveness of literacy and numeracy programs in Australian schools
- To inform classroom, school and sector practices aimed at improving the effectiveness of literacy and numeracy programs in Australian schools
To provide data to parents on their child’s literacy and numeracy skills as captured by one measure at four set points along their schooling journey to complement the range of other objective and subjective strategies utilised by teachers to assess a child’s progress,

To identify individual learning needs and inform teaching programs

To provide parents with information they may use when choosing a school for their child

Q. There seems to be a lot of ‘negative hype’ about NAPLAN. What’s all the fuss about?

A. This ‘negative hype’ is generated because of reasonable, yet arguably overstated, concerns around such things as the misuse of published average test results on My School to create ‘league tables’ that pit schools against each other; reports of excessive teaching to the test ‘eating’ into teaching time, reports of high stress levels of some teachers, parents and children in the lead up to the tests and complaints by parents that the delay in getting their child’s individual test results makes them less than useful in informing their child’s learning needs in that year.

Q. My child is doing NAPLAN this year. What information can I expect to receive from the school?

A. As a parent, you can expect to be provided with information by the school on the NAPLAN program and the testing schedule for this year. Included in this should be information on your options in relation to your child’s participation in the testing.

A brochure for parents and carers is available online at http://www.nap.edu.au/verve/_resources/NAPLAN_2013_Parents_Brochure.pdf

Q. What options do parents have if their child has a special learning need or disability or if they simply don’t want their child to sit the test/s?

A. The following options are available:

i) Adjustments

Students with physical disabilities or special learning needs are able to be provided the reasonable adjustments that reflect the kind of support they are normally given in the classroom in learning and assessment activities.

ii) Exemption.

Students are eligible for exemption from the tests if:

1) They have a significant intellectual disability;
2) They have recently arrived in Australia from non-English speaking countries

Parents are required to notify the school of their consent for their child to be exempted from the test, via a form co-signed by a parent and the Principal. Parents can override this automatic exemption and can direct the school to have their child sit some or all of the test/s, with appropriate adjustments.
Children exempted from the test/s are then deemed not to have met the minimum standards, but do not receive a score and so do not affect the school’s average score. Published results list the % of students exempted and % of students falling below national minimum standards.

**Withdrawal**

Students can be formally withdrawn from the test by parents only. Parents are required to formally notify the school of their decision to withdraw their child from the test, via a form co-signed by a parent and the Principal.

In the Principals’ Handbook prepared for school leaders by the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA), it is made very clear that under no circumstances are principals or teachers to influence parents’ decisions to withdraw their child by recommending this as an option. They must balance their responsibility to inform all parents of this right with the directive not to influence. *Incidence of undue pressure being placed on parents to withdraw their child from the testing must be reported to ACARA.*

In practice, if a parent has not sought advice or formally requested that their child be withdrawn and a principal suggests this course of action, it is a contravention of the rules and must be reported to ACARA.

*(Parents with children in a SA Catholic school can report undue pressure by a teacher to their principal. If the principal or a teacher is applying pressure, parents can ring the relevant Principal Consultant at the Catholic Education Office on 08 8301 6885)*

Students who are formally withdrawn from the test are not included in the results. Participation rates are published. In Catholic Education SA the participation rate is ~95%. Withdrawal rates are higher for Year 3 tests but this tapers off by Year 9.

**Q. What if my child is sick on a designated test day?**

**A.** Where children are absent on any of the test days, it is expected that parents will notify the school of the child’s absence on the day as per the usual process.

The child can catch up on the missed test/s on the afternoon of Wednesday or Thursday or on the Friday of the week of the testing, which is the designated ‘catch up’ day. This is a decision to be made taking the child’s health and wellbeing into account (i.e. if child was absent for Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday it is likely they are not well enough to catch up on all five tests on the Friday).

Where a child is absent from a test and cannot do it via a catch up opportunity during the test week, they are recorded as absent and are not included in calculations for either the school average or % of students meeting national minimum standards.

Q. **How are NAPLAN results used by teachers to support my child’s learning?**

A. The NAPLAN tests complement a range of other assessment strategies utilised by teachers to assess a child’s progress, to identify individual learning needs and shape individual learning plans.

In SA, there are nearly 80,000 students taking the tests each year. It requires considerable time for these all to be marked (particularly written responses), analysed and scaled consistently across the whole country. The move toward online testing will alleviate this time lag (Refer to Online Testing). Nevertheless, when NAPLAN results are published in September, they can provide teachers and parents with a valuable external assessment of a student’s relative strengths and areas for improvement that complements the information gathered through classroom assessments throughout the year.

An example of the use of NAPLAN results in informing individual learning plans is where Year 9 NAPLAN results are drawn on as one piece of information taken into account in the development of Personalised Learning Plans (PLP) which is undertaken in Year 10 as a compulsory subject of the SA Certificate of Education (SACE).

Q. **How are NAPLAN results used to inform classroom and/or school practice to improve learning?**

A. This is a great question and one that parents are encouraged to ask their school leaders. For example:

“How are the school’s NAPLAN results used to inform the professional learning needs of the staff and teaching practice within the school?”

Within Catholic Education SA, schools are supported to analyse their school’s annual results and trends in results over time. Particular strengths or areas for improvement may be identified for particular year levels or groups of students. It is the role of the school principal, as the leader of learning within the school community, to then oversee the use of this information and other data to inform their school improvement plan in areas such as teaching practice/pedagogy and professional learning needs of staff.

Schools are encouraged to share with their parents and the broader school community how NAPLAN data is used to inform teaching and learning.

Q. **My child’s in Year 3 and due to take the test for the first time this year and she’s worrying about it. How can I best support her?**

A. Parents are encouraged to treat the NAPLAN tests simply as one element of the school’s assessment and reporting process and not place too much unwarranted weight on them.

The higher than usual withdrawal rate of children in Year 3 (the first time children will participate in the national tests) indicates that there may be some concern in the ‘unknown’
expressed by parents and/or the child. You are encouraged to speak to your child’s teacher or to parents of children who have participated in the tests for reassurance that they are not such a big deal. Your child will notice if you are concerned or worried and will be equally reassured by your positive, unfazed approach to the tests.

The same advice applies to parents with children in years 5, 7 and 9.

Importantly, parents are entitled to use appropriate grievance processes to query any overt or covert emphasis on the importance of the tests by the school, including any perceived impact on teaching practice in the lead up to the tests (e.g. excessive ‘teaching to the test’ or practising for the test) or perceived pressure to withdraw their child from the test.

Q. I hear NAPLAN is going online. What does this mean?

A. The dedicated website for NAPLAN (www.nap.edu.au) provides the most up to date information about the gradual transition to online testing from 2016

The Australian Curriculum and Reporting Authority (ACARA) is working towards moving NAPLAN online. The aim would be for students to complete NAPLAN tests using a computer or another electronic device, such as a tablet.

Some of the main benefits of students taking part in NAPLAN online include:

- Assessments will use a tailored test design. Students will answer an initial set of questions and then be directed to subsequent sets of questions based on the accuracy of their responses. Students with a high number of questions correct will be directed to more challenging questions. Students who have a lower level of accuracy in the initial set of questions will be directed to questions that are less challenging.

- Tailored testing will provide teachers and schools with more targeted and detailed information on their students’ performance on the tests.

- Use of a computer-based environment provides the opportunity to broaden the scope of the assessments.

- Delivery of assessments online will significantly reduce the time it takes to provide feedback to schools, students and parents.

- ACARA research into online assessment has shown that students have engaged well with computer-based tests.

For more information go to: http://www.nap.edu.au/online-assessment/naplan-online/naplan-online.html
Q. What weight should I place on NAPLAN results when choosing a first school or secondary school for my child?

A. NAPLAN testing and the publication of school data on My School contributes to a culture of transparency and accountability which is a reasonable expectation of schools and schooling sectors.

However, raw NAPLAN data found on the My School website can be unfairly used to compare schools without a reasonable analysis of the factors that may be contributing to these outcomes so it’s easy to jump to conclusions about how ‘good’ a school is and to make unfair comparisons between schools.

It is important to focus on the role of NAPLAN in validating and informing school and classroom practice and in monitoring the impact of school improvement processes rather than creating ‘league tables’ or pitting schools against each other.

Our advice to parents when checking out a school for your child is to visit the school, get a ‘feel’ for the school and its community. During the visit, ask the principal the following key questions in relation to their NAPLAN results:

- **How are the school’s NAPLAN results used to inform the professional learning priorities for the staff and to continuously review and improve teaching practice within the school?**

- **How are a child’s NAPLAN results used as a discussion starter between parents and teachers about the individual learning needs of each child?**

- **How does this school work together with parents and families to create positive attitudes to learning and build families’ capacity to support learning at home?**

These questions will tell you more about a school’s commitment to supporting each child’s learning than the raw NAPLAN data published on a national website.

Q. What are the most important tips for parents about NAPLAN?

- Put the NAPLAN tests into perspective – they are one tool in a range of strategies used to assess your child’s progress and inform his/her learning needs.

- Read all information sent to you by the school about the NAPLAN tests and your options.

- Try not to place too much emphasis on the testing. Treat the NAPLAN testing week as any other school week.

- Raise any issues you may have about the NAPLAN testing with your child’s teacher and/or the school principal following the appropriate grievance processes within your school.

- Ask how your child’s school (or prospective school) uses its NAPLAN data to inform classroom and school practices aimed at improving the effectiveness of the school’s literacy and numeracy programs.