NAPLAN results possibly impacted by withdrawals



Recently published research has found that some schools have manipulated their NAPLAN results by withdrawing low-performing students from the tests. The tactic is designed to make a school's results look better than it would otherwise. The study found that independent private schools were twice as likely as public schools to withdraw low-performing students from the tests.

The study, *Unintended consequences of school accountability reforms: Public versus private schools*, found that poorly performing schools are more likely to encourage parents of low-performing students to withdraw their children from NAPLAN tests as a way to boost their school results reported on the My School website.

"We find that schools in both the public and private sectors appear to respond strategically to the increase in accountability. The worse a school's initial measured performance as advertised on My School, the more likely that a lower proportion of students from that school participated in subsequent testing years," the report states.

A co-author of the study, Professor Michael Coelli from the faculty of Business and Economics at the University of Melbourne said: "Our evidence is consistent with the idea a number of relatively poorly-performing public and independent private schools are gaming the system, to strategically adjust their NAPLAN testing pool. Manipulating the system like this artificially boosts their average scores, arguably to protect their academic reputation."

The withdrawal rate in independent private schools was over twice that in public schools and the difference increased over the period to 2015. The study observed that independent schools have "potentially the most to lose from public accountability" and therefore respond more strongly by adjusting their testing pool. Gaming the system by Catholic schools was less prevalent than in independent and public schools.

The research is published in *Economics of Education Review*. It analysed NAPLAN non-participation rates of 6,981 Australian schools between 2008 and 2015. It found that the overall rate of student withdrawal due to a formal parental request rose from just 0.33 percent in 2008 (before My School was introduced) to 2.29 percent in 2015. By contrast, overall non-participation rates due to absence or exemption barely changed over the same period.

The authors said that the manipulation of schools' results by the withdrawing of low-performing students threatens the integrity of the public accountability mechanism and undermines the information provided to parents making enrolment decisions.

The authors suggested that one policy response to prevent schools from manipulating the system is to require a minimum percentage of students in each school participating in testing each year.

Other recommendations include making it mandatory for schools to explain any significant year-on-year changes in non-participation rates and automatically auditing schools which report large drops in test participation.

As a co-author of the study, Professor Gigi Foster, noted independent schools have a lot to lose if they don't deliver the results that their parents expect because independent schools are "famous for charging parents a pretty penny for the privilege of enrolling their kids". The withdrawal rate in independent schools increased sevenfold from 2008 to 2015, albeit from a small base, and has probably continued to increase.

Independent private schools are notorious for taking advantage of special provisions to boost their student results. For example, schools in NSW can apply for special disability provisions that provide practical assistance to students who may otherwise be disadvantaged when sitting their HSC exam.

The highest fee independent schools regularly claim and gain the most approvals. In 2023, 49 per cent of students at SCEGGS Redlands, 40 per cent at The Emmanuel School, 32 per cent at Moriah College and St Andrew's Cathedral School, 30 per cent at Ascham and Wenona School, 29 per cent at Loreto Kirribilli and MLC School, 28 per cent at SCEGGS Darlinghurst and 25 per cent at Barker College were granted approval.

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