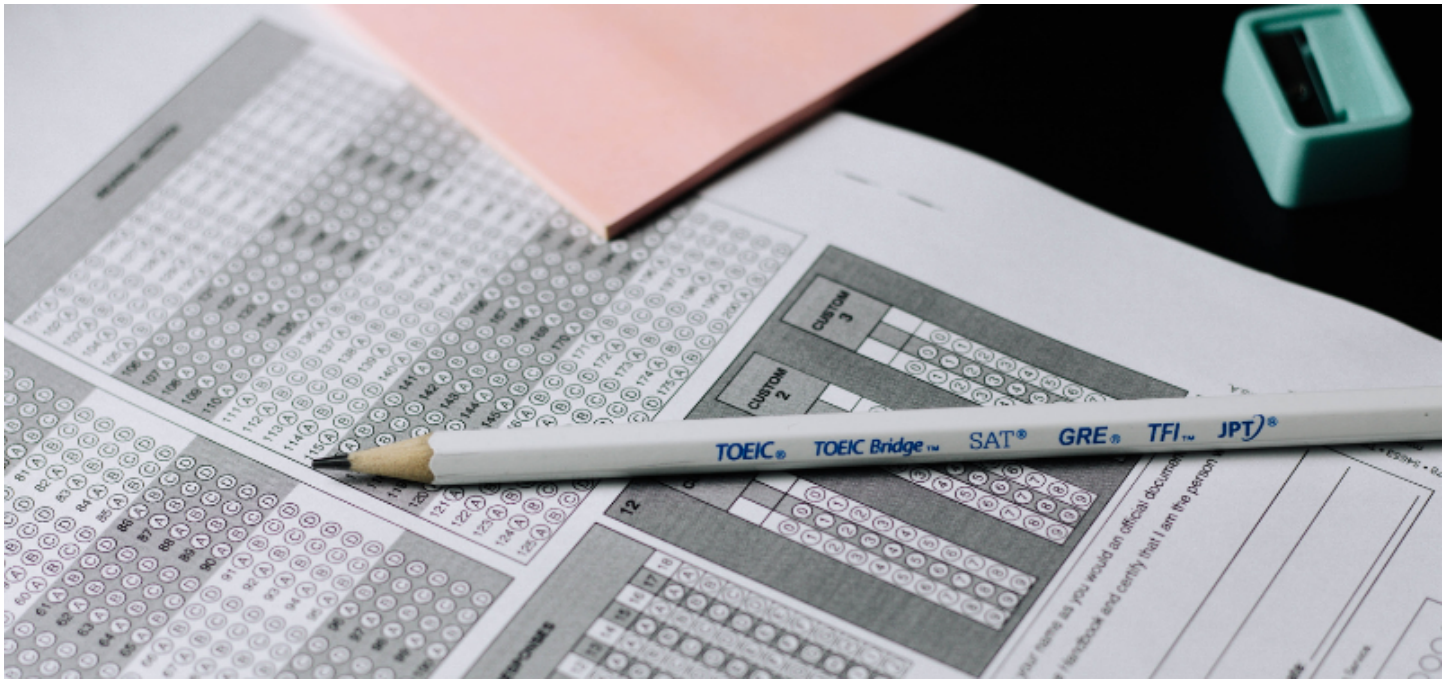
More funding increases needed following new NAPLAN results

SSTUWA
State School Teachers' Union of WA

By Trevor Cobbold



The latest National Assessment Program Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) results reveal the enormity of the challenges facing Australia's school system.

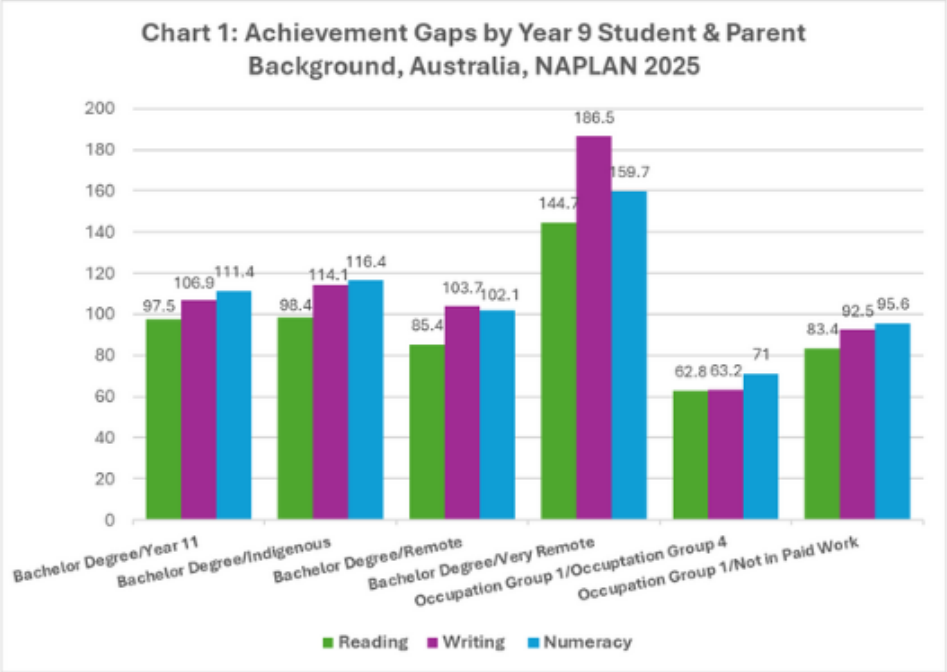
They show vast achievement gaps between rich and poor, a huge proportion of equity group cohorts not achieving national proficiency standards and a very large proportion in need of additional support in their learning.

Unfortunately, the education equity targets and new funding agreements between the Commonwealth and state and territory governments provide little prospect that the gaps can be reduced. Urgent action is needed to ensure that public schools are fully funded in the near future.

Year 9 students of parents with a bachelor's degree or higher achieved much higher average scores in reading, writing and numeracy than students of parents who only completed Year 11 [See chart 1 below].

The gaps were 98 points for reading, 107 points for writing and 111 points for numeracy. They represent a learning gap of four to five years because Year 9 students of parents with only a Year 11 education achieved average literacy and numeracy scores below that of Year 5 students of highly educated parents.

Note: The achievement gap is the difference between the mean score between different student cohorts. For example, the mean reading score of students whose parents have a bachelor's degree is 96.5 points higher on the NAPLAN scale than that of students whose parents have a Year 11 education.



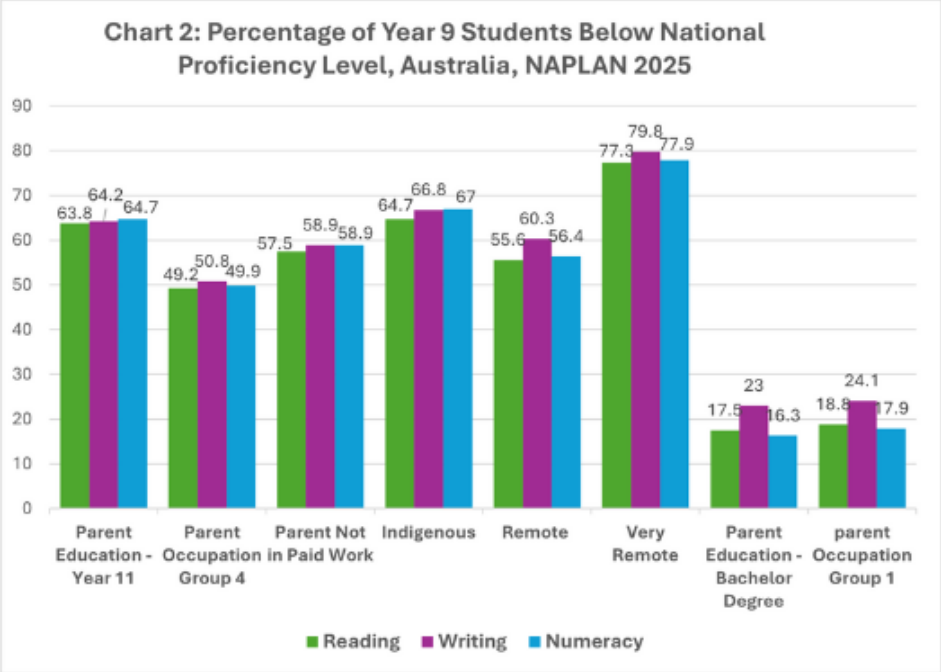
In addition, Year 9 students of parents in the highest occupational group (Occupational Group 1: elected officials, senior executives/managers, management in large business organisation, government administration and defence, and qualified professionals) scored 63-71 points more than students of parents in the lowest occupation group (Occupational Group 4: machine operators, sales/office/service/hospitality staff, assistants, labourers, and related workers).

This represents a learning gap of nearly four years. Students from the highest occupation group achieved 83-96 points more than those of parents not in paid work and which represent over four years of learning.

The gap between Indigenous students and those of highly educated parents remain very large: 98 points for reading, 114 points for writing and 116 points for numeracy. These gaps represent over four years of learning for reading and nearly five years for writing and numeracy. The equivalent gap for remote area students is about four years while that for very remote area students is nearly six years.

The NAPLAN results also reveal that very large proportions of disadvantaged students are not achieving national proficiency standards in reading, writing and numeracy. For example, over half to two-thirds of disadvantaged Year 9 students do not achieve the standards as shown by the following percentages
[See Chart 2 below]:

- Students whose parents have a Year 11 education: 64-65 per cent.
- Students whose parents are in the lowest paid occupation group: 49-51 per cent.
- Students whose parents are not in paid work: 58-59 per cent.
- Indigenous students: 65-67 per cent.
- Remote area students: 56-60 per cent.
- Very remote area students: 77-80 per cent.

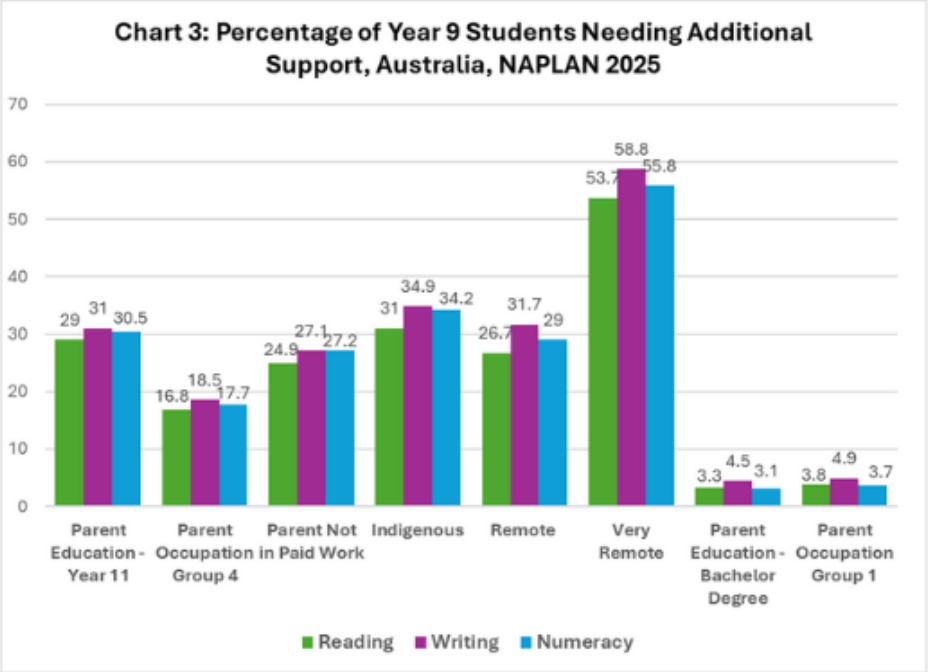


By contrast, only 16-23 per cent of students of highly educated parents and 18-24 per cent of students with parents in the highest occupation group did not achieve the standards. The proportion of disadvantaged students not achieving the standards is about three times that of more advantaged students.

There was little change in the proportion of disadvantaged students not achieving the proficiency standards since 2023. The only exception is a small increase in the proportion of Indigenous students achieving the reading and writing standards.

Many disadvantaged students are not achieving at the basic minimum standards and are only achieving at the lowest proficiency level. For example, the following percentages of Year 9 students need additional learning support in reading, writing and numeracy [See Chart 3 below]:

- Students whose parents have a Year 11 education: 29-31 per cent.
- Students whose parents are in the lowest paid occupation group: 17-19 per cent.
- Students whose parents are not in paid work: 25-27 per cent.
- Indigenous students: 31-35 per cent.
- Remote area students: 27-32 per cent.
- Very remote area students: 54-59 per cent.



By contrast, only three to five per cent of students of highly educated parents and four to five per cent of students with parents in the highest occupation group need additional learning support.

These are massive differences between advantaged and disadvantaged students. The proportion of disadvantaged students needing additional support is generally four to seven times that of advantaged students, and even more in the case of students in very remote areas.

The proportions of disadvantaged Year 9 students in need of additional support are similar to those in 2023. There was a small reduction in the proportion of Indigenous students needing additional support in reading and writing.

The large majority of disadvantaged students attend public schools. A study by Save Our Schools shows that the large majority of students from low socio-educational advantage (SEA) families attend public schools.

In 2023, 81 per cent of all low SEA students attended public schools and 91 per cent of all schools with over 50 per cent of their students in the lowest SEA quartile were public schools. Nearly one-third of all students in public schools are from low SEA families.

Other data drawn from the My Schools data set show that public schools enrol 82 per cent of Indigenous students, 79 per cent of remote area students and 87 per cent of very remote area students.

The Heads of Agreement of the Better and Fairer Schools Agreement specifies targets to increase equity in school outcomes by 2030. However, the agreement lacks a clear definition of equity. This means that the targets are too weak to make Australian school education fairer.

For example, there is no requirement to reduce the proportion of disadvantaged students in the NAPLAN level Needing Additional Support. This is an incredible oversight and it could even worsen inequity.

Despite this heavy concentration of disadvantaged students in public schools, government funding increases, adjusted for inflation, have strongly favoured Catholic and Independent schools since 2009.

Between 2009 and 2023 government funding (Commonwealth and state) for Catholic schools increased by $3,101 per student and by $2,708 in Independent schools compared to $2,091 for public schools. In percentage terms, the 34.8 per cent increase for Catholic schools at was double the 17.5 per cent increase for public schools, while funding for Independent schools increased by 21.2 per cent.

Private schools have also received increased income from fees and other sources which provide them with a significant resource advantage over public schools.

Public schools have long been under-funded for the learning challenges they face. In 2024, they were only funded at an average of 88 per cent of their Schooling Resource Standard (SRS) across Australia.

By contrast, private schools were over-funded on average at 104 per cent of their SRS.

New funding agreements with the New South Wales, Queensland, South Australian, Western Australian and Tasmanian governments reveal that public schools will not be funded at 100 per cent of their SRS by 2034 despite a significant planned boost in funding over the decade.

Public schools in these states, and also likely in Victoria when its agreement is finally published, will be under-funded because the states can continue to use non-SRS expenditures as part of their SRS funding share.

They can claim expenditure on school transport up to 1.8 per cent of their SRS (1.5 per cent for WA and Tasmania) share and all expenditure on regulatory authorities, such as curriculum and standards, relating to public schools.

These expenditures are specifically excluded from how the SRS is measured. As a result, public schools will continue to receive less funding than they should.

Continuing under-funding of public schools for another decade means there is little prospect of removing, indeed even reducing, the large achievement gap between rich and poor and increasing the proportion of disadvantaged students achieving the national literacy and numeracy proficiency standards. This is a disaster for the future learning and life prospects of disadvantaged students. It also has broader consequences for individuals' health and social outcomes.

Reducing the achievement gaps between rich and poor students is critical to improving work force skills and productivity.

In fact, the achievement gaps are a measure of the potential for productivity improvement and higher living standards. Fully funding public schools is fundamental to increasing national productivity.

Public schools face a funding crisis. Governments have to be forced to fully support public education. It demands an organised response from public school and community organisations.

Teacher, parent, principal and community groups must collectively organise and campaign at the school, district, state and national levels to demand a better deal for public schools.

A better deal should include:

- The Better and Fairer School Funding Heads of Agreement should be revised to include a target to halve the proportion of disadvantaged students needing additional support by 2029.
- The Commonwealth should accelerate the increase in its funding share of the SRS for public schools to achieve 25 per cent by 2029.
- The bilateral funding agreements should be revised so that:

  o State and territory governments remove the four per cent rort by 2029.

  o Immediately remove all allowances for state and territory governments to include non-SRS expenditures such as school transport and regulatory agencies as part of their share of funding the SRS of public schools.

Trevor Cobbold is the convenor of Save our Schools Australia.
The opinions expressed in this article are that of the author and does not necessarily reflect any official policies or positions of the AEU or SSTUWA.
This article was first published on the Save our Schools Australia website and has been reproduced here with permission.

Authorised by Sally Dennis, General Secretary, The State School Teachers' Union of W.A.
ABN 54 478 094 635 © 2026