



## Public submission made to the Review to Achieve Educational Excellence in Australian Schools

Submitter: Learning Difficulties Coalition of NSW  
Submitting as a: Parent or community organisation  
State: NSW

### Summary

Students with additional learning needs, such as language and literacy difficulties, are disadvantaged when having to sit written tests and exams. These are students with average to often above average intellectual and academic ability face barriers to the true expression of their knowledge and ideas under test and exam conditions.

The current NSW HSC Minimum Standards reforms are adding to this academic disadvantage and is creating a situation where, potentially, there will be a new body of students unable to receive their HSC. The minimum standard reforms are being seen in a negative light by the majority of professionals and parents involved in supporting students with additional learning needs. Of particular concern is the impact on these students' state of mental health and wellbeing. In this submission we address the issues, and present some recommendations.

### Main submission

We (the Learning Difficulties Coalition of NSW Management Committee) are responding specifically to the academic achievement barriers that are increasing, rather than decreasing, for students with additional learning needs in all NSW schools. These students, between 20-30% of the student body, have a range of learning difficulties that very often impact their ability to demonstrate their true ideas and knowledge in test and exam situations, particularly those that involve a high degree of reading and writing. Such learning difficulties include Reading Disorders (including Dyslexia), Language Disorder, Dyspraxia, Dysgraphia, Dyscalculia, ADHD, and ASD. As a proactive community of professionals and parents, we are trying to help these young people navigate their way through the academic and social challenges posed throughout their school life, so that they may graduate from secondary education with an expectation for a positive and fulfilling life post school. We are therefore extremely concerned about the HSC minimum standards reforms, announced in 2016 and already in place for this year's cohort of Year 9 students.

As is now well known in NSW, BOSTES (now NESA) is making the following changes, announced in July 2016 by Minister Adrian Piccoli, NSW Minister for Education at that time:

- There is to be a two-phased reform, over the next 4 years, with a minimum literacy and numeracy standard for HSC eligibility from 2020 (HSC Minimum Standard).
- From 2017, all students can meet this standard by attaining a minimum Band 8 result in all components of the Year 9 NAPLAN.
- From 2018 (i.e. for those students not achieving this level in their Year 9 NAPLAN tests) an online literacy and numeracy test will be available. Students will be able to take this on multiple occasions until they demonstrate competency in all components to Australian Score Skills Framework Level 3. The ability to re-take the tests is available to them for 5 years post the start of their HSC courses.

The issues.

- In 2016 and 2017 half to two-thirds of all NSW students achieved results in Band 7 or below in some or all of the NAPLAN components (information from ACARA: Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority). This data will undoubtedly include the majority of the students with additional learning needs as outlined above. A recent study at Charles Sturt University (2015, not yet published) reported a consistently lower performance by students with language disorders on all components of the NAPLAN tests, across all grades, when compared to typically developing students.
- There are no steps in place to provide the extra intensive learning support that will be vital in helping students make the essential gains in their literacy and numeracy abilities. Students will only have the opportunity to re-sit the tests until they “get it right” i.e. pass at the required level. This is highly unlikely to happen for the majority of students with additional learning needs, without their being given intensive and very direct literacy and/or numeracy instruction over a period of time.
- Direct literacy and numeracy support needs to start back in early primary school, and teachers continue to be severely under-supported in professional learning in this area, going right back to pre-service teaching i.e. at the undergraduate level. Currently learning support for students with additional learning needs disappears in the main after Year 1, and is almost non-existent in most NSW secondary schools in all sectors.
- There are many students in these statistics who will never be able to reach the required level, including those with all types of learning difficulties and

those from Aboriginal and non-English speaking cultural backgrounds. These students have, till now, been quite able to take, and receive, the HSC and go on to tertiary education if they so wish, and have been doing so historically. Instead there will now be, in effect, a second tier of students who will not only be seen as failures, but who will be leaving school with nothing to show for their 6 years of secondary education.

- Anxiety about these new requirements is already taking hold, across student and parent bodies in particular. Critics of the reforms are afraid that HSC pressure will be transferred to Year 9 students before they are mature enough to handle it, and we are already finding that many students are seeing themselves as 'failures' from, or even before, the age of 14. Anecdotally I see many secondary students with language and literacy disorders in my speech pathology practice, and they have consistently been talking in terms of 'passing' and 'failing' the different NAPLAN components. This is a new way of relating to the NAPLAN, as previously they would just be aware of the bands they had achieved.
- There are legal requirements for NSW students to stay in school for Years 11 and 12, unless they have an education, training or employment alternative in place. In having now drastically reduced the tertiary education options through NSW TAFE cuts and increases in TAFE course fees to an unattainable level for many, the number of alternative options available to these 'failing' students has been significantly reduced. This is actually quite an alarming situation.
- An additional concern is that classroom teachers will now feel the pressure to 'teach the test' from Year 7 onwards, when their agenda is already overloaded with existing curriculum content.

#### Recommendations

1. To at least reduce the minimum NAPLAN-related benchmark to a more realistic level. Band 6 is already seen as an achievement at the national minimum standard. Band 8 is quite unrealistic for the majority of students, for the reasons outlined above.
2. Increase literacy and numeracy support as the highest priority, from school entry onwards and continuing into and throughout secondary education. This would be achievable, in part, by decreasing the amount of curriculum content, which, at the secondary education level in particular, is putting huge teaching pressure on teachers. If the goal of this reform is to ensure that students leave school with adequate levels of literacy and numeracy, it is only logical that this is achieved by significantly increasing the amount of literacy

and numeracy teaching at all primary and secondary stages, and is definitely NOT achieved by throwing more tests at the students.

3. Students with additional learning needs, who are most at risk of failing to achieve this new requirement, need to be identified at an early age, and re-identified as they enter secondary school, so that additional learning support can be put into place throughout their secondary education. With this current 'reform', the identification of students will not be happening till Year 9. This is known as 'closing the barn door after the horse has bolted'.
4. Major reforms need to be made to NSW technical education institutions to provide a broad spectrum of options to all school leavers, in particular by reversing the massive cuts and fee increases currently occurring across the NSW TAFE sector.

Thank you for considering our concerns and recommendations.

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