

# Introduction

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NSW Auditor-General's Report  
Improving the literacy of  
Aboriginal students in NSW  
public schools

INTRODUCTION

Literacy  
results show  
little overall  
change and  
a continuing  
gap

## 1. Have literacy test results improved?

### Finding

NSW test results over the last decade shows no discernible signs of improvement. There is a significant continuing gap in the results for Aboriginal students compared to the results for non-Aboriginal students.

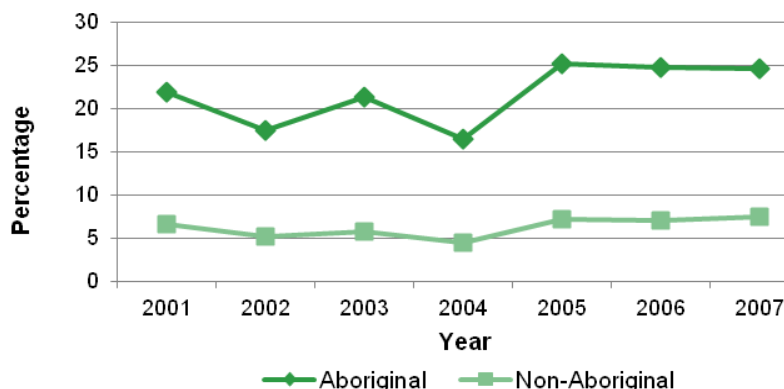
We have found no evidence base to support the proposition that either closing the gap (by 2016), or halving the gap (by 2018), is likely to be attainable.

Given that the Aboriginal population growth is double that of the general population, it is likely that there will be increasing numbers of Aboriginal students falling behind.

Notwithstanding gains and losses at individual schools, over the last decade NSW test results have shown little overall change in results for literacy, both in terms of the percentages of students in the performance bands and the state average scores.

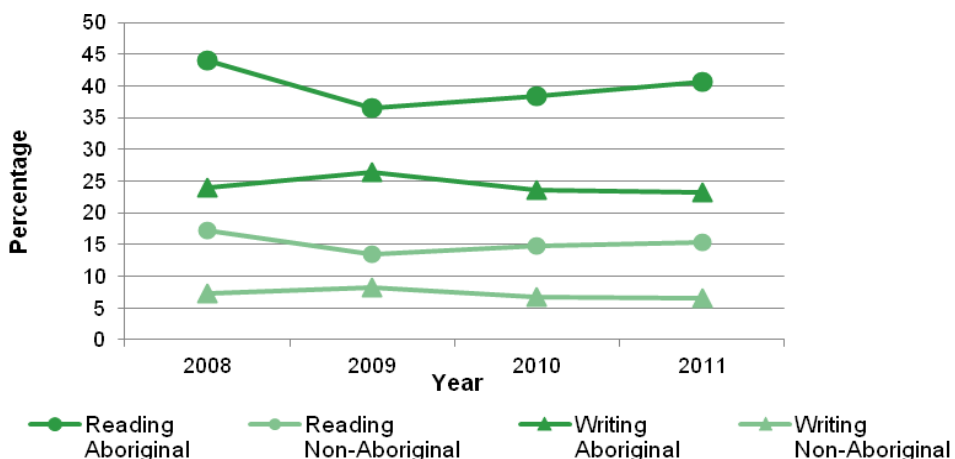
In particular, NSW test results over the last decade (see Appendix 2) show a significant continuing gap in the results for Aboriginal students compared to the results for non-Aboriginal students, with no discernible signs of improvement. By way of illustration, the gap for Year 3 students is depicted below from State-wide testing prior to NAPLAN (exhibit 1) and directly from NAPLAN (exhibit 2).

**Exhibit 1: Year 3 Literacy: Percentage of students below the minimum standard, 2001 to 2007**



Source: NSW Department of Education and Communities, 2011. Based on testing program prior to NAPLAN.

**Exhibit 2: Year 3 NAPLAN Reading and Writing: Percentage of students at or below the minimum standard, 2008 to 2011**



Source: NSW Department of Education and Communities, 2011. Based on NAPLAN test results.

The current NSW State Plan outlines one of its priorities is to halve the gap between NSW Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students in reading and numeracy by 2018. (There is no equivalent State Plan target for writing.)

The 2006 NSW State Plan aimed to close the gap between Aboriginal and all other students in primary school literacy and numeracy rates by 2016. It highlighted that Aboriginal students are 19 months behind in literacy by Year Three and by Year Five Aboriginal students may need an extra three and a half years of literacy learning to match the literacy levels of non-Aboriginal students.

States' 'closing the gap' targets come from the National Indigenous Reform Agreement. In 2008 the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) agreed to 'halve the gap in reading, writing and numeracy achievements for indigenous children within a decade'.

We have found no evidence base to support the proposition that either closing the gap (by 2016), or halving the gap (by 2018), is likely to be attainable.

We have looked at the distribution of 'the gap', based on analysis by the Department. The data suggest that the needs of Aboriginal students vary considerably. In particular, we found that:

- around a third of schools have no significant gap, although some of these are schools with low numbers of Aboriginal students

No evidence  
closing the gap  
attainable

### Exhibit 3: NAPLAN Reading: Year 3 gap

Geolocation	Number of primary schools with more than 5 per cent Aboriginal students, 2011			
	Major gap	Small gap	Gap not significant	No gap
Major cities	128	33	28	56
Inner regional	142	25	18	57
Outer regional	87	16	6	24
Remote	12	–	1	4
Very remote	2	–	–	–
<b>Total</b>	<b>371</b>	<b>74</b>	<b>53</b>	<b>141</b>
<b>Percentages</b>	<b>58%</b>	<b>12%</b>	<b>8%</b>	<b>22%</b>

Source: NSW Department of Education and Communities, 2011.

Note:

These are schools with greater than 5 per cent Aboriginal Students (to reduce impact of individual students)

The 'gap' is the difference in mean scores between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students. A significant gap is assumed to be 0.2 standard deviations. Translating this to the data above:

- 'major gap' - a difference greater than 30 points is considered a significant gap
- 'small gap' - a difference from 15 to 30 points is potentially a significant gap
- 'gap not significant' - a difference less than 15 points is considered not a significant gap.

- the gap increases as the proportion of Aboriginal students in a school increases

**Exhibit 4: NAPLAN Reading: Difference in mean scores between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students by Aboriginal student enrolment percentage, 2011**

Aboriginal Students Enrolment %	Year 3 Mean Score Gap	Year 5 Mean Score Gap	Year 7 Mean Score Gap	Year 9 Mean Score Gap
Less than 5%	33.96	36.37	25.72	20.68
Between 5% and 10%	34.90	36.16	28.28	28.30
Between 10% and 15%	41.03	32.67	35.29	35.50
Between 15% and 20%	34.69	43.98	41.23	40.97
Between 20% and 25%	43.89	38.60	39.05	44.83
Greater than 25%	49.81	36.13	59.50	53.75

Source: NSW Department of Education and Communities, 2011.

- schools with major gaps are as likely to be found in major cities and inner regional areas, as in more remote areas
- the size of the gap increases with remoteness.

**Exhibit 5: NAPLAN Reading: Difference in mean scores between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students by geolocation, 2011**

Geolocation	Year 3 Mean Score Gap	Year 5 Mean Score Gap	Year 7 Mean Score Gap	Year 9 Mean Score Gap
Major cities	31.13	29.72	24.84	17.56
Inner regional	41.27	42.96	38.00	37.02
Outer regional	51.38	48.12	45.28	54.39
Remote	64.14	24.64	53.16	57.92
Very remote	99.58	–	–	–

Source: NSW Department of Education and Communities, 2011.

Many factors  
outside of  
school control

The size of the gap, while it can be readily measured, tells little about the factors that contribute to the results shown above. There are many factors outside of a school's control that impact educational outcomes for Aboriginal students. These include:

School-related factors:

- past negative experiences of school, compounded by the experiences of parents and other family members
- poor school performance and the ability to keep up with school having a negative impact on school attendance and retention
- poor student-teacher relationships, feelings of social isolation, racial discrimination or bullying and learning difficulties.

#### Non-school factors:

- low parental or family engagement with the education system
- compared to non-Indigenous counterparts, a higher risk of clinically significant emotional and behavioural difficulties, including developmental problems, carer illness, poor parenting and poor family function
- language barriers, often linked to differences between the language spoken at home and at school
- low household income, which often means that families are not able to cover school fees and other school-based costs
- limited access to or use of mainstream services
- poor health and nutrition
- poor housing and poor or unsafe community environments.

Source: Department of Education and Communities, The Psychological and Emotional Wellbeing needs of Children and Young People: Models of Effective Practice in Educational Settings, 2011.

We observed schools operating in greatly differing circumstances. Some schools operate in Aboriginal communities which are stable and united by a single language. Others in communities that are fragmented and transient.

Gains in education may be limited unless other aspects of socioeconomic disadvantage are improved, such as health, nutrition, housing and employment.

Similar to other states and territories, the Aboriginal population for New South Wales is a young population with thirty-five per cent being less than fifteen years of age. The NSW Aboriginal population is younger than the NSW non-Aboriginal population, and NSW Aboriginal population growth is double that of the general population. The enrolment of Aboriginal students has almost tripled since 1988 (Appendix 3). It has been estimated that the Aboriginal population of New South Wales will grow by thirty-five per cent between 2006 and 2021. As a result, given that the gap remains unchanged in percentage terms, there are increasing numbers of Aboriginal students who are falling behind.

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