With apologies to Jane Austen, it is a truth universally acknowledged that the acquisition and enhancement of literacy skills is a fundamental educational goal. What is less universally acknowledged is that in every decade since the start of the 20th century harbingers of doom have proclaimed serious declines in the literacy skills of each generation of students when compared with some allegedly halcyon previous generation.

If you believe that ANU Economist Andrew Leigh’s highly publicised recent study proves that NSW is having another literacy crisis, you would be wrong. Leigh’s literacy data is based merely on extracting a tiny section from the comprehensive Longitudinal Survey of Australian Youth (LSAY) produced by the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER) which attempts to measure a wide range of issues relevant to a large sample of Australian students in Year 9. Leigh’s literacy data is from 1975 to 1998. He produces no 1999 – 2008 data.

But his LSAY 1975 – 1998 literacy analysis is thin. For example, Leigh provides no comparative analysis of evidence that would prove that the degree of difficulty in the questions and the contents of the comprehension pieces used were consistently of the same standards across the 23 years. Are we dealing with apples? Oranges? Lemons?

An example of the limitations of this literacy assessment instrument and the extravagant purposes to which it can be put was provided by the 1996 LSAY and the political manipulation of the results by the then Commonwealth Government.

On 21 October 1996 the then Federal Minister for Education in the fledgling Howard Government, David Kemp, used the 1996 LSAY to scream from the rooftops that the results proved that one in three of all Year 9 students were virtually illiterate and that there had been a serious decline in standards, education policies and teaching practices since the 1975 LSAY.

LSAY 1996 proved nothing of the sort.

A paper produced by the then Economic and Policy Analysis Division (EPAD) of the then Commonwealth Department of Employment, Education, and Training and ACER revealed that the literacy ‘test’ had consisted only of ten questions on a comprehension passage. And that it had set out to measure what the ACER defined as “mastery literacy” in students. Not “basic skills”. Not “functional literacy”. To be so classified, a student had to get 8 right out of 10. Unsurprisingly, about one in three of the students scored fewer than 8 ‘correct’ answers.

It is on the public record that the accomplished author, whose heavily metaphorical and elliptical piece was used in the test, subsequently undertook the test himself. His answers were marked, using the official LSAY marking guide. And what did he score? 6 out of 10. When answering the questions ‘what did the author mean?’ his answers had to be marked ‘wrong’ in accordance with the marking guide. So much for test credibility.
As respected journalist Brian Toohey pointed out at the time students were “expected to give unequivocal answers about the meaning of a piece of prose in which the writer deliberately avoids stating plainly what he means”.

By contrast, over the past decade the NSW Department of Education and Training has developed the most comprehensive and rigorous set of basic skills tests in Australia. And what does that data tell us?

That between 1996 and 2007 the proportion of Year 3 students performing below the ‘Minimum Standard’ in literacy (the bottom performance band) has declined steadily from 17.0% to 11.1%; the proportion of students in the top two performance bands has risen steadily from 37.7% to 47.9%; and the mean literacy score for all Year 3 students has risen from 49.6 to 51.3.

That between 1996 and 2007 the proportion of Year 5 students below the ‘Minimum Standard’ (now set at the bottom two performance bands) has declined steadily from 9.0% to 6.8%; the proportion of students in the top two bands has risen steadily from 47.0% to 53.0%; and the mean literacy score for all Year 5 students has risen from 56.3 to 57.5.

That between 1998 and 2007 the proportion of Year 7 students below the Minimum Standard has declined from 4.8% to 3.7%; the proportion of students in the highest performance band has risen from 30.8% to 35.0%; and the mean literacy score for all Year 7 students has risen from 88.1 to 89.0.

This is a story of NSW improvement, not decline, over the past decade. But the data reminds us that we can never relax our vigilance in continuously improving the literacy skills of all our students. Which is exactly what is happening in NSW schools.

*Dr Paul Brock is the Director of Learning and Development Research in the NSW Department of Education and Training, and Adjunct Professor in the Faculty of Education and Social Work, University of Sydney.*