

MIND THE GAP

By TOM GANNON

THE Hazelwood Health Study has found the 2014 Hazelwood Mine fire had a significant impact on school aged children in the area at the time.

The study's research used NAPLAN data from Morwell school students in years 3, 5, 7 and 9 to determine the impact the mine fire had on academic

results at the time and in the years following the fire.

The mine fire was recognised as one of the most significant air quality incidents in Victoria's history.

The study found that in the year following the mine fire, major academic interruptions across all NAPLAN domains were evident in the highly

exposed Morwell schools, compared to the Victorian regional average.

This evidence equated to a three to four month gap in educational attainment.

Research shows that Morwell students had their educational progress significantly impacted four to five years after the fire.

Hazelwood Health Study co-principal investigator Dr Matthew Carroll said

this gap appeared to be returning to normal seven years later.

"The trajectory we got from the study shows us that in general, the results of those students most effected have been coming back to where they would've been and the issues highlighted by the study are correcting themselves," he said.

Continued on page 4

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Continued from page 1

However, the study was hindered due to its research method which, because of a lack of adequate sample size, meant that researchers were forced to test Morwell students' NAPLAN scores against aggregate scores across rural Victoria. This meant that researchers weren't able to use anecdotal evidence from impacted students to understand why there was a gap in educational attainment, but only that it had occurred.

"While it's the best way you generally can't get the numbers to get strong results," he said.

"It's incredibly challenging to go out and get approvals from the school and the parents to get to the student which forced us to use aggregate data."

Dr Carroll said that ultimately the study reminds us of the scale of the mine fire and provides the message that the impacts of such an event can carry on well in to the future.

"The primary point of the study is to show how big of an impact these sorts of disasters can have on many different facets of a community," he said.

"This reminds us that the mine fire really was a major event and tells us the effects can be long lasting, which is something in the past people wouldn't have had a sense of being a main point of concern."

A second round of clinical testing is now underway in the Valley, looking in to the health impacts of the Hazelwood mine fire on very young children.

Dr Carroll urged families who completed the Early Life Follow-up (ELF) survey in 2016 to re-book by emailing latrobe.elf@utas.edu.au.