Response to the NSRA consultation paper
Review to Inform a Better and Fairer Education System

Dr Jennifer Buckingham | MultiLit Pty Ltd

AUGUST 2023

MultiLit

About MultiLit

MultiLit is a leading provider of effective literacy instruction, intervention and positive teaching and learning in Australasia. Our evidence-based work is grounded in extensive research and expertise in the science of reading and learning, ensuring our programs deliver results with impact for the students and schools we work with.

Originating at Macquarie University, MultiLit has been providing effective literacy programs for over 25 years. We currently work with over 6,000 Australian schools, and train more than 9,000 teachers each year, as well as provide our Australian-developed programs and resources to schools all over the world. Our highly regarded professional development (PD) workshops provide the skills, knowledge and resources to support the effective implementation of all our programs.

MultiLit's work is guided by the MultiLit Research Unit, led by Emeritus Professor Kevin Wheldall AM and Dr Robyn Wheldall. In total, MultiLit employs nine staff with doctorates, and many more staff (we employ approximately 150 staff in total) with relevant masters degrees (e.g., linguistics, speech pathology and special education) and relevant postgraduate specialist diplomas or certificates (e.g., learning difficulties, linguistics and literacy). Combined, these staff comprise experts in the field of reading and related skills, instructional science and behaviour management, many of whom are published widely in academic research journals. A large proportion of MultiLit's people have been teachers or leaders in schools or school systems in Australia and overseas.

MultiLit has a number of community education activities including the Five from Five project which provides free professional learning and teaching resources in effective evidence-based reading instruction for teachers, parents and the community, and publishes a free periodical on reading research and related education issues called *Nomanis*. MultiLit staff are involved in professional organisations including Learning Difficulties Australia, as well as the researchED and Sharing Best Practice networks.

As an organisation that has been working closely with Australian schools and school systems for more than 25 years to improve student outcomes, MultiLit welcomes the opportunity to contribute to this important review of schools policy.

This submission will focus on three priority areas for a new National School Reform Agreement (NSRA) identified in the consultation paper *Review to Inform a Better and Fairer Education System*.

1. Improving student outcomes (Chapter 2)
2. Our current and future teachers (Chapter 4)
3. Collecting data to inform decision-making (Chapter 5)

The submission makes four key points:

- ▸ Demonstrated approaches to improving student outcomes using Response to Intervention (RTI)/Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS) currently being used in Australian schools can be emulated quickly and effectively.

- ▸ High-quality existing resources and established organisations with capacity to upscale already exist – there is little need for duplication and potential dilution.

- ▸ Current and future teachers need to be better trained with up-to-date evidence-based teaching methods and resources in order to be effective in classrooms and to reduce workload.

- ▸ Government and other school systems should make it easier to conduct research studies in schools so that evidence can inform practice in the long term.

Improving student outcomes – including for students most at risk of falling behind

What are the most important student outcomes for Australian school students that should be measured in the next NSRA? Should these go beyond academic performance (for example, attendance and engagement)?

Teaching academic skills and knowledge is the prime purpose of schools but it is difficult to separate school education outcomes into entirely distinct categories. Schools are like ecosystems – all the elements are interdependent and a change in one aspect will lead to changes in others. Student academic achievement is linked to attendance, engagement, behaviour and wellbeing (which are all linked to each other). These, in turn, are linked to teacher wellbeing and effectiveness, which have an effect on student academic achievement, and so on. Tracking changes in outcomes is important so we can understand how they interact and what practices influence them.

Some outcomes are easier to measure than others. Student attendance is relatively straightforward to measure, and behaviour can be measured too, but engagement and wellbeing are more subjective. Just because a child appears to be paying attention and participating does not necessarily mean they are truly on-task or learning what is intended. Wellbeing is even more difficult to define. Arguably, attempts to measure and set targets for wellbeing will lead to the perception that schools are responsible for it, which is often beyond their capacity. Schools are a critical point of contact for student wellbeing and welfare and are well placed to identify students in need of support and refer them to allied professionals but, beyond that, their main duty is to provide a high-quality education. Poor academic performance contributes to students' sense of belonging and self-efficacy, and this is where schools and school systems can make their greatest impact and for which they should be responsible.

Australia has a set of low stakes but potentially high yield mandatory national assessments which give an indicator of student, school and system performance in the fundamental

academic skills of literacy and numeracy in Years 3, 5, 7 & 9 – the National Assessment Program for Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN). Three states (South Australia, New South Wales and Tasmania) have introduced the Year 1 Phonics Screening Check as an additional standardised systemic assessment to determine whether students are making adequate progress in the critical early literacy skill of phonic decoding. These states and others have universal on-entry assessments when students begin school.

The National Assessment Program also has sample assessments in science literacy, information and communication technology (ICT) literacy, and civics and citizenship. These assessments are for students in Years 6 and 10 and are typically administered on a three-yearly cycle. The most recent assessments for each domain were science in 2018, ICT in 2017, and civics and citizenship in 2019. All states and territories have samples of students who participate in international assessments – Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) in Year 4 on a five-year cycle, Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) in Years 4 and 8 on a five-year cycle, and Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) for reading, mathematical and scientific literacy in Year 9 on a three-year cycle.

Thousands of schools also use the ACER Progressive Achievement Tests (PAT) at least once a year, as well as a wide range of other standardised and non-standardised assessments. The Year 1 Phonics Check Online, funded by the Australian Government, is being used by many schools outside the states that administer it as a systemic assessment.

✓ The Year 1 Phonics Screening Check should be added to NAPLAN

All states and territories should be using the Year 1 Phonics Screening Check and it should become part of NAPLAN. This assessment would provide the necessary data to establish a systemic evidence-based early intervention plan in a whole school Response to Intervention approach (see below). The phonics assessments administered in Western Australia and Victoria do not provide enough consistency, validity or reliability to be used for this purpose. Without a systemic early literacy assessment, many students are not identified as struggling readers until Year 3, by which time there are large gaps in student achievement that are more difficult to remediate than if they had been identified in Year 1.

The UK Government made the Year 1 Phonics Screening Check mandatory in English schools in 2012. There is good evidence suggesting that the Phonics Screening Check played a significant role in England's improved performance in the most recent PIRLS assessment.[1]

An early numeracy assessment would also be useful. Mathematics Hub, funded by the Australian Government, has a 'Number Check' assessment that should be explored more fully to determine its validity and reliability, and fitness for purpose as a systemic assessment.

The Year 1 Phonics Screening Check results should not be published on My School but there should be state-level targets, and the state-level results should be published by the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) annually.

---

1   Stainthorp, R. (2020). A national intervention in teaching phonics: A case study from England. *Educational Developmental Psychologist, 37*(2), 114–122. https://doi.org/10.1017/edp.2020.14

What are the evidence-based practices that teachers, schools, systems and sectors can put in place to improve student outcomes, particularly for those most at risk of falling behind? Are different approaches required for different at-risk cohorts?

How can all students at risk of falling behind be identified early on to enable swift learning interventions?

✅ All teachers should know how and when to use explicit instruction and all students should have access to a knowledge-rich curriculum

Explicit and systematic instruction and knowledge-rich curricula are beneficial for all students but are arguably especially important for students in equity cohorts. There is no need for different programs in type or substance for different cohorts of students.

In terms of teaching strategies – children have more in common in the way they learn than difference. Some students may need adjustments to pace and intensity, but all respond to evidence-based instruction.

Likewise, a knowledge-rich curriculum is beneficial for all students. It is an important element of reading comprehension, but knowledge of the world and its people and cultures is also valuable in its own right. The systematic building of knowledge has been a neglected element of curriculum development due to the adoption of inquiry-based learning and the embracing of '21st Century Skills' in which the teaching of facts and concepts was side-lined.

The importance of knowledge and a knowledge-building curriculum has been described by numerous researchers in Australia and internationally.[2] The Australian Curriculum cannot be described as a knowledge-building curriculum but it can be used as a blue-print to implement one. There are no fully developed Australian knowledge-building curricula as yet but there are a number in the US that can be adapted to Australian contexts.[3] Such an adaptation is in process in at least one unofficial network of schools.[4]

High-quality curricula are important for all students but are especially critical for students from disadvantaged backgrounds. As Ben Jensen recently stated, "Students get knowledge in school through the curriculum. A high-quality, content-rich curriculum builds deep knowledge in a clear and sequenced manner. It enables students to comprehend increasingly complex texts. In so doing, it can significantly reduce the impact of differences in socio-economic background. A low-quality curriculum, by contrast, prevents poorer students from building the knowledge that will enable them to bridge the inequality gap."[5]

2   Steiner, D., Magee, J., & Jensen, B. (2018). *What we teach matters: How quality curriculum improves student outcomes*. Johns Hopkins Institute for Education Policy and Learning First; Smith, R., Snow, P., Serry, T., & Hammond, L. (2021). The role of background knowledge in reading comprehension: A critical review. *Reading Psychology, 42*(3), 214–240. https://doi.org/10.1080/02702711.2021.1888348; Willingham, D. (2006). How knowledge helps. https://www.aft.org/ae/spring2006/willingham

3   For example: Core Knowledge Curriculum https://www.coreknowledge.org/free-resource/core-knowledge-sequence/ and Wit & Wisdom https://greatminds.org/english/witwisdom

4   Read2Learn at Brandon Park Primary School in Victoria https://thinkforwardeducators.org/read2learn

5   Jensen, B. (2023, July 29). Curriculum research shows when schools don't have a high-quality, content-rich curriculum, inequality increases in exactly the way it has occurred in Australia. *The Australian*. https://www.theaustralian.com.au/inquirer/curriculum-research-shows-when-schools-dont-have-a-highquality-contentrich-curriculum-inequality-increases-in-exactly-the-way-it-has-occurred-in-australia/news-story/1e17eb921e062ef215dbc8b7766507b9

✅ A Response to Intervention/Multi-tiered Systems of Support approach will help all children to succeed

The Response to Intervention (RTI) model (also known as Multi-tiered Systems of Support or MTSS) is an efficient, evidence-based approach to achieving improved outcomes for all students.[6] An RTI model typically involves three levels or 'tiers' of instruction and intervention. Tier 1 is whole class instruction using high-quality curricula and pedagogy. Student learning is monitored regularly using appropriate assessments. Tier 2 is small group intervention for students who have been identified in the assessments as not making good progress and who need extra support. The Tier 2 intervention will be closely aligned with Tier 1 but will be targeted more to students' learning needs. Students' learning progress will be monitored even more frequently and adjusted accordingly. Tier 3 intervention is an individualised program of instruction for students who do not respond to the Tier 2 program and will be informed by specialist diagnostic assessments.
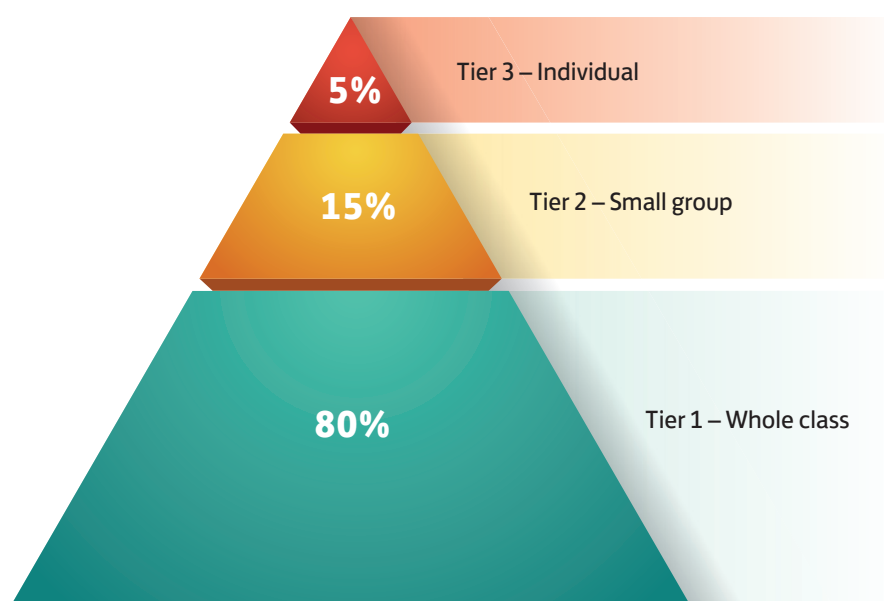

Figure 1. The three-tiered Response to Intervention model[7]

The RTI model is based on a 'non-categorical' approach to intervention in which students are provided with the appropriate effective learning support irrespective of a diagnosis of a learning difficulty or disability. The premises of this approach are (a) that all students who are not making good progress in any area of the curriculum are entitled to support and (b) the type of intervention is determined by the instructional need rather than the cause – struggling readers need an evidence-based reading intervention that targets the relevant subskills, no matter what the reason for their difficulties.

For this reason, an RTI model that is predicated on evidence-based effective instruction is universally applicable. It is a student-centred approach that is intentionally focused on instructional need and therefore can be implemented for all students, including those in the

---

6   Response to Intervention is sometimes referred to as Multi-Tiered Systems of Support; however, the latter term is used in many different ways whereas Response to Intervention is more specified and is well understood. Madelaine, A., & Wheldall, K. (2019). What is Response to Intervention? *Nomanis Notes*. MultiLit. https://www.nomanis.com.au/nomanis-notes

7   Wheldall, K., Wheldall, R., & Buckingham, J. (2023). *Effective instruction in reading and spelling*. MRU Press.

identified equity cohorts. Importantly, it addresses two of the Productivity Commission's (2022) findings: a large proportion of students (approximately 80%) who were below the National Minimum Standard in Year 3 were at or below the National Minimum Standard in Year 5; and, many of these students were not in an equity cohort.[8] Such students are often referred to in reading research literature as 'instructional casualties' – they had no identified impediments to learning to read and would have learned if they had been given effective, evidence-based instruction.

There is widespread and growing support for the RTI approach for improving student outcomes. An expert panel appointed to advise the Tasmanian Government on the steps and strategies required to achieve the goal of 100% literacy recommended the implementation of an MTSS/RTI approach:

> "D) All students are taught the same concepts through a structured approach to teaching literacy utilising a multi-tiered system of support that recognises that some will require more time on the content/strategies to acquire the necessary skill. Tier 1 instruction should be aligned to the science of reading evidence base and supported by accredited professional development.
>
> E) Decisions about the level of support required for students who are not meeting expected progress in literacy will be based on robust curriculum-based assessment data. Learners in need of additional support beyond Tier 1 instruction will receive Tier 2 and Tier 3 interventions, with the goal to return the student to Tier 1 instruction as soon as possible. Regular assessments and progress monitoring using evidence-based practices should be used to determine which students receive Tier 2 and 3 interventions."[9]

With careful implementation of an RTI model, the number of students who do not achieve a good level of literacy will decrease over time. Students who fall behind in class are identified quickly and given effective intervention for as long as it is required. The small proportion of students who require more intensive support are also identified before learning gaps become entrenched and the associated negative impacts affect their wellbeing.[10] This model is both pedagogically and cost effective. Consequently, schools' human and financial resources can be devoted to the students who most need them.

By using *evidence-based instruction, assessments and intervention in an RTI model*, more students will be on track and fewer students will fall through the cracks.

8   Productivity Commission (2022, September). *Review of the National School Reform Agreement: Interim report*. Productivity Commission.
9   Literacy Advisory Panel (2023, May). Final report to government: Lifting literacy. https://www.dpac.tas.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0027/297711/Final-Report-to-Government-Literacy-Advisory-Panel.pdf
10 De Bruin, K., Kestel, E., Francis, M., Forgasz, H., & Fries, R. (2023). *Supporting students significantly behind in literacy and numeracy*. Australian Education Research Organisation. https://www.edresearch.edu.au/resources/supporting-students-significantly-behind-literacy-and-numeracy

✅ Response to Intervention in action: MultiLit

For over twenty-five years, MultiLit has been producing evidence-based reading programs for instruction and intervention, as well as standardised assessments, designed to be implemented in a RTI model in Australian schools. The suite of MultiLit programs includes:

Tier 1: *InitiaLit F–2* is a three-year series of whole class instruction in the five 'keys' to reading using explicit and systematic teaching methods.

Tier 2: *MiniLit Sage* is a small group reading intervention focusing on accurate and fluent decoding and word reading for students in Year 1 and 2.
LanguageLift is a small group reading intervention focusing on oral language development for students in Foundation to Year 2.
MacqLit is a small group reading intervention that includes phonics for reading and spelling, fluency, vocabulary and comprehension for students in Year 3 and up.

Tier 3: *Reading Tutor Program* is a one-to-one reading intervention that includes phonics for reading and spelling, fluency, vocabulary and comprehension for students in Year 3 and up.

MultiLit programs take at least five years to develop before publication. They are genuinely evidence-based in that their content and design are informed by scientific reading research, but they also undergo a rigorous research protocol involving field trials, pilots and randomised control trials in schools using standardised assessments and quantitative analysis. Independent reports on the programs by respected researchers have concluded that they have strong evidence of efficacy.[11] Few, if any, programs or resources used in Australian schools meet both these criteria, whether they are provided by the private sector or by government.

Many individual schools around Australia have chosen to use one or more MultiLit programs. The results they achieve depend on two factors in particular: whether the programs are being taught with fidelity and frequently (at least four times a week), and whether they are used within the tiers of instruction, assessment and intervention in the RTI model.

Example 1: Yates Avenue Public School

Yates Avenue Public School is in Dundas Valley, northwest of Sydney. In 2018, two-thirds of Year 1 students were assessed as needing reading intervention and the school began implementing the MiniLit (Tier 2) intervention program. They realised that the reason so many students needed intervention in Year 1 was because instruction in Foundation was not effective. So, in the same year, the school also began teaching the InitiaLit (Tier 1) program in Foundation. In 2019, InitiaLit was extended to Year 1 and by 2020, InitiaLit was being taught in Foundation, Year 1 and Year 2. In 2021, after the school had been implementing the InitiaLit program for three years, no student required the MiniLit reading intervention. Post-COVID lockdowns, in 2022 and 2023, only 8–10% of students required the MiniLit reading intervention. This is a strong demonstration of the Response to Intervention model, where highly effective Tier 1 instruction dramatically reduced the proportion of struggling readers.

---

11 Quach, J., Goldfeld, S., Clinton, J., & Serry, T. (2019, August 25). Finding the fundamentals of reading. *Pursuit*. University of Melbourne; de Bruin, K. (2021). *Tier 2 literacy interventions in Australian schools: A review of the evidence v.2.0*. Catholic Education Melbourne.
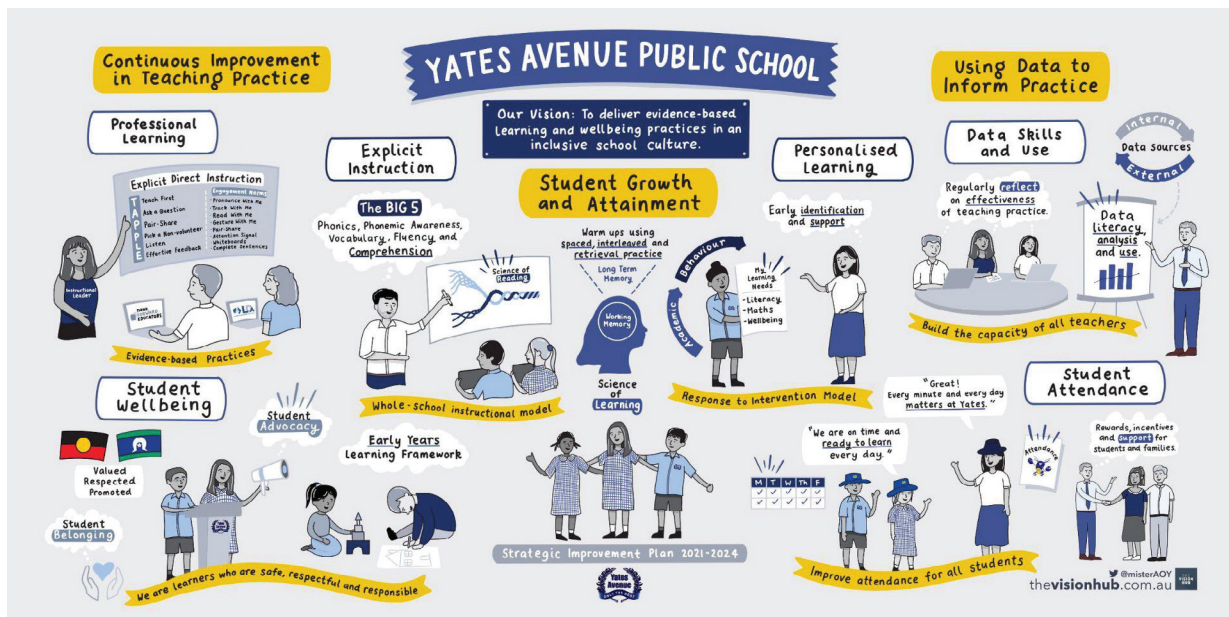
Results from the Year 1 Phonics Screening Check in Table 1 show that students at Yates Avenue Public School have improved and are achieving strong results. In this assessment, the maximum score is 40 and the expected minimum score is 28.

Table 1. Yates Avenue Public School Year 1 Phonics Screening Check results, 2020–2022*

	2020	2021	2022*
NSW average score	23	27	26
Yates Avenue average score	30	38	32
NSW % at/above benchmark	43	57	55
Yates Avenue % at/above benchmark	71	94	80

*2022 test window was half a term earlier than 2021

Year 3 NAPLAN results confirm this improvement over the period in which the Response to Intervention model using MultiLit reading programs, Spelling Mastery and Explicit Direct Instruction was implemented. Yates Avenue made substantial growth over a period when there was no change in the state average. Yates Avenue's mean reading scores went from below the state average to equivalent to the state average. Similar or greater growth was achieved for the other NAPLAN domains.

Table 2. Yates Avenue Public School NAPLAN Reading, Year 3 and Year 5 mean scores, 2018 & 2022

	2018	2022	Growth
Yates Avenue Year 3 Reading score	396	434	+38
State average Year 3 Reading score	437	438	+1
Yates Avenue Year 5 Reading score	435	498	+63
State average Year 5 Reading score	511	510	-1

NAPLAN 2023 statistics are not comparable with previous years and national and state level results for 2023 NAPLAN assessments have not yet been published. Nonetheless, Yates Avenue Public School's results appear to be very impressive. There were no students who were assessed as 'needs additional support' in any of the literacy domains and the majority of students were in the top two achievement levels.

Table 3. Yates Avenue Public School NAPLAN Reading, Year 3 and Year 5 combined in each achievement band, 2023

	Reading	Writing	Grammar & Punctuation	Spelling
Exceeding	17%	0%	13%	38%
Strong	53%	100%	67%	46%
Developing	30%	0%	20%	16%
Needs additional support	0%	0%	0%	0%

Source: Graphic and data provided by Yates Avenue Public School

Example 2: Upwey South Primary School

Upwey South Primary School is in the Dandenong Ranges area of Victoria. The school began implementing InitiaLit in 2019 and uses MultiLit programs for intervention. The improvement in NAPLAN results over this period demonstrates the effectiveness of the schools' Response to Intervention approach.

The Year 3 achievement growth from 2017 to 2022 among students at the school was 10 to 20 times greater than the state average growth (Table 4). There are very few students if any in the lowest two achievement bands in Year 3 (Table 5). The proportion of students in the top two achievement bands in Year 3 in 2022 was substantially higher in the school than similar schools or the state average (Table 6).

Table 4. Upwey South Primary School NAPLAN Reading, Writing, and Spelling mean scores, 2017 & 2022

	2017	2022	Growth
Upwey South PS Year 3 Reading score	420	490	+70
State average Year 3 Reading score	446	454	+8
Upwey South PS Year 3 Writing score	407	455	+48
State average Year 3 Writing score	428	430	+2
Upwey South Year 3 Spelling score	395	463	+68
State average Year 3 Spelling score	423	426	+3

Table 5. Upwey South Primary School NAPLAN Year 3 Reading, Writing and Spelling, 2022

	Reading	Writing	Spelling	Grammar & Punctuation
Top 2 bands	81%	76%	64%	79%
Middle 2 bands	16%	24%	36%	18%
Bottom 2 bands	3%	0%	0%	3%

Table 6. Upwey South Primary School NAPLAN Year 3 Reading, students in Top 2 achievement bands, 2022

	Reading	Writing	Spelling	Grammar & Punctuation
Upwey South PS	81%	76%	64%	79%
Similar schools	63%	53%	46%	58%
State average	58%	51%	49%	54%

Source: Data provided by Upwey South Primary School

Example 3: Canberra Goulburn Catholic Education

Three systems of Catholic schools also began to implement an RTI model that includes MultiLit programs in the past three years. They are in various stages of implementation but the first – Catholic Education Canberra Goulburn – is already seeing results. A report by Equity Economics found that Catholic Schools in the ACT improved strongly over the period in which the RTI model had been in place. Table 7 shows that from 2019 to 2022, the number of students performing 'well below' or 'below' the average score for similar schools around Australia reduced significantly in Year 3 NAPLAN Reading, Writing and Spelling.[12] That this occurred during a period of upheaval due to COVID-19 lockdowns is notable. The results can't be explained by demographics – the Equity Economics data compares ACT Catholic schools with schools that have a similar socio-economic profile. Nor can they be explained by differences in the numbers of students with additional learning needs. According to Ross Fox, the Director of Catholic Education Canberra Goulburn, data from the Nationally Consistent Collection of Data on School Students with Disability (NCCD) showed his school system had 23.4% of students with additional needs while the average across Australia in 2022 was 22.4%.[13]

Table 7. Students in ACT Catholic Schools performing 'well below' or 'below' the national average for students in similar schools in Year 3 NAPLAN.

|	2019	2022
Reading	42%	4%
Spelling	71%	13%
Writing	71%	21%

Source: Equity Economics and Development Partners (2023)

---

12 Equity Economics and Development Partners (2023). *Raising the grade: How schools in the Australian Capital Territory can lift literacy outcomes for students and the economy.* https://www.equityeconomics.com.au/s/Raising-the-grade-How-schools-in-the-Australian-Capital-Territory-can-lift-literacy-outcomes-for-stu.pdf

13 Fox, R. (2023, July 15). Nothing superficial about scientific-base to effective teaching. *Pearls and irritations.* https://johnmenadue.com/nothing-superficial-about-scientific-base-to-effective-teaching/

Example 4: Closing the Gap in 42 Indigenous schools around Australia

In 2021, MultiLit began a Closing the Gap partnership with the Australian Government and is now working with 42 majority Indigenous schools, many of which are in the most remote areas of the country. This project involves the delivery of MultiLit programs in the RTI model. Tier 1 and Tier 2 programs are taught by teachers and education assistants. Tier 3 instruction is delivered through online tutoring with the MultiLit Literacy Centres. Remote and very remote schools were hit particularly hard by the immediate and ongoing effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, and the well-known existing challenges associated with remote schooling were amplified as a result. Nonetheless, schools that have been able to overcome these challenges to a sufficient extent to implement the programs, even if not always to 'textbook perfection', have been very positive about the changes they are seeing in student learning.
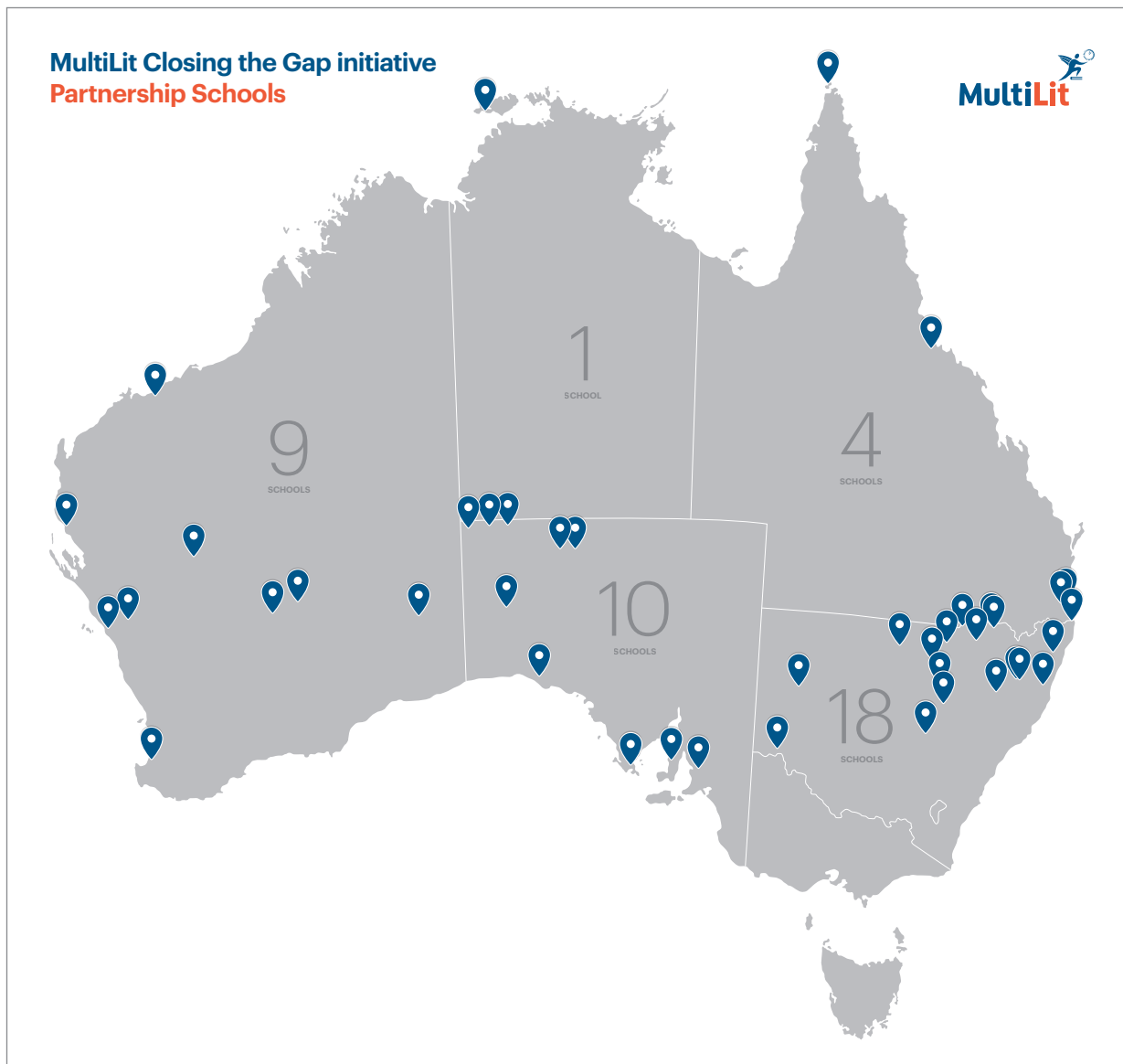
A teacher at Lincoln Gardens Primary School in South Australia said, "I like the way [the program] starts. It doesn't wait until students are in Year 4 or 5. You're starting in Reception and progressing to where they need to be by the end of the year or term, and it builds the kids' confidence. That's my main thing, that they leave the school ready for high school or wherever with that knowledge that they have gotten bit by bit, but it's worked for them."

✅ The *Reading Pledge* framework is a sound basis for a national Response to Intervention initiative

The *Primary Reading Pledge* report published in 2020 was informed by the RTI model. It was developed to address the problem of large-scale low literacy demonstrated in NAPLAN scores. Its contention is that very few students should leave primary school experiencing difficulties with reading and it sets out a clear, evidence-informed framework to achieve this goal.[14]

The framework recommends a systemic standardised assessment in Year 1, ideally the Year 1 Phonics Screening Check, so that reading difficulties can be identified early and appropriate interventions can be provided to all students who require them. Reading difficulties in the early years are most often the result of low word reading accuracy and fluency. These can be identified with a well-designed phonics check to assess decoding ability. High-quality phonics interventions are very effective, especially if provided at this critical stage in reading development.[15] As noted above, some Australian states have begun implementing the Year 1 Phonics Screening Check, namely South Australia, New South Wales and Tasmania. The Western Australian and Victorian governments have adopted non-standardised approaches that are of unknown quality. In contrast, the Year 1 Phonics Screening Check adopted from the UK, which is used in the other three states, has strong reliability.[16]

Almost all students do the NAPLAN tests and they are an under-utilised resource for improvement. NAPLAN reading assessments are tests of comprehension. They indicate that students have low reading performance but not why. There are two fundamental aspects of reading that can typically explain a student's low reading comprehension – word reading accuracy and language comprehension. That is, knowing what the words are and knowing what they mean. This is the well-established 'Simple View of Reading' which is a highly robust and predictive model, with these two factors accounting for 95%+ of variance in reading ability.[17]

Since the *Primary Reading Pledge* report was published, there have been some changes to NAPLAN reporting. However, the recommendations can be easily adapted to the new system. It can also be extended to secondary students. Figure 2 is an updated version of the framework.

---

14 Five from Five, AUSPELD & Learning Difficulties Australia (2020). *Primary Reading Pledge.* MultiLit. https://fivefromfive.com.au/primary-reading-pledge/

15 Gersten, R., Haymond, K., Newman-Gonchar, R., Dimino, J., & Jayanthi, M. (2020). Meta-analysis of the impact of reading interventions for students in the primary grades. *Journal of Research on Educational Effectiveness, 13*(2), 401–427. https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/19345747.2019.1689591; Wanzek, J., Stevens, E. A., Williams, K. J., Scammacca, N., Vaughn., S., & Sargent, K. (2018). Current evidence on the effects of early reading interventions. *Journal of Learning Disabilities, 51*(6), 612–624.

16 UK Department for Education Standards and Testing Agency. (2012). Year 1 phonics screening check: pilot 2011 technical report. https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/368290/phonics_2011_technical_report.pdf

17 Gough, P. B., & Tunmer, W. E. (1986). Decoding, reading, and reading disability. *Remedial and Special Education, 7*(1), 6–10. https://doi-org.simsrad.net.ocs.mq.edu.au/10.1177%2F074193258600700104; Hjetland, H. N., Lervåg, A., Lyster, S.-A. H., Hagtvet, B. E., Hulme, C., & Melby- Lervåg, M. (2019). Pathways to reading comprehension: A longitudinal study from 4 to 9 years of age. *Journal of Educational Psychology, 11*(5), 751–763. http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/edu0000321; Sleeman, M., Everatt, J., Arrow, A., & Denston, A. (2022). The identification and classification of struggling readers based on the simple view of reading. *Dyslexia, 28*(3), 256–275. https://doi.org/10.1002/dys.1719
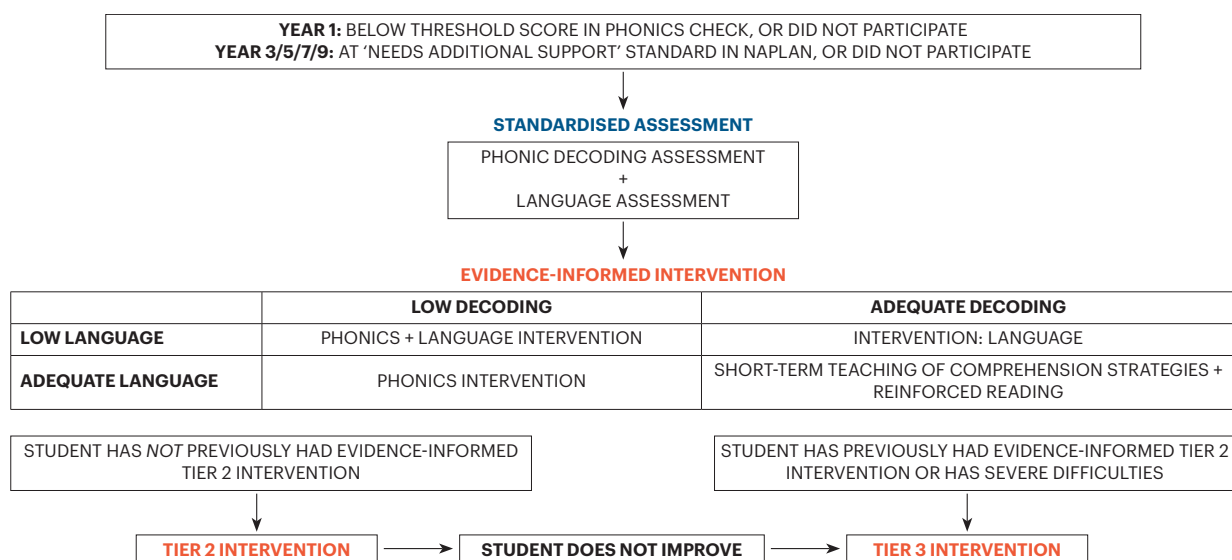
	LOW DECODING	ADEQUATE DECODING
YEAR 1: BELOW THRESHOLD SCORE IN PHONICS CHECK, OR DID NOT PARTICIPATE **YEAR 3/5/7/9:** AT 'NEEDS ADDITIONAL SUPPORT' STANDARD IN NAPLAN, OR DID NOT PARTICIPATE		

STANDARDISED ASSESSMENT

PHONIC DECODING ASSESSMENT
+
LANGUAGE ASSESSMENT

EVIDENCE-INFORMED INTERVENTION

	LOW DECODING	ADEQUATE DECODING
LOW LANGUAGE	PHONICS + LANGUAGE INTERVENTION	INTERVENTION: LANGUAGE
ADEQUATE LANGUAGE	PHONICS INTERVENTION	SHORT-TERM TEACHING OF COMPREHENSION STRATEGIES + REINFORCED READING

STUDENT HAS *NOT* PREVIOUSLY HAD EVIDENCE-INFORMED TIER 2 INTERVENTION	STUDENT HAS PREVIOUSLY HAD EVIDENCE-INFORMED TIER 2 INTERVENTION OR HAS SEVERE DIFFICULTIES

TIER 2 INTERVENTION → **STUDENT DOES NOT IMPROVE** → **TIER 3 INTERVENTION**

Figure 2. Framework for reading intervention using a Response to Intervention model

All students whose scores are in the band designated as 'Needs additional support' in reading each year should be given screening assessments for phonic decoding (word reading accuracy) and language comprehension to determine which of these sub-skills requires support through intervention. The *Primary Reading Pledge* document provides lists of valid and reliable assessments and evidence-based interventions, many of which are free or low cost.

Schools that provide high-quality whole class initial reading instruction, identify struggling readers early and intervene effectively, see dramatic reductions in the number of students who need reading intervention in the upper primary years. This has positive consequences for students and for school resourcing. The framework outlined in the *Primary Reading Pledge* would lend itself to a national policy initiative. It is applicable at both a school and system level.

Our current and future teachers

> **What change(s) would attract more students into the teaching profession?**
> **What change(s) would support teachers to remain in the profession?**
> **What change(s) would support qualified teachers to return to the profession?**
> **What additional reforms are needed to ensure that the schools most in need can support and retain highly effective teachers?**
> **What can be done to attract more First Nations teachers? What can be done to improve the retention of First Nations teachers?**

The consultation paper appropriately includes a focus on ensuring that students are taught by well-qualified teachers. Student learning is highly contingent on teaching quality, which in turn is contingent on teachers being well prepared and well supported as professionals.

There is a quantity element – there needs to be sufficient teachers to be able to provide consistency in classrooms and so that students receive the attention they need. Numerous

initiatives are taking place around the country to attempt to attract, retain and return teachers to the profession. Typically, however, incentive-based initiatives have limited success.

The problems of attracting and retaining teachers are linked. The factors that deter people from becoming teachers are the same as the factors that cause people to leave teaching. One factor is a salary scale that begins at a competitive level to other graduate salaries but quickly hits a ceiling in the public and Catholic school systems. Another factor is working conditions. The physical working conditions in many schools would not be considered acceptable in most professional jobs. In addition, there is the poor behaviour of students, ranging from disrespectful to violent, and the lack of support for teachers in behaviour management (currently being investigated in a Senate Inquiry). The expectations on teachers are more demanding, leading to increases in workload. Together, these factors make teaching unappealing for many people.

Australia has one of the worst 'disciplinary climates' in the OECD as measured by student reports. Australia had a negative disciplinary climate in a survey conducted as part of the 2018 Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), ranking 70/77 where 77 was the country with the worst disciplinary climate.[18]

On average, approximately:

- one-fifth of Australian students reported that students cannot work well
- one-quarter reported that students don't start working for a long time after the lesson begins
- one-third reported that the teacher has to wait a long time for students to quieten down
- one-third reported that students don't listen to what the teacher says
- almost one-half of Australian students reported that there is noise and disorder in most English classes.[19]

In all countries, disciplinary climate was positively related to reading performance. In Australia, a one unit increase in disciplinary climate was associated with an 18-point increase in reading scores. This is the equivalent of approximately 6 months of schooling. If Australia's mean score had been 18 points higher in 2018 it would have been ranked 6th in PISA for reading instead of 16th.

Several recent surveys of teachers have found that student behaviour is a strong contributor to people leaving the teaching profession. The Australian Teacher Workforce Data survey found that 'classroom factors' which include student behaviour was the third highest factor among the reasons cited for intentions to leave teaching. In 2022, 60% cited classroom factors compared to 47% in 2018.[20] A 2021 survey of 570 Australian teachers conducted by the NEiTA

18 Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) (2020). *PISA 2018 results volume III: What school life means for students' lives*. OECD Publishing. https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/education/index-of-disciplinary-climate-by-school-characteristics_b7d3d683-en

19 Thomson, S., De Bortoli, L., Underwood, C., & Schmid, M. (2020). PISA 2018: *Reporting Australia's results. Volume II student and school characteristics*. Australian Council for Educational Research. https://research.acer.edu.au/ozpisa/49/

20 Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (2023). Australian teacher workforce data. https://www.aitsl.edu.au/research/australian-teacher-workforce-data

Foundation and the Australian College of Educators (ACE) states that: "Behaviour management was frequently nominated by teachers as the greatest challenge they face."[21] This problem has been documented for at least the past 20 years with attrition rates rising further following the COVID-19 pandemic.[22]

✅ Teachers need to be well prepared with evidence-based teaching and behaviour management methods to meet the challenges of classrooms

One further factor that is rarely considered in the context of teacher workforce and workload strategies is teacher education. Numerous studies have shown that graduate teachers do not feel well-prepared to enter the classroom. While it is unrealistic to expect that graduate teachers will be instant experts, it is not unrealistic to expect that they will have learned the fundamentals of effective teaching methods that will make them more confident and more successful in the classroom, and therefore more able to cope with the challenges.

The evidence-based teaching methods described above not only lead to improvements in learning, but also better student behaviour, which reinforce each other. Explicit instruction is fast paced, interactive and engages all students in the learning task. Students are less likely to be distracted and more likely to be working at the right level, leading to a sense of success, which in turn motivates them to participate in their learning.

For teachers, the benefits of explicit and systematic instruction are more focused students who know what to expect and who respond accordingly. Explicit and systematic instruction brings greater structure to lesson planning. Not all behaviour can be addressed through explicit teaching methods, but there are specific classroom management techniques that are based on scientific research that all teachers should know and that all schools should support.

MultiLit's submission to the Senate Education and Employment References Committee inquiry into disruption in Australian school classrooms makes several specific recommendations, including:

- ▸ Schools should implement a Response to Intervention framework focusing heavily on the effective implementation of Tier 1 (i.e., universal) support in order to increase the capacity of teachers to support students at Tier 2 and 3. Effective Tier 1 practices will reduce the number of students requiring Tier 2 and 3 support.

- ▸ Teachers require training in explicit instruction in Tier 1 strategies including (but not limited to) the Positive Teaching approach, function-based approaches, effective instruction and proactive classroom support.

- ▸ School-wide approaches should also focus on teaching all students contextually appropriate behaviours that support engagement, participation and learning as an integral component of their behaviour support policies and practices.[23]

21 NEiTA Foundation. (2021). *NEiTA-ACE Teachers Report Card 2021* (p.16). https://www.neita.com/post/neita-ace-teachers-report-card-2021-launched-on-world-teachers-day

22 Longmuir, F., Gallo Cordoba, B., Phillips, M., Allen, K.A., & Moharami, M. (2022). A*ustralian teachers' perceptions of their work in 2022*. Monash University. https://www.monash.edu/__data/assets/pdf_file/0008/3061169/Teachers-Perceptions-of-their-Work-2022.pdf

23 Parliament of Australia. https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/Senate/Education_and_Employment/DASC/Submissions

Strong Beginnings: Report of the Teacher Education Expert Panel (hereafter, the TEEP report) included recommendations to bring more evidence-based content into initial teacher education courses.

A new NSRA should include a commitment in all jurisdictions to implement the recommendations of the TEEP report. For the providers of initial teacher education that already include most or all of the TEEP's mandatory core content, this will be a relatively smooth adjustment. For those that do not, they would have professional responsibility as well as a regulatory requirement to provide this information to teachers.

These new requirements for initial teacher education (ITE) have implications for the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers. A revision of these standards should bring them into alignment with the ITE core content and the evidence-based practice guides published by the Australian Educational Research Organisation (AERO).

With respect to attracting and retaining First Nations teachers, these teachers need to be prepared to teach the Australian Curriculum using evidence-based practices. Aboriginal educators in remote schools are under-utilised often because they are undertrained. They are not always offered the opportunity to participate in the same professional learning as teachers, but they are just as likely to benefit from it. As part of the MultiLit Closing the Gap project, all staff working with students to learn to read participate in the MultiLit training and are encouraged to undertake professional development. These people stay in the community when teachers come and go.

> **Are there examples of resources, such as curriculum materials, being used to improve teacher workload or streamline their administrative tasks?**
>
> **How should digital technology be used to support education delivery, reduce teacher workload and improve teacher effectiveness? What examples are you aware of?**

✓ Support teachers to use the quality materials and resources already available rather than duplicating effort

Digital technologies have given teachers access to a growing array of curriculum materials and teaching resources from government education departments and agencies as well as from private not-for-profit and commercial organisations. The quality of these materials and resources is variable and whether this abundance has increased or alleviated teacher workloads is debatable. Given the documented weaknesses in initial teacher education, and the heavy demands on teacher time, it seems likely that many teachers would find it difficult to make efficient and accurate judgements about which resources and materials will be effective for student learning. Furthermore, lessons that are created by someone else means that teachers often do not have buy-in. If the content of these pre-made lessons includes difficult content, there is a danger of the teacher having insufficient additional knowledge with which to expand, answer questions confidently and so on. For pre-prepared lessons to be delivered effectively, with maximum student engagement, teachers need to be explicitly trained and supported in their delivery.

The most common resources available and used by teachers are reading programs, particularly phonics programs. Part of the reason for the proliferation of phonics programs is because preparation to teach phonics using evidence-based methods has been lacking in initial teacher education. For a long time, systematic and explicit instruction in phonics was not supported by education departments and therefore there were no effective resources or professional learning opportunities. Publishers and individuals created programs to fill a gap that many schools had identified in their literacy lessons. However, even within the category of phonics programs there is a range of quality; there are a number of evidence-informed programs but also some that are misguided and less effective. This is especially true for apps and web-based programs that students engage with independently. Few have been subjected to experimental efficacy studies.[24]

Nonetheless there are some examples of curated and quality assured resources and materials based on good evidence. Some have evidence of efficacy through experimental trials (e.g., MultiLit programs) while others have either been developed or have been through quality assurance processes by people with expertise and sound knowledge of evidence-based practices. Ochre Education is an example of this. It provides a bank of online teaching resources that reduces the need for teachers to develop new content and teaching plans for every lesson. The creators of the Ochre Education project are knowledgeable about evidence-based practices and are working in partnership with AERO, so there is a high level of confidence about their quality; however, as yet they have not been tested for efficacy. The resources have been well received by teachers and are being widely used in schools, so an evaluation should be part of the future planning for this organisation.

In addition, there are several well-established professional development and coaching programs with strong support in schools, such as the EDvance and Teach Well programs.

The existence and success of these programs is arguably because they have emerged from the non-government sector. There is a temptation for governments to replicate these programs and resources but often they are inferior or due to instability of funding and priorities, can be short-term. This also leads to unnecessary duplication of resources and crowding out of providers that are already doing good work. Governments can learn from and support non-government providers, but it is counterproductive to compete with and undermine them. A better approach would be to develop a transparent process to endorse a selection of high-quality evidence-based programs, resources and materials to guide schools in their choices. Access to well-designed resources can also help to reduce workload.

The Literacy Hub is an example of an effective Australian Government initiative that may not be available for teachers in the long-term because it was only funded for four years. The Literacy Hub has high-quality resources for teachers and also hosts the Australian Government's Online Year 1 Phonics Check. Continued funding of this initiative is desirable; much of the content would be especially valuable if the Year 1 Phonics Screening Check was added to NAPLAN.

---

24 The Reading Doctor program has published research on its efficacy. Winn, T., Miller, J., & van Steenbrugge, W. (2020). The efficacy of a computer program for increasing phonemic awareness and decoding skills in a primary school setting for children with reading difficulties. *Australian Journal of Teacher Education, 45*(12), Article 1. http://dx.doi.org/10.14221/ajte.202v45n12.1

Collecting data to inform decision-making and boost student outcomes

What types of data are of most value to you and how accessible are these for you?

Is there any data not currently collected and reported on that is vital to understanding education in Australia? Why is this data important?

Is there a need to establish a report which tracks progress on the targets and reforms in the next NSRA? Should it report at a jurisdictional and a national level? What should be included in the report?

Is there data collected by schools, systems, sectors or jurisdictions that could be made more available to inform policy design and implementation? What systems would be necessary to make this data available safely and efficiently?

The Productivity Commission and AERO have identified the need for longidunal data to identify the actual students at risk of falling behind based on their performance (and not on equity groups alone) and to monitor these students' progress over time. Should this be the key data reform for the next NSRA?

Is there data being collected that is no longer required?

How could the national USI support improved outcomes for students?

✅ NAPLAN should be preserved and stabilised and Australian Teacher Workforce Data should have full commitment in the new NSRA.

✅ Continue participation in international assessments

Schools and systems collect reams of data every year. The questions are whether they are the right data for the purpose, and whether the data are being utilised to bring about improvements. With respect to the first question, many schools are using out-dated and time-consuming assessments that should be removed or replaced. Examples are Running Records and benchmarking assessments like PM and Fountas & Pinnell. Conducting these assessments eats into teachers' valuable time and does not provide reliable data. Prior to the implementation of a Response to Intervention framework, all systems should review the validity and reliability of the assessments that schools are required to use and make changes where necessary. Teachers often bemoan that too much time is taken up with assessing students. But if the purpose behind ongoing assessment is made clear, and teachers know what to do with the results, they will begin to see how beneficial it is and attitudes will change.

With respect to the second question about the use of data, the finding that the same students are identified by NAPLAN as needing support in successive years of testing, suggests that data are being collected but not acted upon. NAPLAN is constantly under attack and has undergone several reviews. In 2023, the shift to an online assessment resulted in a reset of the

scale scores, breaking the trend line so data from 2023 into the future will not be comparable to previous years. Nevertheless, NAPLAN is a valuable source of statistics about school and system performance and provides parents with objective information about their child's progress. It should be preserved in the new NSRA.

Data that is collected for the purposes of performance monitoring should be reported. The annual *National Report on Schooling in Australia* provides statistical, policy and contextual information. This could potentially include reporting on state and territories' progress toward meeting targets. It is currently published by ACARA, which has responsibility for NAPLAN data. There is no obvious reason why ACARA could not perform this reporting function. There is definitely a need for longitudinal data to follow the achievement of students over time as noted by the Productivity Commission and AERO. The ability to do this accurately and to follow students into post-school pathways is presumably dependent on the implementation of the national Universal Student Identifier (USI). A USI was proposed years ago; it is difficult to understand why this has not been delivered.

A new source of detailed, longitudinal information about teachers – Australian Teacher Workforce Data (ATWD) – is an important national initiative. It will give much-needed insight into current and future teachers, allowing for better planning and providing the ability to monitor and analyse the impact of policies. All states and territories should commit to providing data for the ATWD in a new NSRA.

✅ The new NSRA should require states and territories to facilitate and support school-based research

It is encouraging that the consultation paper talks about evidence-based practice and evidence-based reforms. The word 'evidence' is mentioned 32 times in the 52-page document. In order to implement evidence-based reforms and practice, there needs to be good evidence. Ideally this evidence would come from rigorous experimental research in Australian schools.

Unfortunately, it is very difficult to conduct research in schools. The nature of educational research is inherently complicated but that is not the main problem facing researchers. Nor is it that schools do not want to participate. We have found that schools are very willing to enter into mutually beneficial research partnerships. The major obstacle is obtaining timely approval from state education departments. This process takes at least several months but can take a year or more. This is difficult for an organisation like MultiLit but is especially critical for researchers that have received a time-limited grant or PhD students who have 3.5 years to complete their degrees who can lose crucial time waiting for approvals, and often lose the opportunity to obtain what would have been valuable data leading to valuable findings.

It is undeniable and absolutely necessary to ensure that research is done in an ethical way. There are non-negotiable elements such as child safety and data privacy. However, these concerns and protections are being enacted to the extent that it is almost impossible to conduct experimental research. The whole point of experimental research is that the outcome is unknown. Responsible researchers do due diligence to ensure as much as possible that there will be benefits, and build in strong safeguards against harm, but it is not always possible to guarantee that there will be direct benefits for the students involved. A new teaching program can be meticulously designed but there is no scientific evidence that it is effective

until it is tested in the classroom. In other cases, such as assessment norming studies, the purpose of the research is to provide wider benefits to education through the collection of data to validate assessments.

AERO has produced a national research application that was intended to streamline the application process. Having fewer forms to fill out to do studies in multiple states is helpful but has not overcome the obstacles to obtaining approval. This is severely limiting the collection, publication and utilisation of evidence to improve teaching practice and ultimately, outcomes for students.

Final comments

There is a great deal of expertise in Australian schools. Many teachers, principals and assistants are working thoughtfully and carefully to help students achieve excellent outcomes. The examples described in this submission are remarkable but not unique. There is, therefore, enormous potential to improve student outcomes more widely by adopting these evidence-based approaches through system-wide reforms. This does not mean layering another initiative or program over the numerous activities already taking place in schools. It means taking stock of what is happening in schools, what is working and what isn't, and replacing ineffective legacy practices with better ones. It means ensuring that current teachers and teacher education students know about evidence-based instruction (e.g., through supporting the TEEP recommendations), and providing them with guidance about where to find and how to use the high-quality resources and materials available. In a new NSRA, all states and territories should prioritise lifting student outcomes through the use of an RTI model of explicit, systematic instruction and intervention, and the teaching of a knowledge-building curriculum.

Governments and other systems need to pay more than lip service to evidence in education. A commitment to evidence-based practice also means making a commitment to school-based research. It is currently very difficult to conduct rigorous, longitudinal research in schools due to the time and other obstacles involved in getting research approvals. With genuine commitment to evidence-based educational initiatives there is good reason to expect that student outcomes will improve.

Contact

For more information or to discuss this proposal, please contact:

Dr Jennifer Buckingham
Director of Strategy and Senior Research Fellow
E jennifer.buckingham@multilit.com
T 0438 608 451

MultiLit is a research initiative
of Macquarie University

MultiLit