

National WA [Education](#)

What you need to know about declining reading ability in WA classrooms (and how to fix it)



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The news

The number of children in West Australian public school classrooms who do not meet reading expectations for their age group is higher than both the state and national average for all students.

And the state's year 3 students, across all school sectors, are also falling behind their eastern states counterparts.



MLC in Perth has implemented specific reading strategies to help its students.

Who is most at risk?

It should come as no surprise that those most at risk of having a lower reading proficiency are from lower socio-economic areas, often at regional and remote schools.

In WA, around half of regional and remote students are not proficient in reading, scoring in the lowest two of the four new NAPLAN bands. The number is even higher for Indigenous students.

Grattan Institute education program director Dr Jordana Hunter said the more regional and remote students a state has, the bigger the impact on its overall outcomes.

The new NAPLAN bands and what they show

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- Exceeding: The student's result exceeds expectations.
- Strong: The student's result meets challenging but reasonable expectations.
- Developing: The student's result indicates that they are working towards expectations.
- Needs Additional Support: The student's result indicates that they are not achieving learning outcomes. They are likely to need additional support to progress satisfactorily.

“It is challenging to get consistent, high-quality teaching in schools that are harder to staff and are struggling with high rates of teacher turnover,” Hunter said.

“Unfortunately, declining attendance rates for many First Nations students is also a major challenge. Lifting attendance is important to give those students a real opportunity to master reading.”

Another group at risk are the students whose parents did not finish school.

“This is concerning because it suggests our school system isn’t doing enough yet to break the cycle of disadvantage,” Hunter said.

What leads to poor results?

According to a [Grattan Institute’s report](#) released last week, there have been decades of disagreements on the best teaching practices, making it difficult for educators to figure out how to best help their students.

Hunter said in WA there was a lack of consistency when it came to assessing students from as young as year 1, making it impossible to compare strategies.

[MultiLit](#) director of strategy and senior research fellow Dr Jennifer Buckingham said this inconsistency had a direct impact on NAPLAN results for reading in WA, particularly in year 3.

“Over 35 per cent of year 3 students across the state are struggling to read, which means they are also likely to be experiencing difficulty in subject areas that rely on sound literacy skills,” she said.

“Unfortunately, we still have too many schools claiming to use multiple strategies to teach reading, which often indicates they are relying on whole language or balanced literacy approaches that are inferior to explicit and systematic phonics teaching and leave too many children struggling, or worse, falling through the cracks.”

What are the stats?

- 70 per cent – Indigenous students in WA who did not meet proficiency.
- 60 per cent – WA students falling short whose parents did not finish school.
- 68 per cent – The number of WA students who are proficient, according to NAPLAN 2023 data.
- 83 per cent – The number WA should aim for in 10 years, according to the Grattan Institute.
- 90 per cent – The minimum number we should aim for long-term.
- \$40 billion – The amount it will cost Australian taxpayers to support poor readers in schools today, who are more likely to drop out, over their lifetime according to the Grattan Institute.

What needs to be done to improve?

From where WA students are currently sitting, a 90 per cent proficiency target may seem like a difficult number to reach, but Hunter said the continued decline was “a preventable tragedy.”

“WA has some great foundations to build on, including some big investments in early years reading instruction, recommending high-quality programs and assessments to schools,” she said.

“Closer monitoring to ensure schools act on this guidance is important, as is a step-up in the level of training for teachers in evidence-based instructional practice.

“We also recommend WA adopt the 40-item [national year 1 Phonics Screening Check](#) across all schools and collect this data at a statewide level, so that additional school supports can be targeted where needed.”

Schools taking the initiative

MultiLit’s reading program was rolled out at Belmay Primary School in 2019. Almost 40 per cent of students have a language background other than English.

Buckingham said its introduction helped lift the achievement of struggling readers. In 2018, the school’s average reading level was “below” that of students with a similar background and is now “close to” similar schools.

Writing is now “well above” when compared to students with a similar background, and spelling is also “above”.

Methodist Ladies’ College said it was already using the Grattan Institute’s six-step ‘reading guarantee’ strategy, which includes providing literacy instructional specialists to help teachers.

Junior years pre-primary to year 2 leader Emily Wood said she has seen the benefits of this stepped approach firsthand in the classroom.

“Students enjoy and embrace instant feedback, repeated practice and reliable schedules encouraged by these systematic approaches,” she said.

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