

Dear Ministers for Education

The next National School Reform Agreement must ensure all students learn to read and write proficiently.

The statistics are bleak. The latest [NAPLAN](#) data revealed that 1 in 3 Australian children are not meeting reading proficiency benchmarks. This means there are well over 1 million children in school today who do not have the literacy skills to navigate the world with confidence, proficiency, and dignity. There are multigenerational, economic and health consequences from this preventable literacy deficit. Literacy affects everyone, everywhere.

We have substantial achievement gaps between students from advantaged and disadvantaged families, between those who live in cities and those who live in the regions, and between First Nations and non-Indigenous children. These gaps should not exist. “There is no doubt that out-of-school factors are driving part of this [equity gap](#). But decades of reading research shows that with the right instruction, almost all children can achieve reading proficiency.” While students from priority equity groups are over-represented among the group of students who are [struggling readers](#), there are also many advantaged children who are not becoming proficient readers.

We know every child can learn when they have access to an evidence-based education. We have been involved in lifting the performance of students, schools, and sectors by applying the best scientific research on how children become literate. Now is the time to implement these approaches at a national level so every child in school in Australia can benefit.

We call on Australian governments to ensure the next National School Reform Agreement embeds approaches based on robust research – at scale – in every aspect of literacy education. The new Agreement must be [grounded](#) in the most contemporary evidence on how to improve literacy outcomes, it must be aspirational about what can be achieved, and disciplined in implementation across six policy reform initiatives.

1. Establish ambitious but achievable reading proficiency targets
2. Ensure high quality, evidence-based approaches are embedded in initial qualification training and professional development for teachers
3. Explicitly outline the skills and knowledge required by teachers in standards which are linked to accreditation for both pre-service and in-service teachers
4. Outline evidence benchmarks
5. Facilitate the early identification of students who require support and track progress in reading skills through national implementation of the Year 1 Phonics Check and screening in the first year of high school
6. Ensure all students receive high quality literacy instruction and that students who require intervention have equity of access to, and participation in, appropriate support services in a timely manner.

We are a coalition representing a movement of education reform which is working to ensure all children thrive academically and no child is left behind, regardless of their starting point.

Twenty years ago, a similar group of us wrote to the then Commonwealth Education Minister, the Hon Dr Brendan Nelson AO, calling for a review relating to the teaching of reading. This led to the 2005 [National Inquiry into the Teaching of Literacy \(Australia\)](#). In the decades that have followed, we have failed as a nation to implement the recommendations of that review. We cannot waste any more time, we must bridge the research to classroom gap. Now is the time for a nation-building education reform effort to ensure every Australian school student can exercise their fundamental right to read, write and spell, and engage with academic learning across the year levels.

What do these reforms look like?

Reform 1. Establish ambitious but achievable reading proficiency targets

We must measure progress and achieve results. The next National School Reform Agreement must clearly outline national targets for reading, based on the new NAPLAN proficiency benchmarks. The starting point for setting these targets is an understanding that [95 per cent](#) of students can meet reading benchmarks when they are supported by high-quality evidence-based instruction for all students, with additional support provided to those students who require it. These targets would affirm our collective belief that all children can learn to read and write, regardless of background.

Reform 2. Ensure high quality, evidence-based approaches are embedded in initial qualification training and professional development for teachers

“[Research evidence](#) tells us that teachers are the most influential within-school factor in determining children and young people’s academic attainment.” But the 2022 [Quality Initial Teacher Education Review](#) found many beginning teachers are underprepared to teach reading and that students’ readiness to teach would be bolstered by a strengthened focus on evidence-based teaching strategies. The 2023 report of the [Teacher Education Expert Panel](#) (TEEP) recommended that in order to address this, Initial Teacher Education (ITE) core content must - amongst other things - provide pre-service teachers with an understanding of

- “[...] why specific instructional practices work, and how to implement these practices
- effective pedagogical [...] practices including explicit modelling, scaffolding, formative assessment, and literacy [...] teaching strategies that support learning because they respond to how the brain processes, stores and retrieves information [...]
- [how to address the needs of] diverse learners, including students with disability.”

While Governments have agreed to implement the TEEP recommendations, it will take 20 to 30 years before ITE graduates who have benefitted from this content make up the majority of the teaching workforce in schools.

We cannot wait this long. There must be a significant and systemic investment now into professional development for in-service teachers who are currently providing reading instruction in schools. Schools should use their professional learning time to provide teachers with the knowledge and skills outlined in the TEEP report. High quality [micro credentials](#) are an effective way to upskill teachers. Accessing professional development cannot come at the cost of workload intensification for teachers. Not only should teachers

have access to quality professional development, but there must also be appropriate paid release time for teachers.

Reform 3. Explicitly outline the skills and knowledge required by teachers in standards which are linked to accreditation for both pre-service and in-service teachers

The Australian Professional Standards for Teachers, developed by the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership ([AITSL](#)), serve as the regulatory framework for teachers' ITE, professional learning, practice, and engagement. They set out the requirements for the accreditation of all ITE programs. They also outline the key elements of quality teaching across four career stages: Graduate, Proficient, Highly Accomplished, and Lead.

These standards define what constitutes teacher quality and provide a framework for knowledge, practice, and professional engagement throughout teachers' careers. Graduating from an accredited ITE course and achieving both provisional and full registration requires a demonstration of meeting the teacher standards.

The standards were approved over a [decade ago](#) and it would be timely to revise them in consultation with experts in reading instruction and intervention to ensure they are specific enough about evidence-based teaching strategies.

Reform 4. Outline evidence benchmarks

Actions by Australian governments have fallen short in ensuring widespread access to robust research findings on literacy instruction for schools and educators. These research insights have not been effectively integrated into curriculum materials and classroom teaching methodologies. There appear to be gaps and a lack of consistency in what states and territories promote as evidence-based practice and a lack of knowledge as to what practices are being used from class to class.

The demanding workload of teachers and school leaders has left them with limited time to source and identify reliable curriculum materials and instructional approaches. The [Australian Teacher Workforce Data project](#) indicates that teachers work, on average, 140-150% of their paid hours and the largest proportion of non-face-to-face teaching time was spent on preparation and assessment tasks.

Educators need to feel confident that their decisions are based on the best available evidence. Too often terms like *best practice* and *evidence-based* are being used to describe teaching practices, which are – in fact – based on the weakest form of [evidence](#), on anecdote, personal preference, and opinion.

Under United States (US) [federal school funding](#) (the Every School Succeeds Act; ESSA) “states are expected to ensure education initiatives address a four-tier hierarchy of evidence”. “Local and state taxes fund most of US school education, but federal dollars have substantial impact on state and local education decision-making. ESSA, the main vehicle for federal education funding, [...] requires states, local education bodies and schools to prioritise evidence-based” interventions. The [Evidence for ESSA website](#) was established by education researcher Robert Slavin at Johns Hopkins University. The website reports effect sizes for interventions across reading, maths, socio-emotional learning and other domains.

[EDReports](#) is a non-profit US organisation which assists teachers and school leaders in identifying high-quality curriculum materials. It conducts thorough reviews of curriculum materials, including textbooks and web-based resources, and publishes the results.

In the United Kingdom, the [Education Endowment Foundation](#) (EEF) is an independent charity, which supports schools to improve teaching and learning through better use of evidence. One of the ways in which EEF does this is by acting as an independent “[evidence guardian](#)” for teacher development policies and programs.

In [France](#), the French Scientific Council of National Education is comprised of a team of multidisciplinary experts providing evidence-based instructional guidance and protocols to address inequity in schools. Their work has shaped education reforms and policies.

Here in Australia, there is initial good [practice](#) with work by the [Australian Education Research Organisation](#) to provide a platform to share teacher-produced resources. The [Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority](#) also has a range of resources available linked to the Australian Curriculum. [AITSL](#) hosts video illustrations of practice and [Education Services Australia](#) also makes teacher resources available.

Drawing on the work of these organisations, it is recommended that Australia look to best practice from international comparators to put in place funding provisions under the Australian Education Act, which will assist teachers in curating and updating resources that meet an acceptable benchmark for evidence-based curriculum and classroom practice materials.

Reform 5. Facilitate the early identification of students who require support and track progress in reading skills through national implementation of the Year 1 Phonics Check and screening in the first year of high school

Universal screening is the best and most efficient way to ensure early identification of students facing potential learning challenges, enabling timely intervention and support to facilitate their academic progress. When it comes to learning differences, our education system is primarily focused on a ‘wait to fail’ model instead of on the development and implementation of preventive approaches.

Early identification is important in moving from a reactive to a proactive model. Ideally, identification would take place before a child enters the formal schooling system and the roll-out of evidence-based language and literacy screening tools should be a focus for early childhood policy development and program implementation. Noting that the NSRA’s coverage begins in the foundation year of primary school, best practice within the school environment would see screening undertaken three times a year from the first (foundation) year of primary school to Year 2 with additional screening as needed throughout primary school and on entry to high school.

Australia should draw inspiration from international comparators such as France and England, which have effectively rolled out national screening to identify children who are struggling with the foundational skills for literacy. All [French](#) students are screened in their first year of primary school for reading and mathematics proficiency. The program supports teachers in identifying students at risk of falling behind. England's [Year 1 Phonics Screening Check](#) provides a tool for teachers to confirm all children have learned phonic decoding to an age-appropriate level. The check was introduced in 2012 and has been associated with

improved reading outcomes and assisting in propelling England to higher rankings in international assessments.

The development and release of the Year 1 Phonics Check by the Australian Government has been a good first step. This fast and simple check is an online or paper and pencil tool that can be used by teachers to identify those children who are struggling and to support them to catch up through small group intervention and one-on-one support. The check is in full use across schools in South Australia and New South Wales, with Tasmania to follow. While other jurisdictions have also attempted to implement screening tools they are of varying quality and there are some states and territories that do not have any formal, state-mandated screening in Year 1 at all.

The Year 1 Phonics Check is an important tool in increasing equity in education. Results from the South Australian check indicate that there have been state-wide improvements in students' abilities, as well as improvements across all priority equity cohorts including First Nations students and students with a verified disability, English as an additional language, and from non-metropolitan schools and the most disadvantaged communities.

There should be appropriate, ongoing funding for the Year 1 Phonics Check and the [Literacy Hub](#) which hosts the online platform and provides resources in support of the check. In addition, standardised screening assessments should be used for children who do not pass the Year 1 Phonics Check to identify specific strengths and weaknesses in their reading abilities. These tools would be used to assess reading and language subskills in order to pinpoint the underlying factors in a student's reading difficulty and provide the basis for intervention decisions.

NAPLAN data indicates there is [a significant number of secondary students who do not have firm literacy foundations in place](#), which underlines the importance of quick curriculum-based screens early, on their arrival at high school. "The information gleaned could inform the allocation of students for further assessment and intervention, without delay."

To ensure uniformity across the country and ensure children do not fall through the cracks, it is essential to implement national standardised screening in Year 1 and on entry to high school. This would ensure there are systems in place to identify those students who are struggling with reading acquisition and who require additional support. Teachers should have access to paid relief time for professional development, to undertake screening, and to analyse results and plan accordingly.

Reform 6. Ensure all students receive high quality literacy instruction and that students who require intervention have equity of access to, and participation in, appropriate support services in a timely manner

Every school should deliver evidence-based, high-quality literacy instruction, with additional early interventions for students who need additional support.

When [children struggle](#) to keep up with classroom learning, it can create a negative cycle where they lack understanding, become frustrated and disengage from learning, which can hinder future learning opportunities. If teachers do not intervene quickly to help these students, even small learning gaps can grow and have devastating consequences as academic demands increase.

To ensure timely support for struggling students, we call for implementation of a systematic intervention model. This [model](#) operates through three tiers of teaching support, increasing in intensity based on the needs of each student.

- Tier 1: High-quality initial instruction for all students
- Tier 2: Targeted additional support, typically in small groups, for students identified through assessment as falling behind (approximately 20-25% of students)
- Tier 3: Intensive one-on-one support for students who do not respond sufficiently to Tier 2 interventions or who have identified learning difficulties (approximately 5% of students)

Small group and one-on-one interventions are ideally additional to the high-quality instruction all students in the class should receive, rather than a substitution for whole class instruction.

All states and territories collect data through NAPLAN and other assessments, which identify students who would benefit from intervention. But this data is [not yet being used](#) to target those who most need help. This needs to change – so students get support exactly when they need it as outlined in the [Primary Reading Pledge](#).

The National School Reform Agreement should include a commitment to the provision of intensive tuition support to help all students who are falling below the NAPLAN proficiency benchmarks. Wrap-around services should be provided to at-risk and vulnerable students through easy access to allied health professionals (e.g., psychologists, [speech pathologists](#), occupational therapists).

Teacher Workload

The [National Teacher Workforce Action Plan](#) requires that all National School Reform Agreement outcomes are subject to a Teacher Workload Impact Assessment. This is a critical requirement for success. All National School Reform Agreement initiatives must help reduce teacher workload to ensure capacity for teachers to best support student outcomes.

Implemented appropriately, the reforms outlined in this letter will reduce workload for teachers.

Yours sincerely,

Dr Jennifer Buckingham OAM

Director of Strategy and Senior Research Fellow
MultiLit

Georgina Byron AM

Chief Executive Officer
The Snow Foundation

Professor Anne Castles

ARC Laureate Fellow
Director, Australian Centre for the Advancement of Literacy
Australian Catholic University

Jessica Colleu Terradas CF

Senior Officer Literacy
Canberra-Goulburn Catholic Education

Professor Max Coltheart AM

Emeritus Professor of Cognitive Science
Macquarie University

Adjunct Associate Professor Tessa Daffern

La Trobe University
Director & Principal Consultant, Literacy Education Solutions

Dr Tina Daniel

Lecturer, Primary Literacy
PhD (Deakin), MSc (Curriculum & Assessment) (DUC), Adv. Dip. (Oxford), B.A. (Melb)
Australian Centre for the Advancement of Literacy
Research Trust Fellow
Faculty of Arts & Education
Australian Catholic University

Julia Davies-Duff

Doctoral Lecturer in Teacher Education
Faculty of Education
University of Canberra

Dr Kate de Bruin

Senior Lecturer, Inclusive Education
Monash University

Jessica Del Rio

Lead, Government & Public Finance
Equity Economics

Adjunct Associate Professor, Lisa Denny

Workforce Demographer
University of Tasmania

Elena Douglas

Chief Executive Officer
Knowledge Society

Megan Enders

Chief Executive Officer
Fogarty Foundation

Saul Eslake

Vice-Chancellor's Fellow at the University of Tasmania
Independent Economist

Annie Fogarty AM

Chairperson and Founder
Fogarty Foundation

Scarlett Gaffey

Certified Practicing Speech Pathologist
Lecturer in Speech Pathology
University of Canberra

Associate Professor Lorraine Hammond AM

Edith Cowan University

Dr Kerry Hemenstall

B.Sc., Dip.Ed., Dip.Soc.Studies, Dip.Ed.Psych., Ph.D., MAPsS

Associate Professor Alison Holm

BSpPath (Hons), PhD, LLB (Hons), CPSP
Practice Education Coordinator, Speech Pathology
School of Health Sciences, College of Health & Medicine
University of Tasmania

Professor Teresa Iacono, Ph.D.

Professor of Rural and Regional Allied Health
La Trobe Rural Health School
Living with Disability Research Centre

Associate Professor Saskia Kohnen

Director
Macquarie University Reading Clinic

Dr Deslea Konza

B.A., Dip.Ed., Dip.Spec.Ed., M.Ed.(Hons), Ph.D
Independent Reading Consultant and Coach

Associate Professor Suze Leitão

PhD, CPSP, FSPA, Life Member of Speech Pathology Australia
Associate Professor Speech Pathology
Director Graduate Research
Curtin School of Allied Health

Emeritus Professor Bill Loudon AM

University of Western Australia

Dr Susan Main

Senior Lecturer
School of Education
Edith Cowan University

Dr Jacqueline McKechnie

PhD MSPA CPSP

Discipline Lead and Assistant Professor in Speech Pathology
University of Canberra

Dr Lin Meeks, PhD

Director, Ants in the Apple Pty Ltd

Honorary Affiliate, Institute of Special Educators

Mary-Ruth Mendel

Speech Pathologist

Executive Director, Australian Literacy and Numeracy Foundation

Dr Jessica Paynter, PhD (Clinical Psychology), FAPS

Senior Lecturer

School of Applied Psychology

Griffith Institute for Educational Research

Griffith University

Dr Joanne Quick

Senior Lecturer, National School of Education, Faculty of Education and Arts

Head of Discipline (Primary)

Acting Head of Discipline (Early Childhood and Primary)

Course Coordinator, Bachelor of Education: Early Years and Primary

Australian Catholic University

Caroline Reed

Co-CEO, Ochre Education

Professor Sheena Reilly AM

FASSA FAHMS FSPA FRCSLT

Professor Emeritus

Health Group

Griffith University

Dr Sally Robinson-Kooi

TPTC., B.Ed. (TESOL), PhD

Literacy Researcher

Ingrid Sealey

Director & Founder

Teach Well

Associate Professor Tanya Serry

PhD, FSPA, CPSP, MA (Applied Linguistics), B.App. Sc (Sp. Path)

Associate Professor, Literacy and Reading, School of Education

Co-Director of the SOLAR Lab

La Trobe University

Associate Professor Kym Simoncini
Early Childhood and Primary Education
Queensland University of Technology

Reid Smith
Co-CEO, Ochre Education

Professor Pamela Snow PhD, MAPS
Life Member, Speech Pathology Australia
Professor of Cognitive Psychology
Co-Director, Science of Language and Reading (SOLAR) Lab
School of Education
La Trobe University

Julie Sonnemann
Education Lead
Impact Economics and Policy

Dr Damon Thomas
Senior Lecturer in Literacy Education
School of Education
The University of Queensland

Dr Hua-Chen Wang
Lecturer
School of Education and Macquarie University Centre for Reading
Macquarie University

Alison Watson
CAT/Lecturer Primary Education
College of Education, Psychology and Social Work
Flinders University

Associate Professor Marleen Westerveld, PhD, FSPA, CPSP
Speech Pathology
School of Health Sciences and Social Work
Griffith University

Professor Kevin Wheldall AM
BA, PhD, Copyhold, FASSA, FBOsS, FCollIP, FIARLD, MAPS, MCEDP
Emeritus Professor, Macquarie University
Chairman, MultiLit Pty Ltd
Director, MultiLit Research Unit

Dr Robyn Wheldall
BA, PhD (Special Education), MAICD
Company Director, MultiLit Pty Ltd
Deputy Director, MultiLit Research Unit