



Submission to the National School Reform Agreement (NSRA) Expert Panel

Review to Inform a Better and Fairer Education System Consultation

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Any enquiries about this submission should be directed to:

ACT Alliance for Evidence-Based Education



Submission to the NSRA Expert Panel

This submission is made on behalf of the ACT Alliance for Evidence-based Education, a coalition of teachers, speech pathologists, occupational therapists, psychologists, academics, researchers, and parents committed to promoting evidence-based practices and policies in education. Our alliance aims to ensure that every child in the Australian Capital Territory (ACT) has access to quality education and support.

The current state of literacy in the ACT is concerning, with one in three 15-year-old students performing below the Australian proficient standard for reading in the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA). Over the past two decades, the ACT's performance in PISA has shown a long-term decline, resulting in students performing approximately six months behind their counterparts from twenty years ago. NAPLAN results also reveal a troubling situation, with almost one in five ACT students performing at or below National Minimum Standards for reading, equivalent to a Year 6 level. As students progress through school, the proportion at or below minimum standards doubles between Year 3 and Year 9.

This issue is not unique to the ACT; it is prevalent across Australia, calling for a national literacy reform initiative comprising five elements:

1. National implementation of standardised universal screening to ensure all students are on track and to identify those who require additional support
2. National implementation of a systematic response to intervention model providing evidence-based instruction for all students with small group tutoring and one-on-one support for those who require additional help
3. National support for high-quality curriculum and instruction, empowering an independent body to provide evidence-based instructional guidance and protocols for early reading instruction and interventions
4. National investment in quality teaching, supported by clear standards linked to accreditation with training and coaching provided for in-service teachers
5. Increased transparency and accountability regarding data, especially for students with disabilities

By adopting these elements, we can foster a culture of accountability and significantly improve literacy outcomes for all students, breaking the predictability of achievement based on socio-economic status and providing equal opportunities for success.

Implementation of National Standardised Universal Screening:

Australian federal, state, and territory governments should increase monitoring and accountability for poor reading outcomes by mandating national standardised evidence-based universal screening assessments in all schools to identify students at risk for reading difficulties. Following identification, immediate, early, tiered interventions can be implemented using the data to target policy and resources more effectively.

At a minimum, these assessments should be conducted in the first year of compulsory primary school and high school, with best practice suggesting up to three screenings per year throughout primary school. Transparency and accountability should be fostered through the collection of national data on literacy standards, disaggregated by equity data, and by informing parents about their child's progress compared to benchmarks.

The ACT does not currently have a standardised and evidence-based approach to screening students for early reading skills in the foundational years of Year 1 and Year 2. School principals have the discretion to select and administer assessments to their students. As it stands many struggling readers in the ACT are only identified during the Year 3 NAPLAN reading test, which is long after the period for effective intervention (preschool to Year 1).

The Year 1 Phonics Check is a short assessment that confirms children have learned phonic decoding to an age-appropriate standard. However, its application has been ad hoc, varying between states and schools. A national tool is essential to allow comparison of data at a national and state level and to ensure children do not fall between the cracks in jurisdictions such as the ACT that have failed to implement appropriate checks. Despite strong calls from the community to introduce the Year 1 Phonics Check and other age-appropriate screening instruments, the ACT Government has made it clear it will not introduce universal screening tools in Year 1 and Year 2, including the Year 1 Phonics Check.

International comparators to Australia, such as France and England, have introduced national screening tools that have been successful in providing support for struggling students. France's EvalAide program, for example, involves universal screening for all first-year primary school students in reading and mathematics, with later screenings in Year 6. The French screener is based on a 'Response to Intervention' approach, where struggling students are identified early on and provided with the necessary support to thrive in school. The French screener was inspired by the implementation of previous successful international initiatives, including in Finland, Sweden, and Singapore.

Similarly, England has implemented a statutory phonics screening check for all Year 1 students, offering interventions and support for those who do not meet the standard. Specific reporting requirements keep parents informed about their child's progress, including screening results compared to same-aged peers in their school and nationwide. These successful international models demonstrate the importance and feasibility of national measures to support early identification and targeted interventions to improve reading skills.

National Implementation of a Systematic Response to Intervention Model:

When children struggle to keep up with classroom learning, it can lead to a negative cycle where they lack understanding, become frustrated, and disengage from learning. This can hinder their future learning opportunities. Without timely intervention from teachers to help these students, even small learning gaps can grow and have severe consequences as academic demands increase.

In the ACT intervention programs in schools lack consistency, fidelity, and proper staffing. There is no standardised approach to intervention, with some schools offering small group programs while others do not. The staff responsible for these interventions vary, including learning support assistants and teachers who may not have the necessary training. Some schools use intervention programs like MiniLit or ineffective programs such as Reading Recovery, but they are often not implemented with fidelity in terms of frequency of remediation, assessments, and appropriate grouping of students based on progress. This has led to inadequate support for struggling students, forcing some parents who can afford it to pay for private tutoring or switch schools.

A systematic response to intervention model aims to address this issue by providing excellent classroom instruction to all students while also offering targeted additional teaching to those who require extra support for brief periods. The model places a strong emphasis on preventing learning gaps from arising in the first place, achieved through high-quality universal instruction. To identify potential learning gaps early on, all students undergo screening. If a significant number of students require small-group tutoring, school leaders should investigate the quality of whole-class instruction, along with the use of evidence-based literacy and numeracy approaches to ensure students receive the necessary support.

To provide timely support for struggling students, a national systematic response to intervention model should be rolled out across all schools with three tiers of teaching support:

- Tier 1: High-quality evidence-based instruction for all students.
- Tier 2: Targeted additional support in small groups for students at risk of falling behind.
- Tier 3: Intensive one-on-one support for students not responding well to Tier 2 interventions or for students who are significantly below benchmarks.

Governments should support the establishment of a list of endorsed evidence-based intervention programs that have a strong record of effectiveness for at-risk students.

National investment in a comprehensive and high-quality catch-up learning support system is critical to address the needs of all students effectively. Consistent use of effective instruction for all students, combined with a team-based problem-solving approach for selecting evidence-based interventions and implementing them with fidelity for students who require additional support through small group tutoring, can lead to 95 per cent of students meeting academic benchmarks.

National support for high-quality, evidence-based curriculum and instruction:

In the ACT, there is a need for stronger evidence-based approaches to teaching and assessing reading, particularly concerning the prevalent use of the multi-cueing or three-cueing method. This method relies on context and cues within the text to help novice readers guess unfamiliar words. The three-cueing approach has shown to be ineffective in helping children learn to read, especially for weak and at-risk readers. Despite this, the three-cueing system continues to be widely used in ACT schools.

To assist schools in transitioning away from ineffective practices, governments must prioritise teacher effectiveness and implement education reforms that ensure effective reading instruction is present in every classroom. This can be achieved by empowering an independent body with the task of providing quality assurance of evidence-based instructional guidance and protocols for early reading instruction, as well as implementing best practices for interventions aimed at older students facing reading difficulties. Establishing a rigorous quality assurance mechanism for curriculum materials will further enhance the effectiveness of literacy education across the nation.

National investment in quality teaching, supported by clear standards:

The effectiveness of teaching methods relies heavily on the expertise and abilities of educators, shaped by their training, guidance during tertiary programs, and continuous professional development. However, the Quality Initial Teacher Education (QITE) Review revealed that many Initial Teacher Education graduates in Australia lack practical preparation for teaching reading, including phonemic awareness and phonics, which subsequently impacts classroom practices.

To enhance teacher training, policymakers and governments should facilitate partnerships between state and territory education departments, universities, and schools. This collaboration would ensure that pre-service and in-service teacher training aligns with evidence-based practices and is directly connected to classroom instruction.

Strengthening the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers, developed by the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL), is crucial to emphasise the professional knowledge and evidence-aligned instructional practices required for teaching reading and writing.

Additionally, Australian Governments should invest in reading specialists or literacy coaches to support in-service teachers. These specialists would provide effective evidence-based reading instruction training, offer professional learning opportunities, model best practices, and provide valuable feedback to educators. Jurisdictions like South Australia, Ontario, and New Zealand have already demonstrated the benefits of investing in research-based curricula and coaches for teachers.

Increased Transparency and Accountability Regarding Data, Especially for Students with Disabilities:

We fully support the recommendation proposed by the Productivity Commission, urging all states and territories to adopt specific targets in bilateral agreements under the National School Reform Agreement. These targets should aim to reduce the proportion of students who do not meet basic levels of literacy and numeracy. By implementing these targets, governments can showcase their dedication to delivering equitable education and ensure

accountability in enhancing outcomes for struggling students, especially those with disabilities.

Transparency in data plays a pivotal role in monitoring progress, identifying areas for improvement, and holding educational stakeholders accountable.

Governments should prioritise the collection, analysis, and accessible dissemination of data concerning students with disabilities, which is a significant gap in current reporting. This data should be disaggregated based on disability type, grade level, and other relevant factors to enable targeted interventions and measure the effectiveness of support programs.

In line with UNESCO's Sustainable Development Goal 4, we must aspire to achieve inclusive and equitable quality education, ensuring that all youth and a significant proportion of adults, irrespective of gender, attain literacy and numeracy proficiency by 2030.

By adopting clear targets and fostering data transparency, we can establish a culture of accountability that drives improvements in literacy outcomes. These measures are instrumental in breaking the predictability of achievement based on socio-economic status and providing equal opportunities for all students to succeed, regardless of their background.

Equity Economics report - Raising the grade: How schools in the Australian Capital Territory can lift literacy outcomes for students and the economy

We are attaching a report that was recently released by [Equity Economics](#) which outlines systemic failures in the ACT to employ evidence-based approaches to literacy instruction. This report is to be considered as part of our submission and supports the need for urgent national reform. Ensuring the right of students to access quality education should be of utmost importance.