

The Snow Foundation is a philanthropic organisation which takes a research-based approach to supporting disadvantaged communities. While the Foundation has always had a focus on the Canberra region, we have extended our reach across Australia through four pillars including our place, our country, our sector, and our family. We have a strong commitment to social justice and work to raise awareness and contribute to systemic change.

Literacy is a fundamental right and a public good, essential for learning and accessing opportunities in society. Poor literacy skills lead to unemployment, lower wages, and limits opportunity. A lack of adequate literacy skills can contribute to social and emotional vulnerability, affecting self-esteem, social interaction, community involvement, and personal development.

Australia needs a clear national literacy target. We know that 40 per cent of 15-year-old Australian students fall below the Australian National Proficient Standard in reading as tested in the OECD's Programme for International Student Assessment.¹ The next National School Reform Agreement must clearly outline the national target for reading proficiency, supported by policy and reform initiatives to achieve this goal. The starting point for setting this goal is an understanding that 95 per cent of students can meet academic benchmarks when they are supported by high-quality evidence-based instruction for all students, with additional support provided to those students who require it.²

Extensive multidisciplinary research from linguistics, cognitive psychology, neuroscience, speech-language pathology, and education spanning over forty years has identified core reading skills, including phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension. However, these essential skills are not consistently integrated into schools' curriculum and instruction, and there is often a lack of systemic investment in state and territory education systems to facilitate the transition from traditional practices to research-based approaches. Cooperative federalism is required to ensure every Australian school student can meet academic benchmarks for literacy.

Fundamental to achieving this objective is a requirement to ensure research-based approaches are embedded – at scale – in every aspect of literacy education. Governments, education departments and authorities, schools and educators, non-government organisations, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and community leaders, business and philanthropic sectors, researchers and experts, must work together collaboratively.

We call on the Expert Panel to entrench the reforms outlined below in the National School Reform Agreement.

¹ The Australian National Proficiency Standard represents a 'challenging but reasonable' expectation of student achievement with students needing to demonstrate more than elementary skills.
<https://research.acer.edu.au/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1035&context=ozpisa>

² De Bruin K, Kestel E, Francis M, Forgasz H and Fries R (2023) Supporting students significantly behind in literacy and numeracy: a review of evidence-based approaches, edresearch.edu.au AERO Monash University.

Submission to the review to inform a better and fairer education system

The Challenge: Australia faces a significant literacy challenge, with 40 per cent of 15-year-old students falling below the Australian National Proficient Standard in reading. To address this, we propose the establishment of a clear national literacy target, supported by policy and reform initiatives within the next National School Reform Agreement.

The Objective and Target: Our objective is to ensure Australian school students meet academic benchmarks for literacy. We believe that 95 per cent of students can meet academic benchmarks when provided with high-quality evidence-based instruction, with additional support for those who require it.

Our Theory of Change: A research-based approach must underpin every aspect of literacy education, encompassing teacher training, curriculum development, instruction, assessment, progress monitoring, and intervention. To achieve this, collaboration is essential among governments, education departments, schools, educators, non-government organisations, community leaders, businesses, the philanthropic sector, researchers, and experts.

Key national reforms required:

1. **Quality Teaching:** Teachers (both pre-service and in-service) must receive comprehensive and appropriate training in evidence-based literacy instruction. Professional standards for teachers should be strengthened so they clearly emphasise the knowledge and research-aligned instructional practices required for teaching reading and writing, in order for teachers to meet accreditation requirements.
2. **Curriculum:** Develop and implement evidence-based curriculum materials aligned with best practices for proficient literacy skills. A national body should be tasked with continuous evaluation and quality assurance of these materials.
3. **Instruction:** Implement a consistent multi-tiered system of support framework in both primary and secondary schools. Every school should deliver evidence-based, high-quality literacy instruction to prevent reading failure, with small group and one-on-one interventions for students who need additional support.
4. **Assessment:** Mandate national universal, evidence-based screening assessments to track reading skills and identify students requiring additional support. Assessments should ideally cover the entire journey from preschool to entry to high school. At a minimum, the Year 1 Phonics Screening Check must be rolled out nationally.
5. **Data:** Adopt specific targets to reduce the proportion of students who fall below proficiency benchmarks. Collect and measure outcomes for all students, including those with disabilities, First Nations students, and from marginalised backgrounds.

Equity is Fundamental: Our vision is rooted in the belief that every Australian child has the right to read, and research-based practices will empower educators to support students from all backgrounds in their literacy journey. By ensuring all students can read proficiently, we can break down barriers, reduce disparities and create a more equitable education system for the betterment of our nation. Together, let us embrace the power of literacy and forge a path to a brighter and more prosperous future for all Australians.

Equity is Fundamental: Every Australian child has the right to read

