



Review to Inform a Better and Fairer Education System

August 2023



Introduction to our submission

Think Forward Educators welcomes the opportunity to respond to the *Review to Inform a Better and Fairer Education System*.

Think Forward Educators is a national charity aimed at bridging the research-to-practice gap to embed enduring, evidence-based instructional change in schools. Since our launch, Think Forward has grown from a group of 20 to more than 19,000 members across Australia. We advocate for education that allows every child to succeed: Promoting social equity, using the Science of Learning.

The organisation is an inclusive community and knowledge hub for all teachers where they can confidently access information on evidence-informed practices. In the past year alone, Think Forward hosted over 5,000 members for live webinars, with 12,000 registrations for all our events, and 9,100 views on our professional learning materials.

The organisation was founded to share specific ideas that will improve student learning: the knowledge of the Science of Learning. The ‘what’ of professional learning is rigorously defined and is limited to practices that are truly evidence-based.

Evidence-based practices

Think Forward Educators promotes the science of learning. These are principles of how students learn that are applicable to almost all students in almost all classrooms. This means we take an optimistic view of teaching and teacher professional learning because we believe that if teachers have the right knowledge, they can help almost all students to learn at high levels. The science of learning has practical implications for classroom teaching, for example:

- **The Science of Reading** explains how the brain learns skills that are not innate or ‘biologically primary’. Therefore, reading must be explicitly and systematically taught in a structured way. (See [AERO](#))
- **Quality knowledge-rich curriculum** which is linked to research on how students need ample background knowledge to read and comprehend ([See evidence on Core Knowledge in the US](#))
- **Responsive teaching and formative assessment** which promote interactive teaching with continuous checks for understanding
- **Multi-tiered intervention systems** which involve a high quality instructional core, universal student screening, evidence-based interventions provided on a sliding scale of intensity, and progress monitoring of students receiving intervention ([See AERO](#))

The evidence shows that all students benefit from these approaches to teaching and learning.

Our Recommendations

Recommendation 1: Fund teacher professional learning that is grounded in a strong evidence base

At the policy level, it is easy to get agreement on high-level ideas for how to improve support for teachers: better professional learning, strong mentoring programs, higher quality teaching resources. But education systems have an unfortunate habit of extensively designing the structure of each professional support but not thinking too deeply about the actual content.

This means that teachers are often spending time in professional development sessions or professional learning communities focused on things that will not actually improve teaching. At its worst, precious time is wasted on instructional fads or weakly-evidenced practices that could lead to worse learning outcomes.

Our recommendation is to encourage funding for professional learning that is grounded in evidence-based instructional practice and discourage funding for unproven (or disproven) professional learning content areas.

Recommendation 2: Support efforts to close the research-to-practice gap

Think Forward Educators members want more professional learning about specific instructional practices they can implement in the classroom. They love to hear about research relevant to their daily work that can help improve student outcomes. However, if teachers have to do a lot of work to figure out how to implement research-based practices, they will struggle to find the time to do so.

Think Forward Educators has found so much success in part because teachers are seeking specific examples of how high-level research concepts can be applied to daily instruction. The collaboration of the Think Forward Educator community has allowed teachers to go deep into the specifics of how to implement evidence-based practices.

Efforts to fund more collaborative, tangible professional learning around evidence-based practices would be welcomed.

Recommendation 3: Support program evaluation with rigorous evaluation design

Despite our focus on evidence-based teaching practices, we recognise that the existing research base in education implementation is generally quite small, and there are many areas of teaching which don't have a strong evidence base to guide teachers. Think Forward Educators members find, for example, that there is more evidence to guide instruction in early maths or literacy compared to the humanities. For this reason, we recommend more support for rigorous program evaluation to establish more robust evidence on what is working and what is not for students across Australia.

Education systems provide funding for many different educator professional learning initiatives, but very few of these have a rigorous evaluation attached. Large budgets allocated to certain professional learning providers or programs should be attached to

requirements for well-designed evaluation, including controlled and/or randomised trials. Education systems often roll out new professional learning initiatives on a limited basis initially, so there is often scope for randomisation and analysis of outcomes against control groups.

Educators in Australia unfortunately have to rely on evaluation research from overseas (often from the US) where it is lacking locally. Having more requirements for larger programs to conduct rigorous evaluation would help increase the evidence base for teachers across Australia.