



## Public submission made to the Review to Achieve Educational Excellence in Australian Schools

Submitter: Dyslexia-SPELD Foundation  
Submitting as a: Parent or community organisation  
State: WA

### Summary

In responding to the ‘Review to Achieve Educational Excellence in Australian Schools’ we chose to focus on four key questions, specifically what educational success should look like for Australian students and schools, how school quality and success should be measured, effective and efficient use of school funding, and the barriers to improvement as we felt these were crucial to discuss and there was a great depth and breath of information to cover.

### Main submission

What should educational success for Australian students and schools look like?

- 1) What capabilities, skills and knowledge should students learn at school to prepare them for the future?

Students currently completing their schooling face a very different set of challenges and demands, in both further education and the workplace, than did previous generations. Today’s school-leavers need skills in technology (including keyboarding and programming), the capacity to source, assess and interpret information as to its reliability, problem-solving skills, communication skills, and arguably a greater awareness of community and global issues. This is not to say, however, that they do not need many of the same capabilities and skills that their parents and grandparents required. Nor is the case that a strong knowledge base is less important now than it was in the past. In many ways – the opposite is more likely to be true. Strong skills in literacy and numeracy – and a robust general knowledge - remain absolutely essential and together pave the way for the knowledge, skills and capabilities underpinning almost all leisure, learning and employment choices currently available to post-secondary school students. Students also need a well-developed range of academic and social behaviours in order to negotiate their way in the workplace, further training, the community and interpersonal relationships.

Unfortunately, the view that foundation skills in literacy and numeracy are not essential, or are, perhaps not as important as they used to be, has gained some momentum in recent years.

Numerous reports and inquiries make it clear that a high proportion of young people are leaving school ill-prepared (due to poor literacy and numeracy) for further training and/or employment (Australian Literacy and Life Skills Survey (ABS); 'No More Excuses – an industry response to the language, literacy and numeracy challenge'; PISA; PIRLS; TIMMS; and, NAPLAN).

In their No More Excuses report, the Industry Skills Council of Australia stressed that they would prefer school leavers to have stronger skills in literacy and numeracy, than other work-related skills and capacities. They suggested that individual industries, workplaces and training facilities were well-equipped to train school-leavers in the specificities of their chosen field but what they were ill-prepared to do was teach them basic skills in academic and social behaviours, literacy and numeracy. The concerns expressed by the Industry Skills Council are justified. In a survey of apprentice bricklayers, it was found that 75% of trainees struggled with basic arithmetic (such as adding and subtracting decimal numbers) and 80% could not do simple calculations (such as calculating the pay they would receive for four and a half hours of work) (No More Excuses, 2011). Poor literacy and numeracy skills have significant implications for adequate job performance, further education, and health and safety issues but they are also strongly associated with long term social, emotional and health outcomes. In a report prepared for Medibank Private Limited by PricewaterhouseCoopers (PwC), the existing body of evidence surrounding health literacy was considered and the findings suggested that poor health literacy was equally as damaging to long term health outcomes (including life expectancy) as chronic disease (Health Literacy – Implications for Australians, 2011). Poor numeracy is an even stronger predictor of long-term life outcomes (including health, employment and financial security).

A compounding factor associated with poor literacy is that students who are poor readers (including students with poor reading accuracy and/or fluency) tend to read very little and rarely read for pleasure. Research shows that year 5 students with reading skills in the top decile are likely to read – on average – over four million words (in books, magazines, etc.) out of school each year – whereas students in the bottom decile read – on average – 60,000 words out of school each year (Stanovich & Cunningham, 1997). The impact of this on a student's vocabulary development and their general knowledge is extraordinary and, given that these are arguably the two most powerful factors associated with language comprehension, means that some students gain access to the secondary school curriculum (and beyond), whereas others don't. The single most important contributor to vocabulary and general knowledge growth is the ability to read fluently.

The level of functional literacy (i.e. the reading and writing skills necessary to manage everyday tasks) in Australian 15 – 19 year olds is shockingly low. Relative to other countries, Australia's educational outcomes have been declining across all academic domains, including reading, since 2000. At present, almost 41% of 15 year old boys and 29% of girls in Australia have literacy levels either below or at the lowest levels of what is deemed to be functional (PISA). In the 2016 NAPLAN results almost 60% of Australian year 9 boys were either absent, withdrawn, on or below benchmark in writing. This places these students at a huge disadvantage in terms of future training and employment opportunities.

Poor functional literacy is highly correlated with negative outcomes for both the individual and the community in terms of disengagement from school, increased mental health issues, and limitations on later life options.

Students with diagnosed or imputed learning disorders (including dyslexia, dysgraphia and dyscalculia) are at increased risk of failing to develop accurate and fluent reading, written expression and computational skills. It is vitally important that attention is paid to supporting and monitoring these students; ensuring that appropriate intervention (provision of high quality early instruction – in addition to targeted intervention - delivered either one-on-one or in small groups) and individualised learning and teaching adjustments to ensure full access to the curriculum – are provided.

In summary: The capabilities, skills and knowledge students need to learn at school must include:

- The skills needed to read accurately and fluently (in order to read accurately and fluently - students will need to have been explicitly and systematically taught phonic knowledge during the early years and had the opportunity to engage in repeated oral reading to build fluency. They will also have needed ample opportunities to practise and apply their skills through reading decodable texts, writing sentences to dictation, etc.);
- The skills needed to write accurately and fluently (in order to write accurately and fluently – students will need to have been explicitly and systematically taught: handwriting skills; Standard Australian English spelling using phonic, orthographic, syntactic, morphemic and semantic knowledge; English syntax (taught in context));
- A strong vocabulary (which has been taught explicitly and to which students have been exposed through their reading);
- A wide general knowledge (which has been taught explicitly and to which students have been exposed through their reading and other media);

- Language (including reading) comprehension skills (strategies such as comprehension monitoring, questioning, paraphrasing, graphic organisers, summarising, making inferences etc. can all be explicitly taught – but with the understanding that these are only successful when the student understands the vocabulary in the text and has some grasp of the underlying concepts);
- The arithmetical skills and knowledge needed to perform mathematic operations accurately and fluently; and,
- Mathematical reasoning skills.

## 2) How should school quality and educational success be measured?

The quality of a school is determined by a number of factors including: the sustainable progress made by the students at the school; the established culture of the school community – across the staff, students, parents and the wider community; the level of resiliency of the students attending the school and the respect they hold for each other, the staff and their physical environment. It is important that all students should make at least one year's academic progress every 12 months. A successful school is one that has systems in place capturing the individual progress made by every student and can demonstrate that the students in their school have met, or exceeded, expectations in multiple areas of the curriculum. A successful school also focuses on the cumulative development of positive individual and community values, ethical behaviour and self-awareness. In the report released by the Florida Center for Reading Research (Teaching all Students to Read: Practices from Reading First Schools with Strong Intervention Outcomes) seven common traits observed in successful schools were identified – strong leadership, positive belief and teacher dedication, data utilisation and analysis, effective time-tabling, professional development, evidence-based intervention programs, and parent involvement.

In order to determine whether a meaningful impact on learning has been made, it is important to have clearly defined goals for success (What does it mean to write a well-structured sentence? What does it mean to read fluently at age-appropriate levels? What does it mean to display empathy to fellow students? What changes should we see for each student over a specified time period?) and then determine (often collectively) whether the student has developed the skills necessary to achieve success. The emphasis should be on “skills not scores” (Hattie, 2016). This highlights the importance of setting aside time for teaching staff to collectively: develop specialist knowledge in specific subjects and programs; review school data and current research; set term, year-level and individual student goals; and, monitor student progress and review outcomes achieved.

Evidence suggests that successful schools collect and use data effectively. They make use of screening to identify the required reach of instruction and to pinpoint any

students with gaps in their foundation skills. They undertake regular formative and summative assessments designed to ensure that student learning is taking place (ongoing curriculum-based assessment) and that the students are improving over time in line with expectations.

Although it is important to review NAPLAN (and other) data according to SEI, it is also important not to limit the expectations we have of any group of students. There are many examples, both in Australia and overseas, of successful schools in low SES areas significantly out-performing schools in high SES areas.

The quality of a school can also be viewed through the lens of disability and inclusion. A high quality school will have systems in place to ensure that any student with a disability (including students with learning disorders – such as dyslexia) will be supported well and that efforts will be made to address their areas of weakness (through evidence-based, targeted intervention) and to ensure they have full access to the curriculum.

In summary: School quality and educational success should be measured by considering:

- Factors including (but not limited to): the sustainable progress made by the students at the school; the established culture of the school community; the level of resiliency of the students attending the school and the respect they hold for others;
- The importance of all students making at least one year's academic progress every 12 months;
- The cumulative development of positive individual and community values, ethical behaviour and self-awareness;
- The use of screening to determine the instructional reach required in every class and to identify students in need of additional intervention;
- The judicious use of regular formative and summative assessments designed to ensure that students are improving over time and in line with expectations; and,
- The approach taken by the school, including written policies and procedures, to ensure that all students with imputed or diagnosed disability are supported and included appropriately – with the provision of effective intervention and appropriate adjustments (to ensure inclusion).

What can we do to improve and how can we support ongoing improvement over time?

- 3) How could schools funding be used more effectively and efficiently (at the classroom, school or system level) to have a significant impact on learning

outcomes for all students including disadvantaged and vulnerable students and academically advanced students?

In response to declining literacy and numeracy standards and (some claim) the publication of international league tables (such as PISA), school systems in other parts of the world have been focused on improving student performance. The attempts have utilised current research and have aimed to improve student outcomes without a significant increase in education funding. In the U.S. many states have moved towards a Response to Intervention (RTI) model, whereas in England, the approach taken was labelled the Improving School Performance (ISP) model. In essence, these two models have much in common and closely resemble the approaches taken in other areas – including Singapore and Hong Kong.

The RTI model has a number of features including: a multi-tiered approach to instruction, intervention and support; the effective collection of and utilisation of data; clearly articulated whole-school plans; regular assessment of progress made; a strong focus on early, explicit high quality instruction; and, the delivery of evidence-based intervention by well-trained teachers for those students who are either falling behind, or who have already fallen behind. The RTI approach usually includes three waves (or tiers) of instruction and intervention to ensure that all students are offered the best possible chance of success. The first wave of instruction includes screening (to identify the reach of instruction required in every classroom from the lowest achieving students to the highest achieving students requiring differentiated instruction), high quality instruction (in the early years this includes the explicit teaching of phonemic awareness, structured synthetic phonics, vocabulary, spelling and language comprehension strategies) and frequent curriculum-based assessment to ensure that all students are making progress. The second wave of instruction (and intervention) provides students who are falling behind with additional instruction delivered explicitly with greater intensity (usually in small groups) and targeted at the area of weakness. The third wave of instruction (and intervention) is provided to those students with significant gaps in their skill set and conceptual knowledge (particularly in literacy, numeracy and academic and social behaviours) and is delivered by well-trained teachers (or, in some cases, education assistants) in either very small groups or one-to-one.

Students with learning disorders, such as dyslexia, are often in need of third wave support but rarely receive it. This is mainly because they are frequently lost in the large numbers of students struggling. It is undoubtedly the case that if both wave one and wave two were delivered well – there would only be a small number of students requiring wave three intervention – and students with learning disorders would be amongst them.

The RTI model also benefits academically advanced students through early identification (screening) and the provision of an individualised response.

The Improving School Performance (ISP) model introduced in English schools resulted in accelerated improvements (well beyond the national average) for students in low SES areas. The key components of the ISP approach were in line with the RTI model, with perhaps a stronger emphasis on continuous professional development for all staff and frequent monitoring of all students (by collegiate teaching teams) against previously determined teaching and learning goals. There was also greater emphasis placed on the 'non-negotiables' of explicit instruction, daily phonics instruction, and frequent formative assessment.

These approaches do not require ongoing higher levels of funding – although they may require an initial input of funds to address gaps in teacher knowledge and improved resourcing.

- What actions can be taken to improve practice and outcomes?

As outlined above, in order to improve student outcomes the delivery of services at the school level needs to change. Strong improvements have been gained through the introduction of models such as the RTI or ISP approach. Over the past two years, the Dyslexia-SPELD Foundation (DSF) has been working closely with twenty schools in the Pilbara region in order to introduce an RTI model. All staff needed additional training – in RTI, the three waves of instruction and intervention, evidence-based literacy and numeracy instruction (and intervention) and explicit instruction. With high staff turnover in the area this has required repeated workshops but the results are beginning to be evident.

Essentially, in order to improve outcomes, both pre-service and in-service training needs to be provided. This includes:

- Improving preservice training of all teachers, including knowledge of evidence-based literacy and numeracy programs.
- Improve in-service training of current teachers.
- Provide all teachers with access to the on-line courses currently being developed (by organisations such as DSF)
- Ensure all State and Territory departments of education revisit/rethink the arguments around whole language and balanced literacy. The approach to teaching literacy in schools must be based on evidence rather than theory or anecdote.

4) Are there any new or emerging areas for action which could lead to large gains in student improvement that need further development or testing?

- a. What are they and how could they be further developed?

See responses above.

Are there barriers to implementing these improvements?

5) If yes, what are they and how could these be overcome?

Unfortunately, encouraging universities to change direction in their approach to teacher education has proved difficult. It is clear that they are of the view that the curriculum they offer is already overcrowded and including additional content such as detailed courses in literacy and numeracy instruction seems unlikely. This also doesn't provide an opportunity to up-skill existing teachers.

External providers, such as DSF, are uniquely positioned to develop comprehensive web-based courses for educators, focusing on providing up-to-date evidence-based information on how to teach and/or remediate children and adults struggling to read (which aligns with longitudinal research).

DSF is currently completing a series of online modules aimed at enabling and empowering teachers or other staff, to explicitly address the needs of students who are struggling, in order to maximise the learning outcomes of all learners.

We are also working on an on-line certificate in reading instruction – covering the development of reading skills from oral language through to reading fluency – that will be suitable for both pre-service and existing teachers.