
Reading Pledge

The Reading Pledge is an evidence-based framework for schools to reduce the number of children who finish primary school unable to read proficiently. The entire Reading Pledge publication can be accessed via the link at the end of this excerpt.

Pledge

To reduce to near zero the number of children who finish primary school unable to read, or who struggle with reading in secondary school, by providing both primary and secondary school teachers with the training and resources they need to deliver targeted assessments and effectively address the needs of those students who are struggling, through the provision of effective intervention.

Rationale

Every year since the National Assessment Program for Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) was implemented in 2008, a substantial number of students have not met the literacy standards necessary to make good progress in education. In 2023, almost 90,000 Year 7 students were placed in the lowest two standards, indicating that they did not meet the ‘Strong’ proficiency standard of ‘challenging but reasonable expectations’ in reading. Of these, close to 27,000 were in the lowest proficiency standard and identified as ‘needs additional support’. There are too many students leaving primary school not meeting proficiency standards in reading.

Action

Every child who does not meet the designated achievement benchmark in the Year 1 Phonics Check (or similar assessment) or the NAPLAN Reading assessments is referred for standardised reading assessments and, based on those results, provided with appropriate evidence-informed interventions.

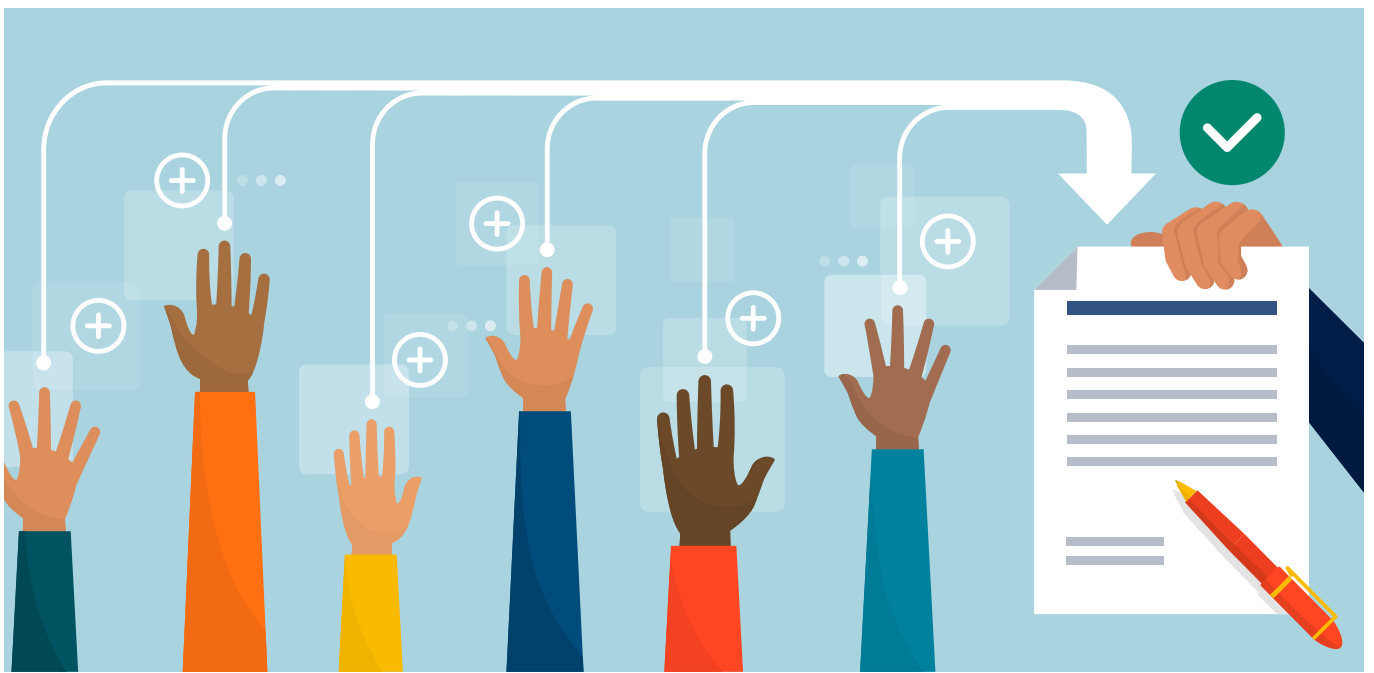
Background to the Reading Pledge

The Primary Reading Pledge published in 2020 highlighted the number of students who were unable to read well after seven years of primary school and that these students should have been provided with support much earlier in their education. It provided an evidence-based framework for schools and systems to use to reduce this number. The Primary Reading Pledge said:

Thousands of children each year are being denied this basic right, most of whom are casualties of a system that has become accustomed to an unacceptable rate of failure.

Many schools adopted the Pledge and have been working towards a goal of 100% literacy. This updated version, called the Reading Pledge, also extends the framework and guidance on intervention and assessment to secondary schools.





The Reading Pledge is both a call to action for all those involved in education, and a practical and useful tool for schools. It once again draws on the combined expertise and experience of two organisations (Five from Five and Learning Difficulties Australia) who have been supporting teachers to help struggling readers for, in some cases, decades.

NAPLAN results for previous cohorts have shown that every year, similar numbers of students begin their secondary education without the necessary literacy skills to enable them to succeed in education and beyond.

Nor is it the case that these students are identified for the first time in Year 7. Analysis of longitudinal data has shown that 72% of students identified as struggling readers in NAPLAN Year 3 were still struggling in Year 5, and 88% of students identified as struggling readers in Year 7 were still struggling in Year 9 ([Productivity Commission, 2022](#)).

The NAPLAN assessments provide an opportunity to identify every child in need of support and for a systematic response to be implemented. Currently, there is little guidance and support for schools to respond to NAPLAN results for low achieving students.

Response to Intervention (RtI) is a tiered model of instruction and intervention for students experiencing difficulties in acquiring basic skills and appropriate social behaviours ([Fletcher & Vaughn, 2009](#)). The goal of RtI is to provide screening and/or assessment, deliver effective intervention, monitor

student progress and then use the students' responses to the intervention provided to determine 'next steps'.

RtI typically has three 'tiers' of instruction and intervention. With initial whole-class reading instruction based on evidence-based best practice (Tier 1), most students will get off to a good start in learning to read. Those students who begin to fall behind, often operationally defined as those in the bottom 25% of what might be expected for the age cohort, are then offered Tier 2 instruction.

Tier 3 intervention is even more intensive, tailored to the specific needs of the individual student, and preferably provided by a reading expert. If RtI is implemented well, only a very small number of children are likely to require this level of support on a continuing basis, but they may need it for several years.

Students should receive the instruction and intervention they need

The best setting for students to learn to read is primary school. Ideally, all students will receive exemplary Tier 1 reading instruction. This should be the expectation for all schools. Application of the RtI model will identify students who need additional support and provide intervention early. This will result in fewer students progressing to secondary school without adequate reading skills.

Once students reach secondary school, it is much more difficult to catch them up for several reasons. First, the skills gap is often very wide so it can

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take a long time for them to reach the level of their peers (Colleu Terradas, 2023). Second, many students have developed anxiety or low self-concept around reading, well before they reach adolescence (McArthur, 2022). Third, finding time in the secondary school timetable for intervention is challenging. Finally, few secondary schools have teachers with specialist literacy skills (de Haan, 2021).

The costs associated with intervention on this scale are considerable but not unrealistic, especially if managed efficiently at a systemic or sector level. The costs of not intervening through intergenerational impacts on employment, income, health, welfare and crime are far greater. It has been estimated that illiteracy costs the economy up to \$44 billion each year. With adequate investment to ensure appropriate interventions reach the students who need it and evidence-based reading instruction accessible to all Australian students, it is estimated that a 13-fold return on this investment is possible (Del Rio & Jones, 2023).

While NAPLAN can and should be used as a source of information to identify students who need intervention in Years 3 and 5, evidence-based intervention should be provided in schools as a matter of course much earlier than Year 3. All students in Foundation to Year 2 should be given valid and reliable screening and progress monitoring assessments in reading subskills, including the Year 1 Phonics Screening Check. This is a recommendation of the expert panel report as well as a recent report from the Grattan Institute (Hunter et al., 2023; O'Brien et al., 2023).

The Year 1 Phonics Screening Check is already being used or will be used as a systemic assessment in South Australia, New South Wales, Tasmania and Queensland. Data from South Australia in 2023 show that 71% of Year 1 students achieved the benchmark score of 28/40, up from 43% in 2018 (Government of South

Australia, 2018, 2023). This indicates that significant improvement has already occurred in South Australia, but further improvements are required to classroom reading instruction (Tier 1 in the RtI model). In New South Wales, data for 2023 showed 59% of Year 1 students met the benchmark, an increase of two percentage points since 2021 (NSW Government, 2023). Tasmania's results are not yet available, and Queensland will implement the assessment from 2024.

Provision of early intervention can represent a significant investment, but effective intervention at this stage will reduce the number of children requiring intervention in Year 3 and Year 5, at which stage their difficulties will be harder and more expensive to remediate.

Numerous reading interventions are available and are currently being used by schools. Almost all schools offer reading support in some form. However, reading intervention is not consistently evidence-based and targeted, and is often limited to the first few years of school – sometimes due to lack of knowledge of evidence-based intervention and sometimes due to lack of resources and support. Children who continue to struggle with reading after receiving some (but not enough) early support will be among the children identified as 'needing additional support' or 'developing' in NAPLAN.

Ideally, government and system policy would enable and facilitate the provision of evidence-based supports for struggling readers, but schools do not have to wait for this to happen. There are actions that schools can take using existing resources and processes. The Reading Pledge provides a framework and lists of valid assessments and evidence-based and evidence-informed interventions.

The best setting for students to learn to read is primary school.

The entire Reading Pledge can be downloaded for free from <https://fivefromfive.com.au/reading-pledge-2024/>.