

Legal and Social Issues Committee
Victorian Legislative Council
Victorian Government

13 October 2023

Dear Committee members

Re. Grattan submission to the Victorian Legislative Council Legal and Social Issues Committee's Inquiry into the State Education System in Victoria

This submission identifies reform options for the Victorian government, drawing on Grattan Institute's research on school workforce strategy, teaching quality, curriculum materials, and school improvement. It focuses primarily on the first five Terms of Reference, related to (1) Victorian student learning outcomes; (2) the state of the teaching profession in Victoria; (3) student wellbeing; (4) the administrative burden on teachers; and (5) best practice in other jurisdictions and educational settings.

1. Victorian student learning outcomes

Too many Victorian teenagers are not reaching minimum proficiency standards. The OECD's 2018 Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) test showed that one in three Victorian 15-year-olds fall short of Australia's proficient reading standard and almost half fall short in maths.¹ Australia also had fewer high achievers in reading and maths, compared to the top PISA performers on the assessment (see Figure 1.1).

Analysis of the 2023 NAPLAN data also shows that a large number of students are falling below learning expectations. About one in three Year 9 students are below proficiency in both reading and numeracy (see Figure 1.2).² And the results are much worse for disadvantaged students – students whose parents did not finish school are almost twice as likely to fall short of proficiency.

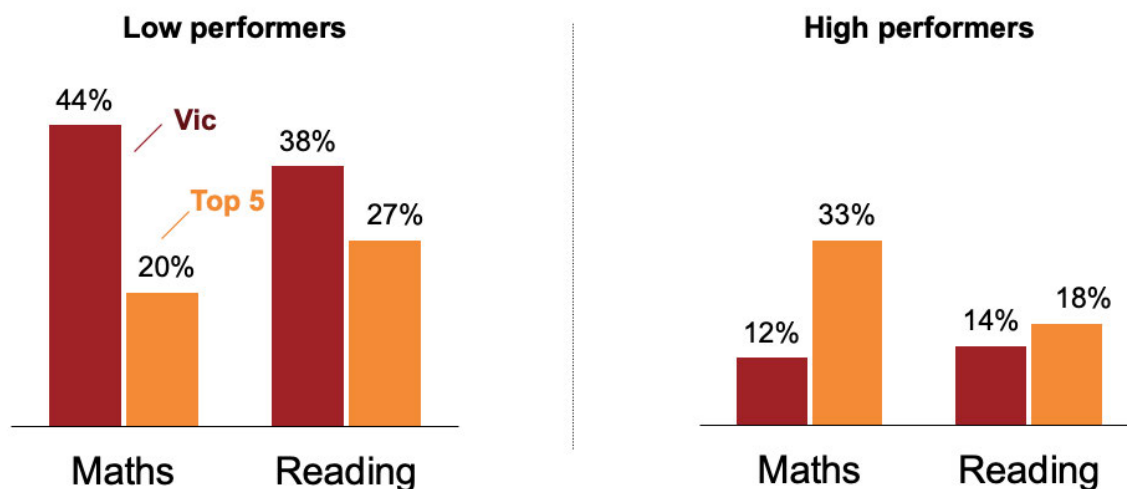
Analysis of the 2022 NAPLAN data shows that the gap in reading between the most advantaged and disadvantaged students in Victoria is already wide. By the time they reach Year 3, students whose parents did not finish school are the equivalent of 2 years and 3 months behind in their learning compared to students whose parents went to university. By Year 9, this gap more than doubles to 4 years and 8 months of learning (Figure 1.3).

¹ Students who are proficient at PISA Level 3 or above are assessed as having attained Australia's National Proficient Standard, and having demonstrated more than the minimum skills expected in the domain. See Thomson, S., Bortolotto, L. D., Underwood, C. and Schmidt, M. *PISA 2018: Reporting Australia's Results Volume I Student Performance*. Australian Council for Educational Research. <https://research.acer.edu.au/ozp/sa/35/>

² Students identified as below proficiency are those in the Need Additional Support or Developing categories.

Figure 1.1: What PISA tells us

Percentage in each proficiency band, by subject, Victoria & 'Top 5', PISA 2018

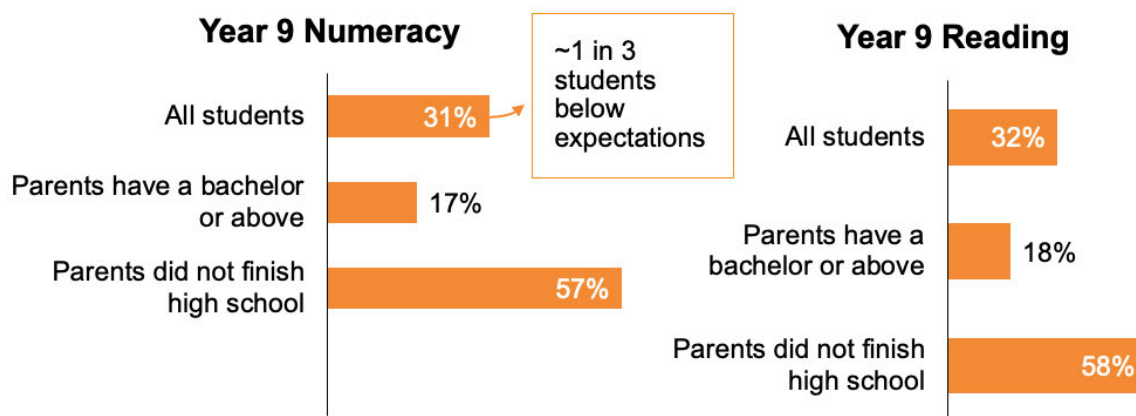


Notes: Top five countries/economies for Maths includes B S J Z (Beijing, Shanghai, Jiangsu and Zhejiang), Singapore, Macao (China), Hong Kong and Taiwan. Top five for Reading includes B S J Z, Singapore, Macao, Hong Kong (China), Estonia. Top five for science includes B S J Z, Singapore, Macao (China), Estonia, and Japan. Below proficient includes Levels 1 and 2. High performers includes Levels 5 and 6.

Source: OECD PISA (2018); Thomson De Bortoli Underwood and Schmid (Australian Council for Educational Research) (2019) PISA 2018: Reporting Australia's Results Volume I Student Performance

Figure 1.2: What NAPLAN tells us

Percentage of Year 9 students identified as **below expectations**, Vic NAPLAN 2023

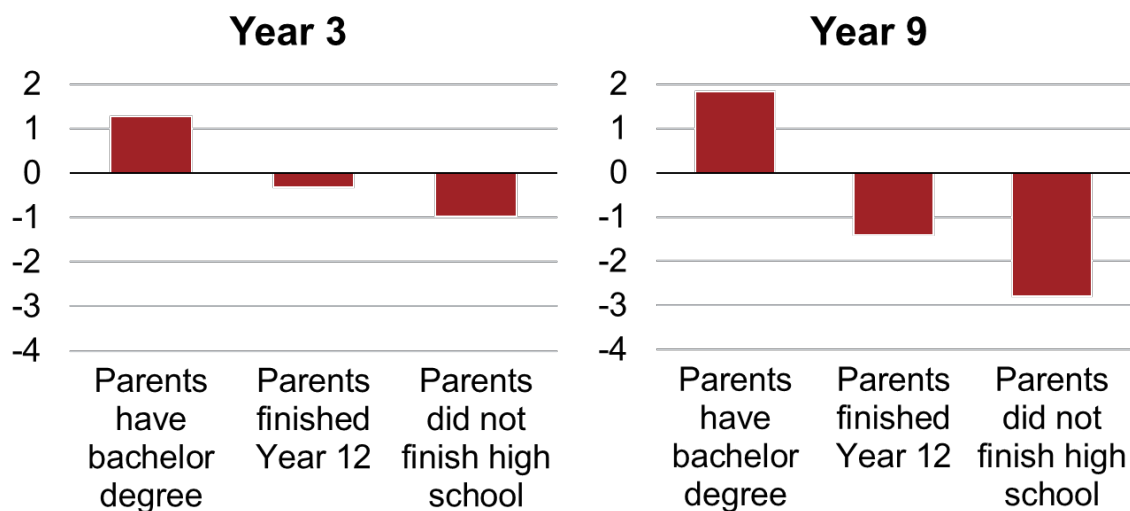


Notes: Students identified as 'Below expectations' are those in the "Need Additional Support" or 'Developing' categories. Broadly similar patterns are observed for other year groups. About 40,000 Year 9 students whose parents have a bachelor or degree or above sat the test and completed at least one question. About 7,000 students whose parents whose highest education level is Year 11 or below sat the test and completed at least one question.

Source: ACARA (2023). NAPLAN results.

Figure 1.3: We must do more to tackle under-achievement in Australia

Number of years Victorian students are behind, or ahead, of their expected reading level, by parents' education, 2022



Notes: Expected year level is the cohort average for non Indigenous students in major cities between 2010 and 2017
 Source: Grattan analysis of 2022 NAPLAN data

In comparison with other states, Victoria has a relatively advantaged student population. Grattan Institute’s 2018 report, [Measuring student progress: A state-by-state report card](#), showed that after taking account of socio-economic factors, Victorian students’ learning progress is – on the whole – no different to the national average (Attachment A). Our updated analysis shows that the picture between 2012 and 2022 looks similar. This suggests Victoria could do more to improve student outcomes.

Section 5 of this submission outlines practical reforms that can improve student learning, including mandating the national Year 1 Phonics Check,³ embedding multi-tiered systems of support in all schools, and ensuring all schools have access to high-quality curriculum materials.

2. The state of the teaching profession in Victoria

To attract and retain more teachers, and boost the productivity of the existing workforce, Australian governments should create new expert teacher career paths to provide more subject-specific, hands-on instructional leadership in schools and expert, subject-specific leadership across the system.

Grattan's previous research on this topic, set out in *Top Teachers: sharing expertise to improve teaching* (2020), shows that the existing teaching career path needs to be reformed so that Australia's top teachers can lead professional learning effectively in schools (Attachment B). To this end, we propose that three new permanent positions should be created: Instructional Specialists, Master Teachers, and Principal Master Teachers. These roles would enable expert teachers with recognised skills and dedicated responsibilities to work with classroom teachers to build quality practice.

Instructional Specialists would work within a given school to set the standard for good teaching in their subject area (e.g. Maths teaching), strengthening teachers' classroom skills – helping teachers understand not just 'what to do' but 'how to do it' – and spreading evidence-informed practices. They would be paid about \$40,000 more than the highest standard pay rate for teachers. The position would be limited to about 8 per cent of teachers.

Master Teachers would be responsible for improving subject-specific teaching (e.g. Maths teaching) across multiple schools by coordinating professional learning, supporting Instructional Specialists, and connecting schools with research. They would be paid about \$80,000 more than the highest standard pay rate for teachers. This position should be limited to about 1 per cent of teachers.

Master Teachers would help bring rigor and coherence to professional judgements about best practice in their subject, and act as system-level brokers, facilitating learning between system leaders, schools, and teachers.

Principal Master Teachers would be the subject-specific experts for the state, overseeing the work of Master Teachers and leading instruction in their subject across the state. Principal Master Teachers would be experts in curriculum design and pedagogy in their subject areas, bridging the divide between research and classroom practice.

At present, the Victorian government has invested in creating instructional leadership roles across the system through 'Learning Specialist' and 'Master Teacher' roles. The government should review these roles as part of their system-wide workforce strategy to ensure that:

- The scope of each role is right.
 - Master Teachers should be subject specialists, allocated to a region and working with 15-to-30 schools

³ The national Year 1 Phonics Screening Check is available on the Federal Department of Education's Literacy Hub. The Federal Government has invested \$10.8 million to make this assessment and associated professional learning free of charge to teachers, school leaders, and families. See: Department of Education, (2023). *Year 1 Phonics Check*. Australian Government. <https://www.education.gov.au/australian-curriculum/year-1-phonics-check>

- Learning Specialists should also be subject specialists, with substantial time release (at least 0.3-to-0.5 FTE, depending on school size).
- Staff have the right skills for their role.
 - A rigorous application process is required to ensure that potential applicants have the requisite knowledge and skills, and to enable the Department to upskill potential applicants (as necessary) in areas that align with system-level priorities.
 - Staff in the new positions must receive robust training on evidence-based and subject-specific teaching practice, school- and system-wide approaches to effective instruction and assessment, coaching techniques, and change management.
- The two roles are designed to work together.
 - Learning Specialist work should be guided and overseen by a Master Teacher in the same subject and area who is in and out of schools, observing practice and providing coaching support to Learning Specialists.
 - Master Teachers should be guided and overseen by a Principal Master Teacher, who would be the subject-specific expert in the state.

3. Student wellbeing

Schools are a key environment beyond the home for nearly all Australian children. This means that experience at school can be either a risk factor or protective factor for a child's mental health. Students' sense of belonging at school shapes their emotions, behaviour, and engagement, all of which influence their academic performance.⁴ This is particularly important for students from lower socio-economic backgrounds, who often have a weaker sense of belonging to school.⁵

Schools can promote a sense of belonging by fostering positive relationships, minimising bullying, and implementing school-wide behaviour management strategies, routines, and supports.⁶ Without these strategies, schools can struggle to manage poor behaviour.⁷

Australia has more work to do here. Australian students find their classes considerably more disruptive than students in other OECD countries. In 2018, Australia ranked 69 out of the 76 economies surveyed for the OECD's index of disciplinary climate.⁸

⁴ Australian Education and Research Organisation (2023). *Encouraging a sense of belonging and connectedness in primary schools*. <https://www.edresearch.edu.au/resources/encouraging-sense-of-belonging-and-connectedness-in-primary-schools>

⁵ See Figure 2 on p. 4: Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation (2020). *Supporting students' sense of belonging: Every student is known, valued and cared for in our schools*. NSW Department of Education. <https://education.nsw.gov.au/content/dam/ma-n-education/about-us/education-data/cese/2020-supporting-students-sense-of-belonging.pdf>

⁶ Australian Education and Research Organisation (2023). *Encouraging a sense of belonging and connectedness in primary schools*. <https://www.edresearch.edu.au/resources/encouraging-sense-of-belonging-and-connectedness-in-primary-schools>; Shoeffe, S., Toon, D., Rosenbrock, M. and Matthew, H. *Effective behaviour supports in schools*. Evidence for Learning. <https://evidenceforlearning.org.au/education-evidence/guidance-reports/effective-behaviour-supports-in-schools>; and Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation (2020). *Supporting students' sense of belonging: Every student is known, valued and cared for in our schools*. NSW Department of Education. <https://education.nsw.gov.au/content/dam/ma-n-education/about-us/education-data/cese/2020-supporting-students-sense-of-belonging.pdf>

⁷ Australian Education and Research Organisation (2021). *Focused classrooms: Managing the classroom to maximise learning*. <https://www.edresearch.edu.au/sites/default/files/2021-02/AERO-Trained-and-tested-guidance-Focused-classrooms.pdf>

⁸ This index is based on students' responses to questions such as how often students don't listen to what the teacher says, or that the teacher has to wait a long time for students to quieten down. See Table III.B1.3.1 pp. 262–263, in Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (2019). *PISA 2018 results (Volume III) : What school life means for students' lives*. <https://doi.org/10.1787/19963777>.

Australia's disruptive classrooms have a negative impact on students and teachers. Students report feeling more engaged with their learning when they feel teachers care about them and are in control of the classroom.⁹ And poor student behaviour is a key reason why a quarter of Australian teachers report feeling unsafe at work.¹⁰

To improve student wellbeing, schools should also focus on closing learning gaps. Improving student wellbeing and academic achievement should not be seen as a trade-off in which prioritising one means neglecting the other.¹¹ When students develop a sense that they are succeeding academically, it boosts their self-esteem.¹² This makes students' mastery over learning an important protective factor for their wellbeing.¹³

The reverse is also true. Students who struggle significantly with learning gaps that are not addressed can face declining mental health outcomes, which in turn can undermine future learning. Being unable to grasp content, and follow an explanation, can damage students' perception of their competence and self-worth.¹⁴

This is why effective teaching matters for students' wellbeing and resilience.¹⁵ The reciprocal relationship between academic achievement and wellbeing means that schools can significantly contribute to students' wellbeing by excelling in the core business of teaching and learning.¹⁶

But schools should not – and cannot – be solely responsible for the mental health and wellbeing of students. If Australia places this expectation on schools, it risks stretching the role of teachers and school leaders beyond both their expertise and their capacity.

While schools can play an important role in creating safe and inclusive environments that promote good mental health and wellbeing, there are many aspects of student mental health and wellbeing that need to be addressed outside the school gates.

Addressing students' wellbeing requires schools to work in partnership with health and social service providers. Schools are uniquely placed to identify and refer students who require further support. To do this, teachers and school leaders need better access to a health and social services sector that integrates more effectively with schools and provides students with the mental health care and support they need.

⁹ Uden, J. M. v., R tzen, H. and P eters, J. M. "Engag ng students: The ro e of teacher be efs and nterpersona teacher behav or n foster ng student engagement n vocat ona educat on". *Teaching and Teacher Education* 37, pp. 21–32.

¹⁰ Longmu r, F., Cordoba, B. G., Ph ps, M., A en, P. K.-A. and Moharam , M. *Australian teachers' perceptions of their work in 2022*. Monash Un vers ty. <https://do.org/10.26180/21212891>

¹¹ C arke, T. (2020). "Ch dren s we be ng and the r academ c ach evement: The dangerous d scourse of trade-offs n educat on". *Theory and Research in Education* 18.3, pp. 263–294. <https://do.org/10.1177/1477878520980197>

¹² Cah , H., Bead e, S., Farre y, A., Forster, R. and Sm th, K. (2014). *Building resilience in children and young people: A literature review for the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (DEECD)*. Youth Research Centre, Me bourne Graduate Schoo of Educat on. <https://do.org/10.26180/21212891>

¹³ Ib d.

¹⁴ O Conne , M. E., Boat, T. and Warner, K. E. *Preventing Mental Emotional and Behavioral Disorders Among Young People: Progress and Possibilities*. ISBN: 978-0-309-12674-8. <http://www.ncb.n.m.n.h.gov/books/NBK32775/>

¹⁵ Lera et a (2022). Lera, M.-J., Leon-Perez, J. M. and Ru z-Zorr a, P. "Effect ve Educat ona Pract ces and Students We -be ng: The Med at ng Ro e of Students Se f-eff cacy". *Current Psychology*.

¹⁶ Qu nn, P. and Duckworth, A. (2007). "Happ ness and Academ c Ach evement: Ev dence for Rec proca Causa ty". *Annual Meeting of the American Psychological Society* 4,; and Qu nn and Duckworth (2007); and Ke nkorres et a (2020). Ke nkorres, R., Stang, J. and McE vany, N. "A ong tud na ana ys of rec proca re at ons between students we -be ng and academ c ach evement". *Journal for educational research online* 12.2, pp. 114–165.

The Victorian government should review the interactions between the health, community services, and school education systems to ensure children and young people – and their families – receive the support they need so that students get to school each day ‘ready to learn’.

4. The administrative burden on teachers

Effective teaching requires high levels of knowledge and skill, and substantial time for preparation. Developing and sustaining effective classroom teaching day in, day out, does not just happen by itself.

Over the past few decades, our expectations about what schools and teachers should deliver have increased. Without careful reconsideration of what we are expecting teachers to do in the time available, we risk pulling teachers in so many different directions that they find it hard to teach effectively.

On this issue we highlight Grattan’s recent report, [Making Time for Great Teaching](#) (January 2022), which emphasises the increasing expectations of schools and teachers over time. The report argues for a more effective use of school workforces, streamlined workloads involved in core teaching activities, and increased flexibility for school leaders to better balance teacher workloads (see Attachment C).

Part of the research we conducted for the report was a 2021 survey of more than 5,400 teachers and school leaders across Australia. The survey sounded the alarm on the current situation in schools. The vast majority of teachers (92 per cent) said they ‘always’ or ‘frequently’ do not have enough time to prepare for effective teaching – the core part of their role. If teachers are not well prepared, student learning suffers.

Governments have devoted a lot of attention to reducing onerous administration and paperwork in teachers’ jobs. This is certainly an important issue: many teachers are concerned about unnecessary administration and bureaucracy, clunky data systems, and inefficient meetings. But OECD survey data suggests Australian teachers actually don’t spend much time on administration and bureaucracy: 33 per cent of their time each week is spent on ‘core’ teaching activities outside the classroom, such as correcting student work, preparing for lessons, team work and professional development. This is four times as much as the amount of time (8 per cent) they spend on general administrative activities (see Figure 4.1, p. 24).

Governments have tended to overlook other workload reforms that could have a bigger impact. Our research on teacher workload identifies a range of important options for reform that would lift school effectiveness by giving teachers the opportunity to focus on effective preparation for the classroom.

Governments should focus on three reform areas in particular:

- improving the deployment of the wider school workforce, including school specialists and support staff, so teachers can deliver high-quality classroom instruction;
- streamlining the workload involved in core teaching activities, to reduce the need for teachers to ‘re-invent the wheel’ in curriculum and lesson planning;
- increasing school leaders’ flexibility to strike a sensible balance between class sizes and teachers’ face-to-face teaching time, and to smooth out workloads over the school year by scheduling more time for teachers to work together on preparation activities in term breaks.

The first of these reforms relates to the most efficient and effective deployment of the wider workforce in our schools, including teachers, specialist staff, teaching assistants and other support

staff. In the past, Grattan Institute has called on federal and state education ministers to commit to a nationwide evaluation of how the substantial teaching assistant workforce is currently deployed in schools and to examine concrete options to deploy this workforce more effectively, with the twin goals of improving student outcomes and alleviating workload pressures on teachers.

Our August 2022 opinion editorial, [Making Better Use of Teaching Assistants](#), published in The Conversation (see Attachment D), highlighted the need to improve the deployment of teaching assistants (TAs) in Australian schools. We estimate that Australia spends more than \$5 billion on TAs each year, which accounts for about 8 per cent of recurrent school expenditure. There are more than 105,000 TAs working in classrooms across the country today, almost a four-fold increase since 1990 – well above the increase in students and teachers over that period. Yet Australian governments know very little about what teaching assistants do in practice and how principals and teachers can better support them to maximise benefits for school communities.

Improving the way schools use specialist staff and teaching assistants to provide assistance to individual students and small groups can deliver big improvements in student outcomes. In addition, teaching assistants and other support staff can significantly reduce the time teachers spend on tasks that do not require teaching expertise, such as routine administration, yard duty and supervision of extra-curricular activities.

The second reform area listed above, the streamlining of teachers' curriculum planning, is considered in detail in Section 5d below.

We urge the Victorian government to consider these first two reforms before reducing face-to-face teaching time or class sizes. Victorian government schools already have relatively low face-to-face teaching time and class sizes. At the most basic level, total spending on teacher salaries is determined by the total number of teachers employed and average teacher salary levels. The number of teachers employed is determined largely by teachers' mandated face-to-face teaching hours and class sizes (student instructional time being fixed). Changing teaching hours and class sizes can have a large impact on total spending on teacher salaries, which accounts for a major proportion of government spending on schools.

Reducing teachers' face-to-face teaching hours or reducing class sizes exacerbates pressure on government budgets and teacher supply. Therefore, the Victorian government should first look at other ways of ensuring that workloads remain sustainable.

5. Best practice in other jurisdictions and educational settings

The following section outlines practical reforms that the Victorian government can make to boost student learning outcomes that have been successfully implemented in other jurisdictions. Further detail on each is provided in Grattan's recent submission to the Commonwealth Government's Expert Panel NSRA review: [A better and fairer education system: Submission to the review to inform the next National School Reform Agreement](#), (August 2023) (Attachment E).

a. Set ambitious targets and report on progress

The Victorian Government should prioritise student learning and set ambitious targets for student academic performance. International jurisdictions such as Ireland, Ontario in Canada, and Mississippi in the US, show that significant improvement is possible. We should follow their lead.

In 2011, the Irish *National Strategy for Numeracy and Literacy* set specific targets to improve reading and maths, in particular setting targets to lift poor performers and stretch high achievers.¹⁷ Later, Ireland added targets for closing the gap between students from disadvantaged and advantaged schools.¹⁸

The strategy aimed to improve reading and numeracy performance – as measured by Ireland’s national assessments and by PISA – by five percentage points over nine years.¹⁹ In the event, Ireland over-shot most of its original targets in half the time.²⁰ This was reflected in improved performance against other international benchmarks. In the 2011 PIRLS reading assessment, 85 per cent of Irish Year 4 students were identified as proficient readers.²¹ By 2016, the proportion had improved to 89 per cent, pushing Ireland’s international ranking up from 10th place to 4th place.²²

Australian governments should adopt ambitious academic targets for reading and numeracy in the next NSRA. The new NAPLAN proficiency categories are likely to be the best measure by which to set targets and monitor system performance over time. The new proficiency benchmark is set higher than the old NAPLAN ‘national minimum standard’, which was too low, and misidentified too many struggling students as being on track with their learning.²³

Under the new proficiency categories, students’ NAPLAN performance is now rated as either ‘exceeding’ (the strongest performers), ‘strong’, ‘developing’, or ‘needs additional support’ (the weakest performers).

Students in the top two categories have demonstrated proficiency, while students in the bottom two have not.²⁴ According to the Australian Curriculum, Assessment, and Reporting Authority (ACARA), the proficiency cut-off point (between the ‘strong’ and ‘developing’ categories) has been set at ‘a

¹⁷ The 2011 strategy set targets to increase the percentages of primary children performing at Level 3 or higher (i.e. at the highest levels) in the National Assessment of Mathematics and English Reading by at least 5 percentage points at both second class and sixth class by 2020 and to reduce the percentage of children performing at or below Level 1 (i.e. minimum level) in the National Assessment of Mathematics and English Reading by at least 5 percentage points at both second class and sixth class by 2020. At the post-primary level, the 2011 strategy set targets to increase the percentage of 15-year-old students performing at or above Level 4 (i.e. at the higher levels) in PISA reading literacy and numeracy tests by at least 5 percentage points by 2020 and to have the percentage of 15-year-old students performing at or below Level 1 (the lowest level) in PISA reading literacy and numeracy tests by 2020. See Ireland Department of Education, R. of and Skills (2011). *Literacy and Numeracy for learning and life: The National Strategy to Improve Literacy and Numeracy among Children and Young People 2011-2020*. https://curriculumonline.ie/getmedia/f4b76380-9c0c-4543-aa6b-f4e7074597e2/HMP7_Literacy_and_Numeracy_Strategy_English.pdf.

¹⁸ Ireland Department of Education and Skills (2017) *National Strategy: Literacy and Numeracy for learning and life 2011-2020. Interim Review: 2011-2016 New Targets: 2017-2020*. <https://assets.gov.ie/24960/93c455d4440246cf8a701b9e0b0a2d65.pdf>

¹⁹ Ireland Department of Education, R. of and Skills (2011). *Literacy and Numeracy for learning and life: The National Strategy to Improve Literacy and Numeracy among Children and Young People 2011-2020*. https://curriculumonline.ie/getmedia/f4b76380-9c0c-4543-aa6b-f4e7074597e2/HMP7_Literacy_and_Numeracy_Strategy_English.pdf.

²⁰ Ireland Department of Education and Skills (2017) *National Strategy: Literacy and Numeracy for learning and life 2011-2020. Interim Review: 2011-2016 New Targets: 2017-2020*. <https://assets.gov.ie/24960/93c455d4440246cf8a701b9e0b0a2d65.pdf>

²¹ Thomson et al (2012). Thomson, S., Homan, K., Wernert, N., Schmidt, M., Buckley, S. and Munene, A. *Monitoring Australian year 4 student achievement internationally: TIMSS and PIRLS 2011*. Australian Council for Educational Research. https://research.acer.edu.au/cg/v/ewcontent.cg?article=1002&context=tms_p_r_s_2011

²² This ranking might have been one place lower if Croatia had participated in the 2016 test, given that its students performed better than Ireland in 2011.

²³ Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (2023). *NAPLAN Results*.

<https://www.acara.edu.au/reporting/national-report-on-schooling-n-australia/naplan-national-results>.

²⁴ According to statements by the Australian Curriculum, Assessment, and Reporting Authority (ACARA) about the new benchmarks: ibid.

reasonable expectation of student achievement at the time of testing'.²⁵ Students who fall short of this benchmark may have gaps in their foundational knowledge and skills, making it harder for them to keep up with grade-level learning expectations over time. Unless these gaps are closed quickly, students are likely to find it increasingly hard to catch up to their peers.

The Victorian Government should set a long-term goal of ensuring that at least 90 per cent of students meet this new proficiency benchmark in reading and numeracy in Years 3, 5, 7, and 9.²⁶ Students who meet the 'reasonable expectation' of achievement at each of these year levels are more likely to remain on track with their learning as academic demands increase from year to year. Proficiency in reading and numeracy are also core foundations for success in a wide range of subjects, and in life beyond school.

An ambitious but realistic intermediate target would be for each state and territory to lift the proportion of their students who meet the new NAPLAN proficient benchmark in reading and numeracy – that is, those in the 'strong' or 'exceeding' category – by 15 percentage points over the next decade to 2033.

The Victorian government should also closely track the progress it makes towards its goals. A stand-alone annual report should be tabled in Victorian Parliament that tracks progress against specific targets and reforms in order to create greater political and policy focus on the reforms needed and clearer accountability. The annual report should include sector analysis of performance, as appropriate, as well as performance for student cohorts of interest. This would boost accountability for student performance.

Transparent monitoring of progress would also be a marked improvement on Victoria's Education State targets, which used the old NAPLAN scale, not the new proficiency categories, were very broad (including targets for reading, mathematics, science, critical and creative thinking, and the arts), and have not been publicly reported on since 2019.²⁷

b. Mandate the national Year 1 Phonics Check

Universal screening is the most effective and cost-efficient way to ensure any student at risk of falling behind in their learning is identified early and given the help they need to catch up.

A student's ability to accurately decode words is a strong predictor of their future reading achievement.²⁸ It is critical that schools identify students who struggle with word decoding in the first few years of school as early as possible so that they can be provided with additional learning opportunities, such as targeted instruction. If these students still do not progress, additional screening might be necessary to identify whether they have an underlying learning difficulty or disability.

²⁵ Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (2018). ACARA noted that the new achievement levels are set using the professional judgment of panels of expert teachers.

²⁶ This acknowledges that some students may not be able to reach proficiency due to, for example, acute learning disabilities.

²⁷ Victorian Government (2022). *Education State Targets*. <https://www.vic.gov.au/education-state-targets>

²⁸ Castles et al. (2018). Castles, A., Raschle, K. and Nation, K. "Ending the Reading Wars: Reading Acquisition from Novice to Expert". *Psychological Science in the Public Interest* 19.1, pp. 5–51.

<https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/1529100618772271>; Machin, S., McNally, S. and Varenago, M. "Teaching to Teach" Literacy: CEP Discussion Paper No 1425. Centre for Economic Performance. <https://cep.se.ac.uk/pubs/download/dp1425.pdf>

Victoria should mandate that all Victorian schools – across the government, Catholic, and independent sectors – use the Australian Government Year 1 Phonics Check,²⁹ which has already been adopted in NSW, South Australia, and Tasmania. This check is a universal assessment of students' decoding skills (using knowledge of phonics) across 40 words and pseudo-words of increasing complexity.³⁰ This assessment is freely available, accurate, and efficient. It only takes about seven minutes to administer one-on-one with a teacher.³¹

Students who do not meet the 'expected level' in Year 1 should be re-assessed in Year 2. Aggregate state-wide results should be publicly released, with sector and cohort breakdowns to assist with the identification of best practice.

This would be a significant improvement on Victoria's current mandatory Foundation and Year 1 assessment: the English Online Interview (EOI). The phonics component of the EOI assessment only includes 6-to-10 words and non-words,³² compared to the 40 words and non-words in the

²⁹ The national Year 1 Phonics Screening Check is available on the Literacy Hub. See: Department of Education, (2003). *Year 1 Phonics Check*. Australian Government.

<https://www.education.gov.au/australian-curriculum/year-1-phonics-check>

²⁹ Australian Education and Research Organisation (2023). *Encouraging a sense of belonging and connectedness in primary schools*. <https://www.edresearch.edu.au/resources/encouraging-sense-of-belonging-and-connectedness-in-primary-schools>

²⁹ See Figure 2 on p. 4: Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation (2020). *Supporting students' sense of belonging: Every student is known, valued and cared for in our schools*. NSW Department of Education.

<https://education.nsw.gov.au/content/dam/main-education/about-us/education-data/cese/2020-supporting-students-sense-of-belonging.pdf>

²⁹ Australian Education and Research Organisation (2023). *Encouraging a sense of belonging and connectedness in primary schools*. <https://www.edresearch.edu.au/resources/encouraging-sense-of-belonging-and-connectedness-in-primary-schools>; Shoeffe, S., Toon, D., Rosenbrock, M. and Matthew, H. *Effective behaviour supports in schools*. Evidence for Learning. <https://evidenceforlearning.org.au/education-ev-dence/guidance-reports/effective-behaviour-supports-in-schools>; and Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation (2020). *Supporting students' sense of belonging: Every student is known, valued and cared for in our schools*. NSW Department of Education. <https://education.nsw.gov.au/content/dam/main-education/about-us/education-data/cese/2020-supporting-students-sense-of-belonging.pdf>

²⁹ Australian Education and Research Organisation (2021). *Focused classrooms: Managing the classroom to maximise learning*. <https://www.edresearch.edu.au/sites/default/files/2021-02/AERO-Trained-and-tested-guided-focused-classrooms.pdf>

²⁹ This index is based on students' responses to questions such as how often students don't listen to what the teacher says, or that the teacher has to wait a long time for students to quieten down. See Table III.B1.3.1 pp. 262–263, in Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (2019). *PISA 2018 results (Volume III) : What school life means for students' lives*. <https://doi.org/10.1787/19963777>.

²⁹ Uden, J. M. v., Ruzien, H. and Peters, J. M. "Engaging students: The role of teacher beliefs and interpersonal teacher behaviour in fostering student engagement in vocational education". *Teaching and Teacher Education* 37, pp. 21–32.

²⁹ Longmuir, F., Cordoba, B. G., Phelps, M., Allen, P. K.-A. and Moharam, M. *Australian teachers' perceptions of their work in 2022*. Monash University. <https://doi.org/10.26180/21212891>

²⁹ Carke, T. (2020). "Children's wellbeing and the academic achievement: The dangerous discourse of trade-offs in education". *Theory and Research in Education* 18.3, pp. 263–294. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1477878520980197>

²⁹ Cahill, H., Beadell, S., Farrelly, A., Forster, R. and Smith, K. (2014). *Building resilience in children and young people: A*

³⁰ Phonics is understanding the connection between individual sounds of spoken language (phonemes) and letters (graphemes) that represent those sounds: Education Endowment Foundation (2021). *Phonics*. <https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/education-ev-dence/teaching-learnng-too-quickly/phonics#:~:text=Phonics%20is%20an%20approach%20to,phonemes%20to%20read%20written%20language>

³¹ Department of Education (2023). *Literacy Hub: Year 1 Phonics Check*. Australian Government. <https://www.literacyhub.edu.au/teach-and-assess/year-1-phonics-check/>

³² Note that the phonics assessment completed in Term 1 of Foundation has only 6 words or pseudo words and the Term 1 Year 1 phonics assessment contains 10 words or pseudo words. See Victorian Department of Education (2022). *English Online Interview Guide*. Victorian Government:

national Year 1 Phonics Check. The 40 words and non-words in the national Year 1 Phonics Check are carefully selected to check student's knowledge of increasingly complex letter-sound combinations.³³ The EOI assessment tests students on fewer letter-sound combinations, which means it is less likely to accurately identify students struggling with decoding.

The Victorian government should set a target that at least 90 per cent of students who re-sit the test achieve the 'expected level' in Year 2, with appropriate interim targets established once baseline data are collected. Experience in England shows that 90 per cent of students met the 'expected level' by the end of Year 2 within four years of introducing the Phonics Screening Check.³⁴ Results should also be included in the annual report to Victorian Parliament proposed above, in Section 5a.

c. Embed a multi-tiered system of support in all schools

Targeted interventions, particularly small-group or one-to-one tuition, can be effective in boosting learning for students who have fallen behind. A review of the global evidence showed that small-group tuition can boost student learning by as much as four months, on average, over the course of a year.³⁵ Victoria has already made a significant and valuable investments in small funded small-group tuition in government and low-fee non-government schools since 2021.

High-quality small-group tuition is best delivered through a systematic 'multi-tiered system of support' (MTSS) model in schools, which comprises an integrated set of practices and interventions to support improved academic results and student behaviour.³⁶ In the MTSS model, all students receive high-quality classroom instruction ('Tier 1'); some students who need more support also receive targeted additional teaching 'doses' for short periods ('Tier 2'); and a small number of students receive more intensive, individualised support ('Tier 3').³⁷

Grattan Institute's recent report, *Tackling under-achievement: Why Australia should embed high-quality small-group tuition in schools* (January 2023), shows that when delivered through a multi-tiered system of support, catch-up tutoring can help reduce learning disparities, including equity gaps (Attachment F). In most cases, small-group tuition ('Tier 2') or one-on-one tuition ('Tier 3')

<https://www.education.vic.gov.au/Documents/school/teachers/teachingresources/discipline/english/assessment/English-On-line-Interview-Guide%202022-081222.pdf>.

³³ Australian Department of Education (2021). *Attachment 2: The structure of the Phonics Check*. Australian Government. <https://www.teracyhub.edu.au/media/h0e01so/attachment-2-structure-of-the-phonics-check.pdf>. Note that the Australian national Year 1 Phonics Check is adapted from the UK national Phonics Screening Check, which has its own assessment framework. See UK Standards and Testing Agency (2017). *Assessment framework for the development of the Year 1 phonics screening check*. UK Government. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5a82b304e5274a2e8ab58e2c/Y1_Phonics_assessment_framework_PDF_A_V3.pdf

³⁴ Note that national phonics screening check data was not collected in the 2020/21 school year due to the pandemic. Performance decreased slightly in the 2021/22 school year to 87% and has since increased to 89% for the 2022/23 school year. See UK Department of Education (2022). *Key stage 1 and phonics screening check attainment*. <https://explore.education-statistics.service.gov.uk/fnd-statistics/key-stage-1-and-phonics-screening-check-attainment>

³⁵ Ofsted (2022). *Guidance: Early career framework and national professional qualification inspection framework and handbook*. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/early-career-framework-and-national-professional-qualification-inspection-framework-and-handbook/early-career-framework-and-national-professional-qualification-inspection-framework-and-handbook#full-inspection>

³⁶ Evidence for Learning (2021). *Small Group Tuition: Evidence for Learning*.

<https://evidenceforlearning.org.au/education/evidence/teaching-earning-too-little/small-group-tuition>

³⁷ Hunter and Sonnemann (2023, p. 10). *Tackling under-achievement: Why Australia should embed high-quality small-group tuition in schools*. Grattan Institute. <https://grattan.edu.au/report/tackling-under-achievement/>

should provide an additional dose of instruction that supports work done in the classroom, rather than be a substitute for classroom teaching.

Success depends on how well the tiers are designed and implemented. Not all schools have best-practice classroom instruction firmly in place, or use small-group or one-on-one interventions that are evidenced-based or well-targeted to student needs. Workforce shortages can also be an impediment.

Given the \$738 million invested or committed to small-group tuition since 2021, the Victorian government should investigate ways in which evidence-based approaches to small-group catch-up tuition can be more strongly embedded in effective MTSS models in schools in order to tackle persistent and significant learning gaps.

The Victorian Government should also give schools stronger guidance and training both on the use of high-quality student diagnostic assessments and effective instructional materials, and on intervention programs that build foundational skills.

d. Provide access to comprehensive, knowledge-rich and quality-assured curriculum materials

Grattan Institute research has found that governments have dramatically underestimated how much support teachers and school leaders need to get curriculum planning right. On this topic we highlight Grattan's report, [*Ending the lesson lottery: How to improve curriculum planning in schools*](#) (October 2022), which recommends that governments provide further support to help schools implement a whole-school approach to curriculum (see Attachment 2).

With clear school-wide agreement about what students should learn in each year level and subject, teachers can better respond to the range of student abilities in their class and can draw on other teachers or support staff to target small-group or one-on-one tutoring to specific student needs.

Grattan Institute's 2022 survey of 2,243 teachers and school leaders shows that a whole-school approach to curriculum planning is the exception in Australia, not the rule. Half of all teachers are planning on their own. The typical teacher spends six hours a week sourcing and creating materials; about a quarter of teachers spend 10 hours a week or more. Only 15 per cent have access to a shared bank of high-quality curriculum materials for all their classes. Of even more concern is the fact that teachers in disadvantaged schools are only half as likely to have access to a shared bank compared to teachers in advantaged schools. Supporting schools to shift to a whole-school approach to high-quality shared curriculum planning could save teachers three hours of time each week.

Grattan Institute recommends a new partnership between governments, principals, and teachers, in which governments and leaders in the government, Catholic and independent school sectors acknowledge the heavy lifting involved in curriculum planning, and provide schools and teachers with clearer guidance and more practical support to help all schools implement a whole-school curriculum approach.

The first step is to audit available high-quality, comprehensive curriculum materials in Victoria – focusing on subject-specific materials that are fully sequenced across year levels and include detailed lesson-level materials along with student assessments, workbooks and teacher guides – and invest to fill gaps, prioritising Maths, Humanities and Science for primary, and English for secondary.

Victoria should not necessarily seek to develop materials 'in-house'. Instead, government should look to commission new materials from commercial or not-for-profits (including subject associations), or provide incentives for providers to raise the quality or comprehensiveness of existing materials.

These materials should be road-tested in real classrooms, and be made readily available to all schools in all sectors to use and adapt, if they choose.

To support this effort, the Victorian government should back the establishment of a rigorous, independent, quality-assurance mechanism tasked with evaluating the quality of curriculum materials nationally and publishing its findings. In designing such a mechanism, we recommend Australian governments look to the US, where an independent not-for-profit organisation, EdReports, has developed a nationally recognised framework for examining the quality of comprehensive curriculum materials. EdReports uses trained and paid teacher experts to conduct thorough quality reviews of comprehensive curriculum materials developed by both commercial and non-profit providers, and publishes the results on its website.

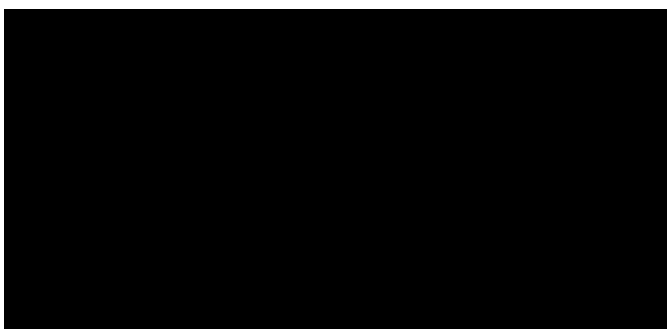
Second, governments should strengthen curriculum expertise in schools. Principals, curriculum leaders, and teachers need much more professional development to implement a high-quality, whole-school curriculum approach, and to adapt teaching materials effectively for their schools and their students. Governments should also direct the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL) to revise the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers and Principals to free teachers from the unhelpful assumption that individualised lesson planning is the best way to support student learning in their classrooms.

Finally, the Victorian government should commit to strengthening the focus on curriculum planning in school reviews aimed at tracking implementation on the ground and targeting more support to the schools that need it. Reforms should also be adopted to ensure that all schools are reviewed – government, Catholic, and independent – and that reviews are conducted by independent reviewers who are well trained in understanding and applying quality benchmarks and are capable of providing constructive feedback to schools.

Reviews should be conducted at least every four years. Schools that are not meeting the expected standard in the Year 1 Phonics Check, and/or have a high proportion of students not meeting the NAPLAN proficiency benchmark in reading, should be reviewed more regularly. We estimate that a school review that includes a thorough examination of a school's curriculum and instructional approach would take about three to five days (including two days on-site), depending on the size of the school. Reviews should consider the alignment between the planned, taught, and learnt curriculum, using classroom walk-throughs, observations, and student assessment data.

Please do not hesitate to contact me if you have any questions about this submission.

Yours sincerely,



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