Submission to the Productivity Commission - Review of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap 2026

October 2026

1.0 Introduction

In August 2021 MultiLit was invited by the Australian Government to provide literacy programs for students in at least 40 majority Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander schools as part of the school education measures outlined in the Closing the Gap Implementation Plan. MultiLit entered into an agreement with the Commonwealth in November 2021. Under this agreement MultiLit engaged in school partnerships with majority Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander schools across Australia. This included offering its programs and resources, professional development for teachers and learning support staff, the provision of ongoing educational support, and direct Tier 3 - individualised synchronous tutoring for students, via trained MultiLit tutors operating on a tailored tutoring platform.

MultiLit has worked with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander schools and communities throughout its 30 years. This has been in a variety of contexts and with a range of partners including governments and not for profit organisations. This submission draws from our extensive experience and specifically, the last five years of the MultiLit Closing the Gap Initiative which is currently the largest Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander school literacy program in Australia, impacting thousands of students each day.

The importance of effective early literacy instruction

Education is the transformative process that allows the individual to reach their full potential. All human development factors are enhanced by education, which has a strong correlation to employment, income earning potential, health outcomes, life expectancy and overall wellbeing. A vibrant modern society is enabled by its successful education of children and youth, and it underpins the social mobility that allows even the most disadvantaged in a community to achieve their life's potential.

The most foundational building block in a child's education is literacy. We know that failure to become a competent reader and writer will impede all other educational pursuits. In turn this will limit employment prospects, income capacity and potentially many other social outcomes. There are few more important issues in the field of education than ensuring every child becomes literate.

Not only is literacy education important in the early years, but it must also be effective. The science of reading and the science of instruction have informed what effective teaching should look like. Research shows that the best reading instruction will systematically develop the Big 5 skills: phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension. This will be applied via a tiered approach that recognises that some children will require more support, either in a small group setting or on an individual basis – a response to intervention framework or multi-tiered system of supports.

Researchers also know that commencing education from a point of social disadvantage impacts literacy and, more broadly, overall education outcomes. Social disadvantage and poverty have a huge, well-known and negative impact on literacy achievement in all English-speaking countries.[1] For example, in 2009, 13.9% of Australian children in the lowest socioeconomic quintile were assessed as 'developmentally vulnerable' in language and cognitive skills, compared to 4.7% of children in the highest quintile.[2] Effective early reading instruction is critical to help 'close the gap' between children from high-SES and low-SES backgrounds.

Rural, remote and very remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities are among the most disadvantaged groups in Australia. Consequently, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander youth are underrepresented in attaining Year 12 or equivalent qualification, and this flows on to an underrepresentation in further education, higher education and employment. While there have been many policy initiatives implemented seeking to address this underrepresentation, it remains a persistent issue for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. Invariably, pathway and transition programs later in life struggle to reverse generational disadvantage. By focusing on the foundational building block of effective early literacy instruction, we can best place Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students to achieve their full learning potential and meet the ambitions of Closing the Gap Target 5: *by 2031, increase the proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people (age 20-24) attaining year 12 or equivalent qualification to 96 per cent*. This benchmark currently stands at 68 per cent.

MultiLit contends that a focus on literacy attainment supported by targets and indicators will ensure Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children become literate and are positioned to achieve their educational potential.

[1]David Kinnane, Why poor kids are more likely to be poor readers (and what we can do about it), *Nomanis*, 11 June, 2020
[2]*A Snapshot of Early Childhood Development in Australia, Australian Early Development Index (AEDI)*, National Report 2009, Re-issue - March 2011

Focus of this submission

MultiLit welcomes the Productivity Commission's second review of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap. This submission addresses the Commission's questions about system enablers and barriers, the relationship between reform activity and socio-economic outcomes, the role of data, and the way governments translate commitments into action.

Our central recommendation is that the National Agreement should make early literacy progress visible within the accountability framework for Outcomes 5 and 6. Target 5 measures Year 12 or equivalent attainment among people aged 20 to 24, while Target 6 measures tertiary qualification attainment among people aged 25 to 34. These are important outcomes, but they are late and infrequently reported measures. They do not provide governments, communities or schools with a timely indication of whether children are developing the literacy and education skills needed to participate fully in schooling and to progress to complete Year 12 and participate in further education.

2.0 Recommendations

1. **Establish nationally agreed early-literacy sub targets under Outcome 5. '**What gets measured gets done' is a popular maxim that is pertinent in this context. The targets as they are currently framed are distal to the foundational work that is the essential precursor for an effective education. We need to be much more focused on the quality of the early instruction in English language literacy if we are to provide students with the means to participate effectively in their schooling and beyond. The sub targets should measure foundational reading achievement early enough to support

instructional focus and intervention, include clear trajectories, and be reported with appropriate disaggregation.

2. **Retain long-term attainment targets while adding leading indicators.** Year 12 and tertiary attainment should remain central, but annual or otherwise timely literacy measures should show whether progress towards Targets 5 and 6 is credible much earlier than is currently being reported.

3. **Create formal aligned arrangements between commonwealth and state and territory governments for Closing the Gap education initiatives.** Agreements should address program recognition, implementation support, assessment, data access, evaluation and the management of overlapping initiatives before delivery begins.

4. **Fund implementation capability as well as program access.** Longer-term funding should cover professional learning, coaching, onsite support, leadership continuity, data use and targeted intervention, particularly in regional, remote and very remote schools.

5. **Build sustainability and local capability into program design.** Short-term pilots should include a funded transition plan, continuing workforce development and deliberate investment in local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander educators and leaders.

6. **Ensure student learning and classroom implementation is visible.** Accountability should include measures of literacy growth, structured review of classroom practice and action where students are not receiving sufficiently rigorous or appropriately targeted instruction.

7. **Adopt a proportionate and coordinated data model.** Data should be collected once where possible, shared lawfully and securely, governed in partnership with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, and returned to schools and communities in forms that support local decisions.

3.0 Early literacy and the education targets

Outcome 5 is that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students achieve their full learning potential. Its target is to increase Year 12 or equivalent attainment among people aged 20 to 24 to 96 per cent by 2031. The Productivity Commission reports that 68.1 per cent had attained Year 12 or equivalent in 2021. This was an improvement from 63.2 per cent in 2016, but the target was not on track and masks the fact that in remote and very remote communities, the proportion is significantly lower than 60%. The underlying measure is drawn from the five-yearly Census.

The National Agreement already identifies NAPLAN reading, writing and numeracy results in Years 3, 5, 7 and 9 as drivers of Target 5. This recognises that educational attainment develops over time. However, treating literacy only as a supporting indicator does not give it sufficient weight in planning, investment or accountability. NAPLAN data can also be difficult for schools to assess and interpret and does not provide sufficiently specific or timely information to guide day-to-day teaching decisions. Further, the first national literacy measure does not occur until Year 3, when difficulties may already be well established and more costly to address. MultiLit's experience as supported by the academic literature confirms that it is a much more difficult and more expensive challenge to catch a student up in reading. Evidence-based early instruction is the key to getting children off to a good start in reading, spelling and writing. Disengagement in education starts early if students do not have the literacy skills to engage in learning at school.

Outcome 6 seeks to increase the proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people aged 25 to 34 who have completed a tertiary qualification at Certificate III level or above to 70 per cent by 2031. The

pathway to this outcome begins well before a student applies for university or vocational education. Students need to be able to read increasingly complex curriculum materials, learn independently and demonstrate their knowledge across subject areas. They also need confidence in their ability to succeed as learners. Students who have spent years struggling to access classroom content may be less likely to see further education as achievable or to feel confident enough to apply. Strong early literacy does not guarantee school completion or tertiary participation, nonetheless, weak literacy substantially restricts both the skills and confidence needed to pursue these pathways.

Education is also connected with outcomes beyond Targets 5 and 6. The Productivity Commission's Outcome 5 dashboard notes the association between higher education levels and health and wellbeing, housing, employment and earnings. Literacy is therefore an enabling capability across the National Agreement. It should be monitored as part of a broader, strengths-based approach that also values culture, identity, language, community authority and student wellbeing.

4.0 A proposed early literacy measurement framework

MultiLit recommends that the parties to the National Agreement develop the sub-targets through genuine, shared decision-making with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander representatives, educators and communities. The final measures should be nationally coherent without imposing a single high-stakes test or overriding community priorities.

Stage	Suggested measure	Purpose
Early primary	The proportion of students demonstrating an agreed foundational reading benchmark by the end of Year 1 or Year 2	Provides an early signal and supports timely, targeted instruction
Year 3	The proportion of students meeting the agreed national proficiency standard in reading	Shows whether students can access the curriculum as reading demands increase.
Years 3 to 9	Growth in reading achievement between national assessment points	Recognises progress, including for students who begin below age or year expectations
Implementation context – to be annotated to the measure	Attendance, remoteness, language background, disability and other agreed contextual measures	Supports fair interpretation and identifies where additional system support is required

Inclusion of a common set of implementation context descriptors allows for measures to be contextualised. From MultiLit's experience working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander schools, these should include attendance, jurisdiction, remoteness, language background and disability. This supports the benefits of the literacy measurement framework by identifying factors that influence literacy outcomes and therefore being able to respond with additional levels of support where required. It also allows for targeted strategies to address context specific circumstances.

The measures should include published trajectories to 2031, regular public reporting and disaggregation by implementation context. Growth measures are important because they show whether students are learning even when they have not yet reached a common benchmark. The framework should be consistent with Indigenous Data Sovereignty and Indigenous Data Governance principles.

The purpose of the sub-targets should be to guide system improvement, not punitive comparison of schools or communities. Assessment should help schools identify each student's point of need and

provide instruction that builds from their current knowledge and skill acquisition. This is consistent with ACARA's guidance for the Australian Curriculum Version 9.0, which recognises that literacy learning progression supports teachers to identify gaps and plan targeted teaching for students working at, above or below year-level expectations (Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority [ACARA], n.d.-a, n.d.-b).

Schools must be supported to consolidate essential learning before introducing more complex content, without pressure to move students on prematurely to keep pace with standardised benchmarks or meet curriculum requirements. Sub-targets should recognise growth from students' starting points alongside progress towards year-level expectations, and results should direct resources, workforce support and implementation assistance to the places where they are most needed. This approach is particularly important in schools experiencing severe, chronic absenteeism across the student population, where interrupted attendance, of both staff and students, can leave substantial gaps in foundational learning and makes assessment of each student's actual knowledge and skills essential to planning effective instruction.

5.0 Evidence from the MultiLit Closing the Gap Literacy Initiative

The MultiLit Closing the Gap Literacy Initiative provides a practical case study of a Commonwealth-funded program delivered across government, Catholic and independent schools in New South Wales, Queensland, South Australia, Western Australia and the Northern Territory. Forty-two schools were recruited in 2022 and 2023 with 40 continuing through the 2026 extension year. The majority of participating schools serve regional, remote and very remote communities.

The initiative combines evidence-based literacy programs with professional learning, implementation advice, onsite and online support, assessment and regular data review to guide instruction. Schools use a tiered model that includes whole-class instruction, targeted small-group intervention and, for a smaller number of students, intensive individual support through the MultiLit Literacy Centres. The delivery experience shows that providing program materials or initial training alone is insufficient. Sustained implementation depends on leadership, workforce stability, coaching, protected instructional time, appropriate student placement and regular use of assessment data to inform instruction.

The Australian Council for Educational Research is independently evaluating the Initiative. The evaluation has included interviews with 20 schools and approximately 105 teacher survey responses. Emerging findings considered through the initiative's 2026 sensemaking process indicate that schools are reporting literacy improvement, with consistent instruction. The strongest gains occurred where students attended sufficiently to receive consistent instruction. Nonetheless, it was significant that students made strong and statistically significant gains even if they had high levels of chronic irregular attendance. With 70 per cent of respondents identifying attendance as a major barrier, the results demonstrate the effectiveness of the Initiative when students are present and able to participate regularly. They also suggest that stronger attendance and catch-up strategies could lead to even greater gains. The findings also identify implementation conditions that shape results, including staff turnover, leadership support, access to professional learning, use of student data and continuity of delivery.

The MultiLit Initiative demonstrates the value of frequent monitoring of progress throughout the primary years. Schools can assess on an ongoing basis whether literacy instruction is effective. MultiLit contends that a Closing the Gap target that is determined at Year 12 leaves it too late for corrective action. By contrast, regular curriculum-based and (less regular) standardised measures allow teachers and school leaders to adjust grouping, reteach targeted content, provide intervention and monitor whether students are moving towards independent access to age-appropriate learning and this is where

the standardised measures are informative. This approach provides a clearer sense of whether a student is on track to achieve the Year 12 outcome (Target 5).

6.0 What the initiative shows about system enablers

Implementation support changes what schools can sustain

Schools serving communities with the greatest educational inequity frequently must manage high staff turnover, position vacancies, student transience, variable attendance and competing system requirements. These conditions do not reduce the importance of effective instruction; they increase the level of implementation support required. Onsite observation and coaching are particularly valuable because they allow advice to be adapted to the school's workforce, timetable, student data and community context.

Collecting assessment data is only the first step. Analysing student errors, identifying gaps in underlying knowledge and skills, selecting content for reteaching and choosing effective instructional strategies require considerable expertise and professional judgement. In our experience, this informed use of assessment is not consistently embedded in routine teaching practice. Teachers and school leaders require sustained, practical coaching to translate assessment findings into timely, targeted instruction, and to use reassessment to determine whether that instruction has addressed the identified learning needs.

High-quality instructional programs and aligned assessments are essential foundations for this work. As free and automatically generated learning materials become increasingly available, schools need support to distinguish readily accessible content from resources that are accurate, evidence-informed and coherently sequenced. Assessment must provide useful information about the skills students have mastered and those requiring further instruction, with clear connections to appropriate teaching content. A collection of activities cannot, on its own, provide this coherence. Well-designed programs give teachers a reliable structure for instruction, assessment, reteaching and consolidation, while coaching builds their capacity to use that structure responsively and effectively.

Translating these high-quality programs and assessments into effective classroom practice requires ongoing implementation support. Onsite observation and coaching are particularly valuable because they allow advice to be adapted to the school’s workforce, timetable, student data and community context. This support should include modelling how to interpret assessment results, plan and deliver reteaching, and check for consolidation before moving students forward. Building these capabilities across teaching and leadership teams is essential to sustaining effective practice through staffing changes. Funding models should therefore recognise the full cost of implementation. This includes time for professional learning, coaching, assessment, data interpretation, leadership planning and intervention delivery. Short funding periods and late extension decisions make it harder to retain skilled staff, plan visits, maintain school confidence and embed practice.

Attendance and learning must be considered together

An emerging finding from the MultiLit Initiative reinforces a straightforward implementation issue: literacy programs can only have their intended effect when students have sufficient access to instruction matched to their assessed needs. Irregular attendance should not be used to lower expectations or justify weaker teaching. Schools must also stop refusing students access to foundational literacy instruction solely because of their older age or year level. Governments should address barriers to attendance while ensuring schools have coherent instructional systems that help students reconnect with learning when they return.

Data must support decisions at the point of delivery

The MultiLit Initiative has strengthened schools' use of assessment data to identify student needs, review placement and plan reteaching. However, evaluation and reporting requests can also create substantial administrative work when information is requested retrospectively, consent arrangements are unclear, or schools are asked to provide data already held elsewhere in the system.

Commonwealth and state or territory agencies should agree on and align data access, consent, privacy, governance and reporting requirements before implementation. Schools and communities should receive useful findings in return. A collect-once, use-carefully model would reduce duplication while strengthening accountability and local decision making.

7.0 Further lessons from regional and remote implementation

Successful short-term pilots need to transition to sustainable practice

Short-term initiatives can demonstrate effective educational outcomes but face the challenge that they do not necessarily change the system that the school returns to when funding ends. A pilot may train an initial group of staff and establish effective routines, but these gains remain vulnerable to staff turnover, leadership change and the loss of specialist support. Schools can then move to the next funded innovation before the previous approach has become embedded.

This is particularly damaging in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities where considerable time and care have been invested in building trust with local organisations, leaders and families. When a pilot ends abruptly or its future remains uncertain, the harm extends beyond continuity of delivery. It can weaken the relationships and goodwill established through the program. Communities may reasonably experience the withdrawal of a valued initiative as another broken commitment, particularly when funding limitations and government decisions have not been communicated in a timely manner for a program that is having positive impact.

Closing the Gap initiatives should be designed from the outset with a credible pathway beyond the pilot period if they demonstrate efficacy. Funding agreements should include an implementation and sustainability plan, a realistic period for embedding practice, leadership succession and induction arrangements, continued access to coaching, and a clear process for effective approaches to become part of ordinary school and system operations. Evaluation should examine whether capability and trusted relationships continue beyond the funding period.

Community authority requires investment in local capability

Consultation with local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities must extend beyond initial endorsement or occasional feedback. Local educators, community leaders and families hold knowledge about language, attendance, mobility, relationships and the conditions affecting student participation. They should have an active role in shaping implementation, reviewing progress and defining success.

Programs should also leave stronger local capability behind. This requires participation, high-quality professional learning and supported pathways for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education assistants, community educators and emerging leaders to develop expertise in literacy instruction, assessment, coaching and program leadership. Sustainable reform is more likely when capability is held locally rather than remaining dependent on visiting specialists.

The soft bigotry of low expectations

Engagement, confidence, cultural safety, attendance and positive relationships are important outcomes. They are not substitutes for evidence that students are learning. In regional and remote settings, an over-reliance on these intangible, qualitative outcomes can engender reduced academic expectations, less rigorous tasks or lower expectations for school completion. Lower standards and outcomes should not be represented as success.

MultiLit's implementation experience indicates that this remains a serious risk for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. High expectations must be visible in the quality of instruction, the level of work students are supported to complete, measured growth in literacy, and the expectation that students can progress to higher levels of schooling. Accountability frameworks should report engagement and wellbeing alongside learning growth, rather than substituting for academic achievement.

Classroom practice needs greater visibility

School and system plans do not guarantee that agreed practice reaches individual classrooms. There is often limited oversight of lesson quality, program fidelity, the use of assessment data or the instructional response when students do not progress. Inconsistent classroom delivery can continue for long periods before it becomes visible in system-level data.

Greater accountability should be developmental rather than punitive. It should include structured classroom observation, routine review of student progress, feedback and coaching, and clear follow-up when agreed instructional practices are not being implemented. Leaders also need sufficient literacy expertise to distinguish between nominal program use and effective teaching.

Curriculum exposure cannot replace foundational instruction

A persistent barrier arises when school leaders interpret the obligation to teach age-level curriculum as a reason not to provide older students with instruction at their assessed level of literacy development. Students may be exposed to age-level texts and tasks that they cannot read independently while the foundational knowledge and skills preventing access remain unconsolidated.

Students should retain access to rich, age-respectful curriculum content and high expectations. At the same time, individual data review and analysis must be used to provide explicit instruction at the point in the literacy progression where learning has broken down. For some older students, this requires intensive teaching of foundational reading and spelling skills using materials that respect their age and identity. Exposure to content is not an adequate substitute for mastering the skills needed to access that content independently.

8.0 Intergovernmental alignment is essential

The Commonwealth may fund a high-quality teaching initiative, however participating schools operate within a state and territory system that may also have input in to determining curriculum, assessment, staffing, professional learning priorities and school improvement requirements. Independent and Catholic schools operate within their own governance arrangements. If these settings are not aligned, schools can face conflicting expectations, duplicate assessments, competing literacy approaches or uncertainty about whether a Commonwealth-funded initiative is recognised and legitimate within their system.

This has been a recurring challenge during the MultiLit Closing the Gap Initiative. Participating schools have received overlapping and/or conflicting advice from departmental literacy units, system-employed coaches and other departmental bodies. At times, these advisers have promoted different pedagogical approaches, assessment practices or implementation priorities. Schools understandably give precedence to directions and resources issued by their local education system. Where the

Commonwealth-funded initiative is not formally recognised and integrated by the relevant jurisdiction, its continuity is vulnerable even when the school is making positive progress.

Syllabus change and competing initiatives have created a particular pressure point. For example, in New South Wales the release of department-provided Component B units of work and the early years 'Systematic Synthetic Phonics' (SSP) plan was not coordinated with either the MultiLit implementation team or partnership schools within the Initiative. This led schools to believe they needed to fit all department resources into their existing schedules, which often resulted in repeated content being programmed and delivered. MultiLit observed that some schools treated these units as superseding data-informed grouping, explicit foundational literacy instruction and established intervention structures. This interrupted implementation and, in some cases, required substantial work to rebuild practices that had previously been established.

Commonwealth and jurisdictional action should not proceed as parallel streams if there is a collective expectation to attain national targets. It is preferable that prior to a Closing the Gap initiative being established, the relevant education department should formally agree to support its implementation with the Commonwealth. Inconsistencies need to be resolved at system level rather than be left to individual principals and teachers.

Future Closing the Gap education initiatives should be supported by intergovernmental alignment that addresses areas of potential conflict and ensures that the education initiative can be implemented and operate without system conflict. Mutual endorsement by government (commonwealth and state) of the initiative is important in providing comfort to school leaders and educators that their participation is valued and supported.

9.0 Responses to Productivity Commission guiding questions

Guiding question	MultiLit response
What are the most significant enablers or barriers affecting progress towards the socio-economic outcomes?	Key enablers are: • Explicit evidence-based early literacy instruction • Sustained implementation support • Workforce capability • Stable funding • Regular use of student data that measures student progress • Sufficient student attendance Barriers include: • Staff turnover • School leadership change • Conflict between government agencies • Short-term funding agreements • Duplicate reporting obligations • Restrictions on the use of student data for reporting and feedback
Are the socio-economic outcomes and targets appropriately defined and measured?	Targets 5 and 6 measure important long-term outcomes, but they need early literacy sub-targets and published trajectories. Engagement measures should be reported alongside, not instead of, learning growth. Five-yearly, age-based attainment measures do not provide timely evidence of whether current cohorts are on track.

Guiding question	MultiLit response
How are governments and regional or local partners translating reform commitments into action?	Translation is strongest when funding is paired with a clear implementation model, local capability-building, professional learning, classroom oversight and regular data review. Formal Commonwealth and jurisdictional alignment is needed so departments, coaches and funded initiatives provide aligned and supportive advice.
How have governments improved access to relevant data?	School-level data can support rapid instructional decisions, but access and reporting remain fragmented. Data arrangements and standards should be agreed at a national level before delivery. Data standards should follow Indigenous Data Governance principles and return useful information to schools and communities in a timely manner.

10.0 Conclusion

Targets 5 and 6 express ambitions that matter deeply: completion of school and access to further education. The present framework, however, waits too long to show whether the necessary foundations for those outcomes are being built. A small set of co-designed early literacy sub targets would provide a timely line of sight from primary school and throughout the school journey to Year 12.

The experience of the MultiLit Closing the Gap Initiative shows that improvement depends on more than selecting an evidence-based program. Schools need sustained implementation support, skilled local educators and leaders, usable data, visibility of classroom practice, sufficiently rigorous instruction and governments that provide aligned direction. The Productivity Commission should recommend that the parties embed these conditions in the National Agreement's education accountability and funding arrangements.

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