Submission to the Productivity Commission's Inquiry into the National School Reform Agreement 2022: Response to the Interim report

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This submission addresses elements of two areas of focus identified in the Interim Report.

1. **Lifting outcomes for all students**
2. **Supporting teaching**

1. Lifting outcomes for all students

Draft finding 3.1
Many students have additional needs that do not directly relate to culture, disability or remoteness

- A significant number of students do not meet minimum standards — often year after year. Around one third of students who do not meet national minimum literacy and numeracy standards in their early years of schooling do not meet national minimum standards in later school years.
- Most underperforming students do not belong to the priority cohorts named by the National School Reform Agreement. Around 85 per cent of these students do not belong to any of the priority equity cohorts identified in the National School Reform Agreement. Low educational performance needs a different approach.

Information request 3.1
Intensive, targeted support for students who have fallen behind

Would programs that provide intensive, targeted support to students who have fallen behind lend themselves to being a national policy initiative under the next intergovernmental agreement on schools?

The goal of lifting outcomes for all students is surely the over-arching goal of any education reform initiative. Lifting outcomes in the fundamental skills of literacy and numeracy is essential. These skills underpin achievement in all other curriculum areas and are directly related to other aspects of school and post-school life, as described in the Interim Report.

The Interim Report finding that a substantial number of students fail to meet minimum standards in literacy and numeracy each year was also identified in the *Primary Reading Pledge* report co-authored by Five from Five, AUSPELD, and Learning Difficulties Australia in 2020.[1] The report makes the case for including students '*at* minimum standard' among the students about which we should be concerned, because the minimum standard itself is very

[1] http://fivefromfive.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/PRIMARY-READING-PLEDGE_August2020Final.pdf

low. Students who are only 'at' the standard cannot be considered to be performing proficiently or competently in these areas.

Using the criteria of 'at/below National Minimum Standard' (NMS) gives a higher but still conservative number of students who are struggling with literacy and numeracy. It does not include students who were withdrawn or absent, many of whom would fall into this category if they had participated in the test. Table 1 provides estimates of the number of students who were at/below National Minimum Standard (NMS) in reading in 2021 (albeit with the caveats associated with the data for that year) using student population data from the Australian Bureau of Statistics. Approximately 57,000 students began their secondary schooling in Year 7 with literacy levels that will make it difficult to succeed in education and training and in their lives beyond school.

Table 1. Students at/below National Minimum Standard (NMS) in NAPLAN Reading, 2021

	Percent of students	**Number of students (est.)**
Year 3	11.4%	36 942
Year 5	12.5%	31 219
Year 7	17.9%	56 952
Year 9	25.4%	79 537

Source: NAPLAN 2021 National Report (ACARA); ABS Schools, Australia 2021 (Table 42b)

The Interim Report found that 80% of students below the NMS for numeracy in Year 3 were either at (46%) or below (34%) the NMS in Year 5. This means that the vast majority of students identified as struggling in NAPLAN tests in Year 3 did not receive the support they needed to make sufficient progress by Year 5 and were almost certainly still struggling with numeracy when they finished primary school.

With respect to *literacy*, the report states that "[a]round one-third of the students who do not meet minimum literacy standards in year 3 do not meet minimum standards in year 5". It does not provide equivalent figures on the proportion of students below NMS in Year 3 that were at NMS in Year 5 for literacy, and the Productivity Commission declined to provide them on request. There is no reason to believe they are very different to those for numeracy but publication of the figures for literacy in subsequent reports would be welcome.

'Instructional casualties'

One of the most important findings in the interim report regarding student outcomes is that the majority of students with poor literacy and numeracy outcomes are not in one of the designated 'priority equity cohorts'. This recognises formally, and perhaps for the first time quantitatively, that most struggling readers are 'instructional casualties' — students who could and should have learned to read but were not taught well. The implication is that if these students had received evidence-based classroom initial reading instruction in

Foundation to Year 2, they would not be struggling readers in Year 3. (Moreover, this is also true of most struggling readers in the priority equity cohorts). On the upside, this problem can be fixed. A great deal is known about effective reading instruction. It needs to be brought into all classrooms so that fewer students need intervention.

The *Primary Reading Pledge*: An evidence-based framework of assessment and intervention to get all students reading

The *Primary Reading Pledge* was developed to address the problem of avoidable low literacy. Its contention is that very few students should leave primary school experiencing difficulties with reading. It sets out a clear, evidence-informed framework to achieve this goal.

The framework recommends a systemic standardised assessment in Year 1, ideally the Year 1 Phonics Screening Check, so that reading difficulties can be identified early and appropriate interventions can be provided to all students who require them. Reading difficulties in the early years are most often the result of low word reading accuracy and fluency. This can be identified with a well-designed phonics check to assess decoding ability. High quality phonics interventions are very effective, especially if provided at this critical stage in reading development.[2] Some Australian states have begun implementing the Year 1 Phonics Check, namely South Australia, New South Wales, and Tasmania. The Western Australian and Victorian governments have announced they adopting a different approach to phonics assessment. These are non-standardised approaches and are of unknown quality, unlike the Year 1 Phonics Check adopted from the UK used in the other three states which has strong reliability.[3] Nonetheless, it is positive that the importance of assessing phonics knowledge in Year 1 has now been acknowledged in five out of eight states and territories.

Almost all students do the NAPLAN tests and they are an under-utilised resource for improvement. NAPLAN reading assessments are tests of comprehension. They indicate that students have low reading performance but not why. There are two fundamental aspects of reading that can typically explain a student's low reading comprehension – word reading accuracy and language comprehension. That is, knowing what the words are, and knowing what they mean. This is the well-established 'Simple View of Reading' which is a highly robust and predictive model, with these two factors accounting for 95%+ of variance in reading ability.[4]

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4 Gough, P. B., & Tunmer, W. E. (1986). Decoding, reading, and reading disability. *Remedial and Special Education*, *7*(1), 6-10. https://doi-org.simsrad.net.ocs.mq.edu.au/10.1177%2F074193258600700104; Hjetland, H. N., Lervåg, A., Lyster, S.-A. H., Hagtvet, B. E., Hulme, C., & Melby- Lervåg, M. (2019). Pathways to reading comprehension: A longitudinal study from 4 to 9 years of age. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, *11*(5), 751-763. http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/edu0000321; Sleeman, M., Everatt, J., Arrow, A., & Denston, A. (2022). The identification and classification of struggling readers based on the simple view of reading. *Dyslexia*, *28*, 256-275. https://doi.org/10.1002/dys.1719

The Primary Reading Pledge recommends that all students whose scores are *at or below* NMS in reading each year should be given screening assessments for phonic decoding (word reading accuracy) and language comprehension to determine which of these sub-skills requires support through intervention. The Primary Reading Pledge document provides lists of valid and reliable assessments and evidence-based interventions, many of which are free or low cost. Schools that provide high quality whole class initial reading instruction, identify struggling readers early, and intervene effectively see dramatic reductions in the number of students who need reading intervention in the upper primary years. This has positive consequences for students and for school resourcing. Examples of schools where this has occurred can be provided to the Productivity Commission on request.

The framework outlined in the Primary Reading Pledge would lend itself to a national policy initiative. It is based on the Response to Intervention model, which in turn is based on a 'non-categorical' approach to instruction, assessment and intervention.[5] It is applicable at both a school and system level.

Signs of progress to build on

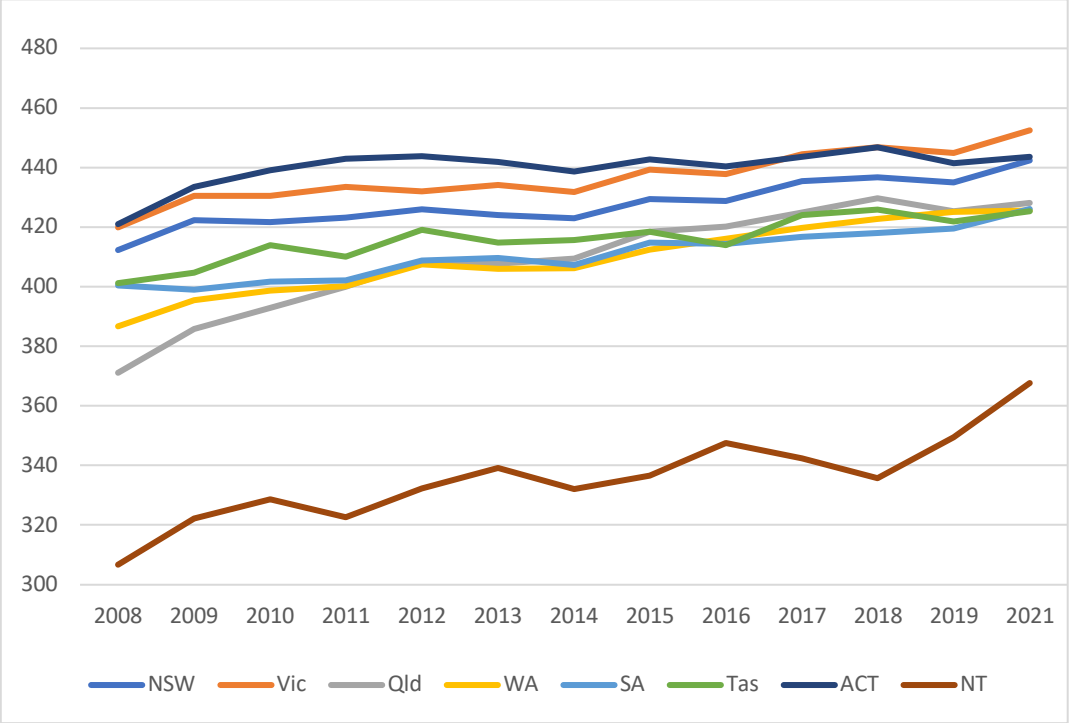
The Interim Report looks at NAPLAN scores in the past decade and finds that they have been 'flat'. However, if we look back further, it can be noted that there have been improvements in NAPLAN reading performance in Year 3 and 5 over a period of time in which schools have been increasingly adopting evidence-based teaching methods in early reading instruction.

Figure 1 shows mean scores for reading in Year 3. The NAPLAN National Report 2021 finds that the change from 2008 to 2021 is significant and positive.[6] Figure 2 shows the proportion of students at/below the NMS in 2008 and 2021. These proportions have reduced over this time (the large drop in Queensland is likely to be partly explained by the addition of a year of full time school). The scale of the change is not grand but it is progress to build on.

[5] Response to Intervention is sometimes referred to as Multi-Tiered Systems of Support; however, the latter term is used in many different ways whereas Response to Intervention is more specified and is well understood. Madelaine, A., & Wheldall, K. (2019). What is Response to Intervention? *Nomanis Notes.* MultiLit. https://www.nomanis.com.au/nomanis-notes

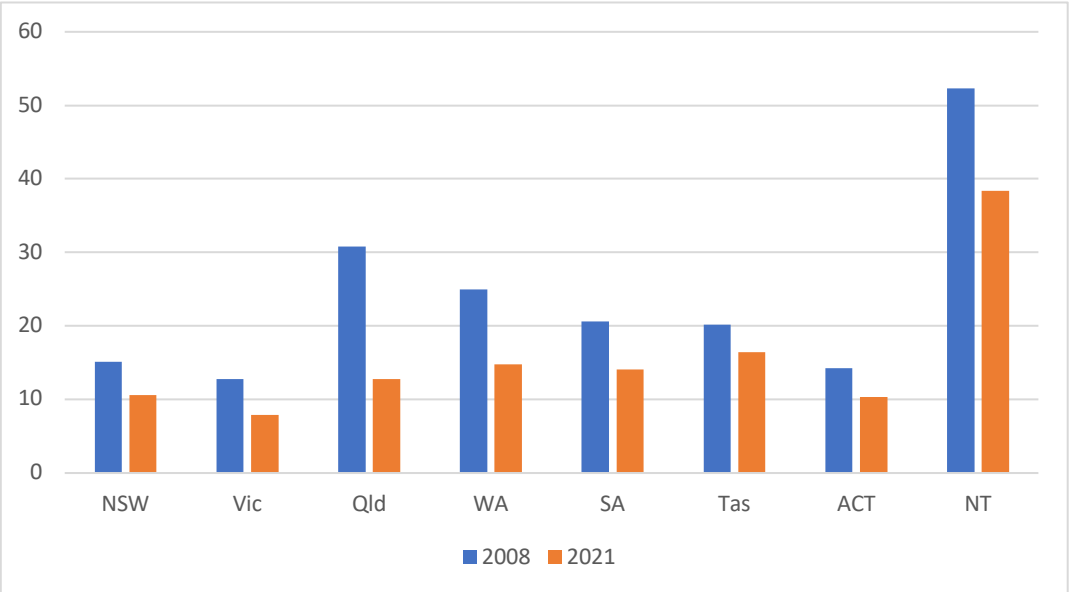
[6] Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (2021). *NAPLAN achievement in reading, writing, language conventions and numeracy: National report for 2021*. ACARA.

Figure 1. NAPLAN reading mean scores 2008 – 2021, by state and territory



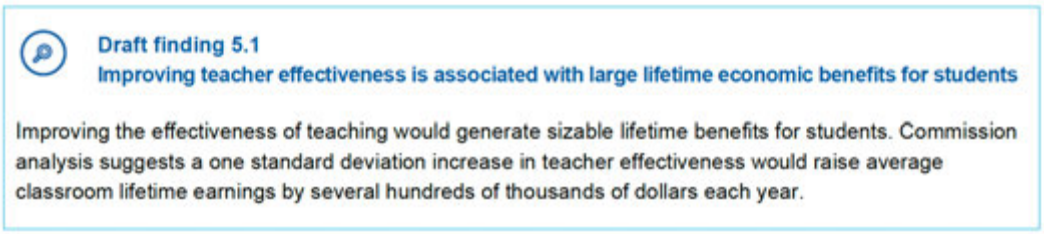
Source: NAPLAN National Report, various years (ACARA)

Figure 2. Percentage of students at/below National Minimum Standard, 2008 & 2021, by state and territory



Source: NAPLAN National Report, various years (ACARA)

2. Supporting teaching



Improving initial teacher education is the long-term solution

With the exception of providers of initial teacher education (ITE), it is a widely held view that the quality of ITE in Australia is mostly unsatisfactory, especially for preparing teachers to teach reading. It is not necessary to describe the numerous reports and inquiries undertaken over several decades; they are well known. The lack of adequate improvement despite many reform efforts is spelled out in the latest review, 'Next steps: Report of the Quality Initial Teacher Education Review'.[7] The recommendations in that report seem to provide a feasible way forward. It is disappointing that universities have to be forced through regulation to improve the scholarship and rigor of their course content, but they have persistently failed to do so voluntarily and indeed many Deans of Education and academics deny the need to do so.

Further evidence that there are gaps in teacher knowledge about effective, evidence-based reading instruction can be seen in the large numbers (many thousands) of teachers who spend their own time and often their own money to attend professional learning outside of school hours. The providers of this professional learning include the La Trobe University Science of Language and Reading (SOLAR) short courses, Edith Cowan University short courses, the Five from Five seminars and webinars, Think Forward Educators, AUSPELD, the state SPELD organisations, and Learning Difficulties Australia. In schools, organisations such as Fogarty EDvance, Teach Well, COGLearn and the Knowledge Society provide professional learning and coaching in high impact teaching strategies and the evidence that underpins them. All of these organisations are experiencing high demand as more and more teachers become aware of the gaps in their knowledge.

While ongoing professional learning and expertise development is a hallmark of a profession, much of this is essential knowledge that could and should have been taught to teachers in their degrees. Relying on teachers themselves and their schools to back-fill fundamental teaching skills post-graduation is enormously unproductive. As noted in the Interim Report, effective teachers by definition have better outcomes for students. Effective teachers use effective methods. When teachers do not obtain these skills either pre- or post-graduation, it is likely to be contributing to their workload, stress and potentially decisions to leave the profession.

[7] https://www.education.gov.au/quality-initial-teacher-education-review/resources/next-steps-report-quality-initial-teacher-education-review

Quality Teaching Rounds is not an evidence-based approach

The Interim Report puts forward Quality Teaching Rounds (QTR) as a potential approach to generating more effective teaching and therefore better student outcomes. QTR was also mentioned favourably in the 'Next steps' report. However, there is no research evidence that QTR has a positive impact on student outcomes when used by classroom teachers in schools, which is the measure by which the effectiveness of the approach should be judged.

The Quality Teaching Model/Rounds have been in play in school education for about twenty years but until recently there had never been any experimental research that evaluated its impact on students' academic outcomes. All of the research was on whether teachers got better at using the model, not whether students benefited as a consequence. Recently, however, a randomised control trial with student achievement as the outcome measure was conducted.[8] The results for student achievement were weak at best when QTR was implemented by classroom teachers rather than the researchers themselves. This raises obvious questions about its value at scale in real school settings. Greg Ashman has written about the research previously and has also raised these concerns in his submission to the Productivity Commission.[9] Given that the Quality Teaching Model does not currently have an empirical or scientific evidence base, and has not been updated in almost 20 years (the Framework/Classroom Practice Guide cited in the 2021 study was published in 2003 and contains no citations or references to support the model as being effective for learning),[10] these weak research findings on QTR are not surprising. The Quality Teaching Model's unproven premises and its lack of supporting evidence are at odds with pedagogies with good experimental evidence and are not informed by cognitive science. QTR should be investigated much more deeply before recommending its use more widely.

I would welcome the opportunity to speak with the Commissioners about this submission. The views in this submission do not necessarily represent the views of my employers or any of the other institutions with which I am affiliated.

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[8] Gore, J. et al., (2021). Improving student achievement through professional development: Results from a randomised control trial of Quality Teaching Rounds. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, *101*, 103297. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2021.103297

[9] https://fillingthepail.substack.com/p/quality-teaching-rounds?utm_source=url

[10] The Classroom Practice Guide is difficult to find online. The only online version I could find is here: https://web1.muirfield-h.schools.nsw.edu.au/technology/Programs/Template/Quality%20Teaching%20Guide.pdf