Closing the Education Equity Gap

Philanthropy's Strategic Role

KEY ISSUES PAPER
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Insight ED

About us

Insight ED

Insight ED is a new advisory group specialised in education, working with not-for-profits and governments to deliver rigorous evidence and new analysis to improve the lives of Australia's children and young people.

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This report was commissioned and funded by Snow Foundation as part of its commitment to better understand the educational landscape in Australia. The purpose of this report is to inform the Foundation—and the broader philanthropic sector—so that it can identify how best to position itself and contribute meaningfully. The findings, analyses, and views expressed in this report are those of the authors.

Snow Foundation is a philanthropic family foundation empowering communities and backing leaders through a holistic, collaborative approach, to achieve meaningful social change.

Established in 1991 by brothers Terry Snow AM and George, the Snow Foundation has been led by Terry's daughter Georgina Byron AM as CEO since 2006, significantly growing its national reach and impact from its origins in Canberra.

The Foundation is committed to supporting people experiencing disadvantage and injustice with an emphasis on: Women and Girls, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, LGBTIQ+, Youth and the For-Purpose Ecosystem.

Within the Youth theme, Snow Foundation has a particular interest in educational outcomes and believe that all students can develop the knowledge, skills and agency to thrive, and that race, gender, socio-economic status and location should not be predictors of educational attainment.

Acknowledgement of Country

We acknowledge Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as the first inhabitants of the nation and the traditional custodians of the lands where we live, learn and work.

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Executive Summary

This paper aims to highlight key challenges in Australian school education and where the greatest opportunities lie for philanthropy.

As David Gonski stated, *"If you can educate somebody, not only can you change their life, but you can actually change the life of a community."*[1]

Education is a powerful force for breaking cycles of disadvantage. Giving every child—regardless of background—the chance to build a brighter future and create new opportunities for generations to come. It serves as a crucial safeguard against economic instability, poor health, social isolation and interactions with the justice system.

Yet Australia's school system is underperforming. Half (49%) of Australian 15-year-olds do not meet the national proficiency standard in mathematics and 43% fall below proficiency in reading in the OECD's Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA). Students disproportionately affected are those from lower socio-economic backgrounds, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and children in regional and remote schools. By Year 9 in NAPLAN, priority equity students, on average, lag more than five years behind their more advantaged peers.

Far too many students fall behind because they are 'instructional casualties'—students who should have mastered the essential skills, but did not receive quality teaching instruction. This is not the fault of individual teachers or principals, it results from systemic failures in the education system.

The philanthropic sector has a unique opportunity to work in partnership with governments, officials, schools, principals and teachers, to help reverse this and improve the lives of Australia's children.

This paper identifies **six key areas** where the evidence is clear and there is a case for philanthropic investment:

1. Expand access to evidence-based curriculum materials
2. Guarantee core literacy and numeracy skills through high quality instruction
3. Upskill school leaders in priority equity schools
4. Better identify students at risk of falling behind with catch up support
5. Empower schools serving highly disadvantaged communities
6. Improve student engagement, wellbeing and health

Many of these areas are traditionally associated with government and are the most powerful levers for lifting student learning. Their complexity and scale mean no single sector can transform them alone. The strategies that help priority equity students succeed are the same ones that boost outcomes for all.

49%

49% of Australian 15-year-olds do not meet the national proficiency standard in mathematics.

43%

43% fall below proficiency in reading in the OECD's Programme for International Student Assessment.

System leaders often face ongoing challenges in successfully implementing initiatives and fostering classroom change.

Philanthropy has a powerful role to play in providing stability across political cycles, sustaining momentum for key initiatives and holding decision-makers to account. It can take a long-term view and ensure reforms have the time and support to take root.

Australia's education system offers strong assets for philanthropic investment, including dedicated school leaders and teachers, school networks for delivering reforms and a mechanism for connecting with communities. If the philanthropic sector works together, operating in partnership with government, it can change the lives of Australia's children.

Summary of key challenges and potential roles for philanthropy

Challenge 1

Australian students lack access to high-quality curriculum materials that build essential knowledge and skills.

Philanthropy can fund the development, distribution and quality assurance of high-quality curriculum materials.

Challenge 2

Too many students aren't proficient in reading or maths because evidence-based instruction isn't widely adopted in classrooms.

Philanthropy can improve training and coaching for pre-service and in-service teachers.

Challenge 3

School leaders aren't given the right ongoing support, particularly to lead evidence-based instruction and manage priority equity schools.

Philanthropy can support leadership development, ensuring leaders have the expertise and resources to improve student outcomes.

Challenge 4

Students at risk of falling behind in school are not identified early enough, leaving them without the extra intervention they need.

Philanthropy can fill gaps by supporting the development of rigorous screening and progress monitoring tools and intervention models, providing technical assistance as well as quality assurance.

Challenge 5

Schools with high numbers of priority equity students experience staffing shortages, disruptive classrooms and too little system support.

Philanthropy can support solutions such as school network models and recruiting high-quality teachers and leaders, while also exploring root causes of the problem and ways to improve social diversity in schools.

Challenge 6

Schools are not well supported to foster student wellbeing or to address attendance issues, making it harder to learn.

Philanthropy can fund school-based wellbeing initiatives, support teacher training and expand integrated service models.

01 Why school education reform can’t wait

"When we think of a 'good society'—one that is fair and just—one of the defining characteristics is likely to be that all individuals have equal opportunity to realise their potential, irrespective of the circumstances into which they are born. Education plays a critical role in determining whether or not individuals are given this opportunity."[2]

Australian governments have reaffirmed their commitment to excellence and equity in education through the Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration.[3] However, too many Australian children still lack access to a high-quality education that sets them up for success.

Without strong literacy and numeracy skills, students face serious barriers to future learning, employment and participation in society.

A child's level of literacy and school outcomes are a powerful predictor of a child's ability to overcome trauma and survive circumstance. As psychologist Dr Steven Dykstra has said, "If they can read, they can benefit from therapy and everything else we may try to do for them. If they can't read, all of that is a waste of time."[4]

An Australian study found that being read to at home was the strongest protective factor for children at high risk of maltreatment, with those read to being three times more likely to show resilience, functionally adapting better to school despite adverse experiences such as abuse, neglect, or exposure to violence. Low literacy levels are strongly associated with behavioural challenges, increased risk of substance abuse, mental health issues and involvement in the justice system (see Breaking the school to prison pipeline).[5&6]

In addition, the sense of belonging that students feel at school is linked with academic achievement, the likelihood of completing school and employment outcomes twenty years on.[7]

Breaking the school to prison pipeline

Children with poor literacy, language skills and school disengagement are more likely to end up incarcerated — this is known as the school-to-prison pipeline.[8] Prison populations tend to have lower educational attainment and higher rates of learning difficulties, with a 2022 survey revealing that two in three prison entrants had not completed Year 10, compared with just 16% of the general population.[9] Studies indicate that nearly half of young offenders have undetected impairments, making literacy acquisition and social connection more difficult.[10] A 2001 study found that 60% of NSW inmates were functionally illiterate or innumerate, reinforcing the link between education and crime.[11]

Even a small increase in high school completion rates leads to significant reductions in criminal incidents, demonstrating the economic and social benefits of investment in education.[12]

2 in 3

Two in three prison entrants had not completed Year 10.

60%

A 2001 study found that 60% of NSW inmates were functionally illiterate or innumerate, reinforcing the link between education and crime.

Australia can do better

Australia has the potential to lead globally in education, quality of life and social justice. For example, Australia ranks first among high-income countries for health care and equity outcomes, and Australian students rank among the top creative thinkers globally in the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA).[13 & 14]

However, when it comes to the foundational skills required for school, work and life, Australia trails behind many of the world's best-performing systems. In international assessments of 15-year-olds' abilities in mathematics and reading, Australia's performance is above the OECD average but behind top performers. For example, Australian students are more than four years behind Singapore in mathematics, and almost a year behind Ireland in reading.[15]

Even more concerning is Australia's performance shows a steep long-term decline in student achievement compared to other OECD countries.[16] The average Australian student today is nearly two years behind in maths and about 1.5 years behind in reading compared to the typical Australian student 20 years ago.[17]

Australia's education system is failing to provide a strong foundation for a significant share of its students. Half (49%) of Australian 15-year-olds do not meet the national proficiency standard in mathematics and 43% fall below proficiency in reading (Figure 1).[18]

Compounding this is Australia's relatively low level of academic resilience: just 10% of disadvantaged students reach the top quartile in mathematics performance—below the OECD average and behind countries such as the United Kingdom, Canada, Ireland and Japan.[19]

Even among students from the highest socio-economic quartile, 1 in 4 students (25%) fail to meet the standard across reading and mathematics—highlighting both a deep equity divide and a broader systemic problem affecting all levels of advantage.

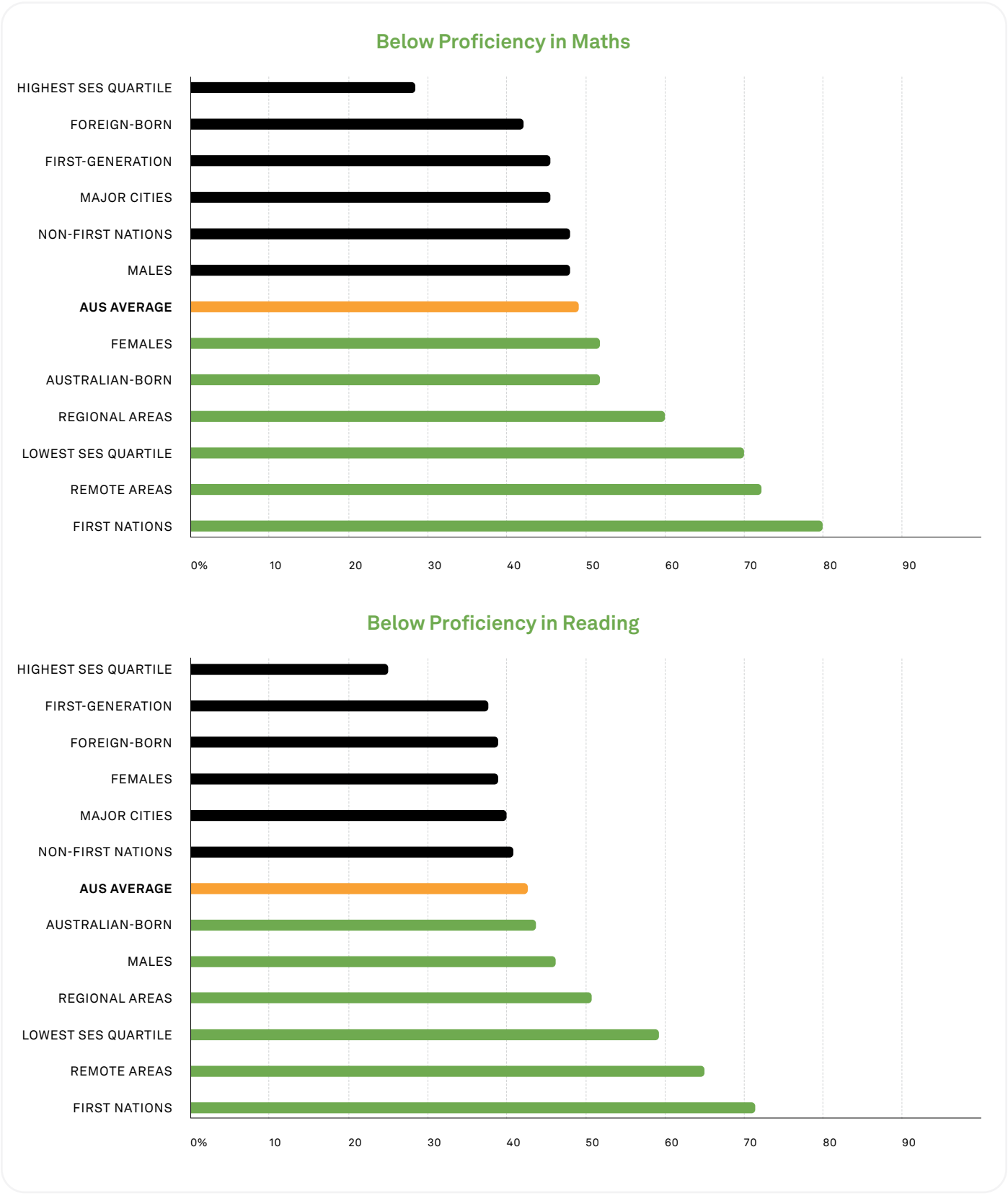
The situation is particularly concerning for students in priority equity groups:

Approximately 70% of **Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students** are not proficient in reading.

Around 60% of **students from low socio-economic status (SES) backgrounds** do not meet the standard in reading.

In remote areas, almost 65% of students fall short in reading.

Figure 1. Australian students at or below the National Proficient Standard (%) in Mathematical and Reading Literacy, PISA 2022

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Inequity is embedded

Education results show a systemic failure to deliver on the promise of education for all—with a deep inequity in foundational skills. For example, in Year 3 reading in NAPLAN, the gap between students whose parents didn't finish school and those whose parents hold a bachelor's degree or above is about two years of learning. By Year 9, this gap expands to more than five years.[20]

An estimated 20% of Australian students drop out before reaching Year 12, reflecting the long-term impact of inadequate support.[21] Young people who drop-out of high school are more likely to be unemployed and work in poorly paid jobs.[22]

Many struggling students are what researchers call instructional casualties—students who could and should have mastered essential skills, but who were not given access to effective, evidence-based teaching.[23] This is not a failure of individual educators or schools. It reflects a system that has evolved that allows failure to persist.

A culture of low expectations reinforces limited ambition. Without a fundamental shift in this mindset—one that believes in the potential of every student—meaningful, lasting reform will remain out of reach.

Fixing early childhood education won't solve the problem

Australia's equity challenge cannot just be fixed by focussing on early childhood education. While students from low-SES backgrounds often start school behind, the learning gap continues to widen throughout schooling. The Longitudinal Study of Australian Children shows that even low-SES students who start school on track are more likely to fall behind over time. In the lowest SES quartile, 20.5% of students who began strong in literacy and numeracy drifted down by the middle years of primary school, compared to only 6.5% in the highest SES quartile.[24]

02 Driving change: the crucial role of philanthropy

"All students, regardless of background, deserve high expectations and the support to achieve them." – Education Endowment Foundation (EEF), UK

Philanthropy plays a critical role in lifting expectations, driving innovation and funding high-impact interventions that ensure students receive the support they need to succeed.

Philanthropic investment sends a clear message: we expect — and will achieve — more from our education system.

Philanthropy in education in Australia is already showing success, but increased investment presents a unique opportunity to shape the future and improve the lives of Australia's children.

Internationally, philanthropy has been a game changer

In the US and UK, philanthropy has spearheaded disruptive national reforms. Crucially, these initiatives haven't shied away from the core business of teaching and learning.

Instead, internationally philanthropy has strategically focused on key aspects of teaching instruction – from instruction, curriculum and assessment through to building the evidence-base in these areas – to confront student disadvantage head-on. These core areas are recognised as one of the most powerful levers for driving widespread improvement.

Example: The UK's Education Endowment Foundation (EEF) focuses on teaching instruction to tackle inequality

The EEF—established by the Sutton Trust and the UK government—has been transformative in how research on teaching and learning is used in schools worldwide to help tackle inequality. The EEF significantly built up the evidence-base on effective teaching practices and then made it easy-to-access for schools through a 'teaching and learning toolkit' which summarises insights from 3,000 rigorous research studies. The toolkit is now used by 70% of school leaders in the UK.[25] It also has a practical focus in funding pilots and evaluating them to assist with scale-up efforts, as well as supporting school networks to build implementation capability. Critically, the EEF's work focuses on identifying evidence-based classroom strategies that improve teaching and learning, so only proven strategies are adopted to address inequality.

70%

The toolkit is now used by 70% of school leaders in the UK.

Collective action is required

Despite decades of reform, Australia continues to face persistent equity gaps in school education. A chronic challenge is getting implementation right. We know a great deal about what improves student learning, but making it happen in the classroom is an ongoing issue. State and territory governments often underestimate the guidance and support schools require to make shifts in teaching practice.[26]

Guidelines should make it easier for schools to align what is taught, how it is taught, and how learning is assessed—ensuring coherence from research to policy to practice. In addition, there's a critical need to build a more robust research base, given the limited amount of rigorous empirical studies in school education more broadly. Organisations like the Australian Education Research Organisation are helping bridge these gaps, but the broader government infrastructure remains underdeveloped especially in areas such as empirical research, quality assurance and accountability.

Extra government funding will not necessarily fix the problem. Australia's Better and Fairer Schools Agreement commits $16.5 billion over 10 years to fully fund government schools.[27] Financial investment alone cannot guarantee meaningful change. Strategic implementation, careful oversight, and a focus on results are all essential to ensure that funding leads to improved outcomes.

This is where philanthropy can play a vital role, not as a replacement for public funding, but as a partner in driving systemic improvement. Through targeted investments in evidence-based solutions, philanthropy can complement government efforts and help bridge gaps in innovation, flexibility and responsiveness. By working alongside government, philanthropic organisations can help pilot new approaches, evaluate impact and support scalable models that benefit students across the nation.

03 Six key areas for philanthropic impact

This section identifies six key areas where philanthropic investment can drive significant and lasting change:

1. Improve access to evidence-based curriculum materials
2. Guarantee essential reading and maths skills through high quality instruction
3. Upskill school leaders in priority equity schools
4. Better identify students at risk of falling behind with catch up support
5. Empower schools serving highly disadvantaged communities
6. Improve student engagement, wellbeing and health

These are powerful levers for student success, and it is hard to see how big change can occur without them. Most levers focus on aspects of teaching and learning – curriculum, instruction, catch-up support – in addition to student wellbeing. Importantly, a focus on student learning can also boost wellbeing – given opportunities for learning can boost confidence and help to connect students, families and communities to ensure safety and resilience.

Philanthropic investment in these areas would not only strengthen the quality of schooling, but also empower teachers as professionals to own and drive evidence based-practice for sustainable change.

How were the six key areas identified?

The six key issues are based on gaps that exist in the Australian landscape and what the evidence-base says matters. It assumes a hierarchy of evidence which gives greater weight to studies which are systematic reviews, randomised controlled trials and meta-analyses, drawing on rigorous evidence summaries available.

The six key areas are not exhaustive of all key challenges in education, but it is hard to see improvements in equity without addressing them at a minimum. We provide examples of philanthropic support in each key issue area.

Many of the example initiatives and policy levers for lifting student outcomes for priority equity students are the same for all students, regardless of levels of advantage.

1. Improve access to high-quality curriculum materials

Key takeaways:

- Many students lack access to high-quality curriculum materials that build essential knowledge and skills, especially important for students experiencing disadvantage.
- There is little quality assurance of curriculum materials, leaving educators overwhelmed with thousands of resources and no clear way to determine quality.
- Philanthropy can fund the development of high-quality curriculum materials, and improve quality assurance of them, to ensure schools have access to proven, knowledge-rich resources which are properly sequenced.

Knowledge-rich and carefully sequenced lessons are important to build student knowledge and skills incrementally. This is especially important for priority equity students who often start school with lower levels of background knowledge and rely more heavily on school to build it.

For example, one 2023 US longitudinal study of 2,000 students looked at the impact on students' reading scores if they received a high-quality curriculum—Core Knowledge—for at least four years, beginning in Kindergarten. It showed that students from low-income families could perform the same on tests as children from higher-income families when taught with high-quality curriculum materials.[29]

Despite their importance, Australian teachers have limited access to high-quality curriculum materials in Australia, especially in priority equity schools. A 2022 survey of 2,243 teachers and school leaders across Australia showed only 15% have access to a shared bank of high-quality curriculum materials for their classes—and this is even less in disadvantaged schools.[30]

Schools also lack good information on the quality of specific curriculum materials and textbooks to inform their purchasing decisions. In other industries, standards and quality ratings help to guide staff or consumer understanding of product quality. Easy-to-interpret and trusted evaluative information on classroom resources is needed for schools.[31]

"Many teachers tell us they struggle with this choice; that they can access thousands of curriculum resources online but they want guidance on which ones are high-quality, the precise content to teach and how to sequence content across subjects and year levels."

– Learning First (2023)

Philanthropy examples

Expanding access to high-quality curriculum, Ochre and Paul Ramsay Foundation.

The Advancing Curriculum for Equity (ACE) project, led by Ochre Education is a three-year initiative supporting priority equity schools. It provides high-quality, evidence-informed curriculum resources to improve student outcomes, focusing on priority equity students in regional and rural areas. It also assists small, regional schools with appropriate class resources for teaching multi-age classes, where there can be students from up to four grades in the same class—no easy teaching task. A research project will explore barriers to resource implementation and co-design solutions with priority schools.

Quality Assurance of curriculum materials, US and Australia.

Knowledge Matters is an independent, nonprofit organisation that endorses and promotes a short list of outstanding knowledge-rich curriculum materials in reading, science and history for schools to use. Founded in 2015 with philanthropic support, led by leading technical experts in their fields, it has seen significant progress. It now works with many school districts to help integrate knowledge-rich curricula into school policies, impacting thousands of schools across the country.[32] A similar not-for-profit QA body is in the early stages of establishment in Australia, but still requires endowment funding to allow independence to hold the line on rigour.

2. Guarantee essential reading and maths skills through high quality instruction

Key takeaways:

- Too many Australian students aren't proficient in reading or maths because evidence-based instruction isn't widely adopted in classrooms.
- Educators lack training in proven teaching methods and don't have the resources they need to implement the science of learning.
- Philanthropy can step in, for example, strengthening initial teacher education, or catalysing improvements in teacher professional learning and coaching on the job.

Evidence shows *virtually all* students can reach proficiency in mathematics and reading, if they receive systematic and high-quality instruction. For example in reading, only a small proportion of students, such as those with significant hearing and visual impairments, developmental disorders, or language impairments, may not achieve proficiency. Therefore, for most students, 'reading failure is unnecessary'.[33]

When teaching instruction fails, it is disadvantaged students who are left even further behind, given they tend to start school behind and have fewer learning opportunities in the home.

High quality instruction is a powerful lever for change. A student with a great teacher can achieve in half a year what a student with a poor teacher achieves in a full year.[34]

"...it's a preventable tragedy—the reason most [of those] students can't read well enough is that we aren't teaching them well enough."

– Grattan Institute (2024)[35]

A key issue is that educators have limited knowledge of evidence-based teaching practice and 'the science of learning'.[36] The science of learning sets out how people acquire, retain and apply knowledge and it helps teachers design effective teaching strategies (see Box 3). It is based on an understanding of how to move information from short term memory to long term memory. Research by the Centre for Independent Studies (2024) found teachers describing themselves as "stumbl[ing]" on to (evidence-based) explicit teaching methods or knowing that something wasn't right but not "hav[ing] all the information".

" My own son failed to learn to read. He was quite articulate and it didn't make a lot of sense. I did everything that I was trained to do in my own degree... I thought this was how things worked because that's what my university degree had prepared me for. But it wasn't working... So I then had to go looking for something else and it was then that I stumbled across explicit teaching principles" – Assistant Principal from NSW (2024)

– Centre for Independent Studies

"As a teacher, I just don't have the resources I need to teach children how to read."

– Primary school teacher, Equity Economics and Development Partners Report (2023)

Promising recent policy developments in Australia are shifting toward a greater focus on the science of learning, but there is a very long way to go to embed it in classrooms.[37]

First, professional learning for in-service teachers is often fragmented and lacks structured support with on-the-job learning.

There is little consistency in what schools prioritise on professional learning: what a teacher may learn at their first school may be in direct contrast to what they learn in their second school. These competing ideas lead to confusion, without deepening knowledge or expertise. Several think tank reports have called for significant improvements to teacher development, with greater use of expert teachers to guide and coach the consistent development of teachers across the system.[38]

Second, there's a need to strengthen Initial Teacher Education.

Principles derived from the science of learning need to be recognised not just by classroom teachers, but by initial teacher education (ITE) institutions. Teaching degrees do not adequately prepare teachers for the classroom in Australia. ITE course content is often not aligned to evidence-based practice and education academics tend to reinforce outdated instructional approaches.[39] Initial training also needs to be more practical, with more time spent in schools with guidance and support.[40] Despite significant national reviews and reform efforts, change is too slow. There are limited incentives for university providers to improve the quality and consistency of training and weak accountability.[41]

"Compared to school systems in the United Kingdom and United States, Australia's policymakers are years behind in ITE [Initial Teacher Education] reform efforts across a wide range of policy settings, including the content in ITE qualifications, the structure of the ITE market, financial incentives to support policy objectives, and enhancing the accountability of the ITE sector."

– Centre for Independent Studies (2023)

Box 3: What is the science of learning?

The science of learning draws on cognitive psychology, neuroscience and education research to articulate how students learn best and how teaching should be designed accordingly.

Core principles include that:[45]

- Learning is a change in long-term memory. Students must transfer information from working memory (where it is consciously processed) to long-term memory (where it can be stored and used).
- Working memory has a very limited capacity, so learning is optimal when the amount of new information at any one time does not overload it.
- Learning requires instruction which breaks down what students need to learn into smaller learning outcomes and models each step (known as 'explicit teaching'), to retrieve and build information through sequenced instruction of knowledge and skills.
- Learning requires sustained attention and engagement, including self-regulation skills to monitor and control thoughts, emotions and behaviours to achieve goals. Safe, structured and predictable environments help students self-regulate and sustain attention.

Philanthropy examples

Science of Reading, Mornington Peninsula Foundation (MPF), Victoria.

The MPF is a place-based philanthropic community organisation focused on breaking the cycle of disadvantage through education. In 2023, it launched the Science of Reading initiative, which aims to support schools in transitioning to evidence-based literacy instruction, emphasising oral language development and evidence-based systematic phonics instruction. At Rosebud Secondary College, teachers reported being up to four weeks ahead in their teaching programs, along with dramatic decreases in disruptive behaviours and suspensions.[42]

Innovative training institutes, UK and US.

The Ambition Institute in the UK provides cutting-edge teacher training and leadership development with a focus on priority equity schools. It designs training programs based on rigorous research, with its own dedicated research team, reaching thousands of teachers.[43]

The **National Council on Teacher Quality (NCTQ)** in the US evaluates teacher training programs and advises governments on how to improve teacher development. In 2024, it helped 15 states to adopt stronger teacher development programs on primary reading instruction, with 40,000 views of its evidence-based guide for schools.

Barksdale Reading Institute.

Founded through a $100 million investment by Jim and Sally Barksdale in 2000, the Institute played a pivotal role in transforming Mississippi from one of the lowest-performing states in America in reading to a national model for success. The institute focused on teacher training and coaching. Mississippi's statewide literacy reforms, influenced by Barksdale's work, included early screening for reading difficulties, structured instruction in the core skills for reading and accountability measures to ensure students mastered foundational skills. As a result, Mississippi climbed from 49th to 21st in fourth-grade reading rankings.[44]

3. Upskill school leaders in priority equity schools

Key takeaways:

- School leaders are key to effective instruction, yet they aren't given the right training or ongoing support.
- School leaders lack training in core areas such as evidence-based instruction and whole-school curriculum approaches, as well as managerial skills like leading change, budgeting, staff management and community engagement.
- Philanthropy can support leadership development, ensuring leaders in priority schools have the expertise and resources to improve student outcomes.

School leadership development requires urgent attention. It has the second greatest in-school impact on student outcomes after teacher effectiveness.[46] It is especially important in priority equity schools where it can drive evidence-based teaching practices and excellent leaders can be a magnet for attracting good teachers to the school.

Yet principal preparation in Australia is often ad hoc and disconnected, lacking a systematic approach with structured development opportunities. Many aspiring principals feel under prepared for the complexities of leadership, particularly in areas like staff management, workload pressures and community engagement.[47] School leaders can also lack vital knowledge in evidence-based literacy and numeracy instruction and whole-school curriculum approaches - which are vital for school improvement.

School leaders deserve much more. Running a school is complex; the average secondary school principal manages a budget of more than $15 million, which is more than the turnover of 98% of Australian businesses. They are also responsible for managing, on average, around 100 staff.[48] Training is required across all business elements: financial management, human relations, strategy and most importantly culture.

Australia's approach is in stark contrast to the best education systems internationally who treat leadership development as a continuum that includes recruitment of promising candidates, rigorous initial training and ongoing training and support.[49]

Philanthropy examples

School leadership Fogarty EDvance program, WA.

Fogarty EDvance, established by the Fogarty Foundation in 2012, improves leadership in disadvantaged WA schools through a structured three year program of on-the-job professional development. It embeds effective leadership practices, fosters peer learning and supports school leadership teams to develop, lead and manage a targeted change program. Since its launch, 11 cohorts, 500+ leaders and 148 schools have benefited, improving student attendance, behaviour and academic performance. Schools report stronger classroom engagement, reduced disruptive incidents and a more positive learning environment. After many years spent 'proving up' and refining Fogarty EDvance, the Foundation transferred operational management of the program to Knowledge Society as of early 2023.[50]

Support for principals' professional learning, Schools Plus, NSW.

The Hunter Principals' Network, supported by Schools Plus, is targeting improvements in student numeracy across 20 primary and secondary schools. Funding a Deputy Principal for Explicit Teaching, the initiative provides professional learning, coaching and curriculum alignment, benefiting 1,000 students and 550 educators annually. The initiative combines targeted professional development with leadership support, ensuring consistent classroom practices. Early results show higher engagement, stronger instructional routines and improved numeracy outcomes. Plans are underway to scale the model to Maitland.

4. Identify students at risk of falling behind for catch-up support

Key takeaways:

- Students at risk of falling behind in school are not identified early enough, with schools lacking consistent screening, intervention and progress monitoring tools.
- A multi-tiered system of support—a proven framework for early intervention—is not widely implemented in schools, leaving at-risk students without targeted help.
- Philanthropy can fill gaps by supporting the development of rigorous screening and progress monitoring tools and intervention models, providing technical assistance, and provide quality assurance on effective tools, resources and interventions.

The recently released 2024 Australian Early Development Census data shows that around half of all Australian children are starting school developmentally vulnerable—underscoring the urgent need for stronger early identification and intervention systems in every school.[51]

All schools need to monitor student learning and provide early interventions to prevent students from falling behind. Yet early screening and catch-up support is not working well in Australian schools. Teachers lack access to high-quality screening tools to identify students who are at risk of later difficulties in their learning.[52] Teachers also need greater access to high-quality diagnostic tools to accurately identify skills gaps, as well as progress monitoring assessments to track if extra support is working well or not.

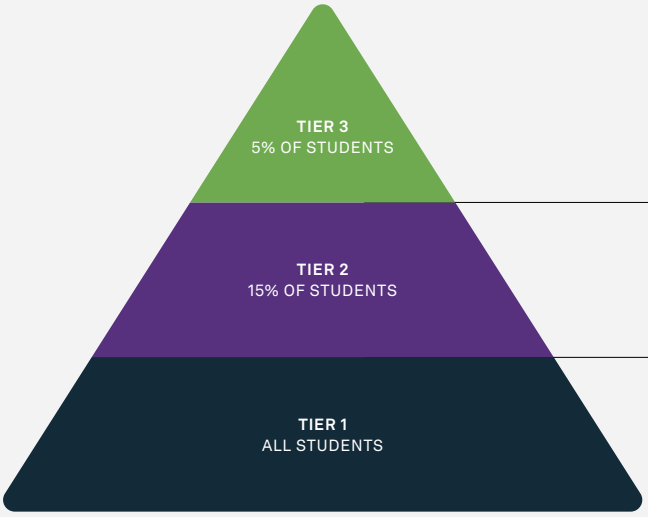
> "Children get missed if there aren't safeguards to catch them in the form of universal tests to identify children with poor decoding [reading] abilities."
>
> – Dean of Education, University of Canberra, Equity Economics (2023)

> "Having worked across multiple schools, I can confirm there's absolutely no consistency to intervention."
>
> – Speech pathologist, Equity Economics (2023)

Research suggests catch-up support is best organised within a 'multi-tiered system of support' (MTSS) model. This framework emphasises early intervention and providing evidence-based support at a sliding scale of intensity (see Box 4 below).[53] The MTSS model is still in its infancy in Australian schools. One 2022 survey shows two in five secondary teachers report low confidence in their school's approach to helping students who fall behind.[54] Schools need much better training and resources to deliver MTSS effectively.[55]

Box 4: Multi-tiered system of support (MTSS) for students at risk of falling behind

MTSS is a way to organise extra support for students' academic progress, behaviour and wellbeing. It starts with universal screening of all students' progress to identify students at risk of falling behind. There are three tiers of support; Tier 1 involves universal support for all students, Tier 2 is targeted support for those who require additional assistance often in small groups, and Tier 3 is the most intensive support for students who need one-on-one intervention. Data-based decision-making for the determination of support is key, along with ongoing progress monitoring. A 2023 systematic review of the MTSS model found it promoted improved academic and behavioural outcomes for students.[56]



Tier 3: Intensive support, often on a one-on-one basis, is provided to students who do not respond adequately to Tier 2 interventions.

Tier 2: Targeted and additional support, usually in small groups, is provided to students who are at risk of falling behind.

Tier 1: Learning gaps are prevented from arising in the first place by providing high-quality universal instruction for all students.

Philanthropy examples

Screening: Year 1 numeracy test, Centre for Independent Studies.

In Australia, the Centre for Independent Studies has received philanthropic support to develop a year 1 numeracy test. The screener will assist teachers in the early identification of students who aren't likely to reach grade level standard by the end of the year. The Centre was also heavily involved in advocacy for a year 1 phonics check.

Building school capacity for catch-up, National Centre for Intensive Intervention (NCII).

In the US, the NCII provides guidance on high-quality screening and assessment tools, and tiered intervention supports to help educators identify at-risk students. It offers training and coaching and helps schools implement evidence-based tiered intervention models. The centre is funded by the US Department of Education which ensures schools have access to free, high-quality resources. Districts and schools working with NCII report improvements in implementing a strong preventive approach, helping to develop a strong foundation in whole class and small-group instruction, along with intensive intervention one-on-one. There is no equivalent institute in Australia.

5. Empower schools serving highly disadvantaged communities

Key takeaways:

- Schools with high numbers of priority equity students experience significantly lower learning growth.
- Such schools experience staffing shortages with many inexperienced teachers, disruptive classrooms and too little support.
- Philanthropy can support solutions like school network models, recruit and train high-quality teachers and leaders, as well as explore viable solutions to improve diversity in schools.

Schools with large numbers of priority equity students, on average, have much lower student learning growth compared to more advantaged schools.[57] Grattan Institute analysis showed disadvantaged schools make only half the progress in numeracy between Year 7 to Year 9 as students in more advantaged schools. In many cases, students in disadvantaged schools are making a lot less than a year of growth each year.

In 2023, around 20 percent of schools have very high numbers of priority equity students.[58] This is around 1,500 schools across Australia directly impacting 555,000 children and teenagers. These schools tend to have large numbers of children who are First Nations children, from low-income backgrounds, with disabilities and rural students.

Australia has one of the most segregated education systems in the OECD and concentrations of disadvantage have also been worsening over time and at a higher rate in Australia than in most other OECD countries.[59]

Several factors contribute to poor student outcomes in priority equity schools.

A major issue is staffing challenges, with more inexperienced teachers as well as higher rates of turnover of staff, including school leaders. Staffing challenges can result in teachers working in areas outside their subject expertise and higher workloads, leading to teachers feeling overworked or burnt-out and limited in the quality of teaching they can provide.[60] Australia's low SES schools face much greater shortages of educational staff than high SES schools and this shortage gap is the worst in the OECD.[61]

Priority equity schools also tend to have more behaviour and safety issues and disruptive classrooms. Students in these schools are also more likely to have poorer physical and mental health, higher rates of trauma and a low sense of belonging to school (discussed in Key Issue 6). This can make the task of teaching more difficult and school staff in these settings can require extra resources, support and training.

Australian policy makers have tried many approaches, with varying success. These include state and territory governments continuously monitoring and providing intensive support, creating collaborative peer networks of schools to tackle common challenges and providing financial incentives to attract quality teachers and leaders to these settings.[62] Despite these efforts, improvement has been limited. More effective school supports are needed.

In addition, greater attention to understanding the root causes of high concentrations of disadvantage in schools is needed. This will help to design viable solutions for improving social diversity, helping to reduce pressures on schools in the first place.[63]

Philanthropy examples

School network models: The Ark network in the UK.

The Ark network in the UK is an education charity that operates a network of 39 disadvantaged schools. Its network structure allows for intensive professional development for school leaders and teachers, along with curriculum resources. It has achieved outstanding results: an estimated 69% of children eligible for a disadvantage loading leave an Ark primary school on track in their maths and English, compared to 46% nationally. Ark also incubates innovative projects with system-level impact, with its curriculum resources now being used by 350,000 students across the UK.

Advocacy efforts: The Grattan Institute (2024), supported by the Susan McKinnon Foundation.

The Grattan Institute (2024), supported by the Susan McKinnon Foundation, examined the potential of network models as a way to improve school performance. The report advocates for 'multi-school organisations' (MSOs) which are families of schools grouped under the operational control of an executive leader, with joint governance and accountability. The research paper helped lead to the establishment of the Tasmanian Department of Education's trial of an MSO in the near future.[64]

Recruiting teachers: National Exceptional Teaching for Disadvantaged Schools (NETDS), sponsored by the Origin Energy Foundation.

The NETDS program attracts high-achieving graduates to low socio-economic schools across the country. The program selects top-performing education students and provides them with specialised training to prepare them for teaching in disadvantaged schools. Since 2008, it has trained 500+ teachers across 250 schools, with 90% choosing to work in disadvantaged communities and 85% staying beyond five years. The program now runs in multiple Australian universities.[65]

6. Lift student engagement, health and wellbeing

Key takeaways:

- Australian schools face problems with student wellbeing and engagement —marked by disruptive classrooms, low rates of school belonging, high absenteeism, and rising mental health challenges.
- Educators lack training in fostering engagement, self-regulation and culturally responsive teaching, and schools don't have the resources or external support services needed to address students' wellbeing.
- Philanthropy can fund school-based wellbeing initiatives, support teacher training, and expand integrated service models.

Australian schools do not do well on student engagement. Australian classrooms are highly disruptive—about 40% of students in Australia report there is noise and disorder in most maths classes, and this is much worse in disadvantaged schools. Around 30% reported students do not listen to what the teacher said and that the teacher has to wait a long time for students to quiet down.[66] No learning can happen with majorly disrupted classrooms – explicitly teaching behaviour is fundamental to ensure every classroom operates with respect, responsibility, belonging and purpose.

Australian students compared to the OECD average also have a lower sense of belonging, experience a higher level of bullying, have lower feelings of safety, are less resistant to stress, have less curiosity and less perseverance. Priority equity students also do less well on these measures and are more likely to agree with statements *"I feel like an outsider (or left out of things)"*, *"I feel awkward and out of place in my school"*.[67]

Student attendance has also been declining in Australia in the last decade, including in the years leading up to COVID-19, especially for students in remote locations and First Nations students. School refusal reports have been growing since the COVID-19 pandemic, with prevalence higher among students with autism spectrum disorders and ADHD. There are also serious concerns of school-age children's mental health, with around 14% of children aged 4–17 experiencing a mental health disorder, with anxiety and depression being the most common.[70]

Schools need more support to help foster student engagement and wellbeing.

Australian teachers and school leaders need upskilling in how to explicitly teach behaviour and social and emotional skills important for self-regulation and learning.[71] There's also a lack of evidence-based guidance for educators to improve wellbeing outcomes.[72]

Teachers also require upskilling in evidence-based culturally responsive teaching practices related to First Nations perspectives, with more research on what works in this area.[73] The Culturally Nourishing Schooling Project is investigating how deep professional learning conversations can support teachers in critically reflecting on their biases, strengthening relationships with Aboriginal communities and embedding evidence-based cultural inclusion into classrooms.[74] Better resources and training in how to make appropriate adjustments to support students with a disability to learn effectively is also much needed.[75]

Lastly, schools need better support and linkages to external services, families and communities. This is critical and seriously underfunded. All schools should have access to allied health services such as speech pathology and occupational therapy. Without good coordination, students and their families do not get access to the support they need which can impact student readiness for learning and behaviour in class.

> "...many schools are having to take on service coordination and advocacy roles for which they are not adequately resourced or equipped"
>
> – Expert Panel (2024) – p98

When schools aren't adequately supported to get student engagement right, the consequences are substantial. School expulsions and risk of dropout are more likely, with lifelong impacts for those individuals (see Box 5).

Box 5: Difficult decisions on school expulsion

Lead researcher, UniSA's Professor Anna Sullivan, says schools face difficult decisions around suspensions and expulsions. "Boys, Aboriginal students, students from low SES backgrounds, and students with a disability are disproportionately excluded from schools…There is a distinct blind spot about how school suspensions and expulsions perpetuate wider social inequalities…"[76]

Research from the National Indigenous Youth Education Coalition's School Exclusion Project highlights the historical and ongoing exclusion of First Nations students from Australian schools, showing how discriminatory policies have systematically denied access to education. The report reveals that disciplinary measures, such as suspensions and expulsions, disproportionately target Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, reinforcing cycles of disadvantage. It calls for urgent reforms, including greater transparency in exclusion data, a shift away from punitive disciplinary practices, and a commitment to Indigenous-led education models that prioritise inclusion and self-determination.[77]

Philanthropy examples

Student engagement: The Classroom Mastery program by Knowledge Society.

The Classroom Mastery program by Knowledge Society is a structured, evidence-based initiative designed to help schools create calm, safe, and productive learning environments by improving classroom behaviour and culture. It equips teachers with practical strategies to manage classrooms effectively, including the use of consistent routines and expectations. It has been implemented in 150 schools across Australia.[78]

The 'Alternative Suspension program' run by the Y, funded by Eureka Benevolent Foundation.

The 'Alternative Suspensions program' is an innovative approach to improve how schools respond to student suspensions. Rather than sending suspended students home – where they may disengage further – the program offers a structured, supportive environment for students aged 12 to 18 to build their skills for educational re-engagement. The youth workers who run the program work closely with referral support services including psychologists and alcohol and other drug counsellors to help young people work through issues and help guide them back into education.

Integrated service delivery: Our Place supported by the Colman Foundation, Victoria.

Our Place is a place-based initiative which integrates early childhood education, health, adult education and parenting and community services within disadvantaged schools. First implemented at Doveton College in 2012, it now operates in 10 sites and is delivered in partnership with the Victorian government.[79] Schools offer tailored on-site health, wellbeing and family support to address barriers to student engagement and learning. While there is limited data on the impact on outcomes, there are early 'green shoots' of success in terms of early childhood learning, student engagement and adult employment outcomes, and the sites playing an important role as 'the glue' in improving coordination of services.

FamilyLinQ supported by the Bryan Foundation, Queensland.

FamilyLinQ is an integrated school-based hub initiative in Queensland, launched through a collaboration between The Bryan Foundation and the Queensland Government with a combined investment of $29.1 million over 10 years. It aims to improve health, education and life outcomes for children and families by bringing together education, health and community services under one roof.

04 Next steps

The path ahead

This paper sets out the key challenges in school education and the role that philanthropy could play in education reform. A potential next step would be to work together to create a plan which philanthropic organisations could collaborate on, outlining an agreed direction with options for investment and partnership with government.

This plan could provide a structure for funders and others to coordinate efforts where appropriate, clarify distinct roles, and enhance collective impact—without compromising individual decision-making.

By way of example, a group of US funders is coming together with a bold, long-term ambition: to significantly lift national literacy rates over the next 25 years. Recognising the urgency for systemic, sustained reform, they are forming a coalition to identify and act on the levers that most influence literacy outcomes: high-quality teaching, strong school leadership, and genuine parental engagement. The group will work to establish a shared scoreboard with clear goals for reducing the number of students not proficient in reading and to champion coordinated, coherent efforts across the literacy ecosystem. The group is calling for a collective step change in ambition—one that harnesses data, aligns strategies and empowers communities to make literacy success a reality for every child.

Roles philanthropy can play

Philanthropy Australia's 2024 paper outlines various opportunities for philanthropy to work with the education system, without duplicating government effort and making a meaningful difference.

The various roles philanthropy can undertake include...

- **Strengthening system capability** through evidence generation, public advocacy and tools that support effective decision making at scale.
- **Funding pilots and programs** that address persistent issues or emerging challenges.
- **Targeted initiatives** for example place-based initiatives tailored for communities, or initiatives focussed on specific equity groups.

Philanthropy can work independently, in partnership with government, or through intermediaries such as non-profit organisations or independent agencies (see Figure 2 below). To ensure lasting impact, philanthropy should consider the 'end game'—for example whether initiatives should be replicated or transitioned to government or commercial providers for broader delivery.[80]

Capabilities and responsibilities

Government	Intermediaries	Philanthropy
• Fund, manage, and support schools • Build and maintain school infrastructure • Design and implement standardised curriculum and assessment • Attract, train, and retain a quality school workforce • Advance excellent and equitable learning outcomes	• Broker information and partnerships between government and philanthropy • Understand needs and barriers of educators, policymakers and philanthropy through research and consultation • Develop and disseminate research and resources that advance shared aims • Devise ways to improve culture, confidence, knowledge and implementation across the education sector	• Problem-solving projects for persistent and emerging issues • Targeted activity for places, cohorts or elements of education • Activity that shows promise but is challenging to undertake, due to factors like expense or access • Expanding research capabilities • Supporting implementation pilots

Source: Philanthropy Australia (2024)

Building trust and collaboration is key

Philanthropy's impact will be maximised by building trust with governments, school leaders and communities. Long-term coalitions can drive systemic change, with co-designed initiatives and accountability frameworks raising expectations.

There are many great examples of collaborative philanthropic investments to explore. For example the Investment Dialogue for Australia's Children (IDAC) is a 10-year partnership with government, and the clearing house of the Australian Environmental Grantmakers Network is an example of collective grant-making efforts (See Box 6).

Box 6: Collective action by philanthropy – IDAC and AEGN Clearing House Project

Investment Dialogue for Australia's Children

The Investment Dialogue for Australia's Children (IDAC) is a 10-year partnership between government, philanthropy and community organisations, aimed at improving the health, education and wellbeing of children and families, particularly in disadvantaged communities. It coordinates funding and expertise to support place-based initiatives, early childhood development, and youth-focused programs, ensuring investment is strategic, collaborative and evidence-based. Guided by a Working Together Agreement, IDAC brings together key philanthropic partners with ARACY serving as the Strategic Convenor.

Australian Environmental Grantmakers Network

The Australian Environmental Grantmakers Network (AEGN) was founded in 2008 by a small group of philanthropists to create a trusted space to share environmental funding opportunities and insights. Today, it is a peak membership organisation, with 200 trusts, foundations and donors as members. It includes an innovative 'project clearing house' model, which lists meaningful projects in need of funding which philanthropy can take up on their own, or as co-funders. It is a collective model (not in partnership with government) which facilitates easy flow of information for good decision making. In 2023, it enabled the funding of 64 projects worth $37 million with support from network members.

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End Notes

1. Duffy (2025)

2. Bankwest Curtin Economics Centre (2017).

3. Council of Australian Governments. Education Council (2019).

4. Dykstra S (nd).

5. McArthur and Castles (2017). Armfield et al (2021)

6. Brunner (1993).

7. Abbot et al (2013).

8. Moretti E. (2005).

9. Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2023).

10. Snow and Powell (2012).

11. NSW Legislative Council (2001).

12. Lochner and Moretti (2001)

13. Tikkanen et al (2021). Australia ranks number 1 in health care outcomes and equity compared to high income countries including Canada, France, Germany, Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Sweden, Switzerland and the United Kingdom.

14. ACER (2024a). Australian students ranked second in PISA's creative thinking assessment, but confidence in applying these skills varied, with girls feeling less confident in science and innovation, and disadvantaged students reporting lower confidence overall.

15. OECD (2023a). On average, what students learn over a school year corresponds to about 20 score points on the PISA scale. Australia's performance in mathematics is 88 points lower than Singapore and 18 points lower than Ireland in reading.

16. Australia's PISA results have declined more sharply than the OECD average (OECD 2023). Other assessments like NAPLAN, PIRLS, and TIMSS have shown improvement in primary school or remained stable in secondary school (Larsen (2024)).

17. Based on OECD PISA data, between 2003 and 2022, Australia's average performance declined by 37 points in mathematics and between 2000 and 2022 declined by 30 points in reading.

18. ACER (2023). The Australian National Proficiency Standard represents a 'challenging but reasonable' expectation of student achievement with students needing to demonstrate more than elementary skills. The Australian proficiency standard for PISA is level 3. Internationally, the OECD has identified Level 2 as the level of proficiency on the PISA performance scale at which students demonstrate competencies that will enable them to actively participate in life situations.

19. PISA data indicates that on average across OECD countries and in Australia, Singapore and Estonia, about 10% of students are academically resilient (from a disadvantaged background but achieved high performance), with 11% in the United States and Korea, 12% in Japan, Ireland and Finland, 13% in Canada and 15% in the United Kingdom.

20. Grattan Institute analysis of NAPLAN data (2024a). This trend is seen with individual-level student data in Grattan Institute (2016) p.26.

21. Australian Bureau of Statistics (2024)

22. Grattan Institute (2024)

23. Grattan Institute (2024b) find virtually all student can learn to read with evidence-based instruction, citing J. Torgesen (2004), Al Otaiba and D. Fuchs (2006), Mathes and Denton (2002) and Mathes et al (2005). Kilpatrick (2015) finds research consistently demonstrates that many students struggling with reading can achieve and sustain normalised reading skills when provided with effective interventions.

24. Australian Department of Education (2023),p.84

25. Education Endowment Foundation (2021)

26. For discussion see Grattan Institute (2023, 2024b, 2025), Centre for Independent Studies (2024b)

27. This investment prioritises equity, excellence, wellbeing and workforce sustainability, linking funding to key reforms such as phonics and numeracy checks, catch-up tutoring, mental health support and teacher professional learning. Prime Minister of Australia. (2025)

28. Neuman and Dwyer (2011);

29. Grissmer et al (2023)

30. Grattan Institute (2022)

31. CIS (2024c), Grattan Institute (2024b, 2025)

32. Knowledge Matters (2023, nd)

33. Grattan Institute (2024b) cites Moats (2020, p. 5).

34. Leigh (2010)

35. Grattan Institute (2024b)

36. Grattan Institute (2024b) cites Serry et al (2022); Stark et al (2016); and Hammond (2015). Grattan Institute (2025), Centre of Independent Studies (2024b)

37. For example, the Australian Education Research Organisation (AERO)'s teaching and learning model in 2023 is a significant step. Several state governments are focussing more on explicit teaching, including Victoria and NSW.

38. Grattan Institute (2020, 2024b, 2025), Centre for Independent Studies (2024d), Monash University (2023)

39. See Department of Education (2023b)

40. Centre for Independent Studies (2023)

41. Department of Education (2023b), Department of Education (2022)

42. Morning Peninsula Foundation (n.d.)

43. Ambition Institute (nd; a,b)

44. Lurye (2023)

45. AERO (2023), AERO (nd), Deans for Impact (n.d.), Centre for Independent Studies (2024b). Article by Darling-Hammond et al (2020) includes a broader conception of the science of learning

46. NSW CESE (2015), Learning First (2017)

47. AITSL (2015)

48. Grattan Institute (2024), p8.

49. Learning First (2017)

50. Fogarty (2025)

51. Department of Education, Skills and Employment (2025) 52.9% of Australian students are developmentally on track.

52. CIS (2024a), Grattan Institute (2024b)

53. AERO identifies the MTSS framework as the best way to organise support of struggling students. de Bruin K et al (2023)

54. Weldon et al (2022)

55. Grattan Institute (2023), Centre for Independent Studies (2024a)

56. de Bruin et al (2023)

57. Grattan Institute (2018)

58. Defined as having more than half of their students from the lowest quartile of socio-educational advantage, see Paul Ramsay Foundation (nd).

59. Australian Government Department of Education (2023) p87.

60. Productivity Commission (2022) Australian Government Department of Education (2023)

61. OECD PISA results, 2022, 2018 and 2015, Save Our Schools Australia 2024

62. The federal government dedicated significant funds to low socio-economic schools in National Partnership Agreements between 2008-2015 and the Gonski review reforms better align school funding with student needs (see Grattan Institute (2024d))

63. For example, see report by Kellner et al (2023)

64. Tasmanian Department of Education (2025)

65. Origin Energy Foundation (nd)

66. ACER (2024)

67. ACER OECD PISA report (2022)

68. AERO (2025)

69. APH (2023)

70. AIHW (2021)

71. Australian Department of Education (2023) p.122, Centre for Independent Studies (2023b)

72. AERO (2023)

73. See AERO (2024), AITSL (2022)

74. Durksen (nd)

75. Australian Department of Education (2023)

76. Sullivan

77. National Indigenous Youth Education Coalition (2024).

78. Knowledge Society (2025)

79. Dandolo Partners (2023)

80. Gugele and Stern (2014)

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