*Review to Inform a Better and Fairer Education System*

**Submission from Learning Difficulties Australia (LDA) and in relation to the next National School Reform Agreement (NSRA)**

**August 2023**

**Who we are**
Learning Difficulties Australia is a not-for-profit association of teachers and other professionals, dedicated to assisting students with learning difficulties through effective teaching practice based on scientific research. With a rich history of over 55 years, we provide support through professional learning and training, quarterly bulletins and a bi-annual academic journal publication dedicated to the advocacy and improvement of education for students with learning difficulties. LDA has a membership base of over 750 members across Australia, of which 60 are specialist consultants who work with students individually.

**What we wish to comment on**
For the purpose of this submission, we will address the issues raised in Chapter 2 of the Consultation Paper which is titled *Improving student outcomes – including for students most at risk of falling behind* – as this is a priority area for the work of LDA. Chapter 2 of the Consultation Paper (which is called *Review to Inform a Better and Fairer Education System)* provides excellent background and analysis regarding the status of students who are particularly at risk of experiencing poorer educational outcomes in school and the longer-term consequences for these individuals. While there is acknowledgment that there are some factors outside of the control of the education system in the Consultation Paper, we support the commitment of the Expert Panel to identify and promote those things that can be addressed within the education system. The complexity of establishing an education system that is effective, engaging and responsive to student needs is a challenge that LDA recognises needs to be tackled at a Federal level.

**LDA considers the below as key elements that will have the most impact on student outcomes in Australia:**

1. A Response to Intervention framework at both school and departmental level.
2. Widespread adoption of the science of reading and learning pedagogy in both Initial Teacher Education (ITE) and school environments.
3. Explicit Instruction as a standard approach to all new learning.
4. School environments that foster student connection and belonging.
5. Adoption of the Primary Reading Pledge, a plan developed collaboratively by Five from Five, AUSPELD and LDA (see link below) by all primary schools in Australia.

It is our view that if these key elements were at the heart of our education system, students would complete their schooling with higher rates of success and go on to become active participants in society.

**Key element 1: Response to Intervention (RTI) framework at both school and departmental level.**

One of the ways in which students can be well supported, at the earliest time possible and as intensively as is required, can be achieved through a multi-tiered system of support. This is referred to as MTSS in the Consultation Paper. For the purposes of LDA's response here we shall refer to a Response to Intervention framework by which we also mean a multi-tiered approach to instruction in academic areas and in behaviour education and management.

A Response to Intervention (RTI) framework is characterized by successive tiers of instruction, typically known as Tier 1, 2 and 3, with the majority of students (around 80%) being well served by Tier 1 or universal instruction in which all students participate.  Around 20% of students will require additional support of increased intensity, typically instruction in small groups, at Tier 2. A smaller percentage (around 5% of students) will require more intensive and individualized instruction at Tier 3. This is a well-known model and we will not elaborate further here but suffice to say, we believe that improving student outcomes for **all** Australian students, relies upon quality (that is, evidence-based) Tier 1 instruction in foundational reading, writing and mathematics. It is not sufficient to have evidence-based intervention in place at Tier 2 and 3, although this is also critical, while Tier 1 instruction is wanting.

In a recent AERO (Australian Education Research Organisation, 2023) report titled, *Supporting secondary students lacking foundational literacy and numeracy skills: Research summary*, it was highlighted that schools who implement an RTI framework, are able to 'efficiently identify and effectively support struggling students'. LDA's mission is to support students to achieve their full potential at school and this is best achieved when they have access to high quality Tier 1 instruction in school and those who are struggling receive additional support. In a recent LDA Bulletin (2023), Greg Clement (Primary School Principal and Literacy Consultant) describes the goal of RTI as being '...to create a system that works for all students and a framework that aligns new and existing strategies to meet each student's academic, behavioural and social-emotional needs'.

**Key element 2: Teacher knowledge of the Science of Learning and Cognitive Load Theory.**

The Science of Learning is a wide body of knowledge around how students learn best. Encompassed in this is Cognitive Load Theory. This outlines how the brain processes and

retains information and should be at the centre of quality instruction. The lack of widespread understanding of the Science of Learning has left space for other theories and less effective means of instruction to become standard. Consequently, teachers are missing out on the opportunity to plan, teach and deliver content in a way that is aligned with how the brain works and leads to success for both teachers and students.

This has a high impact on the teaching of literacy where understanding the research on how students learn to read informs effective instruction and thus makes it easier for teachers and policy makers to align classroom practices with evidence (AERO, 2023). The Simple View of Reading states that in order for a child to be a successful reader they need quality instruction in two broad areas; decoding and language comprehension. Low proficiency, in one or both, leads to poor outcomes. A strong recommendation for improving student outcomes is the inclusion of compulsory systematic synthetic phonics instruction in primary school years, to ensure all students are successful decoders. In addition, the use of screening tools such as the Yr 1 Phonics Check assessment, ensures that instruction has been effective (MultiLit, 2020).

**Key element 3: Explicit instruction as a standard approach to all new learning.**

Explicit instruction is 'a structured, systematic and effective methodology for teaching academic skills' (Archer & Hughes, 2011). Content that is planned and delivered according to this pedagogy takes into account 'how the brain processes, stores, and retrieves information' (AERO 2021). Explicit instruction is supported by rigorous research evidence and has been shown to work across contexts regardless of subgroups of students and subject matter.

Key practices of explicit instruction include:

1. Breaking down learning into manageable chunks to address cognitive overload, demands on processing and working memory.
2. Demonstrating worked examples, which illustrate when the concept or skill will be applied.
3. Guided and supported practice, building confidence and enabling teachers to regulate the difficulty of practice opportunities using embedded formative assessment techniques.
4. Providing immediate feedback both positive and corrective, to ensure student responses are accurate and misconceptions are not rehearsed (Archer & Hughes, 2011).

Explicit instruction and formative assessment are interlinked practices. Good explicit instruction includes embedded formative assessment to gauge whether students are able to complete tasks independently or need further instruction to be successful. Furthermore, this is

encompassed within an RTI approach, ensuring all students are provided with the tools with which to reach their full potential.

**Key element 4: School environments that foster student connection and belonging.**

A recent systematic review conducted by AERO found that 'positive relationships with the school community can shape a student's emotional, behavioural and cognitive engagement with schooling and influence academic outcomes (2023). The benefits of a school environment that places students' connection at the forefront includes:

- Reduced levels of absenteeism.
- Students with increased levels of trust with teachers.
- Willing engagement in challenging learning activities.
- A willingness to contribute to the school community and help others.

Positive approaches to classroom behaviour education and management can greatly impact the quality of relationships within the classroom. There are some simple yet effective ways of establishing positive classroom environments where teaching and learning is engaging and rewarding for students and teachers alike (Wheldall, Wheldall, & Merrett, 2020). Whole-school approaches are important to ensure consistency of approach and fairness. It is at the classroom level, however, where relationships are mainly formed and maintained. Where students have more challenging behaviours, evidence-based approaches can also be employed in an RTI approach. The goal should always be to provide enough support, but not more than is necessary (also referred to as 'the lightest touch'), to help students develop pro-social and independent behaviours that will ensure they can engage successfully with their peers, their teachers and the curriculum.

**Key element 5: Adoption of the Primary Reading Pledge (PRP) – a plan to have all students reading by the end of primary school.**

Chapter 2 of the Consultation Paper provides excellent detail of how students' gaps in learning can compound over time. There is a clear imperative to intervene as early as possible to support students who are not keeping up with their peers in terms of their learning. Our view is that the principal goal of primary schooling is to equip students with a solid foundation in the basic skills of literacy and numeracy and to develop learning behaviours that will prepare them for their secondary schooling. One of the ways that this goal can be achieved is by ensuring that no child leaves primary school without having the basic skills of literacy and numeracy in place.

In 2020, **Learning Difficulties Australia** (LDA) (https://ldaustralia.org.au) worked with **Five from Five** (https://fivefromfive.com.au/) and **AUSPELD** (the Australian federation of state SPELD
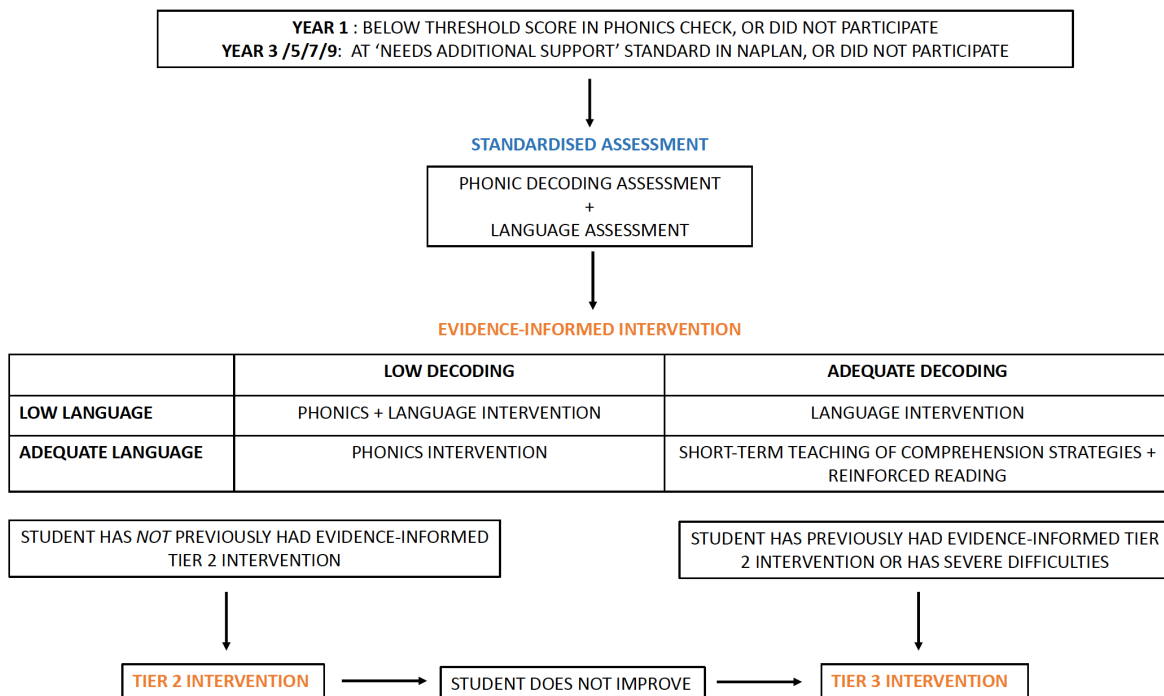
organizations (https://auspeld.org.au) to devise a plan known as the Primary Reading Pledge to have all students reading by the end of primary school.  The wording of the Pledge is: To reduce to near zero the number of children who finish primary school unable to read by providing primary schools with the resources and training to provide effective assessment and intervention.

The action of the plan is that every child who does not meet the designated achievement benchmark in the Year 1 Phonics Check (or similar assessment), Year 3 NAPLAN Reading, or Year 5 Reading assessments is automatically provided with standardized phonic decoding and language assessment and, on the basis of those results, provided with appropriate evidence-informed interventions.

The Primary Reading Pledge forms part of this submission and can be accessed here.

https://fivefromfive.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/PRIMARY-READING-PLEDGE_August2020Final.pdf

Although there are changes to the way that NAPLAN is reported from 2023, adjustments to the PRP can readily be made to accommodate this change. A recently updated (August 2023) assessment and intervention flowchart complementing the 2020 Primary Reading Pledge is shown below.

**YEAR 1** : BELOW THRESHOLD SCORE IN PHONICS CHECK, OR DID NOT PARTICIPATE
**YEAR 3 /5/7/9**:  AT 'NEEDS ADDITIONAL SUPPORT' STANDARD IN NAPLAN, OR DID NOT PARTICIPATE

↓

**STANDARDISED ASSESSMENT**

PHONIC DECODING ASSESSMENT
+
LANGUAGE ASSESSMENT

↓

**EVIDENCE-INFORMED INTERVENTION**

|  | LOW DECODING | ADEQUATE DECODING |
|---|---|---|
| **LOW LANGUAGE** | PHONICS + LANGUAGE INTERVENTION | LANGUAGE INTERVENTION |
| **ADEQUATE LANGUAGE** | PHONICS INTERVENTION | SHORT-TERM TEACHING OF COMPREHENSION STRATEGIES + REINFORCED READING |

| STUDENT HAS *NOT* PREVIOUSLY HAD EVIDENCE-INFORMED TIER 2 INTERVENTION | STUDENT HAS PREVIOUSLY HAD EVIDENCE-INFORMED TIER 2 INTERVENTION OR HAS SEVERE DIFFICULTIES |
|---|---|

↓ ↓

**TIER 2 INTERVENTION** → STUDENT DOES NOT IMPROVE → **TIER 3 INTERVENTION**

A similar plan for numeracy and mathematics could be developed.

Clearly for any ambitious plan like the Primary Reading Pledge to be successful, system support is required. This is an area where the Commonwealth Government could work with the States and Territories to resource and support the implementation of the plan.

**A comment on the issue of priority cohorts**

We would like to make a comment about the desirability of creating additional priority cohorts. As Chapter 2 of the Consultation Report reports, there are many students who fall outside of the priority cohort areas who require support to fulfil their potential. Also, as the Consultation Report highlights, there can be unintended consequences of targeting cohorts for support. This is not to suggest that we do not recognize that certain groups in our society do face particular and significant challenges.

Our contention is that all students who are struggling to gain adequate skills and knowledge are deserving of our support. A label or category should not inform whether students are eligible for support for their learning. We favour a non-categorical approach to instruction (Wheldall, 2009). There is no evidence to suggest that the cohort to which an individual belongs determines the instruction that they should receive. Rather an assessment of the student's skills and knowledge should inform the next instructional step.

We believe that a fully articulated and sufficiently resourced RTI framework which delivers evidenced-based instruction and intervention to whomever requires it across the education system in Australia provides the most effective and the most equitable approach.

**Our conclusion** By making the five key elements included in this submission a priority, we will see widespread improved student outcomes across the diverse learning contexts that we have in Australia. Policy reform is required at a jurisdiction level to ensure that all students in Australia are given the tools with which to succeed and become active participants in our society.

Contact details:

██████████████████████

Learning Difficulties Australia

ABN 26 615 758 577

██████████████████████████ Website: www.ldaustralia.org

## References

Archer, A., and Hughes C., (2011). *Explicit Instruction: Effective and efficient teaching.* The Guilford Press, New York.

Australian Education Research Organisation. (2023). *Encouraging a sense of belonging and connectedness in secondary schools.* https://www.edresearch.edu.au/sites/default/files/2023-03/aero-sense-of-belonging-and-connectedness-secondary.pdf

Australian Education Research Organisation. (2021). *Explicit instruction.* https://www.edresearch.edu.au/practice-hub/explicit-instruction

Australian Education Research Organisation. (2023). *Supporting secondary students lacking foundational literacy and numeracy skills: Research summary.* https://www.edresearch.edu.au/resources/supporting-secondary-students-lacking-foundational-literacy-and-numeracy-skills-research-summary

Australian Education Research Organisation. (2023). *Tiered literacy and numeracy interventions.* https://www.edresearch.edu.au/articles/tiered-literacy-and-numeracy-interventions

Clement, G., (2023). "Meeting students' needs through MTSS: A case study of an inner Melbourne primary school". *Learning Difficulties Australia Bulletin,* 55 (1), 24-25.

MultiLit. (2020). *Primary Reading Pledge. https://fivefromfive.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/PRIMARY-READING-PLEDGE_August2020Final.pdf*

Wheldall, K. (2009). "A non-categorical approach to teaching low-progress readers" Bulletin of *Learning Difficulties Australia Bulletin*, *41 (*3&4), 13-15.

Wheldall, K., Wheldall, R., & Merrett, F. (2020). *Positive Teaching for Australian primary schools: Effective behaviour management.* MultiLit.