

## Professional learning under the spotlight

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### Collaborative research project provides insights into what works to enhance teacher professionalism

Teachers, like athletes, benefit from ongoing support, and a research initiative is uncovering which professional learning interventions make the biggest impact.

The Australian Education Research Organisation (AERO) is leading a multi-study project in partnership with education systems, sectors, universities and professional learning providers to investigate how best to build teacher capacity through evidence-based teaching practices.

One study explores the value of refresher training, or 'boosters', in helping teachers sustain and deepen their use of effective strategies. Another examines the role of coaching as a mechanism for professional growth. These two studies are part of a wider aim to provide practical insights into how professional learning can be delivered more effectively across Australian schools.

Interim findings from the project have so far highlighted the importance of the relationship between coaches and staff and identified elements of refresher training that may be effective.

AERO CEO Jenny Donovan said the project was gathering important insights to assist teachers, schools, and systems to make informed decisions about professional learning.

“Schools allocate significant budgets to professional learning, but it can be difficult to know what interventions work best, in what contexts, and why,” Dr Donovan said.

“In addition, there remain gaps in our collective knowledge about how to ensure professional learning is as effective as possible and achieves lasting change so that a greater number of teachers and students can benefit.

“This project, which AERO is pleased to be undertaking in partnership with universities, professional learning providers and school systems, is providing important insights about what works, including identifying the factors that contribute to productive coaching relationships.

“Coaching is not just for athletes and sporting teams; teachers can get enormous benefit from expert teacher coaches when the conditions are right.”

While coaching is known to be a promising strategy, AERO has partnered with La Trobe University’s Science of Language and Reading (SOLAR) Lab to investigate the

effective mechanisms of sustained, in-school coaching on teacher use of explicit instruction as well as student literacy outcomes.

Interviews with educators involved in the randomised controlled trial involving 22 schools across Victoria revealed that a focus on building the professional coaching relationship in the beginning — although time-consuming — was a vital ingredient for success.

Study participants also highlighted the importance of flexibility and adaptability to the school context, the coach's credibility and knowledge, mutual respect, agreement on and a shared understanding of responsibilities, and having a clear and common goal that aligned with broader school priorities.

In a separate study in partnership with the Association of Independent Schools of Western Australia (AISWA), AERO examined the effectiveness of a scalable refresher or 'booster' intervention as a follow-up to more extensive professional learning.

"AISWA is proud to contribute to research that informs how professional learning can make a significant difference in student learning," said Chris Massey, Executive Director of AISWA.

This study found that the booster intervention tested was not effective, providing no additional benefit for teachers who participated in the booster versus those who did not.

"Overall, evidence from this and other studies shows that light-touch, scalable professional learning interventions do not meaningfully enhance teaching practice," Dr Donovan said.

"Sustaining change takes time and resources, and so far, there are no demonstrated shortcuts to improving outcomes and achieving lasting change.

"It is possible that future research could identify a more effective form of scalable booster intervention; however, in the interim, schools should avoid light-touch interventions and focus on leveraging professional learning through quality interventions that are sustained in duration."

These projects are part of AERO's broader program investigating effective professional learning. Other findings include an examination of motivations for schools participating in external professional learning, also in conjunction with SOLAR Lab.

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## About Us

AERO is Australia's independent education evidence body, established in 2021 and funded by the Commonwealth, state, and territory governments.

Our vision is to achieve excellence and equity in education outcomes for all children and young people through the effective use of evidence. AERO's role is to generate high-quality evidence, make it accessible, and encourage the adoption and effective implementation of evidence into practice and policy.