AERO's submission to the Inquiry into factors driving educational attainment

June 2026

Implementing evidence-based practices supports all learners, irrespective of their gender or background, to reach their full potential. This includes providing clear guidance to support the adoption of effective practices for all children and young people, paired with early identification and targeted support for students who are at risk of falling behind in their schooling, and prioritising quality improvement in ECEC.

The Australian Education Research Organisation (AERO) would like to thank the Australian Government for the opportunity to provide a submission to the House Standing Committee on Education's Inquiry into the factors driving educational attainment in Australia.

AERO is Australia's leading national education evidence body. Our vision is for Australia to achieve excellence and equity in educational outcomes for all children and young people through effective use of evidence. In support of this vision, AERO:

- generates high-quality evidence
- presents high-quality evidence that is relevant and accessible
- encourages effective implementation of evidence in practice and policy.

AERO's submission outlines the most effective ways to support children and young people to achieve their potential in school education (Part 1) and Early Childhood Education and Care [ECEC] (Part 2), with consideration of research for different student cohorts (where available), according to the Inquiry Terms of Reference.

In schools, the most effective and efficient way to strengthen support and engagement for **all students at all stages is to improve teaching quality**, which is the greatest in-school influence on student progress and achievement (Australian Education Research Organisation [AERO], 2023). This means that all schools should use evidence-based teaching practices in all classrooms, including explicit instruction, paired with the systematic provision of additional support for students who are at risk of falling behind in their learning (Australian Government Department of Education, 2023; Burns et al., 2005; Burns & Symington, 2002; de Bruin et al., 2023).

In early childhood settings, **all children, including those from diverse groups, benefit from intentional teaching practices** (AERO, 2025; Barblett et al., 2021; Grieshaber et al., 2021; Tayler, 2016), which involve educators making deliberate, thoughtful decisions to achieve quality learning outcomes for children. Strengthening ECEC educators' understanding and use of intentional and responsive teaching practices is an

important aspect of increasing quality ECEC to support all children to develop and reach their potential.

However, knowing what works for improving outcomes and embedding it into practice can be difficult, with health science research estimating that it takes 17 years for what we 'know' about effective practice to become what we 'do' in common practice (Robinson et al., 2020). A deliberate and structured approach to implementation of evidence-based practices can help reduce this gap. Australian education systems and sectors should provide guidance, resources and clarity to educators, teachers and leaders to support the adoption of effective practices for all learners.

To support sustainable, long-term improvement in educational attainment for all children and young people, AERO recommends:

In schools

1. Promoting evidence-based teaching practices for all students and providing teachers and leaders with clear, actionable guidance, training and support to effectively implement evidence-based teaching practices.
2. Prioritising a multi-tiered system of supports (MTSS) in all schools, encompassing evidence-based teaching practices for all students, paired with the systematic provision of additional support for students who are at risk of falling behind.

In ECEC

3. Strengthening educator and teacher understanding of intentional teaching in ECEC and providing clear, actionable, evidence-based guidance and advice to improve practice.
4. Prioritising quality improvement in ECEC, as measured by the National Quality Standard Quality Area 1 (Educational program and practice), as well as Quality Areas 3 (Physical environment) and 5 (Relationships with children), to reduce the likelihood of children's developmental vulnerability at school entry.

Part 1 – Schools

AERO's research has identified variations for different student cohorts in a range of areas. While there are some differences related to gender, there are much larger gaps associated with socio-economic status (indicated by parental education and parental occupation) and significant challenges faced by students who are learning English as an additional language (EAL) while learning the curriculum.

Our submission focuses on variations in student performance, engagement with the curriculum and attendance – all of which have impacts for educational attainment and can be supported through the implementation of evidence-based teaching practices in schools and targeted support.

Student performance

Student performance is a key component of educational attainment and can be examined through analyses of national datasets, particularly NAPLAN results. NAPLAN data show some gender differences in literacy and numeracy performance, with larger differences associated with indicators of socio-economic status.

The most recent 2025 NAPLAN data show an overall trend of girls performing slightly higher than boys in reading and boys performing slightly higher than girls in numeracy (Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority [ACARA], 2025). This is consistent with AERO's earlier analysis of 2013-19 NAPLAN data, which showed that boys were over-represented among those who remained consistently at or below the National Minimum Standard for reading (64% of the cohort), while girls were over-represented among those who remained consistently at or below the National Minimum Standard for numeracy (54% of the cohort)(Williams et al., 2023).

However, the size or magnitude of the association between gender and student outcomes is not that large, especially when compared to the association between socio-economic status and student outcomes (AERO, 2024). NAPLAN data from 2025 show that student performance generally increased in line with higher levels of parental education and occupation, which are indicators of socio-economic status (ACARA, 2025). This is consistent with AERO's earlier analysis of 2013-19 NAPLAN data, which showed that students whose parents had education levels of Year 11 or below were over 6 times more likely to consistently perform at/below the National Minimum Standard compared to those who had at least one parent with a bachelor's degree or above (Williams et al., 2023).

While there are large differences in performance for students with differing levels of parental education, it is important to note that socio-economic status does not determine achievement, and there is substantial variation within all student subgroups. The most effective way to support students from all cohorts to achieve their potential is to embed evidence-based teaching practices in all schools and ensure students who are at risk of falling behind are identified early to provide timely and targeted support.

Engagement with the curriculum

Students from language backgrounds other than English generally perform well in NAPLAN (ACARA, 2025); however, EAL students face the challenging task of learning English while, at the same time, learning the curriculum through English. AERO's research found that it takes at least 6 years of schooling for EAL students commencing school at beginner English levels to equitably participate in curriculum learning (Lu et al., 2026). EAL students in the lower half of the socio-educational advantage scale progressed 22% slower than those in the higher half, and male students took 6% longer than females to progress in learning English.

While AERO's research did not include First Nations students who are learning English as an additional language or dialect, new research is underway to better understand the experiences of First Nations EAL students in Australian schools.

To effectively engage in their schooling, EAL students need 'targeted, systematic and explicit instruction based on their language needs and prior learning' (ACARA, n.d.). Without effective teaching practices and appropriate support, EAL students are at risk of academic underachievement and plateaus in their English language and literacy skills (Australian Council of TESOL Associations, 2022).

Attendance

Student attendance is linked to higher student performance and educational attainment (Ansari & Pianta, 2019; Gershenson et al., 2017; Gottfried, 2011, 2014; Smerillo et al., 2018; UK Government, 2022), with greater differences in attendance associated with socio-economic factors rather than gender.

Over the last decade, there has only been a negligible difference in the attendance rates of boys and girls (ACARA, 2025; Groves et al., 2025). In 2025, both Australian boys and girls (Years 1-10) attended school at a rate of 89% (ACARA, 2025).

Much larger differences in student attendance rates are associated with school levels of socio-educational advantage (SEA). In 2025, data show that students (Years 1-10) from the highest SEA schools had attendance rates of 92%, compared to students from the lowest SEA schools, who had attendance rates of 82% (ACARA, 2025). Similarly, data from 2018-22 show that student attendance increased with higher levels of student parental occupation and education (ACARA, 2025).

Evidence shows that effective teaching practices are essential to actively engage students in their learning, and support student motivation and attendance (Richardson et al., 2023), which increases student exposure to instructional time and promotes positive educational outcomes (Allensworth & Balfanz, 2019; Keppens & Spruyt, 2020).

Promote evidence-based teaching practices for all students

Rigorous evidence demonstrates that there are evidence-based teaching practices that benefit **all students, regardless of year level, subject and background** (Mancenido et al., 2024). These practices align with the cognitive science behind how students learn through the process of acquiring, retaining, retrieving and consolidating knowledge. Learning is most effective, when students can connect new information to prior knowledge.

Students learn by transferring information from working memory, which has limited capacity, to long-term memory, where it is stored and used to build complex mental models. Effective teaching practices such as explicit instruction and guided practice help to manage cognitive load, ensuring that new information is introduced in small, manageable chunks. Students retain learning when they are provided with timely feedback, opportunities for practice and meaningful tasks that allow them to draw on their growing mental models. Guidance is gradually reduced as students build stronger connections to knowledge in long-term memory, fostering independence and mastery in applying their learning.

AERO has drawn on empirical evidence to develop a model of learning and teaching (the model) that maps the process of how students learn against the most effective and efficient teaching practices that support learning:

- Teachers foster the conditions of a learning-focused environment, in line with the evidence that students are actively engaged when learning
- Teachers develop a teaching and learning plan for the knowledge students will acquire, in line with the evidence that learning is a change in long-term memory
- Teachers manage the cognitive load of learning tasks, in line with the evidence that students process limited amounts of new information
- Teachers maximise retention, consolidation and application of learning, in line with the evidence on how students develop and demonstrate mastery.

Research highlights the importance of embedding responsive practice, including cultural responsiveness, into teaching practice and resources (Opfer et al., 2017; Stornaiuolo et al., 2023; Wallace & Arredondo, 2022). This includes creating resources that are responsive to the needs of students from diverse backgrounds, alongside teachers critically examining their own attitudes, assumptions and biases, to ensure change is culturally responsive and equitable (Ryan, 2023). This is particularly important for priority student cohorts, where a 'one-size-fits-all' approach risks reinforcing inequities (Carey, 2015; McLure & Aldridge, 2022; NSW Department of Education, 2023).

Support a deliberate and structured approach to implementation in schools

Implementation is the bridge between knowing what works for improving student outcomes and embedding it into practice. While research underscores the importance

of maintaining fidelity so that evidence-based practices drive impact, there is limited specificity in the literature about the best ways to mobilise these practices in schools and the role of system-level support. Specificity is crucial because schools operate in diverse contexts, each with unique challenges, resources and student needs. Without detailed guidance, schools may struggle to adopt these practices effectively leading to inconsistent application and diminished impact.

School leaders and teachers need clear, actionable guidance to effectively implement evidence-based teaching practices in culturally responsive ways, ensuring that all students, regardless of background, can achieve educational success. AERO has drawn on a strong body of implementation research to develop a deliberate and structured approach to support schools to engage in effective implementation (AERO, 2026). Within this deliberate and structured approach, quality professional learning is an implementation strategy that schools may select to support the adoption of evidence-based practices. AERO is generating evidence on how professional learning can be delivered and supported to improve and sustain the use of evidence-based practice in schools (Kovacs et al., 2025).

Prioritise a multi-tiered system of supports (MTSS)

AERO's analysis of longitudinal NAPLAN data shows that many students with early low performance don't catch up to their peers (Williams et al., 2023). Maintaining learning gains as students progress through school can also be challenging (Williams et al., 2023). Of students with early low performance, the largest movement back onto a pathway of improved performance happens between Year 3 and Year 5. These challenges suggest the need for early intervention to support all students to develop foundational knowledge and skills.

NAPLAN data, presented earlier, show disparities in student performance for different cohorts, particularly for students from lower socio-economic backgrounds. Identifying and supporting students who are at risk of falling behind is crucial for achieving equity and excellence in Australia's education system. Research emphasises the importance of early screening and intervention, using evidence-based, targeted approaches to ensure all children can experience success and positive dispositions towards learning from the outset (Goss & Sonnemann, 2016).

AERO's research has identified the multi-tiered system of supports (MTSS) framework as an effective framework for organising the support required to address learning gaps across all ages and diverse contexts (de Bruin et al., 2023).

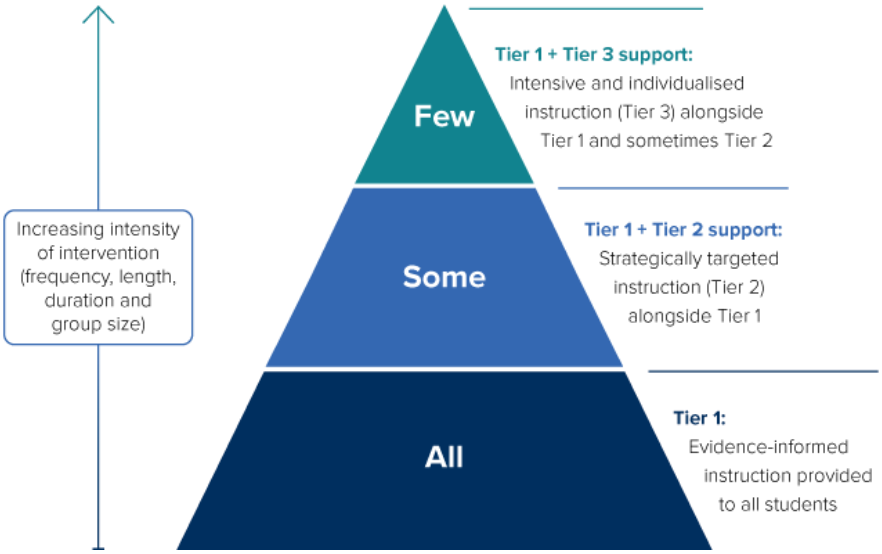

Figure 1: How tiers of support work in an MTSS framework

Within the MTSS framework, schools implement universal evidence-based practices, identify students who need additional support, and monitor the impact of interventions. While the mechanisms for learning remain the same for all students, those facing persistent challenges receive more intensive, frequent and sustained support. To ensure timely and effective support, it is essential that schools and teachers are equipped with the training and resources to identify students who need further assistance early and provide targeted, evidence-based interventions through small group (Tier 2) or more intensive and individualised (Tier 3) instruction to help them get back on track.

Part 2 - ECEC

Strengthen intentional teaching practice in ECEC

AERO's research shows that intentional teaching is critical to maximising all children's opportunities for learning and development, across all learning domains, with evidence of the benefits of intentional and responsive interactions being strongest for children experiencing disadvantage (AERO, 2025).

AERO's research shows that quality ECEC is built upon a foundation of evidence-informed teaching practices and strong educator-child relationships (Ramia et al., 2023). Quality is achieved through positive interactions between ECEC educators and children and the delivery of engaging, developmentally appropriate learning experiences that are planned with knowledge of what children already know, can do and understand (AERO, 2025; Australian Government Department of Education, 2022).

Intentional teaching is a key practice that creates purposeful learning opportunities in children's everyday play and requires educators and teachers having a diverse repertoire of learning and teaching strategies, with the knowledge of when and how to use these effectively to extend children's learning and development.

Despite the benefits of intentional teaching and its place in ECEC, there remains a disconnect between policy, educator and teacher knowledge and pedagogical practice (Kirkby et al., 2018; Leggett, 2025; Lewis et al., 2019), which contributes to a lack of clarity about how intentional teaching strategies are applied within play-based learning . Strengthening ECEC educators' understanding and use of intentional and responsive teaching practices is an important aspect of improving quality ECEC in Australia. However, improving practice requires consideration of implementation at a service-level and at a sector level.

Support a deliberate and structured approach to implementation in ECEC

Effective implementation in ECEC, as in other settings, involves more than simply adopting a new idea or the introduction of a new resource. It requires embedding planned meaningful and sustainable change that is responsive to the unique context of each service. Similar to school education, a deliberate and structured approach involves tailoring implementation work to the specific context of an ECEC setting and purposefully sequencing planned activities to integrate evidence-based practices and sustain improvements over time.

Prioritise quality improvement

The quality of ECEC matters when it comes to shifting children's learning and development trajectories (Burchinal, 2018; Burchinal et al., 2016; Melhuish et al., 2015; Rankin et al., 2022). AERO's research demonstrates that there is a link between ECEC

quality and school readiness and child development, as measured by the Australian Early Development Census (AEDC).

Improving the quality of ECEC service ratings is a key driver to support more children to be developmentally on track by the time they start school. AERO's research identified that improved ECEC quality, as measured by the National Quality Standards, consistently reduced the likelihood of children's developmental vulnerability at school entry (Rankin et al., 2024). This is particularly significant, as a child's level of development when they start school is strongly associated with school readiness and their academic learning outcomes throughout primary school (Brinkman et al., 2013).

AERO's research found that children who attended ECEC services rated as 'Exceeding' the National Quality Standard in Quality Area 1 (Educational program and practice), Quality Area 3 (Physical environment) and Quality Area 5 (Relationships with children) were consistently less likely to be developmentally vulnerable. Prioritising improvement to drive more ECEC services to achieve Exceeding ratings for Quality Areas 1, 3 and 5 could improve outcomes for children at risk of developmental vulnerability.

An equitable ECEC system in Australia relies on the availability of quality services that meet the needs of all children and families. Access to quality ECEC is especially important for multilingual learners who are learning English. While many multilingual children thrive in ECEC, those who are yet not proficient in English at the start of school face multiple challenges, which can contribute to developmental vulnerability in their first year of schooling. Drawing on AEDC data, AERO's research identified that multilingual children who participated in higher-quality ECEC settings demonstrated strengths in more areas of child development than similar children who participated in lower-quality ECEC settings. Educators and teachers may not always recognise the different languages or dialects of First Nations children (Angelo & Hudson, 2020), highlighting the importance of identifying appropriate support for all children who are learning English as an additional language while participating in ECEC.

Prioritising quality improvement in ECEC, as measured by the National Quality Standards, and supporting all children to access to quality ECEC is important to reduce the likelihood of developmental vulnerability for children when they start school.

Conclusion

All children and young people benefit from effective teaching practices to support them to achieve their potential. In schools, this means adopting evidence-based practices that align with how students learn, paired with the systematic provision of MTSS to ensure that students who are at risk of falling behind are identified early and receive additional support. In ECEC, this means the provision of intentional teaching for all children and strengthening the quality of ECEC to support school readiness and child development.

AERO's submission outlines variations for student cohorts across performance, engagement in the curriculum, and attendance, which contribute to educational attainment. There are some differences related to gender, with larger gaps associated with socio-economic status (indicated by parental education and occupation) and other challenges faced by EAL students who are learning English while learning the curriculum.

The evidence shows that implementing evidence-based practices is effective to support all learners, irrespective of their gender or background, to reach their potential. This includes providing clear guidance to support the adoption of effective practices for all children and young people, paired with early identification and targeted support for students who are at risk of falling behind in their schooling, and prioritising quality improvement in ECEC, as measured by the National Quality Standards.

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