

CURRICULUM: GREAT LEADING, TEACHING AND LEARNING IN OUR PRIMARY SCHOOLS

PRIMARY CURRICULUM

A new story of primary schooling is needed, one which starts with building the foundational skills of literacy and numeracy, where the joy of learning is celebrated, and each learner's potential is unleashed. Where is the primary curriculum based upon an understanding of how children learn? Where is the space for playful curiosity, for deep wondering and engagement?

The current primary curriculum is too crowded, impossible to teach if taken literally. It is based on outdated models of curriculum, focussed on divisions, grades, and subjects. While this might work for secondary teachers who usually focus on a limited subject selection, the expectations for a single primary teacher to 'cover' all this material is highly unrealistic.

High rates of disengagement and test results that are not that impressive, are symptoms of this malaise. We want good results. We want to see improved results. We question whether these are best attained through current curriculum mandates.

THE TEACHING CHALLENGE:

Teachers need to prepare for fundamentally changing the mental constructs of 30 children in 40 minutes. They need to shift strategies during the lesson to achieve this change in mental state, engage in hundreds of speech acts, maintain order and detect the engagement of each and every child – as well as carry responsibility for a large range of administrative requirements. Add in curriculum that signals that learning should not only be directed at discipline knowledge but simultaneously at learning dispositions, capabilities, and cross curriculum priorities.

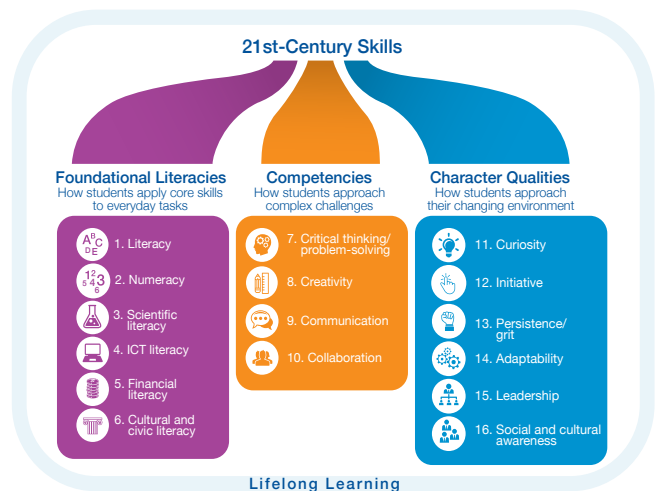
¹ Oates, T (2024). CBE of Cambridge Assessments

TO SUPPORT A NEW PRIMARY CURRICULUM

Reduce Curriculum Overcrowding

A primary curriculum must be one that focuses primarily on building literacy and numeracy competencies to mastery so that each student becomes an autonomous learner. By adopting a modern pedagogy specific to primary children and inclusive of an emphasis on building 21st Century skills, learning will be integrated, contextual, meaningful, purposeful and successful.

Andreas Schleicher, Director for Education and Skills at the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) argued that we need a focus on fewer things in greater depth and with developing creativity skills a priority. (September 2024) ▶



² World Economic Forum (2015) New Vision for Education

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Focus on Meaning and Purpose

Education should be more than just academic achievement—it should help children and young people find meaning and purpose in their lives. Schools should guide students to discover their strengths, develop what they can excel at, and understand their potential contributions to society. By helping students answer questions like “What does society need from me?” and “How can I contribute?” we foster a generation that is not only skilled but also driven by a sense of purpose. Quality student-teacher relationships, coupled with openness to diversity, new ideas, and innovative ways of working, create the foundation for this. These principles underpin an education system that truly empowers students to lead meaningful, fulfilling lives while addressing the needs of a changing world.

Make Teacher Workload Manageable

To support a reimagined primary curriculum, the work of our school staff must be manageable. Recruitment of new teachers to the profession is important but so too is retaining the many good teachers we have. Increasing the number of specialist teachers in primary schools provides generalist teachers more time to do their job well and assists with curriculum overload. More specialist teachers also provide much needed additional planning time for generalist primary teachers.

Learning is relational, not transactional and children learn best when relationships with teachers are strong. And teachers teach best, and leaders lead best when in a safe working environment, have a manageable workload and are well supported. Primary leaders need the freedom to determine the nature of specialisation best needed to enhance learning outcomes across the curriculum and meet wellbeing needs across the school.

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Full-Service Schools - Integrated Services

Children are unable to learn well unless they are well. To be well, children and their families also need ready access to services. Teachers become frustrated when children in need of help, can't access help in a timely manner. It shouldn't be like this. There are many, many agencies and NGOs providing duplicate services soaking up much needed resources which are not effectively used. There are too many uncoordinated service providers, none of which individually has the capacity to provide the level of service needed by some children and their families.

Where resourcing is made available, APPA embraces the challenge of schools being hubs for place-based paraprofessional services, integrating government and NGO services within **properly funded and supported** community service hubs or full service schools (FSS). This would include speech, occupation and physiotherapy, and counselling and family support structures, tailored to the needs of families. While embracing this challenge, this needs to be properly resourced with appropriate staffing. The burden of sourcing and coordinating such services cannot be the responsibility of the principal.

Curriculum programs addressing student wellbeing and resilience will be enhanced as we provide exposure to developmentally appropriate risk taking and challenging experiences. The trialed introduction of Mental Health Nurses is one initiative that APPA supports. Fully qualified nurses with additional training in mental health employed by the State Health Departments to operate in primary schools to triage first aid, administer medication and meet the mental health needs of students and families is an initiative worth exploring.

CONCLUSION

It is imperative that practicing principals and teachers work with those in bureaucracies to co-create an enhanced educational system. APPA, as the peak body representing over 7200 practising principals is ideally placed to provide such input and direction. **APPA calls for the development of a new primary curriculum, a curriculum which reflects how children learn, and which encourages responsiveness and adaptability for teachers in meeting needs.** We call for a coherent curriculum which recognises diversity, is culturally sensitive and is built around 21st-century competencies, capabilities, and skills.

PRINCIPAL WORKLOAD, PRINCIPAL WELLBEING

Primary school principals are essential to fostering quality education, community engagement, and student success. They make a difference.

THE ROLE OF PRIMARY LEADER

The primary leader plays a vital role in building community and engaging families by serving as a bridge between the school and its broader community. They are often the first engagement with families in the formal learning process, fostering a welcoming, inclusive environment that encourages and builds parental involvement.

According to John Hattie, principals are the second most important influence on student achievement within a school, after classroom teachers. While Hattie's research shows that the direct effect of principals on student learning is not as significant as that of teachers, principals play a crucial role in creating the conditions for effective teaching and learning. Hattie emphasises that principals can have a substantial indirect effect on student outcomes through their focus on instructional leadership, promoting teacher collaboration, establishing a positive school climate, setting high expectations, and ensuring a focus on evidence-based teaching practices. By fostering an environment where teachers can thrive, principals contribute significantly to student achievement, making them key figures in the overall success of a school.¹

School leaders focus on teaching and modelling excellence and equity, ensuring that all children in their care become confident, creative individuals, successful learners, and engaged, informed members of the community, as outlined in the Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration.

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PRINCIPAL WORKLOAD

However, increasing workloads, compliance tasks, and inadequate resources are leading to burnout, with 56% of principals considering leaving their roles, according to the 2023 Australian Principal Wellbeing Survey.² While being a principal is a profession that we believe can be the best in the world, we need to address the issues that are making it a less than desirable job. Addressing the workload and wellbeing of primary school principals is crucial to retaining effective leaders and ensuring student success.

What we want is an education system which enables the development of healthy, literate, numerate, happy children who are well connected to, and supported within their communities. When the whole system is working as it should, we have engaged, motivated staff confident to lead responsive and quality teaching and learning.

TO ADDRESS PRINCIPAL WORKLOAD AND WELLBEING

Provide business management solutions

The role of primary leaders must be manageable. They are increasingly asked to do more with less, and this risks too many leaders and emerging leaders leaving and taking up opportunities elsewhere. The increasing workload threatens to undermine their ability to lead effectively. Work volume has increased with more compliance tasks, audits and required documentation, implemented with no increase in financial or human resources. Job demands need to be matched with job resources.

The addition of compliance tasks, audits and associated required documentation have resulted in organisational management now taking too much of a leader's time, taking time away from culture and community establishment (human resource ►

management) and educational / instructional leadership. In times of teacher workforce shortage, recruiting teachers, including sourcing relief teachers, is taking more and more time and many school leaders are spending more time each day reorganising the school to ensure classes have a teacher in front of them. We need strong business management to take care of the many operational dimensions of the role. (For example, budgeting management of ancillary staff, operation of childcare centres, and integrated services.)

Ensure principal safety and support

The accountabilities in the primary principal role are many³ and the intensification of principals' work has been well documented. It will always be a demanding and busy profession, but it needs to also be one that is respected, safe and worthwhile.

To lead well, principals need to be physically, psychologically and reputationally safe. It is the responsibility of employers to provide a safe and healthy work environment and to take all reasonable steps to protect employees from harm and injury. An effective, supportive, person centred approach by systems ensures principals are safe and supported and better able to support others.

Prepare for school leaders for their role

Effective principal preparation must be tailored to the unique needs of schools and communities, with gender, culture, and context as guiding principles. School leaders, particularly those in low SES areas or facing crises, deserve regular professional supervision and coaching. We must ensure all principals have access to quality differentiated professional learning that empowers them to lead effectively. Investing in these measures is essential for creating school leadership that is truly fit for purpose.

Enact policy development that works

Currently, school leaders feel disenfranchised from the policy development process and feel there is too much input from people who have never set foot inside a classroom (other than their own student experience). We accept their intentions are good - just wrong! Schools need input into decisions that impact them. While it is recognised that government set policy agendas, those policy agendas can and should be enriched by a school perspective. Working with schools in the continuing refinement of policy propositions enhances policy outcomes and increases the likelihood of policy implementation success.

Policies need to be adaptable to local contexts. There are many decisions that should be taken at the local level where the context is known. We need to take seriously, the ability of experienced educators to make good decisions to suit their context and to move away from a bureaucratic 'one size fits' all approach which is sadly killing initiative, responsiveness, and creativity. This means devolving more resources to the school level and trusting senior educators to make good decisions in their local context. Trust your leaders!

Schools are well versed in using evidence-based research to support changing practise, but Australian educational indicators are not showing improvement. It is time we insist that evidenced-based policy settings are also adopted. Where is the evidence that policy settings such as those established in the current NSRA are effective and resulting in the agreed outcomes? Serious school reform needs to look at structuring a school / bureaucracy interface which works, by working with schools in developing workable policy positions.

SUMMARY

When we support principals with effective preparation, a safe work environment and manageable workloads, we make a positive investment in the future of our students. By ensuring that principals can perform their roles effectively, we are securing better educational outcomes for all children.

APPA calls for the BFSA to be a catalyst for real school reform, one which harnesses the energy of professionals working in the area to achieve mutually desired results. What it shouldn't be, is more of the same, more and more measuring in the hope that results come from increased micromanagement and falsely premised accountability. School based personnel feel confined by the morass of measurement which kills initiative and creativity and inhibits schools responding community by community to pressing needs. Substantive change requires a substantial change in emphasis. This emphasis must turn the bureaucracy on its head and instead see systems actively partner with those on the ground, in particular principals and teachers.

- 1 Hattie, John: **Visible Learning for Teachers: Maximizing Impact on Learning (2012)** and *Visible Learning: A Synthesis of Over 800 Meta-Analyses Relating to Achievement (2008)*.
- 2 [The Australian Principal Occupational Health, Safety and Wellbeing Survey \(squarespace.com\)](https://www.squarespace.com)
- 3 APPA's 'A contemporary school leader'

PRIMARY RESOURCING

APPA advocates the importance of bringing to life a vibrant, inclusive educational system. This is achieved through adequate and equitable resourcing in primary education, recognising its foundational role in building a stronger and fairer future for Australia. APPA acknowledges the commitment to equalised needs based funding across all sectors by 2029.

QUALITY PRIMARY EDUCATION

We call for the prioritising of equity, transparency, and holistic child development, as outlined in the Mparntwe declaration. This vision recognises the substantial economic and societal benefits of investing in primary education, laying strong foundations for future generations and a respectful, civic society in general.

Quality primary education is fundamental to Australia's bright future. We emphasise the need for stronger primary foundations to address current disparities and ensure every child receives equitable opportunities, regardless of their background or location. 100% of the SRS for all primary school students is a minimum standard yet to be achieved. Every child regardless of sector and postcode should receive exactly what they need.

RESOURCE EQUITY

We demand full transparency in fund allocation to schools, ensuring resources reach those most in need. We advocate for a comprehensive refresh of the education funding resource model to guarantee fairness and equitable distribution of resources.

Every year of school matters, therefore every year should be resourced to address the specific needs and costs associated with primary student success. Key considerations include:

- » the importance of early intervention strategies tailored to the diverse needs of students,
- » flexibility to meet children at their point of need whenever the need arises, and
- » clarity and transparency of current funding allocations.

PRIMARY RESOURCING

Primary schools are funded significantly less than per student than their secondary equivalents. However, primary outcomes substantially predict the course of a student's life.¹ Prior performance in primary school predicts future outcomes more so than student background or parental education or occupation. The \$3,481 funding gap between Year 6 and Year 7 students in 2024 is difficult to justify, especially given the rise in school refusal and mental health issues in young children.

EARLY INTERVENTION

Evidence overwhelmingly supports early-age student intervention. As economics professor John Heckman highlights, investing in early childhood yields the highest returns, boosting success for more children and reducing future social spending.

Lesser funding to the primary years of schooling affects primary leadership density. It limits resources that schools can allocate to additional leadership roles to address complex issues such as student wellbeing and learning outcomes. The lack of a well-resourced leadership team means that job demands are not matched by job resources.

We argue for a strategic focus on primary education resourcing, where significant, long-lasting impact can be achieved through timely interventions, setting students up for future success. ▶

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ADDRESSING THE ISSUES

To address these issues:

- » Fund every primary school student at 100% of the SRS as a bare minimum.
- » Address the disparity in funding between primary and secondary students.
- » Fund infrastructure in every primary school to create 'fit for purpose', safe and positive environments which are conducive to the learning needs of the cohort.
- » Devolve more resources to the school level and trust senior educators to make good decisions in their local contexts.
- » Ensure resourcing is adequate to meet the needs of the diversity and complexity of priority cohorts.
- » Recalibrate the economic modelling methodology of the SRS which does not address the challenges of educating primary children in remote and rural locations. There needs to be additional funds in the Better Schools Funding Agreement to address this challenge for without them the challenges continue, and achievement gaps remain.

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CONCLUSION

APPA advocates for stronger collaboration between state and federal jurisdictions, engaging with APPA in co-design and solution focused strategies for improvement, and ensuring equity in funding allocation. **APPA calls for funding to ensure an education of the highest quality for every student, in every locale and for funding to be targeted to those students who need it most.** While Australia is recognised as having an excellent education system, it is not excellent for everyone, leaving our most vulnerable children behind.

APPA's advocacy over the past 50 years demonstrates an ongoing commitment to ensuring the children of Australia, regardless of their background or educational setting have what they need to be successful. We will not deviate from this moral imperative.

1 Heckman, JJ (2006) "Skill formation and the economics of investing in disadvantaged children"; Duncan, GJ & Magnuson, K (2011) The nature and impact of Early Achievement Skills, Attentions Skills, and Behaviour Problems"; Moffitt TE *et al* (2011) "A Gradient of Childhood Self-Control Predicts Health, Wealth, and Public Safety"; Chetty, R, *et al* "How does your Kindergarten Classroom Affect your Earnings? : Evidence from Project Star"; Blander, J, Gregg P & Macmillan, L (2007) "Accounting for Generational Income Persistence: Non-cognitive Skills, Ability and Education".

SUPPORTING STUDENTS WITH COMPLEX NEEDS

Increasing numbers of students with complex needs are being catered for in mainstream classrooms using existing resources. “Complex needs” refers to students who face multiple, interconnected challenges that impact learning, development, or well-being. These students require a multifaceted, coordinated approach involving specialised interventions, personalised learning plans, and collaboration among educators, families, and healthcare professionals.

KEY AREAS OF HIGH NEEDS

- 1 Special Educational Needs:** These students may have physical, emotional, cognitive disabilities, or giftedness, requiring tailored plans and resources.
- 2 Behavioural or Emotional Challenges:** Students exhibiting aggressive or oppositional behaviours that affect learning and social interaction, including school refusal.
- 3 Health Issues:** Students with chronic illnesses affecting attendance and engagement in school activities.
- 4 Socio-economic Disadvantages:** Students lacking access to early interventions or external support services outside of school.
- 5 Diverse Backgrounds:** Students requiring specialized support, including those from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, LGBTQI+, remote students, students in out-of-home care, and refugee students.
- 6 Neurodiverse Students:** Students with neurodevelopmental disorders requiring specialized interventions.

Furthermore, many students come from families with complex needs, dealing with mental health issues, disabilities, substance use, domestic violence, or poverty. Schools attempt to build parents’ capabilities and connect them to appropriate external supports.

EARLY INTERVENTION: A KEY STRATEGY

APPA advocates for a fundamental shift toward early intervention during primary education. Investing in resources for primary schools—such as human, physical, and financial support—can significantly improve long-term outcomes. Primary education is a crucial period for developing healthy learning habits and engaging parents in their child’s education.

SUPPORT FOR FAMILIES

Schools invest time and energy in building partnerships with families to support student success. However, understanding the broader social determinants that contribute to unmet needs is crucial for effective support. The **Disability Standards for Education (2005)** require schools to provide reasonable adjustments to meet the needs of students with disabilities, and families need broader support to address socioeconomic, health, and housing factors that impact engagement.

FIT-FOR-PURPOSE FACILITIES

Schools must have dedicated facilities to host allied health staff and provide interventions. These include therapy rooms, quiet zones, and sensory spaces that support students’ regulation needs. Under the **Australian Disability Discrimination Act (1992)**, schools are required to ensure facilities are accessible and inclusive. Specialised equipment, adjustable furniture, and assistive technology must be readily available to support collaboration between educators and allied health professionals. ▶

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR POLICY AND RESOURCE ALLOCATION

- 1 Responsive Needs-Based Funding Model:** Funding must be based on student needs, using the Nationally Consistent Collection of Data (NCCD) as a guide. This model would eliminate the need for repeated diagnostic processes, reducing wait times for students to access specialist services. However, it is important to recognise that the NCCD does not capture all complexities of student needs. The NCCD collects data on students with disabilities but does not directly dictate funding amounts. The NCCD informs the Schooling Resource Standard (SRS), but actual funding depends on factors like state and federal agreements, school location, and the sector (public, private, or Catholic). It is crucial that funding allocated through the NCCD for a student reaches that student locally. Models like “extensive plus” (NSW and QLD) could better address the full range of additional support needs.
- 2 Increased Funding for Primary Schools:** Enhanced funding is essential to enable greater staffing flexibility, including hiring more school psychologists, intervention specialists, social workers, and speech pathologists. This funding should also support specialised training for staff and resources for parents to enable early intervention strategies. Addressing problems in primary education is more cost-effective than solving them later in secondary schooling.
- 3 Enhanced Professional Development:** Teachers and support staff need increased access to specialised training in areas such as mental health, trauma-informed practices, and behaviour management. Providing professional development opportunities aligned with current policies will reduce schools’ reliance on external providers and allow better allocation of school budgets.
- 4 Increased Access to Specialist Professionals:** Schools, particularly in regional and remote areas, need more frequent and responsive access to specialist staff. This workforce should be part of a whole-of-government effort to observe students, collaborate with stakeholders, and develop tailored support plans.
- 5 Integrated Approach Across Departments:** A holistic approach is needed to align efforts across Education, Health, Communities, and Justice departments. Schools often manage complex student needs in isolation, and improved collaboration across these agencies can ensure more comprehensive support for students and families.
- 6 Support for School Leaders:** Additional support is necessary for school leaders in managing complex parent and student needs. Leaders cannot assume the role of “Practice Manager,” and current case management demands require a review of existing funding models.

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CONCLUSION

APPA calls for the prioritising of early intervention and adequate resources for primary schools to improve outcomes for students with high needs. A coordinated effort across all stakeholders—government, schools, families, and community organisations—is critical to ensure that these students receive the support they need to succeed. Currently, the goodwill of teachers and school leaders acts as the safety net for vulnerable children, but this is neither sustainable nor acceptable. Addressing these challenges with responsive resources will ensure schools can lead problem-solving efforts and provide meaningful support for Australia’s most vulnerable students.