

## Why APPA Champions the Early Years - and How School Leaders Can Help

Why is APPA so invested in early childhood development, why do we continue to champion our *Thrive by Five* messaging and the importance of the first years of life? It's a great question, and one that goes to the heart of our mission.

Our work in this space began in 2016 under the leadership of then-President, Dennis Yarrington. The National Advisory Council initiated this project in direct response to the 2015 Australian Early Development Census (AEDC) data. The trends were deeply concerning across all five developmental domains, pointing to the growing number of children beginning school developmentally vulnerable, with lasting impacts on their learning outcomes, including NAPLAN performance.

Dennis and the NAC consulted widely, working with experts such as speech pathologists and occupational therapists, to craft messages that were clear, practical, and rooted in science. These messages were designed to give school leaders, and their communities, an easy entry point into conversations about early development and learning and school readiness.

### Thrive With Five

The five 'big rocks' of APPA's Thrive with Five campaign: **play, read, eat well and sleep well** were underpinned by **talk**, for as Professor Clare Wood powerfully reminds us: language is parasitic to every learning area. If we don't address early language development, we undermine the entire curriculum.

APPA President Malcolm Elliott carried the work forward, promoting resources including a poster that NAC members at the time distributed through schools and parent associations.

Today, the APPA Board continues to endorse this work. Promoting the importance of the **First 1000 Days** is embedded in our Strategic Plan under **Influence Primary Education**. Why? Because it is a matter of equity, opportunity, and long-term educational success. Our role as national leaders demands we act early, not just react later. The recent Primary Education Summit theme: '*The moral and economic imperative of investing in primary and earlier*' was intentional to highlight the wisdom of preventing learning gaps, rather than attempting to ameliorate them later.

Last year, I partnered with a graphic designer to update this work into engaging *tiles* for use in newsletters and on social media. These tiles are backed by simple, expert-informed activities families can do, centred around *play, talk, read, eat well, and sleep well*.

## 2024 AEDC Data

The latest AEDC data confirms the concerns of 2016 have not only persisted, but they've also intensified.

### Key findings from the 2024 AEDC:

- **Only 52.9%** of children are developmentally on track in all five domains (down from 54.8% in 2021).
- **23.5%** of children are vulnerable in one or more domains.
- **12.5%** are vulnerable in two or more domains; the highest rate since the census began.
- The most significant declines are in **emotional maturity** and **social competence**, areas deeply affected by COVID-19 disruptions.

Children from rural areas, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander backgrounds, low-income households, and culturally and linguistically diverse communities are overrepresented in these vulnerability statistics.

## A low effort, high impact strategy

These data affirm what school leaders are witnessing daily: too many children are starting school without the foundational capabilities they need to thrive, socially, emotionally, and cognitively. This has direct implications for classroom learning, wellbeing, behaviour, and teacher workload. While we are seeing the effects of a system under strain, APPA is not in the business of handwringing. We are solution-seekers. Our strategy is deliberately *low-cost, low-effort*, but potentially *high-impact*, a smart, strategic use of our collective reach into almost every community in Australia.

We are not just advocating for children to be “ready for school.”

We are advocating for them to be **ready for learning**.

## Be part of the community solution

I encourage school leaders to share the Thrive with Five newsletter messages through their networks. They align with APPA's mission: *...through advocacy and support, advance the education and wellbeing of primary school leaders, students and communities.*

Angela Falkenberg, APPA President  
June 2025