

# Learning Difficulties Information Guide

Literacy



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# About this guide

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**The Learning Difficulties Information Guide – Literacy is a foundation for understanding learning difficulties in literacy, including dyslexia, and a guide for what teachers can do to support this cohort of students.**

This guide sits alongside the:

- Learning Difficulties Information Guide – Numeracy
- Learning Difficulties Information Guide – School Leaders.

The school leaders guide contains information to help schools understand how supporting students with learning difficulties fits within the broader vision of the Education State.

This guide and the numeracy guide are more specialised, designed to help build the confidence and practical capability of teachers to identify, assess and implement interventions to support students with learning difficulties in day-to-day practice.

While the advice in all three guides is intended to help support students with learning difficulties, its application will help to improve the literacy and numeracy of all students (Gettinger & Stoiber 2007; Marston 2005).

## Background

This guide was created in 2019 to support the Literacy and Numeracy Strategy Phase 2, which outlined Victoria’s plan to improve literacy and numeracy outcomes for all students.

It was updated in 2022 to reflect new strategies and initiatives including the:

- [Disability Inclusion](https://education.edugate-cms.eduweb.vic.gov.au/school/teachers/learningneeds/Pages/disability-inclusion.aspx)  
<https://education.edugate-cms.eduweb.vic.gov.au/school/teachers/learningneeds/Pages/disability-inclusion.aspx>
- [Autism Education Strategy](https://education.edugate-cms.eduweb.vic.gov.au/school/teachers/learningneeds/Pages/Autism-Education-Strategy.aspx)  
<https://education.edugate-cms.eduweb.vic.gov.au/school/teachers/learningneeds/Pages/Autism-Education-Strategy.aspx>
- [Diverse Learners Hub](https://aus01.safelinks.protection.outlook.com/?url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.vic.gov.au%2Fdiverse-learners-hub%2Fautism-student-resources&data=04%7C01%7CLia.Castorina%40education.vic.gov)  
<https://aus01.safelinks.protection.outlook.com/?url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.vic.gov.au%2Fdiverse-learners-hub%2Fautism-student-resources&data=04%7C01%7CLia.Castorina%40education.vic.gov>
- [Learning Difficulties \(teachers\) - Numeracy](https://www.education.vic.gov.au/Documents/school/teachers/teachingresources/discipline/english/reading/Numeracy-Guide.pdf)  
<https://www.education.vic.gov.au/Documents/school/teachers/teachingresources/discipline/english/reading/Numeracy-Guide.pdf>

## Disability Inclusion

The Disability Inclusion reforms provide increased support for students with disabilities through:

- a tiered funding model for students with disability with additional funding for schools to help students with disability take part in their education on the same basis as their peers
- a Disability Inclusion Profile - strengths-based process to help schools and families identify:
  - the student's strengths and needs
  - the educational adjustments schools can make to help students with disability.
- initiatives to help build knowledge and skills in inclusive education across the school system, and increase access to:
  - specialist expertise
  - coaching
  - professional learning
  - evidence-based guidance and resources
  - scholarships for school staff.
- Inclusion Outreach Coaching to support schools to use inclusive education practices

## Autism Education Strategy

Recognises that additional specific support is required to assist autistic students with their education and ensures that this strongly aligns with the Disability Inclusion package. It:

- promotes and celebrates autism inclusion and diversity at the whole-school level
- builds the capability of school leaders and staff to meet the educational needs of autistic students
- involves the student, families and experts in collaboratively planning for students' education
- supports autistic students' health and wellbeing
- supports autistic students' individual education needs
- strengthens accountability and transparency for students with disability.

## Diverse Learners Hub

A key initiative of the Disability Inclusion reforms and flagship of the Autism Education Strategy.

The Diverse Learners Hub (DLH) is an online centre of excellence providing the best evidence-based advice and support for meeting the learning and wellbeing needs and aspirations of diverse learners.

## Learning Difficulties webpages

A key component of the DLH is the new suite of learning difficulties webpages covering three distinct categories:

- Parents
- Teachers – Literacy
- Teachers – Numeracy.

The new webpages will support our education workforce and parents/carers to better meet the educational needs and aspirations of diverse learners, including those with learning difficulties such as dyslexia and dyscalculia.

The webpages:

- provide evidence-based resources, information and guidance (with year-level examples) to support classroom best practice
- will empower students with learning difficulties and their families to engage in the education system and home-school partnerships with confidence and contribute to meeting the educational needs, aspirations and wellbeing of diverse learners.

# The difference between a learning disability and learning difficulty

Approximately 15–20 per cent of students in every school in every classroom will have a learning difficulty (AUSPELD 2014).

**Learning difficulty** is an umbrella term to describe students who are experiencing difficulty with learning because of a variety of reasons (for example, disability, living in out-of-home care) and who are unable to access the curriculum through high-quality instruction alone.

This group of students, if they are provided with greater knowledge and practice, are more than capable of closing the gap between them and their peers.

Understanding the reasons why a student may be experiencing difficulties while learning is an important first step to help them better access the curriculum.

**Learning disabilities** are a subset of learning difficulties and are classified as congenital, neurological differences (that may or may not be diagnosed) which include specific learning disabilities, such as dyslexia and dyscalculia.

Students with learning disabilities are predisposed to difficulties with their learning, no matter the circumstances they are born into, their school environment or the quality of teaching they experience.

Not all students with neurological differences will present with a set of recognisable traits, which can make it hard to identify a learning disability.

It is likely, however, that students with learning disabilities will respond less effectually and more slowly to intervention compared to those with other learning difficulties.

For the purposes of this guide, 'learning disabilities' will be viewed as a subset of the larger group of students generally referred to as experiencing learning difficulties.

For more information visit [Understanding types of learning difficulty](http://www.education.vic.gov.au/school/teachers/teachingresources/discipline/english/reading/pages/understandings.aspx) (www.education.vic.gov.au/school/teachers/teachingresources/discipline/english/reading/pages/understandings.aspx)

## Legal responsibilities

One in five Australians will have a disability at some stage in their lives. For some, the disability will be temporary. Others are affected for a lifetime. Whatever the case, everyone has the right to be an active member of their community and to have a say in the decisions that affect their lives.

As a teacher, your attitudes, words and actions have a huge impact on the lives of students with disability.

The Disability Standards for Education 2005 (the Standards) were developed under the Disability Discrimination Act 1992 (DDA). The definition of disability in the DDA includes physical, intellectual, mental health and learning disability.

The Standards clarify the obligations of education providers under the DDA and seek to ensure that students with disability can access and participate in education on the same basis as other students.

School leaders and teachers should be aware of their obligations in supporting students with learning disabilities to ensure their compliance with the DDA and the Standards.

Among other things, schools are obliged to make reasonable adjustments to ensure students with learning disabilities can access education on the same basis as their peers.

## Personalised learning and support planning

To maximise engagement and outcomes for students with learning difficulties, a four-stage personalised learning and support planning process is recommended.

The four stages of **Assess, Plan, Teach** and **Evaluate** serve as a guide for identifying students' learning strengths and needs and for designing, implementing and evaluating tailored teaching and intervention strategies, including the development of Individual Education Plans.

### Individual Education Plans

An Individual Education Plan (IEP) describes the adjustments, goals and strategies designed to meet the educational needs of an individual student to enable them to reach their potential.

An IEP is a living document that is essential in guiding the educational planning and monitoring of a student's unique learning needs.

IEPs are recommended for students with learning difficulties. An IEP:

- supports schools in developing a meaningful learning program for students and to track progress against SMART goals
- provides a means to share information between school, student, family and other support professionals
- helps schools to determine how best to use resources to support students
- promotes agency and student voice by involving the young person in the process
- serves to establish the process by which teachers and schools are meeting their legal obligations for students with learning disabilities under the Disability Discrimination Act 1992 and the Disability Standards for Education 2005.

## The DDA and the Standards in a nutshell

Together, the DDA and the Standards help to ensure that Australian school students with disability get the same opportunities at school as everyone else.

- The DDA is Commonwealth legislation that aims to eliminate disability-based discrimination and promote equal rights, opportunity and access for people with disability.
- The Standards help to clarify the DDA. They provide a framework for the educational rights of students with disability to enable them to access and participate in education on the same basis as other students. (NCCD 2019)

## Professional learning

### Disability standards for education eLearning modules

[Disability standards for education eLearning](http://www.education.vic.gov.au/school/teachers/learningneeds/Pages/dselearning.aspx) ([www.education.vic.gov.au/school/teachers/learningneeds/Pages/dselearning.aspx](http://www.education.vic.gov.au/school/teachers/learningneeds/Pages/dselearning.aspx))

- helps schools and other education providers understand their obligations under the DDA and the Standards
- is important to understanding the model applied to the nationally consistent collection of data on school students with disability.

# Literacy learning difficulties

Not all students become literate with the same degree of ease. Some students encounter significant difficulty mastering basic reading and writing skills (Odegard 2019), while others may experience challenges as they move through to upper primary and secondary school.

Print literacy comprises our ability to read (decode words and understand written text), spell (encode words from speech to print) and write (form simple words and phrases and ultimately generate extended written text). In all cases, reading is the starting point for learning to be literate.

## Why is literacy important?

Literacy is essential for developing the relevant knowledge and skills to interpret and use language confidently for learning and communicating, and to participate meaningfully in society.

For students, literacy includes successfully understanding and creating different types of texts, analysing and evaluating information, making meaning and using and modifying language for different purposes in a range of contexts.

Becoming literate is more than just knowledge and the application of skills. Certain behaviours and dispositions also assist students to become effective learners who are confident and motivated to use their literacy skills broadly.

They include students managing their own learning to be self-sufficient, working collaborating with others, being open to ideas, opinions and texts from and about diverse cultures, returning to tasks to improve and enhance their work and being prepared to question the meanings and assumptions in texts (ACARA 2019).

## Characterising learning difficulties in literacy

There are many reasons why a student might struggle to master reading or related literacy skills.

Factors that can compound an underlying reading difficulty include:

### Student-related factors

- chronic absenteeism
- sensory impairment(s)
- delayed acquisition of language
- speech sound errors
- social-emotional difficulties

### Social and/or environmental factors

- limited early language and literacy exposure
- low socio-economic status
- family history of learning disabilities
- gaps in reading instruction
- disrupted learning (for example, school refusal)
- if English is not a student's first language, or the primary language spoken at home, this may contribute to initial difficulties while the child masters the language.

Other students may struggle with reading due to underlying difficulties with word decoding or oral language comprehension.

For more information visit [Deciding if a student has a learning difficulty in literacy](https://education.edugate-cms.eduweb.vic.gov.au/school/teachers/learningneeds/Pages/unpack-literacy-learning-difficulty.aspx)  
<https://education.edugate-cms.eduweb.vic.gov.au/school/teachers/learningneeds/Pages/unpack-literacy-learning-difficulty.aspx>



# Identifying literacy learning difficulties and dyslexia

Given the range of skills and abilities that are involved in becoming literate, it is important to understand the processes and abilities that are needed to read, write and communicate effectively when seeking to identify literacy learning difficulties.

## Understanding reading

The aim of reading is to comprehend or extract meaning from text. To successfully understand written text (reading comprehension), students need to be able to **decode written words** and must have adequate **oral language competency** to attach meaning to those words and to phrases and longer passages. Gough and Tunmer's (1986)

Simple View of Reading model (Figure 1) illustrates how reading comprehension is a product of these two core competencies.

Word decoding means being able to map written symbols (graphemes) to the corresponding sounds (phonemes). This is also known as 'phonics'.

Learning to decode words is a skill that must be taught explicitly, ideally through structured and explicit instruction. This is particularly important for English, because the sounds of speech do not always correspond directly with letters.

For example, the sound 'f' corresponds directly to its matching grapheme in words such as 'fork' and 'if'. However, the sound 'f' does not match directly with the letter 'f' when the former appears in words such as 'phone' or 'cough'.

In English, there are 26 letters, 44 phonemes and more than 200 ways to represent phonemes in spelling. All children, including those with dyslexia, will benefit from being taught explicitly and systematically to decode words (Castles, Rastle & Nation 2018; Rose 2006; NICHD 2006).



Figure 1: The Simple View of Reading (adapted from Gough and Tunmer 1986)

### Oral language comprehension

Oral language comprehension refers to the ability to take in and process spoken information in order to derive meaning.

Vocabulary and grammatical knowledge (such as understanding of verb agreement, prefixes, suffixes and complex sentence construction), are all key to strong oral language comprehension.

### Reading demands across school years

Reading instruction should align with the increasing reading demands that students face as they progress through school.

Figure 2 is an overview of the reading skills that a typical student acquires (as they relate to word decoding and reading comprehension) as they move through the school years.

Explicit reading skills, as a component of literacy, are vital for lifelong learning and achievement.

The [Victorian Curriculum F-10](http://www.victoriancurriculum.vcaa.vic.edu.au) ([www.victoriancurriculum.vcaa.vic.edu.au](http://www.victoriancurriculum.vcaa.vic.edu.au)) sets out the skills that students need to succeed in reading and viewing, writing, and speaking and listening.

<b>Foundation and Year 1</b>	Students learn to decode and read words. This involves skills needed to decode words: phonemic awareness, letter-sound knowledge and recognition of high frequency words.
<b>Year 2 toward upper primary</b>	Students build reading rate, accuracy and automaticity.  Reading comprehension becomes an increasingly vital instructional focus as students move from learning to read, to reading to learn.
<b>Upper primary and beyond</b>	Students are required to read as a means of learning, researching topics and broadening their knowledge base.  Reading comprehension skills are crucial to academic success.

Figure 2: Alignment of reading instruction based on students' increasing academic demands.



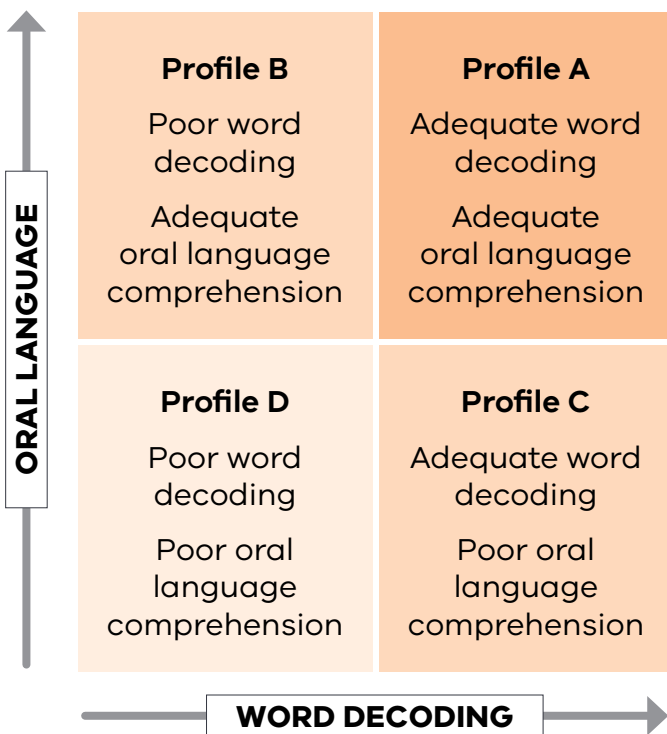
## Reading profiles

As previously noted, there are many reasons why a student might struggle with reading and writing skills (Odegard 2019). It is important to understand why a student is having difficulty with different aspects of their literacy in order to provide effective support.

Using the core competencies of the Simple View of Reading, students can be classified according to four reading profiles.

These profiles can give teachers an initial indication of the type or types of difficulty a student might be experiencing.

Figure 3 displays the four profiles.



### Profile A – Able Reader

Students have adequate core competencies and are well-equipped to learn to read without difficulty.

### Profile B – Word Reading Difficulty

Students often struggle to gain proficiency decoding words despite adequate oral language comprehension.

These difficulties are often seen in students with dyslexia.

### Profile C – Specific Reading Comprehension Deficit

Students can decode words but have difficulty understanding what they have read because of poor oral language comprehension.

Typically, this reading difficulty presents in mid-primary years.

These students do not have a reading profile that aligns with dyslexia.

### Profile D – Mixed Reading Difficulties

Students have not yet developed adequate skills in word decoding and oral language comprehension.

They have difficulty learning to decode and read words and extract meaning from text.

Figure 3: Subtypes of reading profiles based on the Simple View of Reading.

## Difficulty with word decoding

Students who have difficulty with word decoding may struggle to identify and segment all of the word parts (they struggle with phonemic awareness). They may also have difficulty understanding the relationship between graphemes and their corresponding phonemes (difficulty with phonics).

### What does difficulty with word decoding 'look' like?

The severity of word decoding deficits varies, but students with poor word decoding will typically read slowly and with difficulty.

They are likely to read out loud in a monotone and without fluency and to find reading exhausting and not enjoyable.

In most cases, students with poor word decoding will consistently make grammatical errors in sentence construction.

They will likely have poor punctuation and capitalisation and messy handwriting.

## Difficulty with oral language comprehension

Oral language comprehension refers to the ability to take in and process spoken information in order to derive meaning.

Broadly speaking, oral language comprehension is reliant on vocabulary knowledge, grammatical knowledge, familiarity with narrative structure genres and working memory.

### What does difficulty with oral language 'look' like?

Students with poor oral language comprehension will have difficulty understanding what is said to them.

Unlike reading difficulties, there is no standard set of symptoms that indicates poor oral language comprehension.

Common characteristics may include some or all of the following:

- appearing not to listen or have difficulty maintaining attention when spoken to
- difficulty recalling spoken information
- difficulty following multiple instructions or complicated sentences
- trouble understanding inference in spoken information.

## Specific reading comprehension deficit

These readers have difficulty understanding what they have read, despite appearing to read accurately and at a reasonable pace.

Typically, these students make a strong start when learning to read in the early years of school, but face challenges in mid to upper-primary years as texts become increasingly complex.

### What does specific reading comprehension deficit 'look' like?

Students with a specific reading comprehension deficit perform poorly on reading comprehension tasks, despite the fact that their word-level reading skills are adequate.

This reading difficulty subtype has also been referred to as 'hyperlexia', which emphasises the fact that these students have strong word reading skills but have difficulty comprehending or drawing meaning from what they read.

Specific reading comprehension deficits are underpinned by a fundamental deficiency in oral language skills.

For these students, it may be that their comprehension of conversational language is adequate. Deficits may become evident when complex language demands arise.

This is because written language, as found in textbooks and age-appropriate literature, is typically more sophisticated than spoken language in terms of density, formality, grammatical complexity and breadth of vocabulary.

It requires students to apply conceptual, inferential and metaphorical thinking.

It is at this level of language-processing that specific reading comprehension deficits will often become apparent.

For more information visit:

#### [Creating a literacy profile](https://education.edugate-cms.eduweb.vic.gov.au/school/teachers/learningneeds/Pages/literacy-profile.aspx)

<https://education.edugate-cms.eduweb.vic.gov.au/school/teachers/learningneeds/Pages/literacy-profile.aspx>

#### [Teaching students with word reading difficulties](https://education.edugate-cms.eduweb.vic.gov.au/school/teachers/learningneeds/Pages/word-reading-difficulties-literacy.aspx)

<https://education.edugate-cms.eduweb.vic.gov.au/school/teachers/learningneeds/Pages/word-reading-difficulties-literacy.aspx>

#### [Teaching students with comprehension difficulties](https://education.edugate-cms.eduweb.vic.gov.au/school/teachers/learningneeds/Pages/comprehension-difficulties.aspx)

<https://education.edugate-cms.eduweb.vic.gov.au/school/teachers/learningneeds/Pages/comprehension-difficulties.aspx>

## Dyslexia

Dyslexia, the most common form of specific learning disability, is characterised by **difficulties with accurate and/or fluent word decoding and poor spelling** (Lyon, Shaywitz & Shaywitz 2003).

Reading and spelling deficits, together with a delayed response to intervention, are also central features of dyslexia (Odelgard 2019).

Dyslexia is a lifelong condition. Nonetheless, students with dyslexia can learn to read with fluency and accuracy given intensive, evidence-based intervention over extended periods.

It is important to note that dyslexia is not connected in any way to a student's intelligence or effort in learning to read.

Dyslexia is not caused by visual processing deficits and, contrary to popular belief, is not characterised by seeing letters or words backwards (Velluntino et al. 2004).

Difficulties with reading comprehension are an inevitable consequence for students with dyslexia because of the time and effort needed to decode words, along with the risk of reading words inaccurately.

The cognitive load required simply to get the words 'off the page' can leave students with insufficient energy to attach meaning to the text.

Some students may present with features associated with dyslexia for other reasons, such as chronic illness, that have hindered their opportunity to master word decoding.

As with students who have a formal diagnosis of dyslexia, non-dyslexic students who struggle with decoding can also be taught to read given additional supports and intervention.

## What does dyslexia 'look' like?

Students with dyslexia will present with many of the same markers as students with poor word decoding. Typically, however, non-dyslexic students who have difficulty with word decoding will progress more quickly than students with dyslexia, following evidence-based intervention.

In the early years, other common indicators include:

- difficulty learning sequences (for example, reciting the days of the week)
- difficulty identifying rhyming words
- difficulty detecting sounds within words or detecting alliterated words
- persistent articulation difficulties (for example, saying 'wabbit' instead of 'rabbit').

As students progress to upper primary and beyond, further difficulties may become apparent, including:

- becoming easily fatigued while reading
- poor text comprehension
- poor spelling
- messy handwriting
- poor organisation of spoken and written narrative
- difficulty comprehending instructions
- difficulty completing tasks.

## Understanding writing

Writing encompasses many skills and competencies. These include spelling, language construction, narrative discourse (of which there are many genres), cohesion of ideas, cognitive operations such as planning and organising, fine motor coordination, and visuospatial and visuoperceptual skills.

For this reason, there are two categories of writing difficulty: non-language-based difficulties and language-based difficulties.

### Non-language-based difficulties

These include:

- Fine motor coordination difficulty. This can manifest in a student pressing too hard when writing or as messy handwriting with poor lettering. For some students, difficulties with fine motor control for handwriting may be part of a Developmental Coordination Disorder (DCD). Other signs of a DCD include:
  - uncoordinated or 'clumsy' movements
  - difficulty with tasks requiring fine motor skills (for example, buttoning clothing, tying shoe laces, cutting in a straight line) and/or gross motor skills (for example, running and jumping)
  - tires easily
  - takes a disproportionate amount of time to change clothing (for example, for physical education or swimming)
  - difficulty eating without making a mess.

As DCD most commonly affects handwriting, students may produce less written work in a set time than their peers. Legibility can also decrease considerably with increases in speed.

More information about DCD and strategies to help make classrooms and learning more physically inclusive can be found on the department's website.

- Visuospatial and/or visuoperceptual awareness difficulty, manifested by:
  - difficulty with spacing of writing (including spacing letters and words appropriately)
  - difficulty aligning writing on a page.

### Language and/or cognitive-based difficulties

Language-based writing difficulties often overlap with reading difficulties (Hendren 2018). This is particularly evident in spelling, which is impaired for students who have difficulty with decoding.

Indicators of language and/or cognitive-based difficulties include:

- difficulty with spelling
- mixing up capital letters with lower-case letters and omitting or making errors using punctuation markers
- difficulty constructing sentences and extended narratives. This is associated with:
  - impaired oral language competencies; written expression may be poorly constructed and/or grammatically simple, use limited vocabulary and lack narrative cohesion
  - impaired cognitive operations; written expression is not well-planned, reflecting poor organisation of ideas, and/or not adhering to the task requirements.

# Literacy intervention

The best outcomes for students with literacy learning difficulties are achieved when need is identified early and students are provided with high-quality, evidence-based instruction and interventions. Research shows that early identification protects against the growing divide between children who do not make a strong start learning to read at school and their classroom peers (Snowling & Hulme 2011).

These students should not be left to 'catch-up' on their own (Catts et al. 2015; Smart et al. 2005). Instead, they should receive additional support that targets key skills, knowledge and abilities.

## Response to Intervention and literacy learning difficulties

The Response to Intervention (RTI) framework can be helpful for thinking about how to implement approaches to support students with learning difficulties. RTI is a framework of academic support often embedded within a Multi-tiered System of Support, alongside School-wide Positive Behaviour Support.

RTI divides support into three tiers of increasing intensity, organised according to need (Figure 4).

It provides a useful model to consider how best to embed academic support for students with learning difficulties within a school-wide approach to teaching and learning. The RTI framework is a functional, dynamic means of identifying students who are struggling with literacy, based on how well they are responding to the instruction or interventions being provided at each tier.

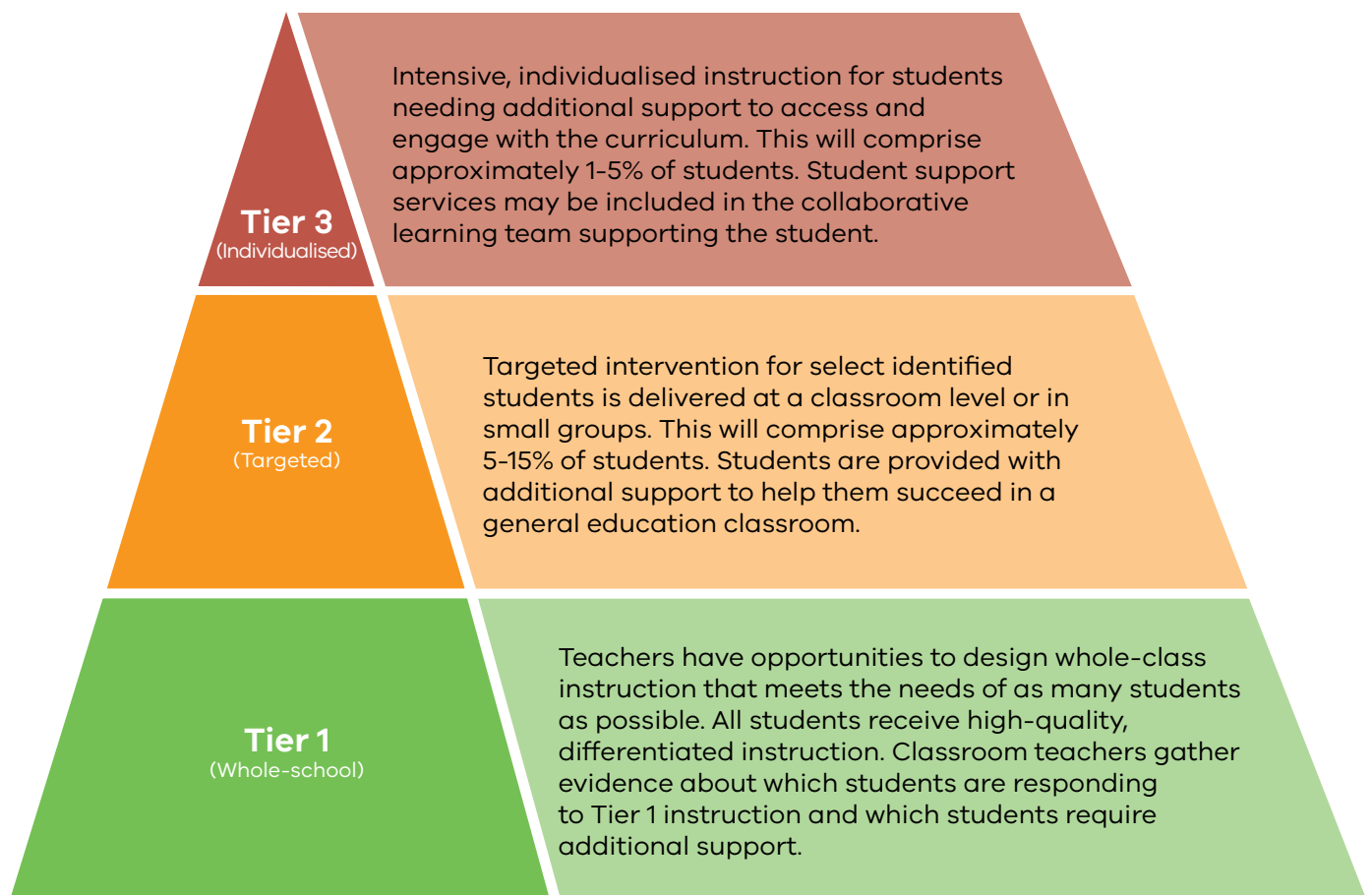


Figure 4: Response to Intervention tiers of academic support (adapted from Buffum, Mattos, & Weber 2012).



## Tier 1 - Instruction

Instruction should be delivered by teachers who are well-informed about what constitutes evidence-based reading instruction and who understand how to implement such teaching.

### Core components

Table 1 describes the components essential to effective reading instruction. These should be taught as part of a comprehensive reading program using explicit instruction and a structured literacy approach.

## Tier 1 resources

The department has a range of resources to help teachers deliver high-quality instruction and assessment at Tier 1.

Teachers may consider using:

- [Literacy Teaching Toolkit](http://www.education.vic.gov.au/school/teachers/teachingresources/discipline/english/literacy/Pages/default.aspx)  
[www.education.vic.gov.au/school/teachers/teachingresources/discipline/english/literacy/Pages/default.aspx](http://www.education.vic.gov.au/school/teachers/teachingresources/discipline/english/literacy/Pages/default.aspx)
- [English Online Interview](http://www.education.vic.gov.au/school/teachers/teachingresources/discipline/english/assessment/pages/default.aspx)  
[www.education.vic.gov.au/school/teachers/teachingresources/discipline/english/assessment/pages/default.aspx](http://www.education.vic.gov.au/school/teachers/teachingresources/discipline/english/assessment/pages/default.aspx)

Component	Detail
<b>Phonemic awareness</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Knowledge that words are made up of individual sounds (phonemes) and that these sounds can be segmented, blended and manipulated.</li> </ul>
<b>Phonics:</b> <b>Orthographic conventions of print</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sound-symbol (phoneme-grapheme) correspondences</li> <li>• Letter patterns that signify sounds (phonemes) such as 'ck'</li> <li>• Spelling conventions, such as never having 'ng' at the start of English words</li> <li>• Punctuation markers</li> </ul>
<b>Reading fluency</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Word reading accuracy, speed and/or fluency</li> </ul>
<b>Vocabulary</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Semantics: meaning conveyed by a system of words and strings of words. The meaning of words and word strings may be relatively stable, such as 'swim' or more abstract, such as 'she swims like a fish'.</li> </ul>
<b>Oral language competencies</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Morphology: meaningful parts of words, such as:               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>o base words, such as 'think'</li> <li>o affixes, such as 're' (added to 'think' to make 'rethink')</li> <li>o grammatical markers, such as 's' added to 'dog' to make 'dogs'</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Syntax: conventions of grammar and word order including:               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>o 'active' and 'passive' voice</li> <li>o phrase and clause structure</li> <li>o conjunctions used to join phrases and clauses</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Narrative language: extended discourse using a variety of genres.</li> </ul>

Table 1: Components of an evidence-based approach to teaching reading

## Reading comprehension

Reading comprehension should be considered the end-product of a number of different skills and competencies (listed in Table 2).

Unlike learning to decode, reading comprehension cannot be considered a discrete skill that can be taught in isolation.

• Word decoding
• Oral language skills
• Background knowledge about general information
• Working memory capacity
• Executive functioning such as attention, concentration, problem-solving and self-monitoring
• Inferring information from text or 'reading between the lines'
• Knowledge about different text types such as story grammar, expository texts, persuasive texts.

*Table 2: Skills and competencies required for reading comprehension.*

Teaching reading comprehension strategies, such as summarising, paraphrasing and identifying key or main ideas, is one way to enhance students' ability to comprehend what they read.

However, it is essential not to underestimate the importance of the key skills and competencies that contribute to strong reading comprehension (Elleman & Compton 2017).

For example, students need a wide-ranging vocabulary bank, as well as broad and deep knowledge about a range of topics.

Explicit teaching of curriculum-based and/or content-based vocabulary, coupled with critical discussions about content and sophisticated questioning are essential to boost students' abilities to comprehend written text.

## High Impact Teaching Strategies

The High Impact Teaching Strategies (HITS) are 10 instructional practices that reliably increase student learning.

For students with literacy learning difficulties, the HITS represent a collection of evidence-based strategies to help support teaching and learning.

For example, research into effective literacy intervention shows that instructions that directly address the information a student needs to learn (**Explicit Teaching**) have the greatest effect size for reading among students at every year level, supporting both low and high-level word comprehension (Hattie 2009).

**Appendix 1: Explicit Teaching** provides more detailed information about this specific strategy.

For overviews and examples that illustrate each of the strategies in action, see [Excellence in Teaching and Learning](http://www.education.vic.gov.au/Documents/school/teachers/support/high-impact-teaching-strategies.pdf) ([www.education.vic.gov.au/Documents/school/teachers/support/high-impact-teaching-strategies.pdf](http://www.education.vic.gov.au/Documents/school/teachers/support/high-impact-teaching-strategies.pdf)).

Teachers, who know their students and their students' learning styles well, can readily judge whether HITS or another strategy will work best to teach a particular concept or skill.

Note, however, that using HITS to teach any concept or skill reliably increases the chance that students will learn it, regardless of whether they have a learning difficulty.

For more information visit:

[Helping students to read more accurately](https://education.edugate-cms.eduweb.vic.gov.au/school/teachers/learningneeds/Pages/read-accurately.aspx)  
<https://education.edugate-cms.eduweb.vic.gov.au/school/teachers/learningneeds/Pages/read-accurately.aspx>

[Encouraging positive engagement with reading and writing](https://education.edugate-cms.eduweb.vic.gov.au/school/teachers/learningneeds/Pages/encouraging-positive-engagement-with-reading-writing.aspx)  
<https://education.edugate-cms.eduweb.vic.gov.au/school/teachers/learningneeds/Pages/encouraging-positive-engagement-with-reading-writing.aspx>

## Tier 2 and 3 - Intervention

It is essential that students who do not respond sufficiently to classroom instruction alone are identified early and provided with evidence-based intervention.

Students' literacy skills should be thoroughly assessed and interventions tailored accordingly.

For example, some students may have difficulty accurately segmenting sounds in multi-syllabic words (difficulty with phonemic awareness), while others may guess words because their word decoding skills are not yet consolidated.

### Tier 2 Intervention

In addition to high-quality, differentiated instruction, Tier 2 intervention may be required for students who have not responded adequately.

Tier 2 is not a departure from the curriculum, but a more intensive and 'scaffolded' version of general classroom instruction.

Generally, effective Tier 2 intervention:

- is aligned closely with the strategies and approaches being taught in the student's classroom
- is provided early, so that gaps in the student's achievement compared to that of their peers do not widen further
- seeks to accelerate students' learning so they can successfully engage in a general education classroom
- accords with scientific, evidence-based approaches for teaching reading (see Table 1).

### Tier 3 Intervention

At Tier 3, the intervention strategies employed at Tier 2 are delivered with greater intensity, frequency, and duration.

Intervention support is often delivered one-on-one. It is important to note that students with learning disabilities (such as dyslexia and dyscalculia) will respond slower and less effectually to intervention strategies than students with other types of learning difficulties.

## Supporting students in secondary school

The ability to decode words efficiently and automatically allows students to read accurately and fluently. This, in turn, frees up energy for comprehending text.

However, many readers with learning difficulties, including upper-primary and secondary students, may still have gaps in foundational skills, such as phonemic awareness and/or phonics.

As these skills are crucial for becoming a competent reader, such students often require Tier 3 intervention, in addition to adjustments that support their access to the curriculum.

Regardless of age or year level, these students will benefit from a program to build and consolidate phonemic awareness and phonic decoding. Older students are likely to progress quickly through the early phases of such a program.

## Tier 2 and 3 resources

The department has a range of resources to help teachers understand students' learning needs. Teachers may consider using:

- [Diagnostic Assessment Tools in English](http://www.education.vic.gov.au/school/teachers/teachingresources/discipline/english/Pages/date.aspx)  
[www.education.vic.gov.au/school/teachers/teachingresources/discipline/english/Pages/date.aspx](http://www.education.vic.gov.au/school/teachers/teachingresources/discipline/english/Pages/date.aspx)
- [Focused teaching strategies](http://www.education.vic.gov.au/school/teachers/teachingresources/discipline/english/reading/Pages/focusteach.aspx)  
[www.education.vic.gov.au/school/teachers/teachingresources/discipline/english/reading/Pages/focusteach.aspx](http://www.education.vic.gov.au/school/teachers/teachingresources/discipline/english/reading/Pages/focusteach.aspx)
- [Key literacy knowledge and skills for students in Prep to Year 2 \(ages 5-8\)](https://education.edugate-cms.eduweb.vic.gov.au/school/teachers/learningneeds/Pages/literacy-knowledge-skills-prep-year-2.aspx)  
<https://education.edugate-cms.eduweb.vic.gov.au/school/teachers/learningneeds/Pages/literacy-knowledge-skills-prep-year-2.aspx>
- [Key literacy knowledge and skills for students in years 3 to 6 \(ages 9-12\)](https://education.edugate-cms.eduweb.vic.gov.au/school/teachers/learningneeds/Pages/literacy-knowledge-skills-year-3-to-6.aspx)  
<https://education.edugate-cms.eduweb.vic.gov.au/school/teachers/learningneeds/Pages/literacy-knowledge-skills-year-3-to-6.aspx>
- [Key literacy knowledge and skills for students in years 7 to 10 \(ages 13-16\)](https://education.edugate-cms.eduweb.vic.gov.au/school/teachers/learningneeds/Pages/literacy-skills-year-7-to-10.aspx)  
<https://education.edugate-cms.eduweb.vic.gov.au/school/teachers/learningneeds/Pages/literacy-skills-year-7-to-10.aspx>

## Adjustments for students with learning difficulties

In addition to targeted intervention, adjustments can be implemented to help students with learning difficulties get the most out of classroom instruction.

Accommodations can be made also in relation to undertaking assessment tasks and completing school work (including projects, in-class tasks and homework).

Table 3 lists potential adjustments and accommodations, which will vary depending on a student's particular learning needs. It is followed by links to resources for further ideas.

<p><b>Adjustments to help students get the most out of classroom instruction include:</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• simplified worksheets</li> <li>• highly explicit, direct instructions</li> <li>• displaying task instructions on a whiteboard</li> <li>• printed notes (instead of requiring the student to copy from the board)</li> <li>• audio-recordings of instructions</li> <li>• summary outlines of the lesson plan (before class, if appropriate)</li> <li>• instructions that are broken down into smaller steps</li> <li>• topic-specific word banks with definitions</li> <li>• additional opportunities for practice and questions.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Environmental adjustments can include:</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• a desk close to the teacher</li> <li>• limiting distractions when the student is working.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Adjustments to help students fully demonstrate their knowledge when being assessed, and/or when completing school work include:</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• audiobooks, audio-recordings</li> <li>• assistive technology (such as text-to-speech and speech-to-text tools)</li> <li>• graphic organisers and other scaffolds to assist with extended writing tasks</li> <li>• additional time to complete work</li> <li>• allowing work to be presented in different modes or formats (for example, verbally or visually instead written).</li> </ul>

Table 3: Examples of adjustments and accommodations to support students with learning difficulties.

## Student support services

Student support services (SSS) assist children and young people facing barriers to learning by providing a range of strategies and specialised support at the individual, group, school and area levels.

SSS comprise a broad range of professionals employed by the department, including:

- psychologists
- speech pathologists
- social workers.

SSS staff work as part of an integrated health and wellbeing team within areas of schools, focusing on providing group-based and individual support, workforce capacity-building and specialised services.

The [SSS Referral Process](http://www.education.vic.gov.au/Documents/school/principals/spag/safety/SSSrefprocess.pdf) ([www.education.vic.gov.au/Documents/school/principals/spag/safety/SSSrefprocess.pdf](http://www.education.vic.gov.au/Documents/school/principals/spag/safety/SSSrefprocess.pdf)) identifies children and young people with the greatest need, and matches student/school needs with the expertise of SSS team members.

## Professional learning

### **Analysing English Online Interview data to improve literacy outcomes**

Online learning program that supports teachers to interpret, identify, measure and address capability gaps. It provides information about the causes of early literacy difficulties and demonstrates how data from assessments such as EOI can help identify students with literacy learning difficulties.

### **Inclusive Classrooms – Supporting Students with Learning Difficulties including Dyslexia**

Eight-week blended learning course to develop teachers' knowledge of evidence-based practices to support all students to become competent readers.

Register via the [Inclusive Classrooms professional learning program](http://www.deafeducation.vic.edu.au/inclusive-classrooms) website [www.deafeducation.vic.edu.au/inclusive-classrooms](http://www.deafeducation.vic.edu.au/inclusive-classrooms)

### **Learning Difficulties including Dyslexia webinar series 1**

(<https://courses.deafeducation.vic.edu.au/w/courses/93-learning-difficulties-including-dyslexia-webinar-series-1>) **and 2** (<https://courses.deafeducation.vic.edu.au/w/courses/102-learning-difficulties-including-dyslexia-webinar-series-2>) short, sharp webinars to increase staff capability to support students with learning difficulties, including dyslexia.

[Graduate Certificate in Education](https://education.edugate-cms.eduweb.vic.gov.au/school/teachers/learningneeds/Pages/graduate-certificate-in-education-learning-difficulties-program.aspx) (Learning Difficulties) program (<https://education.edugate-cms.eduweb.vic.gov.au/school/teachers/learningneeds/Pages/graduate-certificate-in-education-learning-difficulties-program.aspx>)

New online postgraduate course, developed for the department by the Melbourne Graduate School of Education, University of Melbourne, to build teachers' understandings of and interactions between different types of learning difficulties, including dyslexia and dyscalculia.

# Case study - Year 8 student example

Improvements to teaching practice and student learning are strongly dependent on effective implementation within an evidence-based improvement cycle.

The four stages of the FISO 2.0 improvement cycle support teachers to focus on better outcomes for all students.

It can be used at different levels, from the whole-school to the classroom and over different time periods, from four-week to annual cycles.

Learning difficulties in the classroom	Considerations
<p>Sarah is in Year 8. Sarah is an engaged student who enjoys classroom debates and actively participates in English.</p> <p>Sarah’s teacher notices that Sarah often appears to have difficulty completing tasks that involve reading long passages of text. The teacher also notices that while Sarah’s writing is rich in vocabulary, they appear to have difficulty organising their thoughts on the page and are prone to messy handwriting, poor punctuation and spelling.</p> <p>The teacher meets with the school’s Learning Specialist to look over some examples of Sarah’s writing and discuss their observations. Based on this data and the Simple View of Reading model (see page 9, Figure 1), the two of them suspect that Sarah has difficulty with decoding and reading individual words (word decoding).</p> <p>The teacher consults with Sarah’s previous English teachers who confirm that Sarah has encountered difficulty with phonics and phonemic awareness in the past.</p>	<p><b>Analyse data</b></p> <p>‘What is the problem?’</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Identify if the student has a literacy learning difficulty (page 9)</li> <li>• Collect and use data and evidence to consider reasons for a student’s performance</li> <li>• Create a literacy profile</li> <li>• What does the student need to learn next?</li> <li>• How will you sequence what they need to learn?</li> </ul>
<p>The teacher speaks with Sarah about their goals in English for the year and what they would like to improve. Sarah expresses a desire to improve their essay writing and spelling.</p> <p>Using Sarah’s goals and data they have collected as the basis for planning, the teacher and Learning Specialist prioritise some immediate literacy goals, including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• increasing Sarah’s familiarity with narrative structure genres (including critical writing)</li> <li>• advancing Sara’s grammatical knowledge and improving their ability to use punctuation accurately.</li> </ul> <p>They also set some long-term literacy goals, including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• improving Sarah’s ability to identify, segment and blend word parts (phonemic awareness)</li> <li>• advancing Sarah’s knowledge of the relationship between graphemes and corresponding phonemes (phonics).</li> </ul>	<p><b>Prioritise and set goals</b></p> <p>‘What is the desired outcome?’</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Set immediate and long-term goals in the context of understanding need and required support</li> <li>• What organisational skills will you teach the student to develop their capacity to teach themselves?</li> </ul>

Learning difficulties in the classroom	Connections
<p>The teacher reviews the instructional strategies used to teach reading and writing. Having recently attended professional learning on supporting students to use text structure in their writing, the teacher feels confident in their approach to high-quality differentiated instruction (Tier 1), but less confident about the use of explicit instruction to support development of Sarah’s phonemic awareness.</p> <p>The teacher decides to utilise existing reading and writing groups in class to provide Sarah with support to advance their phonics and grammatical/punctuation knowledge (Tier 2).</p> <p>The teacher also checks in with Sarah’s family and recommends that Sarah attend the school’s Homework Club once a week, where a literacy specialist can work with Sarah one-on-one to improve their phonemic awareness (Tier 3).</p> <p>The teacher records the details of this planning in an Individual Education Plan (IEP) and shares this document with Sarah and Sarah’s family.</p>	<p><b>Develop and plan</b> ‘What will be done about it?’</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Develop a plan of action that details what will be done, when, where and with what support</li> <li>• Use RTI to support literacy learning difficulties (page 16)</li> <li>• Create an Individual Education Plan</li> </ul>
<p>The teacher identifies the criteria that will be used to evaluate the impact of the plan:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• improvement in Sarah’s spelling accuracy both in day-to-day writing tasks and spelling tests</li> <li>• improvement in Sarah’s sequencing of writing and narrative structure</li> <li>• increased grammatical complexity in Sarah’s writing, with accurate use of punctuation.</li> </ul> <p>At the end of the term, the teacher meets with Sarah and Sarah’s family at a parent-teacher conference. The teacher notes that there has been an improvement in the structure of Sarah’s writing and use of punctuation, but that issues with spelling, phonics knowledge and phonemic awareness still exist.</p> <p>Nonetheless, Sarah is responding well to the interventions and is making incremental but consistent progress.</p> <p>Sarah, their family and the teacher agree to continue with the plan and to review Sarah’s progress at the end of next term.</p>	<p><b>Implement and monitor</b> ‘How will you know it worked?’</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Continue to monitor student progress and evaluate the student’s response to instruction/intervention</li> <li>• What would you expect the student to know, understand or be able to do if adjustments were successful? This includes short-term expectations (week to week) as well as long-term (month to month).</li> <li>• Encourage each step in the student’s knowledge or skill and fluency by providing scaffolding and modelling.</li> </ul>

# Learning difficulties and student wellbeing

**Students with learning difficulties often face daily struggles at school as they attempt to deal with various challenges. As teachers you have an opportunity to assist all students, including those with learning difficulties, to become determined, resilient and committed learners.**

Research suggests that students with learning difficulties are at greater risk of having a poor sense of academic self-concept and may hold negative beliefs about themselves that are directly linked to their performance in class, such as 'I am no good at reading', 'I can't spell', or 'I am stupid'.

While students with high self-esteem are typically more adaptable and do better in social environments, students with learning difficulties who have low self-esteem tend to be less effective in engaging with others, experience feelings of powerlessness, feel disconnected from their peers and have difficulty coping with setbacks (Hattie 2009).

Experiencing low self-esteem/efficacy for long periods of time can also increase the possibility of developing mental health issues such as anxiety, depression, and behavioural problems.

Students with learning difficulties may become withdrawn, appear disengaged, disruptive, rude or even aggressive as a result of the frustration they may feel not being able to keep up with the demands of the classroom.

These behaviours often become more pronounced as students become older, as their identity and sense of self-worth becomes increasingly associated with their experiences of academic and social success.

On the other hand, when students begin to cultivate a positive self-view and feel connected to their peers, teachers and their learning, there is a marked improvement in academic achievement (Suldo, Thalji & Ferron 2011; Howell 2009).

For more information visit [Helping students to become independent learners in literacy](https://education.edugate-cms.eduweb.vic.gov.au/school/teachers/learningneeds/Pages/independent-learners-literacy.aspx) <https://education.edugate-cms.eduweb.vic.gov.au/school/teachers/learningneeds/Pages/independent-learners-literacy.aspx>

## Empowering students

Students' success is strengthened by a robust sense of self-efficacy; that is, a firm belief in their ability to succeed at school. This sense of achievement in their learning and what students see as the meaning and purposefulness of their actions, come together to build a strong sense of agency and self-determination.

Developing a strong sense of agency and self-efficacy is particularly important for students with learning difficulties, who are more vulnerable to feelings of powerlessness and that they have limited control over their learning and futures (AUSPELD 2014).





## Framework for Improving Student Outcomes 2.0

The Framework for Improving Student Outcomes (FISO) is an evidence-based framework that aims to enhance student outcomes in Victoria through supporting system-wide school improvement.

FISO 2.0 aims to further enhance schools' effectiveness in achieving positive learning and wellbeing outcomes for every student.



The focus on improving students' learning and wellbeing recognises that:

- students' ability to learn is influenced by their wellbeing
- students' wellbeing is influenced by their engagement learning.

The redesigned framework:

- de-clutters the original FISO to help schools focus on what matters most
- elevates the importance of wellbeing both as an enabler of learning and as an outcome in its own right
- aligns to broader initiatives of the Victorian Government in supporting learning and wellbeing to strengthen coherence across disability inclusion, mental health and teaching and learning
- represents outcomes and elements that have been established in a contemporary and broader evidence-base
- provides specific and refined practice and outcome indicators to support schools' self-evaluation.

For more information visit [FISO 2.0](https://www2.education.vic.gov.au/pal/fiso/policy)  
[www2.education.vic.gov.au/pal/fiso/policy](https://www2.education.vic.gov.au/pal/fiso/policy)

## Engaging with families

The partnerships between schools and families are incredibly impactful throughout students' school years. Incorporated in productive ways, these relationships have the potential to:

- support differentiated instruction and study at home
- improve student outcomes
- enhance satisfaction for all stakeholders (Forlin & Hopewell 2006).

It is important that teachers are proactive in their communication with families and acknowledge the contribution that parents, guardians and carers make in a child's development.

This is crucial, since research demonstrates a clear and positive relationship between family involvement at home and students' academic achievement (Bakker et al. 2013; Castro et al. 2015).

To achieve a positive relationship it is important that families have confidence in their child's teachers, feel welcome at school and experience reciprocity in their communications with school (Epstein 2018).

Establishing this relationship comes with challenges, and barriers can exist that hinder a constructive relationship between school staff and families.

As individuals who are familiar with the cultures of both home and school, it is important to consider how to involve students in this process to help bridge potential barriers and achieve a positive and productive partnership.

For more information visit [Building positive partnerships with parents](http://www.education.gov.au/family-school-partnerships-1) ([www.education.gov.au/family-school-partnerships-1](http://www.education.gov.au/family-school-partnerships-1))



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# Appendix 1

## High Impact Teaching Strategy - Explicit Teaching

Effective teachers use explicit teaching to provide instruction, demonstrate concepts and build student knowledge and skills. In explicit teaching practice, teachers show students what to do and how to do it, and create opportunities in lessons for students to demonstrate understanding and apply the learning.

### Strategy overview

When teachers adopt explicit teaching practices they clearly show students what to do and how to do it. Students are not left to construct this information for themselves. The teacher decides on learning intentions and success criteria, makes them transparent to students, and demonstrates them by modelling.

In addition, the teacher checks for understanding, and at the end of each lesson revisits what the lesson has covered and ties it all together (Hattie, 2009).

### How effective is it?

Explicit teaching is effective in accelerating student performance. The aim is to teach generalisations beyond rote learning, and to sequence learning. In explicit teaching practice, teachers constantly monitor students' progress towards challenging goals.

The effects of explicit teaching are similar for students in all school settings. In addition to numeracy, explicit teaching also has the highest effect size for reading among students at every year level. It supports both low and high-level comprehension.

### This strategy is demonstrated when the teacher:

- explains what students need to know and be able to do by the end of the lesson or unit
- uses worked examples to show students how to do something
- allows students sufficient time to practice what they have learned
- guides student practice by monitoring their work and providing help when it is needed
- reinforces the main points at the end of the lesson.

### This strategy is demonstrated when students:

- understand the learning goals and success criteria
- have access to multiple examples before undertaking the learning task
- master the new knowledge and skills before moving on
- receive feedback as needed.

### This strategy is not demonstrated when:

- the teacher is didactic, with few opportunities for students to be active in the learning
- classroom discussion is restricted and student input is discouraged
- the teacher responds judgmentally to students' attempts at problem solving activities rather than treating each attempt as an opportunity for further learning.

