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## Improving reading in a community of schools

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## Summary

International research into the teaching of reading has identified key factors that contribute to improvement in students' reading.

A network of four schools in New South Wales implemented a professional learning program with a student-centred approach to reading fluency, vocabulary and comprehension in years 3 to 6. The aim was to improve students' understanding of what successful readers do; engage them in the purposes and pleasures of reading a wide range of texts; and facilitate their shared responses to texts.

## Target student group

The strategy focused on students from years 3 to 6 at four government schools in New South Wales.

## Method

The core of the Improving Reading in a Community of Schools strategy is the [Focus on Reading \(3–6\) program](#). This intensive professional learning program is designed to support teachers in implementing explicit approaches to teaching reading in their schools. It is delivered by personnel from the NSW Department of Education and Communities, who facilitate the program and assist in classrooms as professional mentors.

The principals of the four schools involved in the pilot of this program were keen to assist their teachers and raise the performance levels of their students in reading. The pilot was carried out in a Sydney region.

The Focus on Reading 3–6 program highlights the importance and use of:

- **rich texts**, particularly subject-based texts, multi-modal texts and the types of texts that interest and motivate learners in the middle years
- **rich talk** of the kind that encourages students to 'show their thinking' through talk
- **'deliberate'** teaching that begins with insightful assessment; involves planning for explicit instruction based on students' needs; supports and scaffolds students through modelled, guided and independent teaching; provides clear and purposeful feedback and constant opportunities for student reflection.



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The program focuses on the six strategies identified as central to effective comprehension: Visualising, Questioning, Making Connections, Predicting, Summarising and Monitoring. These are examined within the comprehensive reading framework, the Four Roles of the Reader, developed by Peter Freebody and Alan Luke (2003).

Several sources of data were used to determine the impact of the professional learning program on the teaching approaches adopted in each school and on student learning outcomes. In addition, independent data were collected by the Educational Measurement and School Accountability Directorate (EMSAD), responsible for data collection and analysis for schools. (These data provide information on individual student's performance as well as cohort and whole-school trends.)

Additional data were collected in the form of surveys, interviews with teachers and principals, and classroom observations. These were used to ascertain teachers' perceptions of their teaching practice and to allow opportunities for reflection on changing perspectives on the most effective ways to teach reading. Questions addressed to principals aimed to uncover their perceptions of teacher change and student learning.

## Results

The intended outcomes of the Improving Reading in a Community of Schools strategy are evident in NAPLAN and NSW EMSAD data.

The improvements in student reading outcomes were evident only a short time after implementing the Focus on Reading program in the pilot schools. The 2010 NAPLAN data for the schools indicate that students made significant improvements in reading. The number of students below or at National Minimum Standard reduced by more than 15 per cent in year 3, averaged between the four schools, and by more than 10 per cent in year 5. Between 2008 and 2010, the mean scale scores across the four schools in year 3 increased by an average of 45 scale points, and the average increase in mean scale scores for year 5 was 33 scale points. Further improvements were evidenced with a comparison between 2009 and 2011 NAPLAN results. Year 3 students across the four schools improved by an average of 22 scale points in reading and year 5 students improved by an average of 29 scale points.

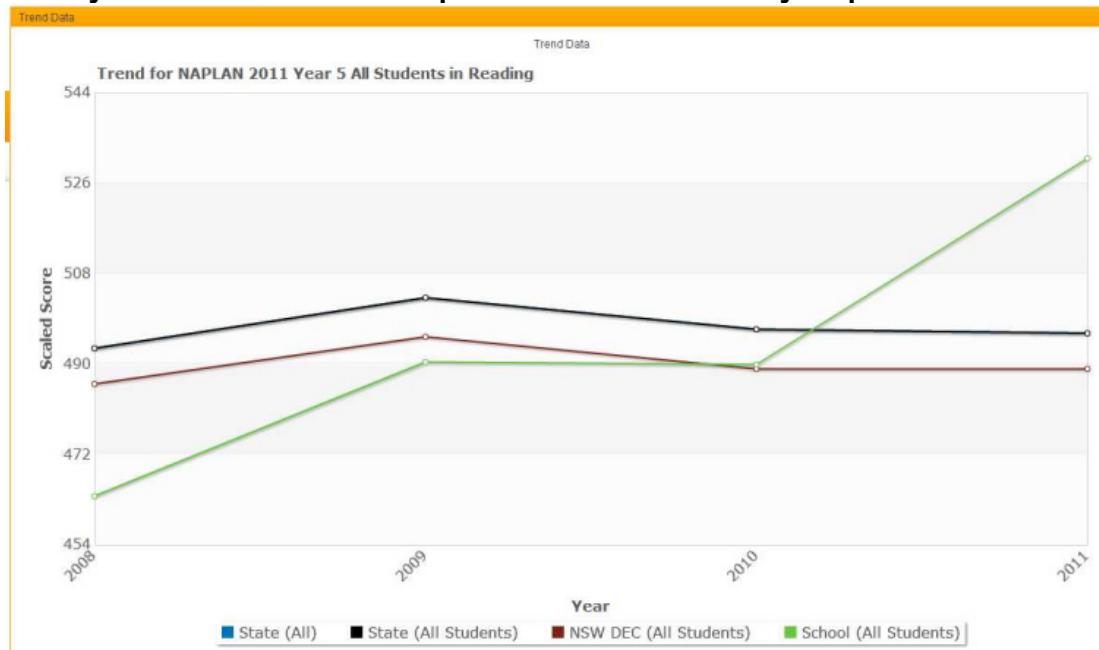


Success was also determined by the drastic reduction in the number of students in the lowest two bands of NAPLAN and significant increases in the number of students in the highest two bands. One of the four schools in the pilot program had 20 per cent of their 2009 year 5 cohort in the bottom two bands. By 2011 they had 0 per cent of year 5 students in the bottom two bands and 56 per cent of students in the top two bands.

When compared with other schools in the Sydney region for growth in reading, three of the four schools were in the top 10 per cent for reading growth, with one of the four schools achieving the highest growth in reading of any of the schools in the region.

These significant improvements are illustrated in the graphed results of two of the four schools in the pilot program.

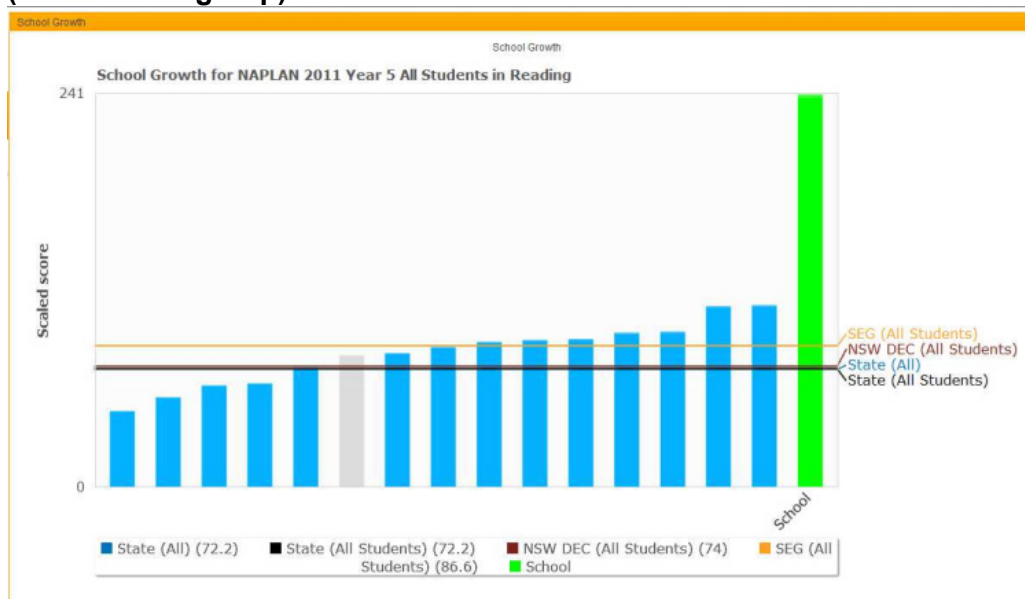
### Botany Public School: student performance over a two-year period





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## Maroubra Bay Public School: growth in student performance measured against SEG (local school group)



Data collected by EMSAD independent of the schools also indicated initial and sustained success and provided an important morale boost for the teachers and school leaders, inspiring them to continue on the path of professional change in reading.

Observations of teacher practice corroborated the significant improvements in students' learning. The teachers were engaged in the program and committed to the need for change. The strategies designed to improve students' reading fluency, vocabulary learning and comprehension were enacted with a high degree of professional understanding.

### Unexpected outcomes

The unexpected outcomes of the Improving Reading in a Community of Schools strategy relate to the above expectations of commitment from both principals and teachers.

Principals have demonstrated their deep commitment through:

- supporting teachers using different kinds of texts for reading
- observing students in classrooms to ensure that the strategies are being implemented consistently across the school
- embedding the teaching approaches into school policy.



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As a result, the four pilot schools are now model schools for other schools wishing to implement the Focus on Reading professional learning program. Teachers have been invited to speak to new schools in the program about the successful outcomes they have achieved.

## Lessons learned

The Improving Reading in a Community of Schools strategy has illustrated the positive impacts on student learning that result from teachers building and sharing their expertise and scaffolding students through explicit instruction in reading. The results of external and independent testing highlight what happens when teachers empower students with a range of reading strategies and share their understanding through authentic opportunities for dialogue around texts.

Further, the outcomes of this innovation in reading pedagogy underscore the importance of the support provided by school leaders for teacher change and improved student learning.

## Next steps

The sustainability of the teaching approaches and learner strategies central to the Focus on Reading program was raised as a concern at the outset of the pilot. It has been necessary to ensure consistency of approach, given staff changes at each school. All new teachers to these schools will be required to undertake the Focus on Reading professional learning program. The teaching approaches central to explicit reading instruction have also been written into school policies.

As a result of the successes experienced in the four pilot schools, many schools have indicated a willingness to be involved in the Focus on Reading professional learning program.

## Research base

Studies in Australia and overseas have established a strong evidence base of teaching approaches and learner strategies that develop and strengthen students' capacity to comprehend a range of texts. This evidence has assisted educators to distil 'what works' in teaching reading comprehension.



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- Explicit teacher-directed instruction of comprehension strategies such as predicting, summarising and monitoring, and what effective readers do when they read.
- Explicit and teacher-directed instruction on the syntactical and rhetorical features of texts across all genres and school subjects.
- Opportunities for students to learn in collaboration with peers and through dialogue focused on their reading.
- Opportunities for students to read independently, to read in pairs and groups, and to be read aloud to.
- Opportunities provided to students to build their knowledge, vocabulary and language.
- Opportunities for teachers to use assessments that are targeted at informing instruction.
- Opportunities for teachers to be involved in ongoing professional development and learning.

(Fielding & Pearson 1994; Snow, Burns & Griffin 1998; Freebody 2007)

Note: For comprehensive reviews of this evidence base, see the work of Fielding & Pearson 1994; Snow, Burns & Griffin 1998; Freebody 2007

The OECD Programme for International Student Achievement (PISA) defines reading engagement as the time that students report reading a diversity of material for pleasure and their interest in and attitudes towards reading (Brozo et al 2007).

The Focus on Reading (3–6) professional learning program works from this substantive evidence base. The program was piloted in the four network schools which aimed to improve student performance in reading across all levels of achievement, particularly students below National Minimum Standard and those mid-range students whose growth in reading performance plateaued in the primary years of schooling. Specifically, the program as applied in these schools aimed to improve students' inferential and applied comprehension, extend and enrich their vocabulary, and strengthen their capacity to use reading as tool for learning in all key learning areas.

Note: This professional learning program is funded by the National Partnership on Literacy and Numeracy and is a joint initiative of the Commonwealth and the State of New South Wales



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## Further reading and links

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Department of Education of NSW 2010, '[Focus on reading 3–6](#)' .

Duke, NK & Pearson, PD 2002, 'Effective practices for developing reading comprehension', in AE Farstrup & SJ Samuels (eds), *What research has to say about reading instruction*, 3rd edn, IRA, Newark, Delaware, pp 205–42.

Freebody, P & Luke, A 2003, 'Literacy as engaging with new forms of life: the "four roles" model', in G Bull & M Anstey (eds), *The literacy lexicon*, 2nd edn, Pearson Education, Frenchs Forest, NSW, pp 51–66.

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Pearson, PD 2009, 'The roots of reading comprehension instruction', in S Israel & G Duffy, *Handbook of research on reading comprehension*, Routledge, New York, pp 3–31.

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## Contacts

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