

# EMPOWERING YOUNG MINDS

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## A review of Australian children and young people's learning

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### **About ARACY**

ARACY is an independent, not-for-profit, health promotion charity focused on bringing knowledge and people together to enhance the wellbeing including health of Australian children and young people.

We link evidence with policymakers and practitioners, focusing on disease prevention through holistic wellbeing including health promotion for the next generation.

By bridging academic fields, systems, and jurisdictions, we advocate for evidence-based strategies that guide decision-makers toward effective outcomes in wellbeing, including health.

### **About UNICEF Australia**

UNICEF Australia, the United Nations Children's Fund, is the world's largest children's charity working to protect the rights of children, globally and here in Australia. Established in 1946 in the aftermath of World War II, we now operate in more than 190 countries and territories. Run entirely on voluntary donations, UNICEF works to improve the lives of every child, no matter who they are or where they live. Our teams are on the ground to ensure every child has safe water, food, health care, education, and a safe place to grow up. In Australia, we work with local partners and governments to raise children's voices, defend their rights, and help them reach their potential at all stages of life.

# Contents

<b>Executive Summary</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Key findings</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>About the Australian Children's Wellbeing Index</b>	<b>11</b>
<b>What do we mean by 'Learning'?</b>	<b>12</b>
<b>Antenatal period and early childhood</b>	<b>14</b>
<b>Middle years</b>	<b>18</b>
<b>Young people</b>	<b>25</b>
<b>Spotlight - The Digital Divide/Generative AI and Learning</b>	<b>28</b>
<b>Emerging challenges for children's learning</b>	<b>31</b>
<b>Areas for action</b>	<b>32</b>
<b>References</b>	<b>34</b>



# Executive Summary

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The Australian Children’s Wellbeing Index was developed in 2021 by the Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY) and UNICEF Australia. The Index is the first comprehensive tool of its kind in Australia. Aligned with The Nest framework, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and UNICEF’s global goals, it provides a holistic picture of how children are faring in different aspects of their lives, such as health, education, safety, rights, and participation.

**T**he wellbeing of Australia’s children is measured and tracked across the six interconnected domains of The Nest – Australia’s Child and Youth Wellbeing Framework. These include being valued, loved and safe; being healthy; learning; having basic material needs met; having a positive sense of identity; and participating in decisions that impact them.

Our publications ultimately aim to set policy priorities and guide action to ensure Australia is an equitable place to grow up and improve outcomes for all Australian children – to make Australia the best place in the world for every child to grow up.

This is the second in a series of papers that ARACY and UNICEF Australia are developing in partnership to further examine the Australian Children’s Wellbeing Index through each of The Nest domains. The papers measure and track what’s important for children and young people, incorporating their voices and analysis of emerging issues. This paper explores the learning domain.

## What do we mean by Learning?

Education and learning are fundamental rights for every child, as stipulated by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). However, not all children have equal access to quality and inclusive education and learning. This paper examines the status of learning and education for Australian children, highlighting the achievements, gaps and challenges that affect their outcomes and wellbeing.

While Australia has made significant progress in providing universal and quality education for its children, there are still persistent disparities in educational outcomes among different groups of children. This includes children and young people from low socio-economic backgrounds, regional and remote communities, and those from First Nations backgrounds. These children can face multiple barriers to accessing and participating in education and learning, such as poverty, discrimination, lack of resources and support, and geographical isolation.

In this report we highlight the key data which provides a snapshot of where we are doing well and where we need to improve on learning outcomes. In doing so, we aim to highlight the evidence and policy areas that need critical focus to support positive long-term outcomes for Australian children in the learning domain.

# Key findings

## Antenatal period and early childhood (conception to 5 years)

### Where is Australia doing well?

1. Participation in early childhood education and care (ECEC) increased in the last decade, with nearly half of one-year-olds and nine in ten four-year-olds now enrolled. Australian Early Development Census (AEDC) data shows most Australian children starting school (55 per cent) are developmentally on track.<sup>1</sup>
2. Current Federal Government focus on the early years through a 10-year Early Years Strategy to create a more integrated and holistic approach to the early years to better support the education, wellbeing and development of Australia's children.

### Where is Australia lagging?

1. ECEC equity and access issues impacting First Nations children and children in communities facing disadvantage. Children living in the most socio-economically disadvantaged communities are twice as likely to be vulnerable on one or more AEDC domains and three times as likely to be vulnerable on two or more domains.<sup>1</sup>
2. ECEC deserts<sup>i</sup> impacting access to learning, particularly in rural, regional and remote communities. In Australia there are more than twice as many children as childcare places. Nearly six million Australians — that's close to one in four — live in a childcare desert. That figure includes more than 680,000 people living in areas with no access to childcare at all.<sup>2</sup>
3. Chronic ECEC workforce shortages impacting the cost and availability of ECEC placements. Temporary waivers for staff are at an all-time high, with nine per cent of the national population of ECEC services currently operating with a temporary staffing waiver (which gives permission to go over the required ratio of educators to children).<sup>3</sup>

## Middle years (5–15 years)

### Where is Australia doing well?

1. Australia performs above the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) average in Programme for International Student Development (PISA) and has fewer underperforming students than the OECD average.<sup>4</sup>
2. Australia's relative international performance as measured by PISA improved between 2018 and 2022.<sup>5</sup>
3. Almost three in four (72 per cent) Australian children aged 5-14 years read for pleasure.<sup>6</sup>

### Where is Australia lagging?

1. Australia ranks in the bottom third of OECD countries in providing equitable access to quality education, behind Austria, Belgium and Czechia.<sup>4</sup>
2. 2024 NAPLAN results showed one in three children are not proficient in numeracy or literacy, leaving Australia well behind their international peers. Results show divisions between genders, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and between students of varying socioeconomic backgrounds.<sup>7</sup>
3. School attendance rates have been falling over the past decade with attendance rates for students in years 1-10 at 89 per cent.<sup>8</sup>

i. Defined as at least three children under five years for every available childcare place. (Source: Hurley, P., Matthews, H., & Pennicuik, S. (2022). Deserts and oases: How accessible is childcare? Retrieved from Melbourne: <https://www.vu.edu.au/mitchell-institute/early-learning/childcare-deserts-oases-how-accessible-is-childcare-in-australia>)

## Young people (12–25 years)

### Where is Australia doing well?

1. Nine in 10 young Australians aged 20-24 years have attained year 12, Certificate III or higher (90 per cent).<sup>9</sup>
2. The enrolment rate in upper secondary vocational education and training is above the OECD average for 20-24-year-olds. The attainment rate in tertiary education is also above the OECD average, with almost half of young people by age 25 reporting having completed a bachelor or postgraduate degree and 38 per cent having completed vocational education and training.<sup>9</sup>

### Where is Australia lagging?

1. School stress is the top issue of personal concern among 15-19-year-olds.<sup>10</sup>
2. As with the middle years, school attendance rates have been falling over the past decade.<sup>11</sup>
3. Australia is experiencing record attrition rates in universities, with overall numbers down 13 per cent since 2016.<sup>12</sup>



# Where is Australia doing well?

Nearly half of one year-olds and 90% of four year-olds are enrolled in Early Childhood Education and Care services.

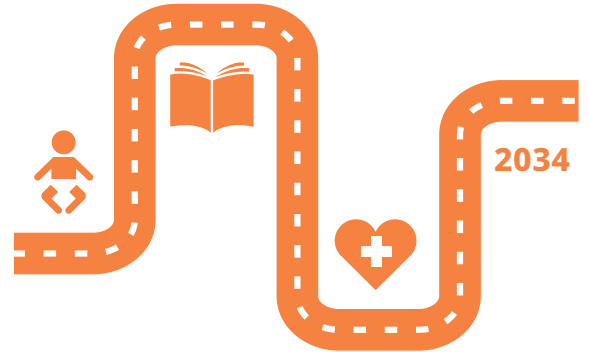


**90%** of four year-olds

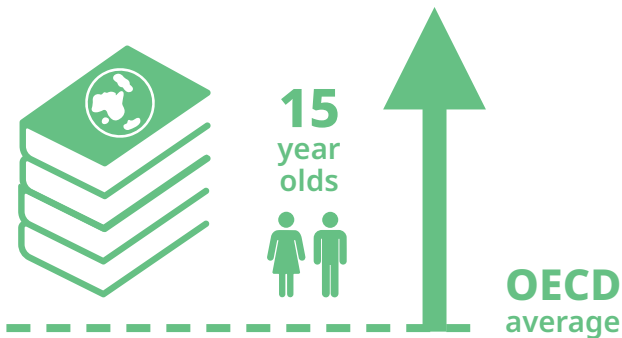


**50%** of one year-olds

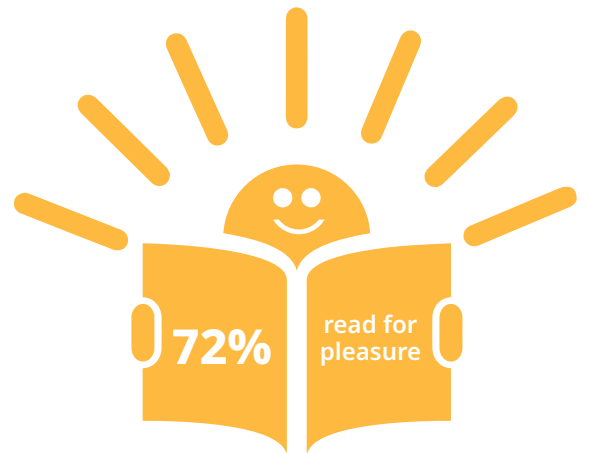
The Federal Government's 10 year Early Years Strategy aims at a holistic approach to children's wellbeing and development.



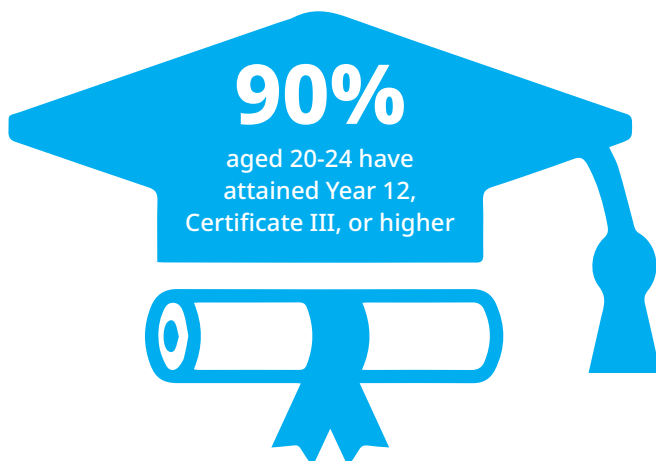
Australia exceeds the OECD average in the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), with fewer under-performing (15 year-old) students.



72% of Australian children aged 5-14 years read for pleasure



90% of Australians aged 20-24 have attained Year 12, Certificate III, or higher.





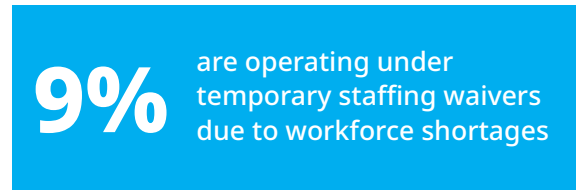
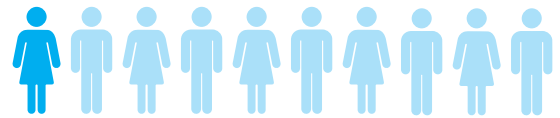
# Where is Australia lagging?

Children in communities facing disadvantage are twice as likely to be vulnerable on one AEDC domain and three times as likely to be vulnerable on two or more domains. Nearly 6 million Australians live in childcare deserts\*.

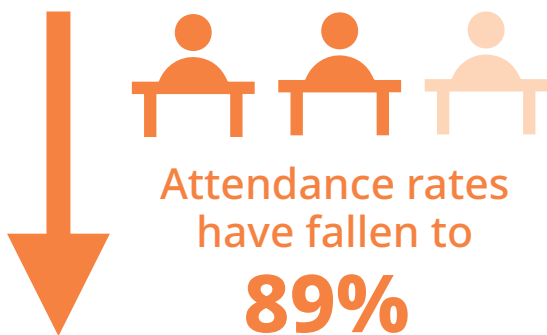


\*any populated area where there are more than 3 children competing for every 1 childcare place available

9% of Early Childhood Education Services across the country have a waiver to operate outside of the required ratio of qualified staff to children



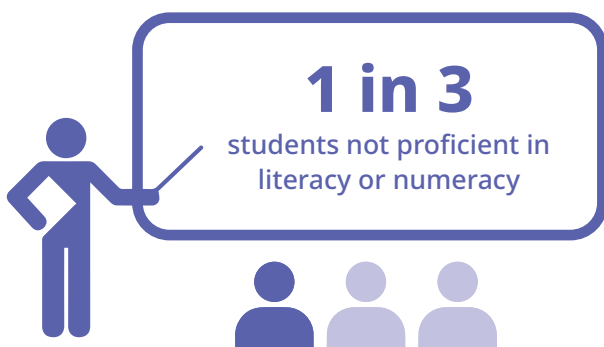
School attendance rates for students in Years 1-10 have fallen to 89%.



School Stress being the #1 concern for 15-19 year olds.



2024 NAPLAN results show proficiency gaps based on gender, First Nations and socioeconomic background



# Emerging challenges for children's learning

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- 1. Cost of living crisis impacting access to learning and education:** Cost-of-living pressures put children's education at risk, with many families finding it hard to afford school essentials and rising costs adding to the significant educational challenges already faced by children experiencing disadvantage and inequity.
- 2. Climate change/disaster impacts on learning and education:** Children and young people are more susceptible to poorer education outcomes following life-changing climate events.
- 3. The digital divide and AI:** Generative AI offers incredible opportunities for students' learning and education. It also poses risks to children's safety, privacy and security, and could contribute to greater inequality in learning access and outcomes.

## Areas for action

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The purpose of this report is to analyse publicly available data to provide a snapshot of where Australia is doing well and where the country is lagging. The following areas for action emerge:

- **Drive a step change in the education system to align with the five core principles of the 'Reinventing Australian Schools'** research for the better wellbeing, health, and learning of every child.<sup>13</sup>
- **Tackle inequality** by ensuring that all children and young people have access to a high-quality education, irrespective of their circumstances, background or where they live. Currently, remote, regional and disadvantaged communities are lagging.
- **Better support children's social emotional wellbeing by** providing access to quality services as well as strengthening links between schools, community and health services.
- **Address the impacts of the cost-of-living crisis** to ensure all students have equal opportunities to participate in their learning. Whilst cost of living is challenging for most families, the cost of housing, food, petrol and extracurricular activities make it harder for low-income families to get children to school with the things they need.
- **Equitable foundations in the early childhood education and care system** to ensure universal and quality access for all Australian children.

# About the Australian Children's Wellbeing Index

The Australian Children's Wellbeing Index was developed as a resource to:

- Show what life is like for children and young people aged 0 to 24 in Australia.
- Track progress on children's rights and wellbeing.
- Influence decision-makers to make Australia among the best places to grow up.

The Index is built on UNICEF Australia's five Children's Goals. Based on the UNCRC, the Children's Goals work together to capture everything a child needs to live a good life and thrive. They are:

- Every child thrives and survives
- Every child has a fair chance in life
- Every child is protected from violence and exploitation
- Every child lives in a clean and safe environment
- Every child learns

Data is organised using The Nest, Australia's evidence-based framework for child and youth wellbeing. The Nest presents holistic wellbeing as six interdependent

domains. A child or young person needs to be doing well in all six domains to thrive. These domains are:

**Valued, Loved and Safe** – children have trusting relationships with family and friends.

**Material Basics** – children live in suitable housing with appropriate clothing, nutritious food, clean water, and clean air.

**Healthy** – children have their physical, mental, and emotional health needs met.

**Learning** – children and young people learn through a variety of experiences within the classroom, the home, and the community in which they live.

**Participating** – children and young people have a voice, are listened to and have a say in decisions that impact them.

**Positive Sense of Identity and Culture** – children feel safe and supported to express their identity and have a sense of belonging.

Together, the Children's Goals and The Nest align as shown below:

The Nest wellbeing domains	UNICEF's Children's Goals
<b>Valued, Loved and Safe</b>	Every child thrives and survives Every child is protected from violence and exploitation Every child lives in a clean and safe environment
<b>Material Basics</b>	Every child thrives and survives Every child has a fair chance in life Every child lives in a clean and safe environment
<b>Healthy</b>	Every child thrives and survives Every child lives in a clean and safe environment
<b>Learning</b>	Every child learns
<b>Participating</b>	Every child has a fair chance in life Every child thrives and survives
<b>Positive Sense of Identity and Culture</b>	Every child has a fair chance in life Every child thrives and survives Every child learns

The Index collates indicators of wellbeing within each domain and uses these to describe the wellbeing of Australian children now and, where the data are available, over time to track progress and detect important trends.

This paper builds on and complements the data and analysis in the Australian Children's Wellbeing Index.

## What do we mean by 'Learning'?

The Australian Children's Wellbeing Index draws on the Convention on the Rights of the Child, UNICEF's global goals for children and Australia's Wellbeing Framework for Children and Young People, The Nest. Article 28 of the Convention of the Rights of the Child sets out the right for all children to access an education.

The Nest defines children and young people learning as:

**“**...through a variety of experiences within the classroom, the home and the community in which they live. Their individual learning needs are addressed to allow them to realise their full learning potential. Families are engaged in their child's learning. Children and young people are supported and encouraged to learn in a wide variety of settings, including formal education. They have opportunities to participate in a breadth of experiences where their learning is valued and supported by their family and in the wider community.”<sup>4</sup>

The Nest learning indicators include:

- Learning activities outside of school
- Unstructured play
- School supports individual learning needs
- Family values learning
- Spends quality time with family
- Goes to school or early education
- Enjoys learning.



# Wellbeing Wheel

A practical way of conceptualising The Nest



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# Antenatal period and early childhood (conception to 5 years)

## Where is Australia going well?

During the past three decades, extensive literature has accumulated on the early years of life for children. Research findings unequivocally agree these years are a critical period of intense learning for children which provide the foundation for later academic and social success.<sup>15</sup> The effects of disadvantage begin before birth, escalate in the first thousand days of life, and continue over the life course of an individual. The evidence also tells us that once a child starts from behind in their learning, the prospect of catching up to their peers, in schooling and in life, is diminished.<sup>16</sup>

Quality early childhood education and care (ECEC) provides young children with opportunities to develop important social, cognitive and emotional skills.<sup>17</sup> Children who participate in quality early childhood education are more likely to develop social skills, experience higher levels of educational success both in primary school and beyond and, in the long term, have better employment outcomes.<sup>17</sup> Although beneficial for all children, early learning programs prove to be particularly valuable for children from families experiencing vulnerability. Quality early childhood education is a key intervention shown to reduce vulnerability.<sup>18</sup>

Since ARACY hosted the National Early Years Summit in early 2020, the early years have come to the fore in policy, political and electoral debates in Australia.<sup>19</sup> Following the 2022 election, the Australian Government initiated a raft of activities focused on the early years, including the development of a decadal Early Years Strategy<sup>20</sup>, and separate inquiries into a) the market for the supply of childcare services<sup>21</sup>, and b) universal provision of early learning in Australia.<sup>22</sup> State and territory governments have also shown renewed interest in this area – including the New South Wales (NSW) and Victorian joint commitment to transform early education<sup>23</sup>, and the Putting Queensland Kids First strategy.<sup>24</sup>

The recommendations and much-needed actions towards early years reforms in policy and delivery, resulting from these activities, are vitally important and require substantial focus and investment.

## ECEC participation

Participation in ECEC in Australia, particularly pre-primary, has risen considerably in the last 10 years.<sup>4</sup>

The number of ECEC services grew by about 25 per cent between 2013 and 2023, as large, for-profit operators responded to increased demand and opened new services, particularly in major cities and inner regional areas. The number of approved places that can be offered to children grew even more rapidly, by nearly 50 per cent in the decade to 2023.<sup>22</sup>

Nearly half of one-year-olds attend some form of ECEC, and about 90 per cent of four-year-olds are enrolled in ECEC.<sup>22</sup> Coverage of ECEC has increased considerably under national commitments to ensure 600 hours of provision for every child in the year before school. Nearly 90 per cent of eligible children are enrolled in a preschool program, but only 70 per cent attend for the full 600 hours.<sup>22</sup>

Across 3-5-year-olds, participation is relatively lower in Australia than elsewhere around the world: in 2020, 82 per cent of young children in Australia participated in formal ECEC or primary education, compared to an OECD average of 87 per cent.<sup>4</sup>

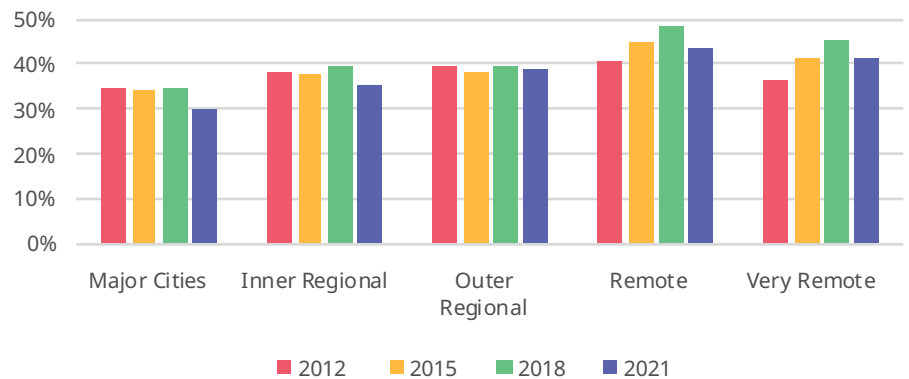
For many children, attending ECEC can have positive effects on their achievements at school and later in life. But children experiencing disadvantage and vulnerability – who are likely to benefit most from ECEC services – are less likely to attend.<sup>22</sup> The OECD reports that access to quality ECEC in Australia, particularly for 3-5 year-olds, could be expanded, particularly given participation gaps for First Nations children and those in communities facing disadvantage.<sup>4</sup>

## Playgroup participation

In 2022-23 more than 160,538 community playgroup sessions were supported across Australia.<sup>25</sup> Research shows playgroups deliver a 'triple benefit': play-based learning and social-emotional development for children; social support for parents and carers; and connections that build communities. Combined, these effects produce more confident, capable parents and carers,

**Fig 1: Playgroup attendance rates by geographical remoteness across 2012, 2015, 2018, and 2021 Australian Early Development Census cohorts**

Source: Playgroup Australia, 2023<sup>25</sup>



and children who are more developmentally ready to start school.<sup>25</sup> Children attending playgroup are 47 per cent more likely to be developmentally on track compared to those who do not attend.<sup>26</sup>

For children who are able to access playgroup, attendance remains strongest in rural and remote communities, where thin markets present a challenge for other ECEC services to establish and flourish. Playgroups emerge from within a community to meet local needs and ensure accessibility for those in the region. They play an important role in levelling the playing field when it comes to geographic disadvantage and educational outcomes.<sup>26</sup>

As part of the 2022-23 Budget, the Australian Government announced \$12.4 million over four years to boost access to playgroups and toy libraries. An additional measure will allocate increased support for First Nations playgroups and toy libraries across Australia, with dedicated funding to develop a playgroups pilot that is culturally informed and incorporates community views to deliver playgroups for First Nations families.<sup>27</sup>

### Australian Early Development Census

The Australian Early Development Census (AEDC) is a nationwide data collection of early childhood development at the time children commence their first year of full-time school. Held every three years, the 2024 AEDC data collection will be the sixth. The AEDC

collects data relating to five key areas of early childhood development referred to as 'domains', which include:

- Physical health and wellbeing
- Social competence
- Emotional maturity
- Language and cognitive skills (school-based)
- Communication skills and general knowledge

The 2021 AEDC findings identified most children as 'developmentally on track' for each of these five domains, consistent with the five collections to date. Between 2018 and 2021, however, the percentage of children who were on track on five domains decreased slightly for the first time since 2009 (from 55.4 per cent in 2018 to 54.8 per cent in 2021).<sup>1</sup>

### Reading to children

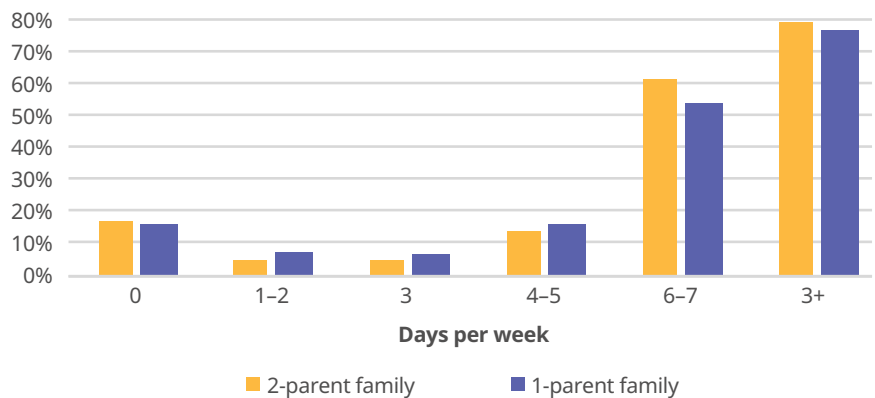
Reading regularly with children from a young age stimulates patterns of brain development and strengthens parent-child relationships. Data from 2017 shows almost four in five children aged 0-2 years (738,000 or 79 per cent) were read to or told stories by a parent on a regular basis in the previous week (that is, on three or more days).<sup>28</sup> Around three in five children (60 per cent) were frequently read to or told stories (that is, on six to seven days in the previous week), and one in six children (16 per cent) were **not** read to or told stories (see Fig 2).<sup>28</sup>

# Antenatal period and early childhood

(conception to 5 years)

**Fig 2: Number of days where a parent spent time with children aged 0–2 years reading or telling stories in previous week, 2017**

Source: Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2020<sup>28</sup>



Note: Relative standard error for 1-parent families for 3 days per week is 39.3% and should be treated with caution.

## The right to play

In recognition of the importance of play to children, Early Childhood Australia (ECA), the peak advocacy organisation for young children (from birth to eight years), launched a **Statement on Play** in late 2023 for the early childhood sector. The Statement reflects ECA's commitment to protect and promote the right of every child in Australia to play.<sup>29</sup>

The United Nations has declared 11 June the International Day of Play, with this day first observed in 2024.<sup>30</sup> This builds on Article 31 of the Convention on the Rights of Child, which recognises the fundamental right of every child to play.<sup>31</sup> Efforts to promote and preserve time for play is recognised as a global necessity; data shows only one in four children play out regularly on their street compared with their grandparents' generation where almost three-quarters said they played outside a few times a week.<sup>30</sup>

## Where are we lagging?

Despite having 95 per cent of Australian children enrolled in 15 hours of early education activity in the year before formal schooling in 2019, and a shift to the entire ECEC workforce holding a qualification<sup>32</sup>, many children still do not have access to quality early learning, disproportionately affecting populations with intersectional vulnerabilities such as rural and remote children and children from low socio-economic status (SES) backgrounds in regional centres.<sup>33</sup>

The ECEC sector is experiencing chronic workforce shortages, operates under complex funding arrangements and is governed by an administratively heavy national quality and compliance system that is sometimes unhelpful and challenging.<sup>3</sup> There is a strong and ongoing demand for qualified, skilled early childhood educators and teachers, and much needed investment in the ECEC workforce to upskill, value and remunerate these critical brain-building professionals.

Significant workforce shortages across Australia are heavily impacting cost and availability of ECEC placements. These barriers affect families in myriad ways, including:

- negatively impacting learning and developmental outcomes for children, including preparation for school, particularly for children experiencing vulnerability and/or disadvantage, First Nations children, and children with disability. AEDC figures from 2021 indicate one in five (22 per cent) children start school developmentally vulnerable.<sup>1</sup>
- preventing parents and carers from achieving their preferred level of workforce participation, particularly women.

This situation is more acute in rural, regional, and remote areas where 'childcare deserts'<sup>34</sup> – defined as at least three children under five years for every available childcare place – are prominent. Quality of care is strongly linked to access and equity, and research has shown that children from the most disadvantaged



demographics gain the greatest outcomes from quality ECEC, and conversely, are the most adversely affected by low-quality ECEC.<sup>33</sup>

Indeed, poorer outcomes for children living in the most socio-economically disadvantaged communities, and/or growing up in regional and remote areas of Australia were highlighted in the 2021 AEDC findings:

- Children living in the most **socio-economically disadvantaged communities** are twice as likely to be vulnerable on one or more AEDC domains and three times more likely to be vulnerable on two or more domains, compared to children living in communities with high levels of socio-economic advantage.<sup>1</sup> In 2021, there was increased developmental vulnerability on one or more and two or more domains for children across the socio-economic spectrum but more so for children living in our most socio-economically disadvantaged areas, reversing previous progress. This was most evident in the language and cognitive skills (school-based) and physical health and wellbeing domains.

- Children growing up in **regional and remote areas** of Australia often have poorer access to services and supports, and the AEDC data reflect this, with rates of developmental vulnerability increasing in relation to distance from metropolitan centres. For those children living in the remotest areas, this is compounded by adversities their communities face. In 2021, there was an increase in developmental vulnerability for children living in regional and remote areas, driven primarily by fewer children on track in their language and cognitive skills (school-based).

National efforts are ongoing to increase the quality of ECEC professionals. The **'Shaping Our Future'** workforce strategy aims to ensure a sustainable, high-quality workforce of early childhood teachers and educators.<sup>35</sup> The strategy is a collaboration between all governments, the ECEC sector, and other key stakeholders to address workforce challenges in the sector over the next decade. Following a consultation process that began in 2020, some 21 actions were identified to be implemented in the short (three years), medium (six years) and long term (ten years). These relate to focus areas such as attraction and retention, data and evidence and professional recognition (e.g. status, pay and conditions of ECEC professionals).



# Middle years (5–15 years)

## Where is Australia going well?

Australian schooling aims for all young Australians to become successful lifelong learners, confident and creative individuals, and active and informed members of the community, positioning them to transition to further study or work and successful lives.<sup>11</sup> It aims for students to improve academic achievement and excel by international standards. To meet this vision, the school education system aims to engage all students, promote student participation and deliver high quality teaching of a world-class curriculum in a sustainable manner.

The provision of school education services aims to meet these objectives in an equitable and efficient way. The vision and objectives align with the educational goals in the Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration<sup>36</sup> and the National School Reform Agreement (NSRA).<sup>37</sup> The NSRA is a joint agreement between the Commonwealth, States and Territories to lift student outcomes across Australian schools.

A recent review of the Australian education system found “our schools provide a world-class education for most students, thanks to the dedication of teachers and school leaders.”<sup>9</sup>

Despite some clear challenges – see “Where are we lagging?” – there are several areas where students are going well, including that Australia performs above the OECD average in the Program of International Student Assessment (PISA) and has fewer underperforming students than the OECD average.<sup>9</sup> Further, Australia’s relative international performance as measured by PISA improved between 2018 and 2022.<sup>9</sup>

### Safety at School

Most young people in the middle years say they feel safe at school.

More than four in five (84 per cent) children aged 8-12 years in Queensland indicated they like being a student at their school.<sup>38</sup> In the Speaking Out Survey, conducted by the Western Australian (WA) Commissioner for Children and Young People, nine out of ten children in years 3 to 6 reported they felt safe at school most or all of the time.<sup>39</sup> In the same survey, nearly one in two

students in years 3 to 6 in WA stated that they like school ‘a lot’ and only four per cent stated that they don’t like school at all.

“*I like my community because I can go to my wonderful school and play with my beautiful friends. We play at the basketball court, or in the prep area and sometimes we play tiger game on the rocks. My friends sometimes get tuckshop and the lady prepares the food and helps the children.*”  
(Student aged 8-12 years, Queensland)<sup>38</sup>

“*I found that I have this one teacher that me and my friend always go to talk to about our problems [they] helped me through a lot and see my side of the story.*”  
(14 year-old student, WA)<sup>39</sup>

Children also want adults to sense when they need more support and to be able to provide it. This includes extra support with their learning, with controlling their emotions, with making and keeping friends, with getting bullied or even ‘sometimes being a bully’, including knowing where they should go for help. Some children expressed concerns about school transitions, with one child as young as eight years old reporting that they are ‘scared about year 12’.<sup>40</sup>

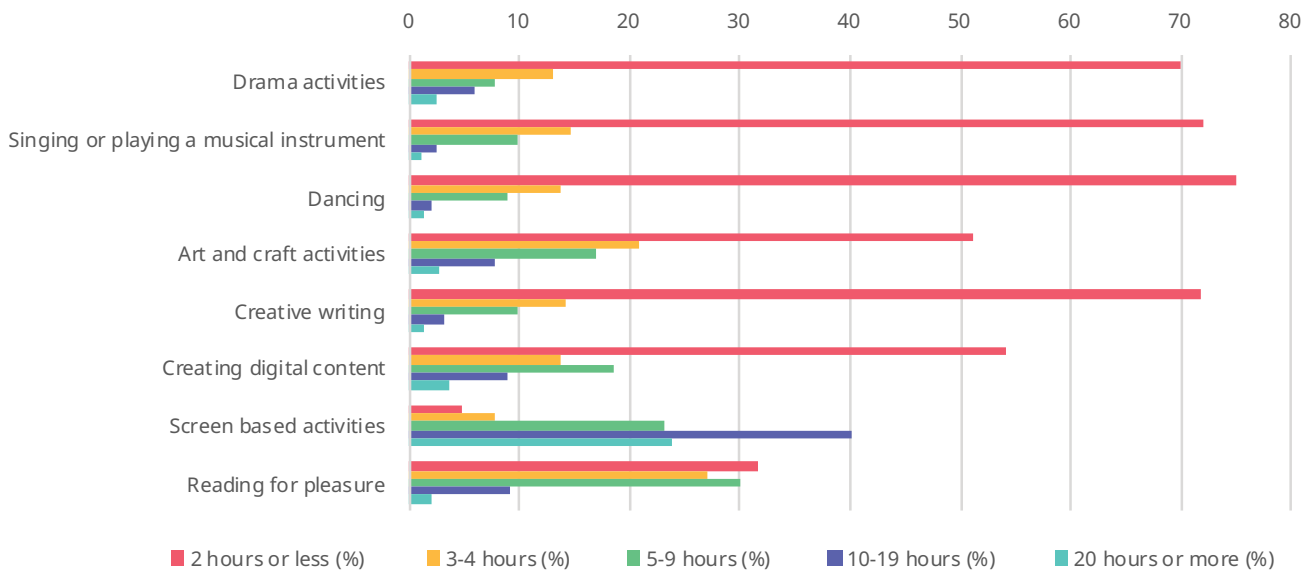
### Participation in cultural and creative activities

In 2021-22, most Australian children aged 5-14 years participated in a cultural activity outside of school hours (94 per cent), with the majority participating in screen-based activities (90 per cent), reading for pleasure (72 per cent), and a creative activity (59 per cent).<sup>6</sup>

The highest participation rates for creative activities were arts and crafts (39 per cent), singing or playing a musical instrument (19 per cent), and creative writing (19 per cent).<sup>6</sup>

In terms of time spent participating in activities, most children (90 per cent) participated in screen-based activities, and almost three quarters (72 per cent) read for pleasure. Reading for pleasure was higher among children aged 5-8 (76 per cent) and 9-11 years (78 per cent) than those aged 12-14 years (63 per cent). Children participating in creative activities generally spent two hours or less per week on their selected activity (See Fig 3).<sup>6</sup>

**Fig 3: Children's weekly hours spent participating in cultural activities**

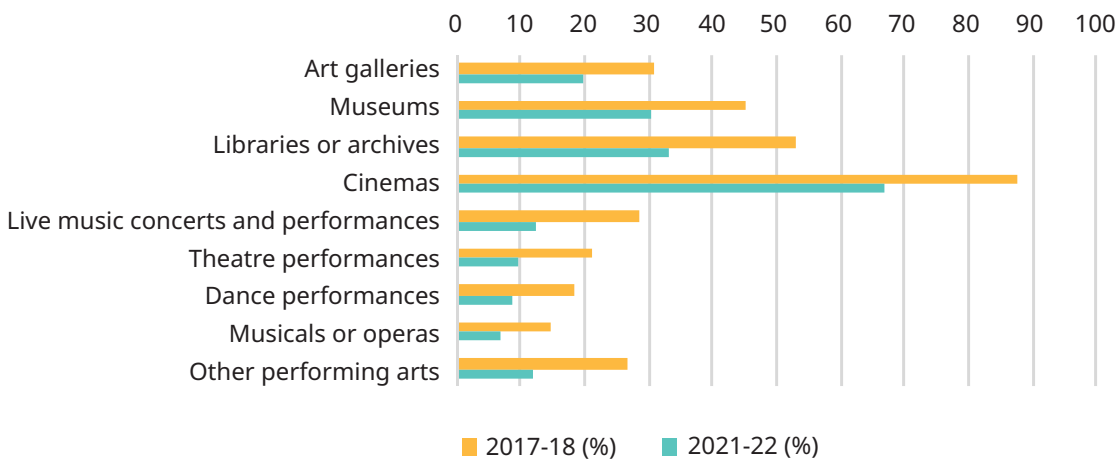


Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2021-22<sup>6</sup>

During 2021-22, eight in ten children (80 per cent) aged 5-14 years attended at least one cultural venue or event outside of school hours. Of all children approximately two-thirds (67 per cent) attended a cinema, one in three attended a library or archive (33 per cent), a further third attended a museum (31 per cent), and fewer than one in 10 (7 per cent) attended a musical or opera.<sup>6</sup>

The impact of the COVID pandemic can be seen in the rates of children's attendance at cultural venues or events between 2017-18 and 2021-22, falling from 94 per cent to 80 per cent. (See Fig 4).

**Fig 4: Children's attendance at cultural venues or events, 2017-18 and 2021-22**



Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2021-22<sup>6</sup>

# Middle years

(5–15 years)

## Where are we lagging?

According to UNICEF, Australia ranks in the bottom third of OECD countries in providing equitable access to quality education.<sup>41</sup> Australia’s school education system is performing well for many students; however, a recent review highlighted that academic performance remains mixed, with too many students falling behind and persistent achievement gaps for students from priority equity cohorts.<sup>9</sup> **Put simply, Australia’s current education system is inequitable and not all students enjoy the same access and benefits that come from schooling.**<sup>42</sup>

“Public education is poorly funded and subject to the socioeconomic status of its attendees.” (18 year-old, South Australia)<sup>43</sup>

“Quality education in public schools is very important as not everyone can afford tutoring. This creates an uneven playing field when completing the HSC (Higher School Certificate). The lack of funding for certain sports is a barrier to participation and for talented kids to continue with their sport to an elite level.” (16 year-old, NSW)<sup>43</sup>

Further, Australia’s overall performance in national and international school-age assessments has shown mixed results and the proportion of students regularly

attending school continues to fall, in a trend that pre-dates the COVID pandemic.<sup>44</sup> Academic outcomes for students from priority equity cohorts are consistently below those of the broader student population, with gaps that have not significantly narrowed, pointing to ongoing systemic barriers to achievement.<sup>45</sup>

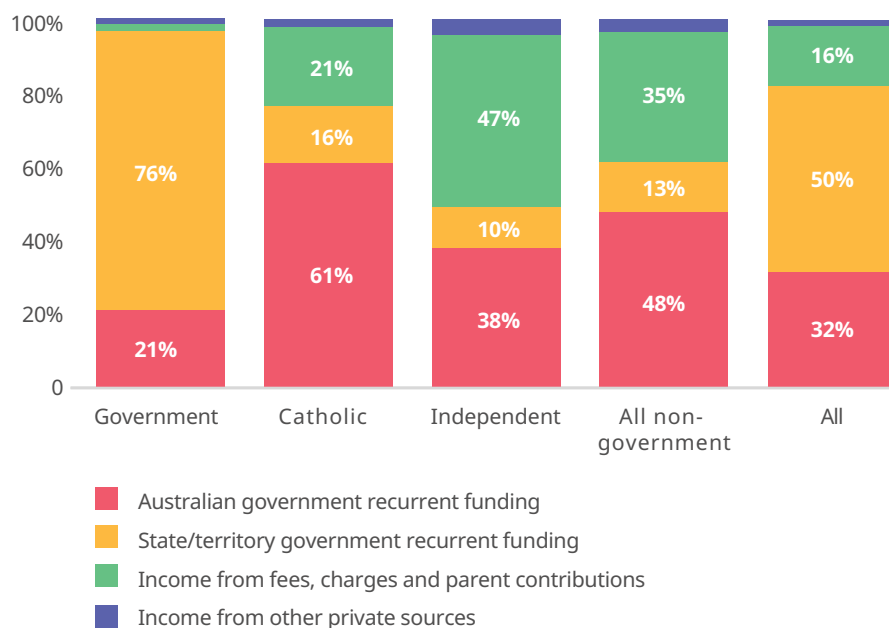
Over two-thirds of Australia’s 9,614 schools are government schools (69.7 per cent), with the remaining non-government sector split between Catholic (18.4 per cent) and independent (12.0 per cent) schools.<sup>46</sup> The proportion of independent schools grew by 1.2 percentage points to 12.0 per cent nationally over the decade to 2022.<sup>46</sup> Among the 4,042,512 students enrolled (2022), just over one-third (35.6 per cent) were in the non-government school sector.<sup>46</sup> The proportion of students enrolled in non-government high schools is 41.3 per cent.

Funding has arisen as a controversial topic in education, and this is particularly true in Australia where parental choice in the education marketplace sees billions of dollars – almost \$20 billion in the 2021/22 financial year<sup>46</sup> – directed into non-government schools.<sup>12</sup>

In 2022, government funding made up 96.3 per cent of gross income for government schools, 76.4 per cent of gross income for Catholic schools and 48.7 per cent of

**Fig 5: Gross school income for all schools by school sector and income, 2022**

Source: ACARA, 2024<sup>46</sup>



gross income for independent schools (See Fig 5, orange and pink segments combined).<sup>46</sup> However, while the bulk of state and territory funding (91.5 per cent) was allocated to government schools, more than three-fifths (61.2 per cent) of Federal Government funding was allocated to non-government schools.<sup>46</sup>

Australia is unique in this regard; governments in comparable countries provide little or no funding to non-government schools. It is strongly asserted by many that these priorities are contributing to the stagnant and declining student outcomes seen across the country. Indeed, socio-educational segregation in Australia is widespread — almost all students who are in schools with high concentrations of socio-educational disadvantage are in public schools, and more than 12 per cent of all students are enrolled in a school where most children are socio-educationally disadvantaged.<sup>44</sup>

As increasing amounts of government funds have been directed into non-government schools, chronic underfunding of most public schools has exacerbated inequities and contributed to higher concentrations of disadvantaged students in the public system, and declining equity of outcomes in Australia.<sup>47</sup>

**“ I want to go to a private school because it is the only school that offers an IB (International Baccalaureate) program, however this is not possible because my family cannot afford it and the scholarships don't cover enough fees, which makes me unhappy.” (15 year-old, Tasmania)<sup>43</sup>**

### National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN)

NAPLAN results have been collected since 2008. From 2023, NAPLAN reports student achievement against four levels of proficiency, resetting the measurement scale and time series so that NAPLAN achievement prior to 2022 cannot be compared to that from 2023 onwards.

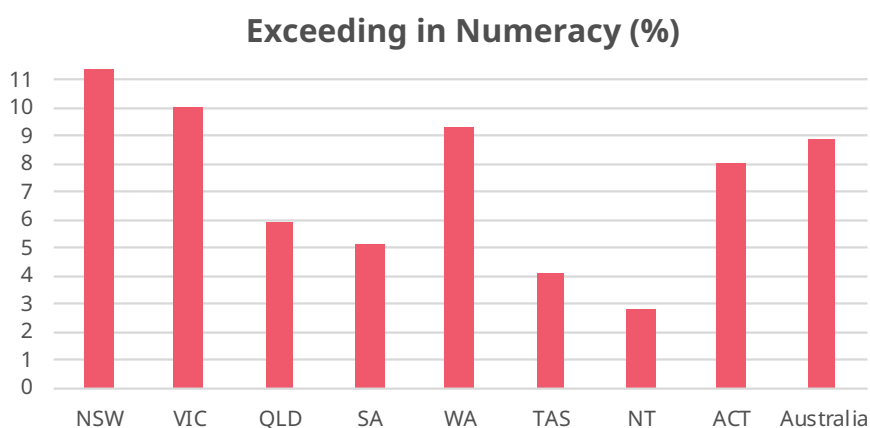
NAPLAN results for 2024 showed one in three students were falling behind expectations in numeracy, reading and writing.<sup>7</sup> Results show divisions between genders, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and non-Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and between students of varying socioeconomic backgrounds. Across age groups and location, girls consistently performed better in literacy and boys did better in numeracy.

Girls outperformed boys by a considerable margin in writing, with higher percentages of female students at “strong” or “exceeding” levels.<sup>7</sup> This was evident in 73 per cent of females compared to 58 per cent of males in year 7, and 69 per cent of females to 53.1 per cent of males in year 9. In numeracy boys performed better, with 5.9 per cent fewer female students in year 3 and 6.7 per cent fewer females in year 5 achieving the “exceeding” band, compared to males.

There were significant differences across states and territories, with students from NSW and Victoria routinely outperforming students from the rest of the country (see Fig 6).<sup>7</sup>

**Fig 6: NAPLAN 2024 Year 9 results: State by state comparison**

Source: The Guardian 2024<sup>7</sup>



# Middle years

(5–15 years)

The 2024 results highlight the inequities that persist across Australia's education system.<sup>7</sup> The results tracked socioeconomic demographics through the employment status of parents. They compared students with parents who worked as senior managers and professionals with students whose parents worked in manual, office and sales jobs. The results showed an obvious difference in all five domains, with students in the former category consistently outperforming their counterparts.

In grammar and punctuation, the gap between year 3 students with parents in the senior managers and professionals' occupation group and those with parents in the unskilled manual, office and sales occupation group was 25.1 per cent.<sup>7</sup> In year 5 it was 17.1 per cent; in year 7 it jumped to 22.6 per cent. In year 9, the gap was highest, at 24.3 per cent.<sup>7</sup>

Non-Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander student results remained substantially above their Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander counterparts in all five testing domains: numeracy, reading, writing, spelling, grammar and punctuation.<sup>48</sup> One third of Indigenous students were categorised as "need additional support" — three times the national average.

## Program of International Student Assessment (PISA)

Unlike NAPLAN, the PISA is not a curriculum-based assessment. It assesses a nationally representative sample of 15 year-olds (rather than a year-level based sample) and provides national and group estimates, rather than reporting individual student results.

The 2022 PISA results were released in late 2023, after originally being planned for 2021 but postponed due to the COVID pandemic. In Australia, around 13,437 students from 743 schools across all jurisdictions and school sectors participated in the survey.<sup>5</sup> The 2022 survey focused on mathematics, with reading, science, and creative thinking as minor areas of assessment. The results were published by the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER) and key findings indicated:

- Australia's proportion of high performers in mathematics was greater than the OECD average, but noticeably lower than Singapore (which was the highest performing country in all assessment domains)
- students from higher socioeconomic backgrounds performed at a higher level than students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds
- students in major city schools performed at a higher level than students in regional schools and, in turn, students in regional schools performed higher than students in remote schools
- on average, students in the independent school sector performed higher than students in Catholic and government schools, and students in Catholic schools performed higher than students in government schools.<sup>5</sup>

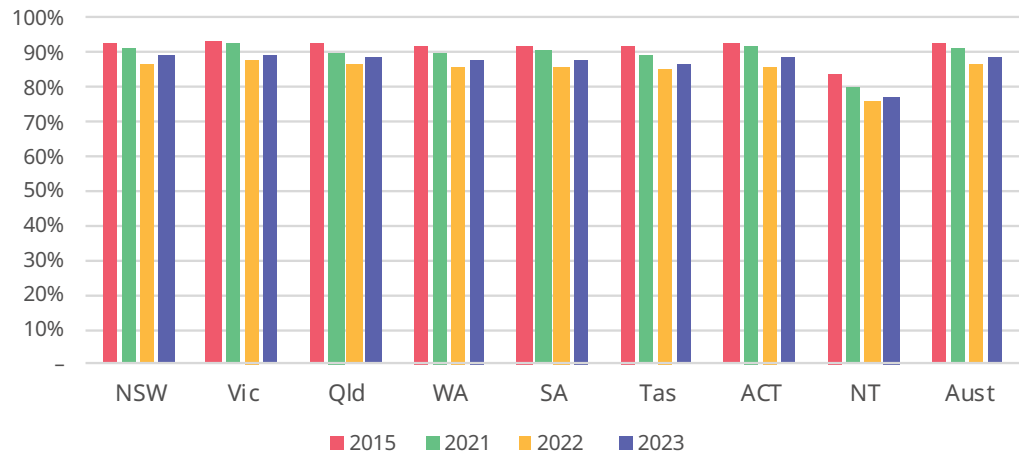
## School attendance

In the last decade, school attendance rates in Australia have been trending downward. In 2023, attendance rates for students in years 1-10 indicated a slight rise to 88.6 per cent, compared to 2022 (86.5 per cent).<sup>46</sup> However, attendance is still lower than the 2021 rate (90.9 per cent), with attendance dropping since the 2015 peak of 92.6 per cent (see Fig 7).<sup>11</sup> The 2023 attendance rates and attendance levels increased with the level of socio-educational advantage of the school. They were higher among students in major cities than in remote areas, and lower among students from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander backgrounds than for non-Indigenous students.<sup>46</sup>

“*School needs to have a larger focus on teaching rather than getting certain marks. Exams are important but the purpose of school is learning and compulsory attendance and such a large focus on getting essays and assignments in is killing the love of learning all students start off with.*”  
(17 year-old, WA)<sup>39</sup>

**Fig 7: Student Attendance Rates across years 1-10**

Source: Productivity Commission, 2024<sup>11</sup>



Attendance is not a new problem, but the many contributing factors have only become more complex since the COVID pandemic. Higher rates of illness, poorer mental health and wellbeing, deepening academic challenges and shifting family attitudes are among the changes students are experiencing. Research shows increased poverty, and the cost-of-living crisis are also key factors affecting school attendance. Issues such as increased housing costs and rising food and petrol prices are making it harder for families on low incomes to get their children to school and ensure they have everything they need for school.<sup>8</sup> Evidence suggests that understanding attendance issues and providing support to students and families, particularly those experiencing disadvantage, when they need it, is key.<sup>8</sup>

### School avoidance and refusal

There is no concrete evidence of the magnitude of school avoidance and school refusal, however the issue has become so prominent in recent years that an inquiry into the national trend of school refusal and related matters was referred by the federal Senate in late 2022. The report was delivered in 2023 and recommended the Federal Government develop a national action plan to tackle the issue.<sup>49</sup> This includes the need for an agreed national approach to the collections, sharing and reporting of data related to school refusal and student engagement, and the need for a strong national evidence base to support effective interventions.

### Disruption in Australian school classrooms

Like the issue of school avoidance and refusal, an inquiry into the issue of increasing disruption in Australian school classrooms was also referred by the federal Senate in late 2022.<sup>50</sup> The report was delivered in 2023, with the Committee leading the report asserting, “student behaviour and engagement in Australian school classrooms is of growing concern to many teachers, school leaders, and parents. Regrettably, the OECD’s PISA 2022 survey has continued to show a decline in the disciplinary climate in Australian classrooms. Indeed, the share of Australian students who reported that students cannot work well in some or every mathematics lesson increased between 2012 and 2022 by over ten percentage points.”<sup>50</sup> The Committee recommended the Senate refer a further inquiry into declining academic standards in Australian schools.

### Regional differences

Students in regional and remote areas report less positively on some health measures including emotional wellbeing and resilience, and remote and regional students were more likely to disagree that they feel happy at school and feel like school is a place where they belong.<sup>39</sup> However, students in remote and regional areas are more likely to hang out with friends, be active outdoors every day and know where to go for support.<sup>39</sup>

## Middle years

(5–15 years)

“ I feel like where we live, we don't have many opportunities so most of us end up leaving before year 9 and it's sad, we deserve to have better education and more things to do after school like what the big cities have.”  
(9 year-old, very remote area, WA)<sup>39</sup>

“ There is a lack of mental health support for young Australians, especially in regional and remote areas.”  
(15 year-old, South Australia)<sup>43</sup>

Among students in WA a lower proportion of students in remote areas reported having their own bedroom, having access to the internet at home or owning a tablet or laptop.

Students in regional and remote areas were more likely to have changed schools than students in the metropolitan area.

Students attending remote schools were less likely than students in the metropolitan area to say they usually get along with classmates or teachers.<sup>39</sup>





# Young people (12–25 years)

## Where is Australia going well?

In 2022, 63 per cent of young Australians aged 15-24 years were currently studying, although participation rates declined as young people got older within this age bracket.<sup>51</sup> For example, while 82.8 per cent of those aged 15-19 (compulsory schooling age) were studying, only 43.4 per cent of those aged 20-24 were studying. Involvement in study was slightly higher for young females across both age groups, with 82.8 per cent of females aged 15-19 and 43.4 per cent of females aged 20-24 currently studying, compared to 81.9 per cent and 41 per cent of males respectively.<sup>51</sup>

By age 25, almost half (46 per cent) of young people reported having completed a bachelor's or postgraduate degree, 38 per cent had completed vocational education and training (VET) and 16 per cent reported not completing any postsecondary qualification.<sup>52</sup>

Further, a recent review of the Australian education system found:

- between 2011 and 2022 the proportion of young Australians aged 20-24 years who have attained year 12, Certificate III or higher increased from 82.7 per cent to 90.1 per cent, and rates among First Nations young people experienced an even bigger increase, from 51.8 per cent in 2011 to 68.1 per cent in 2021.
- the enrolment rate in upper secondary vocational education and training is above the OECD average for 20-24 year-olds.
- the attainment rate in tertiary education is also above the OECD average.<sup>9</sup>

## Satisfaction with educational experiences

The 2023 Mission Australia Youth Survey indicated young people aged 15-19 currently studying were generally satisfied with their studies, with 62.9 per cent being either very satisfied or satisfied.<sup>10</sup> Females (65 per cent) were more likely to be satisfied than males (61.6 per cent). Only nine per cent of young people in this same age group reported being dissatisfied or very dissatisfied with their studies, with a slightly higher proportion of young males (8.9 per cent) than females (8.1 per cent) reporting feelings of dissatisfaction.<sup>10</sup>

Recent data indicates undergraduate university students, many of whom are young people aged under 25 years, are also satisfied with their educational experiences. Based on the 2022 Student Experience Survey, student satisfaction ratings of the quality of their entire educational experience rose from 73.1 per cent in 2021 to 75.9 per cent in 2022.<sup>53</sup> This continues a generally positive upwards trend in the levels of undergraduate student satisfaction. However, student satisfaction has yet to reach the 80 per cent level observed prior to 2020 and the COVID pandemic.<sup>53</sup>

## Where are we lagging?

Data shows that a quarter (25.4 per cent) of students who commenced their university studies in 2017 had dropped out by the end of 2022 – the highest rate since records began in 2005 – and 1.3 percentage points higher than the previous corresponding period.<sup>12</sup> Record attrition rates are running in parallel with decreased interest in university study, with overall numbers down 13 per cent since 2016.

In 2022, many young people still felt the impacts of the COVID pandemic on their education. Young people interviewed by The Smith Family found the shift to online learning challenging and were still feeling the effects of this transition.<sup>54</sup> Many young people affected by the lockdowns felt that the restrictions had negatively impacted their motivation to study. For some young people, online study continued to be the primary form of learning, which they felt had negative impacts on the quality of their education and their educational progress.<sup>54</sup>

“*The world is continuing to develop in the face of changing technology, international affairs, economies, and climate. It's time we prepared young people and future generations to develop the skills needed to survive and adapt appropriately, so they can then continue to progress this nation.*”  
(17 year-old, regional NSW)<sup>55</sup>

# Young people

(12–25 years)

## Participation, Civics and Citizenship

The Raise Our Voice in Parliament initiative highlights the absence of young people in Australia's parliament:

“*There are approximately four million young people in Australia. Yet only seven members of our federal Parliament are aged 18-34. This is a failure of democracy.*”<sup>56</sup>

However, it also emphasises that young people show a strong desire to be engaged in civic participation, with almost all (96 per cent) participants in the 2021 Raise Our Voice in Parliament post-campaign survey reporting they would be more likely to engage with politics as a result of the campaign, and young women being particularly engaged with the highest number of speeches submitted.<sup>56</sup>

The Youth Affairs Council of South Australia (YACSA) believes youth participation and civics education should be better supported in schools as they enable young people to influence issues and decision-making processes that are important to them.<sup>57</sup> YACSA has expressed a concern that young people do not receive effective civics education in schools, citing the most recent national assessment program on civics and citizenship in which only 38 per cent of year 10 students reached the proficient standard, emphasising that in South Australia year 10 is the last year of schooling that civics education is compulsory. YACSA have argued this lack of effective civics education must be addressed to support young people to be informed and responsible citizens, and that limited resources, remote locations, disability, behavioural concerns, or incarceration do not negate the right of young people to education nor the state's responsibility to ensure it.<sup>57</sup>

## School-related stress

School-related stress is the norm among adolescents. School-related challenges were the top issue of personal concern identified by 15-19 year-olds in the 2023 Mission Australia Youth Survey, with similar concerns expressed by young people in surveys of adolescents in Queensland and WA.<sup>10, 39, 58</sup> Further, over a third of parents and carers said school had been hard or very

hard for their children in 2023.<sup>59</sup> The main reasons cited for this were school issues, health and mental health issues, and other social issues. Struggling with schoolwork was also a significant factor in making the school year hard.

School-related challenges identified by respondents in the 2023 Mission Australia Youth Survey included workload issues, challenges with grades, teachers or school staff, and learning difficulties, representing half (49.9 per cent) of respondents.<sup>10</sup> In a survey of high school students in WA, almost nine in ten (88.7 per cent) students in years 9 to 12 reported they were affected by school stress.<sup>39</sup>

“*I think it's important that schools put more effort into dealing with bullying and mental health issues.*” (17 year-old, WA)<sup>39</sup>

“*The stresses that schooling is putting upon kids. The mental illness rate has no reason to be as high as it is, and the majority of people I know link it mainly back to school and other stress that minors have no reason to be under.*” (17 year-old, Qld)<sup>58</sup>

“*I think the most important issue or issues for young people today is/are...] Struggling with school work and studying.*” (15 year-old, WA)<sup>39</sup>

“*I have nothing else to say. Except that my family is low on money. And I'm suffering from not eating or sleeping much. And I'm extremely stressed about school work.*” (13 year-old, WA)<sup>39</sup>

“*A lot of pressure to think about where you are going (what you're doing after school). And if you want to go to uni, it's like you have to dedicate your whole life to school and do perfect and get perfect grades, otherwise you won't make it to uni. It's like year 12 is make-or-break.*” (16 year-old, WA)<sup>39</sup>

“*School needs to have a larger focus on teaching rather than getting certain marks. Exams are important but the purpose of school is learning and compulsory attendance and such a large focus on getting essays and assignments in is killing the love of learning all students start off with.*” (17 year-old, WA)<sup>39</sup>

“ *The biggest personal experience I faced last/ this year was my mental health, I wasn't in the greatest headspace due to schoolwork being stressful, not having a social life.*” (16-year-old, South Australia, Aboriginal)<sup>10</sup>

Further, a significant proportion of WA students in years 7 to 12 did not like school (one in four) and felt that teachers did not care, believe, or listen to them (one in three).<sup>39</sup> This was much higher among high school students compared to primary school students.

### Mental Health and Relationships

The Australian Youth Representative Report seeks to expand on the perspectives of young Australians, highlighting issues that young people in the country are concerned about. In her recent report, Imogen Kane, Australian Youth Representative to the United Nations 2023, illustrates young people are noticing an increase in awareness of mental health issues, which many describe as a great positive throughout their generation.<sup>43</sup> However, the lack of accessible and available youth-designed mental health support in places young people already occupy continues to be a strong barrier seeking support when needed most.

“ *I feel like I've lost my identity over my years at high school as a result of bullying. As a victim of bullying, I feel upset I didn't get the same enjoyment of high school as others.*” (15 year-old, NSW)<sup>43</sup>

“ *Bullying has a really big effect on everyone who attends state education. I can guarantee that at least 60 per cent of people at my school feel unsafe expressing who they truly are because they are worried about others' judgment. People in state education can't share their opinions properly because they will get bullied. The youth needs to know that being a bully will end up making you feel bad for the long term and that being nice to others also makes you feel nice.*” (14 year-old, QLD)<sup>43</sup>

“ *I think it's important that schools put more effort into dealing with bullying and mental health issues.*” (17 year-old, WA)<sup>39</sup>

In a South Australian study, children and young people shared varying ideas about what they want adults to know about school.<sup>40</sup> Children wrote that school is too hard, while others said they were finding certain subjects too easy. Others were eager to express that they're a 'good kid' and 'not naughty', that they're 'trying their best', and 'getting better' at certain sports, school subjects, or other activities. Others focused on their relationships at school, including how they are treated, with some children sharing that they are sometimes being bullied or find themselves being a bully.

“ *How rudely and how bad boys mainly treat girls at school because it can make you feel embarrassed scared and upset.*” (11 year old, Adelaide)<sup>40</sup>

In other studies, young people have expressed a dislike of school generally:

“ *I don't like school. Teachers need to [be] nicer. School needs to start later.*” (13 year-old, WA)<sup>39</sup>



# Spotlight – The Digital Divide/ Generative AI and Learning

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Generative AI is a subset of AI that uses machine learning to discover patterns and structure from training data and then generate new data that have similar characteristics. Generative AI can generate new content such as text, images, audio, and video that resembles what humans can produce. It is effective at recognising patterns (in video, audio, text, or images) and emulating them when tasked with producing something.

Today's children are the first generation that will never know a world without smartphones.<sup>60</sup> Their lives will be enmeshed with digital technologies in a way that no other generation before them has experienced, and AI will permeate through this increasingly digital world as it already does in so many ways.

For children and for society more broadly, the opportunities presented by AI are exciting and almost unlimited, from improving children's access to life saving healthcare, to the vast economic boon it may offer – estimates place the potential additional economic output that AI systems will deliver at roughly US\$13 trillion by 2030.<sup>60</sup>

AI is undoubtedly a force for innovation which can likely help us achieve the **United Nation's Sustainable Development Goals**, but it also poses risks to children's safety, privacy, and security.<sup>61</sup> This could present as discrimination and bias in systems trained on children's data that work unnoticed at great scale<sup>61</sup>, or AI-assisted cyber security breaches placing children at risk of extortion. As with most things, children face increased vulnerability compared with adults, particularly as potential negative impacts they face compound over their comparatively longer-lives lived in both online and offline worlds.

UNICEF Australia and ARACY are committed to steering the impact of AI towards maximising opportunities for children while limiting risks, especially for the most vulnerable.

Australia is currently looking into how to best regulate and promote the responsible use of AI. In October 2023, Education Ministers approved the **Australian Framework for Generative Artificial Intelligence (AI) in Schools**, providing guidance on understanding, using and responding to generative AI in Australian school-based education. The Framework was implemented in Term 1, 2024 and seeks to guide the responsible and ethical use of generative AI tools in ways that benefit students, schools, and society.

In late 2023, UNICEF Australia conducted a poll of 1,000 young people aged 15-17 years and asked them how they are using generative artificial intelligence (Gen AI) chatbots like ChatGPT – some of the first evidence of its kind in Australia. The results indicated that<sup>62</sup>:

- Seven in ten (69 per cent) Australian teens say that they have used a Gen AI chatbot with the main purposes including generating ideas for schoolwork/ school projects (45 per cent), finding out information about something related to their school learning (38 per cent), finding out information or learn about other things not related to their school learning (37 per cent), getting feedback on their writing, assignments or checking their schoolwork (29 per cent) and to write an assignment or do schoolwork for them (20 per cent).
- Girls are more likely than boys to have used a Gen AI chatbot for helping them generate ideas for schoolwork/ school projects (50 per cent compared to 41 per cent). While boys are more likely than girls to have used a Gen AI chatbot for finding out information or learn about other things not related to their school learning (41 per cent compared to 33 per cent).
- 17 year-old teens are more likely than 15-year-olds to say they have used a Gen AI chatbot to get feedback on their writing and assignments, or to check their schoolwork (34 per cent compared to 24 per cent).<sup>62</sup>

Data and evidence in this space is emerging but limited, and together the sector can contribute to the emerging discussions and recommendations being provided to governments on how to address the risks and issues that are facing young people.

## Challenges of Generative AI in schools – inclusion and access

There is much benefit to be gained from the use of Gen AI in education settings, provided the risks are managed. These benefits include amplifying educators' effectiveness, supporting neurodiversity through individualised education, providing access to education and learning in resource-poor settings and strengthening capacities for self-directed learning and inquiry.

Key concerns raised in relation to the use of Generative AI in schools include, for example, supporting students to judge the accuracy/veracity of content; the risk of plagiarism and other legal risks; and the reinforcement of socioeconomic barriers and disadvantages.<sup>63</sup> It is vital inclusion and access are a central focus for policy responses on the use of generative AI in Australian education systems.

Currently, many children do not have access to digital technologies. Access and usage differ according to socioeconomic, gender and age characteristics. Affordability is the greatest barrier to digital inclusion for low-income families with school-aged children.<sup>64</sup> The effect of digital poverty is that the costs of online connection and digital devices present major barriers to education, work, and vital services, and compound existing inequalities. This is referred to as affordability stress.<sup>65</sup>

Children in households without reliable, affordable internet access are excluded from digital connection and attendant access to knowledge and diverse social interactions. The impact of COVID restrictions with the sudden switch to digital learning at home, revealed the extent of limited digital inclusion for many low-income and socially disadvantaged families in Australia.<sup>66</sup> Many students and families struggled with access to, and the affordability of, devices and data, along with having the required digital skills and mentoring for students to learn at home.<sup>67</sup>

Further, some children do not have access due to their geographic location. Compared to households in cities, rural households often have to pay more for less (in terms of data, speed, reliability, and service) due to a range of factors, including a lack of both competition and infrastructure.<sup>68</sup> The pandemic lockdowns highlighted that while many Australians quickly transitioned to working from home and online learning, those experiencing digital exclusion – including people on low income or homeless, elderly, and many in remote and rural areas – were unable to access critical health, education, welfare, and banking services.<sup>66</sup>

We know from the Australian Digital Inclusion Index (ADII) that people living on low incomes are amongst the least digitally included Australians, and nearly a fifth of Australian children under the age of 15 are living in poverty.<sup>67</sup> This means nearly a million students in primary and secondary education in Australia may need additional support to access appropriate devices and data to be able to undertake learning at home.<sup>67</sup>

According to a recent Smith Family survey of parents, over half (51.2 per cent) reported their children would likely miss out on essential digital devices needed for schoolwork because they wouldn't be able to afford them in 2024. One in six (16.6 per cent) reported their children would miss out on internet access for schoolwork.<sup>59</sup>

Given the widening gap between Australia's most and least advantaged learners, the question is whether high-quality education technology (edtech) can, in the right environment, be used to improve outcomes for students facing disadvantage. According to some, the answer is yes – but only if this edtech is well-designed, well-used and well-governed.<sup>69</sup>

The digital divide is often compounded in education settings for students facing disadvantage. Not only may they be unable to access the same digital resources as their more privileged peers at home, but they can be left even further behind if under-resourced schools are unable to harness existing technology to improve teaching and learning outcomes.<sup>69</sup>

According to the Australian Education Research Organisation (AERO), the evidence base needs to be strengthened to know whether Gen AI can a) improve achievement rates for students not meeting proficiency in reading, writing and numeracy, and b) overcome the digital divide without reinforcing or exacerbating existing education inequalities in Australia.<sup>70</sup>

The combination of digital and social disadvantage has far-reaching consequences for the educational outcomes of children from low-income families in

Australia. To realise the benefits of generative AI, we should seek to improve digital connectedness for all children, particularly those in rural and remote areas, and for vulnerable families with limited economic resources.

ARACY and UNICEF Australia support:

- Extensive ongoing consultation with children and young people to uncover creative child-led solutions and insights with respect to their education and the use of generative AI as well as any unintended consequences.
- Commitment to a strong research agenda to understand the potential and risks of generative AI as well as to evaluate its use in educational settings and the reasons for its rapid uptake. This research should also include disadvantaged and marginalised groups and consider the different educational needs of each school age cohort.
- Sustainable solutions to the digital inclusion challenges of families that allow all family members to fully participate in society, and specifically children and young people to fully engage and participate in their education and learning journeys.



# Emerging challenges for children's learning

## Cost of living crisis impacting access to learning and education

Cost-of-living pressures put children's education at risk, with many families finding it hard to afford school essentials, and rising costs adding to the significant educational challenges already faced by children experiencing disadvantage.

A 2023 Smith Family survey conducted with over 2,000 families indicated that almost nine in ten families (88 per cent) were worried to some degree about being able to afford all the things their children will need for school.<sup>59</sup> In the same study, one in three said their kids would miss out on excursions, about half said they could not afford digital devices and one in six said their children would go without internet access.<sup>71</sup> A study by the Australian Council of State School Organisations found one in five parents were using pay-later services to cover education expenses, and one in four could not afford to send their kids on excursions or school camps.<sup>72</sup>

In addition to our call for fair and equitable funding for schools, ARACY and UNICEF Australia also call for Governments to continue to commit to cost subsidies for education expenses to ensure all students have equal opportunities to participate in their learning, regardless of their family's financial situation.

## Climate change/disaster impacts on learning

Since 2019, Australia has experienced some of the most severe, large-scale disasters in the country's history.<sup>73</sup> A recent Deloitte and UNICEF Australia report found that:

- Approximately 1.4 million children and young people experience a climate disaster in an average year.
- Children and young people are more likely to experience disasters if they are:
  - in regional or remote areas
  - from lower socio-economic backgrounds
  - from First Nations communities.

This matters because educational outcomes are dropping for children impacted by disasters. It is estimated that young people who experience a disaster in Australia are 4.2 per cent less likely to complete year 12, and have lower lifetime income due to disruptions to their schooling. These lost lifetime earnings are estimated at \$2,921 million.<sup>73</sup>

The report found several factors that make children and young people more susceptible to poorer education outcomes following life-changing climate events.

They include disruption to school attendance during and immediately after disasters due to the destruction of homes and schools, as well as parental financial stress which can lead to children skipping classes or dropping out altogether.<sup>74</sup>

Thriving Kids in Disasters (TKiD) is a collaborative coalition aimed at uplifting Queensland Disaster Management (DM) system capabilities to support children and young people in Queensland. Their recent systemic review of disaster preparedness, management, and recovery arrangements in Queensland, as they relate to children and young people, looks at recommendations through the lens of The Nest. In the Learning domain, these recommendations are:<sup>75</sup>

1. Resource and expand evidence-based programs that promote disaster awareness and self-efficacy for children and young people; and
2. Embed action-oriented disaster management education that involves kids in real world problem solving across curriculum and that leans into First Nations cultural and traditional environmental knowledge.

ARACY and UNICEF Australia support:

- Increased investment in data and research to provide a full picture of immediate and longer-term trends and help ensure vulnerable communities can be more resilient to future disasters.
- Children and young people's need carefully considered as part of the Federal Government's national climate risk assessment, which is currently in development and will model possible scenarios to reduce disaster risks.
- A national approach to supporting children and young people in the aftermath of a disaster. When funding decisions are being made for disaster recovery programs, the specific needs of children and young people must be considered.

### The digital divide

Generative AI offers incredible opportunities for students' learning and education. It also poses risks to children's safety, privacy and security, and could contribute to greater inequity in learning access and outcomes. The digital divide is explored in detail in the Spotlight Topic – The Digital Divide/Generative AI and Learning.

## Areas for action

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### How to address these emerging learning challenges

- **Drive a step change in the education system to align with the five core principles of the 'Reinventing Australian Schools' research** for the better wellbeing, health, and learning of every child.<sup>13</sup>
- **Tackle inequality** by ensuring that all children and young people have access to a high-quality education, irrespective of their circumstances, background or where they live. Currently, remote, regional and disadvantaged communities are lagging.
- **Better support children's social emotional wellbeing** by providing access to quality services as well as strengthening links between schools, community and health services.
- **Address the impacts of the cost-of-living crisis** to ensure all students have equal opportunities to participate in their learning. Whilst cost of living is challenging for most families, the cost of housing, food, petrol and extracurricular activities make it harder for low-income families to get children to school with the things they need.
- **Equitable foundations in the early childhood education and care system** to ensure universal and quality access for all Australian children.



# Top 5 areas for action

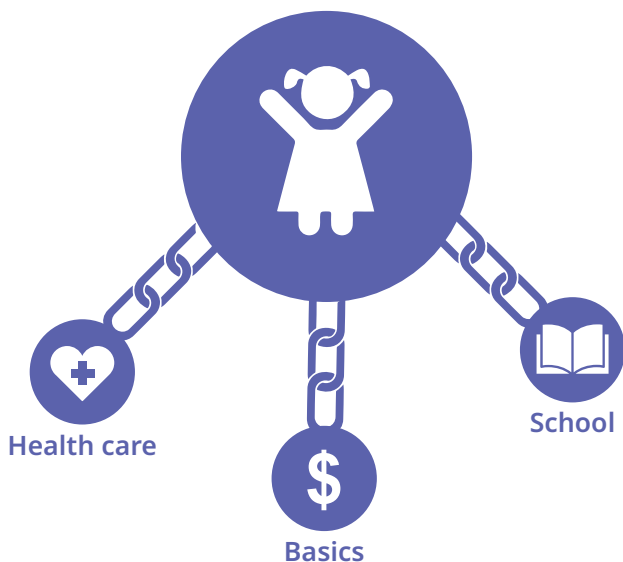
## Holistic Education Reform

Reform the system in line with *Reinventing Australian Schools* to focus on wellbeing, health, and learning for all.



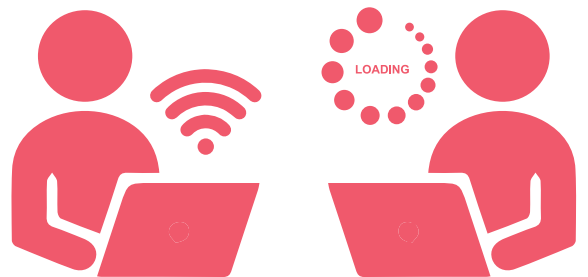
## Support Social and Emotional Wellbeing

Strengthen links between schools, health services, and communities to meet children's emotional and social needs.



## Tackle Inequality and the Digital Divide

Ensure equitable access to digital tools, AI, and quality education for all children, including those in remote areas.



## Address the Cost-of-Living Impact on Education

Provide targeted support so all students can afford school essentials, ensuring equal participation in learning.



## Improve Early Childhood Education Access

Ensure universal, high-quality access to ECEC, especially in disadvantaged and remote communities.



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