

Learning Difficulties Information Guide

School Leaders



Education
and Training

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About this guide

The **Learning Difficulties Information Guide – School Leaders** is a foundation for understanding learning difficulties, and a guide to appropriate school-wide responses. It underscores the importance of literacy and numeracy, and the relationship between learning difficulties and student wellbeing.

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 for principals and school leaders complements two accompanying practice guides for teachers:

- The Learning Difficulties Information Guide—Literacy
- The Learning Difficulties Information Guide—Numeracy.

These guides 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

In June 2018, the Department of Education and Training (the Department) released its Literacy and Numeracy Strategy Phase 2 (the Strategy), outlining Victoria’s plan to improve literacy and numeracy outcomes for all students. The Strategy ensures that teachers have access to relevant support and resources to meet the learning needs of their students and continuously improve their professional practice.

The Strategy aims to support teachers in their daily practice and thereby lift literacy and numeracy achievement, so that every Victorian student, including those with learning difficulties, can expect:

- to receive a quality education that enables success in literacy and numeracy (regardless of their background, circumstances or prior achievement)
- to be engaged in their learning, including working with their teachers to set immediate and longer-term literacy and numeracy goals, and to have their voice heard in designing their own learning.

The three Learning Difficulties Information Guides are a key resource to help enact the Strategy. They also form part of the Department’s inclusive education agenda to support schools to better respond to the needs of students with disabilities.

The Education State: Literacy and Numeracy Strategy

- Delivered new, practical and evidence-based teaching tools and resources that teachers can use in the classroom to have the greatest impact on student learning in literacy
- Delivered new resources that assists teachers to differentiate their teaching practice, including tools and advice on working with students with learning difficulties.

Phase 2: Achieving Excellence and Equity in Literacy and Numeracy

- Maintaining a primary literacy focus and added secondary literacy and primary and secondary numeracy focus
- Literacy and Numeracy Leaders introduced
- **Committed to delivering literacy and numeracy teaching resources and guidance for teaching students with learning difficulties (including dyslexia and dyscalculia).**

What is the difference between a learning disability and learning difficulty?

Approximately 15–20 percent of students in every school, in every classroom, will have a learning difficulty (AUSPELD 2014). This 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 sub-set of the larger group of students generally referred to as experiencing learning difficulties.



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 school leader, 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 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. The definition of disability in the DDA includes physical, intellectual, mental health and learning disability.

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.

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)

Further information to help schools and other education providers understand their obligations under the DDA and the Standards is available on the Department's [website](#) as professional learning.



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*.



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 (that is, decode words and understand written text), spell (that is, encode words from speech to print), and write (that is, 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.

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

The specific learning disability dyslexia is characterised by **difficulties with accurate and/or fluent word decoding and poor spelling**. Word reading and word spelling deficits, together with a delayed response to intervention, are also central features of dyslexia (Odegard 2019).

Difficulties in 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.

Other students may struggle with reading due to underlying difficulties with oral language comprehension. Oral language comprehension refers to the ability to take in and process spoken information in order to derive meaning. Oral language comprehension relies on vocabulary knowledge, grammatical knowledge, familiarity with narrative structure genres and working memory.



Numeracy learning difficulties

In the information age we need to keep track of and process an unprecedented amount of numerical data. Numeracy can be described as the knowledge, skills and behaviours that allow us to use mathematics in a range of everyday contexts, including study, the workplace, and our personal lives. Yet despite the best efforts of their teachers, some students will have a learning disability that affects their learning in numeracy (Butterworth 2005).

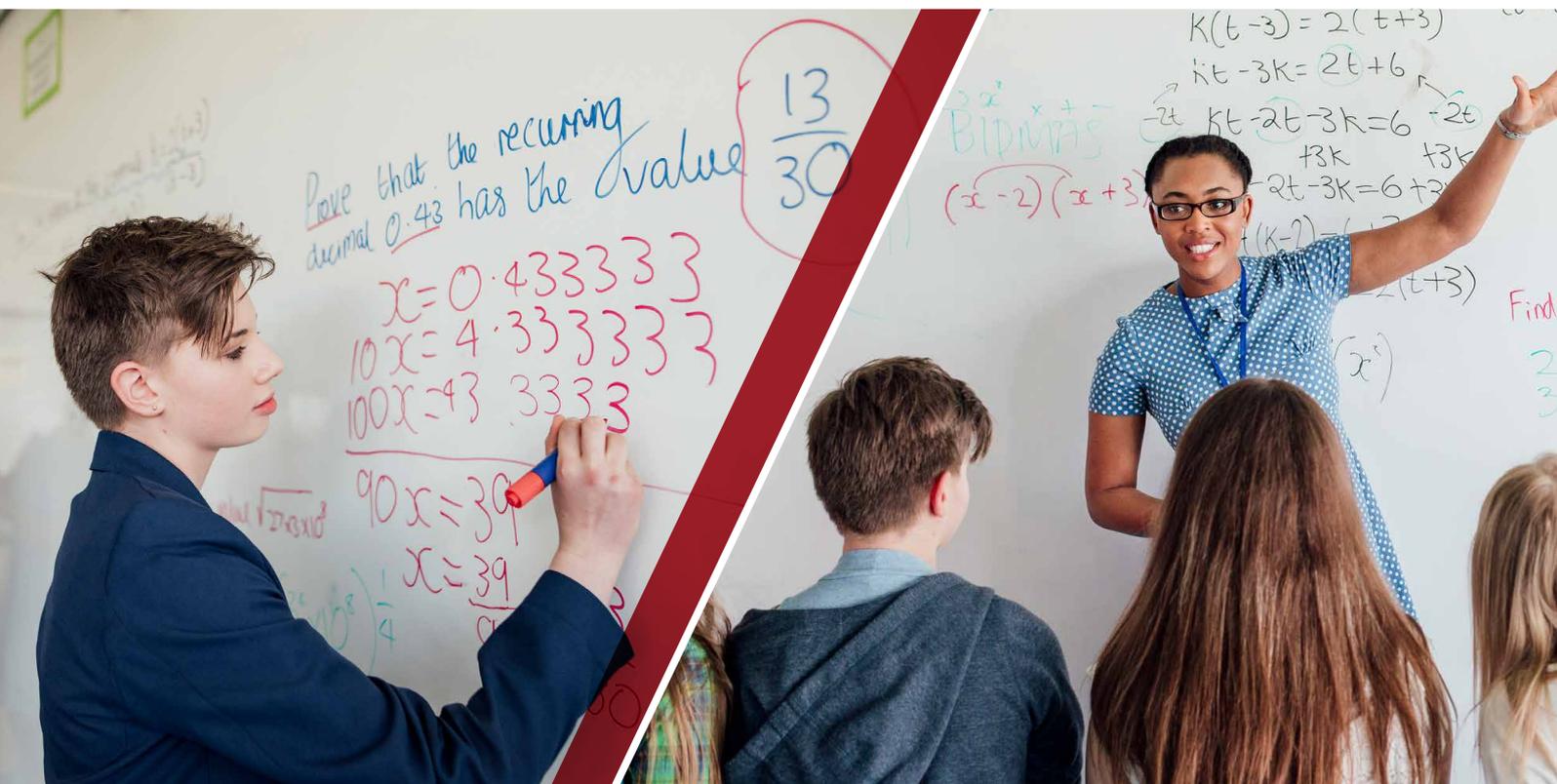
The more acute form of this disability is known as 'dyscalculia', from the Greek *dys-* ('difficulty') and the Latin *calcularre* ('to count').

Why is numeracy important?

The application of numeracy is important for our participation in society and understanding of the world. We use numeracy every day, in all areas of our lives. Because life decisions are so often based on numerical information, students need to be numerate to make the best choices.

Throughout school, students are introduced to increasingly sophisticated and challenging numerical ideas and abilities such as maths fluency, reasoning, modelling, and problem-solving. Grasping these numerical concepts enables students to engage with familiar and unfamiliar situations and make well-informed decisions (VCAA 2019).

While numeracy learning difficulties and dyscalculia have received less attention than other developmental learning disorders in Australia, international prevalence rates suggest that approximately eight percent of people worldwide have dyscalculia—rates comparable to those of dyslexia (Reeve 2019).



Characterising learning difficulties in numeracy

In the past, learning difficulties in numeracy have been characterised as general cognitive problems (for example, low IQ). It is now understood that a student may be experiencing difficulty in mathematics for a range of reasons—in addition to the student and environmental factors mentioned under **Literacy Learning Difficulties**, including:

- specific cognitive problems (for example, issues with working memory)
- overlap with a literacy-learning difficulty.

Dyscalculia is regarded as a specific learning disability, resulting from differences in the brain that affects the typical acquisition of numerical skills (Butterworth 2019). The American Psychiatric Association DSM V (2013) defines dyscalculia as **a learning deficit associated with difficulties processing numerical information, learning arithmetic facts, and performing calculations.**

Research has isolated two 'markers' that can help to identify students' core number ability, specifically:

- the ability to rapidly and precisely enumerate; that is, to establish the number of small sets of objects without explicitly counting them (subitising)
- the ability to efficiently compare the approximate magnitudes of quantities; for example, by identifying which set of dots contains more dots (approximate magnitude) (Butterworth 2019; Landerl 2019).

In approximately 25 percent of cases, dyscalculia overlaps with dyslexia (Butterworth 2005) and since many maths problems also rely on literacy and language skills (for example, arithmetic word problems) a learning difficulty in numeracy can be exacerbated by a learning difficulty in literacy.

There is no easy method for identifying students with a learning difficulty in numeracy, nor is there a 'one size fits all' approach to providing support to these students. Understanding each learner's individual needs is critical to determine appropriate interventions and the different kinds of supports they require.



Learning difficulties and student wellbeing

Students with learning difficulties often face daily struggles at school as they attempt to deal with various related challenges. 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' (AUSPELD 2014).

While students with high self-esteem are typically more adaptable and do better in social environments, students with learning difficulties tend to:

- have low self-esteem
- be less effective in engaging with others
- experience feelings of powerlessness
- feel disconnected from their peers
- 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 experiences of academic and social success become increasingly associated with their identity and sense of self-worth.

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). As school leaders you have an opportunity to assist all students, including those with learning difficulties, to become determined, resilient, and committed learners. Devoting time and resources to safeguard students' mental health is a worthwhile investment in academic success.



Victorian context

Framework for Improving Student Outcomes

Victorian Government schools use the [Framework for Improving Student Outcomes](#) (FISO) to help improve student outcomes and build teachers' capabilities. FISO is an evidence-based model to guide school improvement initiatives, annual planning and monitoring, and is useful in considering how to best support students with learning difficulties.

The [FISO Improvement Cycle](#) is an effective inquiry process that helps school leaders and teachers identify areas of strength, areas of practice that need improving, and to plan for corresponding strategies for improvement. It is a staged, continuous process that is collaborative, flexible, disciplined and focused on learning.

You can plan how to build staff capabilities and directly support students with learning difficulties using the Learning Difficulties Information Guides and the four stages of the FISO Improvement Cycle.

Evaluate and diagnose

- Examine student learning data to increase your understanding of your students' specific needs and contexts.
- Assess whether existing personalised learning and support planning addresses the needs of students with learning difficulties.
- Develop or update Individual Education Plans to bolster literacy and/or numeracy support accordingly.

Prioritise and set goals

- Based on evidence relating to student outcomes, and using the [FISO Continua of Practice for School Improvement](#), identify key areas of literacy and numeracy practice requiring improvement.
- Select one or two high-impact improvement initiatives that address your school's specific needs and enhance current efforts and achievements. Seek feedback on proposed initiatives from teachers, students, parents and carers, as well as the wider school community.
- Set goals that are aligned to these priorities. Goals should suit your school's specific context and current level of practice.
- Define success: clarify what success or a positive impact will 'look like'.
- Establish indicators to measure improvement, and specific improvement measures, typically referring to both measures of professional practice and their expected effect on student outcomes.



Develop and plan

- Determine specific actions and methods aligned to your school's improvement strategies and initiatives.
- Nominate roles and responsibilities for achieving these aims.
- Discuss with your school leadership team and colleagues what professional learning is needed to best support your improvement initiatives.
- When considering how support might be provided to students with learning difficulties, keep in mind the particular needs of students, including their self-efficacy and confidence, as well as specific evidence that will measure the impact of the interventions for this cohort.
- For school leaders, make sure to engage actively as an instructional leader by focusing on student outcomes and by being knowledgeable about, and directly involved in, the work of teachers.

Implement and monitor

- Consider who to collaborate with, and how to build an engaged community around your school's key initiatives (see [Professional Learning Communities](#)).
- Seek support from senior educational improvement leaders and regionally based support teams to share learning within and between schools through formal leadership networks (see [Communities of Practice](#)).
- Monitor the impact of chosen initiatives on student learning by gathering performance indicator data and reviewing progress using the FISO Continua of Practice for School Improvement.

IMPROVEMENT CYCLE



Figure 1: Stages of the FISO Improvement Cycle



Victorian Teaching and Learning Model

The [Victorian Teaching and Learning Model](#) (VTLM) helps to bring FISO into the classroom, providing a common language and relating whole-school improvement approaches to classroom practices. The model allows teachers and school leaders to:

- focus on high-impact improvement initiatives
- drive those initiatives through evidence-based decisions about their teaching and student learning.

The VTLM encourages collaboration among principals, school leaders, teachers, students and parent/carers in effective learning communities to improve learning outcomes for students. A school can self-assess its level of progress during the Evaluate and Diagnose stage of the FISO Improvement Cycle and through the guided whole-school reflection tool.

Many schools will already have an established pedagogical model that underpins teacher practice in their context. For schools who are aiming to further embed the VTLM and [High Impact Teaching Strategies](#), the [Pedagogical Model](#) provides a common language and guidance on improving the quality and consistency of teaching practice and reflects school-wide improvement based on FISO.

The VTLM and FISO Improvement Cycle in action

A primary school's literacy goal may be 'to improve student learning growth and achievement in reading, focusing particularly on students who are achieving at the lowest level'.

Through the [guided whole-school reflection tool](#), teachers and school leaders might identify *Practice Principle 6: Rigorous assessment practices and feedback inform teaching and learning*, as the area of focus for the entire school. School leaders would then enable teachers to work in PLCs and use the guided teacher self-reflection activity for Practice Principle 6 to reflect on their work and plan next steps.

As part of their developing and planning, teachers and school leaders may also choose to identify which domains of the Pedagogical Model would be most useful, for example, **Evaluate**. Teachers in the PLC may agree that the VTLM components related to this literacy reading goal, and based on additional evidence, were High Impact Teaching Strategy 1: Setting Goals and High Impact Teaching Strategy 8: Feedback.

Using the VTLM and the FISO Improvement Cycle allows teachers to link their work in the classroom and their individual performance and development goals with the work across the entire school, supporting school-wide improvement goals.



Supporting students with learning difficulties

Students with learning difficulties have complex needs. In some cases, a student's ability to do well at school can be affected by their socio-economic or language background, or their family's level of education. Disruptions to learning, such as placement in out-of-home care, can also create additional challenges.

These complexities mean schools must not only provide high-quality instruction to support students with learning difficulties, but that the instruction provided is differentiated according to individual student need.

Students can feel self-conscious about learning difficulties, and schools should work closely with students to minimise stigmatisation and disruption to their learning.

In and out of the classroom, teachers should collaborate with families of students with learning difficulties to set goals with students, monitor their learning, and celebrate their progress.

The role of school leadership

Some schools may already have structures in place to support students with learning difficulties. These schools might, for example:

- support teachers to build their knowledge and skills to implement evidence-based literacy and numeracy instruction
- offer differentiated instruction to meet students with learning difficulties at their 'point of need'
- have wellbeing leaders who connect with students and help them to build positive attitudes and mindsets about their learning, teachers and school
- engage year-level leaders to work with students and families to improve engagement and outcomes.

While the Learning Difficulties Information Guides are designed to provide advice to help schools build on their current approaches, school leaders should work together with students and teachers to make decisions about the best model of support in each instance.

School-wide approach to support and Response to Intervention

The Response to Intervention (RTI) framework can be helpful for thinking about how to implement approaches to support students with learning difficulties.

Described below, RTI is a framework of academic support that is often embedded within a Multi-tiered System of Support (MTSS), alongside School-wide Positive Behaviour Support.

RTI divides support into three tiers of increasing intensity, organised according to need (Figure 2). RTI 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.

RTI aligns closely with the Department's [SHARE Principles for Inclusive Education](#) (**S**tudent-centred, **H**uman rights focussed, **A**cknowledges strengths, **R**espects legal obligations, and **E**vidence-based). Schools may implement different supports, but the core assumption behind each model is the same: in every context, some students will require extra support to access and participate in education on the same basis as other students. RTI provides a framework for school staff to work together to organise that support.



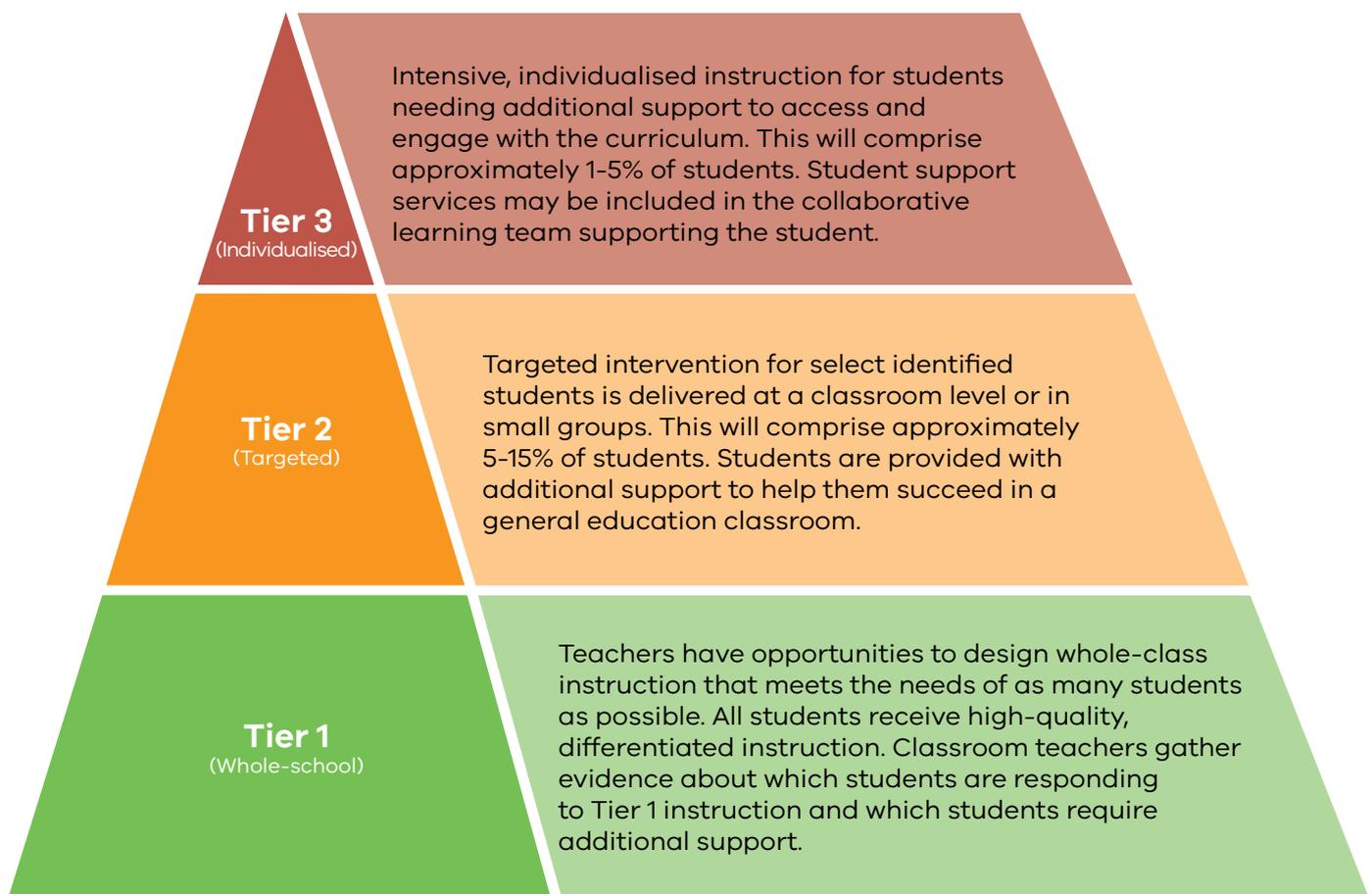


Figure 2: Response to Intervention tiers of academic support (adapted from Buffum, Mattos, & Weber 2012).

High impact teaching strategies

The High Impact Teaching Strategies (HITS) are 10 instructional practices that reliably increase student learning. For students with learning difficulties, the HITS represent a collection of evidence-based strategies to help support teaching and learning.

For example, research conducted into **effective numeracy intervention** shows that logically sequenced instruction (**Structuring Lessons**) and instructions that directly address the information a student needs to learn (**Explicit Teaching**) are highly effective at helping students with numeracy learning difficulties access maths content (Fuchs et al. 2008).

Overviews and examples that illustrate each of the strategies in action can be found in the [Excellence in Teaching and Learning](#) resource.

Student Support Services

Student support services (SSS) assist children and young people who face barriers to learning and achieving their educational and developmental potential. They provide a range of strategies and specialised support at the individual, group, school and area levels.

SSS comprises a broad range of professionals employed by the Department, including: psychologists, speech pathologists and 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](#) identifies children and young people most in need, and matches student/school needs with the expertise of SSS team members.

Empowering teachers and 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 purpose of their actions, come together to build a strong sense of agency and self-determination.

'Learning with agency is an entirely different cognitive and physical activity leading to powerful learners who choose to take on challenges with their whole being.' (Williams 2017)

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 to feeling that they have limited control over their learning and futures (AUSPELD 2014).

Students with a strong sense of agency...

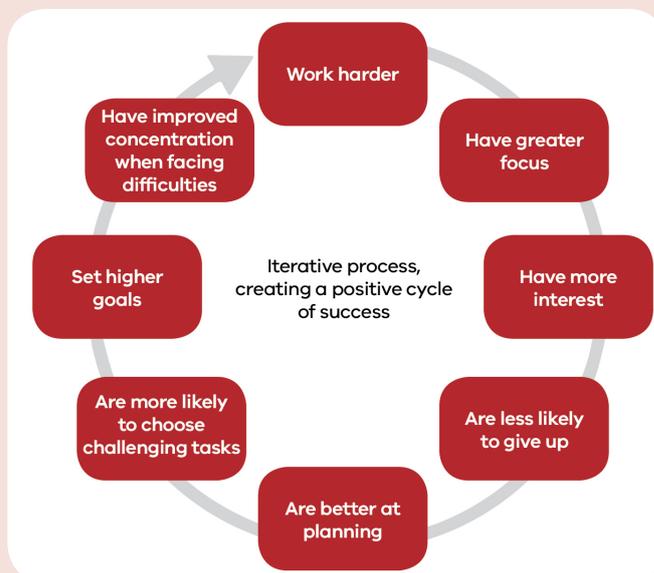


Figure 3: Generating a positive cycle of learning (Johnston 2004).

[Amplify](#) is a practice guide created by the Department for school leaders and teachers. It presents an evidence base and practical school-based examples to help school communities explore and enhance their understanding of student voice, agency, and leadership—the key elements for empowered students.



These elements are similarly important to empowering teachers of students with disability. Research suggests that many teachers do not feel confident or properly equipped to implement inclusive practices and support students with special educational needs (OECD 2019). This can lead to feelings of frustration and lowered self-efficacy. Teachers who complete training or professional learning in inclusive practices are more likely to exhibit positive attitudes towards the inclusion of students with disability and learning difficulties (Powers 2002).

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 schools (Epstein 2018).

However, establishing this relationship comes with challenges, and barriers can exist that hinder a constructive relationship between school staff and families. Considering how to involve students in this process, as individuals who are familiar with the cultures of both home and school, is important to help bridge these divides and achieve a positive and productive partnership.

See the Department's website for advice on [building positive partnerships with parents](#) and resources to help support students' literacy and numeracy development at home.



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