Making Sense of Literacy Change

What We Had, What We Know Now, What Is in Place, and What We Need Next — for All Children, with a Focus on Dyslexic Learners

A clear, evidence-informed guide to understanding the shift in literacy education in Aotearoa New Zealand — for all children, with a focus on dyslexic learners.

> Every child deserves to leave school **able to read and write** — not as a privilege, but as a **basic foundation for life.**

deb | DYSLEXIA EVIDENCE BASED

www.deb.co.nz

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Founder of Dyslexia Evidence-Based (DEB)
Bridging research, practice, and lived experience to create change that lasts.

EVIDENCE. PRACTICE. EQUITY. OPPORTUNITY.

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About This Document

This document explains the significant changes in literacy education in New Zealand and aims to promote a deeper understanding of them. It combines research, policy, and practical experience to provide a clear and connected overview of what has existed in the past, what we currently know, what is in place now, and what is still needed as we move forward.

The document draws on available research, public information, and personal experiences within the education system. It serves as an informational and advocacy resource and does not constitute official guidance, policy, or advice from the Ministry of Education.

Education systems are complex and continually evolving. Many of the changes outlined in this document are still being implemented, and practices vary across schools, teachers, and regions. Some initiatives are in the early stages, and their impacts in classrooms will continue to develop over time.

This document focuses on literacy within English-medium education. While structured literacy approaches can and should be applied across all languages, including Māori-medium education, this document does not provide the same level of detailed information in those contexts due to the author's scope of knowledge.

The goal of this document is to clarify a complex system by showing how the different parts connect. Without a comprehensive understanding of the system, individuals cannot advocate effectively, make informed decisions, or know what questions to ask.

Read this document as part of a broader conversation. It supports understanding, discussion, and informed advocacy, all with the shared aim of improving outcomes for all children learning to read and write.

Terminology Note:
Throughout this document, you may see both the terms *Structured Literacy (SL)* and *Structured Literacy Approaches (SLA)* used. In the New Zealand context, the Ministry of Education uses the term *Structured Literacy Approaches (SLA)* within policy and guidance documents.

Internationally, organisations such as the International Dyslexia Association commonly use the term *Structured Literacy* when discussing evidence-based instruction for students with dyslexia.

Within this document, both terms are referring to the same underlying evidence-informed approach to literacy instruction, although wording may vary depending on the source, policy context, or research being referenced.

About Dyslexia Evidence-Based (DEB) and the Author

Dyslexia Evidence-Based (DEB) is an independent community-based organisation in New Zealand that supports parents, teachers, educators, and specialists in understanding literacy and dyslexia, particularly for children who face challenges in learning to read and write, including those with dyslexia.

DEB began in 2019 as a Facebook support group and has since evolved into a broader platform. This includes a website featuring over 100 pages of accessible information for both New Zealanders and international audiences. All work done within DEB is voluntary and not aimed at financial gain, ensuring the platform remains independent and free of ties to commercial programmes, providers, or organisations.

The primary goals of DEB are

- to bridge the gap between research and classroom practice
- provide clear, evidence-informed information
- support families and educators in navigating literacy challenges
- advocate for system-level changes to improve outcomes for all learners

Sharon Scurr, the founder of DEB, is a parent and advocate with personal experience navigating the education system for a child who struggled with reading and writing. Through this journey, she developed a comprehensive understanding of literacy, intervention, and the challenges within the educational system.

Sharon's work is informed by formal training and ongoing professional development, including:

- IMSLE (Institute for Multisensory Structured Language Education) training
- LMIT (Learning Matters Ltd) training
- Continued education in the Science of Reading, Science of Learning, and Science of Instruction
- Additional studies in autism, intellectual disabilities, ADHD, emotional regulation, interoception, and Developmental Language Disorder (DLD)
- Ongoing engagement with national and international research in literacy and learning
- Understanding and applying introception, trauma-informed and neuro-affirming practices

Her approach is grounded in:

- The Science of Reading
- The Science of Learning
- The Science of Instruction

DEB integrates lived experiences, research findings, formal training, ongoing learning, and direct connections with families, teachers, specialists, and the broader education community.

This document reflects this integrated perspective, combining evidence, research, personal experience, and advocacy to foster a clearer understanding and better outcomes for children.

Introduction

New Zealand is undergoing a major system-wide shift in literacy education. This change goes beyond programmes or classroom practice, reshaping how reading and writing are taught, supported, understood, and implemented across the education system, including the pedagogies that underpin effective teaching and learning.

For many years, schools did not consistently teach reading and writing, and teaching approaches did not always reflect how children learn. As a result, too many children did not develop the literacy skills they needed. When this happens at scale, we are not seeing an individual issue. We are seeing a system issue.

We now understand much more about how children learn to read and write, and this knowledge changes what we must teach, how we must teach it, and how we must support learning over time.

This document brings together the Science of Reading (what to teach), the Science of Learning (how children learn), and the Science of Instruction (how to teach effectively). Together, these form the foundation of structured literacy approaches and provide a clear framework for aligning research with classroom practice.

To make sense of these changes, this document outlines what we had, what we now know, what is currently in place, and what we still need moving forward. It supports a deeper understanding of the system because without that understanding, we cannot advocate effectively, make informed decisions, or know what questions to ask.

This matters to everyone connected to education, policymakers, educators, specialists, and families. This document aims to bring clarity to a complex system, build confidence in understanding the changes, and support stronger, more informed advocacy for all children, especially those who struggle to learn to read and write.

What We Had — Understanding How We Taught Reading and Spelling in New Zealand

For years, parents across New Zealand have asked the same question: “Why can’t my child read or spell?” For a long time, the answer was not about the child. It was about how reading, spelling, and literacy were being taught.

For decades, most New Zealand classrooms used an approach often called Balanced Literacy, which is alongside broader child-led or student-led learning approaches. Despite the name, it was not actually balanced.

This approach was based on the belief that children learn to read naturally, through exposure to books and language, and that learning should be driven by the child’s interests, pace, and discovery, rather than explicit, teacher-led instruction.

Phonics was included, but it was often taught briefly, inconsistently, or without a clear, structured sequence. Importantly, this was not synthetic phonics taught explicitly and systematically. Instead, many children were encouraged to:

- look at the pictures
- guess words using context
- memorise repetitive texts

This approach, sometimes referred to as *three-cueing*, asks children to predict words rather than read them. Guessing is not reading, and it does not support spelling.

Why It Didn’t Work for Most

While some children appeared to succeed, the system was not working for most. Research shows that around 5% learn to read effortlessly, and 35% learn to read relatively easily with broad instruction. Around 40–50% require more explicit, structured code-based teaching, and around 10-15% need explicit, structured teaching to learn successfully with multiple repetitions.

If around 65% of children require explicit teaching or additional support, then a system that does not consistently provide this is not fit for purpose. That is not acceptable.

Alongside this classroom approach, many schools relied on Reading Recovery (only suitable for children aged 6-7 years) as an intervention for children who were struggling. It was designed as a short-term, one-to-one support programme and did not help the majority of children. It was also expensive to deliver, had restricted access to only certain users, and was not designed to meet the needs of all learners, particularly those with persistent difficulties such as dyslexia.

Evidence has shown that initial gains were not sustained. The reality is that too many children were left without effective, lasting support, making this not only a question of effectiveness, but also of equity. For the children it didn't work for, the consequences were long-lasting.

For many children, help did not come when it was needed, and in too many cases, it did not come at all. As a result, we now have students who are illiterate or who have not developed functional literacy skills.

There were no consistent, guaranteed supports in place. Access to help depended on what funding a school could access and how that funding was prioritised. For many families, this meant being left at the mercy of a system where support was not equitable, and where children with dyslexia and other literacy needs were not always prioritised.

What Was Missing?

At the same time, other critical aspects of literacy increasingly depended on individual teacher knowledge. With a curriculum that was often vague in its guidance, what was taught and how it was taught varied significantly from classroom to classroom and school to school.

Over time, this led to important areas of literacy receiving less consistent attention. Handwriting was often reduced or removed from structured teaching. Grammar and sentence-level instruction became less explicit or were inconsistently taught. Spelling, in many cases, was treated as something to be memorised rather than understood.

Many will remember the routine: Friday afternoon spelling tests, and the familiar homework *"look, cover, write, check."*

While this worked for some children, it relied heavily on memory rather than teaching how the spelling system actually works. Without understanding sound patterns, word structure, and meaning, many children were unable to transfer those words into their everyday writing. This is why so many children could pass a spelling test on Friday, but still struggle to spell those same words independently in their writing.

As a result, many children were not given consistent, explicit instruction across all areas of literacy, not just in reading, but in writing as well.

The reality is this: We had a system that wasn't working for about 65% of students.

When a child cannot read, they cannot access the curriculum. They are not able to do the work they are expected to do. They cannot fully engage in learning. Over time, this has an impact far beyond literacy. Children begin to notice. They compare themselves to others. They start the self-doubt, the self-talk — *"I'm not good at this," "I can't do this."* Anxiety increases. Confidence drops. And for many, their mental well-being is affected.

This is not a child's failure or a teacher's failure. It is and was a system failure.

- A system that didn’t educate teachers in the latest evidence-based practices.
- A system that did not consistently teach all children what they needed to know.
- A system that relied on exposure and expectation, rather than explicit instruction.
- A system that was slow to recognise the scale of the problem or felt too big to change.

If we want to understand why children struggle with reading and writing, we need to ask the right questions:

- Were they actually taught the skills they needed?
- Or were they exposed to them and expected to pick them up?

Because when around 65% of children need additional support, we cannot explain this away by saying some children do well. We have to come back to the system.

What we had was a system that did not consistently work for all children and left too many without the skills they needed. But we now know much more about how children learn to read and write. And that understanding changes everything.

What We Know Now — Understanding How Children Learn to Read and Write

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So far, we have covered what we had. Now we need to understand what we know.

This is an important point in the conversation, because without a clear understanding of how children actually learn, it is easy to misunderstand the changes that have taken place, or to reduce them to simple shifts in language or resources. What has happened is much deeper than that.

This is not just a shift in language; it is a shift in understanding. It is a pedagogical shift that changes how reading and writing must be taught.

Over time, a growing body of research has provided us with a much clearer picture of how children learn to read and write. This knowledge challenges many long-held assumptions and replaces them with evidence about what works, why it works, and what children need to be successful.

At the centre of this is a structured literacy approach, not as a programme, but as a framework grounded in what we now know about reading, writing, and how children learn.

To make sense of this, this section draws on three key areas:

- **The Science of Reading** — what needs to be taught
- **The Science of Learning** — how children learn
- **The Science of Instruction** — how teaching must be delivered

Together, these provide an understanding of the framework for structured literacy approaches, showing not only what needs to be taught but also how learning happens and how teaching must be delivered. This is what bridges the gap between research and classroom practice, ensuring that what we know from science is applied in ways that directly support students' learning to read and write.

To help make this visible, I have used frameworks such as Scarborough's Reading Rope and Sedita's Writing Rope. These show that reading and writing are not single skills but complex processes composed of many parts that must be explicitly taught, carefully built, and connected over time.

They also help us understand where things can go wrong. When parts of this process are missing, not taught clearly, or not given enough time to develop, children struggle, not because they are not capable, but because they have not been given the knowledge they need.

What we now know is this: reading and writing are not skills children naturally learn. They must be taught.

The most important shift in this conversation is not opinion — it is evidence.

The Science of Reading — What Children Need to Learn

What we now know is that reading is not a single skill. It is made up of multiple areas of knowledge that must be taught, built, and connected over time. The Science of Reading draws on a large body of research, and Scarborough's Reading Rope is one model used within this research to help explain it.

The Reading Rope makes the process of reading visible and easier to understand, showing how different strands, which build word recognition and language comprehension, must be developed and brought together over time. It shows that when a part is missing or underdeveloped, reading becomes difficult.

Below is a breakdown of these key areas and how they contribute to successful reading.

Reading - Scarborough's Reading Rope

To understand how children learn to read, we need to break reading down into its core parts. One of the most critical of these is word recognition, the ability to read words on the page accurately and fluently. This is not something children develop by chance. It requires explicit, systematic teaching, where skills are carefully built and practised over time. When word recognition is not secure, reading becomes slow, effortful, and often inaccurate, making it difficult for children to focus on meaning. For many learners, particularly those with dyslexia, this is where the greatest challenges sit and where teaching must be the most precise.

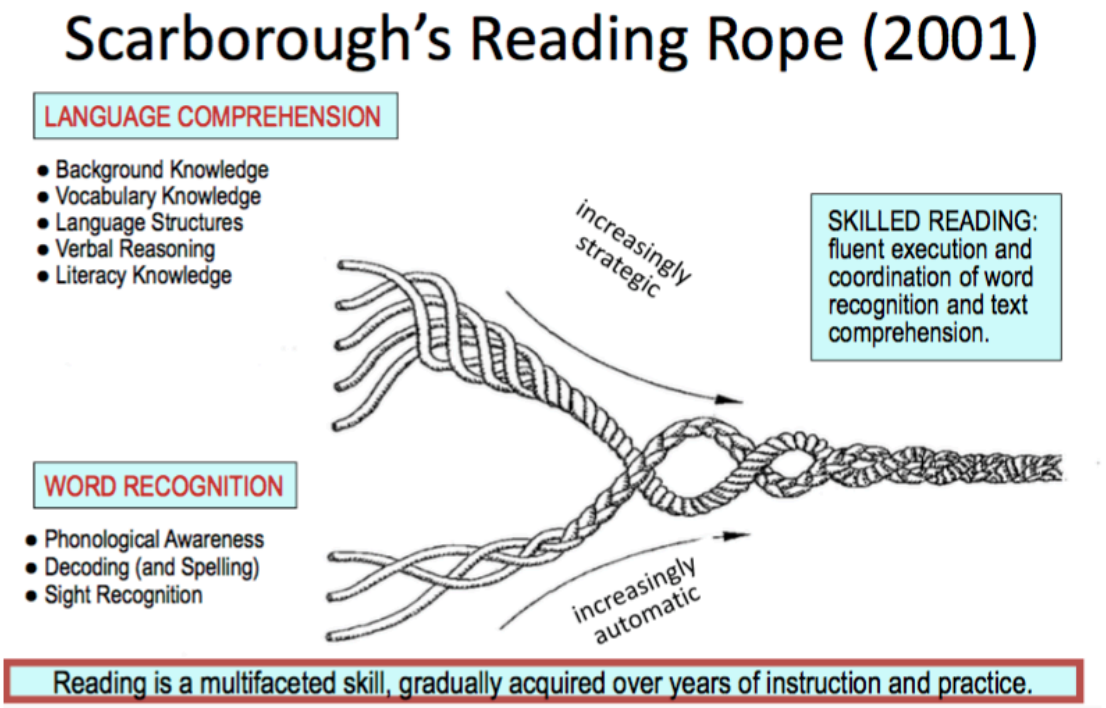

Image taken from the Ministry of Education, New Zealand, Inclusive Education guide, Dyslexia

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Word Recognition — Reading Words

The following skills are necessary for word recognition:

- **Phonological awareness, specifically phonemic awareness**— the ability to hear and manipulate the individual sounds (phonemes) in words (for example, knowing that *cat* has three sounds: /c/ /a/ /t/, or being able to change *cat* to *cap*).
- **Decoding - Phonics (decoding and encoding)** — understanding the alphabetic principle, which is the relationship between sounds and letters, and understanding spelling patterns (for example, knowing that a silent e can change *cap* to *cape*)
- **Sight Word Recognition** — being able to read words without sounding them out each time (for example, recognising *clock* instantly).

These skills allow children to **read the words on the page**.

Language Comprehension — Understanding the Meaning

Alongside word recognition, children also need to develop language comprehension, the ability to understand the meaning of what they read and hear. This is equally critical for successful reading and writing. While children may be able to read the words on the page, without strong language knowledge, the text will not make sense. Language comprehension is built over time through explicit teaching, rich language experiences, and the development of vocabulary, sentence structure, and background knowledge. For many learners, particularly those with language difficulties or dyslexia, this cannot be left to chance and must be intentionally developed.

Oral comprehension is reliant on the following components:

- **Oral language** — the ability to understand and use spoken language
  (for example, being able to follow instructions, have a conversation, or retell what happened during their day in the correct order).
- **Vocabulary** — knowing what words mean, from everyday words like *before*, *after*, *under*, *between*, *over* (**Tier 1**), to more complex words like *enormous*, *predict*, *disappear* (**Tier 2**), through to subject-specific words like *evaporation*, *habitat*, or *fraction* (**Tier 3**).
- **Background knowledge** — understanding the world and concepts
  (for example, knowing about their local area, including its history and geography, national knowledge such as New Zealand's geography and history, and international knowledge, including global geography, historical events, and different cultures and connecting this new knowledge to what they already know).

- **Grammar (syntax)** — how sentences are structured in both spoken and written language
  (for example, understanding the difference between "The dog chased the cat" and "The cat chased the dog," or being able to say "Yesterday I went to the park" instead of "Yesterday I go park").
- **Semantics** — how meaning is built in language
  (for example, understanding that "He's feeling blue" means he is sad, or that bat can have different meanings depending on context).

As word recognition becomes more automatic and fluent, children can focus on reading comprehension, understanding the meaning of what they read. Reading comprehension results from language comprehension working together with fluent word recognition. It involves making sense of words, sentences, and whole texts, drawing on vocabulary, background knowledge, and the ability to think about and connect ideas. In Scarborough's Reading Rope, this is where all strands come together, not just reading the words, but understanding, interpreting, and thinking about the text. When either word recognition or language comprehension is weak, reading comprehension is affected. Strong comprehension allows children to learn from reading, not just do reading, which is the ultimate goal.

These skills enable children to understand what they read and express meaning in their writing. However, they do not develop in isolation. They are built on a foundation of oral language, the ability to understand and use spoken language, including vocabulary, sentence structure, and meaning.

For children to become successful readers and writers, these skills need to be developed together. Oral language supports reading and writing, while reading and writing, in turn, strengthen language. Writing itself is a complex process that must be explicitly taught, requiring children to draw on their knowledge of language, vocabulary, spelling, and sentence structure to communicate meaning clearly.

When any part of this system is underdeveloped, whether it is oral language, word recognition, language comprehension, it impacts the others. This is why teaching must be deliberate, connected, and cumulative, ensuring that all aspects of language, reading, and writing are built and supported over time.

Writing - The Writing Rope

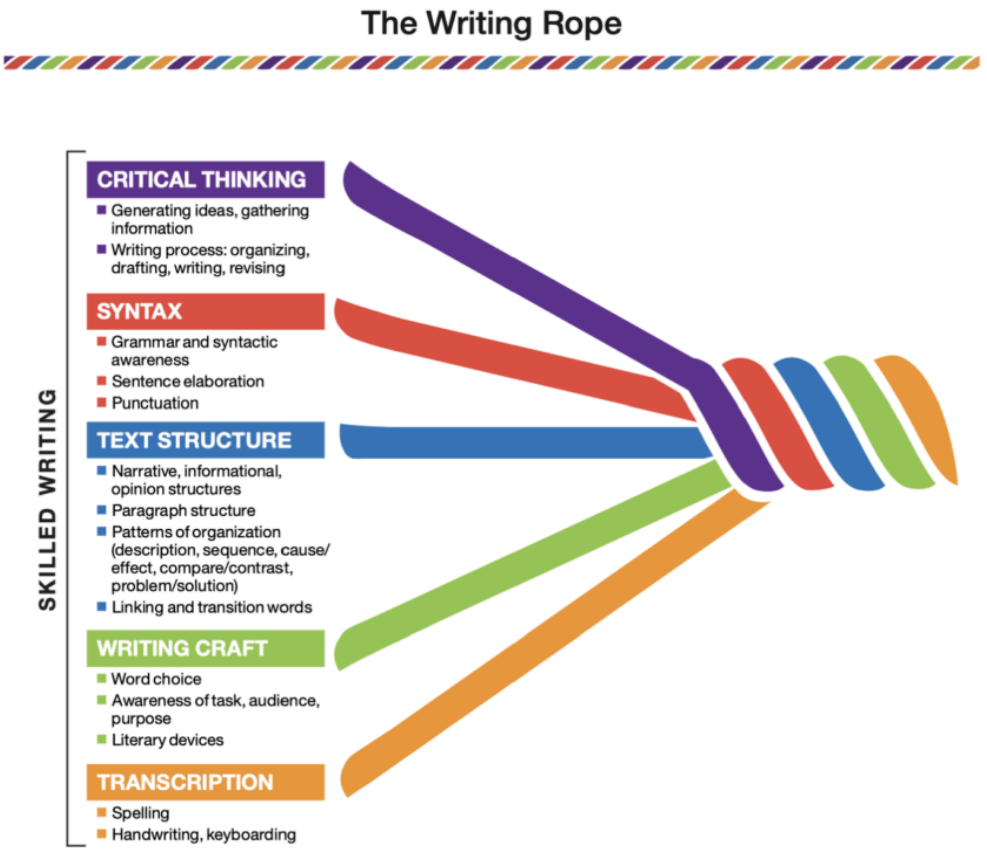


Image from Keys to Literacy website

Writing is not a single skill. Like reading, it is a complex process made up of many parts that must be explicitly taught, practised, and connected over time. Sedita's Writing Rope helps make this visible.

It shows that writing draws on the same underlying knowledge as reading, particularly in areas such as word recognition, spelling, and language. However, writing also requires additional skills to bring ideas together, organise thinking, and express meaning clearly.

To write effectively, children must draw on a strong foundation of oral language, alongside their developing reading knowledge. These systems work together. Children use what they know about language, vocabulary, and ideas, combined with their knowledge of how words and sentences work, to communicate meaning through writing.

As you can see, looking at the breakdown of the writing rope, children need knowledge of reading and oral language to write effectively, as well as the ability to develop:

- **Transcription skills** — the ability to get words onto the page, including spelling (encoding) and **letter formation** (handwriting). This includes forming letters correctly, writing them fluently, and developing automaticity so that the physical act of writing does not take up too much of a child's working memory.
- **Syntax (sentence-level skills)** — understanding grammar and sentence structure, including how to build and expand sentences, and use punctuation to support meaning.
- **Text structure** — knowing how different types of writing are organised (for example, narrative, informational, or opinion writing), including paragraph structure, organisation patterns (such as sequence, cause and effect, compare and contrast), and the use of linking and transition words.
- **Writing craft** — making choices about how writing is expressed, including word choice, awareness of audience and purpose, and the use of language to communicate clearly and effectively.
- **Critical thinking and composition** — generating ideas, gathering and organising information, and managing the writing process (planning, drafting, writing, revising, and editing), supported by executive function skills such as holding ideas in mind and monitoring what has been written.

Writing places a high demand on working memory, as children must manage ideas, language, spelling, and structure simultaneously. For many learners, particularly those with dyslexia or language difficulties, this can be overwhelming without explicit instruction, modelling, and guided practice.

Children cannot read, understand, or write about something if they do not already understand the language and ideas behind it. This is why oral language and knowledge development are essential, underpinning both reading and writing.

The Science of Learning — How Children Learn

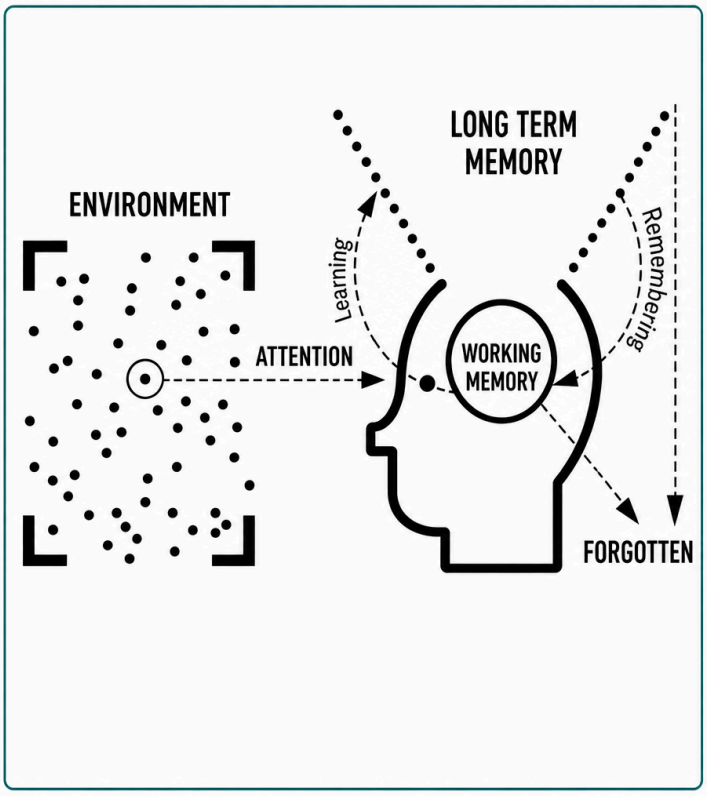
The science of learning explains how the brain processes, stores, and retrieves information, and why understanding how we teach is just as important as what we teach. Learning begins with attention. From the environment, only the information a learner focuses on enters working memory, where thinking takes place. However, working memory is limited and can only manage a small amount of information at once. When too much is introduced, cognitive load becomes too high, and learning begins to break down, not because a child is not capable, but because the demands exceed what their brain can manage.

Through explicit teaching, practice, and repetition, learning is consolidated in long-term memory. However, storing information is not the end goal. Learning is only secure when it can be retrieved. Retrieval brings knowledge back into working memory so it can be used. When retrieval becomes accurate and increasingly automatic, it frees up working memory, allowing learners to think more deeply, make connections, and apply their knowledge to new situations.

If learners cannot retrieve what they have learned, they cannot use it. Without retrieval, there is no problem solving, no transfer of knowledge, and no ability to build new learning. This is why practice must go beyond exposure and include deliberate opportunities to revisit and retrieve learning over time.

This understanding is critical because learners do not all start from the same place. Differences in background knowledge, vocabulary, working memory, executive functioning, and prior learning mean that teaching cannot be one-size-fits-all. This is particularly important for neurodivergent learners, who may experience differences in working memory, attention, and executive functioning. When learning is not carefully structured to manage cognitive load and support memory, they are often the most impacted.

The Science of Learning gives us the knowledge to respond with precision, breaking learning into manageable steps, adjusting the pace, and providing the right level of support so all learners can build secure, usable knowledge.



HOW LEARNING HAPPENS

From environment to memory to use:

- The environment contains a lot of information, but only what the learner pays attention to moves forward
- Attention is the gateway—without it, learning does not begin
- Attended information enters working memory, where thinking happens
- Working memory is limited and easily overloaded
- If too much is introduced, learning begins to break down
- With explicit teaching and practice, information moves into long-term memory
- If learning is not secured, it is **forgotten**
- Learning becomes useful when it can be retrieved
- Retrieval brings knowledge back into working memory so it can be used
- When retrieval becomes automatic, it frees up working memory for thinking, problem solving, and new learning

Learning is not what is taught or even stored—it is what can be retrieved and used.

The Science of Instruction

How we teach the knowledge children need from the Science of Reading, Understanding explicit and implicit learning and getting the order right

Explicit Teaching

We have moved away from child-led approaches towards teaching that is deliberate, structured, and grounded in evidence. Learning is no longer left to chance. Explicit teaching means that learning is carefully planned, clearly explained, and directly modelled. Children are not expected to figure things out for themselves. The teacher does not assume prior knowledge; instead, they make learning visible by showing exactly what needs to be learned, how to do it, and what success looks like. As Anita Archer reminds us, “How well I teach = how well they learn.” Clarity is critical. It reduces cognitive overload, protects working memory, and allows errors to be identified and corrected early before they become embedded.

This is not about simply telling. It is about precision. Teachers identify the most important knowledge and skills and break them into small, manageable steps, so that working memory is not overwhelmed. Learning is built through a structured and responsive process:

I do (modelled instruction)
The teacher explicitly models the learning, demonstrating what to do and thinking aloud, to make the process clear. This reduces cognitive load by removing unnecessary guesswork and allows students to focus on the key knowledge and steps required for success.

We do (guided practice)
Students practise with support while the teacher checks understanding, asks questions, and provides immediate feedback. All students are actively involved; “learning is not a spectator sport.” Teachers monitor closely, “walk around, look around, talk around”, and address errors as they occur. This stage is critical because it strengthens working memory and initiates the transfer of learning into long-term memory. It is repeated as often as needed until learning is secure.

You do (independent practice)
Students apply what they have learned independently. This only happens when they are ready. At this stage, retrieval becomes essential; students are drawing on what has been stored in long-term memory and applying it with increasing accuracy and confidence. Teachers continue to monitor and step back in to model or guide if needed. Movement between these stages is flexible and responsive, not fixed.

Students are expected to be active participants throughout, **saying it, showing it, writing it, and applying it, so that understanding is visible** and no one is left behind. Learning is revisited over time through daily review, practice, and retrieval. Each time students recall and use knowledge, it strengthens memory and supports automaticity. As Rosenshine

highlights, effective teaching includes presenting new material in small steps, guiding practice, checking for understanding, and ongoing review. As Archer reinforces, “Perfected practice over time makes perfect and permanent.” Clear, predictable classrooms matter too, “Predictability predicts ability”, because students need to know what they are learning and what success looks like. Without this level of explicit instruction, guided practice, and retrieval, learning remains fragile and is easily lost.

Implicit learning is essential — but it is not the starting point.

It depends on secure knowledge.

Implicit learning is how students begin to use what they know more flexibly and fluently. It is where learning becomes more automatic, more connected, and more adaptable. This is what allows students to apply skills across different contexts, make meaningful connections between ideas, and think more deeply about what they know.

However, implicit learning does not build knowledge from nothing. It relies on knowledge that has already been explicitly taught, practised, and stored in long-term memory.

Without this foundation, implicit learning breaks down.

When students are expected to discover learning too early, they are often left to guess, rely on ineffective strategies, or memorise without understanding. This increases cognitive load, overwhelms working memory, and leads to fragile or inaccurate learning. As a result, students may appear to be engaging, but they are not building the knowledge they need.

As Archer cautions, “Avoid the void, for they will fill it.” If we do not explicitly teach the knowledge first, students will fill the gaps themselves, often incorrectly.

When knowledge is secure, implicit learning becomes powerful. It strengthens connections, supports transfer, and builds fluency and independence. It is not a replacement for explicit teaching; it is what results from it.

Implicit learning is not how we introduce new knowledge; it is how we extend and strengthen knowledge that is already secure.

Getting the order right matters. Explicit teaching comes first, followed by guided practice until learning is secure, then independent application. Implicit learning develops as a result, not as a replacement. This is not about preference or philosophy. It is about using what works consistently and deliberately.

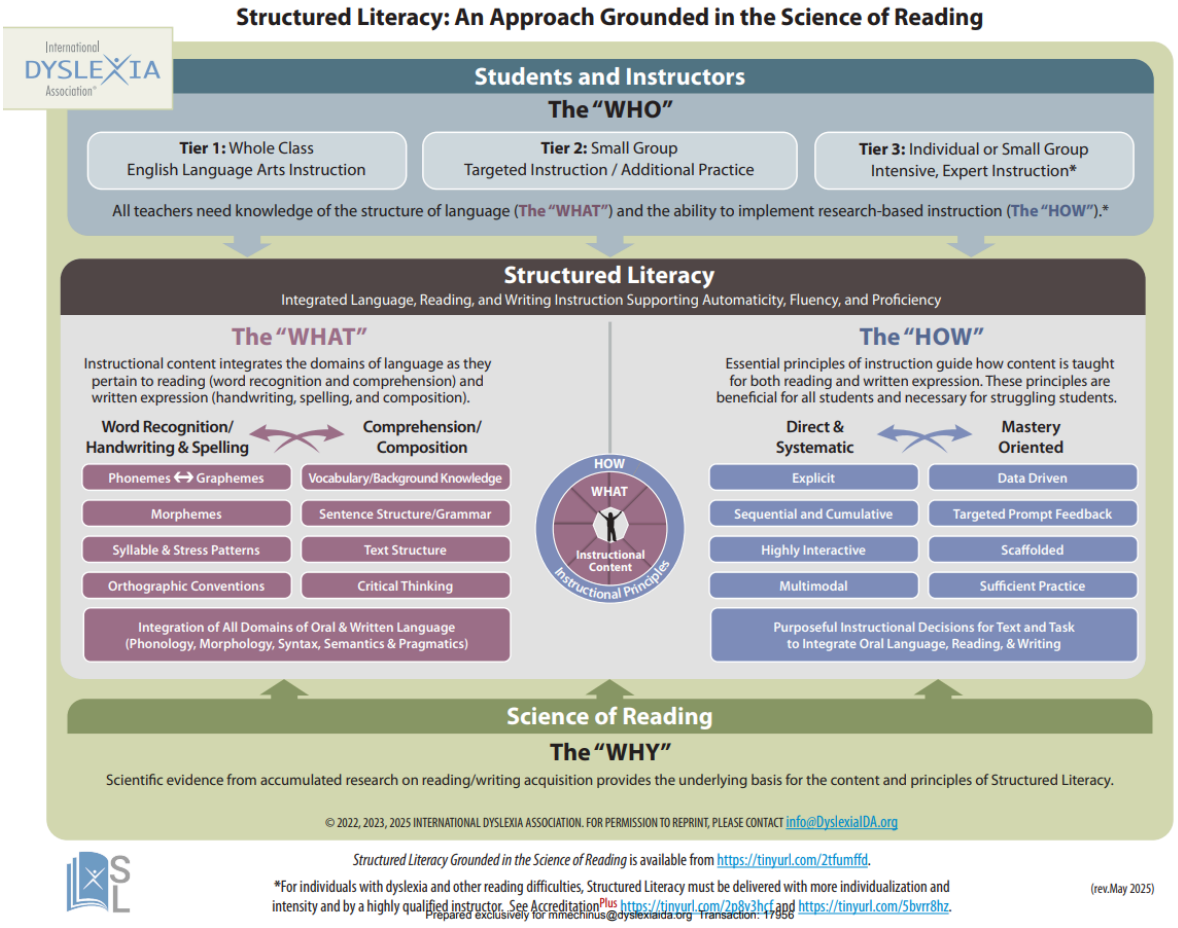
This approach is grounded in what is often referred to as the *Science of Instruction*, drawing on the Science of Learning and well-established principles of effective teaching (Rosenshine, 2012

Structured Literacy - the framework/approach

This is what sits behind structured literacy approaches.

Structured literacy is not a programme. It is a framework grounded in the Science of Reading, the Science of Learning, and the Science of Instruction. It is about understanding the *what, how, when, and who* of learning, and using that knowledge to teach with precision.

When this is understood, we are no longer guessing. We can see where learning is breaking down, why it is happening, and what needs to be taught next.



To understand how this works in practice, we need to look at the framework itself, who it is for, what is taught, how it is taught, and why it works.

The "WHO"

Structured literacy is designed for all learners and delivered across levels of support. This includes Tier 1 whole-class instruction, Tier 2 small-group targeted instruction and additional

practice, and Tier 3 individual or small-group intensive and specialist instruction. All teachers require knowledge of both what to teach and how to teach it effectively.

This is especially important for dyslexic learners. Dyslexic learners are not separate from this approach; they are at its centre. Structured literacy enables targeted, responsive, and individualised teaching. It allows us to identify exactly where a learner is struggling and what needs to be taught next. For many dyslexic learners, this includes Tier 2 and Tier 3 support, more intensive, more frequent, and more precise teaching, closely monitored over time. This is not optional. It is necessary.

The “WHAT”

Structured literacy includes explicit teaching of integrated language, reading, and writing. This includes word recognition, handwriting and spelling, as well as comprehension and composition. It also includes the key elements of language, such as phonemes and graphemes, morphemes, syllable and stress patterns, orthographic conventions, vocabulary and background knowledge, sentence structure and grammar, text structure, and critical thinking.

These sit across all domains of language, phonology, morphology, syntax, semantics, and pragmatics, and work together to support automaticity, fluency, and proficiency in reading and writing.

The “HOW”

This content must be taught using principles of effective instruction. Teaching must be direct and systematic, explicit, sequential and cumulative, and mastery-oriented. It must be highly interactive, multimodal, data-driven, and supported by targeted, prompt feedback, scaffolding, and sufficient practice. Teaching also includes purposeful instructional decisions, the integration of oral language, reading, and writing, and the careful selection of text and tasks.

Scaffolding is critical. Teaching begins with high levels of support that is gradually reduced as knowledge becomes secure. Students are not expected to work independently until they are ready.

This reflects what we know from the Science of Instruction that working memory is limited, cognitive load must be managed, and knowledge must be practised and retrieved over time to move into long-term memory.

The “WHY”

Structured literacy is grounded in a strong and growing body of evidence, including the Science of Reading, the Science of Learning, and the Science of Instruction. Together, these explain how reading and writing develop, how the brain learns, including memory and cognitive load and how teaching must be designed to ensure learning is successful.

For too long, this level of understanding has been missing. Without a strong foundation in the Science of Reading, Learning, and Instruction, it has been difficult to identify where learning is breaking down and how to respond effectively. A structured literacy framework changes this. It provides a clear, evidence-based way to understand learning, identify barriers, and respond with precision.

Structured literacy is not fixed. It continues to evolve as evidence and research grow. What we do know is clear: children need to be explicitly taught the knowledge and skills required to read and write. When that knowledge is taught through a structured literacy approach that is explicit, systematic, and responsive, barriers are reduced, intervention can be targeted, and all learners are better supported.

The myth of “one-size-fits-all”

One of the most common misunderstandings is that structured literacy is a “one-size-fits-all” approach. It is not. This misconception comes from confusing consistency with rigidity. Structured literacy is consistent in its use of evidence, in what we teach, and in how we teach it, but it is not rigid in how teaching is applied. It requires teachers to use diagnostic (formal and informal) assessment data to adjust instruction based on each learner’s needs, including pace, level of support, intensity, and the way learning is scaffolded over time.

The framework ensures that no essential knowledge is missed, while allowing teaching to be targeted, responsive, and individualised. A one-size-fits-all approach treats all learners the same. Structured literacy does the opposite; it ensures all learners get what they need. It is not one-size-fits-all; it is evidence-based teaching designed to fit the learner.

Do all brains learn to read the same way?

The answer is yes, but only when we understand the full picture.

It is important to bring the Science of Reading (what to teach), the Science of Learning (how the brain learns), and the Science of Instruction (how to teach it effectively) together to understand, because all brains rely on the same underlying processes to learn to read.

What changes is not the process, but how quickly and easily those processes develop.

The process the brain goes through to learn to read is consistent across learners, and the four-part processor model helps explain what this involves.

All learners need to build and connect four key processes.

The **phonological processor** is the sound system, allowing learners to hear, identify, segment, and blend sounds in spoken words.

The **orthographic processor** is the print system, enabling learners to recognise letters, understand spelling patterns, and store words so they can be read and written automatically.

The **meaning processor** supports vocabulary and knowledge, allowing learners to understand what words mean, while the **context processor** helps interpret meaning within sentences and connect ideas across a text.

Reading is not a single skill but a network of connections working together. When reading, learners move from print to sounds, to words, to meaning, and then to context.

When spelling, this process is reversed, moving from sounds to letters and into written words. Through the alphabetic principle, (phonics) learners map sounds to letters, and with practice, these connections are stored in long-term memory so they can be accessed automatically.

For example, when reading the word *bat*, a learner maps the sounds /b/ /a/ /t/ to the letters *b-a-t*, stores this word for future recognition, and then uses meaning and context to determine whether it refers to a cricket bat or the animal.

The Science of Learning adds another critical layer. It shows that all learners rely on limited working memory when processing new information, and that cognitive load must be carefully managed to avoid overload. Learning requires repeated practice and connection to build knowledge into long-term memory, and learners must be able to retrieve that knowledge automatically in order to read fluently and continue learning. If any part of this system is not secure, it increases cognitive load and places additional pressure on working memory, making reading more difficult.

However, while the processes are the same, learners do not develop them at the same pace, in the same way, or with the same level of ease. Dyslexia can affect the efficiency with which phonological and orthographic connections are formed, while Developmental Language Disorder (DLD) can affect meaning and language comprehension.

Understanding this allows us to differentiate effectively. It helps us understand individual student profiles and tailor support to their needs. The content we teach and the way we teach it remain consistent, but the level of support, pace, and practice are adjusted to ensure that all learners can build these connections successfully.

This is why teaching matters.

Explicit, structured teaching reduces cognitive load and deliberately builds connections across all four processors, giving every learner the best possible opportunity to succeed.

All brains rely on the same underlying processes to learn to read, but they do not all develop those processes at the same pace, in the same way or with the same level of ease.

A clear understanding of the Science of Reading, the Science of Learning, and the Science of Instruction allows us to differentiate effectively, understand individual learner profiles, and provide the right level of support.

While the content and approach remain consistent, the support, pace, and practice must be adapted to ensure all learners can successfully build the connections needed for reading.

The image below shows the Four-Part Processor model proposed by Seidenberg and McClelland (1989), alongside a representation of how the brain processes information.

What We Need

At its core, we need to ensure all children leave school able to read, write. The shift to structured literacy is important; it cannot sit in isolation. For it to be effective, it must be supported by strong teacher knowledge, a clear and connected system, access to intervention, and the right use of assessment and data.

This is not about one change. It is about building a system that works together, where teaching, support, and decision-making are aligned, and where all learners can access the curriculum and make progress.

Teacher Knowledge, Professional Learning Development

Structured literacy approaches depend on teachers having a strong understanding of how reading and writing develop, how language is structured, and how to teach it explicitly. Teacher knowledge must include a strong understanding of the Science of Reading, the Science of Learning, and the Science of Instruction, alongside a structured literacy framework.

It is unrealistic and unfair to ask teachers to change their approach to literacy without providing them with the knowledge and skills to do so. Just as we expect teachers to teach our children, it is only fair that they are given the time, training, and support needed to build this knowledge. This is not a one-off change.

It requires ongoing professional development, classroom coaching and support, and time to practise and refine teaching. Coaching is a critical part of this. It allows teachers to apply new learning in real classroom contexts, receive feedback, reflect on their practice, and make adjustments over time.

This is where real change happens, not in one-off workshops, but through ongoing, supported practice. This work takes time. Teachers also need permission to learn as they teach, to build confidence, and to refine their practice without the pressure of immediate perfection.

Pedagogical change does not happen in a term or even a year. It requires sustained commitment over multiple years and must extend beyond a single government cycle.

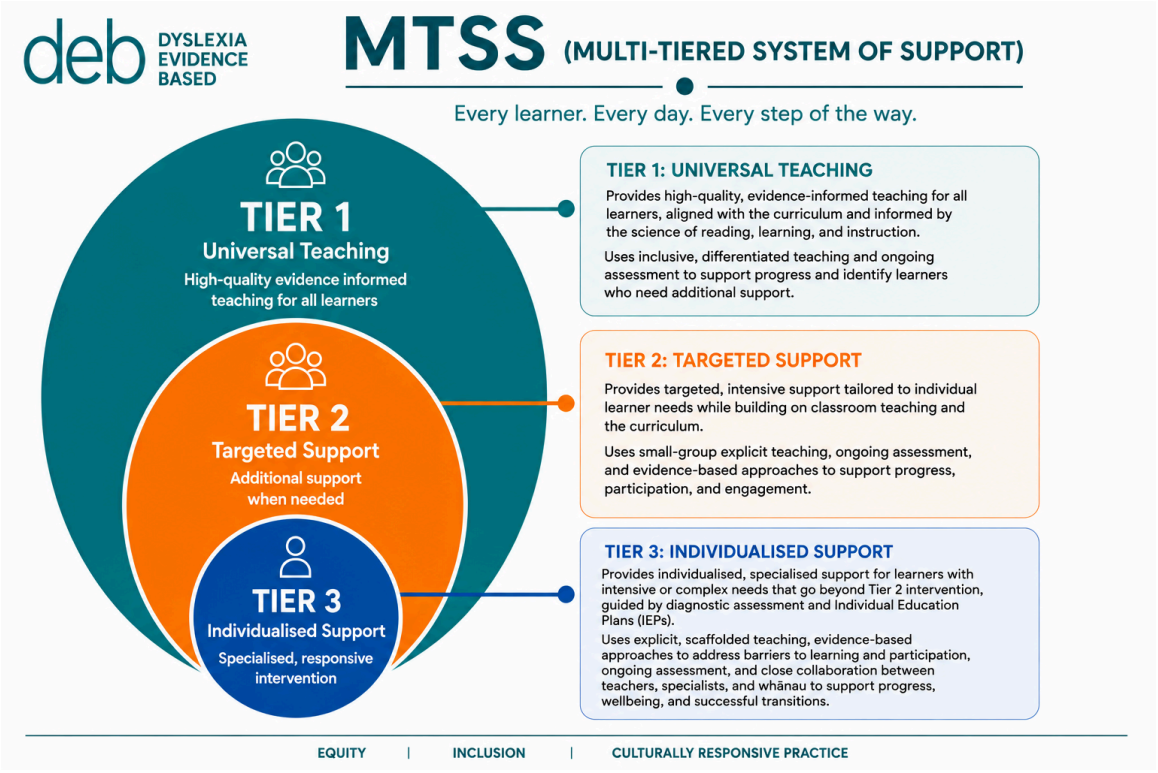
Without sustained support, even strong initiatives lose impact.

A Multi-Tiered System of Support (MTSS)

We need a system that recognises that not all children respond to the same teaching, but that all children are learning the same knowledge and working towards the same goals. This is not about changing the curriculum or lowering expectations. It is about how teaching is delivered, the level of support, the pace, and the way learning is structured, so that all learners can access, understand, and retain what is being taught. It provides us with a system to start early intervention.

This is why we need a strong MTSS (Multi-Tiered System of Support). MTSS is not just about academics. It brings together learning, behaviour, cultural differences, and wellbeing, recognising that they are interconnected and affect how a child learns. It provides a clear structure for how schools organise teaching and support, ensuring that all learners receive strong instruction from the start, and that support increases when needed.

In 2025, DEB submitted an updated tiered intervention framework to further strengthen this approach. This framework provides greater detail and clarity at each tier, helping educators and parents understand which supports can be put in place, when they should occur, and how support intensifies when needed. A key focus is transparency, ensuring families are not left guessing about what is available or how to access it. Below is a summary of this framework and its key recommendations; the full document is available on the DEB website under Advocacy.



Tier 1: Universal Teaching

- Provides high-quality, evidence-informed teaching and learning for all learners, using the teaching sequence and approaches outlined in the curriculum and informed by the science of reading, learning and instruction.
- It is deliberately designed to be culturally responsive, inclusive, and differentiated, reflecting the strengths and needs of all learners.
- Teaching is aligned with the national curriculum and rich in knowledge, ensuring all learners can access meaningful content using both explicit and implicit approaches.
- Explicit teaching is used to introduce and consolidate new concepts, with implicit learning opportunities becoming more prominent as understanding and independence develop—supporting participation and deep learning across all areas.
- Includes early and ongoing universal screening assessment for all students and diagnostic assessments to monitor learner progress and ensure they are tracking towards benchmarks, identify students who may benefit from additional support, and inform planning.
- Establishes the foundation for further support, ensuring that all learners have access to teaching that fosters engagement, participation, curriculum progress, and the opportunity to achieve success.

Tier 2: Targeted Support

- Provides more intensive, focused teaching at a pace tailored to the learner's individual needs, to support the development and proficiency of key skills or learning outcomes linked to the curriculum, and to help maintain engagement in classroom learning.
- Builds on and connects with the classroom teaching approach and the national curriculum, rich in knowledge, informed by the science of learning.
- Involves frequent, intensive, and explicit teaching in small groups.
- Includes, where necessary, targeted approaches to address barriers to learning and participation using evidence-based frameworks.
- It is informed by formal and informal diagnostic assessments against specific criteria, with more regular communication to parents and whānau describing the learner's pace and depth of progress.

Tier 3: Individualised Support

- Provides individualised, specialised support for learners whose needs go beyond small-group (Tier 2) intervention, including those with intensive or complex learning

support needs. Support will be informed by diagnostic assessment and formalised in an Individual Education Plan (IEP).
- Builds on and connects with the classroom teaching approach and the national curriculum, rich in knowledge, informed by the science of learning.
- Provides scaffolded, explicit teaching adapted in intensity, frequency, and delivery to align with the learner's individual profile, needs, and readiness.
- Focuses on progressing towards proficiency in essential curriculum-linked skills or outcomes through one-to-one teaching, or in an intensively supported setting designed to meet complex learning needs.
- Includes, where necessary, close collaboration between teachers, specialists, and whānau to support the learner's progress, engagement, and wellbeing.
- Includes, where necessary, targeted approaches to address barriers to learning and participation using evidence-based frameworks.
- Is informed and guided by formal and informal diagnostic assessment, with ongoing monitoring and regular, collaborative communication between families, teachers, and specialists to ensure support remains responsive to the learner's evolving needs. Outcomes are addressed through coordinated planning and reviewed over time.
- Includes planning for key transitions, such as moving between classes, schools, or levels of support, to ensure continuity, preserve progress, and reduce disruption for the learner.

MTSS is not about choosing one approach over another; it is the structure that brings them together. It provides the structure that ensures these approaches work together in a clear and connected way.

This includes, but is not limited to:

- Structured literacy and structured maths are the academic approaches to teaching reading, writing, and numeracy
- The Science of Reading, the Science of Learning, and the Science of Instruction
- Trauma-informed practice
- Neuro-affirming and other approaches
- Understanding of health conditions, neurodevelopmental profiles, and additional learning needs
- Understanding of personal, social, and economic circumstances
- And culturally responsive teaching

All of these matter, and all have a role in supporting learners.

Structured literacy and structured maths are essential; they provide the foundation for teaching reading, writing, and numeracy. They are academic approaches. On their own, they do not address everything a child brings to learning. They do not replace the need to understand behaviour, trauma, cultural differences, regulation, wellbeing, or the wider context of a child's life.

These factors do not change what needs to be taught, but they do shape how learning is experienced and supported.

Funding and Access to Intervention

High-quality Tier 1 (Universal) teaching is essential, but for many learners, it is not enough on its own. If we are serious about equity, we must ensure that Tier 2 (Targeted) and Tier 3 (Individualised) support are available and consistently delivered across all schools. Every school must have access to funded, trained intervention teachers with the time and support to deliver Tier 2 and Tier 3 intervention. These roles must have clearly defined responsibilities, ensuring that intervention is delivered in a targeted and responsive way, aligned with learner needs.

To make this work, funding must prioritise:

- Tier 2 (small group) and Tier 3 (one-to-one) intervention provision across all schools
- Time to deliver structured, evidence-based support.
- Access to appropriate intervention resources and technology.

Intervention requires specialist knowledge.

Teachers delivering Tier 2 and Tier 3 support must receive specialist training, including:

- Structured literacy (reading and writing intervention)
- Structured maths, including specific support for dyscalculia
- The Science of Reading, the Science of Learning, and the Science of Instruction
- Assessment and progress monitoring to inform teaching
- Trauma-informed practice, neuro-affirming approaches, and other approaches
- An understanding of health conditions, neurodevelopmental profiles, and additional learning needs.

This training must be funded, ongoing, and supported through professional learning, coaching, and collaboration, ensuring teachers can apply this knowledge effectively in practice.

Learning support roles need to be clearly defined. Clear role descriptions are essential to avoid overlap and to ensure intervention teachers can focus on what matters most: teaching and working directly with learners.

There must also be increased investment in specialist support. Schools need greater access to speech-language therapists and educational psychologists, particularly for learners with more complex needs. Their training must align with the Science of Reading, Learning, and Instruction, ensuring they contribute to intervention planning as part of a connected approach rather than in isolation.

Access to the right resources is essential. Learners in intervention often require additional or adapted materials and technology to access the same curriculum. This includes a range of scaffolded resources and tools that support access, practice, and independence.

There should also be access to shared intervention resources, including reading materials and digital supports, similar to a library, ensuring consistent access regardless of individual school budgets.

Early access to intervention is critical

The longer the intervention is delayed, the more intensive the required support becomes, increasing both the time and cost needed to support the learner. Investing early reduces the need for more complex, long-term intervention and improves outcomes for learners.

Transparency and accountability in funding are essential. Parents need clear information about what funding schools receive for intervention and how it is used. Schools also need dedicated, protected funding for intervention, funding that is not absorbed into general operational budgets, but is clearly allocated to support Tier 2 and Tier 3 provision.

This allows for better planning, clearer tracking of support, and more accurate reporting on what is needed and why.

This requires long-term, coordinated investment. Building capability takes time, and sustained funding is needed to strengthen practice and provide stability within learning support roles. If we want this system to work, we need a model where:

- every school has access to funded, trained, structured literacy intervention teachers to work with students of all ages
- teachers receive training on all elements of structured literacy, with ongoing support
- more specialist teachers, such as speech-language therapists and educational psychologists, provide support aligned with classroom practice
- resources and technology are accessible
- funding is transparent and protected for intervention

- support is available when it is needed
- more investment is put into ORS funding and criteria is updated to allow more children to access support for ongoing high or complex needs.

Assessment, Screening, and Data — Why It Matters

A strong system depends on understanding learners early, clearly, and over time. Without this, teaching and support are based on assumptions. With it, they are guided by evidence.

Within an MTSS (Multi-Tiered System of Support) framework, assessment drives decision-making across all tiers. It ensures that Tier 1 (Universal) teaching is meeting the needs of most learners, identifies those who require additional support early, and enables timely movement into Tier 2 (Targeted) and Tier 3 (Individualised) based on evidence, not assumption.

Assessment is central to effective teaching at all levels. For classroom teachers, Tier 1 provides the information needed to understand what learners know, identify gaps early, and plan the next steps in teaching. For teachers delivering Tier 2 and Tier 3 support, it provides the precision needed to target specific skill gaps, monitor progress closely, and adjust intervention as needed. For learners, it provides clarity about what they are working towards, what they need to practise, and how they are progressing.

Dyslexia screening must be funded and available for schools to use. Early identification matters. The earlier we understand a learner's profile, the sooner we can provide the right support. Delays increase the intensity, time, and cost of intervention.

Assessment tools need to be consistent across schools and aligned to the curriculum. This ensures a shared understanding of progress, clarity around expectations, and consistency in how learners are supported.

Data must be collected and used for a purpose. We need to understand what learners know, where gaps exist, and where support is needed. This allows classroom teaching (Tier 1) to be adjusted, movement into Tier 2 and Tier 3 to be timely and appropriate, and support to be provided at the right level. It also allows us to advocate for funding where it is needed most, using clear evidence rather than assumptions.

Assessment must lead to action within the MTSS framework. When data shows a learner is not making expected progress, this should trigger timely support through Tier 2 or Tier 3, not delay or further monitoring. Teachers also need time to assess, interpret, and respond to data, ensuring it informs teaching rather than becoming an additional task. Responsibilities should be clear across the system: classroom teachers supporting early identification and ongoing monitoring (Tier 1), intervention teachers using diagnostic assessment and progress

tracking (Tier 2: small group and Tier 3: one-to-one), and specialists supporting more complex needs.

Assessment is not about labelling children; it is about understanding them. It allows us to respond with clarity and precision, rather than guessing.

At the same time, data collected during a system change must be carefully interpreted. As new approaches, training, and curriculum changes are implemented, results will reflect changes in teaching practice, the development of teacher knowledge, and the natural challenges that come with system-wide change. This does not mean the approach is not working; it means the system is learning.

A strong system uses assessment and data to support early identification, guide classroom teaching (Tier 1), guide targeted and intensive intervention (Tier 2 and Tier 3), provide clear next steps for teachers and learners, monitor progress over time, and adjust support when needed.

Without assessment and data, the MTSS framework cannot function effectively, and we cannot know whether what we are doing is working.

Sustainable Change Requires Time and Long-Term Investment

Meaningful and sustainable education change requires both time and long-term investment. This is not simply about finding time to deliver intervention. It is about creating the conditions needed for teachers, leaders, specialists, and schools to learn, understand, implement, refine, and sustain significant changes across classroom teaching (Tier 1), targeted support (Tier 2), and intensive intervention (Tier 3).

The shift to structured literacy, the implementation of Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS), and ongoing changes to curriculum, assessment, and learning support represent a major system-wide and generational shift in educational practice. These changes require teachers to build new knowledge, strengthen their understanding of how children learn, connect theory to practice, and apply this consistently within real classroom settings.

This work cannot be achieved through short-term initiatives, one-off professional development, or temporary funding cycles. Sustainable improvement takes years of ongoing learning, implementation, coaching, reflection, refinement, and support. Teachers need time not only to learn new approaches, but to practise them, receive feedback, problem-solve challenges, observe impact, and continue refining their practice over time.

A change of this scale also requires permission to learn. Teachers must be supported in building confidence, deepening understanding, and strengthening practice without the expectation of immediate perfection. Sustainable system change happens when educators

are given the time, support, and professional trust to learn as they teach and gradually embed new practice.

Time and investment must be deliberately planned for, funded, and protected across the education system. Schools and teachers need the stability and support required to build expertise, strengthen implementation, and embed change with confidence.

This shift must be grounded in the Science of Reading, the Science of Learning, and the Science of Instruction, implemented through structured literacy approaches. Together, these provide the evidence base for what to teach, how learning develops, and how to teach effectively. Building a system aligned to this knowledge requires deliberate, sustained commitment over many years.

This work also requires long-term commitment across governments. Meaningful education change cannot succeed when priorities continually shift with election cycles, policy changes, or changes in political leadership. Schools cannot repeatedly rebuild systems, retrain staff, and redirect practice every few years while still expecting consistent outcomes for learners.

Large-scale system change requires stability, alignment, and sustained investment over decades, not terms of government. Without this continuity, implementation weakens, knowledge is lost, momentum stalls, and confidence across the sector declines. Teachers, leaders, specialists, students, and whānau need certainty that evidence-informed change will be maintained and strengthened over time rather than repeatedly disrupted or replaced.

The cost of inconsistency is significant. When systems lose direction, the learners most affected are often those who require the greatest support, including students with persistent literacy difficulties, neurodivergent learners, and those already experiencing inequity within the system. These learners cannot afford repeated cycles of educational change that begin, stall, and restart before improvements are fully embedded.

Without sufficient time and sustained long-term investment, training does not transfer effectively into classroom practice, implementation becomes inconsistent, and intervention cannot be delivered with the precision and intensity required. Lasting improvement depends on connected systems of support, ongoing professional learning, and a shared long-term commitment across all levels of education and government

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Bipartisan Commitment

This work must be protected from political cycles through a clear and formal bipartisan agreement.

Education, particularly foundational literacy and numeracy, cannot shift direction with each change of government. Frequent changes in approach disrupt teacher learning, undermine

system consistency, and directly affect learners' outcomes. They create uncertainty and prevent effective practice from embedding.

Education must not be used as a tool for political gain. Decisions that affect children's learning must be grounded in evidence and a clear understanding of what is being implemented, not short-term priorities or the need to secure votes.

Through engagement with policymakers, it is evident that there is not always a sufficient depth of understanding of how children learn or what is required to implement change effectively. Too often, decisions rely on past approaches rather than current evidence.

The Science of Reading, the Science of Learning, and the Science of Instruction must sit at the centre of decision-making. This includes drawing on both national expertise and the broader international research and practice.

A bipartisan commitment must ensure that core elements of the system, including structured literacy approaches, MTSS, assessment practices, curriculum implementation, and access to intervention, are sustained regardless of political change.

Without this, progress will continue to be disrupted, and learners' outcomes will remain inconsistent.

If we are serious about ensuring all children leave school able to read, write, this work must be prioritised, protected, and sustained over time. Without that commitment, we will continue to see children leave school without the essential skills needed to access further education, secure employment, and participate fully in society.

Initial Teacher Education (ITE)

Initial teacher education must be aligned with the current curriculum and grounded in the Science of Reading, the Science of Learning, and the Science of Instruction. Teachers entering the profession must be prepared with the knowledge and skills required to deliver effective classroom teaching and intervention from the outset. This cannot be left to chance or addressed later through professional learning alone.

Current expectations are not sufficient. Initial teacher education must move beyond theory and ensure that teachers can apply their learning in practice. Practice must sit at the centre of training.

At least 50% of initial teacher education must be practical, including structured, supervised classroom experience, opportunities to apply evidence-based approaches, and guided practice with feedback and coaching.

Programmes must provide experience across both classroom teaching (Tier 1) and targeted and intensive support (Tier 2 and Tier 3), ensuring alignment with an MTSS framework.

Initial teacher education must also be of sufficient duration to cover the knowledge and practice required. Training must be a minimum of two years to ensure teachers have the time to develop both theoretical understanding and practical capability. Shortened, one-year programmes do not provide adequate time to cover the depth of knowledge required or to build the level of practice needed to teach effectively.

Teacher education programmes must ensure that graduates:

- understand and apply structured literacy and structured maths, underpinned by the Science of Reading, the Science of Learning, and the Science of Instruction, and informed by current research
- are able to assess and respond to the learner's needs
- are prepared to work within an MTSS framework.

Programmes must also explicitly teach an understanding of a range of learning needs and conditions, including dyslexia, dyscalculia, intellectual disability, FASD, autism, and ADHD, ensuring teachers can recognise, understand, and respond to diverse learners in both classroom teaching and intervention.

There must also be explicit teaching and discussion of the wider approaches within an MTSS framework, including trauma-informed practice, neuro-affirming approaches, and the impact of personal, social, and economic circumstances on learning. Teachers must understand how these approaches work alongside evidence-based teaching to support the learner as a whole.

It is crucial that initial teacher education bridges the gap between the Science of Reading, the Science of Learning, and the Science of Instruction and classroom practice, rather than widening it. Training must ensure that evidence-based knowledge is translated into effective teaching, rather than leaving it as theory.

Teacher education must also prepare teachers to deliver culturally responsive practice. This includes understanding learners' cultural identities, languages, and experiences, and ensuring that teaching is inclusive, respectful, and meaningful.

Culturally responsive practice must work alongside evidence-based teaching. It does not change what is taught, but it influences how teaching is delivered, how relationships are built, and how learners are supported to engage and succeed.

Initial teacher education providers must be accountable for ensuring graduates are classroom-ready. Completion of a programme must not be based solely on attendance or theory. Teachers must demonstrate the ability to apply evidence-based teaching, assessment, and intervention in practice.

If we expect consistent, high-quality teaching across the system, this must begin with how teachers are trained.

What Is Currently in Place — What This Means for Families

There has been a significant shift in literacy across New Zealand over recent years, with a range of changes, investments, and supports now in place. This section outlines what is currently happening in schools and what this means for families navigating literacy, particularly where children are struggling to learn to read and write.

It is important to note that this is not an exhaustive list. The focus here is on key changes that are relevant to dyslexic learners and those who struggle with literacy, while also recognising that many of these supports benefit all children. In many cases, what supports dyslexic learners strengthens teaching and learning for everyone.

This section focuses on literacy within English-medium education, as this is where my knowledge and experience sit. I acknowledge that there are also important developments in Māori-medium education (including kura kaupapa and other settings). I don't have the depth of knowledge in these contexts to provide the same level of detailed breakdown. What is clear is that a structured literacy approach is an approach that can, and should, be applied across all languages, adapted to the linguistic and cultural context in which it is taught.

The following outlines the key changes, supports, and investments that are now in place across the system. These reflect a shift towards more consistent, evidence-based teaching and earlier, more targeted support for students who need it. All of these have been funded and put in place through the Government’s last two budgets, with some elements allocated funding through to 2028. However, as we are currently in 2026, there is no guarantee this funding will remain in place if the government changes this year. These initiatives are now being implemented by teachers, schools, and educators across the country, representing a significant level of investment in literacy.

There has been a significant change in a relatively short period, making it difficult to keep track of everything introduced. It is important to recognise that many of these initiatives are firsts, including the provision of funded, trained, and structured literacy specialist teachers within schools, able to support students across all year levels.

This section brings together what teachers, educators, specialists, and families can now access across the system, even as implementation is still developing. Some of these changes are only just beginning, while others are further underway, so what this looks like in practice may vary between schools. While not every school will implement all elements in the same way or at the same pace, this list provides a clear picture of the direction of change and what families can reasonably expect to see in schools over time.

This includes:

Updated English Primary Curriculum

Over the past six years, under the previous Government (Labour) and now the current Government (National), the English Primary Curriculum has been refreshed and updated again to reflect the understanding of the key skills that must be taught in literacy. These skills are now clearly listed and allocated across year levels, providing a structured scope and sequence that schools can use to guide the development of their own school-based scope and sequence from Years 0–6 to Year 8, depending on the school. These skills reflect what we now know from the Science of Reading, the Science of Learning, and the Science of Instruction, and provide an accountability system for what a child needs to know to read and write before they leave school.

What this means for families: There is now much clearer guidance on what your child needs to learn, when they should learn it, and how skills build over time. This creates accountability, not as a blame system for teachers or schools, but as a shared understanding of the skills children need to be successful in the art of reading and writing. It supports earlier identification of gaps and more consistent outcomes across schools.

Mandated teaching of phonics and structured literacy

The teaching of phonics and structured literacy approaches is now mandated across all state and state-integrated schools, ensuring a consistent, evidence-based foundation for the teaching of reading and writing. This includes explicit, systematic phonics instruction alongside broader literacy components, such as vocabulary, language, spelling, writing, and comprehension.

A mandate means this is no longer optional. Schools are required to teach literacy using this approach, rather than choosing between different methods. This decision was made to bring consistency across the system, based on the growing body of evidence from the Science of Reading, the Science of Learning, and the Science of Instruction, and to address long-standing concerns about variability in how children were being taught to read and write.

What this means for families: This means that how your child is taught to read and write should no longer depend on the school or the teacher they happen to have. For the first time, there is a clear expectation across the system that all children are taught using structured literacy approaches grounded in evidence.

For dyslexic children, this is critical. They require explicit, systematic teaching of how sounds map to letters (phonics), along with structured support across all areas of literacy, including reading, writing, spelling, language, and comprehension. Without this, many children were previously expected to “figure it out,” which led to confusion, gaps in learning, and, in many cases, failure to learn to read and write.

Because this approach is now mandated, it also supports schools in beginning to address gaps for older students, not just those in the early years. Without a mandate, access to effective teaching relied heavily on individual teachers or schools, meaning families were often at the mercy of who their child had each year.

This also aims to reduce the reliance on families having to seek and pay for private intervention by strengthening classroom teaching quality and increasing access to support within schools. This change aims to reduce the number of children falling behind in the early years, while also supporting those who have already fallen behind. It creates a more consistent and equitable system in which access to effective teaching is not dependent on location or individual school practices.
However, this is a significant system shift, and it will take time to embed fully. While the expectation is now clear, how consistently this is implemented in classrooms may still vary, particularly as teachers continue to build knowledge and confidence through ongoing training.

Structured literacy PLD for teachers (Years 0–8): The Ministry is funding professional learning and development (PLD) to support teachers to use structured literacy approaches. This includes oral language, phonemic awareness, systematic synthetic phonics, decoding and spelling, handwriting, vocabulary, morphology, syntax, fluency, text structure, writing, and comprehension. The PLD is grounded in the Science of Reading, Learning, and Instruction. It includes **3 days of initial training**, followed by **8 community practice sessions (online one-hour webinars)**. This PLD was rolled out from Term 3, 2024, and continues through to Term 2, 2026. It is available to all teachers of Years 0–8, including full-time and part-time teachers, principals, specialist staff, RTLB/RTLit, and relieving teachers.
What this means for families: Teachers across New Zealand are now being supported to teach reading and writing in ways that reflect how children actually learn. This is available to all teaching staff, not just specialists. This means children are being taught using the same approach in the classroom and in intervention, reducing confusion caused by different methods. It also supports greater consistency across schools, building shared knowledge and understanding and reducing the postcode lottery of access to effective teaching. This is a step towards bringing both equity and equality into schools. For children who struggle, including those with dyslexia, this means they must now be taught using explicit, structured, evidence-based teaching, with the Science of Reading, Learning, and Instruction at the heart of teaching.

Daily hour of reading, writing, and maths: An hour a day of reading, writing, and maths in primary and intermediate classrooms.
What this means for families: This creates a clear expectation that core skills are taught and practised every day. This matters because this level of consistency was not happening in all schools. For many learners, especially those who struggle, including dyslexic students,

regular, structured practice is essential. These skills are not picked up incidentally; they need time, repetition, and explicit teaching to develop.

Cell phone ban in schools: Cell phone use is prohibited during the school day to help students focus on their learning.
What this means for families: This supports a more focused learning environment, reducing distractions during teaching and practice time. For many students, especially those who struggle, this can improve engagement, attention, and learning retention. There are appropriate exceptions for some students based on individual needs, with decisions made at the school level.

Phonics checks at 20 and 40 weeks: A phonics check after 20 and 40 weeks at school to ensure that children's reading is on track.
What this means for families: These checks are in place to identify children who may be struggling early, rather than waiting until they fall significantly behind. For dyslexic children, early identification is key. The earlier difficulties are recognised, the earlier targeted support can begin, which can significantly improve long-term outcomes.

SMART assessment tool (funded): SMART is a new, Ministry-funded digital assessment tool being introduced from Term 3, 2026. It is used twice a year in Years 3–10 to assess reading, writing, and maths, and is aligned with the refreshed New Zealand Curriculum. SMART is free and available to all schools.
What this means for families: This gives schools a more consistent and nationally aligned way to track your child's progress over time. It can help identify where your child is doing well and where they may need more support. For students who struggle, including those with dyslexia, this can support earlier identification of gaps and more targeted teaching. It also allows teachers to separate different skills, giving a clearer picture of your child's strengths and needs.
However, this is a new tool, and we are still learning how well it will support dyslexic learners in practice.

More Ready to Read Phonics Plus books: New books have been added to the previous books released before 2023 under the previous Labour Government.
What this means for families: Schools now have access to more decodable, phonics-aligned reading books. This supports children in practising reading using the sounds and patterns they are taught in class. For dyslexic learners, this is important. It means reading practice is more structured, predictable, and aligned with how they learn, rather than relying on guessing or memorising.

More Learning Support Coordinators (LSCs):
There are around 650 full-time equivalent (FTE) Learning Support Coordinator roles funded across schools in New Zealand. “FTE” means the total number of roles is equal to 650 full-time positions, although some coordinators may work part-time or across more than one school. Not all roles may be filled at any given time, and in some cases, LSCs are shared across multiple schools as needed. These roles are part of a national approach to strengthening learning support. An induction programme is in place to provide high-quality professional learning and development, including FASD and Autism, to help LSCs maximise their impact on learner achievement. This investment aligns with budget commitments for 2026–2028.

The Ministry of Education is also developing additional national Professional Learning and Development (PLD) for Learning Support Coordinators (LSCs), with rollout expected to begin from July 2026 and continue into 2027. Through a national Request for Proposal (RFP) process, the Ministry is seeking suppliers to design and develop e-learning courses as part of a new LSC PLD Framework. The proposed framework may include Subject Matter Areas (SMAs) across three learning pathways, Foundational, Developing, and Confident, along with a Pre-Assessment process to help determine an LSC’s starting point. Information released through the RFP process suggests the framework might be interpreted to include areas such as Specific Learning Disorders (Dyslexia, Dysgraphia, Dyscalculia), Tier 2 Literacy and Numeracy, Assistive Technology and Accessible Learning, and Trauma-informed Practice. The stated aim is to support a long-term, nationally consistent approach to capability development as the LSC workforce grows, while also supporting greater consistency of practice across New Zealand.

What this means for families: Many schools now have a dedicated person who helps identify children who need extra support and coordinates that support within the school and with external services. This may mean concerns are picked up earlier, support is more organised, and there is a clearer point of contact for families. The additional training and developing national PLD framework for these roles is important, as it may help improve consistency, knowledge, and effectiveness in how learning support is provided across schools, including for learners with specific learning difficulties and more complex support needs. Depending on how schools choose to use these roles, it may also create opportunities for more targeted small-group or one-to-one intervention support within schools.

New learning support classrooms: 25 new learning support satellite classrooms, providing around 225 new student places across the Ministry of Education’s specialist school network. This also includes funding for property modifications to make schools more accessible for learners with additional needs. This is for ORS-funded children with complex or high needs.

What this means for families: This creates more specialised learning spaces and improves access within schools for children with the highest and most complex needs. For some learners, this may mean access to a more appropriate learning environment or better physical support within their current school. However, places are limited so access will depend on availability and level of need.

Early Intervention Services (EIS): From this year, support extends through Year 1 and includes: specialist roles and additional Teacher Aide hours.
What this means for families: Children can be identified and supported earlier, including in their first year at school. This is important because early support can prevent learning gaps from widening over time.

Ongoing Resourcing Scheme (ORS): the package also expands support for learners with the highest needs, with additional funding already enabling 500 more students to receive support since Budget 2025 and **another 1700 are due to receive support by 2028/29.**
What this means for families: Some children with high and complex needs may now be able to access specialist support. However, ORS still has strict criteria, so not all children who need help will qualify.

Investment in speech language therapists and specialist support: $43 million for an extra 78.5 FTE (full-time equivalent, meaning the equivalent of around 78 full-time roles) speech language therapists, as well as additional psychologists and supporting teacher aide hours to help meet the growing demand of students with communication and behaviour needs
What this means for families: There are more specialists available to support children with communication, language, and behaviour needs. For many learners, including those with dyslexia, who often have underlying language difficulties, this can support earlier identification and more targeted help. In simple terms, this is roughly equivalent to 78 additional full-time specialist roles (mainly speech-language therapists, alongside psychologists and support staff). However, these therapists are spread across the country, and demand is high, so access may still depend on where you live and your child's level of need.

Teacher aide hours: An additional 800,000 teacher aide hours are funded. Allocated mainly within EIS and ORS funding
What this means for families: More in-class support is available, though how it is used varies by school.

Structured literacy intervention teachers and targeted PLD: Schools have access to funded staffing entitlement for literacy support in Years 0–6, alongside Ministry-funded professional learning and development (PLD) to support targeted teaching. This PLD builds teacher expertise in a structured literacy approach, explicit teaching practices, assessment, and

monitoring progress. It focuses on supporting students with dyslexia and other literacy and language learning difficulties and on helping teachers build sustainable, school-wide capability.

What this means for families: Some schools now have a funded teacher role**,** either part-time or full-time, dedicated to supporting children who are struggling with reading and writing, including dyslexic learners. For the first time, there is funding directly targeted at supporting children who struggle to learn to read and write**,** rather than relying solely on general classroom support. This teaching aligns with classroom instruction, the curriculum, and the best evidence-based practices. Your child may receive targeted, structured literacy teaching in a small group or one-to-one setting, and their classroom teacher has support to ensure teaching is consistent, explicit, and matched to your child's learning needs.

PLD for specialist teaching in mainstream settings: This PLD opportunity is currently available to educators in specialist schools. It is now being extended to teachers supporting specialist teaching in mainstream contexts. This includes teachers working in specialist classes and/or units in mainstream schools, teachers providing 0.1 or 0.2 ORS specialist teaching, and SENCOs or LSCs providing system-level support to students with high and complex needs.

What this means for families: This is an important step towards strengthening support within mainstream schools. It means the teachers supporting children with higher or more complex needs are receiving more targeted training. For families, this can lead to more informed support, better coordination, and improved consistency between specialist and classroom teaching.

PLD for Years 7–10 writing and targeted teaching: The Ministry is funding professional learning and development (PLD) to support targeted teaching focused on writing for Year 7–10 teachers. This PLD will support teachers in developing and applying deep expertise in structured literacy approaches (SLA) elements, effective writing pedagogy, targeted teaching approaches, and explicit teaching principles for Years 7–10 students. The PLD includes approaches to targeted teaching for students with dyslexia and other literacy and language learning difficulties, assessment practices and how to use tools to monitor progress and will support participants in leading sustainable changes in teaching practices and building in-school capability.

What this means for families: This is a significant step for older students, particularly those who struggle with writing. It means teachers are being trained not just in reading, but also in explicitly teaching writing and supporting students with dyslexia and other learning difficulties. For many families, this addresses a long-standing gap in which writing has often been less supported than reading.

English Learning Area for Years 9–10 PLD: The Ministry is providing professional learning and development (PLD) to support teachers to deliver explicit, coherent, and structured

English teaching at Years 9–10, including approaches that reduce cognitive load and support inclusive learning. This PLD is open to leaders and staff involved in English but is primarily focused on teachers of Year 9 and 10 students, including those teaching English alongside another subject.

What this means for families: This gives teachers the knowledge to support students who are not yet working at the Year 9–10 level of the curriculum. For many learners, including those with dyslexia, this means teaching can be adjusted to meet them where they are, often still in earlier stages of reading and writing development. It supports more explicit, structured teaching that helps students access the curriculum while continuing to build the foundational skills they need. This is critical for older students who are still learning foundational literacy skills.

NCEA co-requisite targeted literacy and numeracy supports: Targeted and limited literacy and numeracy supports are reaching 9,100 students as part of the NCEA co-requisite. This has been extended out to 2027.

What this means for families: Some secondary school students who have not yet met the required literacy and numeracy levels are receiving additional, targeted support. For learners, including those with dyslexia, this provides another opportunity to build the skills needed to meet NCEA requirements. However, support is limited, so not all students who need help may be able to access it.

Structured literacy classroom kits and resource funding: Structured literacy classroom kits will be delivered via some providers and funded with resource funding. In addition, schools will receive between $500 and $5,000 per year for four years, depending on school size, to purchase additional decodable books, games, and other high-quality materials aligned with structured literacy approaches.

What this means for families: This means your child's classroom should have access to better quality, structured literacy-aligned resources, not just teacher knowledge, but the actual tools needed to teach reading well. This includes decodable books that match what your child is learning, rather than relying on guessing or memorisation. The annual funding (up to $5,000 per year, over four years) supports schools in building and growing these resources over time, rather than relying on one-off purchases. For children who struggle, including those with dyslexia, having the right materials is critical to support consistent, structured, and effective teaching.

Accelerating Progress in Literacy – teacher guidance: The Ministry has released guidance to support teachers in identifying students who are not making expected progress in reading and writing and in responding with more targeted teaching. It outlines how teachers can use assessment information to understand a child's needs and plan next steps for support.

What this means for families: There is now guidance available for teachers to read and build their knowledge of how to support children who are falling behind. It may help teachers

better understand your child's needs and think about next steps. However, it is guidance; how it is used will depend on the school and the teacher.

Parent Portal: The Ministry has introduced a Parent Portal that provides a year-by-year guide to what children are expected to learn in reading, writing, and maths under the new curriculum.
What this means for families: This gives parents some visibility into what their child is learning at each year level**,** which hasn't always been clear. It's a helpful step in acknowledging and including parents and can support conversations with your child's school. However, it is a guide; how this translates into classroom teaching and individual progress will still vary.

Scribo – writing support tool (Years 6–8): Scribo is a digital writing tool being introduced to support students with below-expected writing levels, particularly in Years 6–8. It is designed to support structured, targeted teaching and help accelerate progress in writing.
What this means for families: There is now a tool available to support children who are falling behind in writing, particularly before they reach secondary school. It is designed to support small group, targeted teaching. However, this is still being rolled out, and how it is used in practice will depend on the school.

Changes to Literacy Support Intervention

Removal of the Resource teachers of Literacy (RTLits)

Over the past year, there have been changes to how specialist literacy support is provided in schools, including the removal of the **Resource Teachers of Literacy (RTLit)** role.

RTLit were/are highly skilled, fully funded specialist teachers, who held a postgraduate qualification. Their role included working alongside classroom teachers, supporting teaching practice, and guiding literacy support within schools. This was and remains valuable expertise.

However, there were very limited numbers of RTLit nationally (approximately 110 roles filled across more than 2,000 schools). This meant that, in practice, many RTLit had very limited time to work directly with students, with much of their role focused on supporting teachers and schools more broadly. While this support is important, it often means that children who needed targeted, direct intervention did not consistently receive it.

RTLit roles were also full-time and fully funded positions, including salary, car, travel, and operational costs. Expanding this model to reach all students who needed support would have required significant additional investment.

As part of the shift to structured literacy, funding has been reallocated to structured literacy specialist intervention roles within schools. These roles are designed so that the teacher's primary focus is working directly with students who need targeted literacy support, rather than primarily supporting classroom practice.

What this means for families: This change is intended to increase the amount of direct, targeted support available to children who are struggling to read and write. Instead of limited access to a travelling specialist, some schools now have access to a teacher whose role is to work directly with students in intervention.

However, there are also trade-offs. Many of these new roles are not full-time, and there may have been a loss of a highly trained specialist from the workforce. For RTLit's themselves, this has been a difficult transition, with many feeling disappointed by the process and the loss of their roles.

Removal of Reading Recovery and Early Literacy Support

Alongside the Better Start Literacy Approach (BSLA), Reading Recovery and Early Literacy Support continued to operate under the previous Government (Labour). There were attempts to align aspects of these supports with newer approaches, including the use of phonics-based resources. This was often referred to as the **"AND and AND approach",** combining elements of phonics instruction with existing Reading Recovery practices. However, due to the structure and restrictions of the established Reading Recovery model, the approach itself could not be meaningfully changed.

As a result, in many cases, the support provided did not fully align with what we now know from the Science of Reading, the Science of Learning, and the Science of Instruction, and changes were often focused on resources rather than a shift in teaching approach**.**

Reading Recovery was also limited to a small number of students, typically in Years 1–2, and was not suitable for many learners, including children with dyslexia and others who struggled to learn to read. It was a time-limited programme, typically around 20 weeks, during which children were assessed as having met the expected level or not, and support was then discontinued. This created a real equity issue, as access to effective intervention was limited, and many children who needed ongoing, targeted support either did not qualify or did not receive the type or duration of teaching they required.

What this meant for families: This represented a shift from a limited, programme-based model to a broader, more flexible approach, where support was changed to reach more children, not only in numbers, but across more years of primary schooling (Years 0–6), using structured literacy approaches based on the research from the Science of Reading, the Science of Learning, and the Science of Instruction. This approach allows for individualised, targeted teaching across reading, writing, spelling, language, and comprehension, rather than focusing on a narrower set of skills. This also aims to improve success in learning to

read, while reducing the anxiety and mental health challenges that can arise when children struggle without effective support. However, under the previous model, many children were discontinued in Year 2 without being able to read independently or with confidence. In many cases, this led to increased anxiety and a loss of confidence, particularly when children who experienced the programme felt as though they were "failing." Research also showed that any gains made were often not sustained, with the majority of children who appeared to be at expected levels falling behind again within months of the intervention ending. The programme also did not systematically address spelling, which is a critical part of developing strong literacy skills.

In practice, this meant intervention was typically limited to around 20 weeks in Year 2, with little or no further structured support for many children, despite ongoing need, through the rest of their schooling.

Acknowledgment of the Previous Government Investment in Early Literacy

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Better Start Literacy Approach (BSLA)

Under the previous Government (Labour), funding was introduced through the Better Start Literacy Approach (BSLA), initially beginning with teachers of Year 0–1 students and later expanding across Years 0–3. BSLA was available to all New Zealand state and state-integrated schools with students in these year levels, representing an important step in recognising the need for a more structured approach to early literacy and aligning more closely with what we know from the science of reading. We also had strong data emerging from Canterbury University research on BSLA, which helped signal the wider shift towards structured literacy approaches in New Zealand.

There was no limitation on which schools could apply to be involved in BSLA. However, there were limits on how many teachers could be trained within each cohort rollout, meaning implementation occurred progressively over time.

What this meant for families:
This provided a stronger early literacy foundation for many children in their first years of school and helped begin the shift towards more explicit and structured teaching practices. However, as our understanding has continued to grow through the science of reading, the science of learning, and the science of instruction, it has become increasingly clear that support cannot stop in the early years alone. Many children, including those with dyslexia, require continued, explicit, cumulative, and structured teaching well beyond Year 2.

Ministry-funded phonics books and resources

Also, under the previous Government (Labour), the Ministry funded and provided schools with Ready to Read Phonics Plus books and resources. These resources were owned by the Ministry and designed to support early reading through decodable texts aligned with a structured phonics instruction approach. These books were made available to all schools and to homeschoolers.

What this meant for families: Children had access to reading books that matched how they were being taught to read, supporting decoding rather than guessing. This was an important step in improving the quality and consistency of early reading materials available in classrooms. However, these books often included more high-frequency words that needed to be remembered, which could make them more challenging for dyslexic learners.

Regionally Allocated Professional Learning and Development (PLD)

Regionally Allocated Professional Learning and Development (PLD) funding was also available for schools to apply for. Through this funding, schools could engage with Ministry PLD providers to undertake structured literacy approaches professional learning and development. This created opportunities for schools to begin building teacher knowledge and capability around more explicit and structured literacy instruction aligned with the growing science of reading evidence base. However, participation remained optional and was dependent on individual school decisions, priorities, leadership, staffing capacity, and access to available PLD support and funding.

What this meant for families: The experiences of families and children could vary significantly between schools, regions, and classrooms. Some schools chose to prioritise and invest heavily in structured literacy approaches and teacher training, while others remained with existing approaches or were only beginning the transition. This meant access to more explicit and structured literacy teaching was often inconsistent depending on where a child attended school.

What We Need To Happen Next!

A bipartisan agreement on literacy and education

This must be the first priority. How we teach children to read and write must sit outside of party politics, shifting agendas, and short-term decision-making.

A bipartisan agreement means that all major political parties commit to a shared, long-term direction for literacy, regardless of which party is in government. It provides stability and continuity, ensuring that changes are not undone, replaced, or reset with each election cycle.
For schools, teachers, and families, this means confidence that the approach will remain consistent, allowing time for training, practice, and for systems to fully embed. For children, it means they are not impacted by shifting priorities or conflicting approaches as they move through school.
Without this level of agreement, there is a real risk that changes can be reversed with each new government, and that education becomes influenced by short-term priorities rather than long-term outcomes for children.

School-based coaching and support in classrooms

Professional learning must go beyond workshops. Teachers need ongoing classroom coaching and support to translate knowledge into practice. This includes modelling, observation, feedback, and opportunities to refine teaching in real time. Coaching helps ensure that structured literacy, behaviour, wellbeing, inclusion, and curriculum practice are not just understood, but consistently and effectively applied in day-to-day teaching.

Coaching must go deeper than surface-level understanding. It needs to build a clear understanding of how learning happens and how to teach it effectively. This includes embedding the Science of Reading (*what* to teach), the Science of Learning (how learning happens), and the Science of Instruction (*how* to teach) into everyday practice. It also includes a strong focus on managing cognitive overload, using explicit teaching with precision, understanding when implicit learning is taking place, and applying responsive and adaptive approaches to meet the needs of all learners.

This approach is enabled through the roles outlined in this model, including Literacy Coordinators, Behaviour & Wellbeing Coordinators, Curriculum Coordinators, Literacy Coaches, Behaviour & Wellbeing Coaches, Curriculum Coaches, Systems Coaches, and Professional Learning Coaches. These roles work together across the system to support implementation, strengthen teacher capability, and ensure professional learning is sustained, connected, and embedded within classroom practice rather than delivered as one-off training.

This strengthens the system's capability and gives the education sector confidence that teachers are supported and invested in to implement and sustain this change successfully.

A second phase of PLD for mainstream classroom teachers

Initial professional learning has provided a strong foundation, but it is not enough on its own. Mainstream classroom teachers need a second phase of PLD that goes deeper into the Science of Reading (the *what* to teach), the Science of Learning (how learning happens), and the Science of Instruction (the *how* to teach), strengthening teacher understanding of how students learn and how teaching must be delivered in everyday classroom practice.

This phase must move beyond surface-level understanding and into the depth required for effective classroom practice. It should be sustained, practice-based, and directly connected to classroom teaching, ensuring teachers can translate knowledge into consistent, high-quality instruction over time, supported through coaching and ongoing refinement.

It should include a clear focus on explicit teaching practices (modelling, guided practice, and feedback), alongside a deeper understanding of the role of implicit learning, how it occurs, and how it develops over time. A strong focus on managing cognitive overload is also essential, including a clear understanding of how working memory (short-term) and long-term memory function in learning. This supports teachers in structuring lessons, reducing overload, and helping learners process, store, and retain new learning over time.

There must also be a deeper focus on oral language, recognising its critical role as the foundation for reading, writing, and language comprehension. Teachers need a stronger understanding of how to intentionally develop vocabulary, sentence structure, and language comprehension, and how to explicitly teach and scaffold these skills across the curriculum, particularly for learners with language-based difficulties.

There must also be a deeper focus on morphology, particularly for older students, ensuring teachers understand how word structure (prefixes, suffixes, and roots) supports decoding, spelling, vocabulary, and comprehension. This is critical for supporting learners as texts become more complex and language demands increase across the curriculum.

This next phase is critical to move from initial understanding to confident, consistent practice across all classrooms, ensuring that effective teaching is not dependent on individual experience or prior training.

Time and permission to learn

Teachers need both the time and the permission to learn, reflect, and improve their practice. This shift requires more than training; it requires space to think, practise, make mistakes, and refine teaching over time. This must be supported at a system level. The Ministry of Education, alongside school leadership, needs to ensure that teachers are given protected

time and clear permission to prioritise professional learning and the implementation of structured literacy. Without this, professional learning risks becoming an add-on, rather than something that meaningfully changes practice.

Teachers also need support to learn alongside their students, practice the approach, respond to what they see in the classroom, and build confidence through practice. This creates a culture where learning is ongoing and shared, rather than something that happens only before teaching begins.

Permission is equally important. Teachers need to feel able to slow down, revisit content, and focus on doing fewer things well, rather than being expected to cover everything. This is essential for embedding a structured literacy approach in a way that is sustainable and effective.

Continued investment in funded specialist literacy intervention teachers

Funded specialist literacy intervention teachers must continue to be prioritised, trained, and retained, with the role clearly defined and protected. These are not general support roles; they are specialist positions focused on delivering targeted, structured literacy intervention for students who need additional support. This investment must go beyond simply placing roles in schools. It requires ongoing funding, high-quality training, and clear alignment with a structured literacy approach, so that intervention is consistent, evidence-based, and directly supports classroom teaching.

The current Full-Time Equivalent (FTE) allocation also needs to be addressed. While the role was originally funded to support Years 0–3, it has since been extended to cover Years 0–6 without any increase in FTE hours. This has diluted the impact, stretching specialist teachers across too many students and year levels. Additional FTE hours are needed for existing roles, alongside increased allocations, so that all schools can access a funded specialist literacy intervention teacher.

Within a Multi-Tiered System of Support (MTSS), these roles are central to Tier 2 and Tier 3, providing targeted and intensive intervention for students who are not yet responding to Tier 1 instruction. They also strengthen Tier 1 by supporting teachers in delivering high-quality, structured literacy instruction, ensuring alignment between classroom practice and intervention. Access must extend across Years 0–10 so that support is not limited to early years and students can receive intervention at any stage of their learning.

Funded specialist behaviour and wellbeing roles

Alongside literacy, there must be dedicated, funded specialist roles focused on behaviour, wellbeing, and inclusion within an MTSS model. These are not general pastoral or support

roles. They are specialist positions designed to strengthen teacher capability and ensure all learners can access learning.

There would be different roles within this workforce to ensure both system-level support and direct support for learners. This includes behaviour and wellbeing coaches, who work across the school to build teacher capability, guide school-wide approaches, and support consistent practice, as well as specialist behaviour and wellbeing teachers, who work directly with students to provide targeted and intensive support. This ensures there is both system-level support to strengthen teaching practice and dedicated support working directly with the child.

The system already has an existing workforce through Resource Teachers: Learning and Behaviour (RTLB). These roles could be strengthened and repositioned to align with this model, ensuring their expertise is more consistently connected to classroom practice, school-wide systems, and direct support for learners. This builds on what already exists, rather than creating parallel systems, and ensures greater coherence, access, and impact across schools.

These specialists can work alongside teachers to build consistent, school-wide approaches to behaviour, regulation, and engagement. This includes supporting the development and implementation of whole-school frameworks, such as Dr Ross Greene's Collaborative & Proactive Solutions (CPS) model, to ensure responses are proactive, relational, consistent, and culturally appropriate across all classrooms.

Their focus could be on strengthening inclusive classroom practice so that a wide range of learners can successfully participate in learning. This includes supporting trauma-informed, neuro-affirming, and culturally responsive approaches, and building teacher understanding of learners with autism, ADHD, FASD, intellectual disability, dyslexia, developmental language disorder, and other learning differences, as well as a range of health conditions that may impact learning, behaviour, and participation.

These roles could also support ORS-funded learners, helping ensure that plans, strategies, and supports are effectively implemented in the classroom and that teachers feel confident and supported in meeting more complex needs.

A key part of the role could be strengthening knowledge of emotional regulation, interoception, and mental health. This includes developing an understanding of autistic and neurodivergent burnout, recognising signs of overwhelm, chronic stress, and reduced capacity, and supporting teachers to respond in ways that reduce load, adjust expectations, and protect learner wellbeing while maintaining access to learning. This would support schools to respond appropriately to a range of needs, from mild to more complex presentations, in a way that is safe, consistent, evidence-informed, and culturally appropriate.

These specialists could model practice, provide feedback, and support the use of strategies, tools, and environmental adjustments. This helps create predictable, inclusive, and culturally responsive classroom environments where expectations are clear, and learners can engage in learning.

This role is essential within an MTSS framework, ensuring that behaviour and wellbeing supports are proactive, consistent, and aligned with teaching and learning, not reactive or separated from the classroom.

As with literacy, these roles must be sustainably funded, clearly defined, and protected. They require time for coaching, collaboration, and ongoing professional learning. When done well, they will reduce variability across classrooms, strengthen teacher confidence, and ensure that support is available when it is needed, not delayed or dependent on a crisis.

Targeted funding for resources for older students

Older students who are still learning to read and write need continued access to high-quality, age-appropriate resources that support structured literacy approaches. While there has been strong investment in early years materials, this must be extended to support students beyond Year 3. These learners require resources that are aligned to their stage of learning, not their age, including decodable texts for older readers, structured writing supports, and materials that build vocabulary and knowledge without being perceived as "babyish." Without this, students can be limited in both engagement and progress.

Funding is needed to ensure schools can provide appropriate and sufficient materials for intervention and classroom use, including resources that support reading, writing, spelling, and language development. This should not rely on individual schools or families to source or fund materials themselves. Providing the right resources for older students is critical to closing gaps, maintaining dignity, and supporting continued progress, ensuring that students who have fallen behind are given the opportunity to catch up and succeed.

Initial Teacher Education (ITE) must be updated and aligned.

Initial Teacher Education (ITE) programmes must be updated and aligned with the Science of Reading, the Science of Learning, and the Science of Instruction, alongside structured literacy approaches and the refreshed curriculum. Teachers should be entering the profession with a strong, consistent foundation in how children learn to read and write, including explicit teaching practices, phonics, language development, and writing instruction. This reduces the need for significant retraining once teachers are already in classrooms.

Alignment is critical. What is taught in ITE must align with school expectations, ensuring consistency from training through to classroom practice. Without this, new teachers may

enter the system with mixed or outdated understandings, making implementation more difficult and inconsistent. Strengthening ITE ensures the system is sustainable in the long term, with future teachers equipped with the knowledge and skills needed to deliver effective literacy teaching from the start.

Recognition of the scale and length of this shift

This is not a short-term reform. It is a significant pedagogical shift that requires long-term commitment, sustained funding, and ongoing protection to ensure it is fully embedded and not lost. Change of this scale takes years, not months. It requires time for teachers to build knowledge, for practice to be refined, and for systems to align. Expecting immediate results risks superficial implementation, rather than the deep, consistent change needed to improve outcomes for all learners. It is also important to recognise that this shift will involve periods of challenge. As teachers move from previous approaches to new ways of teaching, they will need ongoing support, coaching, and reinforcement to build confidence and consistency over time.

Without recognising the scale and length of this work, there is a risk that expectations become unrealistic, support is reduced too early, or priorities shift before the change is fully embedded. This can lead to a return to inconsistency and undermine the progress made. Sustained commitment ensures that this shift becomes part of the system, not a temporary initiative, providing stability for schools, teachers, and, most importantly, for children learning to read and write.

System-wide consistency and accountability

There must be clear, system-wide expectations and accountability to ensure that structured literacy approaches are implemented consistently across all schools. This cannot be left to individual interpretation or local variation. Consistency must extend beyond schools to include PLD providers, resource developers, and all organisations supporting literacy teaching. Professional learning must align with the Science of Reading, the Science of Learning, and the Science of Instruction to ensure teachers receive consistent messages and guidance.

Without this alignment, there is a risk of mixed approaches, conflicting advice, and confusion for teachers and schools, which ultimately impacts student learning. Consistency ensures that teachers are supported in building confidence and applying their learning in a clear and connected way. Accountability is also essential. There must be clarity about what is expected, how it is monitored, and how support is provided where needed. This is not about compliance alone, but about ensuring that all parts of the system are working together to deliver high-quality, evidence-based teaching.

Without system-wide consistency and accountability, variability will remain and with it, inequity. Ensuring alignment across schools, PLD providers, and the wider system is critical to achieving reliable outcomes for all learners.

Targeted Writing PLD for all teachers, years 1-10

All teachers need access to high-quality professional learning in writing to build their understanding of how writing develops and how it must be taught. Writing has historically received less clarity and consistency than reading, and this must be addressed.' Writing PLD should build teacher knowledge of the writing process and the components of effective writing, using models such as Sedita's Writing Rope to make this visible. It should support teachers to understand how writing draws on oral language, reading knowledge, and additional skills such as transcription, sentence construction, and text structure.

A clear focus is needed on the explicit teaching of writing, including modelling, guided practice, sentence-level instruction, and support for students to move from ideas to structured, coherent writing. Providing access to writing PLD ensures that teachers are not expected to "pick this up" alongside reading, but are given the same level of clarity, structure, and support. This is essential for improving writing outcomes and ensuring consistency across classrooms.

Ongoing access to high-quality, aligned resources

Schools need consistent, reliable access to high-quality resources funded by the Ministry of Education that align with structured literacy approaches. This includes decodable texts, writing supports, spelling resources, and intervention materials that reflect what we know about how children learn to read and write.

This must apply to both mainstream classroom teaching and intervention. In classrooms, teachers need resources that support explicit, systematic teaching, allowing skills to be taught, practised, and built over time. In intervention, resources must be targeted, flexible, and responsive to meet the specific needs of students who require additional support. Resources must be aligned across the system. What is used in intervention should connect directly to what is being taught in the classroom, using the same language, progression, and approach. Without this alignment, students can experience confusion and slower progress.

Access must also be equitable and sustained. Ministry-funded resources ensure that schools are not reliant on limited budgets, outdated materials, or families to provide what is needed. This supports consistency across schools and reduces inequity, ensuring that all students have access to the materials required to learn successfully. Providing high-quality, aligned resources supports strong teaching, effective intervention, and better outcomes, ensuring that classroom learning and intervention work together to improve literacy for all learners.

Further Investment in Teacher Aides (Upper Years)

Further investment into Teacher Aides is essential, particularly for older students, as system changes are being implemented. Many of these learners have moved through the system without access to an evidence-based approach to reading and writing. As a result, gaps in foundational skills are now more visible and more impactful, especially as they face increasing academic demands.

These students are not just “behind”; they require high-intensity, targeted intervention to rebuild the foundational skills needed to access the curriculum and successfully meet co-requisite literacy requirements. This cannot be addressed solely through general classroom support.

Teacher Aides play a critical role in supporting this work. When trained and used effectively, they can provide the additional time, repetition, and structured practice that these students need. They can support small-group and individual interventions, reinforce explicit teaching, and help ensure that learning is revisited often enough to move into long-term memory and become usable.

For this to be effective, Teacher Aides must have access to the same quality, evidence-informed training as teachers. If they are expected to support classroom instruction and deliver or assist with intervention groups, they need a clear understanding of the Science of Reading, the Science of Learning, and effective instructional practices. Without this, there is a risk of inconsistent support delivery, which can limit progress or reinforce gaps.

What this means for families:
For families of older students, this investment means their child is not left to struggle through the final years of schooling without the support they need. It means access to more intensive, structured help within the school day, focused on rebuilding the skills that were previously missed. This increases the likelihood that students can meet co-requisite literacy requirements, stay engaged in learning, and leave school with the reading and writing skills they need for life beyond school.

However, this is only effective when Teacher Aides are well-trained, well-supported, and used as part of a structured, evidence-informed approach alongside the classroom teacher, not as a replacement for quality teaching.

Securing the Future: A Long-Term Action Plan for Education

What is needed next is a clear, transparent long-term action plan that sets out exactly where the system is going and how it will get there. It must be easy to access, written in plain language, and structured so schools, educators, and families can clearly understand what is

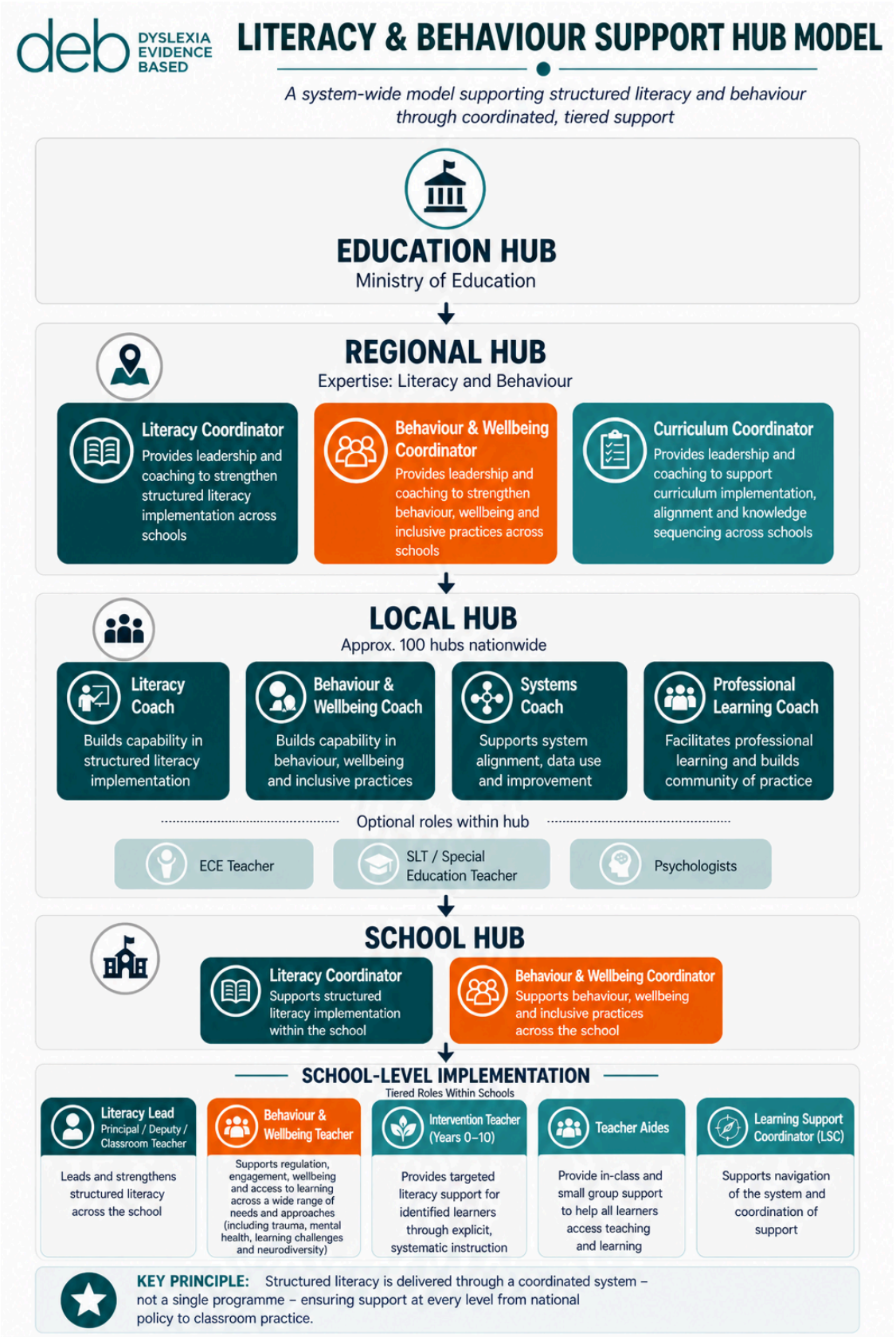
happening now and what comes next. This should be a live document, regularly updated to show what has been delivered, what is in progress, and what has changed or been removed.

This level of clarity provides certainty and confidence. It makes visible the scale of investment, the time required, and the staged nature of this shift, reinforcing that meaningful change cannot happen overnight, but through sustained, coordinated effort.

A simple subscribe function should be included to notify stakeholders of updates. This ensures transparency, keeps the sector informed, and maintains engagement without placing the burden on individuals to keep checking for changes.

With bipartisan agreement, this plan becomes both achievable and sustainable. It gives the sector the confidence to fully commit, knowing there is stability beyond election cycles and a shared responsibility to see this work through.

Literacy & Behaviour Support Hub Model



This model is designed to ensure everyone works together, not in silos. It outlines a connected system from the Ministry of Education through to the classroom, where knowledge, expertise, and support are shared across all levels. Each hub and role has a clear purpose, providing the structure needed for consistency, alignment, and coordinated support.

This updated model builds on DEB's original 2025 submission to the Ministry of Education on proposed changes to Learning Support (available on the DEB website under Advocacy), reflecting both the original intent and the evolving needs within the system.

Updates include renaming the Behaviour Intervention Teacher role to Behaviour and Wellbeing Intervention Teacher, recognising the broader scope of support required. It also acknowledges the increased number of Learning Support Coordinators (LSCs), noting that while additional positions have been allocated, full implementation across schools is still in progress.

Although presented through a literacy lens, this model should not be limited to literacy. The same structure can and should extend to mathematics and wider learning support services, which often sit separately. When specialists work within a connected system, support becomes more cohesive and effective, leading to stronger outcomes for all learners.

This model is designed to ensure everyone works together, not in silos. It outlines a connected system from the Ministry of Education through to the classroom, where knowledge, expertise, and support are shared across all levels. Each hub and role has a clear purpose, and together they provide the structure needed for consistency, alignment, and coordinated support.

It establishes a clear line of support from national policy through to classroom practice. Regional and Local Hubs provide leadership, coaching, and capability building across curriculum, literacy, behaviour, and wellbeing, while schools embed this into everyday teaching. Together, this creates a coordinated system around the learner, ensuring access to the right support at the right time and level.

This is a suggested model to show what is needed next: a clear and connected pathway of support, aligned and sustained funding, and strong system-wide connections to ensure consistency across all schools.

To achieve this, a long-term, bipartisan commitment is essential. Education, particularly how we support children to learn, regulate, and succeed, must move beyond short-term decision-making and changing political priorities, ensuring stability, continuity, and equitable access for all learners.

Education Hub

Ministry of Education - Provides national leadership, direction, and resourcing to ensure a consistent, system-wide approach.

Regional Hub - (Support to Coaches & Teachers)

- Literacy Coordinators
  Leads structured literacy implementation, builds coach capability, and supports effective use of funding and resources.
- Behaviour & Wellbeing Coordinators
  Leads inclusive and behaviour support practices, including supporting Children with ORS funding.
- Curriculum Coordinators
  Leads a coherent, knowledge-rich curriculum, ensuring strong sequencing and alignment across learning.

These roles require high-level expertise (e.g. postgraduate qualifications).

Local Hub (Support to Schools & Teachers)

- Literacy Coaches
  Works alongside teachers to strengthen explicit, systematic literacy instruction across all elements (oral language, decoding, writing, etc.).
- Behaviour & Wellbeing Coaches
  Supports teachers with regulation, engagement, trauma-informed and neuro-affirming practices.
- Curriculum Coaches
  Supports teachers to deliver a connected, knowledge-rich curriculum across subjects.
- Systems Coaches
  Strengthens whole-school systems, alignment, and data use.
- Professional Learning Coaches
  Builds teacher capability through ongoing, evidence-informed professional learning.

School Hub (Connection to System)

Literacy and Behaviour and Well Being Coordinator

A designated staff member (from within the school team) ensures a clear connection between the school and the Regional Hub, supporting communication, alignment, and access to support.

School Implementation (Delivery to Students)

- Literacy Lead
  Leads structured literacy within the school and ensures consistent implementation.
- Behaviour & Wellbeing Teacher
  Works directly with students to support behaviour, wellbeing, and access to learning.
- Intervention Teacher (Years 0–10)
  Provides specialist, structured literacy intervention in one-to-one or small group settings.
- Teacher Aides
  Reinforce learning through guided practice, working alongside teachers and specialists.
- Learning Support Coordinator (LSC)
  Coordinates support across school, whānau, and external services, including funded supports such as ORS.

These roles require Specialist Training

Strong, Aligned Leadership Across the System

Sustainable education change relies on clearly defined, connected, and accountable leadership roles across every level of the system. The “Mississippi Miracle” shows that improvement does not come from a programme, but from strong, aligned leadership that is consistent from the top down and supported all the way into classrooms. It also required significant investment and a long-term commitment, recognising that meaningful change takes time to embed and cannot be achieved through short-term initiatives. Central to this success was a clear connection across all levels, with each part of the system working together rather than in isolation, and a shared accountability for ensuring the change was implemented as intended.

At the **Ministry level**, leadership must set a clear, evidence-informed direction grounded in the Science of Reading, Learning, and Instruction. This includes removing ambiguity by defining expectations, ensuring alignment across curriculum, assessment, and professional learning, and protecting the change through policy and sustained, long-term investment so schools have the confidence and stability to implement it over time. Accountability at this level means ensuring that the systems, funding, and structures are in place and maintained to support the change, and that all parts of the system remain connected and moving in the same direction.

At the **regional level**, leadership is responsible for translating this direction into practice. This includes providing coaching, modelling, and ongoing support; building capability in both teachers and school leaders; and ensuring consistency across schools while allowing for responsiveness to local contexts. This layer plays a key role in maintaining the connection between system expectations and classroom practice. Accountability at this level is about ensuring that support is effective, ongoing, and leads to consistent implementation across schools, rather than variable or optional uptake.

At the **local level**, leadership becomes more targeted and responsive, working alongside schools to guide implementation, strengthen teaching practice, and ensure challenges are identified and addressed early. This level strengthens connections across the system by serving as a bridge between regional support and individual school needs, ensuring alignment remains intact. Accountability here includes being responsive to school needs while ensuring that the agreed direction is upheld in practice.

At the **school level**, principals and senior leaders are responsible for leading the change within their settings. This includes prioritising the work, building staff knowledge, aligning classroom practice with system expectations, using data to guide decisions, and protecting time and resources for both high-quality teaching and intervention. School leadership must remain connected to the wider system, ensuring classroom practices align with the shared direction. Accountability at this level means being responsible for how the change is enacted in practice and the outcomes for learners, while being supported to do so.

What Mississippi demonstrates is that when leadership is aligned, connected, supported, and accountable, and when all levels are working together, change becomes consistent, sustainable, and effective. When this connection, accountability, or long-term commitment is missing, schools are left to interpret expectations on their own, leading to variability in practice and weaker outcomes for learners.

Conclusion — Holding the Change Long Enough to Make It Work

This literacy shift is not a short-term project. It is a system-wide change that must be protected, funded, and supported long enough to become embedded in everyday practice.

We now have a much clearer understanding of how children learn to read and write. We also know that too many children, especially dyslexic learners and older students, were failed by previous approaches. That cannot continue.

What matters now is that this change does not fragment, fade, or become another short-term initiative.

- Teachers need time, training, coaching, and support.
- Schools need access to intervention, specialist knowledge, assessment tools, and clear pathways.
- Families need transparency, timely support, and confidence that their children will not be left to wait and fail before help is provided.

The goal is simple, but urgent: every child must leave school able to read and write. This is not a privilege. It cannot depend on postcode, school, funding, or access to private support. It is a basic foundation for life.

To achieve this, New Zealand needs a long-term, evidence-informed, bipartisan commitment to literacy, learning support, and intervention. The work has started, but it must continue.

A Collective Responsibility — The Role We All Play

This change cannot sit with one group alone.

No single parent, teacher, school, provider, or community can advocate for this on their own. The scale of this shift is too large, and the stakes are too high. It will take all of us, working together, to ensure these changes are understood, implemented, protected, and sustained over time.

Advocacy is not just about speaking up. It is about being informed.

- It is about understanding what matters. What to look for.
- What questions to ask?
- What to expect
- And what to push for when things are not yet in place.

Every parent, every educator, every specialist, and every part of the system has a role to play. As we build our understanding, we strengthen our ability to advocate not just for our own children but for all children.

This document has been written to support that.

It is designed to give you the knowledge, clarity, and confidence to understand what is happening, to recognise what good looks like, and to advocate with purpose.

- Because when we understand the system, we stop guessing.
- We can ask better questions.
- We can expect better outcomes.
- And we can push for the change our children need.

No child should have to rely on luck to learn to read and write. Every child deserves to leave school able to read and write, not as a privilege, but a basic foundation for life.

And no parent or teacher should have to navigate this without the knowledge to advocate effectively.

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