



# **Senate Inquiry into the issue of increasing disruption in Australian school classrooms**

**A submission by the Australian  
Education Research Organisation**

**March 2023**



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### Introduction

The Australian Education Research Organisation (AERO) welcomes the opportunity to provide a submission to the Senate Inquiry into the issue of increasing disruption in Australian school classrooms. AERO is well positioned to comment on the current state of disruption in Australian classrooms and provide evidence-based insights to help address this issue.

AERO is Australia's independent education evidence body, and its vision is to achieve excellence and equity in educational outcomes for all children and young people through effective use of evidence. In support of this vision, AERO generates, identifies and presents high-quality evidence to education professionals, and supports the adoption and effective implementation of that evidence in practice and policy.

AERO has already synthesised the most rigorous and relevant research to identify the evidence-based practices that have been proven to make a difference in the learning outcomes for students. This work has led to a comprehensive series of practical guides and resources to help more teachers and school leaders apply these practices in Australian schools. The practices include:

- [explicit instruction](#)
- [formative assessment](#)
- [mastery learning](#)
- [spacing and retrieval](#)

These practices best support student engagement and achievement in learning because they align strongly with what evidence tells us about how the brain learns.

Classroom management to minimise disruptive behaviour and disengagement is also one of these proven evidence-based practices. AERO's guide, [Focused classrooms: Managing the classroom to maximise learning](#), published in 2021, provides explicit advice on the key practices that create focused classrooms, and is supported by a range of supplementary resources, including [an implementation checklist and case studies of effective practice](#).

An annotated overview of the underpinning research evidence can be found [here](#).

In 2023, AERO will build on this by undertaking the Engaged classrooms project, commissioned by the Australian Government, to develop materials for teachers and school leaders to support improved learning through focused and engaged classrooms.

## Disruption in Australian schools

Evidence shows disruption in Australian classrooms negatively impacts student learning outcomes. Both teachers and students report disruption in classrooms.

- The proportion of Australian students reporting that it takes a long time to start work after lessons begin, that they can't work well when they do, and that noise and disorder are frequent occurrences in classes, is above the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) average and most comparison countries (OECD, 2019a)
- A third of teachers report losing teaching time because of student interruptions, and a quarter report a considerable amount of disruptive noise in classrooms (OECD, 2019b)
- The 2018 Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) results place Australia 70 out of 77 countries on the OECD Disciplinary Climate Index (OECD, 2019a)

Students cannot learn well in disorderly classrooms and when they are disengaged. This is a particular issue for students in schools in low socioeconomic areas, who experience even more disruption and disengagement in their classrooms for a variety of reasons (Sullivan et al., 2014). Australian students' performance on international assessments in reading, maths and science has declined over the last 20-plus years (OECD, 2019a) and secondary school student performance on the National Assessment Program Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) has largely stagnated. While there are multiple factors influencing the deteriorating quality of student outcomes, ensuring teachers are well equipped to implement evidence-based practices, including effective classroom management, is an important avenue for improvement.

Research indicates that most behavioural concerns are minor infringements such as noncompliance or talking out of turn, and it's the extreme frequency of these issues that places a substantial strain on teachers (Sullivan et al., 2014; Goss et al., 2017). Although less frequent, more serious student behaviours are also challenging for teachers, and one study estimates almost 10% of teachers work in schools where these occur on a weekly basis (Goss et al., 2017). Poor-quality teaching practices, which are not supported by a strong evidence base, can lead to disruption and disengagement. Studies have shown that experiencing work-related difficulties (for example, boredom, teacher-student misunderstandings, and the work being too hard or too easy) is cited as the main reason for students' disruptive behaviour and disengagement (Goss et al., 2017). Australian teachers who experience disrupted classrooms feel less confident in their teaching ability and spend less time on teaching and learning (AERO, 2022).

Sustaining a positive and supportive classroom environment that is focused on learning is a complex task and, when teachers are not supported to implement evidence-based classroom practices, there are negative consequences for the profession as well as students. (Freeman et al., 2014). The lack of preparation and ongoing support for teachers to implement effective teaching practices, including classroom management approaches, is clear.

- Australia's Quality Initial Teacher Education Review found many teachers felt underprepared by their initial teacher education (ITE) program for the practical aspects of teaching, including classroom management (QITE, 2022).
- The proportion of Australian teachers reporting high self-efficacy in controlling disruptive behaviour in the classroom or calming a student who was disruptive or noisy is lower than the average across the OECD and has declined by more than 4 percentage points since the 2013 Teaching and Learning in Schools survey (OECD, 2019b)
- Dealing with misbehaviour has been a concern for teachers for some time. A 2014 study found it was the number one professional learning need among new teachers, and a priority area of need for more experienced teachers. Over a quarter of experienced teachers said they needed further professional development on this issue. (McKenzie et al., 2014).

AERO's own research points particularly to the lack of evidence-based classroom management practices being implemented in Australian schools. Classroom management, through the enforcement of rules and routines at classroom and school level, is the least implemented among the evidence-based practices investigated in its 2022 report on [Use of evidence-based practices in schools](#).

- Only, 60% of Year 4 teachers and 38% of Year 8 teachers agree that the school's rules are enforced in a fair and consistent manner.
- Only 61% of teachers frequently tell students to follow classroom rules.

The issue of increasing disruption in Australian school classrooms is significant, with adverse impacts on students and teachers. There are multiple, complex reasons for this but there are classroom practices, supported by the strongest and most consistent evidence, that teachers and school leaders can implement to reverse this trend.

## Evidence-based classroom practices

The ultimate goal is to establish classrooms that are safe and inclusive where all students know and can meet expectations and fully engage in learning. The following evidence-based classroom practices are highly effective at maximising students' on-task learning time by minimising disruptive behaviour and disengagement. They recognise that students' behaviour can and should be managed.

- Establishing and explicitly teaching and practising rules and routines as part of a behaviour curriculum so they become automatised by students.
- Implementing proactive practices, including effective evidence-based whole-class, explicit instruction, and providing additional guidance and support, or extension and enrichment, for identified students.
- Applying effective practices for managing off-task behaviour.

Crucially, it is the implementation of evidence-based whole-class teaching practices, along with the provision of additional support or extension for a smaller number of students, that is fundamental to addressing the prevalent low-level disengagement and disruption caused by work-related difficulties in Australian schools.

Collectively, these practices help to manage the amount of information students are dealing with at any one time, preventing cognitive overload and allowing them to focus on learning.

Although they need to be contextualised to meet needs, these practices are relevant for both primary and secondary settings. Reasonable adjustments must be made where necessary to ensure full access and participation for students with disability.

## Rules and routines

Behaviour needs to be explicitly taught to students and this includes establishing rules and routines in the classroom. Rules and routines have been shown to be effective practices in maximising student learning and minimising disruptive behaviours. Creating rules promotes a sense of structure and predictability for students, which leads to a safe and supportive environment, focused on learning (Alter & Haydon, 2017). The evidence shows that using routines or cues reduces wasted learning time by creating habits of learning that encourage students to respond quickly to instructions (Simonsen et al., 2008).

## Proactive practices

Proactive practices, including the critical implementation of effective, evidence-based whole-class teaching practices and targeted support for small groups of students, can reduce the likelihood of misbehaviour before it occurs. By setting clear and high expectations, building positive relationships, and providing structured and engaging lessons, teachers can create a classroom environment that is more conducive to on-task behaviour. The effectiveness of proactive and preventative classroom management measures is strongly supported by the evidence (Alter & Haydon, 2017).

When students are held to high expectations, they are more likely to meet or exceed those expectations. Having high expectations motivates students to learn, take responsibility for their actions and understand the consequences of their behaviour. The evidence shows that setting ambitious and achievable goals in collaboration with students, followed by a strong emphasis that these goals can be realised, is an effective, proactive approach to classroom management (Rubie-Davies et al., 2014).

High-quality instruction, comprising evidence-based practices that have been proven to make a difference in student learning outcomes, and active student engagement have also been shown to promote positive behaviour. The evidence supports practices that provide frequent opportunities for students to actively engage through, clear and explicit instruction so that students know where they are at in their learning and what they need to learn (Rubie-Davies et al. 2014), questioning (Simonsen et al., 2008) and reducing cognitive load by presenting students with only one task or direction at a time (Pashler 1994). The evidence also supports engaging students through the provision of specific, positive feedback that acknowledges student effort and its contribution to learning progress (Rubie-Davies et al. 2014).

For some students, high-quality instruction may involve more intensive support or enrichment opportunities. For students with disabilities, teachers may need to provide adjustments and support to access the curriculum and align with Disability Standards for Education, found on the [Nationally Consistent Collection of Data website](#). For students with advanced prior knowledge, extended opportunities to connect and apply their current understanding will support continued engagement. Multi-tiered frameworks may be used by schools to support this process. The MultiTiered System of Support (MTSS) is a framework using instructional practices that increase in intensity along a scale of tiered support at 3 levels. High expectations are established for all students and the progress of

each student is monitored, with student data used to make decisions about which students require intensive support or enrichment.

Finally, research points to providing a consistent and predictable physical environment to complement other proactive approaches to classroom management. Where possible, teachers should consider the arrangement of the classroom and consistent use of space/location to maximise on-task behaviour and support routines. For example, consider configurations or spaces that promote the type of task like rows or horseshoes for explicit instruction or clusters for group or practical work (Pashler et al 2013; Wannarak & Ruhl, 2008). Objects within the regular classroom setting should consistently appear in the same place, reducing cognitive load and supporting a consistent and predictable environment focused on learning (Summerfield & Egner, 2009).

## Managing behaviour

Effective practices for managing off-task behaviour require calm, consistent, expected, and proportional use and should be on a sliding scale that increases in intensity. In the first instance, teachers should learn to model the behaviours expected of students. For example, using a calm tone, active listening, respectful interactions and being organised and on time shows students the expectation and gives them concrete examples of the behaviours they should replicate (Alter & Haydon, 2017).

The evidence supports the practice of pre-planning and rehearsing responses to behaviours to help teachers to be more consistent and implement responses on the spot to reinforce high expectations for learners (Alter and Haydon 2017). The responses shown to be highly effective are those that are positive and proactive. Teachers should learn to use early intervention using simple prompts or 'pre-corrections' and referring to those prompts throughout a lesson; for example, Q 'When we get to the library, what are the three things we need to remember to be responsible?'; A: 'Walk on the left, be responsible for your books and surroundings, and talk in a quiet voice.' (Ennis et al., 2017).

Off-task behaviour should be addressed by giving verbal feedback that draws attention to expected behaviours, rather than focusing on undesired behaviours; for example, on-the-spot praise or specific and actionable verbal feedback, have been shown to be highly effective (Simonsen et al., 2008). Further responses may be simple reminders for students of the expectations and the sequence to follow in the routine. At times, there will be the need to re-teach the routine or the rationale behind the rule.

A key and recurring theme in the research is the essentiality of consistent, predictable, and proportional responses, so that students know the expectations but also feel safe in the knowledge that, if their behaviour does not meet expectations, the response will be considered.

## Supporting teachers to implement evidence-based classroom practices

For teachers to effectively implement the evidence-based classroom practices described in the previous section, they need to be well prepared and well supported through initial teacher education, school leadership, and jurisdictional and national guidance and frameworks.



## Strengthening ITE

An important way to support teachers to implement effective classroom management practices is to strengthen ITE programs. The Teacher Education Expert Panel established to provide advice to Education Ministers on ITE delivery is currently investigating how this may be done. More information about their findings to date can be found in their discussion paper [here](#). AERO supports these steps to better prepare pre-service teachers in classroom management and other associated effective evidence-based classroom practices.

## Enabling a whole-school approach

Evidence shows school leadership is an important in-school influence on student outcomes (Grissom et al., 2021). This includes how students behave and engage in the classroom. The UK Education Endowment Foundation's Guidance Report on Improving Behaviour in Schools states as 1 of 6 recommendations that 'consistency is key' and that 'consistency and coherence at a whole-school level are paramount.' It further notes that 'behaviour programmes are more likely to have an impact on attainment outcomes if implemented at a whole school level' (Rhodes & Long, 2021). A common approach from the whole school is needed to minimise student disruption and disengagement (Epstein et al., 2008).

When school leaders implement an evidence-based, whole-school approach and provide ongoing practical support, teachers are more likely to create effective classrooms that are conducive to learning (Goss et al., 2017). Practical support must be evidence-based and comprehensive, covering induction and mentoring, collaborative professional development opportunities with colleagues, tools and resources, and extra support for escalation of issues (Goss et al., 2017). It is important that induction and mentoring, and other professional development activities in the school are led by teachers with expertise in the evidence and practice of effective instruction and classroom management. High-performing school systems do this well. In Shanghai, for example, every new teacher has 2 mentors, one for teaching and the other for classroom management (Goss et al., 2017).

Implementing a whole-school approach is complex and school leaders would benefit from greater clarity and comprehensive guidance on this subject, as well as support for implementation. The Australian Professional Standard for Principals (APSP) sets out, at a high level, expectations related to leadership of instruction and classroom management: For example, 'Principals set high standards of behaviour and attendance, encouraging active engagement and a strong student voice'. AERO has been commissioned by the Australian government to develop guidance that elaborates on and exemplifies the APSP by clarifying what evidence-based whole-school approaches to high-quality instruction and classroom management look like in practice, and how to go about implementing these in Australian schools. This work is AERO's Engaged classrooms project.

## Strengthening system-level support

Government and non-government systems deliver important professional learning programs, such as instructional leader and coaching programs, and provide additional guidance through school improvement frameworks, policies and processes. Systems can help reduce disruption in Australian classrooms by:

- promoting and embedding evidence-based classroom practices in their system-led professional learning, and school improvement frameworks, policies and processes
- measuring and monitoring the implementation and impact of evidence-based classroom practices in schools
- supporting school leaders to recognise and utilise expert teachers in instruction and classroom management in the development of other teachers' practices
- supporting effective interventions for struggling students, for example, small group teaching or 1:1 tuition to ensure that these students are engaged in learning rather than being unsupported in the classroom, which can contribute to disruptive behaviour.

AERO is engaging with government and non-government systems in its Engaged classrooms project to ensure that the project is supporting system policy improvements.

## Conclusion

Evidence-based classroom practices in education are supported by strong and consistent research evidence. We know what these practices are but there is work to do to ensure they are implemented systematically across all Australian classrooms.

Greater gains in positive student outcomes could be achieved if teachers and school leaders had the knowledge and skills to implement classroom practices that work. This should be developed from core foundational content delivered first through ITE, then tried and tested during professional experience, and built on coherently through ongoing professional learning and practice in the early years of teaching and beyond. Implementation of effective evidence-based teaching practices will reduce disengagement and disruption in classrooms and help every young Australian learn and achieve success.



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