


# Student catch-up programs are vital beyond pandemic

JORDANA HUNTER *and* JULIE SONNEMANN

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By **JORDANA HUNTER** and **JULIE SONNEMANN**

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Covid-19 turned the economy – and school education – on its head. Across 2021 and 2022, the NSW and Victorian governments invested about \$1.2bn in Covid catch-up programs for students who fell behind during the long periods of Covid-enforced remote schooling.

These programs involved tutors working with small groups of up to five students at a time, with short bursts of intensive support, usually over 10 to 20 weeks, with the aim of helping students get back on track.

Several innovative online tuition programs have also sprung up around the country. And Australia is in good company – big investments in catch-up tuition have been made in the UK, the US, Canada, and beyond.

The evidence shows that these sorts of programs can work. Robust international research suggests well-designed, short-term, small-group catch-up programs can boost student learning by as much as four months in one year. This can make a huge difference to the life prospects of a child, particularly if the learning boost gets them back up to speed with their classmates.

But, like everything else, the success of these programs depends on how well they are designed and delivered in the real world. Details matter.

Unsurprisingly, public reports show that catch-up programs in Australia have experienced both successes and challenges. Overall, though, they have been valued by teachers and parents as an important component of the pandemic response.

It remains to be seen if the big NSW and Victorian investments in Covid catch-up programs will be renewed for 2023. But there are bigger questions at stake.

Most importantly, what should Australia do about the desperate need for catch-up support for struggling students in all states and territories that pre-dated Covid-19? Will governments learn the lessons from this recent period of tremendous innovation around catch-up learning models in schools?

The harsh reality is that catch-up learning support has always been needed. Disadvantaged children tend to start school well behind their advantaged peers – and the gap only grows wider with every year.

Grattan Institute analysis of 2021 NAPLAN data, for example, shows the learning gap between disadvantaged and advantaged students in Australia more than doubles between year 3 and year 9. In reading, by the time they reach year 9, students whose parents did not finish school end up about four to five years behind students whose parents have a university degree.

Successful academic learning involves the layering up of new knowledge and skills on a solid foundation. If there are too many gaps in the foundation, the resulting structure cannot hold the weight of new learning. Learning gaps can be hard to pinpoint precisely, and they do not tend to go away on their own. Quality instruction is needed to identify and close them.

Closing learning gaps makes economic sense: research shows that robust small-group tuition pays for itself more than twice over by boosting students' future lifetime earnings. But small-group tuition is expensive. If it is not done well, it is a waste of resources and student and teacher time.

Governments should commit to embedding high-quality, catch-up learning support in every school. This means moving away from stand-alone, fragmented catch-up programs to a more systematic approach. Every student should receive high-quality classroom instruction, with targeted additional teaching “doses” to quickly close any learning gaps that open up.

Governments should do four things to strengthen student catch-up supports long-term.

First, get serious about learning from the tremendous innovation from the Covid catch-up - tutoring programs. The NSW and Victorian governments, especially, should conduct rigorous trials of different small-group tuition program designs and their impacts on student learning. Trials can provide much greater confidence than standard evaluations about which program designs work best.

Second, governments across Australia should audit school capacity to deliver catch-up learning effectively.

Third, governments should develop a long-term implementation plan that addresses key issues such as program design, cost-effectiveness, and workforce supply constraints.

Teachers are in short supply, so alternatives such as using well-trained and supported teaching assistants and pre-service trainee teachers should be on the table.

Evidence from the UK shows that teaching assistants can get great student results under the right conditions. Governments should also give schools better guidance and training on the use of high-quality student diagnostic assessments and effective instructional materials.

Finally, government leaders should work together across jurisdictions to ensure the new National Schools Reform Agreement, which they are currently negotiating, embeds high-quality catch-up learning in every school, every year.

*Jordana Hunter is the director of the Education Program at the Grattan Institute. Julie Sonnemann is principal adviser in the Education Program at the Grattan Institute.*

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