

Case Study

ST MARY'S COLLEGE, SEYMOUR, VIC

Explicit approach results in rapid learning gains

At a glance

PROGRAMS ADOPTED:

- InitialLit (2021)
- MiniLit Sage (2021)
- MacqLit (2021)
- WARN (2021)
- WARL (2021)
- WARP (2021)
- PreLit (2023)
- SpellEx (2023)

- IMPACT:
- **Number of Year 3 students in the top two proficiency bands in NAPLAN increased by 23% in a year**
 - **Numeracy scores improved by 40% over a year as students could read and comprehend questions**
 - **Reading intervention requirements have decreased**

The context

It was a Phonics Screening Check conducted towards the end of 2020 that cemented the decision by St Mary's College Seymour to change its approach to teaching reading.

Located in regional Victoria, St Mary's is a combined primary and secondary college with a diverse student enrolment who arrive at school with a wide range of early learning experiences and varying pre-literacy skills.

The disruption brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic only compounded this discrepancy, and it became apparent that a large proportion of Year 1 students were struggling to learn to read.

"The Phonics Screening Check confirmed what we strongly suspected – there was considerable room for improvement and we needed to make a change," said Literacy Leader, Kerrie Pearce.

Why MultiLit?

A new learning diversity leader at the college had experience with MultiLit programs at a previous school and advocated for the introduction of InitialLit.

A classroom program aimed at Foundation to Year 2, InitialLit incorporates a synthetic approach to the teaching of phonics alongside a rich literature and vocabulary component.

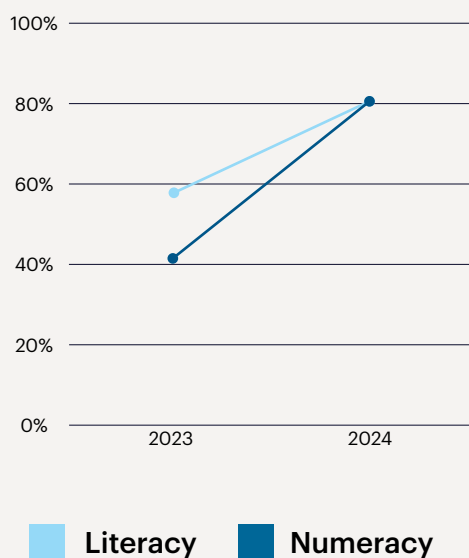
Ms Pearce said given the considerable change in teaching style that was being proposed, it was important that staff "be brought along for the journey".

"I think there's always some trepidation when you introduce something new, but we made it clear that changing things wasn't about playing a 'blame game'," she said.

“At the time, we were a balanced literacy school, but several of us were also learning more about the Science of Reading and the benefits of a systematic and explicit approach to teaching reading.”

– Literacy Leader, Kerrie Pearce

NAPLAN – LITERACY & NUMERACY PERFORMANCE (2023–2024)



“It is framing it in a way that brings it back to the students, making it clear that we are doing it this way because it benefits students.”

“When students develop strong literacy skills, they can better keep up across the curriculum.”

“Our teachers quickly came to understand that they can’t do their ‘whiz bang’ teaching in their science or humanities lessons if students can’t first read the material.”

The impact

When the school introduced InitialLit at the start of 2021, pre-screening revealed that half the Year 1 cohort weren’t ready to learn Year 1 content. A decision was made that those 25 students would do the InitialLit–Foundation program instead.

Those students quickly caught up, and the benefits of the new approach can be seen in the school’s recent NAPLAN results.

In 2024, 80% of Year 3 students were in the top two proficiency bands in NAPLAN – an increase of 23% on the prior year. Writing proficiency also improved, with 88% in the top two bands.

Improved literacy led to a boost in numeracy scores too, with numeracy proficiency increasing from 41% to 81% over the period.

“The students can actually read the questions now,” Ms Pearce said.

“It makes all the difference.”

The school’s NAPLAN scores in Year 3 reading and numeracy are now well above the national average. As a result, the number of students who require reading intervention has decreased by 75%.

St Mary’s Director of Learning and Teaching, Julia Wood, said overhauling the early primary literacy program has had a positive impact across the school.

“Most Foundation to Year 12 schools will leverage the success of the senior year levels, but we have been able to flip it the other way round.

“Everyone is looking at the success of Foundation to Year 3, and it’s creating this amazing energy and desire to recreate that across the older year levels.”

– Director of Learning and Teaching, Julia Wood

Ms Wood said explicit instructional practice has now been established as the norm in all classrooms, ensuring that core knowledge and skills are delivered consistently to all students.

“We often joke about our current Year 4 students being our ‘ground zero’,” she said.

“This initial cohort that started out with explicit, systematic instruction of phonics has the ability to access all areas of the curriculum.

“It puts them on such a strong footing as they progress through their schooling.”