

COVID Intensive Learning Support Program

Phase 2 evaluation report 2021

Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation



Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation

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Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation, August 2022, Sydney, NSW

Please cite this publication as:
CESE (Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation) (2022) *COVID Intensive Learning Support Program – Phase 2 evaluation report 2021*, NSW Department of Education.

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Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank those who contributed to this phase of the evaluation. Special thanks go to the COVID Intensive Learning Support project team for their commitment and ongoing involvement with the evaluation work. Thank you to Jonathan McGuire, Ian Watkins, Wendy Moran, Evgeniya Goryacheva and Andrew Griffiths who reviewed and provided critical feedback, and to Vicki Russell, Gerard Smith and Anna Ung for their work on the publication of this report. Finally, our sincere thanks go to the many educators, teachers and school leaders who participated in surveys, interviews and ongoing data collection for the program.

We acknowledge the homelands of all Aboriginal people and pay our respect to Country.

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Table of acronyms and abbreviations

Abbreviation	Meaning
ACARA	Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority
CESE	Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation
CI	Confidence interval
EAL/D	English as an additional language or dialect
FTE	Full-time equivalent
COVID ILSP	COVID Intensive Learning Support Program
NAPLAN	National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy
PLAN2	Planning Literacy and Numeracy
SLSO	School learning and support officer
SPaRO	School Planning and Reporting Online
WBS-IOS	Work Breakdown Structure – Internal Order Solution, a project management tool for schools to assign staff against projects and tasks.

Executive summary

- The COVID Intensive Learning Support Program has been well received by schools, with survey data showing strong agreement amongst school staff that the program has had a positive impact on students' learning progress.
- School staff implementing the COVID Intensive Learning Support Program reported that the transition to learning from home posed a significant challenge. Learning from home restrictions were in place for 36 local government areas around Greater Sydney for the start of Term 3 in July 2021, impacting approximately half of all NSW public schools. Some schools were only reasonably able to implement the small group tuition model in person for just over a term from the program launch in mid-Term 1.
- At this stage, it is not possible to demonstrate an improvement in student assessment performance at a system level for students who participated in the program. This is due to considerable challenges to both the implementation of the program in the transition to learning from home, and the collection of data using existing reporting platforms.

In March 2021, the NSW Government announced a contribution of \$337 million towards the COVID Intensive Learning Support Program (COVID ILSP). The purpose of the funding was for schools to employ educators to deliver small group tuition to students with the greatest learning needs, especially in literacy and numeracy. It was recommended that schools employ an educator to deliver small group tuition to those students most in need of support. This evaluation seeks to understand how the program had been implemented in NSW public schools, the impact of the program on student achievement as well as student motivation and engagement, and the challenges associated with implementing the program. This report represents the findings as part of Phase 2 of the evaluation.

Evaluation question 1: How has the COVID Intensive Learning Support Program been implemented?

- Students selected to participate in the program had lower average Check-in assessment scores, and were more likely to be EAL/D students, Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander or from low socio-economic backgrounds.
- Reporting data indicates that more than 75% of the 8,281 educators employed to deliver tuition to students were qualified teachers, and that three-quarters of schools chose to withdraw students from class for the program.
- Due to the extended learning from home periods of 2021, there were schools that attempted to implement virtual models of the COVID Intensive Learning Support Program. However, some schools reported that the program was not delivered consistently, or at all, during this time. The COVID Intensive Learning Support Program could have only been implemented via the intended in-person modality for a maximum of 12 weeks before shifting to remote learning.

Evaluation question 2: What challenges were encountered by schools, staff and students?

- The most significant challenge of the program encountered by schools were the disruptions to learning primarily associated with learning from home restrictions from Term 3 2021. Close to 95% of all surveyed principals, program coordinators, classroom teachers and educators reported that running the program was 'challenging' during this time.
- Educators in secondary school settings reported that the greatest challenges were student attendance and engagement. For educators in primary school settings, the greatest challenges were conducting formative assessments to understand students' progress, and reliance on parents to facilitate using technology.
- Fieldwork data indicated that other challenges faced by schools included recruitment of educators and timetabling of sessions. Some classroom teachers also reported that student withdrawal from class was challenging from a classroom content perspective.

Evaluation question 3: What teaching and learning resources were incorporated into practice and how helpful were they?

- A wide range of resources for the COVID Intensive Learning Support Program were available to school staff, including a comprehensive website, professional learning resources and responsive support teams.
- The website was the most frequently used resource by principals and program coordinators (77%), while the professional learning modules were the most frequently used resource for educators (64%).
- The resources were considered by most to be 'helpful', with principals and program coordinators, as well as educators, reporting that the resources primarily assisted with their knowledge of evidence-based practice in literacy (87.6% and 80.9% respectively). It was also reported by these groups that the resources supported effective implementation of the program.

Evaluation question 4: What was the perceived impact of specific tuition approaches on particular cohorts and contexts?

- Survey data from principals and program coordinators, classroom teachers and educators indicate that the program has had a positive impact on students' learning progress, as well as their confidence, engagement and motivation.
- Field work and focus groups with a small sample of schools provided evidence of instances where student engagement and attitudes towards learning had improved.
- Further quantitative analysis on student cohorts and contexts will be carried out in Phase 3 of the evaluation.

Evaluation question 5: Did the COVID Intensive Learning Support Program improve the academic outcomes of participating students?

- Analysis of student outcome data using Check-in assessments was unable to determine the impact of participation on student achievement amongst those who participated in the program in 2021. This is due to a number of factors, including the significant disruption to the implementation of the program as intended, and the inconsistent reporting of students who participated in the program.
- It is hoped that improved reporting mechanisms will resolve these issues for Phase 3 of the evaluation.

Evaluation question 6: What was the impact of the COVID Intensive Learning Support Program on student engagement?

- The evaluation intended to use student attendance data and Tell Them From Me survey data to understand the impact of the COVID Intensive Learning Support Program on student engagement. However, due to learning from home restrictions in both Term 3 and Term 4 2021, systematic student attendance data was not collected by the department.
- This phase of the evaluation faced limitations when collecting Tell Them From Me survey data in Term 4, as optional responses to surveys did not include student reference numbers. Phase 3 of the evaluation intends to use Tell Them From Me data to compare responses across 2021 and 2022.

Conclusions

It is clear from both survey and fieldwork data collected in 2021 that the COVID Intensive Learning Support Program has been well received by schools as a mechanism for supporting students whose learning was impacted by the learning from home restrictions in 2020. However, NSW public schools faced significant challenges implementing the program during the learning from home periods of 2021. This also had an impact on the type and quality of data collected for this phase of the evaluation of the program.

The COVID Intensive Learning Support Program project team has made some changes to the reporting guidelines for schools, which should make analysis of student outcome data clearer for the next phase of the evaluation of the program. In addition, resources have been acquired to undertake qualitative work to investigate the wider impact of the program on specific student cohorts and school contexts.

Introduction

Due to COVID-19 restrictions, NSW public schools encouraged students to undertake learning from home for 7 weeks in 2020. Analysis of the department's Check-in assessments undertaken by the Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation (CESE)¹ suggested that this move to remote learning negatively impacted the learning progress of some students. The Grattan Institute recommended that state government funding be utilised to support students to 'catch up' on missed learning through small group tuition.²

In response, the NSW Government announced a \$337 million program to deliver intensive small group tuition to approximately 290,000 students across all sectors. The program included \$306 million for all NSW public schools, including primary, secondary, central and schools for specific purposes (SSPs). Each school's funding amount was based on the distribution of students in the lowest and second lowest quartiles of the Family Occupation and Education Index (FOEI).

The aims of the COVID Intensive Learning Support Program were to:

1. increase the achievement of students who were disadvantaged by the move to remote and/or flexible learning, helping to close the equity gap
2. gather knowledge about the small group tuition approaches that are most commonly used and their perceived impact in different cohorts and contexts
3. provide schools, teachers and additional educators with teaching and learning resources, assessment tools and professional learning.

The purpose of the funding was for schools to employ educators to deliver small group tuition to students with the greatest learning needs, especially in literacy and numeracy. Educators could be qualified teachers (teachers on leave, casuals, temporary teachers and full-time teachers), or educational paraprofessionals including teacher education students in their final year, as well as university academics and postgraduate students. This was later expanded to include school learning support officers (SLSOs) in March 2021, and allied health professionals in May 2021. Schools were able to use approximately 10% of their funding for program planning, coordination, supervision and administration, enabling many schools to utilise a COVID ILSP coordinator, although this was not a requirement.

Schools could be flexible in their tuition approach according to what best suited their students' learning needs and school context. Guidelines aligned with the evidence-based recommendations of the *COVID catch-up: helping disadvantaged students close the equity gap* report by Grattan Institute were provided to schools. It was recommended that to maximise effectiveness, small group tuition should:

- involve groups of 2 to 5 students
- involve sessions that are 20 to 50 minutes in duration
- occur at least 3 times per week over 10 to 20 weeks
- be targeted to students' specific needs.

1 Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation (2020) *Check-in assessments: Years 3, 5 and 9*, NSW Department of Education, 20 May 2022.

2 Sonnemann J and Goss P (2020) *COVID catch-up: helping disadvantaged students close the equity gap*, Grattan Institute, accessed 20 May 2022.

Previous research from the Grattan Institute indicated that students most likely to benefit from small group tuition are those falling behind in their learning, particularly in literacy and numeracy. It was also identified that other students might benefit from small group tuition, such as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander students, students with disability, students learning English as an additional language or dialect (EAL/D), students in out of home care and/or students who were disengaged from learning.

Schools were required to implement the program by Week 6 of Term 1, 2021.

In addition to the funding, the department also provided:

- a project team to support program implementation
- an employment pool of additional educators
- online models and approved third-party providers of tuition increasing flexibility around program delivery
- a Microsoft Teams forum for schools to share ideas and ask questions
- professional learning and resources
- a dedicated website with guidelines on expenditure, implementation and best practice.

Findings from earlier reviews

Performance audit

In December 2021, the NSW Audit Office published a performance audit of the activities of the COVID Intensive Learning Support Program up until August 2021.³ The second period of learning from home that NSW experienced between July and October 2021 was not included as part of their reporting.

The performance audit found that the COVID Intensive Learning Support Program was designed using evidence and needs-based approaches to support the most disadvantaged students. The COVID ILSP project team, while assembled rapidly, was a responsive and effective entity that established clear governance processes for the program.

The implementation of the program in NSW public schools was deemed to be effective, with the project team providing sufficient resources to ensure that 80% of schools had begun the program by the target date. The report found that data quality for the COVID Intensive Learning Support Program was impacted by the use of the existing reporting systems, where records may have been incomplete or not updated on a regular basis. This made it difficult to ascertain a complete and accurate view of the program.

Phase 1 report

This Phase 2 report builds on the November 2021 Phase 1 internal report produced by the COVID ILSP team. The Phase 1 internal report provided program implementation information using data collected between Terms 1 and 2, 2021.

³ NSW Auditor-General (2021) *Performance Report of COVID Intensive Learning Support Program*, Audit Office of NSW, accessed 20 May 2022.

Implementation of the COVID ILSP

In line with previous research findings from the *COVID catch-up: helping disadvantaged students close the equity gap* Grattan Institute report, the program was intended to be a structured small group tuition program that supplemented students' in-class learning. There was no mandated content that was to be delivered, although schools were encouraged to address a particular area of focus, such as literacy or numeracy, with each group. Within the broad guidelines of group size, frequency, length of tuition cycle and lesson length, schools were free to choose the structure of their program that best suited their context.

Range of approaches schools adopted within the guidelines

Schools were instructed to commence the program by Term 1 Week 6 2021. After this point, schools could start additional groups at any time they desired. Students could participate with multiple groups, concurrently or sequentially, with no upper limit on how many groups they could join. As such, a student's tuition experience could vary widely both between schools, and even within their own school depending on which groups they participated in. These groups could, within the broad program guidelines, vary widely across many dimensions. These dimensions are:

Group size: 2-5 students

Session length: 20-50 minutes

Session frequency: 3-5 times a week

Cycle length: 10-20 weeks

Mode of delivery: withdrawal from class, in class, online, before or after school, or some other method suiting the school's context.

Area of focus: schools were encouraged to focus on either literacy and/or numeracy but had the option of choosing other areas of focus.

Student placements

The idea of a 'student placement' allows us to capture a student's tuition experience for each instance of tuition they received. For example, a student could be in one group in Term 1, which only had 2 students studying literacy in class, and another group in Term 3 (or even concurrently in Term 1), which had 5 students studying numeracy after school. To capture this, this one student is defined as having 2 'student placements'. The total count of students in the program refers to the number of student placements, counting each individual student for as many groups as they participated in.

Assessment and tracking

To minimise administrative burden for schools, existing and familiar reporting systems were used to record student participation. Originally, the Planning Literacy and Numeracy platform (PLAN2) was intended to be the only reporting system. However, after feedback from schools, the School Planning and Reporting Online platform (SPaRO) was also accepted.

PLAN2 facilitated the recording of broad details of the program, such as tuition cycle length and session frequency. SPaRO was not designed to collect these details. Neither system could capture finer details on content delivery at a session level. Some fields were not mandatory and many schools opted to omit details such as area of focus or length of tuition. Having the choice to use one or both reporting systems each capturing slightly different data, as well as non-mandatory fields led to difficulties in accurate reporting of student participation and other details. Further information on the PLAN2 and SPaRO platforms can be found in Appendix 1.

Roles

Throughout this report, we have referred to 3 key school-based roles that were integral the program. Table 1 explains each role and their responsibilities.

Table 1

Description of roles involved in the COVID Intensive Learning Support Program

Role	Description
Principal/coordinator	Either the school principal, a school executive member or classroom teacher with the delegated responsibility of COVID Intensive Learning Support Program coordinator, was responsible for planning, coordination and administration of the program in their school.
Classroom teacher	Classroom teachers worked with the school principal/coordinator and the COVID ILSP educator to identify students who would benefit from additional learning support.
Educator	Educators, sometimes referred to as COVID-19 tutors, were employed by schools to work with students identified as in need of additional learning support.

| Evaluation

Aims of the evaluation

The aims of the evaluation are to:

1. examine how the COVID Intensive Learning Support Program has been implemented across NSW public schools
2. examine the impact of small group tuition on the academic outcomes of targeted students (We will group together students who are in the same year level, receive tuition in the same learning area and complete the same assessments.)
3. examine the perceived impact of specific tuition approaches for different cohorts of students and contexts
4. examine the impact of the program on student motivation and engagement
5. examine the challenges associated with the program for schools, staff, and students
6. identify the teaching and learning resources that schools, teachers and additional educators utilise in their practices.

This report represents findings of Phase 2 of the evaluation. Phase 1 of the evaluation, conducted by an internal COVID ILSP evaluation team, presented the COVID ILSP project team with formative information on the reach of the program, its implementation in schools and how schools have utilised the program for their unique contexts.

Evaluation questions

Process evaluation questions

1. How has the COVID Intensive Learning Support Program been implemented?
2. What challenges were encountered by schools, staff and students?
3. What teaching and learning resources were incorporated into practice and how helpful were they?

Outcome evaluation questions

1. What was the perceived impact of specific tuition approaches on particular cohorts and contexts?
2. Did the COVID Intensive Learning Support Program improve the academic outcomes of participating students?
3. What was the impact of the program on student engagement?

Methods overview

The methods used for the process evaluation of the COVID Intensive Learning Support Program are summarised here and explained in further detail in Appendix 1.

Process evaluation methods

Term 4 COVID ILSP surveys

Principals/coordinators, classroom teachers, educators and students were surveyed in Term 4 2021 to understand the impact of the program. The survey asked participants about:

- the impact the program had on students' learning progress
- the impact of the program on student engagement, motivation and attitudes towards school
- the methods used to monitor student progress
- participant experiences of the program as it was delivered during learning from home in Terms 3 and 4 of 2021.

Focus groups

Focus groups were conducted at 9 schools during Term 4. Learnings from the focus groups are presented in this report as short vignettes, demonstrating the experience of classroom teachers, students and schools and their view of the program's impact on students. The purpose of the focus groups was to:

- hear feedback about the program from school staff, families and students
- develop a qualitative evidence base around the experiences of schools, families and students and their views on student learning progress
- identify strengths and limitations of the program that could inform the COVID Intensive Learning Support Program in 2022.

Recruitment data

COVID ILSP educator recruitment data was collected through Work Breakdown Structure – Internal Order Solution (WBS-IOS), a project management tool for schools to assign staff against tasks. Schools could hire staff and use WBS-IOS to assign them against the COVID Intensive Learning Support Program in a particular role, such as classroom teacher or SLSO.

Student census data

Student census and enrolment data was used to understand which students were selected to participate in the program.

Tracking student participation

PLAN2 data

PLAN2 (Planning Literacy and Numeracy) is an application on the department's Assessing Literacy and Numeracy software platform for recording student progress in literacy and numeracy. Schools were encouraged to use the PLAN2 platform to record and monitor participating students.

SPaRO data

School Planning and Reporting Online (SPaRO) is an online reporting system used by NSW public schools for whole school planning and reporting purposes. Schools could upload lists of participating students to the platform, in addition to using PLAN2, to track student progress. There were significant limitations to using this data reliably for the evaluation.

Treatment assignment

Schools listed all of their students receiving tuition through PLAN2 or SPaRO. The complement of that list was used to identify students not receiving tuition. Unfortunately, these reporting systems were not always suitable for this procedure, raising methodological limitations for this evaluation. Specifically, because the lists of participating students in PLAN2 and SPaRO were incomplete, some participating students remain unaccounted for and have been inaccurately classified as non-participating. This biases the analysis of student outcomes, leading to a likely underestimate of program efficacy.

Methodological limitations

The methodological limitations faced by this evaluation were largely related to data inconsistencies that could not be clarified due to restrictions to contact with schools in the second half of 2021, and reporting requirements for schools.

Reporting, while strongly recommended, was effectively optional for schools

There was a reluctance to place additional administrative burden on schools in 2021 due to the disruptions of 2020. While reporting through the existing reporting systems was encouraged, it was not systematically enforced. Schools were also given a choice of using either PLAN2 or SPaRO for reporting, which has led to difficulties in collating accurate, consistent data.

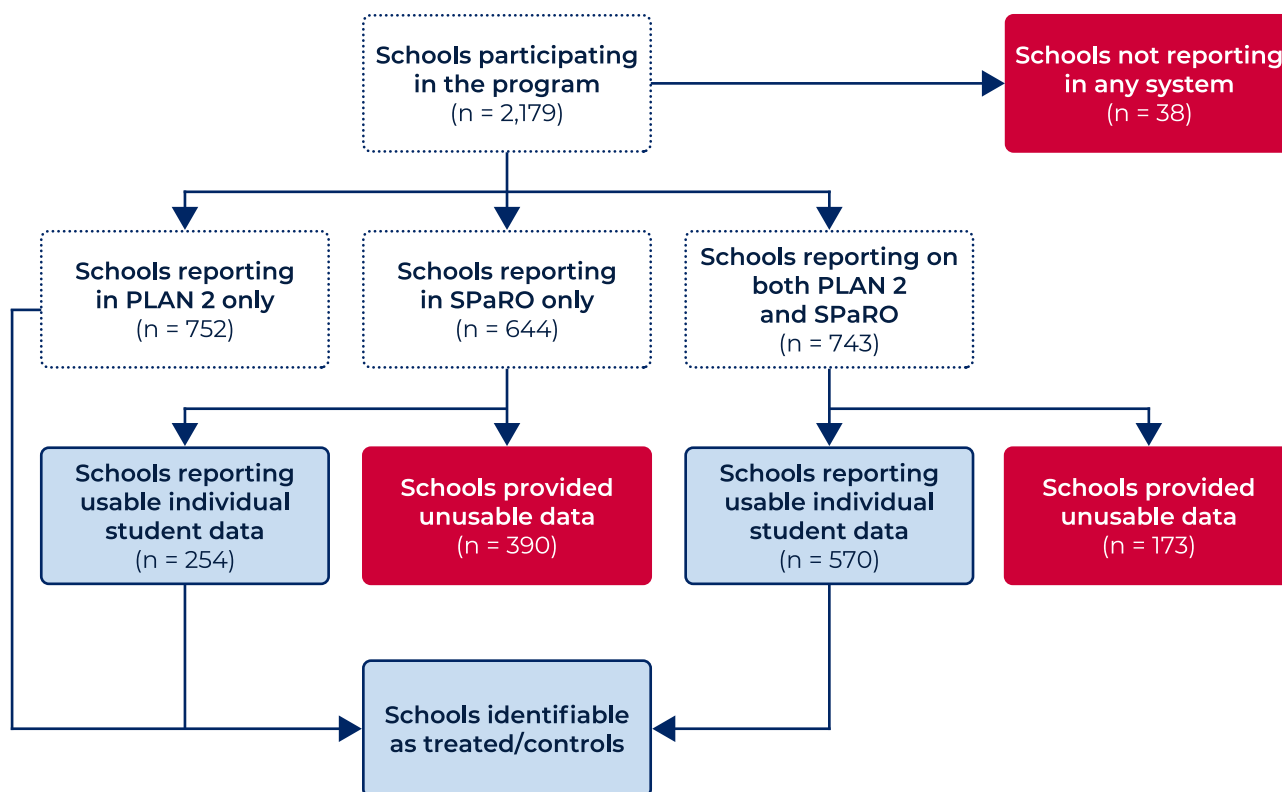
Additionally, during the year, the COVID ILSP project team observed that some schools were not adhering to program guidelines. This was observed in the reporting systems, but also from anecdotal feedback from schools. For example, some schools noted they used individual rather than small group tuition or that they ran the program infrequently. Given the limitations in contacting schools directly during Term 2, there was no method for clarifying a school's implementation details or to reliably adjust for these inconsistencies.

Inaccurate records of student participation

The PLAN2 reporting system had individualised lists of students, so if a school reported only in PLAN2, their records are automatically aggregated for further analyses. However, in SPaRO, a school may identify a total number of students, but then upload a list of students that did not match that total. This meant that there are a suspected number of students receiving tuition who were unaccounted for, and it is not possible to assign the complement of their participation list as the non-participating students. This issue impacted a total of 563 schools, whose incomplete data records were excluded from this analysis (Figure 1). Refer to Appendix 2 for further details on these excluded students.

| Figure 1

Schools' methods of reporting for the COVID Intensive Learning Support program



Inability to reliably collect Term 4 data

The SPaRO data in Term 4 could not be feasibly collected as the reporting period for schools was extended in early 2022. Therefore, the most recent data collection point was Term 3 Week 10. Term 4 data was available in PLAN2, but without SPaRO's lists of participating students, assigning the non-participating students could not reliably be done. These most recent participating students would have been by default assigned non-participating status as they had not yet appeared on a list of participating students, and this will underestimate the effects of the program.

Missing variables

Area of focus

For COVID ILSP reporting, schools were asked to nominate an area of focus for each student group. This enables us to understand if educators are supporting students in either literacy or numeracy, and which aspects of literacy or numeracy. Analysis of PLAN2 data at the end of Term 3 2021 indicated that 34% of records in PLAN2 were missing a nominated area of focus. Similarly, 30% of records in SPaRO spreadsheets were missing an area of focus. Due to the bulk reporting of areas of focus in SPaRO and inconsistencies with uploaded spreadsheets of student names, it was concluded that only PLAN2 data would be used to estimate the areas of focus delivered to students.

Length of program

Schools were also asked to indicate the length of each student group's learning cycle. This assisted with understanding the amount of 'dose' each student received. Analysis of PLAN2 data at the end of Term 3 indicated that approximately one-third (34%) of records in PLAN2 were missing a start and end date. Furthermore, as there were many variations in reporting student participation, there were instances where it was unclear how many groups students had been part of. The SPaRO reporting system did not facilitate consistent reporting of the start and end date as separate fields but rather in the body of the report. Tuition length had to be estimated, relying on the assumption that students reported in PLAN2 are not systematically different from those reported in SPaRO.

Analytical implications of missing variables for process evaluation

The inability to collect Term 4 participation data has implications for identifying rates of participation by student subgroups. For example, comparing Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander student participation vs non-Aboriginal student participation. Any proportions of students calculated are underestimates because the students who participated in Term 4 were not included.

However, what is important for this part of the process evaluation is the comparison between groups, not the raw proportions themselves. That difference in proportions should not change if students continue to be selected for the program in the same manner as they had been up till Term 3 Week 10.

Process evaluation findings

- Students chosen to participate in the program had lower average Check-in assessment scores than students not participating in the program, while student characteristic data showed that EAL/D students, Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander students and students from low socio-economic advantage backgrounds were more likely to be selected for participation in the program.
- More than 75% of employed educators were qualified teachers, and 73% of schools chose to withdraw students from class to participate in small group tuition.
- School staff implementing the COVID Intensive Learning Support Program reported that the transition to learning from home posed a significant challenge. Due to learning from home restrictions in Term 3, 2021, some schools were only reasonably able to implement the small group tuition model in person for just over a term from the program launch in mid-Term 1.

The process evaluation of the COVID Intensive Learning Support Program used data from surveys, field visits including focus groups and PLAN2 data to understand:

- implementation of the COVID Intensive Learning Support Program
- challenges encountered by schools, staff and students
- teachers' use of resources and their helpfulness in the program.

Implementation of the COVID ILSP

There are various aspects of schools' implementation of the program that are important to evaluate. These include resourcing, student selection and monitoring, variations in how individual schools structured delivery of the program and feedback from staff.

Resourcing

There were 265,591 placements, representing approximately 115,243 students who received tutoring support in 2021

The COVID Intensive Learning Support Program asked schools to report students participating in groups of tutoring students. Despite the limitations of the incomplete data collected, we estimate the number of students who participated in the program at the end of Term 3 2021 as approximately 115,243 students. By the end of Term 4 2021 there were a total of 265,591 student placements, which indicates that students participated in more than one group for tuition. Further explanation of the methodology used to calculate this total can be found at Appendix 2.

A total of 8,281 educators were employed to deliver the program in 2021

As of 31 December 2021, 8,281 staff had been employed to deliver and coordinate the COVID Intensive Learning Support Program. School reporting data (WBS-IOS data) indicates that 75% of educators employed by schools were accredited teachers. A further 8% were SLSOs and 17% were paraprofessionals.

Selecting students for the program

Students participating in the program have lower mean Check-in assessment scores across both reading and numeracy

Analysis of student scores across all years, in both Reading and Numeracy, shows that students participating in the program on average have lower Check-in assessment scores than non-participating students (Table 2). This demonstrates that schools are targeting those students in need of additional learning support. The baseline timepoints are different for each year group, as the available baseline data differed for each year cohort.

Table 2

Term 4 2021 mean Check-in assessment scores of participant and non-participant student groups

Year level in 2021	Baseline year level and year	Mean (SD) Reading scores		Mean (SD) Numeracy scores	
		Non-participants	Participants	Non-participants	Participants
4	Check-in Yr 3 (2020)	448 (96.6)	376 (82.9)	445 (81.7)	387 (68.3)
5	NAPLAN 3 (2019)	442 (92.1)	380 (78.2)	421 (81.2)	365 (65.7)
6	Check-in Yr 5 (2020)	509 (86.4)	444 (71.7)	504 (75.8)	447 (54.3)
7	NAPLAN 5 (2019)	504 (76.9)	453 (71.6)	499 (74.4)	450 (60.5)
8	NAPLAN 5 (2018)	505 (89.1)	458 (83.0)	496 (74.1)	454 (59.1)
9	NAPLAN 7 (2019)	471 (77.6)	468 (88.6)	483 (54.5)	470 (56.5)

Students who were more likely to be selected for the program were EAL/D students, Aboriginal or from a low socio-economic background or a combination of these

When analysed, student data shows that there were higher proportions of participating students among Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander, EAL/D or from low socio-economic advantage backgrounds.

Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander students were more likely to be selected for the program. Collected student data shows that 37% of all students who identified as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander were selected for the program, while 22% of all non-Aboriginal students were selected for the program.

Students at the early phases of learning English (EAL/D) also received support through the program at greater rates. For example, 29% of all students from the beginner group were selected for the program, while 14% of all students from the more advanced consolidating group were selected for the program.

Students from the bottom quartile of socio-economic advantage (SEA) were also more likely to be selected for the program, with the likelihood of students being selected decreasing as the quartiles of SEA progress. For example, 35% of students from the bottom quartile were selected for the program, compared to 11% of students from the top quartile. This demonstrates that the program targeted students experiencing greater socio-economic disadvantage.

For full tables, refer to Appendix 3.

More students received literacy support than numeracy support

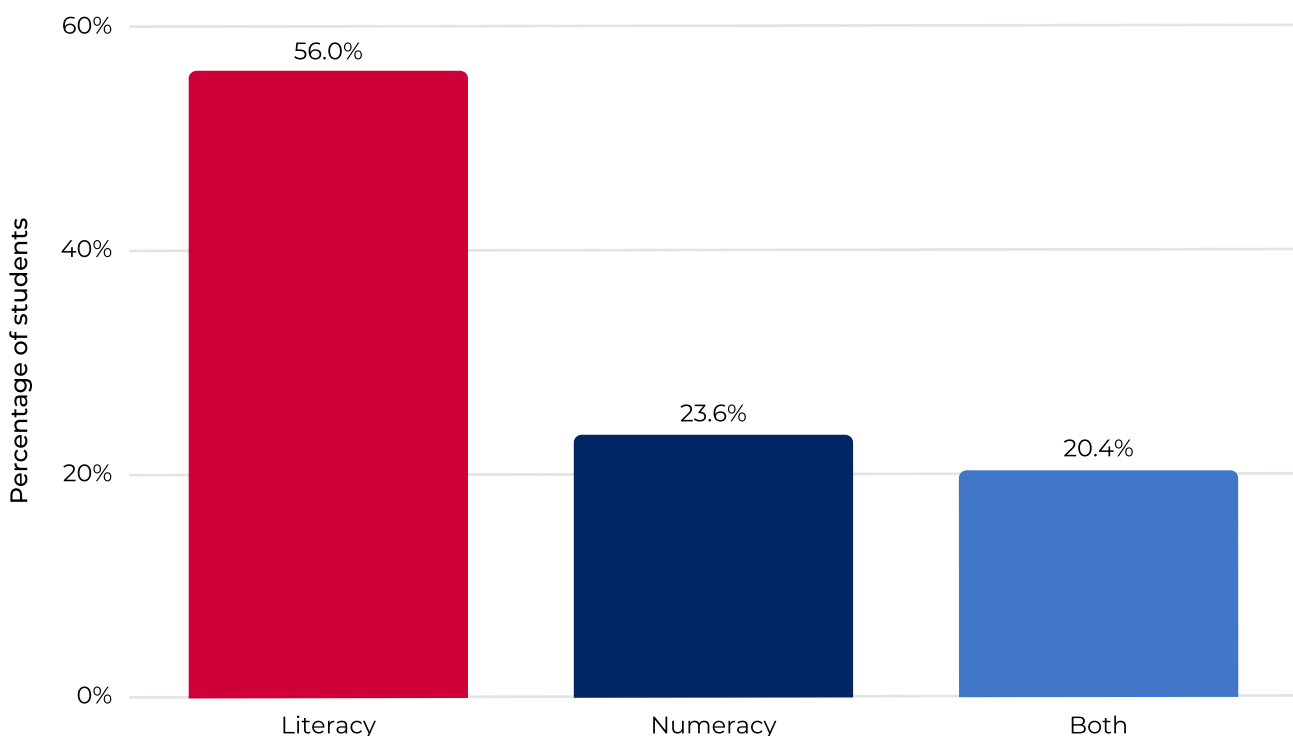
PLAN2 allowed staff to nominate an area of focus for their groups. SPaRO was modified in an attempt to also capture this information; however, the changes did not capture the area of focus on a group-based level. As such, the following results are based on data from PLAN2, with the assumption of similar trends in SPaRO.

School staff identified an area of focus for each student group by selecting the specific learning progression indicators that would be addressed for that learning cycle. Approximately two-thirds of student placements (66%) reported in PLAN2 received targeted literacy instruction, and one-third (33%) received targeted numeracy instruction. This total of student placements includes those who may have received 2 or more placements in the program. For example, a student who was listed in 2 groups for literacy is counted twice. Similarly, a student is counted in both domains if they took both literacy and numeracy tuition.

Figure 2 shows the number of individual students (not placements) who received support in each area of focus. Here, students are counted only once and the category of 'both' is created to account for students who received both areas of focus within the year. In the PLAN2 reporting system there were 27,503 students who received tuition through the program for literacy support, and 11,565 students who received tuition for numeracy support. Just over 10,000 students participated in the program for both literacy and numeracy tuition.

Figure 2

Percentage of participating students receiving support for Literacy, Numeracy or both



Within the areas of focus, learning domains targeted by the program could also be identified. Over two-thirds (69.6%) of literacy placements aimed to support students in reading skills, while one-quarter (25.1%) aimed to support students in writing, and the remainder focusing on listening and speaking (5.3%). The majority of numeracy placements were delivered to support students in number and algebra (80.6%), 14.5% targeted support in measurement and geometry, and the remainder focusing on statistics and probability (4.8%).

Schools chose a variety of ways to structure the program

As previously noted, schools were encouraged to implement the program in ways that suited their school context. The wide ranges in metrics such as group size and lengths of tuition support this. For full tables, refer to Appendix 4.

The most common mode of delivery was withdrawing students from class during school hours, with 72.9% of schools choosing this option. Less than one percent delivered the program before or after school.

Nearly 80% (79%) of schools reported that sessions took place 3 times per week, with just over 5% of schools implementing 5 sessions a week. Over 80% of schools tended to run their tuition cycles for either less than 10 weeks or between 10 to 20 weeks, while the remainder offered programs for more than 20 weeks. Within the reporting system, teachers could indicate the length of sessions as being less than, or more than, 30 minutes. For primary year groups, half of the tutoring sessions were less than 30 minutes and half were more than 30 minutes in length, while for secondary year groups sessions tended to be longer with sessions typically running for 30 minutes or more.

Group sizes varied considerably from individual tuition to groups consisting of 6 or more students. However, this wide variety may be due to the reporting systems, where instead of having a 'drop-down' menu, schools could select students per group with no upper limit. Approximately 12% of schools entered group sizes of 11 or more. This may be because it was more convenient for some schools to enter all students at once, rather than each individual group separately.

Educators reported successfully using online platforms to deliver the program during 2021

When asked about the success of the tuition models in their schools in the survey open text questions, COVID ILSP educators noted that the period of learning from home greatly impacted on the work of this intervention with most educators reporting that face to face small group sessions were the most successful in supporting students' learning progress. However, many educators also noted that online tools such as Zoom, Google Classroom and Microsoft Teams were effective for the delivery of the program while the restrictions were in place.

Some educators noted that they had successfully implemented third-party programs and interventions, while a smaller proportion of educators reported using educational resources and learning platforms. Other educators stated that students received packs of resources at the beginning of the tutoring group cycle.

“We used Zoom and Google classroom; resources were sent home in a paper pack and provided online (manipulatives), these were useful to work on set follow up tasks. Younger grades were more consistent with attendance and following up on a set task.”

Accredited teacher delivering the program, primary school, Term 4 survey

“I delivered all remote learning lessons via Zoom, which was very successful. There were only a few students who could not continue ILSP lessons during home learning due to lack of internet connection.”

Accredited teacher delivering the program, primary school, Term 4 survey

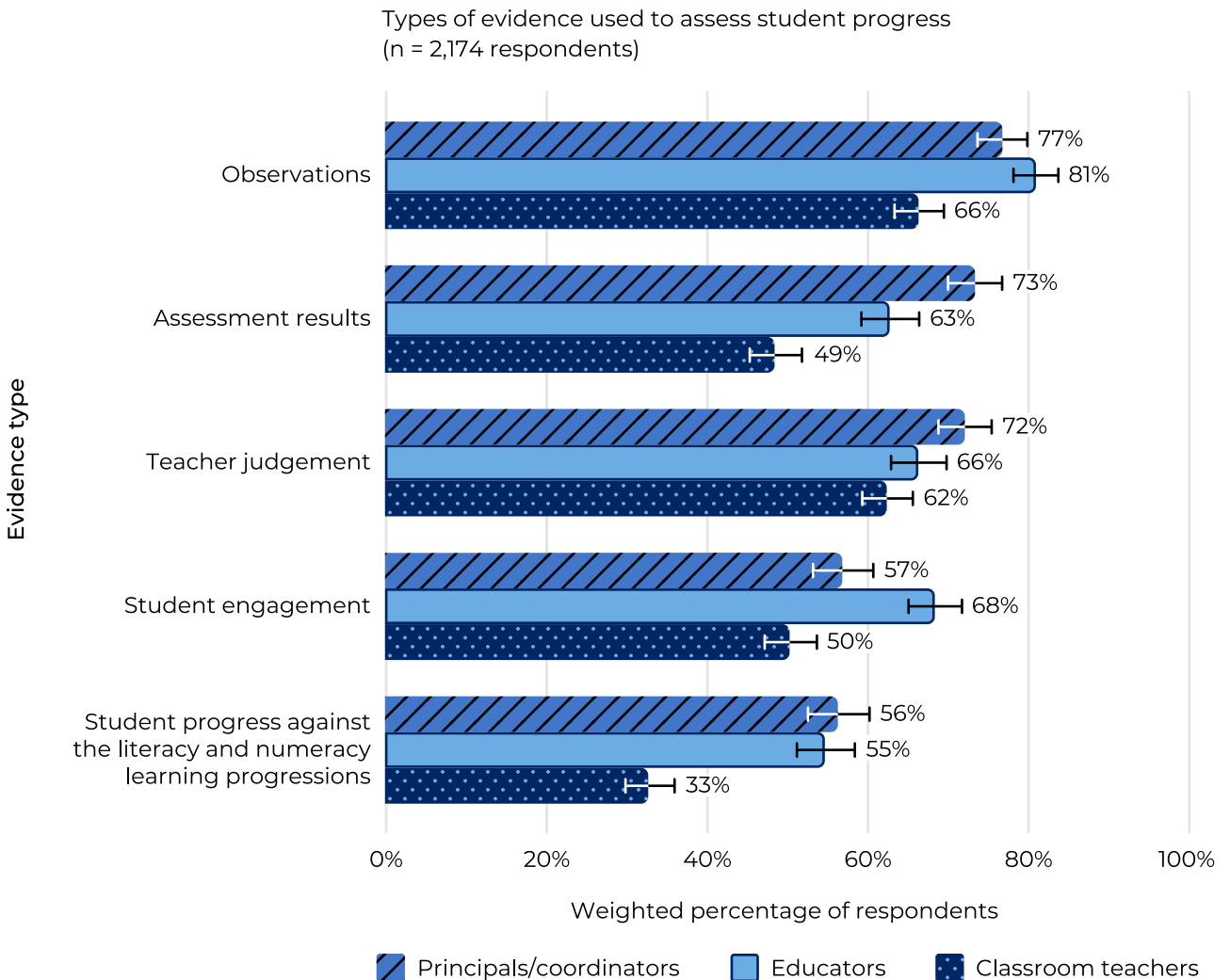
Student progress was monitored using student observations, teacher judgement and assessment results

Data collected from surveys of school staff show that student observations were reported as the primary source of evidence when monitoring students' progress. This was followed by teacher judgement, and assessment results (Figure 3).

It is of note that principals and program coordinators have self-reported higher engagement with evidence such as assessment results and progressions data, than teachers and educators. Similarly, when we compared across primary school and secondary school contexts, educators in secondary school contexts self-reported using Check-in assessments more frequently than the National Literacy and Numeracy Learning Progressions (learning progressions) (Figure 3).

Figure 3

Types of evidence used to assess student progress according to survey data

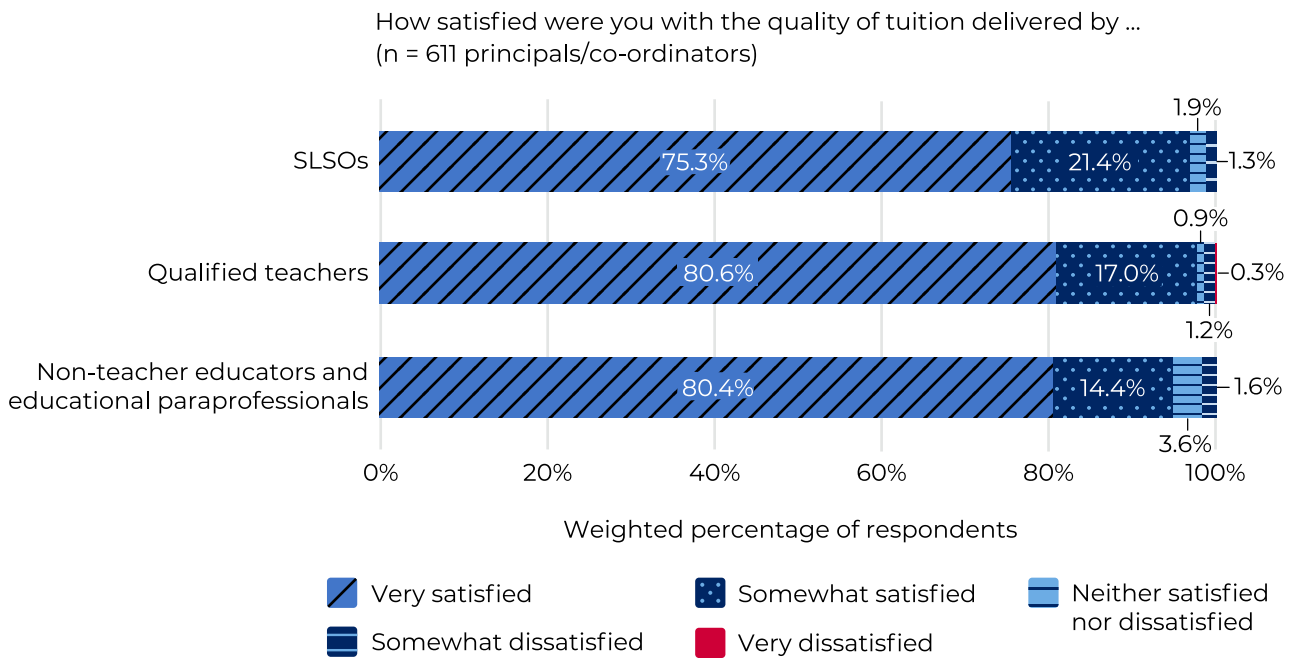


Principals and program coordinators were very satisfied with the tuition provided by all program educators

Almost all principals and program coordinators indicated that they were 'very satisfied' or 'somewhat satisfied' with the quality of tuition delivered by educators employed as part of the COVID Intensive Learning Support Program.

Figure 4

Principal and coordinator satisfaction with small group tuition quality of instruction



Summary

- An analysis of Check-in assessment data shows that students selected to participate in the program had lower average scores than students not participating in the program, indicating that schools were targeting students in most need of assistance.
- Student characteristic data shows that EAL/D students, Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander students, as well as students from low socio-economic backgrounds were more likely to be selected for participation in the program.
- Teacher judgement, learning progressions data and student observations were the primary methods used to monitor student progress.
- 73% of schools withdrew students from class to participate in small group tuition.

Challenges during periods of learning from home

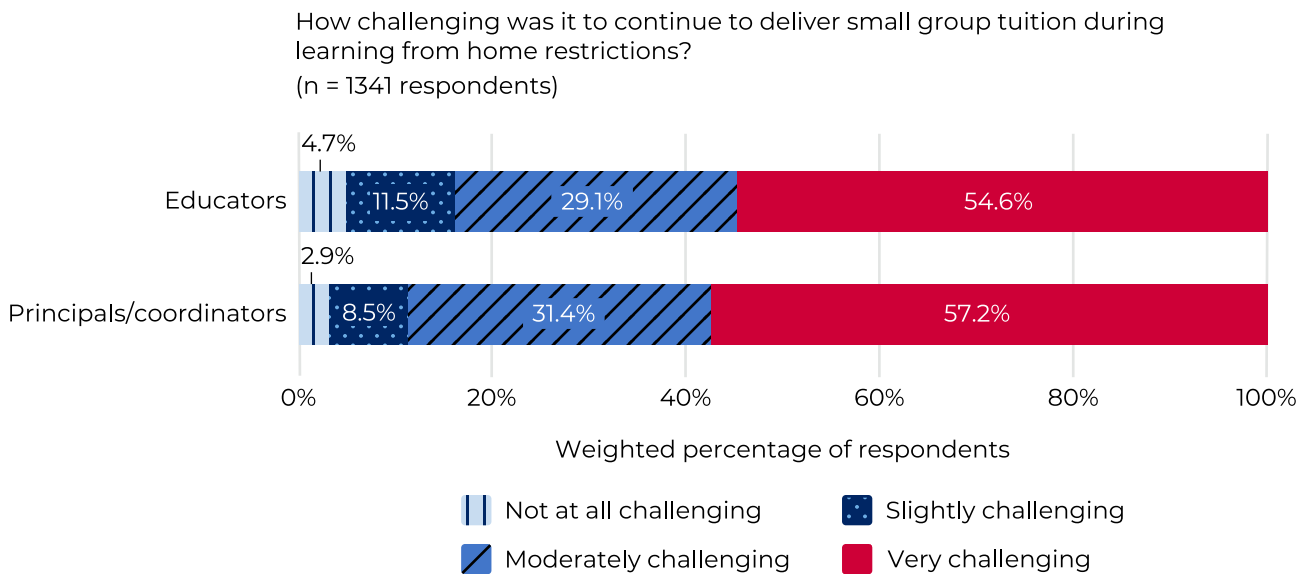
The delivery of the program was impacted by the extended lockdowns in NSW from the start of Term 3 2021, which began on 23 June 2021.⁴ Learning from home restrictions were in place for 36 local government areas around Greater Sydney for the start of Term 3 in July 2021, impacting approximately half of all NSW public schools. While there were some schools that were able to continue supporting students during the periods of learning from home, there were also a range of factors that impacted on students' participation in the program during this time. Program data indicated that schools struggled to continue to deliver the program during the lockdown period, leading the project team to focus on the issue in the comprehensive Term 4 surveys.

Implementing the program during learning from home was a significant challenge for both principals/coordinators and educators

More than 95% of principals, program coordinators and educators reported that implementing the program was challenging whilst under learning from home restrictions (Figure 5).

Figure 5

Learning from home restrictions were a significant challenge to program implementation



More than half of educators (55%, 95%CI: [51%, 59%]) and principal/coordinators (57%, 95% CI [53%, 61%]) reported that it was 'very challenging' to deliver small group tuition during learning from home restrictions. The COVID ILSP project team provided support to educators during this time by bringing in external expert presenters to specifically target developing staff skills in planning and assessing in a remote learning environment. The project team further facilitated collaboration and information sharing on remote learning strategies via the Microsoft Teams platform. This was done as part of a broader department strategy to transition to learning from home.

⁴ NSW Government (23 June 2021) *New COVID-19 restrictions for Greater Sydney [media release]*, [NSW Government](#), accessed 27 May 2022.

Unfortunately, as the Term 4 surveys indicate, it does not appear that these resources could entirely remove the challenges of engaging students having to learn from home. The learning from home period made engaging students in school activities difficult in general and so it would be expected that this issue would extend to the COVID Intensive Learning Support Program.

The main challenge observed during the implementation of the program during learning from home was maintaining student engagement and attendance throughout this period. For educators in a secondary school setting, maintaining student attendance and engagement was rated as the most difficult challenge (58% 'very challenging', 95% CI [52%, 65%]; Figure 7), while for educators in a primary school setting, ability to conduct formative assessments (49%, 95% CI [44%, 53%]) and reliance on parents to facilitate using technology (44%, 95% CI [39%, 49%]) were rated as the most difficult challenges (Figure 6). Educators appear to be reflecting the differing issues of their students, where older students can use technology to learn from home themselves, but have lower levels of engagement.

Overall, less than 15% of educators across both settings, found the various challenges to be 'not at all challenging' indicating that while there are slight differences between school types and staff responsibilities, learning from home, as a whole process, presented them with challenges to delivering the program.

Figure 6
Challenges for educators at primary and infants schools

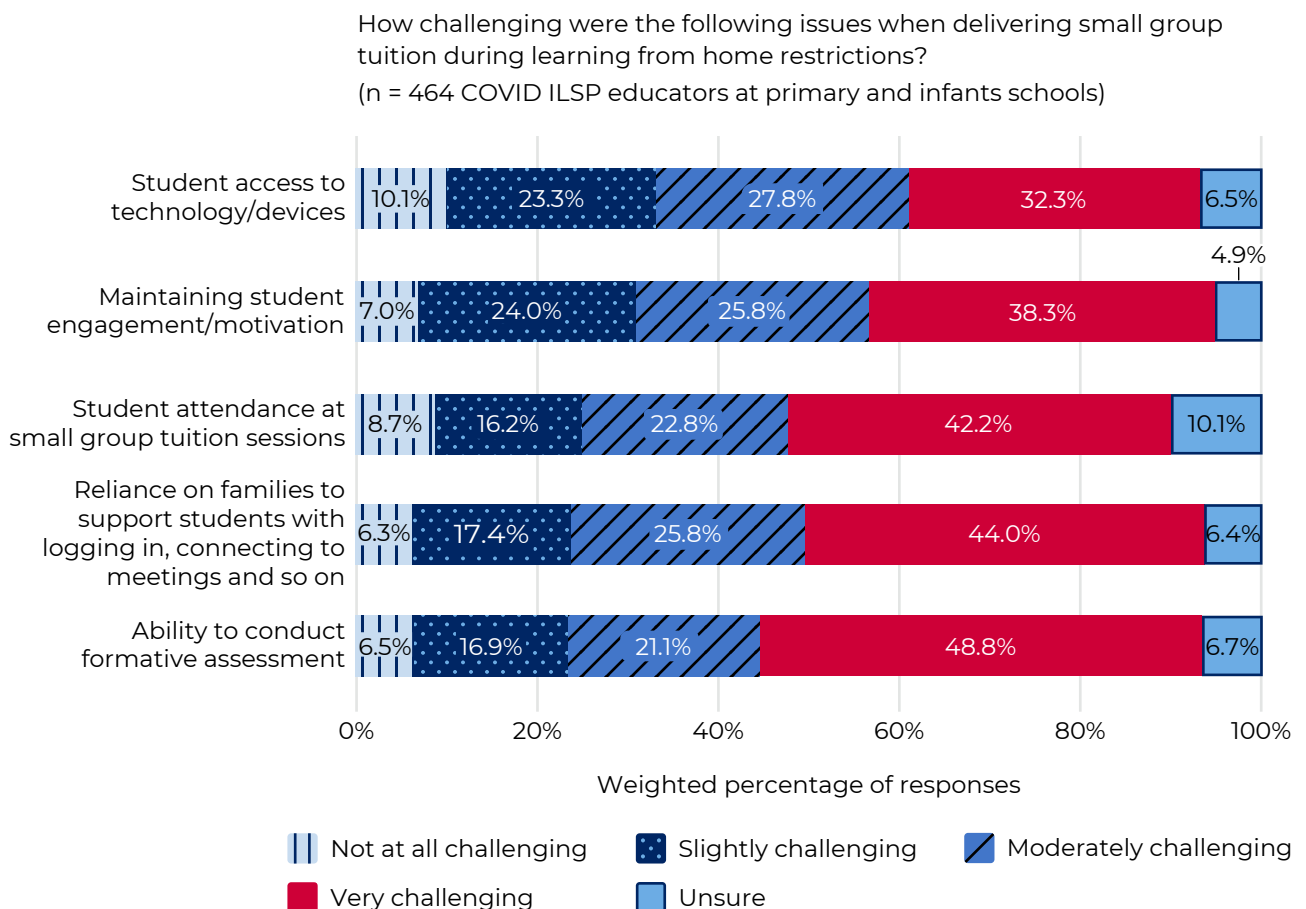
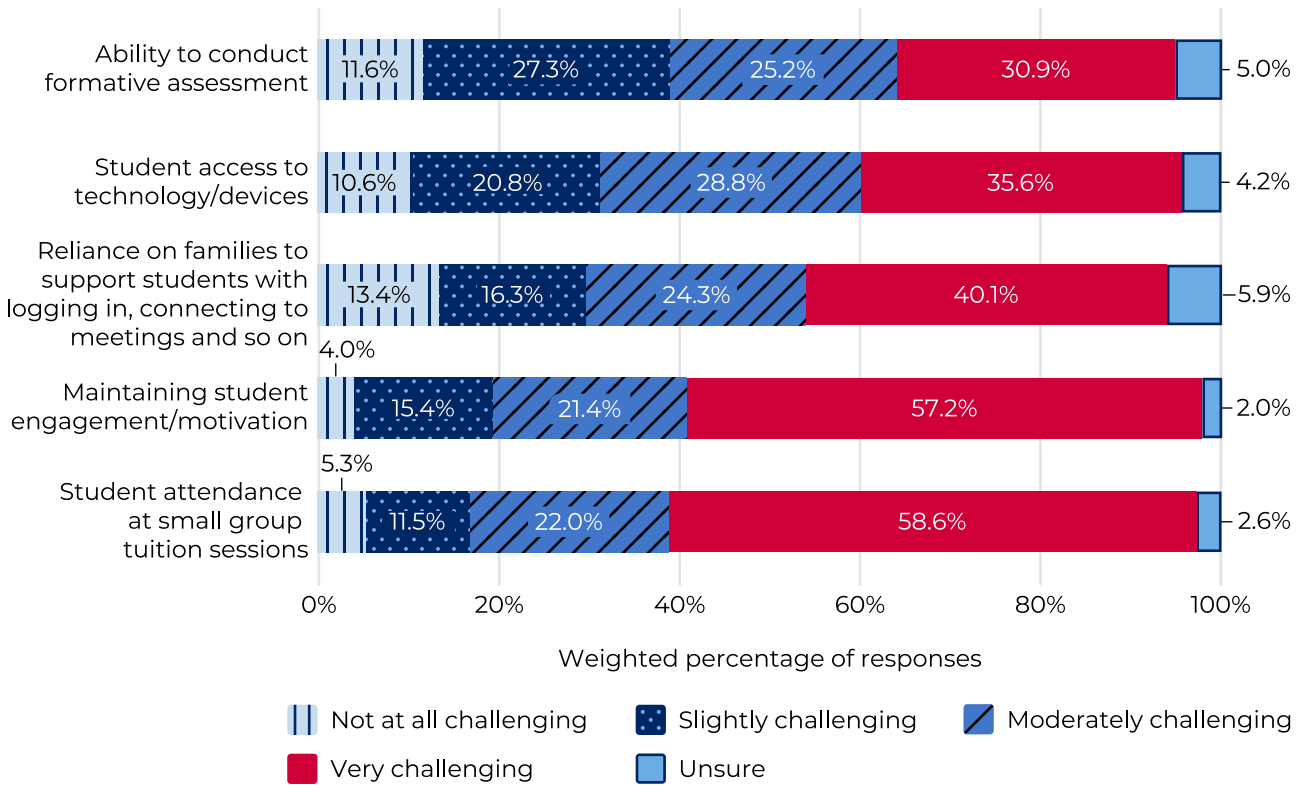


Figure 7

Challenges for educators at secondary schools

How challenging were the following issues when delivering small group tuition during learning from home restrictions?
(n = 222 COVID ILSP educators at secondary schools)



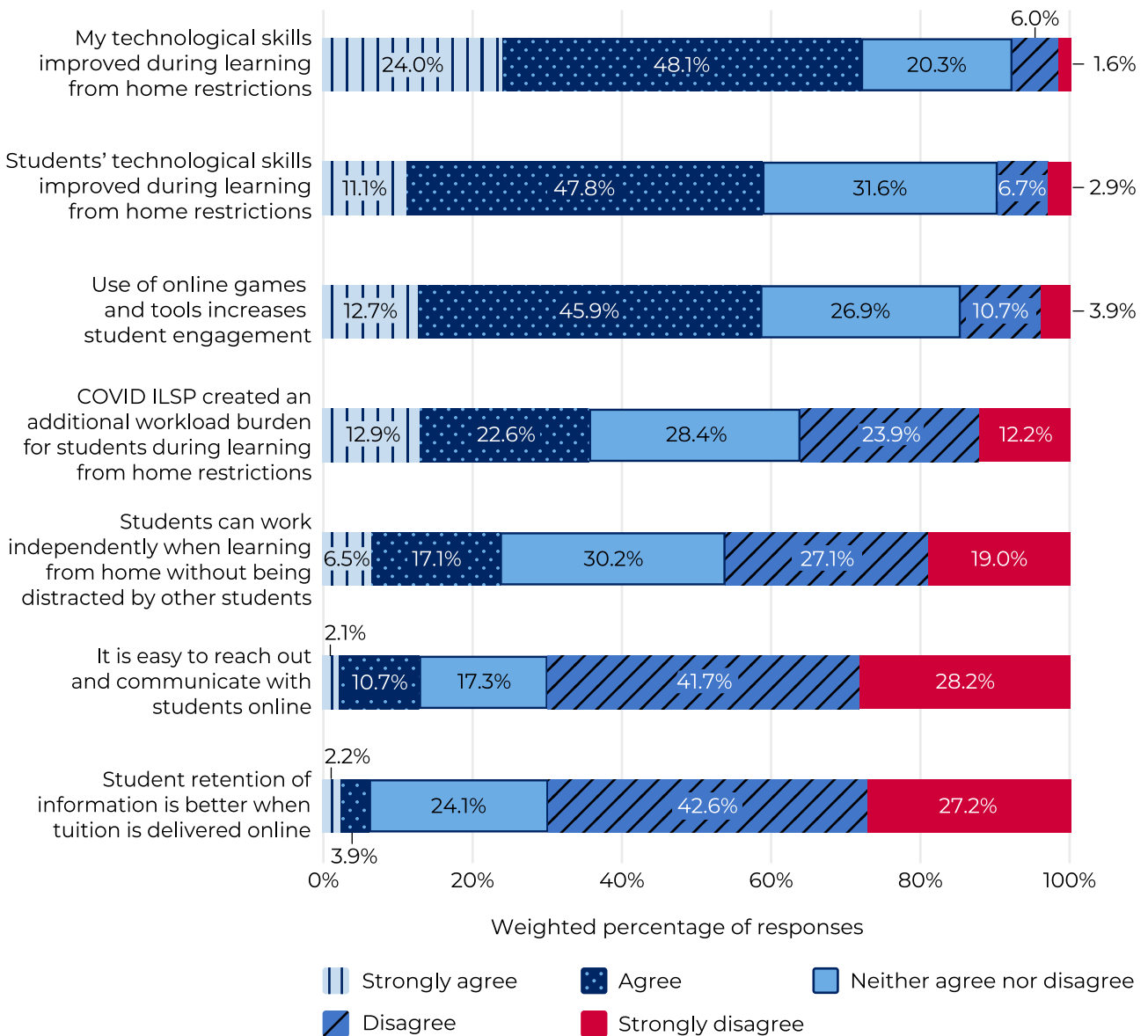
Educators reported that while technological skills improved during learning from home, successfully engaging with COVID ILSP students was challenging

Schools’ shift to learning from home and online instruction represented dramatic changes to teaching and learning. Close to three-quarters (72%) of educators agreed that their technological skills had improved, while close to 60% of educators agreed that their students’ technological skills had improved. However, this move to online learning had implications for students’ engagement in their learning. The majority of surveyed educators believed that students’ retention of information was impacted due to the learning from home restrictions. Specifically, 27% (95% CI [24%, 31%]) of educators ‘strongly disagreed’ and 43% (95% CI [39%, 47%]) ‘disagreed’ that retention of information delivered online was better during this time.

Figure 8

Educators' general opinions on program implementation during learning from home restrictions

To what extent do you agree with the following statements about delivering small group tuition during learning from home restrictions?
(n = 684 COVID ILSP educators)



Summary

- Implementing the COVID Intensive Learning Support Program during learning from home restrictions was reported as a challenge by close to 95% of principals, program coordinators and educators. Some reported that the program was not delivered consistently, or at all, during this time.
- Educators in secondary school settings reported that the greatest challenges were student attendance and engagement. For educators in primary school settings, the greatest challenges were conducting formative assessments to understand students' progress and reliance on parents to facilitate using technology.

Program resources

The COVID Intensive Learning Support Program provided a wide range of resources to assist staff to implement the program. This consisted of:

- a website
- professional learning sessions
- Microsoft Teams channels
- responsive school support.

More than 38,000 unique users visited the COVID ILSP website

The program's website hosted information about the program, the research underpinning the recommendations of small group tuition and implementation requirements. By the end of Term 4 Week 10, the internal department website had been accessed by more than 38,634 unique users.

Survey data shown in Figure 9 indicates that the COVID ILSP website was the resource most frequently accessed by principals and program coordinators, with more than three-quarters of principals and program coordinators (77.4%) accessing the website by the end of the year. Approximately 60% of educators (60.5%) reported accessing the website during the same period of time.

Professional learning modules and frequent 'drop in' sessions were available to support school staff

Between Terms 2 and 4 in 2021, the COVID ILSP project team hosted 49 professional learning 'drop-in' sessions that were held more than twice a week for school staff through Zoom and available as recordings on the Microsoft Teams channel.

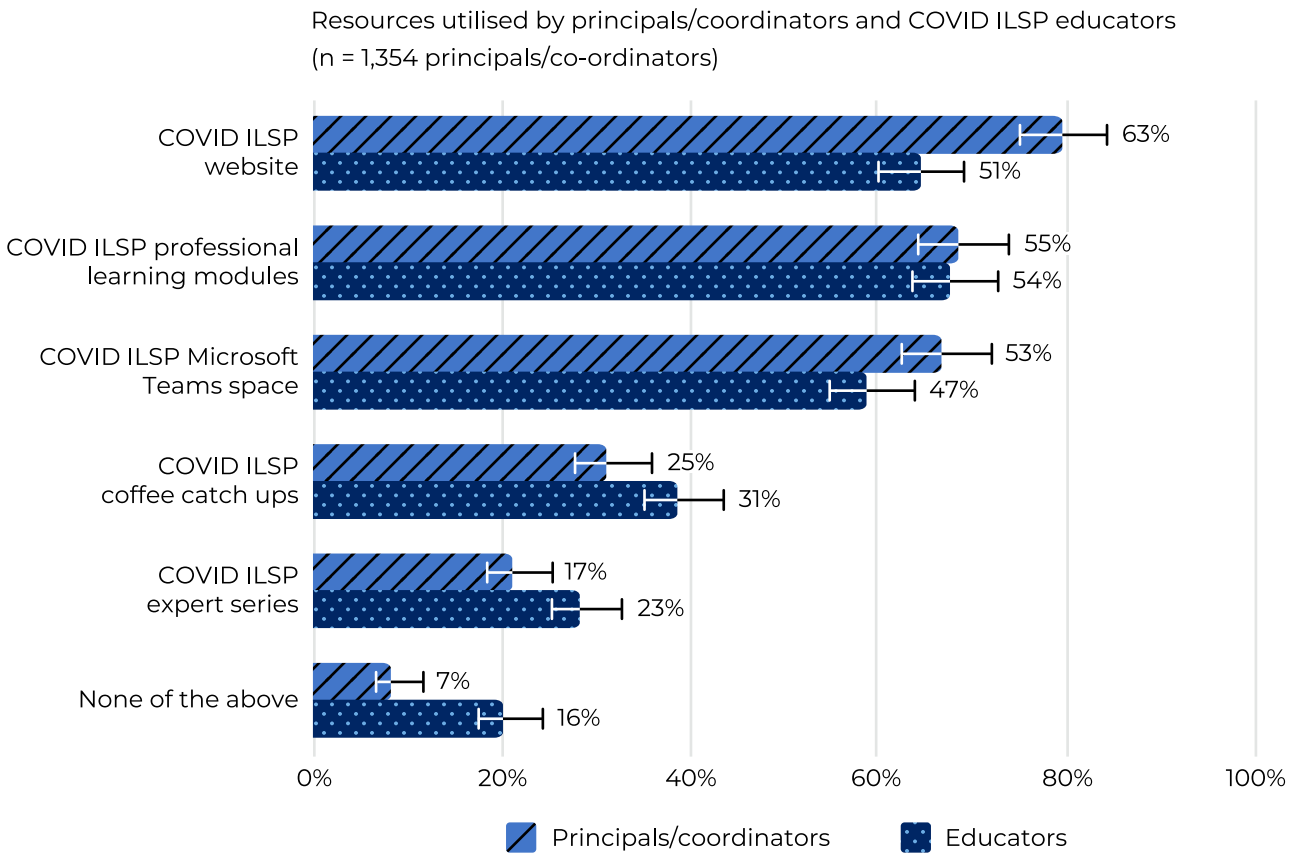
There were also 8 self-directed professional learning modules available to departmental staff on Microsoft Teams. Data on the number of completed courses could not be collected, as the modules and accompanying learning materials were available via webpage. However, by the end of Term 4 Week 10, there had been 6,668 unique visitors to the professional learning modules, and professional learning resources had been viewed a total of 197,790 times.

Survey data shown in Figure 9 reveals that professional learning modules were the resource most frequently accessed by educators, with 54% (95% CI [50.2%, 57.4%]) reporting having engaged with the modules. The professional learning modules had also been accessed by more than half of principals and program coordinators (55%, 95% CI [50.6%, 58.3%] and 54%, 95% CI [50.1%, 57.4%] respectively).

Approximately 16% (95% CI [13.5%, 19%]) of educators and 7% (95% CI [4.9%, 8.9%]) of principals and program coordinators reported not engaging with any of the available COVID ILSP resources.

Figure 9

COVID ILSP school support resource utilisation reported by educators and principals/coordinators



Staff could access support through Microsoft Teams channels or the program's other support channels

The COVID ILSP project team provided multiple avenues for support for school staff. There were two Microsoft Teams channels where staff could interact and respond regarding implementation of the program, with a total of 6,958 members by the end of 2021. Within these teams, members of the project team would facilitate twice-weekly meetings focusing on targeted areas of delivery, such as PLAN2 and learning progressions, literacy, assessment, SPaRO and PLAN2 reporting, small group tuition and personalised learning.

Additionally, a responsive support team was established to provide individualised support to schools. This team worked with schools who requested support through the Microsoft Teams channels. A total of 584 schools received one-to-one support from the COVID ILSP project team between Terms 2 and 4 in 2021.

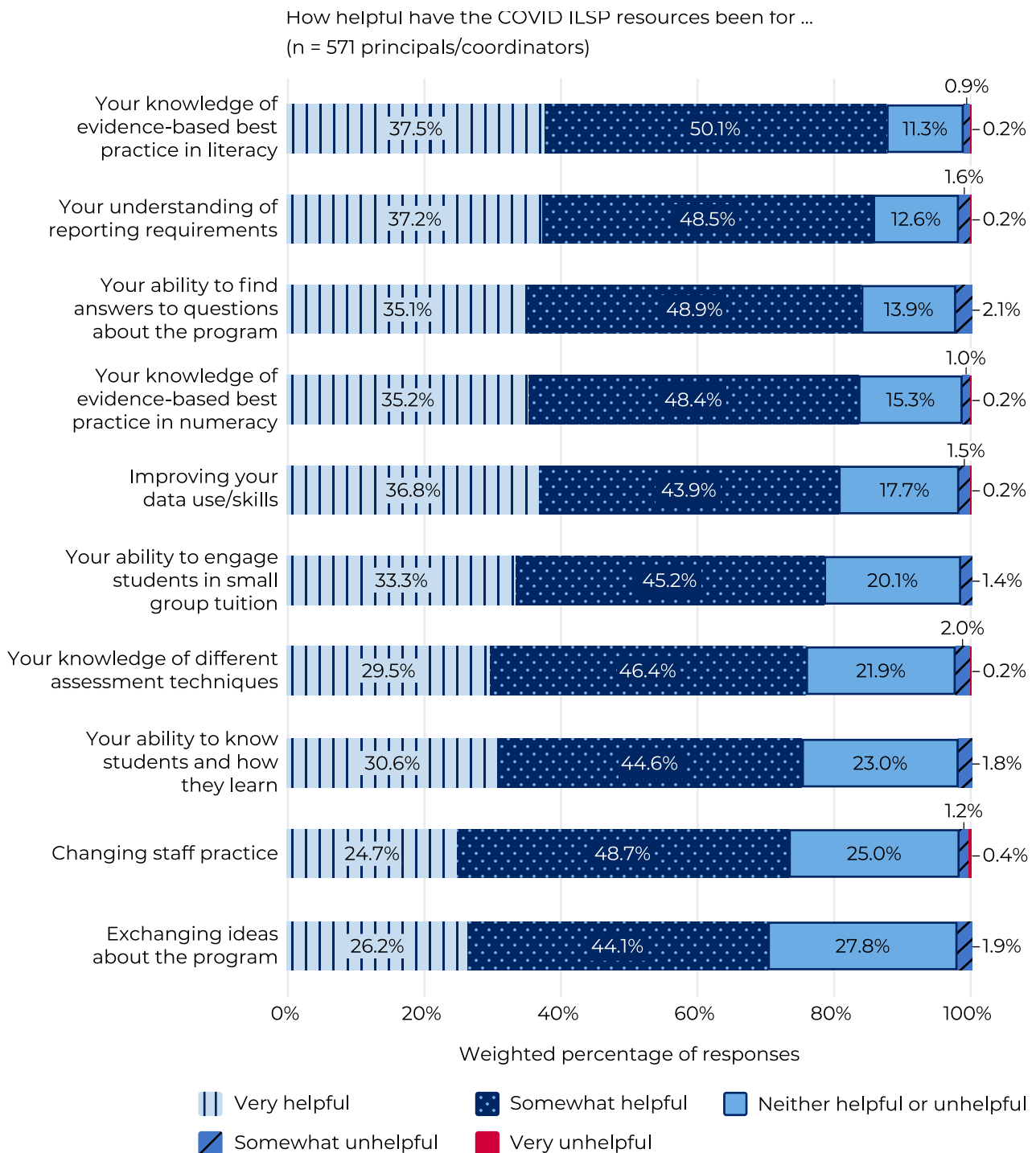
Helpfulness of resources

The majority of principals and program coordinators found the COVID ILSP resources helpful

More than one-third of principals and program coordinators rated resources as 'very helpful' for their knowledge on best practises in literacy (37.5%, 95% CI [33.2%, 41.2%]) and numeracy (35.2%, 95% CI [30.9%, 35.5%]), as well as for improving data skills and use (36.8%, 95% CI [36.7%, 41.0%]) and understanding reporting requirements for the program (37.2%, 95% CI [33.0%, 41.5%]) (Figure 10).

A large proportion of principals and program coordinators found the resources were ‘helpful’ in answering questions about the program (48.9%, 95% CI [44.5%, 53.5%]) and knowledge of different assessment techniques (46.4%, 95% CI [42.0%, 51.0%]). This suggests that the resources were appropriately designed to support the successful implementation of the program.

Figure 10
Helpfulness of school support resources as reported by principals/coordinators

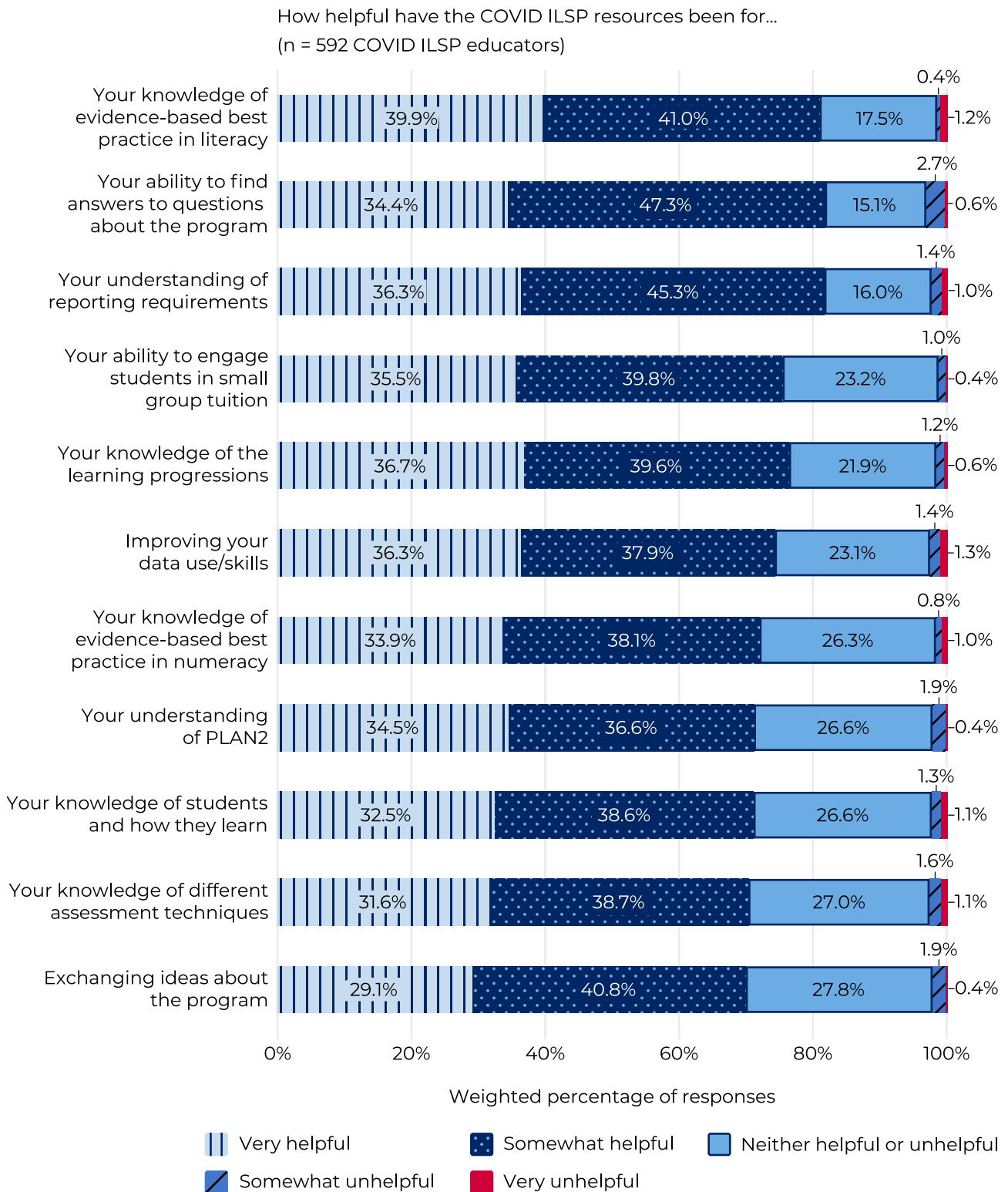


Educators found the resources most helpful for understanding the requirements of the program

The majority of educators found the available resources helpful to their understanding of the reporting requirements of the program (81%) and were able to find answers to their questions about the program (80%) (Figure 11).

Figure 11

Helpfulness of school support resources as reported by educators



Close to 40% of educators reported that the resources for evidence-based practices were 'very helpful' (39.9%, 95% CI [35.7%, 44.4%]). Educators also indicate that the resources were 'very helpful' for understanding the learning progressions. This is also supported by the fact that most educators reported accessing the available professional learning materials.

Summary

- There were a wide range of resources for the COVID Intensive Learning Support Program available to school staff, including a comprehensive website, professional learning resources and responsive support teams.
- These resources were considered by most to be helpful, with principals and program coordinators, as well as educators, reporting that the resources assisted with effective implementation of the program.

Outcome evaluation findings

- Principals and program coordinators, classroom teachers and educators report that the program has had a positive impact on students' learning progress, as well as their confidence, engagement and motivation.
- The program has created opportunities for classroom teachers and educators to collaborate and improve their own professional practice.
- Principals and program coordinators indicate that the program has had a positive impact on educators' professional knowledge, with half in strong agreement that educators were upskilling in their use of data (52%) and best practice for small group tuition (50%).
- At this stage, it is not possible to determine the extent to which the COVID ILSP has impacted student academic outcomes. This is due to considerable challenges to both the implementation of the program in the transition to learning from home, and the collection of data using existing reporting platforms.

The outcome evaluation of the COVID Intensive Learning Support Program seeks to understand:

- the perceived impact of the program
- the impact of the program on the academic outcomes of participating students.

Phase 2 of the evaluation compares students receiving COVID ILSP support with similar students not receiving support on their growth in academic scores from the end of 2020 to the end of 2021.

The perceived impact of the program

Impact on students

Principals and program coordinators, classroom teachers and COVID ILSP educators reported the program had a positive impact on students' learning progress

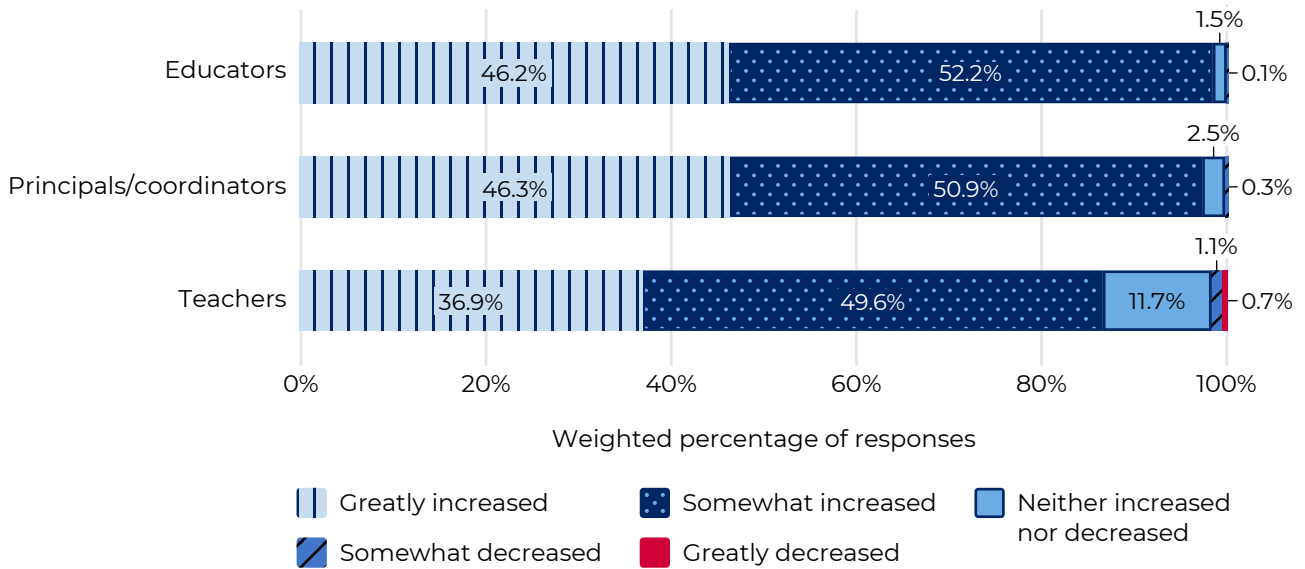
Approximately 45% of all surveyed groups reported that the students participating in the program had 'greatly increased' in their learning progress. A larger proportion of respondents indicated that students had 'somewhat' increased in their learning progress, whilst less than 2% of classroom teachers reported that students' progress had decreased during this time. This very small percentage may be explained as some teachers' feedback regarding the disruption that withdrawing students from class can sometimes cause.

The overall perceived positive impact of the program was also detected in focus groups conducted virtually over Microsoft Teams in Term 4 2021. All 9 schools, their staff and educators, reported that the program had made a positive difference to students' learning progress.

Figure 12

The impact of small group tuition on students' learning progress

What impact has small group tuition had on the learning progress of students?
(n = 2,227 respondents)



Data collected during focus groups with a sample of schools provided qualitative evidence of the program's reception and impact in schools. Vignette 1 demonstrates the experiences of the principal, an educator and a classroom teacher at a regional high school.

Vignette 1

The program was well-received by staff at a regional high school. Staff reported that the program was extremely helpful and provided students with additional and individualised support, which the participating students welcomed and appreciated. Teachers found that the students were increasingly engaged, more willing to learn and more confident when asking for help. The students were also able to comment on their own improved results and could see the direct benefits of the program themselves. The school targeted senior students who had received N-awards and reported that they saw the lowest ever number of recorded N-awards in 2021 as a direct result of the COVID ILSP.

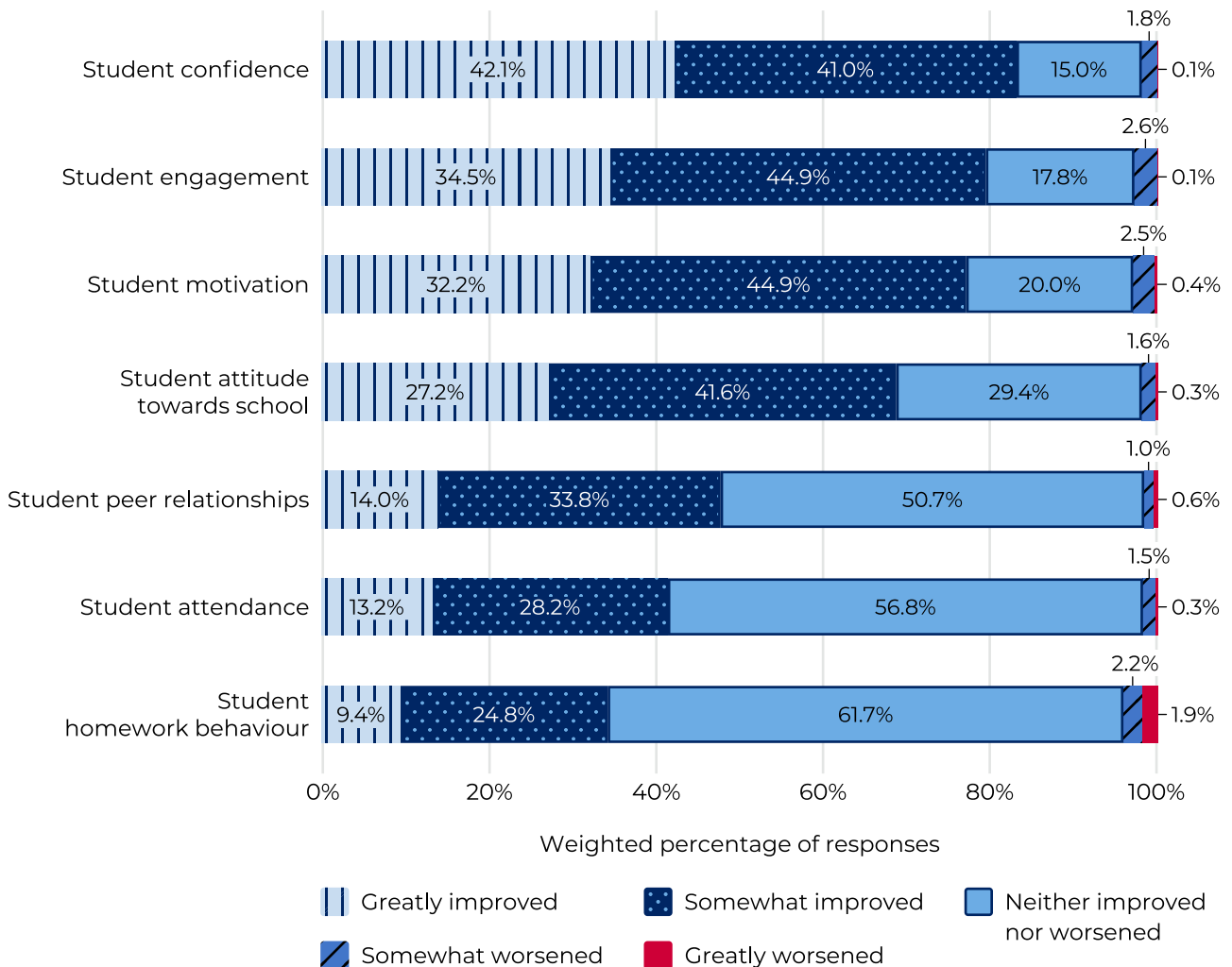
Classroom teachers have observed an improvement in students' confidence and engagement

The vast majority of surveyed classroom teachers reported that students' confidence (84%) and engagement (80%) had improved due to participation in the COVID Intensive Learning Support Program. To a lesser extent, classroom teachers noted that students' motivation (77%) and attitude towards school (69%) had also improved. Some improvement in students' peer relationships (48%) and attendance (41%) was noted but more than half of teachers had reported that there had been no difference to these items (Figure 13).

Figure 13

Classroom teacher appraisal of the effect of COVID ILSP on students

What impact has the COVID ILSP had on all students?
(n = 681 classroom teachers)

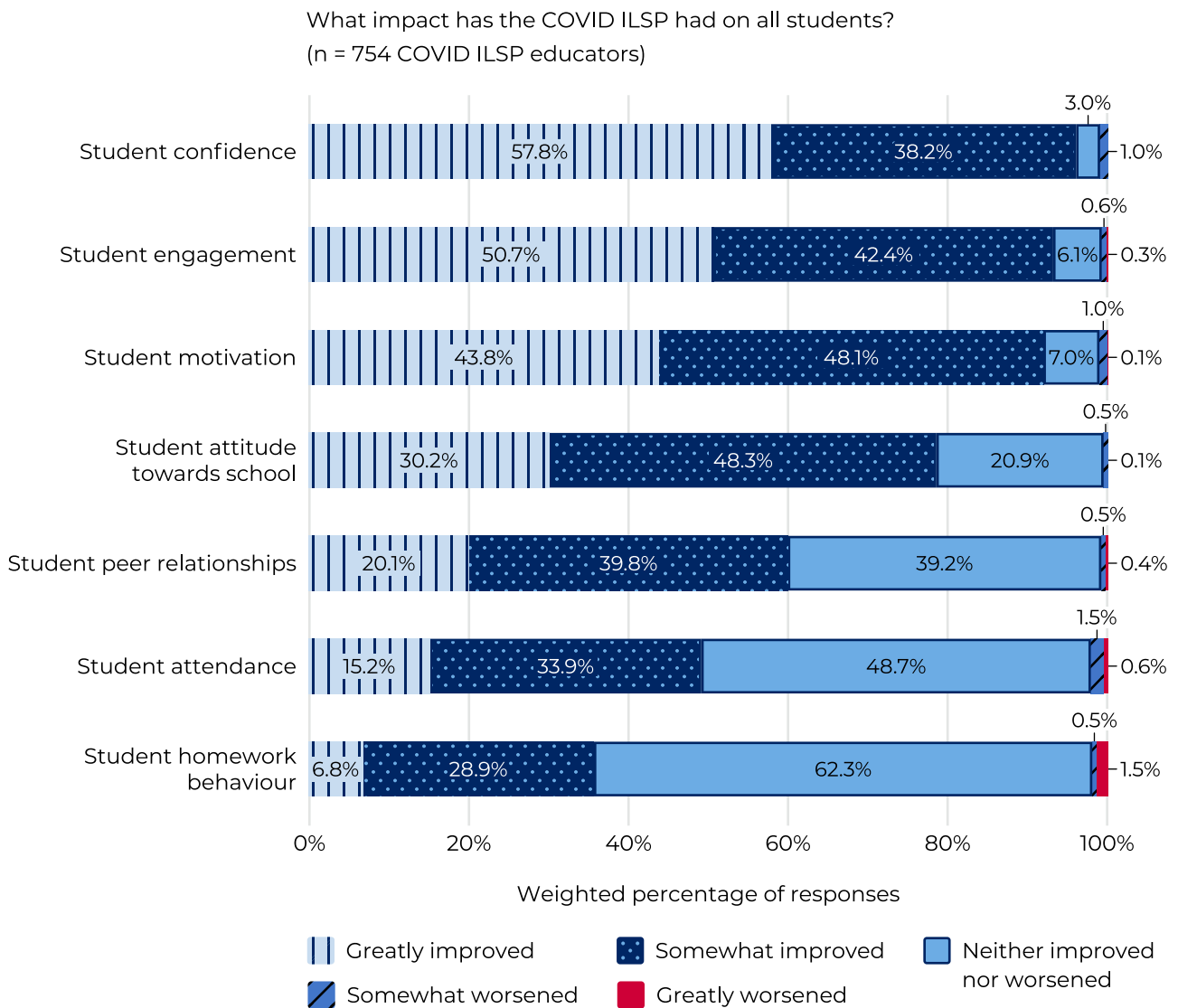


Educators observed that the program had a positive influence on students' confidence, engagement and motivation

Educators reported that the COVID Intensive Learning Support Program had a positive impact on participating students. Almost all educators indicated students had demonstrated improvement in their confidence (98%), as well as notable improvements to student engagement (93%) and motivation (91%). We also examined educators' responses according to school types and found that these three aspects were consistently reported as the most frequent improvements for participating students (Figure 14).

Educators also indicated that the program had encouraged some improvement for students' attendance and homework behaviour. However, the majority did not observe any change in student homework behaviour (62.3%) or attendance (48.6%).

Figure 14
Educator appraisal of the effect of COVID ILSP on students



Focus group data from school staff, educators and students also demonstrates the impact of the program on students' confidence, engagement and motivation.

Vignette 2

Staff at a metropolitan primary school observed students' increased confidence in both their small group tuition and in their regular classroom work as they understood more. A Stage 2 teacher had remarked that the students participating in the program were withdrawn from class activities and had 'put up a brick wall'. However, the students had shown an increased motivation to learn and knew that they had the support of the educator and their peers. The educator noticed that students were excited to share when they had a 'light bulb moment' in class, realising that the skills they learned in the small groups could be applied to their other classes.

Vignette 3

Students at a metropolitan high school found that the program was helpful as a refresher of what they had learned in previous years and they had seen improvements in their work. Overall, the students felt positive about attending the small group tutoring and liked that the educators gave them respect as well as provided a space to ask questions. The 5 students in the focus group all agreed that their confidence in their regular classes had improved. However, there was a consensus that they disliked being withdrawn from the same classes as they had to catch up on a lot of work.

Impact on school staff

The program created opportunities for classroom teachers and educators to engage in professional discussion and learning

The program required school staff to collaborate, plan for and implement learning activities to support students and their learning needs. Educators and classroom teachers reported spending their collaboration time discussing student progress, student engagement and student assessment data. Supported by resources available through the Digital Learning Resources Hub, educators and classroom teachers were able to work together to address students' learning needs.

Focus group data collected from a regional central school demonstrates how school staff benefitted from the program, and how the program had been implemented in a small school context.

Vignette 4

Staff at a regional central school have described the program as the catalyst for successful literacy support for students. The school set up learning stations to address specific literacy skills. Teachers gave the example of one student whose progress against the learning progressions had improved from Stage 1 to Stage 3 with one-on-one intensive support. Teachers also stated that the program improved their skills in monitoring and recording student progress. They reflected that the opportunity for educators and teachers to collaborate and discuss evidence of students' learning, PLAN2 data and the learning progressions has improved their teaching practice, and the model developed by the school will extend beyond the program to become business as usual.

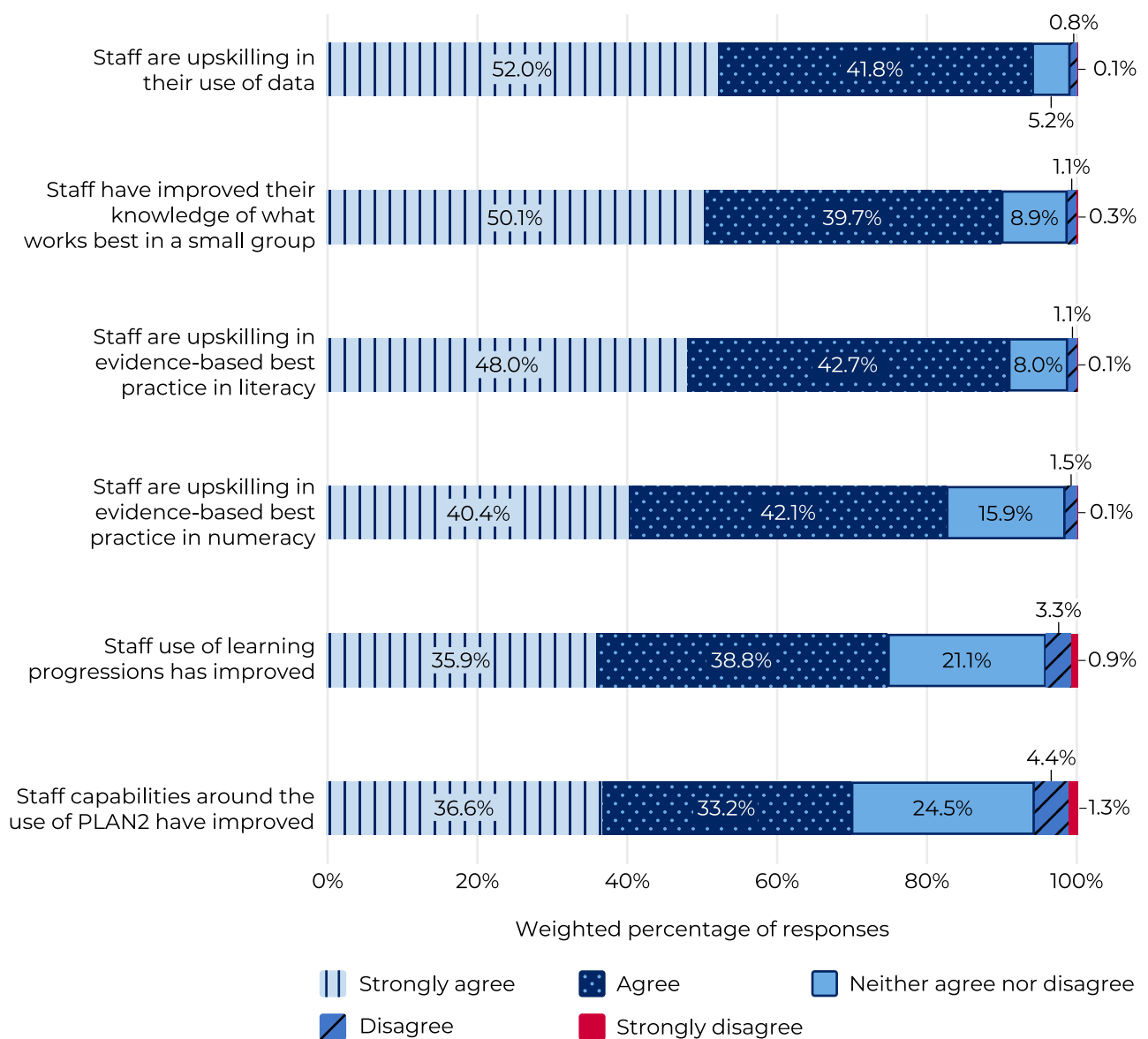
Principals and program coordinators report that the program has supported educators in their professional development

Half of principals and program coordinators 'strongly agreed' that the program had led to educators upskilling in their use of data (52%) and an improvement in their knowledge of best practice for small group instruction (50%). Overall, most principals and program coordinators indicated that the program had influenced and improved educators' skills and capabilities (Figure 15).

Figure 15

Principal/coordinator appraisal of the effect of the COVID ILSP on staff

Do you agree with the following statements about the impact of COVID ILSP on staff delivering the program?
(n = 622 principals/coordinators)



Summary

- Principals and program coordinators, classroom teachers and educators report that the program has had a positive impact on students' learning progress, as well as their confidence, engagement and motivation.
- The program has created opportunities for classroom teachers and educators to collaborate and improve their own professional practice.
- Principals and program coordinators indicate that the program has had a positive impact on educators' professional knowledge, with half in strong agreement that educators were upskilling in their use of data (52%) and best practice for small group tuition (50%).

Impact on student achievement

The methods used for the outcome evaluation of the COVID Intensive Learning Support Program are summarised here and explained in further detail in Appendix 5.

Student participation data

Data from PLAN2 and SPaRO were used where possible to identify participating students. This data was then linked via students' student reference numbers (SRNs) to centrally held school data, their student characteristics and their academic baseline and outcome data

Centrally-held school data

School data held by the department and ACARA were used to develop sampling frames for school data collection.

Academic data: NAPLAN or Check-in assessments

NAPLAN, an annual assessment for all Australian students in Years 3, 5, 7 and 9, as well as the Check-in assessments were used to measure student growth from baseline to outcome measure before and after to program to measure program impact. Table 3 demonstrates the baseline and outcome measures for Years 4 to 9.

Table 3

Baseline and outcome measures used for evaluation of the COVID Intensive Learning Support Program

2021 cohort	Baseline measure	Outcome measure
Year 4	Term 4 2020 Check-in (Year 3)	Term 4 2021 Check-in
Year 5	2019 NAPLAN (Year 3)	
Year 6	Term 4 2020 Check-in (Year 5)	
Year 7	2019 NAPLAN (Year 5)	
Year 8	2018 NAPLAN (Year 5)	
Year 9	2019 NAPLAN (Year 7)	

Data analysis: This evaluation measured academic growth from baseline to outcome timepoints using various NAPLANs and Check-in assessments at baseline and Term 4 2021 Check-in assessments at outcome. However, for Reading in Years 3, 5 and 9, this evaluation has only compared students on their Term 4 2021 Check-in assessment results because these instances of the assessment could not be equated to their prior NAPLAN equivalents.

Data analysis

Analysing student academic outcomes requires comparing students receiving tuition and students not receiving tuition on their academic achievements before and after the program. The difference between academic results before and after a time period is a student's growth over time, and by comparing 2 groups on this metric, one can make inferences on whether the program affected students' academic growth or not.

Check-in assessment coverage is presented in Table 4. The scaled scores from these assessments serve as suitable outcome measures for the baseline measures discussed earlier (Table 3).

Table 4

Check-In assessment coverage for COVID ILSP participants and non-participants

	Reading		Numeracy	
	Non-participants	Participants	Non-participants	Participants
Year 3	92.7 %	92.5 %	92.6 %	92.6 %
Year 4	93.4 %	93.3 %	93.3 %	93.2 %
Year 5	93.2 %	92.6 %	93.0 %	92.4 %
Year 6	93.0 %	92.8 %	92.6 %	92.5 %
Year 7	81.2 %	79.2 %	80.3 %	79.3 %
Year 8	80.7 %	82.1 %	80.3 %	82.5 %
Year 9	74.3 %	72.6 %	72.4 %	72.0 %

Controlling for observational data through matching and modelling

In a traditional random control trial, randomly allocating participants to groups is used to ensure that treatment and control groups are not different from each other at baseline.

However, students are not randomly allocated to the COVID Intensive Learning Support Program. Schools, following program guidelines, selected students who experienced more disadvantage in their learning for the program. Participating students tended to have lower baseline scores on standardised assessments and could have higher growth rates meaning that any observed differences in outcomes could be a result of these inherent differences, as opposed to the effect of the program.

Propensity score matching techniques were conducted to identify non-participating students who were sufficiently similar to participating students. Then, regression techniques were used to further remove any residual confounding effects of these variables. The use of both techniques isolates the effect of the COVID ILSP and minimises the risk that any inference is based on erroneous confounds.

Propensity score matching

Propensity score matching is a technique which allows for different observations to be compared and matched on their similarity on many different characteristics all at once. The matched non-participating students should be similar enough to the participating students to allow valid inferences on the effects of the program. For further details, please refer to Appendix 6.

Relevant variables were selected a priori as being likely to affect a student's likelihood of being selected for tuition. Importantly, students were matched on their baseline NAPLAN or Check-in assessment scores (refer to Table 3). In Years 6, 7 and 9 historic growth could be calculated by taking the difference of previous NAPLAN results. Variables used to match students are outlined in Table 5.

Table 5

Variables used for propensity score matching

Student-level characteristics	School-level characteristics	Assessment characteristics
Aboriginal status	Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage (ICSEA)	Historical growth (Years 6, 7, 9 only)
EAL/D phases	Number of FTE teaching staff	Baseline assessment score
Language background other than English (LBOTE)	Number of FTE non-teaching staff	Outcome attempt date
SEA quartiles	Percentage of girls' enrolment	–
Baseline attendance	Percentage of LBOTE enrolment	–
–	Total enrolments	–
–	School's total gross income per student	–
–	Total lockdown days in 2021	–

Separate matching processes were followed for each grade as baseline NAPLAN and Check-in assessment scores differed between grades. Assessment of program impact can only be conducted on those students who have scores on both baseline and outcome measures. For example, if a Year 5 student has recently moved to NSW in 2021, they would not have a baseline Term 4 2020 Check-in assessment result to match on. Additionally, some students are exempt from taking NAPLAN and Check-in assessments for various reasons. After removal of such students, the final outcome analysis was conducted on 42,595 participating students. Propensity score matching ensures that an equal 42,595 similar non-participating students are used as the comparison group.

For more details on the students excluded at this stage of the analysis, refer to Appendix 6.

Propensity score matching also ensures that for Years 5, 7 and 9 Reading, students are sufficiently similar at baseline, thus allowing for meaningful comparisons at outcome for these students. Differences between the participating and non-participating students pre- and post-matching are presented in Appendix 6.

Table 6

Evaluable sample size by cohort

Year	Number of participating students	Evaluation sample size (participating students)	Percentage of cohort
Year 4	12,844	10,391	81%
Year 5	13,080	10,796	83%
Year 6	9,106	6,378	70%
Year 7	8,111	4,923	61%
Year 8	9,240	6,110	66%
Year 9	7,711	3,997	51%

Modelling strategy

After using matching to obtain a balanced sample, additional modelling was conducted with linear regressions using generalised estimating equations. This modelling approach allows estimates of the population average while accounting for the non-independent observations. An exchangeable matrix was used per student, and similarly robust standard errors were estimated.

In order to make growth comparable between year levels, for each year level NAPLAN and Check-in assessments scores at both baseline and outcome were divided by the standard deviation of scores at baseline. Growth can then be measured as units of baseline variability for each grade, regardless of the scale of each grade's raw values.

Analytical implications of missing variables for outcome evaluation

Missing information from key data sources of the program has resulted in an outcome evaluation where the only option is to treat all students alike. That is, if a student participated, in any area, for any length of time and receiving tuition by anyone, they are considered as equivalently treated. Additionally, students who may have participated in the program in Term 4 but could not be collected were identified as a non-participating student and were used as a comparison student. This means that it is likely the analysis has diluted the estimated effects of the program, and will underestimate the true effect of the program.

Student engagement data

Student attendance data was not consistently collected by the department in Terms 3 and 4 in 2021. This evaluation intended to assess the program's impact on student engagement by comparing the attendance data of participating students with similar non-participating students before and after the program. The collection of Term 4 attendance data was disrupted as a result of the 2021 lockdown and was not available for analysis and reporting.

Tell Them From Me Surveys were also considered as a metric of student engagement. Unfortunately, the most proximal survey conducted in Terms 3 and 4 in 2021 does not have SRNs to match students with their baseline values, thus precluding the pre-and post-comparison between groups.

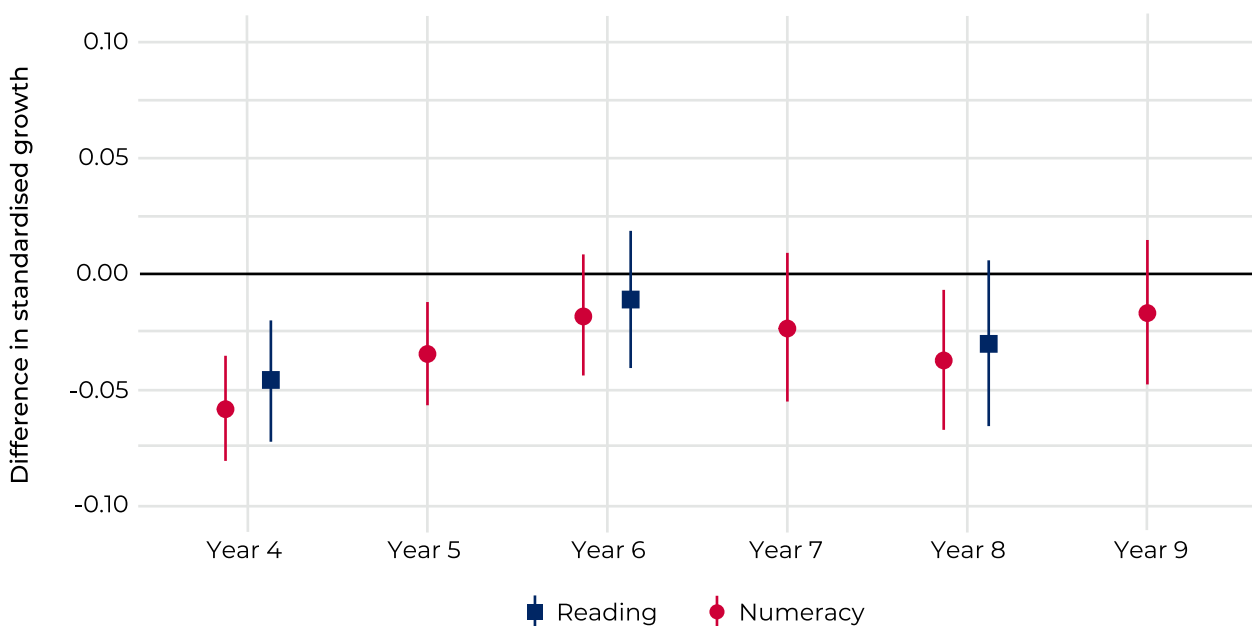
Nonetheless, we attempt to address the impact of the program on student engagement using survey data of staff's perceptions of impact.

Analysis of Check-in assessment scores for participating students

It was not possible to determine the impact on academic achievement of students who received support in 2021. The post modelling results were unable to reliably determine whether students who received tuition grew more than similar students who did not receive the program. While Figure 16 shows lower student growth in the participating group, for Year 6 Numeracy, Year 6 Reading, Year 7 Numeracy, Year 8 Reading and Year 9 Reading, the results are not statistically significant and therefore we cannot be certain that the program had no effect.

Figure 16

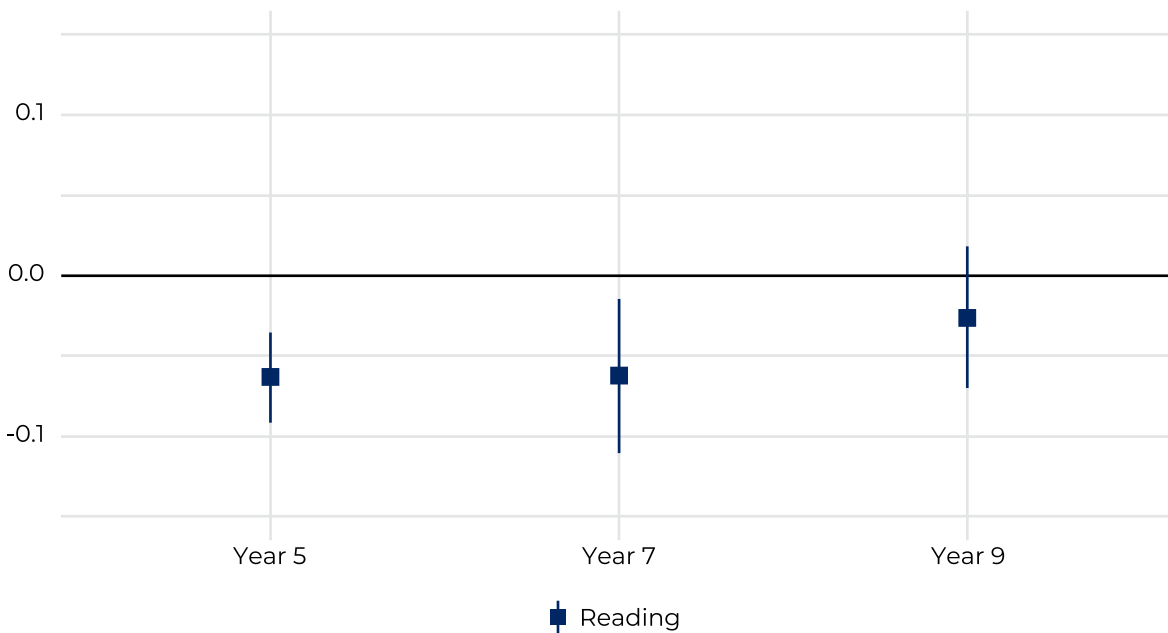
Standardised estimates of effect size (difference in growth from baseline) for each cohort and domain with confidence intervals



For the year levels where the outcome Check-in assessment measures cannot be equated with their baseline, comparing differences in growth is not possible. Instead, we compared the groups on their scores in the Term 4 2021 Check-in assessments. Matching ensured that the groups are sufficiently similar to make inferences. Final estimates of standardised differences are plotted in Figure 17.

Figure 17

Standardised estimates of effect size (difference in Reading outcome score) for each cohort with confidence intervals



It was not possible to reliably determine whether students who received tuition achieved a different outcome in Check-in assessment scores than similar students who did not receive the program. For Year 9, this negative difference is not significant, indicating that we cannot be certain that the program had no effect.

Interpretations

These results must be interpreted in the context of the limitations outlined in the 'Limitations' section discussed earlier. It is likely that the final sample of students for the evaluation has underestimated the effect of the program because of these data limitations. The effect sizes here are so small that half (6 out of 12) of the hypothesis tests indicated that there was insufficient evidence to conclude that the program had any effect in either direction.⁵

⁵ Hattie (2015) advises from their meta-analysis of over 1,200 studies that an effect size of 0.2 is small. ACARA's (2021) guidelines on comparing differences in NAPLAN specifically (Check-in assessment is equated to NAPLAN), similarly advises that 0.2 is considered a small difference. The observed effect sizes are far below even that level.

Unexpected negative results

It was not expected that the students receiving tuition would be estimated to grow less than their similar peers. There are several possible explanations of these results, which do not necessarily conclude that the program negatively impacted on the treated students' growth.

Unobserved covariates may have confounded comparisons

Given the overall small negative effect sizes, it is likely that some unknown confounding variable could have introduced bias between the groups. One explanation is that while students are matched on their baseline data, the baseline may have been collected several years prior. For example, baseline data for students in Year 8 in 2021 were their Year 5 NAPLAN scores from 2018. It is possible that some intervening change in academic performance could have occurred to the matched non-treated students to make them slightly different to the treated students, biasing the comparison.

The differences in the growth rates appear quite consistent even though the growth rates themselves are quite variable. For example, Year 6 Reading had growth rates of less than 20 points, while Numeracy had growth rates of more than 40 points. If the program had truly had a negative effect on students, one would expect that negative effect to be proportional to the growth. Despite the growth in Numeracy being twice the size of the growth in Reading, the differences in differences are remarkably similar. Similarly, between years that have vastly different growth rates, the differences in difference remain similar rather than following some proportion of the differing growth. If the program had had a larger effect this problem would not have been relevant because while some unknown variable remained uncontrolled, the bias introduced would be too small to affect the overall conclusions.

Time required by educators to build familiarity with COVID ILSP may have confounded comparisons

Alternatively, another possibility is that as educators had more time to familiarise themselves with small group tuition, their delivery improved towards end of the year. Thus, students who participated in Term 4 would have the strongest positive results. Given that this evaluation did not identify Term 4 participating students, they are all considered not-participating. Their stronger growth would have incorrectly been attributed to the non-participating group, and make it appear that the non-participating students grew more than the participating students.

Summary

- Our analysis was unable to determine at this stage whether there were improvements in student achievement amongst those who participated in the program in 2021. This is primarily due to inconsistent reporting of students who participated in the program. Improved reporting mechanisms should resolve these issues for the evaluation of the program in 2022.

Program feedback

- The COVID Intensive Learning Support Program allowed schools the freedom to implement support appropriate for their students and school context, and enabled collaboration between classroom teachers and educators to support students.
- Some principals and program coordinators reported wanting greater flexibility with who they can hire as educators for the program. They also expressed an interest in greater funding to support a greater number of students.
- Some teachers found student withdrawal was challenging as work covered by the educators was not always aligned with classwork.
- Educators were interested in the program providing a wider range of resources to support the work of the program.

The program allowed schools the freedom to implement support appropriate for their students and school context

The funding for the COVID Intensive Learning Support Program was designed to allow schools to make choices about the support that would be most beneficial and appropriate for their students. A wide range of resources were made available to schools via the ILSP learning hub, to support the coordinators and educators (Further discussion about the resources can be found in the next chapter). The program guidelines made clear that the only requirements of implementation for this program were to the reporting and evaluation measures.

Across survey and focus group data, participants were appreciative of the freedom the program allowed schools to support their students. Open text survey responses revealed a wide range of models and a variety of pedagogy that were considered successful. Such models included multi-modal lessons with stimulus and response activities, structured third-party programs, specific small group tuition spaces and targeted learning stations.

The program enabled collaboration between classroom teachers and educators to support individual students

Principals and program coordinators, classroom teachers and educators engaged with processes to identify and support those students most in need of literacy and numeracy support. These processes were reported in focus groups as a great source of professional learning for all 3 groups, as they worked together to triangulate sources of data to select students for participation.

Identifying areas of need for individual students also encouraged classroom teachers and educators to articulate and provide feedback on aspects of either literacy or numeracy that needed to be addressed within stage groups or key learning areas.

Staff recommendations for improvement

Principals and program coordinators, classroom teachers and educators provided feedback on how the program could be improved in both the Term 4 surveys and focus groups. Thematic analysis of the open text survey responses reveals that there was frequent praise and appreciation for the program, as well as a desire for the program to continue.

Principals and program coordinators would like more flexibility with who they can hire for the program

Many principals and program coordinators commented on the difficulty of finding staff for the program. In particular, finding appropriate and consistent staff for the program were frequent concerns. Some respondents commented on the benefits of changes made to staffing guidelines in late 2021, allowing educator roles to be filled by SLSOs.

“Access to more tutors – [it was] difficult to get pre-service teachers through the screening, and so on, to have them included.”

High school principal/program coordinator, Term 4 survey

“Extra support in identifying staff capable and willing to be involved in the program.”

High school principal/program coordinator, Term 4 survey

“The announcement that SLSO’s could provide assistance, especially in rural areas where teacher shortages are immense, was fabulous.”

Primary school principal/program coordinator, Term 4 survey

Principals and program coordinators also expressed interest in more funding to expand the program for a greater number of students

Another common theme from principals and program coordinators was an interest in more funding to be able to implement the program on a wider scale throughout the school. Some schools indicated that they would have liked to have hired educators for more days per week, or to hire more educators in total to support students whose learning had been disrupted by COVID-19.

“We were funded for 1 day a week for the year which we used as 2 days a week for semester 1 (1 day a week doesn’t have enough impact).”

Primary school, Term 4

“For consistency of the program for a small school, the funding and location of our school made it difficult for delivery of the program requirements. 3 sessions at an hour each – can’t hire staff for those requirements. Had to be creative with extra funding. This may not be possible next year.”

Primary school, Term 4

Teachers found student withdrawals challenging as work covered by the educators was not always aligned with classwork

For classroom teachers, the most prevalent recommendation for improvement was to provide more support to manage issues with timetabling so that it may decrease the frequency of withdrawing students from their regular classrooms in order to receive tuition.

“Not have students withdrawn from class 3 times/week for different groups. Timetabling is challenging and it is very disruptive to class routines when different students are withdrawn for different groups 3 times a week.”

Primary school teacher, Term 4 survey

“Serious consideration has to be given to the structuring of classes, grouping and timetabling. The frequency of the sessions with so many students from one class, where students are constantly coming and going in the middle of lessons, had a serious impact on the learning needs of the rest of the class.”

Primary school teacher, Term 4 survey

Some teachers also expressed a desire for the program to be centred around classroom-based activities and support the existing work being covered in class. Given that the program is based on research indicating that a structured program is most likely to be successful, it presents a challenge when integrating that approach with the existing teaching approach.

“Sessions within the classroom, at point of need, applied directly to classroom tasks. A lot of the time the COVID support teacher will see growth but the student fails to transfer this knowledge/skills between small group targeted learning to independent work.”

Primary school teacher, Term 4 survey

“Giving teacher voice to the program, to ensure that students who need the extra support are included. This would be best done as part of in class support not withdrawal.”

Primary school, Term 4 survey

Educators desired more targeted resources to implement the program

In the Phase 1 report, responses from educators' survey data indicated they would have liked additional resources that would assist them with implementing the program. In response, digital resources supporting pedagogical approaches, guidelines and best practice were made available to schools. Term 4 survey data for educators show that while resources is still a prevalent theme in educators' feedback, they have made suggestions about the different types of resources that they would assist them with their role rather than a request for resources more generally. In particular, requests for digital resources was a strong theme in the data, likely due to educators who were required to modify activities in response to learning from home.

“Collaboration of interactive online games and interactive classroom games ... Access to devices like iPads, tablets or laptops for use during interactive lessons. Possibly set out like a group reward or a fun way to still have a productive and content rich lesson.”

Primary school, SLSO, Term 4 survey

“More online worksheets and tasks that are automatically graded and that are interactive and interesting for the students – it’s a lot of work taking the basic materials and making them more interactive and able to be marked online.”

High school, accredited teacher delivering the program, Term 4 survey

Educators also requested more teaching materials targeting different content areas.

“The majority of resources and discourse available understandably focus on Primary school stages, with limited access to senior and stage 6 resources. Development of stage based resources would strengthen the program and the networking of staff on the teams forum.”

High school, accredited teacher delivering the program, Term 4 survey

“As a school, we have a comprehension focus and I have found that there are not many comprehension resources available from the department. I have paid for subscriptions to third party companies to gain access to resources to meet my teaching needs and student learning needs.”

Primary school, accredited teacher delivering the program, Term 4 survey

And lastly, comments reveal an interest in more funding for specific programs, activities or even physical resources.

“Funding to allow resource purchases – interactive learning materials, subscriptions and so on.”

High school, accredited teacher delivering the program, Term 4 survey

“A resource bank providing a variety of learning materials, activities and list of useful websites, would be great.”

High school, accredited teacher delivering the program, Term 4 survey

The difference between feedback collected in Term 2 and that of Term 4 reflects educators’ familiarity with the expectations of the COVID Intensive Learning Support Program and more experience with implementing the program, making requests for specific resources that could benefit their students within their individual schools’ contexts.

Summary

- Principals and program coordinators reported that the program could be improved by providing more flexibility with the staff they can hire for the program, as well as additional funding or continuation of the program to expand the number of students supported.
- Teachers found that the withdrawal of students from their classes was challenging, as work covered by the educators in the tutoring sessions did not always align to the students' classwork.
- Educators expressed interest in more targeted resources to implement the program, such as access to devices, resources for specific content areas or different types of resources.

| Conclusion and next steps

The COVID Intensive Learning Support Program has been well received by schools, with survey data showing strong agreement amongst school staff that the program has had a positive impact on students' learning progress.

School staff implementing the COVID Intensive Learning Support Program reported the transition to learning from home as a significant challenge. As NSW schools were under learning from home restrictions from July through to October in 2021, some schools were only reasonably able to implement the small group tuition model as intended for just over a term from mid-Term 1 2021.

Analysis of student assessment data was unable to determine whether there had been an improvement for students who participated in the program, due to considerable challenges to both the implementation of the program in the transition to learning from home, and the collection of data using existing reporting platforms.

The COVID Intensive Learning Support Program project team has made some changes to the reporting guidelines for schools, which should make analysis of student outcome data clearer for the evaluation of the program in 2022. Similarly, the department has indicated that it will acquire additional resources to undertake qualitative work to investigate the wider impact of the program on specific student cohorts and school contexts.

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