The *Catch-Up Learning* program:

Supporting students experiencing disadvantage through online tutoring at home

The Smith Family
Research Report | December 2022

The Smith Family
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Executive summary

Australian research shows a clear and **persistent relationship** between **socioeconomic background** and the **outcomes of young people** at all educational stages. In addition to longstanding gaps in educational achievement, the **COVID-19** pandemic has disrupted Australian schooling since 2020, with its direct impacts still being felt by students, particularly those experiencing disadvantage.

In response to the pandemic, The Smith Family piloted *Catch-Up Learning,* an **online home-based tutoring** program for students in **Years 4 to 8**, in late 2020 to mid-2021. **Qualified teachers** provided **one-on-one** sessions in literacy and numeracy three times a week over a 20-week period, to students experiencing financial disadvantage on The Smith Family's *Learning for Life* program who were struggling in both these subject areas.

The pilot showed **promising evidence** of the program's capacity to engage students and support greater than expected gains in literacy and numeracy, so a larger second trial and evaluation of the program was undertaken in 2022, supported by funding from the Australian Government Department of Education.

Strong program participation

Over **400** students completed the second trial of *Catch-Up Learning*. Students were from all states and territories, with around one third living in regional communities. Almost one in five are of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander backgrounds and 44 percent of participants have a health or disability issue/s.

Program completion was **high** at **83 percent.** Average **program attendance** for students who completed the program was also **high** at **86 percent**. More than **four in five** of these students attended **at least two one-hour** tutoring sessions **a week** for **20 weeks**.

At the end of the program, **two in three** (67%) students had made **greater progress** in **numeracy** than might typically be expected over a six month period.

Strong progress in numeracy and literacy

Pre-program assessments confirmed students recruited to the program were **behind their peers** in both numeracy and literacy. At the end of the program, **two in three** (67%) students had made **greater progress** in **numeracy** than might typically be expected over a six month period. More than half (53%) of the participants had made **greater than expected progress** in **literacy** at the conclusion of the program.

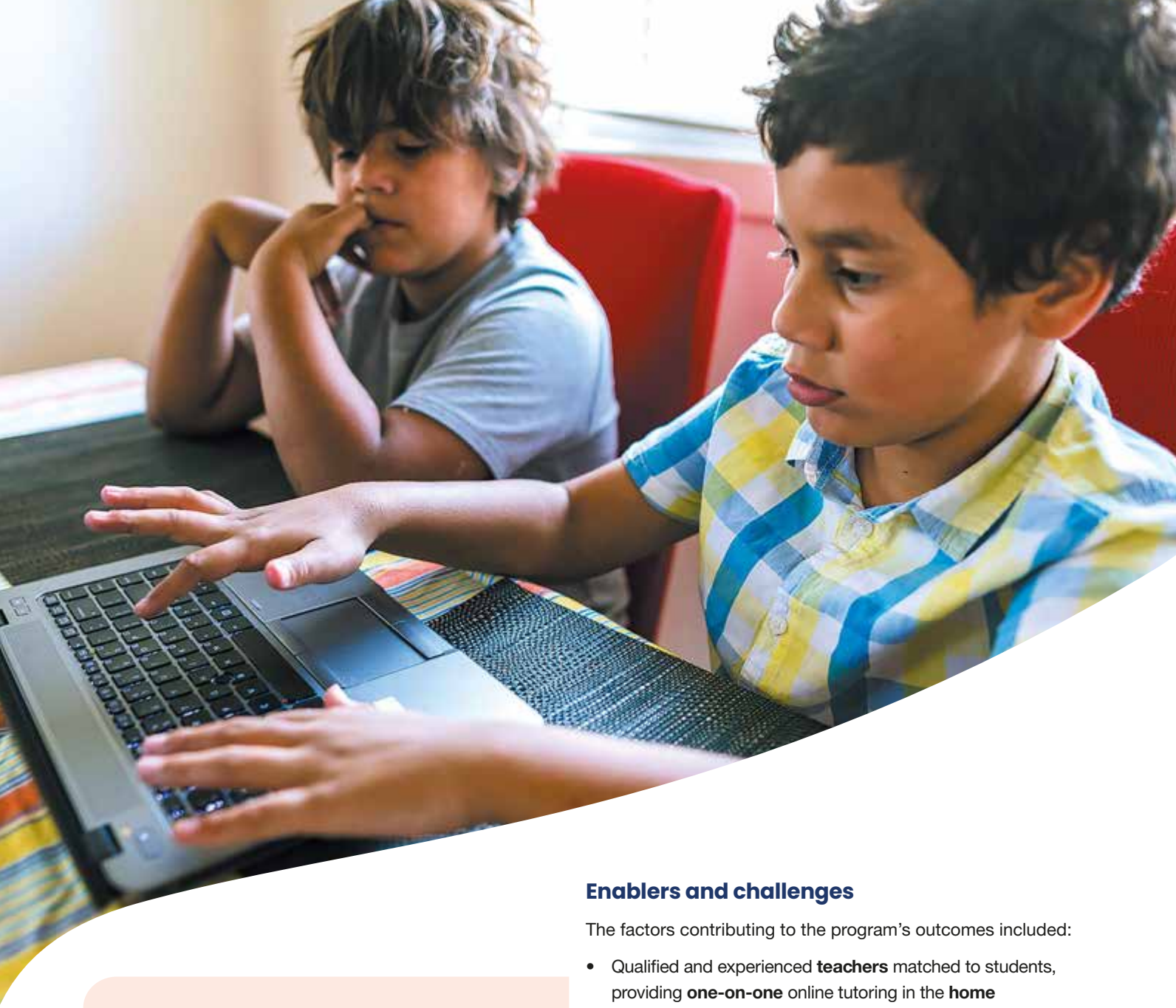
More than **two in five** (44%) students who completed the *Catch-Up Learning* program made **greater than expected progress** in **both literacy** and **numeracy.**

Catch-Up Learning was beneficial for **all groups of students** – including by Indigeneity, gender, location and disability – particularly in **numeracy**. **Two in three** Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and non-Indigenous students made **greater than expected progress** in numeracy.

Students with **lower pre-program** skill levels were more likely to make **greater progress** than expected in numeracy and literacy, suggesting *Catch-Up Learning* may be of **particular benefit** to students experiencing disadvantage who are **furthest behind** their peers.

Increased confidence and love of learning

The evaluation showed *Catch-Up Learning* also contributed to increased student **confidence**, **commitment to** and **love of learning**, and supported students to develop some of the **foundations of learning** that contribute to **longer-term** educational success.



The evaluation showed *Catch-Up Learning* contributed to increased student **confidence**, **commitment to** and **love of learning**, and supported students to develop some of the **foundations of learning** that contribute to **long-term** educational success.

Enablers and challenges

The factors contributing to the program's outcomes included:

- Qualified and experienced **teachers** matched to students, providing **one-on-one** online tutoring in the **home**
- **Strong relationships** between tutors, students and parents/carers
- Aligning learning activities with **students' interests**
- Sessions **tailored** to the individual student and supported by a wide variety of resources.

The second trial responded to the **technology challenges** experienced in the first pilot, but technology remained an issue for one in five students, contributing to a reduction in program attendance and achievement for some of them.

The high average attendance across all groups of students suggests the **intensity** and **timing** of the program was not a major issue for most students. Feedback from a small number of tutors and a parent/carer however, suggested a more **flexible approach** to the length and number of sessions each week may be suitable for some students, particularly those with a health or disability issue. This might also enable the program to fit in more easily around students' and families' other activities.

Background and context

Educational outcomes and socioeconomic background

Australian research shows a clear and persistent relationship between socioeconomic background and the outcomes of young people at all educational stages (Lamb et al. 2020). These outcomes include performance on the National Assessment Program Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN), Year 12 completion and post-school engagement in employment, education and training.

For example:

- 54 percent of Year 5 students whose parents have not completed Year 12 achieved above the national minimum numeracy standard in 2022, compared to 93 percent of those whose parents have completed a Bachelor degree or higher qualification (ACARA 2022)
- At age 15, Australian students from the highest socioeconomic quartile are about three years of schooling ahead, on average, than students in the lowest socioeconomic quartile in reading, mathematical and science literacies (Thomson et al. 2019)
- 67 percent of young people from the lowest socioeconomic backgrounds complete Year 12 or equivalent by age 19, compared to 92 percent of those from the highest socioeconomic backgrounds (Lamb et al. 2020).

Impact of the COVID-19 pandemic

In addition to these longstanding gaps in educational achievement, the COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted Australian schooling for three years across 2020 to 2022, with its direct impacts still being felt by schools and students. Schools across all jurisdictions moved to remote learning for a period/s, and when schools returned to face-to-face learning significant challenges continued, including the ongoing impact of illness among students and school staff.

Research with teachers in NSW suggests that re-engaging students in learning has remained challenging even after students returned to face-to-face schooling (Fray et al. 2022). Remote learning particularly impacts students who live in poverty, those with a disability or additional learning needs, those from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island backgrounds and students in rural or remote areas (Lamb, Maire et al. 2020; Sonnemann and Goss 2020).

Supporting improved student outcomes through tutoring

There is a growing body of international evidence on the effectiveness of tutoring, both one-on-one and in small groups, for improving student outcomes (Education Endowment Foundation 2021). Nickow et al. (2020) describe tutoring interventions as 'ranking among the most widespread, versatile and potentially transformative instruments in today's educational toolkit'. Tutoring is particularly beneficial in supporting lower achieving students who are behind their peers.

The components contributing to the positive impact tutoring has on student outcomes include:

- The ability of tutors to **customise learning** content to the student/s' level
- Greater opportunities for **engagement** and rapid **feedback**
- The **tutor-student** relationship.

Tutoring that occurs outside of classroom time can contribute to improved outcomes by providing students with additional instruction time. Students may also approach tutoring with greater focus and effort than in the classroom, as they are not 'lost in the crowd' of a larger class (Nickow et al. 2020).

Most of the research regarding the effectiveness of tutoring relates to face-to-face tutoring. More recently, evidence is emerging of significant improvements achieved by students struggling in maths or English who participated in an online tutoring program (Carlana and Ferrara 2021; Gortazar et al. 2022). This research finds strong gains in students' learning outcomes, educational aspirations, perseverance and the perception that they can control what happens in their lives. This research has been conducted both during the height of the pandemic and when schooling returned to more 'normal' times, suggesting that online tutoring can be an important complement to in-class teaching for students who are struggling academically (Gortazar et al. 2022).

The development of the *Catch-Up Learning* program

In response to the anticipated impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on students experiencing disadvantage, The Smith Family developed a new program, *Catch-Up Learning,* and implemented and evaluated a small pilot in late 2020 to mid-2021. While the pandemic was a prompt for the program, The Smith Family anticipated that if effective, the program could potentially play an ongoing role in reducing the gap in educational achievement experienced by many of the students supported by The Smith Family on its long-term educational scholarship program, *Learning for Life.*[1]

The evaluation found promising evidence of the program's capacity to engage students and support greater than expected gains in literacy and numeracy (The Smith Family 2021). In light of this, a larger second trial of the *Catch-Up Learning* program, informed by the lessons from the pilot evaluation, was undertaken in 2022, with funding from the Australian Government through the Department of Education.

The *Catch-Up Learning* program

Catch-Up Learning is a tutoring program which aims to improve the literacy and numeracy skills of students experiencing disadvantage who are struggling in these areas. It also aims to support increased student confidence, engagement and positive dispositions towards learning.

Core elements of the program include:

- **Online** delivery by qualified **teachers**
- **One-on-one home-based** tutoring occurring **outside of school hours**
- Students participating in up to **three one-hour** sessions a week for **20 weeks,** or a total of 60 sessions[2]
- Sessions covering **literacy** and **numeracy**.

Program eligibility

Students eligible for the program were:

- On the *Learning for Life* scholarship program
- In Years 4 to 8 in 2022
- Struggling with English and maths as they had achieved a D in both subjects at the end of 2020.[3]

Technological and program support

Informed by learnings from the first evaluation, The Smith Family made significant efforts prior to the commencement of the second trial, to ensure all participating students had access to a laptop or desktop computer with a camera and microphone, as well as reliable internet access. Around 50 families were provided with devices to enable their child's participation in the program. The Smith Family Project Lead provided support and regular communications to families throughout the program to support participation and resolve issues when they arose.

Partnering with ClassCover

As with the first pilot, The Smith Family partnered with ClassCover[4] to deliver the second trial. ClassCover recruited all tutors and provided administrative and day-to-day support for their participation. ClassCover matched tutors to students and supported tutors with pre-program training and onboarding, student engagement strategies, learning resources and student assessments.

Pre-program training[5] covered the online platform and data collection tool, cultural competency, working with vulnerable children, curriculum and learning materials and guidance on how to engage and support parents/carers in their child's learning. Aunty Shirley, an Aboriginal Elder, shared her knowledge with tutors who were matched with Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander students to help them better support students and understand possible challenges. The Smith Family Project Lead also provided tutors with insights on the families The Smith Family works with and the challenges they may face.

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1 The *Learning for Life* scholarship program supports children and young people who are living in low-income families to participate long-term in education. Students can participate on the program through primary and secondary schools and potentially tertiary education. Almost 60,000 children and young people were supported on the program in FY22. Further information on the program is available at https://www.thesmithfamily.com.au/programs/learning-for-life

2 The program ran across Terms 1 and 2 of 2022 with a break over the Easter holidays.

3 This information was from students' school reports with 2020 being the most recent report available when students were recruited to the program in late 2021.

4 ClassCover is an education services company that provides casual teacher management software, online tutoring programmes, teacher professional learning and recruitment services to thousands of schools and teachers across Australia and New Zealand.

5 As there was more time available in the lead up to the second trial, a more comprehensive training program was able to be provided, which was also informed by the findings of the first evaluation.

Evaluation of the second trial

The evaluation of the second trial of *Catch-Up Learning* aimed to:

- Describe **who participated** and the frequency of their participation
- Assess the extent to which participants' literacy and numeracy **skills improved** by the end of the program
- Assess the program's impact on students' **confidence**, **engagement** and learning **disposition**
- Identify the factors which contributed to **improvements** and areas that could be further **enhanced**.

A range of data was collected across the 20 weeks of the program to support the evaluation:

- Participants' **program attendance** rates
- Pre and post-program **literacy** and **numeracy assessments**, using the adaptive Progressive Achievement Tests (PAT) in maths and reading, developed by the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER)[6]
- **Tutor assessments** of each session, including student engagement and the extent to which lessons were disrupted by technology challenges
- A **tutor survey** at the beginning and end of the program, exploring students' attitudes towards learning and the student/tutor relationship
- Interviews with six participating parents/carers and five tutors.

The evaluation also drew on data collected through students' participation in the *Learning for Life* program, including on gender, Indigeneity, experience of health and disability issues and teacher grades.

> The average program attendance rate was 86 percent, with students in all groups attending on average, at least two sessions per week.

Students in the second trial

Eighty three percent of students recruited to the program completed it. Four hundred and twelve students who completed the *Catch-Up Learning* program also completed a pre and post-program assessment in either numeracy, literacy or both.[7]

These 412 students have the following characteristics:

- **Gender:** 55 percent[8] are female and 45 percent are male
- **Indigeneity:** Around one in five (17%) are of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander backgrounds
- **Health and disability issues:** Almost half (44%) have a health or disability issue/s
- **Year level:** 57 percent were in primary school (14% in Year 4, 21% in Year 5 and 22% in Year 6) and 43 percent were in secondary school (28% in Year 7 and 15% in Year 8)
- **Location:** Students from all states and territories participated, with around a quarter (26%) from both Victoria and NSW, 16 percent from South Australia, 14 percent from Queensland, eight percent from Western Australia and around 12 percent from the ACT, Northern Territory and Tasmania combined. Around two in three students (68%) live in metropolitan areas and one in three (32%) live in regional areas.

Program attendance rates

The average program attendance rate for the 412 students was **86 percent**, with students attending on average 49 sessions. The vast majority (84%) attended 40 or more sessions, equating to at least two sessions per week for the duration of the 20 week program.

Program attendance did not differ significantly by gender, Indigeneity, experience of a health or disability issue, Year level, location, or pre-program literacy and numeracy skill levels. On average, **students in all groups attended at least two sessions per week.**

For around one in five students, technological disruptions were a persistent challenge, with these students having a slightly lower average attendance rate than those with fewer challenges (79% compared to 87%).

6 The PAT tools adjust (adapt) the difficulty of each item presented to the student based on the accuracy of the student's previous response. If the student correctly answers the question, the following question is more difficult. If the student incorrectly answers the question, the following question is easier.

7 Six students only completed the pre and post-numeracy assessment and one only completed the pre and post-literacy assessment.

8 Percentages in this report are rounded and so will not always add to 100 percent.

Pre-program numeracy and literacy skills

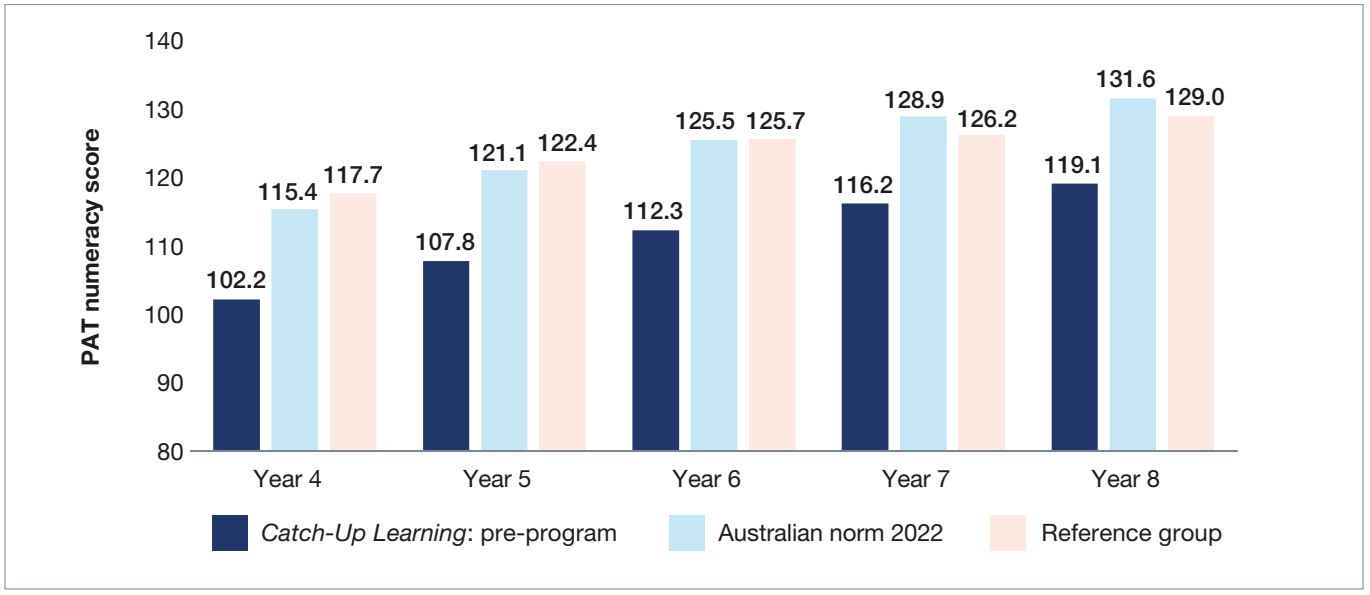
Students were recruited to the program based on teacher grades which indicated they were struggling with numeracy and literacy. To understand how far behind students were from their peers at the beginning of the program, the evaluation compared their initial PAT scores to the Australian PAT Maths and Reading norm data. These national norms provide a point of comparison between students' achievement and the typical achievement of students at each Year level (ACER 2022).[9]

The evaluation also used the PAT results of a 'reference group' of Australian students in Years 4 to 8[10] who completed PATs in reading and/or maths at the beginning of 2021 and again in mid-2021, as the *Catch-Up Learning* participants did in 2022.

Pre-program numeracy skills

As shown in Figure 1, the 411 students who participated in the *Catch-Up Learning* program and completed a pre-program numeracy assessment had, on average, skills below the Australian norm for their Year level. There was a consistent gap of 13 points at each Year level, indicating that the program had recruited students who were struggling with numeracy and in need of targeted support. Figure 1 also shows that the numeracy achievement of the reference group is relatively close to the Australian norm.

Figure 1: Average pre-program numeracy scores of *Catch-Up Learning* students compared to the Australian norm and reference group, by Year level



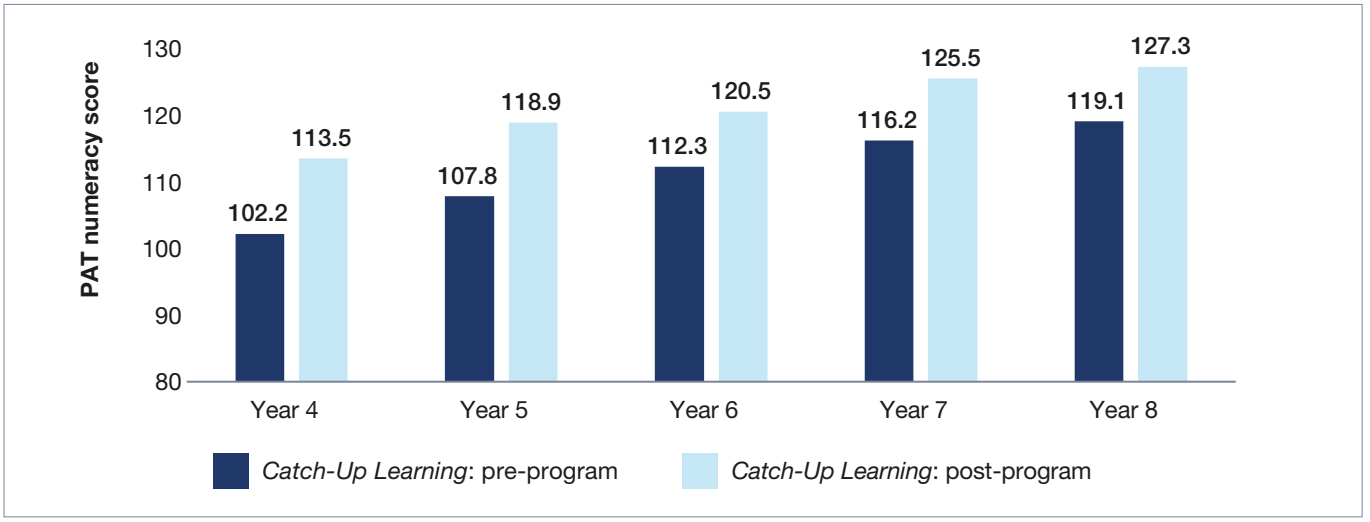
9 Results data from nearly two million tests contributed to the PAT Maths and Reading norms (ACER 2022).

10 The reference group includes 6,687 students for the numeracy assessment comparison and 6,413 students for the literacy assessment comparison. All Australian states and territories are represented in the reference group.

Post-program numeracy skills

As shown in Figure 2, after completing the *Catch-Up Learning* program, the average numeracy score of participating students had improved across all Year levels.

Figure 2: Average pre and post-program numeracy scores of *Catch-Up Learning* students, by Year level



After completing *Catch-Up Learning*, the average numeracy score of students had improved across all Year levels.

The 'reference group' provides an indication of the expected change in students' performance in numeracy and literacy over a period of approximately six months. To understand if the changes in numeracy skills of *Catch-Up Learning* students over the 20 weeks of the program may be attributed to participation in the program, individual students' progress was compared to that of students in the reference group at the same Year level and with similar scores at the start of the program.[11]

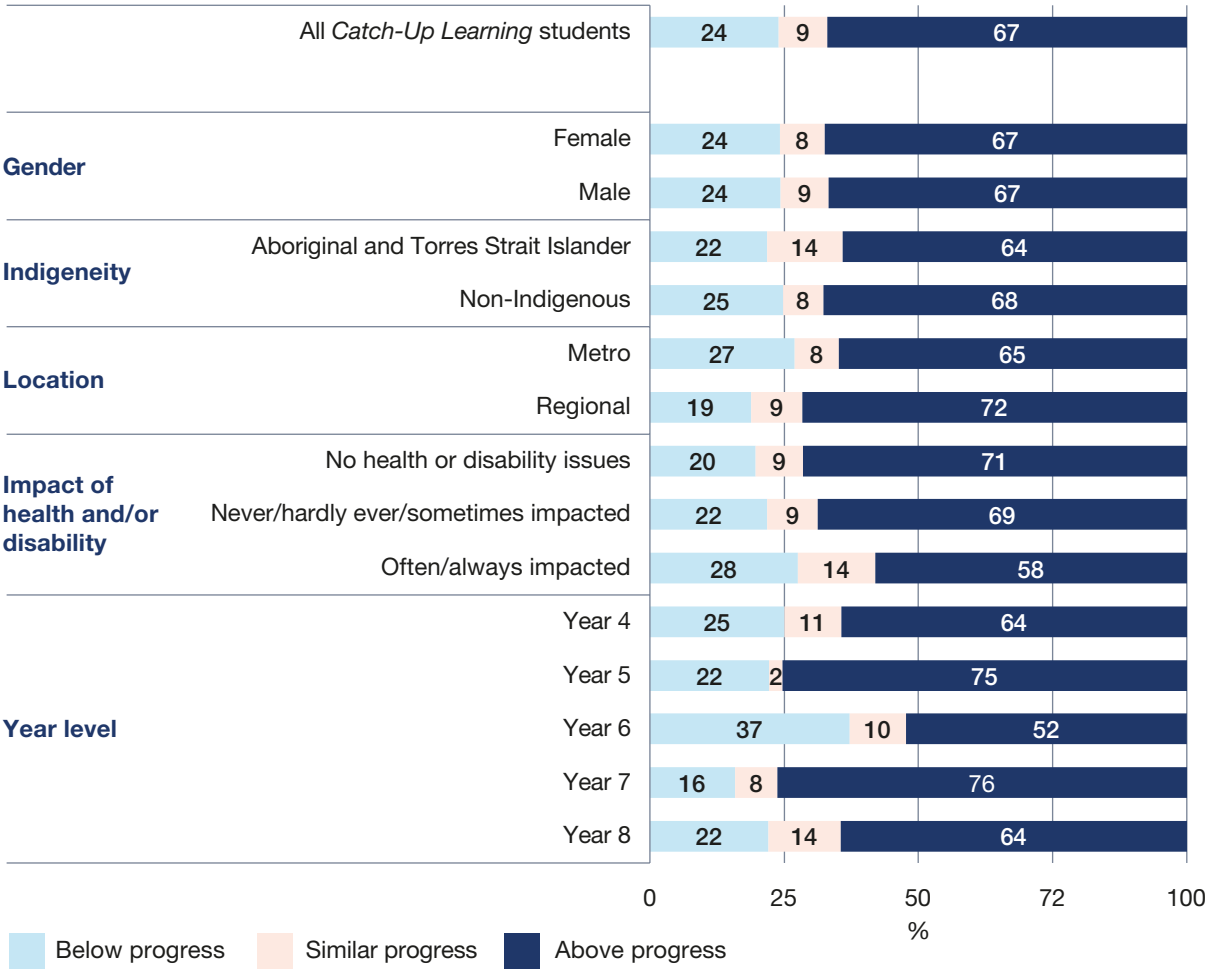
Where progress is greater than the typical progress of students in the reference group, the *Catch-Up Learning* participants' progress is understood to be greater than might be expected without program participation.[12]

11 Twelve of the participants who completed a pre and post-assessment in either numeracy, literacy or both are excluded from the comparisons with the reference group as the group did not contain sufficient students in the same Year level with equivalent initial skill levels as these 12 students to allow for a meaningful comparison. It was not possible to match students on all characteristics such as gender, Indigeneity and experience of a health or disability issue.

12 The PAT norms provide information about students' achievement relative to their peers but cannot be used to explore progress over time (ACER 2022) hence the evaluation used the reference group to assess typical progress over a six month period.

Figure 3 shows that two in three (67%) participants' progress in numeracy was above that of comparable students in the reference group. Nine percent achieved similar gains, and one in four (24%) made less progress than comparable students in the reference group.

Figure 3: *Catch-Up Learning* students' progress in numeracy, compared to progress of the reference group



Across all groups of *Catch-Up Learning* participants – including gender, Indigeneity, health and disability issues, Year level and location – more than half made greater progress than students in the reference group. Unsurprisingly a higher proportion of students without a health or disability issue made above expected progress compared to students with a health or disability issue which often or always impacts on their capacity to do things others their age do (71% and 58% respectively).

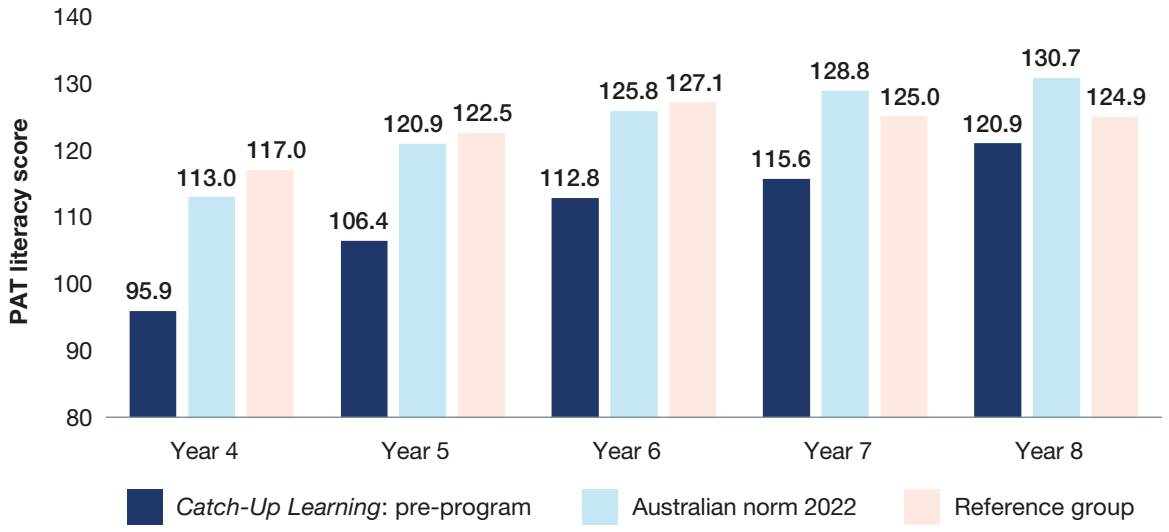
Catch-Up Learning participants with lower pre-program numeracy skill levels were more likely than those with higher pre-program skill levels to make progress above that of comparable students in the reference group. This suggests the program may be particularly beneficial to students who are furthest behind.

Across all groups of *Catch-Up Learning* participants – including gender, Indigeneity, health and disability issues, Year level and location – more than half made greater progress in numeracy than students in the reference group.

Pre-program literacy skills

As shown in Figure 4, the 406 students who participated in the *Catch-Up Learning* program and completed a pre-program literacy assessment had, on average, skills below the Australian norm for their Year level. There was a consistent gap of almost 10 points or more at each year level, indicating that *Catch-Up Learning* had recruited students who needed literacy support. Figure 4 also shows that literacy achievement for the reference group is relatively close to the Australian norm.

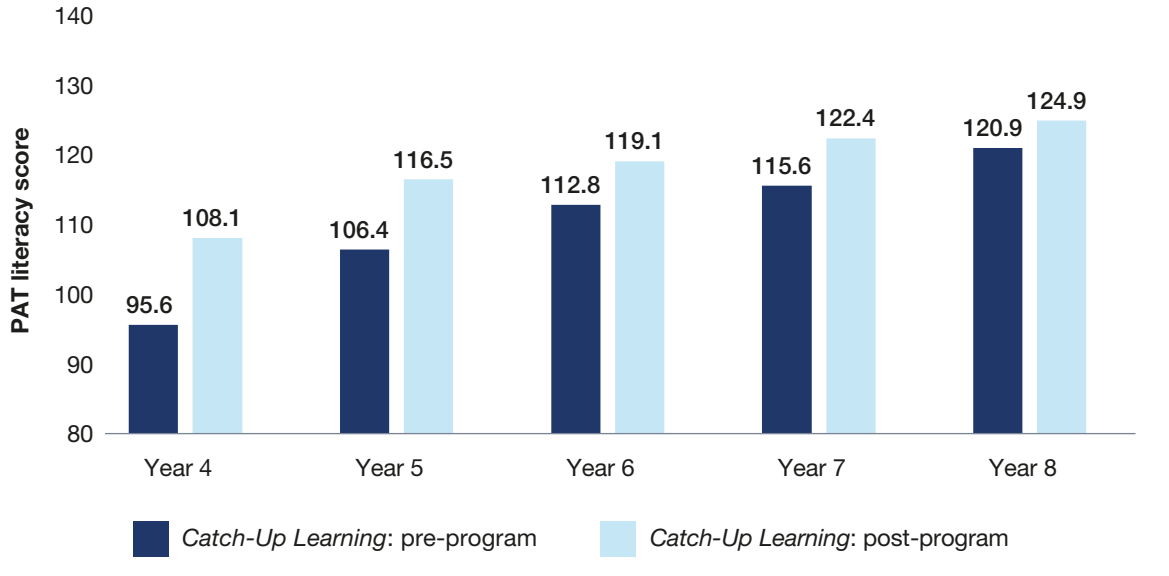
Figure 4: Average pre-program literacy scores of *Catch-Up Learning* students compared to the Australian norm and the reference group, by Year level



Post-program literacy skills

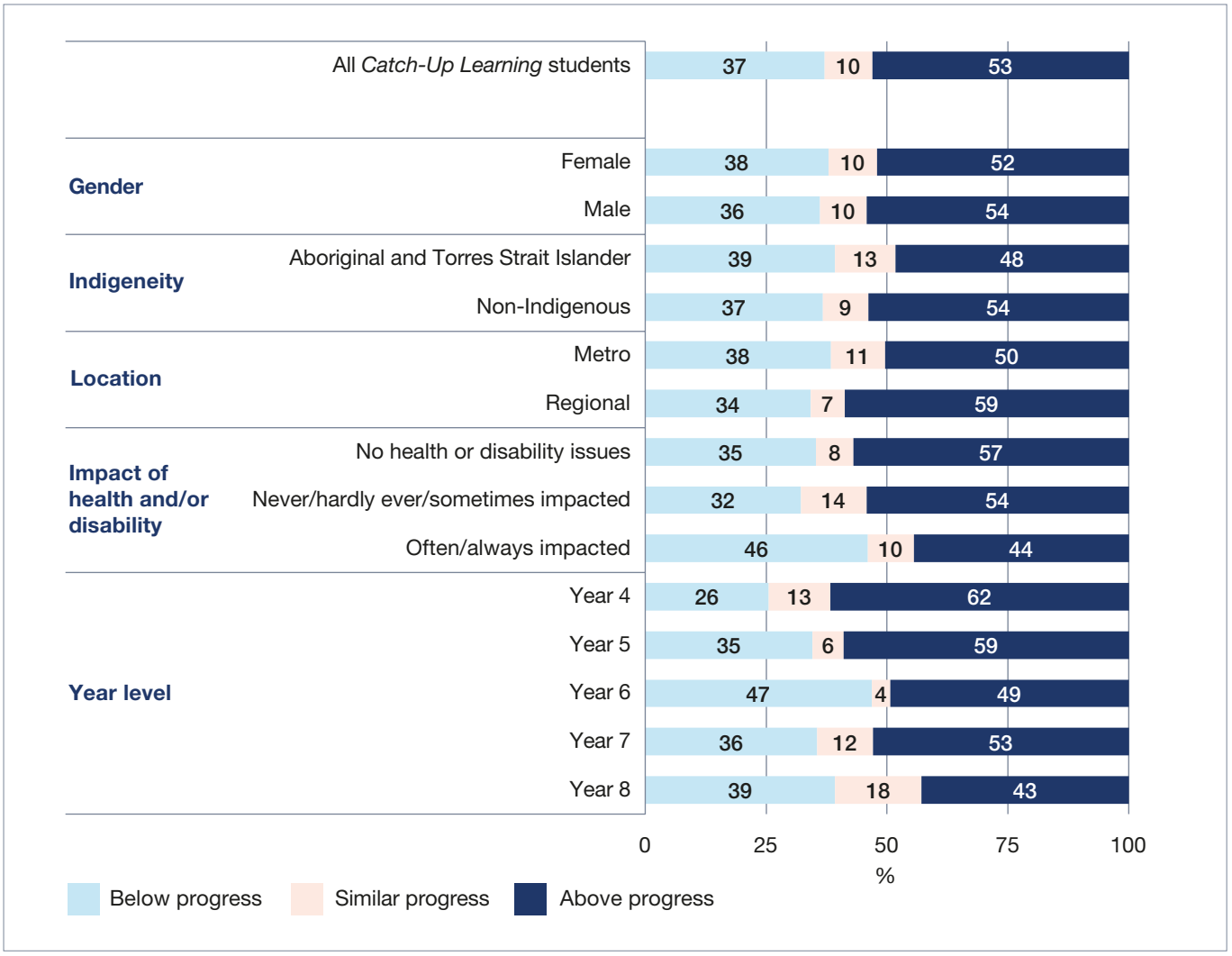
After completing the *Catch-Up Learning* program, the average literacy score of participating students had improved across all Year levels, as shown in Figure 5.

Figure 5: Average pre and post-program literacy scores of *Catch-Up Learning* students, by Year level



The literacy progress of *Catch-Up Learning* participants was also compared to that of students in the reference group who were in the same Year level and had an initial literacy skill level equivalent to the students' pre-program test result. Figure 6 shows that more than half (53%) of *Catch-Up Learning* participants' progress was above that of students in the reference group, 10 percent achieved similar gains and slightly more than one in three (37%) made less progress than comparable students in the reference group.

Figure 6: *Catch-Up Learning* students' progress in literacy, compared to progress of the reference group



Progress in literacy did not vary significantly by gender, Indigeneity, or location. As with numeracy, a higher proportion of students without a health or disability issue made above expected progress compared to students with a health or disability issue which often or always impacts on their capacity to do things others their age do (57% and 44% respectively).

Similar to numeracy, students with lower pre-program literacy skill levels were more likely than those with higher pre-program skill levels to make progress above that of comparable students in the reference group. This suggests that *Catch-Up Learning* may be particularly beneficial to students who are furthest behind.

Students' confidence and love of learning

As well as being behind in their literacy and numeracy at the start of the *Catch-Up Learning* program some students had low levels of confidence, particularly in themselves as learners. They may have struggled to engage with their tutor, found it difficult to ask questions or were reluctant to try new tasks.

The first evaluation of the program found that it supported students' increased confidence and commitment to and love of learning. Parents/carers and tutors who participated in the evaluation of the second trial observed a similar impact. A greater ability to apply learning strategies was also identified as an important benefit of the program.

Over the course of the program, supported by tutors' encouragement, students gained confidence and in turn a greater love of learning. Tutors and parents/carers observed more positive learning behaviours and an increased commitment to learning.

I didn't know what to expect or hope for from the program…what I did hope was that it would help Josie[13] *have more confidence in herself…I believe that the program has done that.* [Parent/carer, Year 6 student]

Jason flourished during this program…We spent a lot of time discussing strategies to help him succeed and how he can help himself in the future. His confidence and our rapport have grown and once where I only taught the top of his head, as he was unable to make eye contact, I have been rewarded with full face visuals for the final two weeks. [Tutor, Year 7 student]

Amber seems to have more confidence, she's more engaged at school…I've been getting feedback from the school saying that she's doing a lot better in class and she's actually doing the work and engaging more in the actual program at school too. She's getting better grades. She's actually thinking more about her future options as well. [Parent/carer, Year 8 student]

The biggest difference in Mahad is that he's now able to do tasks without a doubt in his mind that maybe he's not doing it properly. He has that confidence. The tutor teaches him how to do things on his own without getting worried or just getting overwhelmed…the involvement of tutoring encouraged him and motivated him in doing what he has to do without relying on someone to help him. [Parent/carer, Year 5 student]

Tutors also worked with students to develop some of the foundations for ongoing learning, such as perseverance, comprehension and problem solving skills, and strategies such as reading questions slowly and multiple times.

The way I pitch myself as a tutor to parents is I say, 'I'm not a tutor for life I'm a tutor for a period to give them the skills and techniques'… the tips that they can then go on to manage being those self-learners. And hopefully if we catch them early enough before they've actually disengaged they then will go, 'Actually I can problem solve this'. [Tutor, Year 7 student]

Oliver's tutor has taught him to read the questions first and then read what it's about because there's always the answers in what you're reading. And instead of reading the questions once, you're still going to have to go back through just to read it. So that's one tip he's picked up. [Parent/carer, Year 5 student]

Zane has an aptitude for maths [so] we have focused on word problems in maths, as his literacy skills are developing. He is learning to read more slowly, in order to monitor his reading for comprehension. [Tutor, Year 6 student]

I was very impressed with Antanios' progress over the last two terms. Though he sometimes had trouble reading many words, once he learned the strategy of breaking up the words into parts, he was able to quickly recognise and understand the word and then, to my amazement, answer difficult comprehension questions, including those with abstract concepts, very well. His numeracy abilities also improved greatly once I taught him to slow down and break each maths problem down into parts. He was then quickly able to absorb the concepts and answer them correctly on the whole. [Tutor, Year 7 student]

I feel Sara has benefitted enormously as a result of her participation…She has demonstrated good progress in her learning especially in numeracy and her confidence in her abilities has increased considerably since the start of tutoring. Sara is also beginning to develop skills in metacognition and self-management that I hope will inform her learning going forward. I am particularly impressed with the way she is beginning to apply her prior learning to new content and problems. [Tutor, Year 4 student]

Students who did not complete the program

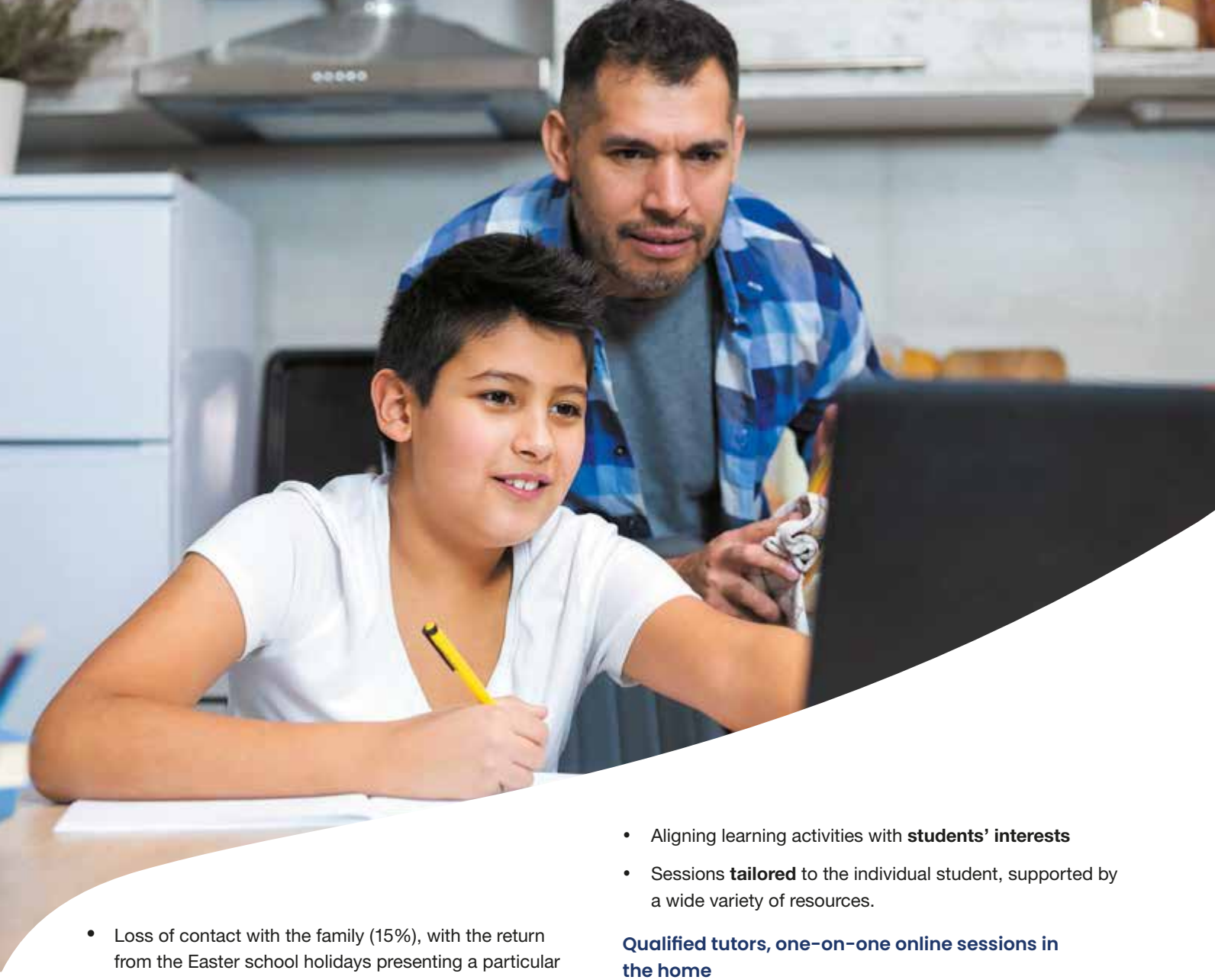
In addition to the students whose literacy and numeracy skills have been explored, 17 completed the *Catch-Up Learning* program but did not complete a pre and post-assessment in literacy, numeracy or both. A further 88 students participated in one or more tutoring sessions but withdrew before completing the program.

Students withdrew across the 20 weeks of the program, with the majority doing so in the early stages of the program (37 students who attended only three or four sessions) or following the break over the Easter school holidays (22 students who attended 14 sessions on average).

Reasons for withdrawing from *Catch-Up Learning* were varied and included:

- The student was not interested in participating (47%), with the majority leaving the program within the first month or so

13 All names of students have been changed. Names have not been used for parents/carers or tutors.



- Loss of contact with the family (15%), with the return from the Easter school holidays presenting a particular challenge as families' routines changed with the start of the new school term
- Difficulties related to technology, especially internet connectivity (10%)
- The number of sessions proving overwhelming for the student or their family (9%)
- Issues related to the health of the student or a family member (7%).

A small number of students withdrew from the program due to a change in their parent/carer's working hours, housing issues, or personal and family matters.

Program enablers

A range of data collected for the evaluation identified factors contributing to the strong outcomes achieved. These included:

- Qualified and experienced **teachers** matched to students and providing **one-on-one online** tutoring in the **home**
- **Strong relationships** between tutors, students and parents/carers
- Aligning learning activities with **students' interests**
- Sessions **tailored** to the individual student, supported by a wide variety of resources.

Qualified tutors, one-on-one online sessions in the home

The careful matching of students with an appropriately skilled and experienced teacher enabled tutors to meet students' developmental and academic needs. The one-on-one sessions allowed tutors to tailor the program to the student and create a space for them to attempt something new or ask a question which might not feel possible in a larger group or classroom environment. Tutors recognised that students' perceptions of their abilities play an important role in motivating learning and subsequent academic performance, gently challenging and encouraging them.

> *When you've actually got a tutor that's patient and understanding and has worked with kids in the past, she knows that kids are going to kind of mess around a bit and not always want to do it. But she was patient with Josie and encouraged her and taught her and when she was right she praised her for it which was really, really good.* [Parent/carer, Year 6 student]

Parents/carers highlighted the benefit of the sessions taking place online in their home, where the student was in their 'comfort zone'. This learning environment and individualised attention also offered the opportunity to develop a supportive relationship with a non-parent adult.

> *It seemed like they cherished that time that they could have a one-on-one chat and get things (out) like just tell you about their day or something that's happened at school. And being a teacher, you understand different things that go on at school…they had one-on-one with an adult that cared about them and that wanted to be there for them…Talk and grow and learn with them. I think that's quite special, especially for those kids that probably might not get that at school…as much as they need it.* [Tutor, Year 6 student]

Strong relationships

Strong relationships of genuine care and respect between tutors, students and parents/carers were a key enabler. For tutors, the building of an effective relationship with their students was seen as critical to motivating their student to engage in the program and to want to attend the tutoring sessions.

> *You need to be patient and you need to build that rapport with them. I find that's what motivates the student and I think if you're…just trying to teach them content and not getting to know the student they will have that defence up and most kids may shut down… they don't want to engage, it's like another chore for them.* [Tutor, Year 6 student]
>
> *From the start we talked a lot about respect and about how respect is important for me to give to Badi but he also has to give me respect as well…You're going to want to put in effort if you're respected, valued and appreciated.* [Tutor, Year 5 student]

Tutors and parents/carers also developed supportive partnerships which contributed to the learning environment and in turn students' progress. Most parents were online at the beginning of each session, ensuring the technology was working, and their child was ready to start their lesson. Tutors used this opportunity to engage the parent/carer in conversations about the student, their learning needs, progress and plans for subsequent tutoring sessions. Parents/carers shared critical information about their child and problem solved with the tutor, contributing to students' improved engagement in their learning.

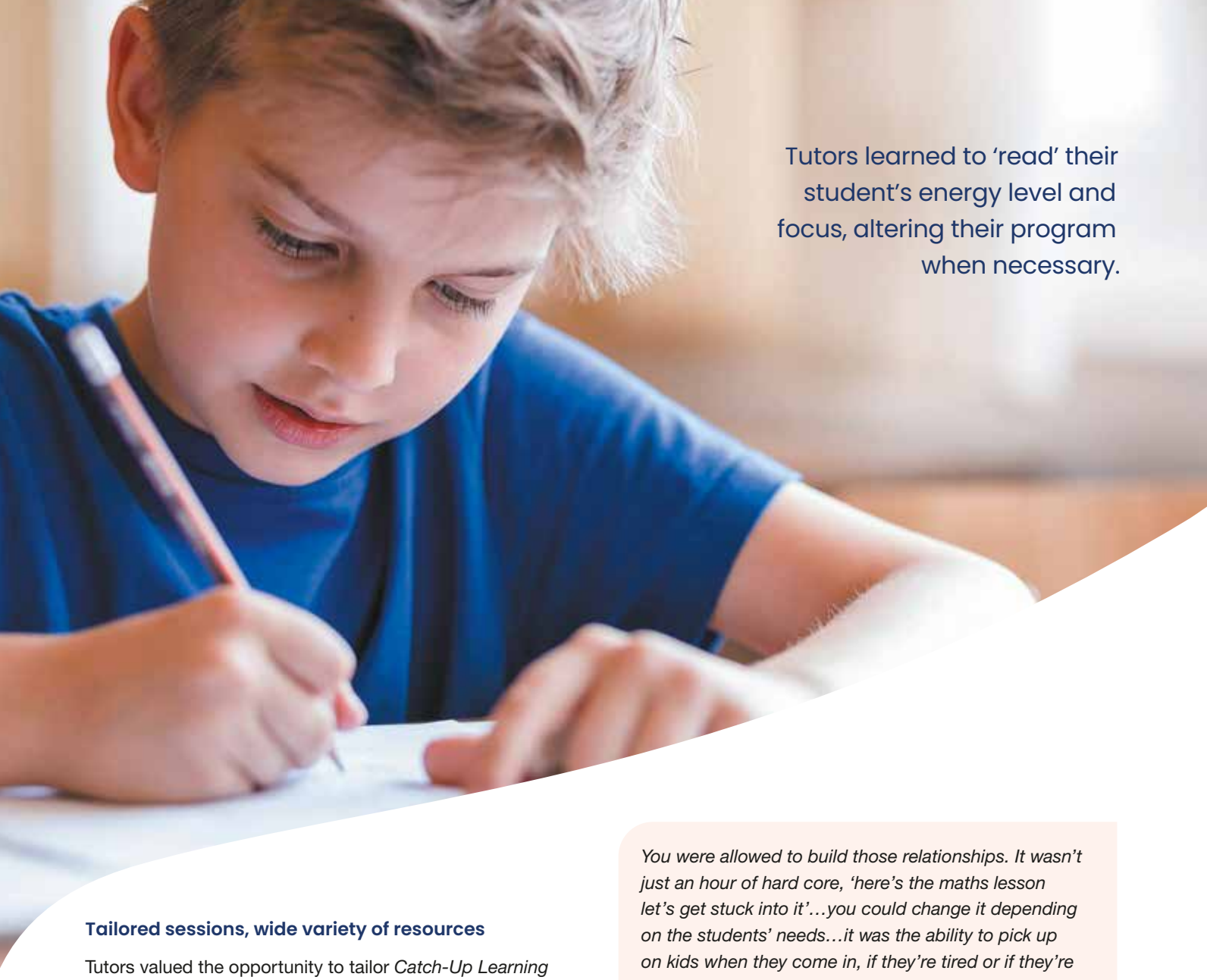
> *The tutor would actually talk to me and let me know how Josie was improving and what not so that was awesome…she took five minutes out of her own time to…explain…'she's definitely improving this and next time we're going to work on this a bit better because she's still struggling with that'…and then I'd let her know Josie was telling me that she was struggling with something else.* [Parent/carer, Year 6 student]
>
> *After school Oliver wasn't focusing…and all he wants to do is play his game…it was a struggle but we ended up getting there in the end. His tutor [and I] we got our heads together…we thought okay well 15 minutes of the game and then while he was playing the game she's got audio that she puts on for him. He sits there and listens and then at the end of that she asks him questions. So he's got to try and multitask at the same time.* [Parent/carer, Year 5 student]

Through observing tutoring sessions and how their child responded, as well as the conversations with tutors, parents/carers also learnt how to better support their child with their learning.

Aligning activities with students' interests

Developing a strong relationship with students and their parents/carers allowed tutors to learn about their students' interests, personality and favourite pastimes. This knowledge was leveraged to connect with the student and increase engagement in learning by aligning literacy and numeracy content to the student's interests and hobbies.

> *I think it's all about getting a little bit personal, building a connection with the student…finding out their interests and having those little conversations…It might not be doing maths or reading it might just be having a conversation but that conversation leads to building rapport and then [the student will] do the work.* [Tutor, Year 6 student]
>
> *The tutor was really good because we didn't know how Nia would interact…But she will talk to anybody about animals and her pet chooks…In teaching Nia [the tutor] started out by finding out about the chooks and getting photos of the chooks and then she would talk to Nia and suggest that they do a story about a chook…[the tutor] has been using that to get her to write the stories.* [Parent/carer, Year 8 student]
>
> *With the older boys…I'd give them some agency… I would ask, 'what would you like to do?' Or if something had come up in conversation that session, 'Should we maybe explore this next session? Would you be interested in it?'* [Tutor, Year 7 student]



Tutors learned to 'read' their student's energy level and focus, altering their program when necessary.

Tailored sessions, wide variety of resources

Tutors valued the opportunity to tailor *Catch-Up Learning* sessions to students' needs rather than following a prescriptive session plan. Tutors learned to 'read' their student's energy level and focus, altering their program when necessary. For example, they might return to a particular activity they knew the student enjoyed if their engagement in the lesson was waning. This approach might mean more time spent on literacy than numeracy or vice versa, as tutors felt appropriate.

> *There were times where Hana and I would be playing games for the first couple of minutes especially if I noticed that she wasn't in a good mood…I tried to calm her down and then you know later on once I can tell that she is good to go we move onto the content.* [Tutor, Year 6 student]

> *You were allowed to build those relationships. It wasn't just an hour of hard core, 'here's the maths lesson let's get stuck into it'…you could change it depending on the students' needs…it was the ability to pick up on kids when they come in, if they're tired or if they're exhausted… [Tutor, Year 5 student]*
>
> *In the first few weeks it's good to figure out something that they like or there's always an activity that they gravitate towards and you can see their face just light up…you can always just go back to that thing that you know that they like, that they're confident at as well. It's a bit of a confidence booster for them.* [Tutor, Year 6 student]

The wide variety of resources available to tutors for *Catch-Up Learning* assisted them in tailoring sessions to their individual student's needs. Tutors interviewed for the evaluation spoke positively about the learning resources on offer, noting that using different activities and games helped improve student engagement during sessions. Tutors were also able to utilise additional materials they were already familiar with to ensure they had suitable options for their student's skill level and interests.

Program challenges

Informed by lessons from the first evaluation, the second trial responded to some of the challenges experienced in implementing the first pilot, for example by providing more families with technology devices and the introduction of an IT Help Desk. Despite these efforts, technology remained a challenge for some families in the second trial. The intensity and timing of the program was also a challenge for some students and families, as it had been in the first pilot

Technology

Internet connectivity, computer hardware problems, and difficulty using the full functionality of the online delivery platform disrupted some students' learning opportunities.

> *Sometimes it would connect and then…not even 20 minutes into the lesson and it would just disconnect…So there was a couple of times therefore Oliver and the tutor had to constantly keep disconnecting…and she would have to go overtime so it wasn't easy.*
> [Parent/carer, Year 5 student]

In response to these technological challenges, ClassCover's Information Technology team quickly stepped in to support tutors and families resolve the issues they were experiencing. This proved an effective solution with technological challenges not continuing beyond the early weeks of the program for the majority of tutors and families.

Despite this additional support, for around one in five students, technological disruptions persisted, proving a barrier to some students' ongoing engagement in the program.

> *Sometimes it took three attempts…for Quin to get into the online session. Both students never got to share their screens as their devices didn't allow it…the whole program was taught by them watching my screen and I would make it interactive in other ways.*
> [Tutor, multiple students]
>
> *The students who had good computer skills and a device that worked consistently appeared to have better outcomes and were able to engage with more varied resources.* [Tutor, multiple students]

As noted earlier, students who experienced persistent technological disruptions had slightly lower attendance than students without these challenges. Students whose lessons were disrupted by technological issues more than 30 percent of the time were also less likely to make progress above that of comparable students in the reference group – in numeracy (56%) and literacy (42%) – compared to students whose lessons were disrupted 10 percent or less of the time – 72 percent and 63 percent respectively.

Program intensity and timing

Catch-Up Learning is a relatively intensive program with hourly sessions held three times a week over 20 weeks. There was some feedback in the first pilot that this may not be the ideal program duration and intensity, and the second trial was an opportunity to test this with a larger group of students.

The high average number of sessions attended (49 sessions) suggests that program intensity was not a significant issue for most students. However, a small number of tutors and a parent/carer interviewed for the evaluation, raised concerns about the length and number of sessions each week. Program intensity was seen as a challenge for students with a health or disability issue and it was also suggested that three sessions per week could be difficult to fit around students' and families' social and extracurricular activities.

> *When we first started out, the three times a week definitely seemed like a lot…I said to the tutor, 'maybe we can just like take it back to maybe half an hour or three quarters of an hour'… sometimes…Amber had had a rough day at school or something had happened but the tutor was really accommodating…she could read that Amber was not paying attention…there was a lot of flexibility…it was a good intensive program but I think that maybe two nights might have been a bit of a better option but that was really the only issue with it was trying to make sure that it fitted within her after school activities as well.* [Parent/carer, Year 8 student]
>
> *I wonder if two sessions per week and over three school terms would be better? Three sessions seems a lot on top of a normal school week and social/sporting commitments, students get tired.* [Tutor, Year 4 student]
>
> *Three times a week was too much for a student like Yasmin, with focus and behavioural challenges. After school, she needed time to be active and socialise, and the commitment to tutoring three times a week would often result in her having behavioural meltdowns prior to tutoring commencing. It would take a minimum of 20 minutes to get her back on track and into a state that she was receptive to learning.* [Tutor, Year 5 student]

Some tutors also suggested that the program might be better run across Terms 2 and 3, rather than the first two terms of the school year. Their rationale was that this timing would avoid the beginning of the school year when students, families and tutors are establishing new routines and the start of Term 2 when routines can shift with seasonal sports changes. It would also see post-program testing occur at the end of Term 3 rather than Term 2 when end-of-semester school testing and reporting occurs.

Students who experienced persistent technological disruptions had slightly lower attendance than students without these challenges.

Conclusions

The second trial of the *Catch-Up Learning* program has shown it can **engage** students experiencing disadvantage who are struggling in numeracy and literacy and support **above expected gains** in both areas. It adds weight to the promising evidence from the first pilot and demonstrates that the program can be implemented at a **larger scale** while still achieving positive results with participating students.

Program completion in the second trial was high at **83 percent**. Average **program attendance** was also high at **86 percent**, with 84 percent of students attending 40 or more sessions. This equates to at **least two sessions per week** for the duration of the 20 week program. Importantly, attendance did not vary significantly among different groups of students, demonstrating the program's capacity to engage a diverse range of students.

Pre-program assessments confirmed that students recruited to the program were **behind their peers** in both numeracy and literacy. At the end of the program, **two in three** (67%) students had made **greater progress** in numeracy than might typically be expected over a six month period. **All groups** of *Catch-Up Learning* participants made strong progress in numeracy, including by Indigeneity, gender, location and disability.

There were also significant improvements in **literacy** skills, with more than half of the participants (53%) making **greater progress** than comparable students in the reference group.

More than two in five (44%) students made **greater than expected progress in both numeracy and literacy**.

In both numeracy and literacy, students with lower pre-program skill levels were more likely to make greater progress than expected, suggesting *Catch-Up Learning* may be of particular benefit to students experiencing disadvantage who are **furthest behind** their peers.

In addition to supporting improvements in numeracy and literacy, the evaluation of the second trial confirmed evidence from the first pilot that the program contributes to increased student **confidence,** and **commitment to** and **love of learning.** Students also developed some of the other **foundations of learning**, such as perseverance and learnt strategies that can contribute to their continued academic improvement and longer-term educational success.

Program enablers included:

- Qualified and experienced **teachers** matched to students and providing **one-on-one online** tutoring in the **home**
- **Strong relationships** between tutors, students and parents/carers
- Aligning learning activities with **students' interests**
- Sessions **tailored** to the individual student and supported by a wide variety of resources.

The second trial responded to some of the **technology challenges** experienced in implementing the first pilot, but technology remained a challenge for some families in the second trial. These challenges contributed to a reduction in program attendance for some students and to some withdrawing from the program.

The **intensity** and **timing** of the program was a challenge for some students and families, as it had been in the first pilot, though program attendance rates did not vary by student characteristics. Feedback from a small number of tutors and a parent/carer suggests that a more **flexible approach** to the length and number of sessions each week may be suitable for some students, particularly those with a health or disability issue.

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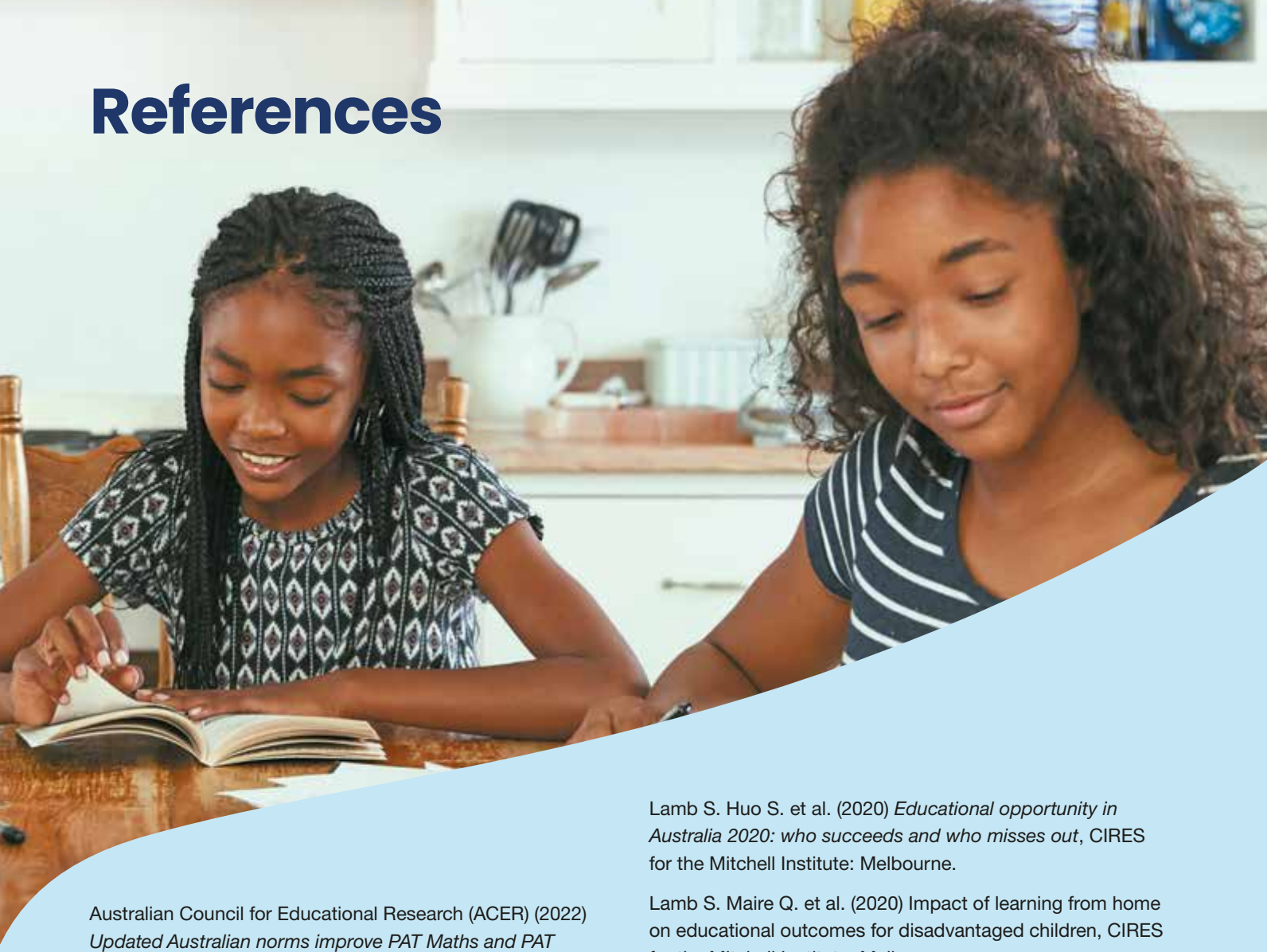

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Amber seems more confident, she's more engaged in school…She's getting better grades. She's actually thinking about her future options.
[Parent/carer of a Year 8 *Catch-Up Learning* participant]

Sara has benefitted enormously as a result of her participation…She's demonstrated good progress in her learning and her confidence in her abilities has increased considerably since the start of tutoring.
[Tutor of a Year 4 *Catch-Up Learning* participant]

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