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From Support to Strategy

Elevating the role of teacher
assistants in education systems

Across Australia, teacher assistants (TAs) form one of the largest, and least consistently utilised segments of the school workforce.



Education systems globally have seen sizable and sustained increases in the TA workforce in recent decades (Webster & Giangreco, 2025).

They are in classrooms every day, working alongside teachers to support student learning, behaviour, and wellbeing. For many students, particularly those with additional needs, the TA transforms school from a place they simply attend to a community where they truly belong.

Yet, despite their importance, TA roles are often poorly defined (Webster & Giangreco, 2025). They are inconsistently deployed, and the workforce as a whole is under-supported (EEF, 2025).

In some schools, TAs are integral to evidence-based teaching teams; in others, they are left to make it up as they go, without training, clear direction, and sometimes without the confidence of the teaching staff they work alongside.

The stakes are high.

Australia is grappling with teacher shortages, workload pressures, increasing complexity in classrooms, and the

imperative to lift productivity in the non-market sector.

TAs are a ready, willing, and already-employed resource that can free up teacher time, extend instructional reach, and improve student outcomes, if we use them well (Sonnemann & Hunter, 2022).

The research is unambiguous: well-prepared, strategically deployed TAs improve learning, engagement, and student and teacher wellbeing (Jackson et al., 2022). Poor deployment, on the other hand, can dilute teacher impact and inadvertently lower expectations for students, particularly those with the most complex learning support needs (Sharma & Salend, 2016).

The question for system leaders is no longer “should we invest in TAs?” – it’s “how do we ensure this investment delivers the biggest possible impact for students, schools, and communities?”

In this article, we combine our extensive experience as national leaders in inclusive education and schooling and share five recommendations to elevate the role of TAs in education systems.

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1. Define the role – and protect it

Ambiguity is the enemy of effectiveness. Without clear role definitions, deployment is inefficient (Sharma & Salend, 2016), TA practice varies wildly between schools, and hours of potential instructional impact are lost, leading to inequity between schools.

The first step for system leaders is to create explicit, jurisdiction-wide role descriptions that clarify the TA's role providing instructional support, alongside their administrative and supervisory duties.

This means articulating, in plain language, what a TA should do to support student learning, and equally, what is the sole responsibility of a qualified teacher, such as lesson planning, assessment, and leading instruction.

Roles should be anchored in student learning needs, TA knowledge and skills, and aligned with inclusive education priorities, ensuring that every TA is deployed with purpose (Sharma & Salend, 2016).

When role clarity is set at the system level, schools can act confidently, knowing their deployment decisions are backed by policy and best practice.

The newly released *Guidelines for the Optimal Deployment of Teaching Assistants in Australian Classrooms* (AITSL, 2025) reinforce this message, calling for national consistency in how TAs' roles are defined, supported, and integrated into teaching teams.

The guidelines highlight that clarity of purpose and supervision is essential if TAs are to make a meaningful contribution to student learning and inclusion.

2. Make professional learning non-negotiable

Even the clearest role description will fall flat without the skills to deliver it.

TA effectiveness increases dramatically when they receive ongoing, evidence-based professional learning, and when teachers are trained to collaborate with and lead them effectively (Jackson et al., 2021).

System leaders should ensure that every TA has access to ongoing and structured professional learning in key areas such as:

- Communication, collaboration and teamwork practices, including working effectively with teachers and specialists (e.g., allied health professionals)
- Relevant legislation and policy, such as the Disability Discrimination Act 1992 (DDA), the Disability Standards for Education 2005 (DSE), the Nationally Consistent Collection of Data on School Students with Disability (NCCD), state/territory inclusion policies
- Administrative support (e.g., NCCD requirements)
- Boundaries and expectations of the TA role, including duty of care and professional conduct
- Principles of inclusive education, such as Universal Design for Learning (UDL), differentiated instruction, Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS)
- Data-informed practice
- Explicit instruction
- Evidence-based literacy and numeracy interventions
- Scaffolding and prompting techniques to build independence
- Questioning techniques that encourage student thinking and engagement

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- Fading support and the gradual release of responsibility
- Positive Behaviour Support (PBS)
- Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) interventions
- Restorative practice and relationship repair
- Trauma-informed practice
- Culturally responsive practice
- Supporting student voice, agency, and self-advocacy
- Personal care and physical support for students with complex needs (where relevant)
- TA professional growth and wellbeing

This training should not be a one-off induction, but an ongoing program that reflects the evolving needs of students, classrooms, and schools.

Equally important is providing school leaders and teachers with ongoing and professional learning that aligns with that provided to TAs (AITSL, 2025). This includes equipping teachers with strategies for integrating TAs into lesson delivery, so both roles complement rather than duplicate effort.

Joint professional learning sessions can cement a shared language and build the trust needed for high-functioning instructional teams (Sharma & Salend, 2016). Making this learning mandatory at the system level ensures equity of access and raises the baseline quality of TA practice across all schools.

3. Build collaboration into the job

Collaboration between teachers and TAs cannot be left to chance. The most effective TA work happens when they are embedded in the instructional team, with clear lines of communication and shared goals for student progress (Sharma & Salend, 2016).

This requires system-level workforce planning that explicitly prioritises time for teachers and TAs to collaborate (AITSL, 2025).

Collaboration that is built into school timetables allows teams to meet, plan, and review support together.



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Timetables should be structured to ensure TAs are placed where their skills will have the greatest impact, and where possible, that they work with consistent groups of teachers and students to build relationships and understanding (Jackson et al., 2022).

System support for workforce models that promote this continuity helps avoid fragmentation of TA time across too many classrooms and subject areas, which may dilute their effectiveness.

By building collaboration into the service delivery models (Jackson et al., 2021, 2022), systems send a clear message: TAs are not an optional extra, but an essential part of the teaching and learning process.

4. Deploy for equity and impact

Deployment is where good intentions meet real-world impact.

Assigning TAs permanently to the students with the most complex needs may seem equitable, but without proper integration into teachers' planning, it can inadvertently reduce those students' exposure to high-quality teacher instruction, replacing rather than supplementing instruction from the most qualified adult in the classroom (EEF, 2025).

Ideally, the TA should be assigned to the classroom rather than to the individual student (Giangreco, 2021).

For TAs to be used effectively, their roles should be defined only after the responsibilities of teachers and experienced leaders of inclusive practice are clearly established and understood, ensuring that TAs support and complement, rather than supplant the work of those ultimately responsible for instruction (Giangreco, 2021).

Importantly, support for the most vulnerable students should not be the sole responsibility of the TA.

In fact, contrary to what many believe is the most effective use of TAs, a more equitable model of support involves the TA 'roving' and providing general classroom support while the teacher supports those requiring additional assistance (Butt, 2016).

System leaders should guide schools towards flexible deployment models within whole school inclusive educational frameworks (Jackson et al., 2021) such as a MTSS (Jackson & Giangreco, in press).

These frameworks should combine one-on-one, small-group, and in-class support, depending on each student's needs and the learning context. Allocations should be regularly reviewed to ensure they are evidence-based and responsive to changes in student requirements.

TAs should be supported by an experienced leader of inclusive practice; a critical role in schools that helps to build teacher and TA collective efficacy (Jackson & Giangreco, in press).

Systems should also encourage schools to collect and use data to track the impact of TA deployment on learning outcomes, student independence, and participation (Sharma & Salend, 2016).

In doing so, deployment becomes a lever for equity, ensuring that targeted support reaches those who need it most, without isolating them from the wider classroom experience.

5. Create career pathways and recognition

The final piece is valuing and retaining skilled TAs. Too often, TA roles are seen as low-status, low-progression positions, despite their complexity and importance.

This perception makes it harder for schools to recruit and retain talented staff.

Supporting our teacher workforce

System leaders can change this by creating structured career pathways (EEF, 2025) and ongoing professional learning opportunities (AITSL, 2025), including advanced roles with specialised expertise in areas such as literacy intervention or behaviour support.

Advancement should be linked to qualifications, experience, and demonstrated impact on student learning, giving TAs a clear reason to invest in their own professional growth. Systems can use professional standards for TAs to help clarify professional identity, create a pathway for structured career progression, guide professional growth and learning, and build recognition and respect.

Supporting TAs who wish to progress into the teaching profession through accredited qualifications, mentoring, and flexible study options that build on their classroom experience has the potential to alleviate teacher workforce shortages. By recognising their existing skills and providing structured pathways, system leaders can cultivate a more capable and specialised teaching workforce.

However, such initiatives may inadvertently create a new challenge if large numbers of TAs transition to teaching without concurrent strategies to replenish the TA workforce, potentially leaving gaps in the essential support roles that underpin inclusive and alternative education programs.

Acknowledgement and visibility, through teaching assistant professional associations, system-wide awards, communications, and performance frameworks, reinforces the message that TAs are a vital part of the education workforce.

When TAs see a future in the profession, their motivation and effectiveness rise, benefiting both teachers and students.

Why this matters for system leaders

Improving TA effectiveness is a system-level challenge, not a school-by-school experiment.

Without clear policy direction, schools will continue to make ad-hoc decisions that squander potential.

But with role clarity, mandatory training, structured collaboration, evidence-based deployment, and a focus on career progression, TAs can become a cornerstone of lifting student outcomes, bolstering teacher productivity, and improving job satisfaction for TAs and teachers alike.

National guidance is now catching up with this agenda. *Guidelines for the Optimal Deployment of Teaching Assistants in Australian Classrooms* (AITSL, 2025) provides a timely roadmap for systems to act, outlining seven key strategies for school leaders to implement that serve as levers for improved student outcomes.

Every day in Australian classrooms, TAs are helping students engage, learn, and thrive. With strategic system leadership, their impact can be amplified many times over, delivering better outcomes for students, stronger support for teachers, and a more productive school system overall.



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Her PhD explored how teachers can enhance the impact of teacher assistants to improve outcomes for all students.

Claire is passionate about supporting schools to strengthen inclusive practice through evidence-based approaches.

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