

Five minutes of phonics to lift child literacy levels

The only way to determine accurately whether children are learning the fundamental phonics skills — the relationships between sounds in speech and the letter patterns in written words — they need for early acquisition of reading is to assess what they know at a critical early point in their schooling.

The Australian government proposed a phonics check for Year 1 students in its May 2016 budget. Federal Education Minister Simon Birmingham has since reiterated the government's intention to introduce the Check in Australian schools.

There is a strong precedent for this policy. The UK government introduced a Year 1 Phonics Screening Check in all primary schools in England in 2012. The proportion of students reaching the expected standard in the Year 1 Phonics Screening Check in England has increased since its introduction — from 58% in 2012 to 81% in 2016. The proportion of students failing to achieve the expected standard in Year 2 reading tests has fallen by one third over the same period — from 15% to 10%.

The most effective way to teach phonics is in an explicit and systematic way. This is one of the best-established findings in educational research. Unfortunately, literacy policies and programs in use in Australian schools do not consistently incorporate evidence-based, effective phonics instruction and numerous studies have shown that initial teacher education courses have not provided teachers with the necessary knowledge and skills to teach in this way.

The result is that Australia has one of the largest proportions of children who do not achieve minimum standards in literacy by Year 4 among English speaking countries. This is preventable and must not be allowed to continue.

The Phonics Screening Check is not an 'exam'. It is not high stakes and is not onerous for students or schools. The Check takes 5–7 minutes per student to administer by a teacher. It comprises 20 real words and 20 pseudo-words. Pseudo words are included because pupils will not have encountered them before and therefore will not be able to read them as remembered 'sight' words.

The UK Year 1 Phonics Screening Check is an effective and cost-effective measure that could easily be adopted for use in Australian schools with some simple adaptations and improvements that would increase its positive impact without increasing its cost.



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