

6th December, 2017

Dear State and Territory Ministers for Education,

The following letter is in support of the proposed Year 1 Phonics Screening Check, due to be discussed at the Education Council Meeting on Friday 8 December.

A major issue for most students struggling with literacy in both primary and secondary school is their capacity to read and spell accurately. This is directly attributable to poor phonic knowledge (the letter-sound relationships underpinning Standard Australian English (SAE)). Students with poor phonic knowledge - and therefore poor reading and spelling accuracy - will invariably have difficulty with reading fluency, reading comprehension and written expression. They will read considerably less than their peers and, as a consequence, have significantly poorer vocabularies and general knowledge. This makes any text they do read more difficult to understand and therefore less accessible, they read even less, and the downward spiral continues. **Much of this damage could be avoided if the teaching of phonics was a key focus in the early years in all schools.**

Phonic knowledge (the letter-sound relationships underpinning our alphabetic system) is best taught explicitly, sequentially and cumulatively, using a pre-determined sequence, during the first two to three years of school. The most effective approach to teaching phonic knowledge is through structured synthetic phonics. This approach results in better outcomes for all students but is particularly powerful in lower SES areas, where children are frequently less well-resourced than their peers. (There is a wealth of evidence underpinning these claims).

Over the past decade, the message that children need to be provided with a strong foundation in phonic knowledge has been widely-acknowledged and, to some degree, responded to. Phonological and phonemic awareness, the alphabetic principle, and knowledge of the code have all been included in the Australian Curriculum – English (ACE) and most state-based departments of education have made it clear that phonics should be viewed as essential learning in the early years. Unfortunately, this knowledge - and the resolve to improve instruction in the early years - has not translated into widespread practice. There have been pockets of change, resulting in a measurable

improvement in both NAPLAN and PIRLS but it would appear that this improvement is driven largely by a minority of schools. Unfortunately, the results also suggest that there remains an unacceptably high number of students achieving at very low levels.

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In an analysis of high performing schools in Western Australia, it was found that – without exception – all had introduced structured synthetic phonics (Louden, 2015). Similar findings were documented in a report focusing on high performing schools in England - released by the UK Office of Standards in Education, Children’s Services and Skills (Ofsted) on November 30th, 2017. Some of the key findings include:

- Reading was at the heart of the curriculum in the most successful classes;
- Structured, synthetic phonics played a critical and central role;
- Checks of children’s phonics knowledge, standardised tests and scrutinies of children’s work provided the essential information that Year 1 teachers needed;
- Children were taught to read in a systematic and structured way - with their phonic knowledge and skills built up cumulatively and explicitly;
- Children’s early writing and spelling was supported and informed by good phonics teaching; and,
- School leaders believed that the phonics screening check in year 1 had sharpened teachers’ thinking about reading in the early years.

When the Phonics Check was first introduced in England in 2012, 58 percent of six year olds reached the pass mark. This year, 81 per cent of six-year-olds reached the standard, with 92 per cent reaching the standard by the end of year 2. The current Executive Headteacher of the Floreat Schools in England and a recognised National Leader of Education, Janet Hilary, recently provided the feedback below in response to a question about the value of the Phonics Check:

“The Phonics Screening Check is an incredibly powerful lever for ensuring all children learn to read. I used it to transform a school where children were in the 2% most deprived nationally in to one of the top performing schools in the country, by achieving a 100% pass rate - year on year. The children perceive themselves to be capable and successful learners and achieve high levels of attainment at ages 7 and 11, progressing to the highest performing secondary schools. If the U.K. abolished the screen, I would continue to administer it and to make teachers accountable for 100% success. Every child should be given the opportunity to flourish.”

Official statistics from the Department for Education in England, show that 147,000 more six-year-olds became fluent readers in 2016 compared with the same period five years ago.

We believe that the proposed Year 1 Phonics Check is a simple, yet effective, tool which has the potential to significantly improve literacy achievement. We are aware of the strong ‘No’ campaign that has been mounted in opposition to the Year 1 Check but suggest that much of the information that has been circulated has been misleading and factually inaccurate.

In response to that information, and in order to highlight our support for the Year 1 Phonics’ Check, we wish to make the following points:

- If approved, this simple, yet powerful, 5 – 7 minute ‘Check’ of student progress will be conducted ‘face-to-face’ by a staff member well-known to the child. It should not represent a cause of concern as, if the national (and state) curriculum is being effectively delivered, and phonic knowledge is being well taught, it will simply mirror tasks that are regularly

taking place in the classroom.

- The 'Check' taps into the essential foundation-level knowledge of letter-sound relationships, recognised as crucial if children are to develop reading and spelling accuracy and fluency. It is a curriculum-based measure that has the potential to identify **most** children at risk of falling behind in reading, spelling and writing – including those who may be at risk of having a persistent and enduring learning difficulty such as dyslexia.
- Children with learning disorders (including reading, written expression and mathematics disorders) are frequently found to have underlying processing difficulties. These include weaknesses in: phonological processing (the processing of speech); orthographic processing (the processing of written symbols); and, working memory (the processing of information in short-term memory). Processing weaknesses such as these frequently result in difficulties acquiring phonic knowledge and – potentially – literacy failure. The Year 1 'Check' would allow for early intervention and – if needed – further assessment.
- Phonics is an essential body of knowledge that is **not** appropriately assessed in either the mandatory foundation or optional year 1 screening and assessment tools currently available. In some cases, assertions have been made to suggest the there are some 'phonics' sub tests in the foundation / year 1 assessment tools, but on closer inspection these can be identified as predominantly tests of phonological and/or phonemic awareness – not phonics.
- The introduction of this simple measure has the potential to sharpen the focus of teachers and principals on the underlying skills necessary for successful reading and, as a consequence, is likely to improve instruction and outcomes for all students.

Thank you for considering the points raised in this letter. As stated, we are of the belief that the Year 1 Screening Check is a simple, yet powerful tool that has the potential to lead to improved literacy outcomes for all children but particularly for those children at greatest risk of failure

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Mandy Nayton', with a long horizontal stroke extending to the right.

Mandy Nayton OAM
President AUSPELD

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