

Submission to the Productivity Commission Inquiry into the National Education Evidence Base

This submission argues for the introduction of a national Phonics test in Year 1 to assess children's word reading skills in their second year of school. It is submitted by Dr Molly de Lemos, AM, Former Educational Researcher with the Australian Council for Educational Research and Past President of Learning Difficulties Australia (2013-2014), Dr Roslyn Neilson, Speech-Language Pathologist and author of widely used assessments of phonological and phonemic awareness in young children, Emeritus Professor Kevin Wheldall, AM, Macquarie University, and Dr Robyn Wheldall, Honorary Research Fellow, Macquarie University. All the signatories to this submission have wide experience and expertise in research and practice relating to the teaching and assessment of reading.

11 May 2016

A National Phonics test in Year 1?

The introduction of NAPLAN testing in 2008 proved an effective means of monitoring students' progress in achieving the literacy and numeracy skills that provide the critical foundations for learning and for successful completion of secondary education.

However, a weakness of the NAPLAN testing is that Year 3 is too late to identify students who have failed to develop the essential early reading skills that provide the basis for subsequent literacy development. Early identification and intervention are now seen as critical in preventing the development of long term reading difficulties that affect the student's learning in all areas of the curriculum.

The recent proposal to introduce a national phonics test at Year 1 would provide an effective means of monitoring the achievement of early reading skills, and at the same time would provide an indication of how effectively these essential skills are being taught by schools.

Such a test has been successfully introduced in England where all students are tested at the end of Year 1 on a word reading test that includes 20 real words and 20 pseudo words. Performance on this test has improved consistently since its introduction in 2012, from 58 per cent reaching the expected standard in 2012 to 77 per cent reaching the expected standard in 2015. Many schools, even in disadvantaged areas, have 95 per cent or more of their students reaching the expected standard. A recent evaluation of the introduction of mandated phonics teaching in England has shown that this has proved to be a cost-effective method of improving the literacy achievement of students, with disadvantaged children showing greater improvements than advantaged children, thus reducing the achievement gap between advantaged and disadvantaged students (see Machin, McNally and Viarengo, 2016).

The introduction of a phonics test in Year 1 could also have a significant impact in drawing attention to the importance of systematic teaching of phonics in laying the basis for reading skills, and result in more effective teaching of reading in the early years of school.

From this perspective it could be argued that the introduction of a Phonics test in Year 1 is the one single initiative that could have the biggest impact in improving both reading achievement and reading instruction in the early years of school.

It is an initiative that is also both feasible and cost-effective.

Reference

Stephen Machin, Sandra McNally and Martina Viarengo (2016), '*Teaching to Teach Literacy*', Centre for Economic Performance, London School of Economics and Political Science, Discussion Paper No 1425, April 2016.

For a brief overview of the introduction of the Year One Phonics Screening Check in England see <http://www.iferi.org/resources-and-guidance/>.

Submitted by

Dr Molly de Lemos, AM, Former Senior Research Fellow, Australian Council for Educational Research and Past President of Learning Difficulties Australia (2013-2014)

Dr Roslyn Neilson, Speech-Language Pathologist

Emeritus Professor Kevin Wheldall, AM, Macquarie University

Dr Robyn Wheldall, Honorary Research Fellow, Macquarie University

11 May 2016