



RESEARCH REPORT SNAPSHOT



Focus on Phonics: Why Australia should adopt the Year 1 Phonics Screening Check



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Why do we need a phonics check?

In order to read proficiently, students need accurate and fluent word identification skills and adequate language comprehension. Put simply, they must be able to work out what the words on the page or screen are, and know what they mean.

The most effective way to develop accurate and fluent word identification is to learn the code of written English through being taught phonics — the relationships between sounds in speech and the letter patterns in written words — especially through an explicit teaching method called 'systematic synthetic phonics'.

Systematic synthetic phonics

In systematic synthetic phonics, children are taught how to build up (synthesise) words from their smallest unit (graphemes) by teaching a carefully planned sequence of small groups of letters at a time, introducing blending after a few letter-sounds have been learnt. If children master these skills easily, teachers can introduce more letters and letter-combinations more quickly so that children start reading and writing more complex words as soon as possible.

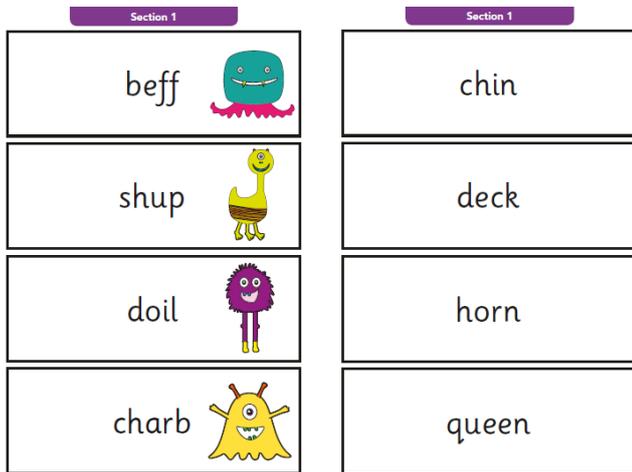
Literacy policies and programs in use in Australian schools do not consistently support effective teaching of phonics, and many teachers do not have the necessary knowledge and skills to teach in this way.

The Australian government proposed a phonics check in its May 2016 budget and federal education minister Simon Birmingham has since reiterated the government's intention to introduce the Check in Australian schools.

UK Year 1 Phonics Screening Check

The UK government introduced a Year 1 Phonics Screening Check in all primary schools in England in 2012. It takes 5–7 minutes per student to administer by a teacher. Results are reported nationally. Individual school results are not published but are taken into consideration in school inspection reports.

The check comprises 40 items, all of which are phonetically decodable words. The check has two sections, each of which has 20 items progressing from easier to harder. There are 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.



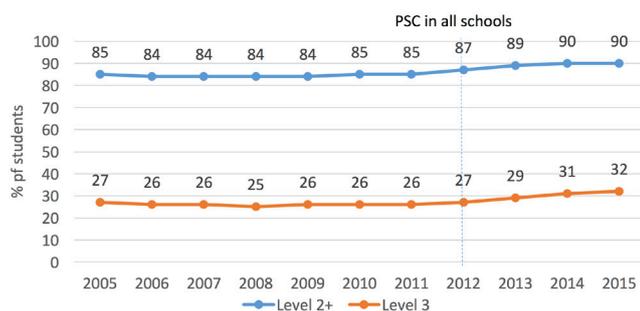
The proportion of students reaching the expected standard in the Year 1 Phonics Screening Check in England has increased each year since its introduction (Figure 8), and the number of students failing to achieve the expected standard in Year 2 reading tests has fallen by one third over the same period (Figure 9). The attainment gap associated with socioeconomic disadvantage has also narrowed.

Figure 8. Percentage of children meeting the expected standard in the Phonics Screening Check in Years 1 and 2, 2012-2016

	Year 1	Year 2	Improvement from Year 1 to Year 2 (Percentage points)
2016	81%	91%	14
2015	77%	90%	16
2014	74%	89%	20
2013	69%	85%	27
2012	58%	Not applicable	

Source: UK Department for Education 2016¹

Figure 9. Percentage of students at Level 2+ and level 3 in reading at Key Stage 1, 2005-2015



Source: UK Department for Education 2015²

Author

Dr Jennifer Buckingham is a Senior Research Fellow and Director of the FIVE from FIVE reading project at The Centre for Independent Studies. She has published widely on a variety of education policy issues, including literacy policies and programs, international assessments, school funding and school choice.

Conclusion and recommendations

The UK Year 1 Phonics Screening Check 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.

A Year 1 Phonics Screening Check would be an effective and cost-effective measure, which would demonstrate how well phonics is being taught across the country and in individual schools, and supply the impetus to drive improvements in teaching.

At the student level, it would provide early identification of students who are struggling with this essential foundational reading skill and need intervention or further specialist assessment.

Recommendation 1: Australia should seek permission to use the UK government's Phonics Screening Check structure and item generation database.

Recommendation 2: Have clear specifications about which students are exempt from the Phonics Screening Check and when the Check can be discontinued.

Recommendation 3: Conduct a pilot study before implementing the Phonics Screening Check nationally. Consider a controlled trial to assess the impact of the Phonics Screening Check prior to national implementation.

Recommendation 4: Explore ways to avoid the 'spike' in the score distribution at the threshold (expected standard) score.

Recommendation 5: Resist proposals to expand the Phonics Screening Check to become a comprehensive literacy assessment.

Endnotes

- 1 UK Department for Education Standards and Testing Agency. 2016. Phonics screening check and Key stage 1 assessments in England, 2016.
- 2 UK Department for Education. 2015. Phonics screening check and Key stage 1 assessments in England, 2015.