

[Home](#) / [News](#) / [Policy](#) / [Education](#)

Sep 6 2015 at 12:34 PM | Updated Sep 7 2015 at 10:03 AM

SAVE ARTICLE | PRINT REPRINTS & PERMISSIONS

\$50m Reading Recovery program is ineffective, NSW Education Department study finds



A NSW Education Department study has found that its \$50 million-a-year Reading Recovery program for early primary school children is ineffective. **Quentin Jones**

by **Tim Dodd**

A \$50 million-a-year scheme to help NSW students learn to read and write through recognising words by sight doesn't work, according to a new study by the state Education Department.

A departmental evaluation of Reading Recovery – a 40-year-old program that originated in New Zealand and is widely used in Australia, the United States, the United Kingdom and Canada – found it is only effective for a small proportion of students.

The report's findings will give more ammunition to critics of Reading Recovery, who say the program does not properly use phonics and explicit instruction to teach struggling students how to read – techniques that research has shown are the best ways to deal with reading difficulties in the early years of primary school.

In contrast to the phonics-based approach, Reading Recovery is less explicit in teaching children how to sound out letters, relying more on them recognising whole



RELATED ARTICLES

Five of world's top 50 unis are Australian

words, and picking up clues from accompanying pictures and the context of the story.

In spite of many academic studies over the last 25 years that have questioned Reading Recovery, it remains a very influential remedial reading program used in early primary school in developed English-speaking countries. In Australia, education departments in the two largest states – Victoria and NSW – strongly back the program.

While the results of the NSW evaluation were clear some months ago, progress on the report has stalled and a department spokesperson said on Friday that it was "still in the process of being completed".

Reading Recovery was first used in NSW in 1984 and, according to the NSW Education Department website, it reached nearly 100,000 students between 1996 and 2011. It is usually begun in year 1 of primary school for children who have fallen behind in their kindergarten year.

Besides lacking effectiveness, Reading Recovery is expensive because it relies on one-to-one instruction by teachers. Critics say it is better to teach reading to all children in the classroom using explicit instruction methods that start in kindergarten.

Children's reading specialist Kevin Wheldall, now an emeritus professor at Macquarie University, was asked by the NSW Education Department to evaluate Reading Recovery in the early 1990s. He and his team found that it was effective for one in three children at most, and those whom it did help had the least reading problems. But the report given to the department was never released.

"It [Reading Recovery] has powerful advocates within the [NSW Education] department which has prevented any dramatic action to deal with it," he said.

Professor Wheldall said the Reading Recovery did not include phonics in "any structured, systematic, explicit way".

Reading Recovery was developed in the 1970s by New Zealander Marie Clay, who successfully promoted the program in other major English-speaking countries and in 1987 was made a Dame Commander of the Order of the British Empire for her services to reading.

However, Lorraine Hammond, a senior lecturer at Edith Cowan University and vice president of Learning Difficulties Australia, said Reading Recovery was an old program that had been "set in stone".

"The whole world of reading has moved beyond the 10-step plan she put forward," Dr Hammond said.

Financial markets show soft side with \$15m gift to universities

An MBA for the teacher

Qld business schools are on top - but why?

Meet Simon Birmingham, the Abbott government minister who is doing something right

LATEST STORIES



JLL boss backs commercial property cycle to power on for two more years

3 mins ago



Some Perth suburbs still rising in value

7 mins ago



Live: Tony Abbott to say farewell

8 mins ago

Safari Power Saver
Click to Start Flash Plug-in

