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No evidence reading and maths plans help

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ONLY two of the more than a dozen remedial reading programs used in schools across the nation are backed by strong evidence they help children struggling to learn to read.

And no strong evidence exists to support the efficacy of any of the more than 20 remedial programs for maths, an independent review of research on the effectiveness of literacy and numeracy programs used in the first three years of school shows.

The review by the Australian Council for Educational Research for the NSW government and its ministerial advisory group on literacy and numeracy found a startling lack of rigorous evaluation.

Of 15 literacy programs assessed, 10 had no or very limited evidence that they were effective, two had some evidence that students improved and only two were backed by strong evidence that they worked.

Of the 21 numeracy interventions examined, 17 had no or very limited evidence of their effectiveness and four had some evidence they improved students' struggle with basic mathematical skills.

"In general, independent, valid and reliable evidence for the efficacy and effectiveness of specific literacy and numeracy interventions currently implemented (or which could be implemented) in the early years is relatively scarce, particularly for interventions focused on numeracy," the report says.

It recommends remedial programs be implemented only when "independent and credible" findings on their effectiveness, including their cost-effectiveness, exist.

Ministerial advisory group head Ken Boston, former director general of the NSW Education Department, said the report had national implications. While a lack of evidence did not mean the programs were ineffective, neither could it be said they were effective without verification.

"There's simply no external, professional, independent scrutiny of these things. We haven't had it in NSW and we haven't had it in Australia," Dr Boston said. "This is saying: from now on when we put money into these things, we evaluate right from the start . . . it has to be tested externally."

NSW Education Minister Adrian Piccoli wants funding to be directed only to programs that have proven their effectiveness by lifting the level of students' skills.

"The ACER report highlights the lack of program evaluation undertaken in the past and that's a practice I'm determined to change," he said. "Policy and funding decisions must be evidence-based and that is why our literacy and numeracy action plan is being independently evaluated."

The reading programs with strong evidence of their effectiveness were MULTILIT (Making Up for Lost Time in Literacy), developed by researchers at Macquarie University, and the widely used Reading Recovery, developed in New Zealand in the 1980s.

But the effectiveness of Reading Recovery has been questioned, with the Queensland government dropping it in 2008 and a recent report in New Zealand blaming it for the lack of improvement in reading skills there.

The ACER report fails to mention one of the biggest flaws in the Reading Recovery research: reporting only students who successfully complete the program, with those who struggle to make progress withdrawn about 14 weeks in and not included in evaluations.