



Prime Minister of Australia

The Hon Julia Gillard MP

Transcript of Joint Doorstop Interview

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Prime Minister

Canberra

PM: I'm here today with Minister Garrett and with Andrew Leigh the Member for Fraser and we've just done some reading to kids. It's been a fantastic morning, some very excited young people here at the Lodge; very interested though in their reading. And we want young people around the country to be passionate about reading which is why today I am announcing our reading blitz for 1.1 million children. What we know is around 75,000 kids at the moment aren't reading as well as we would like. We know that because we've got more information about schools than we've ever had before as a result of the policies of this Government. We always wanted to understand what was happening for every child in every school so we could make a difference for every child in every school. Through this reading blitz we want to make a difference. We want to make sure that every child is assessed, every child's strengths and weaknesses on reading are known and every child gets the opportunity to become a great reader. When kids start school around 74 per cent of them are at risk of not learning to read well. We can reduce that. Indeed studies show that we can reduce that to six per cent but it takes focus and it takes a focus on every child. This is important in a moral sense. We want to do the best for every kid in the country but it's important in an economic sense too. In our nation today around eight million Australians don't read and write as well as they should. Now in the future when jobs will need to be more highly skilled, particularly to be more highly paid, we can't afford our schools to be churning out young people who can't read and write. So I'm very pleased to announce today this new endeavour, this new focus on reading. We will make this reading blitz one of the aims of our school funding reforms. As we've said consistently, we want to see more resources in schools but we want to make sure those resources are tied to a real agenda of change – an agenda of change that is about better quality schooling. I'm determined that we make a difference to the reading of every child in every school and that's what I'm proud to announce today.

MINISTER GARRETT: Thank you Prime Minister. Making sure that every young Australian student when they get into primary school can read well is one of the most urgent tasks that faces us as we want to lift the education for all kids in all schools. The advice is absolutely compelling. If a young child has got good levels of literacy under their belt then they will continue to be good learners and they will get great jobs in the future. The converse is that if we don't make sure that we are providing that support at an early stage between foundation and year three for kids in schools then they can continue to fall behind and we'll be left as a nation with the low levels of literacy that we currently experience. One of the most important things about today's announcement is recognising that making sure that every child is a good reader means making sure every child can be a successful student and I think that it's extremely important given that in the National Plan for School Improvement we have specifically said that every school will need to have a plan for addressing the progress that students are making in their school. As a consequence of this announcement today literacy and a focus on literacy in the early years will be a very important part of that process. I think this is really important for us to recognise what a difference it makes when kids can read well. It sets them up for learning and it sets them up for life.

ANDREW LEIGH: Thanks Prime Minister. As someone who researched a little in this area when I was an ANU academic, I can attest to the fact that there is no better way of raising a country's long run productivity than boosting literacy and numeracy. If you care about the gap between rich and poor there is probably no better anti-poverty vaccine than a great education. I know as a parent though that it's not always easy. Sometimes at the end of the day you come home tired and you don't exactly feel like sitting down on the couch and opening up Barnyard Dance with your three year old. But it really does make a difference and that moment when the lights switch on and a young child starts to read themselves is such an exciting one and such an important one for them and for the nation. I'm really pleased to be here today with a group of Canberra families supporting a great Government initiative.

JOURNALIST: Prime Minister, how much is this program going to cost and where is that money coming from?

PM: This is going to be embedded in the work we're already doing for school funding reform. As you're aware I think, when I became Education Minister we embarked on a major program of change for Australia schools. It has involved new buildings and new equipment, things like new computers, a world class curriculum, a series of new National Partnership, more money in literacy and numeracy, disadvantaged schools and teacher quality. And we know from that work that you can make a difference. This is a problem we can solve. If you bring the right combination of resources and change you can make sure more children are reading at a higher level. Now through our school funding reforms we want to make sure that's happening in every school for every child. The new money is going to be tied to initiatives that make a difference for the quality of education including this one and the reason why in reading we're focused on the years from prep to grade three is if we can get kids successfully reading at that stage of life it'll make a difference for the rest of their lives. If

you miss out on literacy then it can be very hard to catch it up later on. And the evidence shows that if you come out of year three not reading well you're very likely to come out of year nine not reading well either, which means you're very likely to end up an adult who never reads well with all of the consequences that's got for the jobs you can do and the jobs that are locked away for from.

JOURNALIST: Prime Minister, can you take us through the logistics of that as well and when will it come into effect?

PM: Well it would be a part of what we're phasing in through the work we're doing on school funding reform and we've made a difference already in many schools with our National Partnership program which is focused on literacy and numeracy. What this would do is take a very system-wide approach – every child, every school – to the things that we know work. And the things we know work include a focus on phonics. It includes making sure that you understand where every child is at. You're not guessing how good a reader the child is. We're actually measuring that and then we're measuring progress and there's a plan for every child to make sure that we're working on what is mattering to them for their literacy. Every kid is different. Their journey to being a good reader is going to be different. Some of the tools are the same including things like phonics, but how to work with an individual child will be about that child's needs.

JOURNALIST: (Inaudible)

PM: We're on the biggest transformation in Australian schooling for 40 years. So we've got to get it right. It's vital to our nation and our economic future. We want to be a high-skill, high-wage country in the future. We want to be the winner out of all this century of change in our region. We want to be the people who tap into Asian growth and make money out of it. In order to do that we've got to be able to compete and so we've got to win the education race. If we're going to win the economic race, when you're doing something as big as the biggest change in schooling for 40 years, yes it takes some time to do it right and we'll take that time.

JOURNALIST: What year will the first child be the beneficiary of this reading blitz?

PM: There are kids out there benefiting from our literacy and numeracy work now and then our school funding reform and these new plans for school improvement will start coming on stream from next school year.

JOURNALIST: Prime Minister, does it mean extra teachers going in to sit down with the child going through reading, will that require extra teachers in the classroom?

PM: I'll throw to Minister Garrett as well but in the National Partnership schools that we know are doing things that make a difference, there's a wide variety of approaches. It can include things like breakfast clubs and after school activities because kids maybe come from homes where they don't necessarily come to school having eaten. If you've got a rumbling tummy it's pretty hard to concentrate on your reading. Those kids might need extra effort and so longer hours after school. Indeed some reading recovery done during school holiday times can make a difference. It can also be about getting master literacy coaches in who are not only working with kids but they're working with the teachers to increase the teacher quality and improve the skills. It can be about programs that bring the parents into the school so they are actually increasing the number of people who can sit with kids, word by word, sound by sound and make a difference to their reading. But Minister Garrett would also be familiar with a lot of examples.

MINISTER GARRETT: Prime Minister, I think you've covered it well. The important thing to remember is that where we've seen additional investment in the National Partnerships by this Labor Government, we have seen improvements against the trend of decline in literacy. For example we're seeing larger numbers of schools that are applying National Partnership funding, seeing better results in literacy and numeracy as a consequence. But we need to make that happen nationwide and that will mean a series of specific measures that schools can identify and deliver, whether it's things such as the Prime Minister's mentioned, literacy coaches, looking at the application of phonics and literacy learning, for example the MultiLit program which is a recovering literacy program which is used quite widely. But most important of all, for each school to track the progress of kids when they start in foundation through to year three to make sure that when they get to year three that they are at or above those minimum leaves for literacy learning. That will involve much greater use of data by the school community and the school leadership and teachers, much greater interaction with the parents, making sure that in the school improvement plans that are a part of the National Plan for School Improvement this focus on literacy happens early. Again, just to repeat, the evidence is very clear that if we do provide targeted intervention and support in the early years, and of course as Andrew Leigh said, encouraging parents to read to their kids as well then you can lift those literacy levels and then of course the child's learning is on a much more solid foundation from year three on.

JOURNALIST: Prime Minister, the indigenous literacy rate is a lot lower than the rest (inaudible). Are there provisions in this policy specifically for indigenous and rural kids?

PM: The aim is the same for everyone. We want every child to be a good reader so we've got the same aim for everyone but we're well aware from our Closing the Gap work that there is still an unacceptably large gap between the achievement of indigenous children and non-indigenous children. Now that means that we need to keep doubling-down and focusing on the efforts for indigenous children which we are going through the Closing the Gap strategy and which will also be associated with this work. As a result of all of the information we now have about schools, which we never used to have - I've said it before but when I first became Education Minister no one in Canberra in all of the federal bureaucracy could give you a list of the thousand schools that were doing the worst in our country or the thousand schools doing the best. No one could give you that. No one had ever compiled that information. Now we have information school by school including the percentage of indigenous children in the school so we can track achievement in those schools including achievement for indigenous children and we can bring to bear the tools we know make a difference. There are some schools that teach indigenous children where we have worked with them with extra resources that are getting truly remarkable results. We want to see that around the country.

JOURNALIST: Are you actually setting a benchmark for success here nationally or individually and would we be right to conclude that there's no incentive element to this against performance?

PM: There will be constant monitoring and incentives against outcomes. What we've said about our school funding reform is we want to set the goals, the aspirations, the targets for education. We want everybody to have the information - you, me, the parents, communities, teachers, everyone - to have the information. We want schools to have a school improvement plan including this reading plan and schools will held to account for their performance against the plan. If at the end of the day the adults in the system are failing the children we need to know that and we need to take action. But you can only know it if you measure it, make it transparent, give people the resources that they need, help them with the changed agenda and then monitor the outcomes and hold people accountable. That's the combination we're bringing to bear in school reform. If you didn't know what was going on then you couldn't start. If you didn't monitor what change was being achieved then you wouldn't know if you were making progress. If you don't get the resources right then you aren't giving principals and teachers the things at their disposal which enable them to make the maximum difference for the kids. But then you've also got to hold people accountable. Adults in the system have got a duty, an obligation to the children. We want to see them acquit that duty. The best teachers, the best principals do that every day.

JOURNALIST: Prime Minister, is there a change in the teaching method for reading, like there's been more mention of phonics (inaudible)?

PM: It's been changing over time so we are not suggesting that somehow teaching method is changing as a result of the reading blitz that we've announced today. We've been changing the methodology over time. Both as Deputy Prime Minister and Prime Minister I've been very clear about this. I'm not interested in any of the warring between contending theories; I'm only interested in the results and so if what gets a result for a child is phonics then phonics it is. If what gets a result for a child is some other teaching strategy then some other teaching strategy can be engaged. It's all about that child. This isn't something to get ideological about. They're the old days when the Howard Government used to play the reading wars and no one actually sat down with the child and taught them to read while the adults were too busy having a fight amongst themselves. We've move past those days to where we are now and it's all about the child. For a child that comes to read anew, phonics, sounding out letters, is the foundation of literacy. For a child that comes to reading with some capacity - the kids I was talking to in there, some of them were reading out big words like 'imitate' - well they're past phonics and may need the next teaching strategy that's going to help them keep adding new words and new comprehension and new understanding and then obviously bolster their creativity as they start writing themselves.

JOURNALIST: Prime Minister, are you concerned about the Pentagon grounding the F-35 Joint Strike Fighter fleet?

PM: We have committed to purchasing two Joint Strike Fighters. We don't want there to be a gap in our air warfare capability and we won't allow such a gap to arise. Yes, we'll continue to monitor and be in discussions about issues that have arisen and need to be addressed in the performance of the Joint Strike Fighter but we do have the agreement to purchase two and we will go ahead with that purchase.

JOURNALIST: Do you have a message about the floods in New South Wales at the moment?

PM: I certainly do. Like Australians around the country I've watched this circumstance in New South Wales and I think we've all been hit pretty hard over news of the loss of two lives, particularly the news about the loss of Luke O'Neill, the 17 year old doing something I think we can all imagine a 17 year old and his mates doing, going after golf balls in flood waters but such a dangerous thing. To see a young man lose his life like that is truly heart breaking. My message to the communities in New South Wales would be two-fold. First, keep yourself safe. Water is a dangerous thing, deceptively dangerous. Even very low levels of water if it's fast moving can sweep people away. So keep yourself safe. Stay away from the flood waters. We as a Federal Government will do what we need to do to help. No requests

have been made of us at this stage. Obviously, it's local communities and state governments that always do the first instance response and that's the right way to do it. They're the ones on the spot. But if any requests come in for assistance then we will do them, meet them as quickly as possible and with all human endeavours to do everything that's asked for.

Thank you very much.