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Universities 'refuse to accept the evidence' on reading

JUSTINE FERRARI, NATIONAL EDUCATION CORRESPONDENT THE AUSTRALIAN DECEMBER 13, 2012 12:00AM

UNIVERSITIES and state education departments were singled out yesterday to shoulder some responsibility for the shockingly poor results for Australian primary students in international reading, maths and science tests.

A leading researcher in the teaching of reading, Kevin Wheldall accused university faculties and education departments of stubbornly refusing to accept the evidence of the most effective way to teach reading.

Federal School Education Minister Peter Garrett questioned the training provided to teachers while at university.

The tests released on Tuesday night reveal that about 25 per cent of students in Year 4 failed to meet the minimum standard while students' results in maths and science have stagnated during the past 16 years.

Professor Wheldall, founder of the MultiLit remedial reading program, said a national inquiry into the teaching of reading in 2005 had stated precisely how it should be taught.

"It's not the kids' fault, it's not the teachers' fault, it's the fault of the teacher education faculties and educational bureaucrats," said Professor Wheldall, a member of the inquiry's committee.

"They have been resolute in their determination to ignore all the advice they have received about how to teach reading effectively. It's infuriating."

Mr Garrett said state governments had "a lot to answer for" and the results raised "a very big question about the level of training and competency" in university training for teachers.

"It's crystal clear that turning around our performance needs to include a strong focus in our teaching training standards," he told The Australian.

"We want students to be in courses that give them the confidence and understanding of their subject area . . . and we want only teachers that have demonstrated that they are more than capable in the classroom graduating from our universities. Obviously this is not happening in every training course."

Australian Council of Deans of Education president Brenda Cherednichenko said the results required further investigation to understand what was happening in schools and how to improve the teacher education system.

"Teacher education has never been more evidence-based in terms of the way it structures the pedagogy of teaching in the classroom, that's been a growing theme for 10 or more years," she said.

Gonski review member Ken Boston said the results were largely the result of having one of the most socially segregated school systems in the world.

"We have the Gonski solution and then we need to pour the money into what happens in the classroom and the quality of teaching," he said. "Teachers must be better supported to shape the learning experiences for individual children . . . and they need much better professional training, especially based in their own schools."

