

State's \$11m phonics test slammed by teachers

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Education editor

A mandatory phonics test introduced in Victoria this year to screen the reading ability of all grade 1 students might have too few words to be useful and could be conducted too early in the school year to detect problems.

Critics of the state's \$11.3 million update to its existing literacy assessment tool, known as the English Online Interview, say schools would have been better off using the free phonics test available through the federal government.

Overloaded teachers have dismissed the test as "hopeless" and "time-consuming" while providing little meaningful data.

The mandated grade 1 module in the Victorian test has only 10 words, as opposed to the national standard of 40 which has been adopted by NSW and South Australia. Of the 10 words in the Victorian test, only five are "non-words", which are used to teach sounding-out skills, whereas the other test has 20 non-words.

The Victorian test is conducted in term one, but experts say students have not learned the principles of phonics by that stage and the screening should be switched to term three – as in NSW and South Australia – to give teachers a better view of students' progress.

Dyslexia Victoria Support founder Heidi Gregory spent months lobbying for the test to be mandated, but teachers have told her it is "nowhere near" the level they were expecting. "Teachers are saying that it's a waste of time," she said.

How reading is taught is a heated topic in Victoria. Unlike other states, which have openly backed a phonics-based approach, the Victorian government allows primary schools to choose their own literacy strategy.

As a result, some schools have adopted the phonics-based science of reading principles, which teach children the sounds of the English language and the letter combinations that make them.

Other schools choose a balanced literacy approach, which combines some phonics with whole language practices that teach children to read using full words and predictable texts that encourage them to guess words.

Angry public school teachers, who asked to remain anonymous to protect their jobs, said the test was "hopeless" and "time-consuming" with implausible non-words that could render results invalid.

"I must admit that as a school leader, we did it and have never looked at it again," one said.

Another said: "The phonics add-on is an example of this attempt to

put lipstick on the pig that is the English Online Interview. The federal government's year 1 phonics check is much more meaningful and costs schools much less, in terms of resources, to administer."

The Victorian test's implementation is also costly. Schools have been given two days of casual staff funding for each grade 1 teacher to conduct the test this year and the next.

Professor of cognitive psychology Pamela Snow, a co-director of La Trobe University's Science of Language and Reading Lab, said 10 word items was not an adequate sample and would result in over- and under-identification of children with literacy issues.

"Screening tests with high false positive and false negative rates don't make the cut in health, and they shouldn't in education either," Snow said.

Jennifer Buckingham, the director of strategy at literacy company MultiLit, has called for nationally consistent screening check for phonics and said she did not understand why Victoria had chosen to develop its own test instead of using one with "runs on the board".

"Teachers are saying that it's a waste of time."

Heidi Gregory, founder of Dyslexia Victoria Support

"I'd like to think that [the introduction of phonics] is a genuine attempt to make that English Online Interview more effective ... but I just find it really difficult to understand why you wouldn't just use a really good, valid, effective assessment that is already available and doesn't actually cost anything," she said.

The English Online Interview assesses students' reading, writing, speaking and listening across four modules. The first is mandatory in weeks one to five of foundation (prep) and the second in weeks three to seven of grade 1. Modules three and four include additional phonics assessments but are recommended either at the end of grade 1 or for advanced students.

An Education Department spokesperson said Victorian grade 3 students achieved the nation's highest reading scores in this year's NAPLAN testing, and 21.2 per cent of grade 3 students in the state were in the highest category of exceeding expectations, compared to 18.3 per cent nationally.

Victoria's mandatory phonics test was developed by the Australian Council for Educational Research.

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