

# The West Australian

Education Australia Children

## Grattan Institute report reveals Australian children's reading problem, with reforms coming




**Bethany Hiatt** The West Australian

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Bethany Hiatt



 About a third of Australian children are unable to read properly because of poor teaching methods, a new report claims. Credit: Miljan Zivkovic/Miljan Živković - stock.adobe.



About a third of Australian children are unable to read properly because of poor teaching methods, a new report claims.

The report from Melbourne think-tank the Grattan Institute argues a key cause of the nation's "reading problem" is decades of disagreement about how to teach reading.

"In the typical Australian school classroom of 24 students, eight can't read well," lead author and Grattan education program director Jordana Hunter said.

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“Australia is failing these children. And it’s a preventable tragedy – the reason most of these students can’t read well enough is that we aren’t teaching them well enough.”

The report estimates the cost to the nation from poor readers, who are more likely to drop out of school and end up unemployed or in poorly paid jobs, is around \$40 billion over their lifetimes.

Dr Hunter, who was also a member of an expert panel which recently reported to the Federal Government on how to improve Australia’s education system, said the evidence was clear that all schools should use the “structured literacy” approach to teach reading.

Structured literacy includes a focus on phonics, with students learning to sound out letters to decode new words, as well as explicit teaching to build their background knowledge and vocabulary.



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## Checklist: How is reading taught at your child’s school?

Bethany Hiatt

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She called for the remnants of the “whole language” approach – based on the idea that students can pick up reading the same way they learn to talk – to be banished from schools.

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“The whole language approach is a failure. It’s a failure because it doesn’t teach reading well.”

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Dr Hunter urged State and territory governments, and Catholic and independent sector leaders to commit to a “reading guarantee”, with a 10-year target of increasing the proportion of students who reach proficiency on NAPLAN reading tests from 68 per cent to 83 per cent by 2033.

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The six-step guarantee would also include handing teachers a blueprint on how to teach reading based on latest evidence and appointing literacy instructional specialists in schools.

The report also called for schools’ performance on teaching their students to read to be regularly reviewed and for a nationally-consistent Year 1 phonics screening check to be mandated.

The WA Education Department introduced a phonics initiative in 2022 which includes providing schools with a list of endorsed phonics programs.

WA public schools are also required to assess Year 1 students on their grasp of phonics, but schools can use different tests which means their results are not able to be compared.

Last month The West Australian revealed parents were being warned their school may not be using the most effective methods to teach reading, and to beware of characters Skippy Frog or Eagle Eye in their child’s classroom.

Education program provider MultiLit has released a checklist ahead of the new school year to help parents find out if their school is up to date on latest reading instruction methods.

The Eagle Eye reading strategy encourages kids to guess at words from pictures on

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MultiLit senior research fellow Jennifer Buckingham said too many schools were still using outdated strategies that were inferior to teaching phonics explicitly and systematically, leaving many children struggling.

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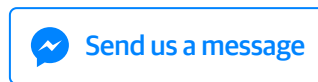
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