

National WA Education

OPINION

WA's reading problem is hiding in plain sight



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The tragedy of Australia's reading problem is that it has been hiding in plain view for years.

When I finished my PhD in 2014, our national primary school literacy achievement was edging towards the bottom of the global rankings for English-speaking countries.



Nearly 36 per cent of WA kids did not meet reading proficiency. ISTOCK

It was clear too many students were struggling with reading unnecessarily.

The latest NAPLAN results have confirmed more than 30 per cent of year 3 students nationwide are not proficient in reading. The Grattan Institute last week calculated the economic cost of this failure at \$40 billion.

Unfortunately, the situation in Western Australia is worse.

Over 35 per cent of year 3 students across the state are struggling to read, which means they are also likely to be experiencing difficulty in subject areas that rely on sound literacy skills, including the humanities, science, and even mathematics.

It goes without saying that children who leave school unable to read and write effectively will struggle in further education and employment.

The recent 'statement of intent' between the WA state government and the federal government to work towards fully funding public schools presents an opportunity to turn this intolerable situation around.

After years of funding increases but only small and inconsistent lifts in outcomes, the government is promising that this funding boost will be tied to yet-to-be-agreed reforms aiming to help students "catch up, keep up, and finish school" – in other words, get more out of their education.

Ensuring that these reforms are supported by robust evidence around what works to enhance learning and boost students' results will be critical to success.

In the case of teaching reading, although many WA schools were early adopters of systematic phonics instruction, some are still using a so-called 'balanced approach' which denies the importance of explicit instruction.

This approach, which can be identified by its reliance on levelled predictable readers, programs such as Reading Recovery, and assessments like Running Records, is not backed up by evidence and risks failing large numbers of students.

Splashing more taxpayer funds on such programs would only perpetuate poor outcomes.

Studies of top-performing primary schools in Australia and overseas have identified high-quality synthetic phonics program, which involve systematically teaching parts of words, so children can learn to read and write, is a common feature.

More must be done to steer schools toward what works.

The science of reading tells us children must be explicitly taught language skills, including phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension, to give them the best chance of becoming competent readers.

We have found that educators are typically united by a deep desire to help their students achieve their best, yet many are still being curtailed by mixed messages.

A 2023 survey of nearly 300 primary school teachers conducted by La Trobe and Edith Cowan University found little agreement about what instructional methods were useful for teaching

reading and identified common practices that have been repeatedly shown in empirical research to be ineffective.

The WA Education Department has taken some important steps towards addressing this challenge by updating its school curriculum to remove references to outdated, inferior practices not supported by science.

Its 'Phonics Initiative' requires schools to use evidence-based systematic synthetic phonics programs as part of early reading instruction that builds oral language and comprehension.

There are signs of improvements however more must be done to steer schools toward what works.

Tightening up the policy around the current year 1 phonics assessment to ensure all schools are required to conduct the same quality-controlled test and report their results to the government would signal WA is ready to be transparent and accountable and remove confusion for teachers.



WA students deserve a better system. ISTOCK

In the five years since South Australia mandated the year 1 phonics screening check, students' word reading proficiency has soared, especially among disadvantaged groups.

NAPLAN results have also improved.

WA students deserve no less.

Dr Jennifer Buckingham OAM is director of strategy and senior research fellow at MultiLit and founder and director of the Five from Five project.

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