

# 'Nonsense' words are helping kids learn to read

SARAH LANSDOWN



**M**AX Shi reads words that flash on a laptop screen for his teacher, Megan Gordon to hear.

"Dat," he says.

"Quass, glog."

Reading nonsense words alongside real ones is a key part of a new year 1 phonics screening program that will be introduced to all public primary schools from next year.

Maribyrnong Primary School was selected as one of the 26 schools to begin using the check for their students this term before it is rolled out across the system.

Half of the students at the school have English as an additional language.

Principal Andrew Buesnel said they started to put a greater emphasis on explicit teaching of phonics about three years ago to help these students.

"What we found through the data we've collected is that this benefits all students, not just our students where English is their second or third language," Mr Buesnel said.

"So when student data is telling you something and that everyone is benefiting you carry on."

The school has its own assessment literacy program but the federal government's free year 1 phonics check will be a new tool to keep track of the students' progress.

"There'll be some really helpful data that comes from this for us, and I think for our system more widely as well," Mr Buesnel said.

## What is a phonics check?

Phonics is the relationship between letters and sounds. The phonics check is an online or paper-based test teachers can



complete with students one-on-one.

It takes about five to seven minutes and involves the student reading 40 words. The teacher makes a note of which words the student read correctly and any words they find difficult. The data is then analysed by the teacher to see which areas need improvement.

The check includes 20 real words and 20 non-words, also known as pseudo words. The reason pseudo-words are used - such as dat or glog - is so students must rely on sounding out the words using their knowledge of phonemes (sounds) and graphemes (letters or groups of letters).

Professor Saskia Kohnen, director of the Australian Catholic University's Australian Literacy Clinic, said phonics was a crucial ingredient of early literacy and a strong predictor of later reading comprehension.

"It's important to check that the learning has actually happened, because if it hasn't, then we want to reteach and maybe intensify teaching. And so the phonics check is a measure that can facilitate that process," Prof Kohnen said.

"I heard one teacher say that when she did the test, she found that the children were really good at sounding out, but they couldn't do the blending. And so this information can really help the teachers plan the instruction."

Prof Kohnen said the screening would help schools identify students who needed extra support and would give direction on where more teacher training or resources were needed.

It comes at a time when all states and territories are moving towards the explicit teaching of phonics with the aim of lifting stagnant literacy levels.

"I think if we want big change, then we need to measure how we're tracking, because otherwise we might not have a reference point of how well this is going," she said.

## Resistance to phonics

The ACT has come late to the year 1 phonics check.

As recently as last year, ACT Education Minister Yvette Berry dismissed calls for

a mandated phonics check while maintaining a kindergarten literacy assessment known as BASE was adequate.

Ms Berry previously said the check was freely available for teachers to use if they wished. But some Canberra teachers told researchers from Equity Economics school leaders had instructed them not to use the free year 1 phonics check or downloadable decodable reading books.

Prof Kohnen said some teachers were concerned the nonsense words would disadvantage students who were already competent readers. But this was found to not be the case in studies led by Prof Anne Castles.

Others worried about having too many assessments in schools.

"I would say that a test that ... has a really clear goal and that identifies gaps and also achievements in crucial aspects of the curriculum are very worthwhile to conduct," Prof Kohnen said.

An expert review of literacy and numeracy instruction in ACT school found there was great variation in the way schools

# Tougher ministerial standards urged after \$78m mess

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"The committee is concerned that, despite the government indicating it has learned multiple lessons from the issues and challenges revealed by this failure, it has been difficult to identify anyone directly accountable for delivery of the program within the ACT public service, and no minister has accepted responsibility for the failure," the committee's report said.

The head of the ACT public service should also develop a plan to improve

and enhance accountability in the service and provide an annual update to the public accounts committee, the inquiry recommended.

The chief minister should also report to the Legislative Assembly each year on governance and accountability in the public service, the inquiry found.

"The committee recommends that the chief minister, as the responsible minister, set clearly defined performance objectives for the head of service and actively [performance man-

age] the head of service to ensure governance in the ACT public service is fit for purpose and for the culture of accountability of the ACT public service as a whole," the committee's report said.

The bipartisan committee released its report into six months' worth of auditor-general's reports on Thursday, the last day before the government entered the caretaker period ahead of the October 19 territory election.

The committee said the government's actions to improve procurement pro-



Legislative Assembly.

cesses after the failed HR system upgrade had been positive but found the work was not complete.

"The committee is of the

opinion that continued scrutiny and vigilance is required to ensure that a failure such as the HRIMS program does not occur again," the committee's report said.

The ACT Auditor-General in December 2023 strongly criticised the handling of the upgrade project, finding it was a "significant failure for the territory".

Only one module of the program was ever delivered until it was terminated midway through 2023. The original program had been costed at \$15 million and approved

in the 2107-18 ACT budget.

The government's response to the audit said the new human resources project would incorporate all the recommendations from the abandoned HRIMS project.

"The ACT government is confident in the ability of the [ACT public service] to embrace and apply the lessons learned from the HRIMS project across all future ICT project, and in the process build a robust risk culture that promotes transparency," the government's response said.





Main: Year 1 Maribyrong Primary School student Max Shi with Teacher Meagan Gordon are doing a phonics check as part of a trial in ACT public schools. Picture by Keegan Carroll

Left: St Anthony's Parish Primary School kinder teacher Shannon Henry does an explicit phonics lesson with her class. Picture by Karleen Minney



St Anthony's Parish kindergarten student Noah White does a phonics check with his teacher Shannon Henry. Picture by Karleen Minney



Year 1 Maribyrong Primary School students Sara Elgohary, Oliver Earl and Mia Shi hold decodable reading books. Picture by Keegan Carroll

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Prof Saskia Kohnen

taught children to read.

The panel recommended the ACT introduce the year 1 phonics check as one measure to bring consistency across the education system.

Other states have seen a marked improvement after bringing in a year 1 phonics check.

South Australia was the first state to begin the screening in 2018. The first year of the screening, only 43 per cent of students were able to decode 28 or more of the words in the check.

By 2023, 71 per cent of students met this benchmark, an improvement of 28 percentage points. Disadvantaged communities, Indigenous students and regional schools all showed improvement compared to the previous year.

NSW began phonics checks in 2021, followed by commitments from Tasmania, Victoria and Western Australia.

Other states have committed to publishing results at state level. But the ACT government has so far refused to make the results of year 1 phonics screening public.

ACT Alliance for Evidence-Based Education co-founder Jessica Del Rio said there was no reason the phonics check results shouldn't be made public.

"Other jurisdictions publish their results at an aggregate level and broken down by key demographics," Ms Del Rio said.

"It's actually totally bizarre that the ACT is not planning to publish the results of the year 1 phonics checks. It's just public data."

ACT Education Directorate deputy director-general Jane Simmons said the focus was on student learning rather than setting up lists of schools' achievement.

"We've got no plans to share those results public, because the intention of the phonics test is for teachers to make decisions about where students are at in their learning," Ms Simmons said.

**Checks and balances**

The year 1 phonics check is not the only way to ensure students are on track with learning to read. St Anthony's Parish Primary School uses a program for kindergarten to year 2 called Initial Lit. It provides lesson plans and slide decks for teachers to follow

- with their own personal spin.

Shannon Henry's kindergarten class starts the day with "alphabet fun". Letters and groups of letters flash on the board and students repeat the sounds.

She regularly does phonics checks with her students in line with what the students have learned in the Initial Lit program throughout the year. It allows her to hone in on any skills her students are struggling with.

"I know immediately what I need to fix and what I need to focus on," Mrs Henry said.

The school also uses the NSW phonics check in year 1 to keep track of students' progress.

Principal Erin Marmont said since the literacy blocks were introduced in 2021, the school had noticed a lift across all of its data, including improved NAPLAN results.

"The results are telling us it's working," she said.

**Australia suffering from a 'CPR knowledge gap': study**

Sam McKeith

MORE than 80 per cent of Australians would not be confident in performing cardiopulmonary resuscitation (CPR) on a baby or child, a study has found, revealing a nationwide emergency skills gap.

The report, issued by first aid training company Australia Wide First Aid, found 82 per cent of respondents would not back their CPR skills in such circumstances.

Some 47 per cent of those polled found providing CPR the most intimidating first aid situation, despite 80 per cent saying it was the most important first aid skill.

Of those surveyed, 34 per cent had experience performing or being involved in administering CPR.

The report follows a St John Ambulance NSW survey released in September that found 46 per cent of parents polled were unprepared to handle a health or medical emergency.

**Rezoning sought for prime Sutton land**

Lucinda Garbutt-Young

AN INVESTMENT group is preparing to seek a rezoning for a potential development of about 300 hectares in the NSW Southern Tablelands.

A site on East Tallagandra Road, immediately west of Sutton village, could have 250 new dwellings developed on it.

Urban planner Liz Densley from Eight Mile Planning has been contracted by the group to work on the site. She said because of "how small the village is

and the level of interest", the planning process had been "turned on its head" by involving the community early.

Ms Densley met with Sutton residents in August to discuss potential zoning changes. The land is currently rurally zoned and can not be developed.

Rezoning is likely to be sought from Yass Valley Council for 5000sqm, single-dwelling blocks - a far larger size than the 1000sqm proposal also put to the community.

"We got some very strong and certain feedback," Ms Densley said.

A key concern was ensuring the community do not lose the opportunity for a bypass to be constructed.

"That is something that has been on the agenda for decades in Sutton," she said.

If rezoning is successful, formal community consultation will be undertaken before a development application is lodged with the council.

"Absolutely nothing is [set in stone] yet," Ms Hayes said.

The site is owned by an investment consortium named Tallagandra Land Projects. The developer of the Canberra brickworks, Doma, is understood to be a part of the consortium but did not wish to comment further. A small portion of the site is considered to be high-value biodiversity, which would be excluded from development.

"We have already studied a biodiversity assessment to determine what vegetation types and critters live here," Ms Densley said.