

Why all states and territories should follow South Australia's lead and introduce the Year 1 Phonics Check: An update

In this article, **Jennifer Buckingham** and **Kevin Wheldall** argue the case for a national Phonics Check.

The proposal to introduce a Phonics Check — employed in schools in England towards the end of year one — into Australian schools has created considerable controversy. It has been said that it would prove stressful to young children and is unnecessary, because phonics is already taught adequately in most Australian schools as part of the literacy curriculum.

The South Australian (SA) government commissioned a trial of the utility of the Phonics Check in 2017 and, on the basis of the trial's finding, decided to implement the Check in all state schools in 2018, with non-government schools joining the program in 2019.

The results of the trial allayed many of the reservations about the Check and confirmed the need for its introduction (Hordacre, Moretti, & Spoehr, 2017). The second state-wide implementation last year showed that some improvement had already occurred but also demonstrated that many children were still struggling with phonic decoding — a foundational skill for reading.

What is the Year 1 Phonics Screening Check?

The Phonics Check consists of 40 single words children read aloud to a teacher. There are 20 real words and 20 “pseudo words” — all of which can be read using phonic decoding. The pseudo words are included because they can't be read from sight memory and are a purer test of phonics ability.

In SA the Check was done in August, when children had been at school for a little over 18 months. The timing of the Check was based on a recommendation from a ministerial advisory group to the federal government.

Many students have very low decoding ability after 18 months at school

The SA state government decided to set the threshold score at 28 marks out of 40 for the state-wide implementation in 2018 and 2019. The 28 mark threshold was set using two criteria: 1) while the threshold score in England is 32, the Check is given later in the school year than the SA Check so more content will have been taught to English children; and 2) benchmarking of the items in the Check against the National Literacy Progressions. The threshold score is the minimum expectation, and given that the Check is not unreasonably difficult and that approximately 16% of children obtained a score of between 36 and 40 in the trial, a high score is achievable and should be the goal.

The headline data from the 2017 trial showed that the majority of children in year one found the test items difficult.



The report shows approximately 33% of children achieved a score above 32. By comparison, 81% of year one students in England achieved this score for the past two years (UK Government, 2018).

Teachers and school leaders were overwhelmingly positive about the Check

According to the SA trial evaluation report, teachers and leaders observed: “...students did more poorly than expected, across the board. Numerous respondents reported feeling surprised and disappointed by the results based on students' known reading abilities and results on the Running Record.”

This is a clear indication that existing assessments in these SA schools were not providing an accurate measure of students' decoding abilities.

The way the data are reported in the 2017 trial evaluation report does not allow a calculation of the proportion of children who achieved 28 out of 40 — the threshold score set for the 2018 implementation. The trial evaluation report showed that around 44% of children achieved a score above 26. In the 2018 implementation, 43% of students achieved the threshold score of 28 or above, and in 2019 it was 52% (Government of South Australia, 2019).

Research on the Phonics Check with Year 1 children in NSW has shown that following one year and three terms of explicit synthetic phonics instruction, the proportion passing the 28 out of 40 criterion was far higher than was found in South Australia — more than 80% (Wheldall, et al. 2019). This shows that a high level of achievement in the check is possible with quality phonics instruction.

In the SA trial, the distribution of student scores was very different to the distribution of scores in England. In SA, student scores were distributed on a bell curve. English student scores are skewed to the right of the distribution. This means most children in SA scored around the middle, whereas most children in England score at the higher end. In many English schools 100% of students achieve the threshold score. This level of data is not available for the 2018 or 2019 assessments in SA.

Three ways South Australia's phonics check is different to England's

The Phonics Check in SA employs the same word items used in various years of the English Checks. But there were methodological differences in how the checks were conducted in SA and in England, which may cloud the comparability of the results obtained.

- 1 The font. Teachers raised the issue that the font used in the Check was different from the standard font used in SA schools. But by the end of year one, children will have encountered many different fonts in books and elsewhere. It's unlikely this will have been a major factor influencing performance on the Check.
- 2 Timing. In England, the Check is given to students about a month before the end of year one (after nearly two years of initial instruction). But in SA trial, the Check is given earlier, in term three. The SA students had about a term less to learn letter sound correspondences, and this needs to be kept in mind, and it is reflected in the lower threshold score.
- 3 The "stopping rule". More significant was the decision to advise teachers to discontinue testing once a child had made three consecutive errors. This stopping rule has the potential to deflate scores on the Check, because students who had

been stopped might have gone on to answer a few more questions correctly. The evaluation report also found that the stopping rule was not consistently applied. However, it's unlikely that many children failing three items in succession would be able to achieve the threshold score of 32 items out of 40. The NSW research mentioned above (by Wheldall, et al, 2019) has demonstrated that the application of the stopping rule makes very little difference to the score achieved. A stopping rule is not part of the standard conditions used in England, although teachers do decide to stop children if they are struggling. As many as 41% of teachers have been found to do this (Walker et al., 2015).

Students liked it

The report of the SA trial was very comprehensive and gathered process information as well as student results. Teachers and leaders in the trial reported that all students responded positively, including struggling readers, and that they were engaged and interested. There were no reports of anxiety or stress for students. Teachers "universally" commented that students "loved the one-to-one time with the teacher".

The Phonics Check was reported to be a "good eye-opener for teachers", and widely seen as complementing rather than duplicating existing assessments

Teachers and school leaders were overwhelmingly positive about the Check. The feedback from teachers and school leaders in the trial was encouraging and positive about all aspects of the administration of the Check and the information it provided, including:

- the sufficiency of training and support materials
- the ease of administration
- the length and duration of the Check for young students
- the engagement and effort of the students, and
- the usefulness of the data it yielded on student reading abilities, for the

purposes of guiding instruction and for identifying and supporting students who "may otherwise be slipping under the radar".

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What should happen next?

In spite of the differences in methodology compared with the Phonics Check in England, it's unlikely that their combined effect could account for such a difference in performance between the two. SA's results suggest that there is little room for complacency about the state of phonics teaching in SA.

Almost all teachers in the trial said that they taught phonics using either synthetic or analytic methods, reflecting the claim that Australian teachers already teach phonics. But there was no information to verify that phonics teaching is systematic or explicit, and these results clearly suggest that they don't teach it well enough.

Even more significantly, the trial has provided strong support for implementation of the Year 1 Phonics Check across Australia

The SA trial and implementation of the year one Phonics Check has been an important initiative. The evaluation report was a valuable guide to changes that needed to be made for a state-wide implementation, and this has been done carefully.

Even more significantly, the trial has provided strong support for implementation of the Year 1 Phonics Check across Australia. Or, at the very least, for other states and territories to conduct similar trials. The NSW and Tasmanian governments have announced trials to be conducted this year.

The trial supports the findings of the expert panel for the Australian government (Buckingham et al., 2017), and has validated the arguments of advocates that the Phonics Check gives teachers vital information about decoding skills not gained from other systemic assessments, and is neither

burdensome for teachers nor stressful for students (Hammond, 2017).

However, an assessment will not of itself improve student learning. For improvement in children's reading ability to occur, systems, schools and teachers must respond to the results of the Phonics Check and improve their teaching practice accordingly.

Dr Jennifer Buckingham and Emeritus Professor Kevin Wheldall, now both with MultiLit Pty Ltd, are well-known researchers, writers, and speakers in the field of literacy. This is a revised and updated version of an earlier article that first appeared in The Conversation at www.theconversation.com.au and Nomanis at www.nomanis.com.au

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