

THE AUSTRALIAN

Teaching taskforce recommends doubling literacy training time



Teacher education courses would be required to introduce a stand-alone unit on evidence-based early reading instruction, which includes phonics, as part of a bid to boost the capacity of graduate teachers. Picture: istock

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5:10AM December 12, 2019

<https://www.theaustralian.com.au/nation/teaching-taskforce-recommends-doubling-literacy-training-time/news-story/6ce5fe9a4060e5344c4e8ccc662bc406>

Graduate teachers would receive increased literacy training, including a stand-alone unit on early reading that covers phonics instruction, as part of a concerted push to boost the capacity of graduate teachers.

State and territory education ministers have been urged to back the recommendations of a taskforce set up to investigate incorporating phonics into the accreditation standards for initial teacher education, following revelations that the key element of teaching children to read and write has been overlooked by many universities.

Fresh from the shock of [last week's PISA results](#), which showed Australia's academic performance has continued to decline, Federal Education Minister Dan Tehan called upon the jurisdictions to back the move to improve early teacher education.

“As part of our renewed efforts to put literacy at the heart of our education system, the Morrison government wants states and territories to change their initial teacher education accreditation standards to include a requirement that all teaching graduates can teach phonics,” Mr Tehan said ahead of a two-day meeting of the COAG Education Council in Alice Springs on Wednesday and Thursday.

“Given last week's PISA results, I can't see any reason why the states and territories wouldn't sign up to giving teachers the skills to effectively teach how to read.”

The minister announced the taskforce, to be overseen by the Australian Institute of Teaching and School Leadership, in October in the wake of research that found that just 5 per cent of units across 60 teaching courses had a specific focus on teaching beginning readers to read.

Most courses also preferred the balanced literacy approach to reading instruction, despite repeated scientific studies finding that systematic phonics instruction to be the most effective way to teach children how to read.

However, the push to embed phonics into teacher training has faced some resistance, with a group of education academics signing an open letter to Mr Tehan, opposing both the composition of the taskforce and the “erroneous assumption ... that phonics is not being taught in schools and universities”.

Australian students are falling behind other developed countries in reading, maths, and science, according to new results from an international student assessment. The results...

The letter, which has also been signed by international academics including US-based pioneers of the whole-language movement, Kenneth and Yetta Goodman, criticised the remit of the taskforce, suggesting that it was too narrowly focused on phonics.

Whole language, and its successor balanced literacy, are methods of teaching reading that focus on learning words in their entirety rather than teaching letter-sound relationships and decoding skills. Balanced literacy also favours multi-cueing, or guessing, over decoding. In balanced literacy, phonics instruction tends to be embedded rather than explicit and systematic.

The taskforce comprised AITSL board member and MultiLit research director Jennifer Buckingham, Edith Cowan University associate professor Lorraine Hammond and Australian Catholic University associate professor Robyn Cox.

Dr Buckingham and Dr Hammond are both vocal proponents of phonics instruction, while Dr Cox is president of the Primary English Teachers Association of Australia, which supports balanced literacy.

It is understood that the taskforce was unanimous in its recommendations that early reading instruction classes cover phonics, but not at the expense of other essential elements of learning to read, such as phonemic awareness, fluency, vocabulary and comprehension.

A second open letter has also been forwarded to Mr Tehan from the Developmental Disorders of Language and Literacy group, which implores education ministers to back the taskforce.

“The recent 2018 PISA results provide further evidence that we have a major problem in how reading is taught in schools in this country, and the flow on consequences of this in other discipline areas and in the ultimate quality of school graduates,” the letter says.

“We urge our education ministers to support the expert group and their push for evidence-based approaches to the teaching of reading in both our universities and our schools. There is no more important mission for an education system.”

Both letters have attracted more than 200 signatures.