



Public submission made to the Review to Achieve Educational Excellence in Australian Schools

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Summary

Early years (K-Y2) units, akin to infants' school, should be established and staffed by early years staff specially trained in scientific evidence-based methods of instruction in basic skills (language, literacy and numeracy).

A Response to Intervention model (RtI) of instruction should be adopted to guide instruction in the K-2 years.

Smaller class sizes and the employment of paraprofessionals should be deemed a funding priority for the early years of schooling (K-2) so as to ensure adequate preparation of young children in the basic skills of language, literacy and numeracy.

Systematic and explicit teaching of synthetic phonics should be introduced in all early years' classrooms from the first year of a child's schooling and the proposed Year 1 Phonics Screening Check should be implemented.

Preschool education should be made available to all children, but especially those from less advantaged backgrounds, for at least the full year prior to their starting school.

Main submission

Submission to the Review to Achieve Educational Excellence in Australian Schools
Emeritus Professor Kevin Wheldall AM and Dr Robyn Wheldall

Given the continuing bad news about the declining performance of Australian school students in both international comparisons and comparisons within Australia over time, there is a clear need to address the issue of achieving educational excellence. The time for excuses and denial is over. Doubtless there are many areas of education that need seriously to be addressed, but in our view the whole edifice of a successful education system is predicated on effective instruction in basic skills in the early years of schooling. Without wishing to deny the importance of other aspects of

education, it is our view that the early years of schooling is key and it is this aspect that we shall focus on in this submission.

In short, reading underpins everything in education. Whatever is studied subsequently, it is learning how to read (and write) that facilitates or hinders future study. It is our contention that nothing will work to lift our game in education until we have brought into play an effective system to ensure that ALL children (with very few exceptions) learn to read and write in a timely fashion, within the first three years of schooling. In this submission, we review briefly the necessary steps that need to be taken to ensure that this happens.

1. First, we need to resurrect the concept of the old infants' school for K-Y2 students, those in their first three years of schooling. (In this submission, the term K will be used for the first year of formal schooling as this is the term that applies in our home state, New South Wales.) This is where the essential work of developing the basic skills of literacy and numeracy should take place. Whether separate geographically or not from the Y3-Y6 provision, conceptually the remit of K-Y2 units should be clearly differentiated. The emphasis of this K-Y2 stage of education should be almost exclusively on developing competence in the basic skills of language, literacy and numeracy taught by early childhood experts who are specially trained to provide optimal instruction based on scientific evidence-based best practice. This may necessitate a thinning down of the scope of the early years' curriculum to allow this focus. In our view, this is more than justified if the end result is fully literate cohorts more able to avail themselves of the curriculum provided from Year 3 onwards. Many teachers of young children complain about the crowded curriculum and the time demands of covering all the aspects of the curriculum that they are required to address. Just finding sufficient time to devote to literacy instruction is a problem in many of our schools. If we can focus time and attention on laying the foundations of literacy in the early years of K-2, students will effectively graduate to the primary school (Years 3-6) where they can read to learn, rather than learn to read, this job having already been done in the infants' school.

Recommendation 1: Early years (K-Y2) units, akin to infants' school, should be established and staffed by early years staff specially trained in scientific evidence-based methods of instruction in basic skills (language, literacy and numeracy).

2. Second, there is a clear need to implement a Response to Intervention (RtI) model to guide instruction in the K-2 years. In this model universal instruction is provided to whole classes in basic skills based on scientific evidence-based best practice. (What this entails specifically in terms of literacy instruction is described below.) This is known as Tier 1 instruction and, if followed properly, should ensure that 75-80% of students progress at an acceptable rate. Continual monitoring of student progress by the classroom teacher will allow the

identification of students who are struggling and in need of greater, more intensive support. So-called Tier 2, small group instruction is then provided for, say, this bottom quartile of students (as compared with national norms), again based on evidence-based best practice using methods, procedures and programs of proven efficacy. Tier 2 support can be provided by trained para-professionals (such as a SLSO – Student Learning Support Officer in New South Wales – under the supervision of a Learning and Support Teacher (LAST)). The small number of students who are still seen to be struggling, following a period of rigorous Tier 2 small group instruction (estimated to be about 5%), are provided with Tier 3 one to one individual instruction with a reading specialist to get them back on track. By these means, it is possible to ensure that all students in the class progress to an acceptable standard in the learning of basic skills. At most, only 1-2% of students are likely to need ongoing individual specialist support which is more readily provided when the needs of the vast majority have been met.

Recommendation 2: A Response to Intervention model (RtI) of instruction should be adopted to guide instruction in the K-2 years.

3. While not being convinced of the automatic benefits accruing to the implementation of smaller class sizes in general, we nevertheless propose that any additional funding available from Gonski or otherwise, be spent on reducing class sizes in the K-2 years only to allow adequate preparation in the basic skills of language, literacy, and numeracy that underpin all subsequent education. Additionally, such funding could be deployed in the provision of trained paraprofessionals to work under the supervision of early years teachers. The aim would be to ensure that an adult:child ratio of 1:10 or fewer is achieved for the early years of schooling.

Recommendation 3: Smaller class sizes and the employment of paraprofessionals should be deemed a funding priority for the early years of schooling (K-2) so as to ensure adequate preparation of young children in the basic skills of language, literacy and numeracy.

4. It has now been established beyond doubt, by three national reviews in the USA, Australia and the UK, that effective early literacy instruction should focus on the 'five big ideas': phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary and comprehension. These five big ideas underpin the Simple View of Reading (SVR) i.e. that reading comprehension is the product of simple decoding and listening comprehension. While, arguably, there has been reasonable emphasis on some of these 'five big ideas', effective phonics instruction has been neglected in favour of so-called 'whole language' (aka 'balanced literacy') approaches that have clearly been shown to fail for far too long. We advocate for scientific evidence-based reading instruction which shows beyond doubt that phonics is a

necessary, but not of course sufficient, condition for learning to read. While there is plenty of public comment about how widespread the teaching of phonics is in Australian school, our belief and experience is that this is done less well than it needs to be to ensure that the vast majority of children become good readers, spellers and writers. We support the introduction of the proposed Year 1 Phonics Screening Check to ensure that effective phonic teaching is taking place and that children are acquiring these necessary skills.

Recommendation 4: Systematic and explicit teaching of synthetic phonics should be introduced in all early years' classrooms from the first year of a child's schooling and the proposed Year 1 Phonics Screening Check should be implemented.

5. Finally, we need to consider the role of pre-school education. We are mindful that education in the preschool years is not within the remit of this review but it is an important part of the educational landscape, particularly when we consider how differing preschool experience can impact on the effect of schooling subsequently. Children come to school with vastly different life experiences including their levels of knowledge and skill that make literacy learning more or less difficult. We shall probably never be able to level the playing field sufficiently so that all children start from the same basic level of proficiency but we can do much to ensure that children from less advantaged backgrounds start school with more of the background knowledge and precursor skills that their more advantaged peers absorb from their home environments. The seminal work of Betty Hart and Todd Risley has provided us with a stark reminder of the vast differences in the language learning environments of children from advantaged backgrounds compared with their socially disadvantaged peers. All children from more deprived backgrounds need ready access to quality pre-school education for at least the year prior to starting school.

Recommendation 5: Preschool education should be made available to all children, but especially those from less advantaged backgrounds, for at least the full year prior to their starting school.

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