

Australian government imposes phonics test on six-year-olds

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Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull's federal Liberal-National government has unveiled a so-called expert panel tasked with imposing yet another standardised test, this time on Year 1 students.

On January 31, the first day of the new school year, Education Minister Simon Birmingham declared that new phonics and numeracy tests would comprise part of the government's "back to basics education approach." This approach is supposedly aimed at using "record and growing levels of investment in Australian schools as effectively as possible to turnaround areas of stagnating or worsening performance."

The reality is that public schools and their students are grossly under-resourced. The government's new testing regime is aimed at further undermining the public education system, by extending the impact of the former Labor government's National Assessment Program—Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) testing regime. NAPLAN remains the pivotal mechanism for federal and state government moves to target working class schools for "reform" or closure, tie teachers' job security and salaries to standardised test results, and narrow the curriculum, bringing back regressive teaching methods through "teaching to the test."

While NAPLAN begins with Year 3 students, the government has now moved to target children two years earlier, with six-year-olds to be tested on their numeracy and literacy skills.

While details of the numeracy testing component remain unclear, the reactionary agenda behind the new literacy phonics screen becomes clear when one examines the "experts" appointed to the government panel. Not a single literacy expert or educational academic has been assigned to "inform the development and implementation of a national Year 1 check."

Instead, four individuals have been appointed directly from a right-wing campaign group, led by the Centre for Independent Studies (CIS) and backed by the Murdoch media.

The CIS is a "free market" think tank, financed by mining companies and other transnational corporations. In recent years it has focussed its remit on demanding austerity budget cuts that target the working class, totalling \$60 billion a year, every year for a decade.

Last year the CIS established the "Five from Five" education

campaign group, led by CIS staffer Jennifer Buckingham. Buckingham is one of the four literacy-based appointees to the phonics test panel, all of whom are "Five from Five" campaigners and supporters—Steven Capp, principal of Melbourne's Bentleigh West Primary School; Pamela Snow, head of the La Trobe Rural Health School; and Mandy Nayton, CEO of the Dyslexia-SPELD Foundation.

The CIS's "Five from Five" campaign is backed by Murdoch's *Australian* newspaper and has been endorsed by multiple dyslexia campaign and advocacy organisations. It purports to be "a group of organisations and individuals who support the objective of promoting effective, evidence-based reading instruction."

In fact, the CIS is using the literacy campaign as a cynical cover to advance its agenda of dismantling the public education system.

Jennifer Buckingham has authored numerous propaganda pieces, in the guise of "research reports" and op-ed pieces in the Murdoch and financial press, to attack public schools. In a 2014 CIS paper, "School Funding on a Budget," she declared that education "cannot be quarantined from efforts to bring the [budget] back into balance," adding that "measures to reduce future spending and improve productivity" could include "removing mandatory class sizes" and "making it easier for principals to dismiss ineffective teachers," that is, to victimise targeted teachers and impose cost-cutting layoffs.

Buckingham also advocates so-called "vouchers," the mechanism long advocated by proponents of a wholly privatised school system, in which families are annually allocated a set amount of public money for each school child that can be used to enrol them at either public or private schools. In addition, she has campaigned for charter schools, i.e., schools that are publicly funded but privately operated. In a 2015 CIS paper, "Free to Choose Charter Schools: How charter and for-profit schools can boost public education," Buckingham insisted that a corporate takeover of "chronically-failing [public] schools" would provide "the positive disruptive reform Australian education needs."

Backed by the government, this right-wing ideologue is now posturing as an expert on the teaching of reading.

The Year 1 testing panel will report to the government by the

end of April. Education Minister Birmingham, however, has already outlined what will be in the new phonics test. The government is importing a British phonics test, first imposed on primary schools there in 2012 by the Conservative-led government. The test involves teachers assessing Year 1 students' ability to read 20 words on flashcards, without the context of an authentic text or even a sentence, and 20 so-called pseudo- or nonsense-words. If students are deemed to have failed the test, they have to repeat it in Year 2.

The Australian government has ignored numerous critiques of this test issued by literacy experts.

One survey of teachers found that 91 percent had concluded that the expensive and time-consuming test had told them nothing that they did not already know about their students' reading abilities. More fundamentally, the test's extraction of separate words from any meaningful context and the demand that students read them (or, more accurately, pronounce them correctly) is contrary to the premise of all quality literacy instruction—namely, that reading is not simply saying words (“barking at print”) but generating meaning from print. Isolating individual words prevents young readers from utilising multiple strategies to read, including by predicting what comes next in a sentence through their knowledge of grammar and syntax, text conventions, and prior understanding of the text's subject.

These issues emerge most sharply with the required testing of “pseudo-words.”

Children will be instructed to “read” computer-generated nonsense such as *shan*, *flarm*, and *strom*. This is supposedly being done in order to assess the students' knowledge of letter-sound relationships. In practice, however, fluent readers (who have moved beyond inefficient sounding out, decoding strategies) know that reading should always make sense, and they approach the test on that basis. Reports have documented strong readers saying, for example, “storm” instead of *strom*, and “farm” instead of *flarm*, and therefore being ranked in the standardised test as less proficient than emergent readers, who laboriously sound out “f-l-ah-ar-mm” and “s-t-r-oh-mm.” (See: Howard Gibson and Jennifer England, “The inclusion of pseudo words within the year one phonics ‘screening check’ in English primary schools,” *Cambridge Journal of Education*, 2015.)

Such reports underscore the fact that the Australian government's new testing measures have nothing to do with assisting either students or teachers.

The immediate agenda is to mandate regressive new teaching measures in public schools across the country. In Britain, the introduction of the phonics test was accompanied by the statutory imposition of a specific literacy teaching model, known as synthetic phonics. Well trained literacy educators will teach the complex relationship between the English alphabet's 26 letters and the 42–44 sounds within spoken English, as it is developmentally required for each student—through an open and

inquiring engagement with rich picture story books and other texts written by real authors, and through authentic writing experiences.

Synthetic phonics, on the other hand, is made up of a rigidly presented, one-size-fits-all, instruction in letter-sound relationships. There are countless commercially marketed synthetic phonics programs, such as Jolly Phonics, for which the government's agenda promises a profit bonanza. They typically present one letter-sound per day or per week instruction for the whole class, regardless of different students' literacy development, and use commercially-produced phonics texts (“the fat cat sat on the mat”) instead of engaging books written by genuine authors to entertain and enlighten the children. In attempting to reduce the learning of reading to a mindless set of mechanical skills, the government is promoting synthetic phonics as another means of narrowing the school curriculum and suppressing creative and critical thought among young people in the public school system.

The CIS and its “Five from Five” campaign is also agitating for “direct instruction”—a deeply authoritarian, 1950s-style teaching method involving teachers clicking their fingers and students chanting rote-memorised responses. American-based companies selling direct instruction scripts for schools and teachers have already received millions of dollars, via government contracts, for use in Aboriginal schools in Queensland and the Northern Territory. One direct instruction organisation—Good to Great Schools Australia, which operates in Queensland's Cape York indigenous communities—is part of the CIS “Five from Five” campaign.

Despite the documented disasters that direct instruction has wrought across Aboriginal communities, including plummeting school attendance rates and increased student disruption and violence, the government has indicated its intention to extend the direct instruction model to working class public schools across the country.

In the face of this onslaught, the teachers' unions are once again demonstrating their complicity with the government. A statement issued by the Australian Education Union on January 31 raised nothing about the political agenda behind the phonics test, and instead urged the government to adopt the bogus “Gonski” school funding model, which is backed by the opposition Labor Party, the original sponsor of standardised testing.



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