

Australia: NSW state government axes longstanding reading program from public schools

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A decision by the New South Wales (NSW) Liberal-National coalition government to abandon a \$55 million one-on-one reading program constitutes yet another attack on the most disadvantaged students in the state's poorest schools. It is aimed at cutting costs and further entrenching regressive teaching methods.

Reading Recovery (RR), one of the most widely used interventions in NSW for over 30 years, assisting students in improving literacy outcomes, is taught by teachers who have undergone one year's specialised training. The program provides Year 1 students, who struggle to read, with half an hour of one-on-one tuition every school day for between 12 and 20 weeks. The goal is to raise each student's performance to the average level of their Year 1 peers. The program has been used in up to 960 schools, with 14 percent of primary school pupils participating.

The NSW Department of Education told school principals in November last year that instead of funding RR, it would recruit a team of 50 literacy and numeracy experts to support Kindergarten to Year 10 teachers in face to face professional learning. In other words, 50 experts will be employed to "teach" both literacy and numeracy strategies to the 40,000 teachers of the 650,000 students enrolled in NSW public school Kindergarten to Year 10 classes!

The axing of RR, which assists the most disadvantaged children—preponderantly 6-year-old boys, students of Aboriginal background, migrant students and those whose parents had little or no tertiary education—comes in the wake of the state government's "Stronger HSC Standards" policy, which penalises low-performing students. From 2017, Year 9 students who have failed to attain a high Band 8 in the

National Assessment Program—Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) test, are ineligible to qualify for tertiary education. Official predictions suggest that up to 50 percent of students are unlikely to reach the Band 8 level.

As governments throughout Australia and internationally wash their hands of the most disadvantaged youth, teachers are being blamed for "underperforming" students and targeted for dismissal, while the conditions for widespread school closures are being created.

NSW Primary Principals' Association president, Phil Seymour, told the media that many principals were deeply concerned that the RR program had been stopped. "Many principals have said to me that it should have continued in some form but there was almost no consultation." Seymour said he was concerned that the government's literacy strategy would be too broad, and young readers would miss out on necessary help.

The findings of a 2015 Centre for Education and Statistics (CESE) study have been cited as the reason for the decision to stop the program. Yet, the CESE report concludes, "RR is an effective intervention for improving short-term reading outcomes among the poorest performing readers, which is the primary intention of the intervention" (*Reading Recovery: A Sector-Wide Analysis*, p.21). In other words, the report could have, justifiably, been the basis for *increasing* RR funding.

The Catholic Education Office (CEO), which has responsibility for 580 schools in NSW, has defended RR. It reported that more than 90 percent of its 1,000 RR students had finished the program with reading

levels equivalent to the rest of the state.

Instead of funding RR, the NSW government is accelerating its push for the teaching of phonics. Phonics is one limited component of a range of strategies teachers utilise to teach their students how to read. It consists of establishing the relationship between letters and sounds. Overwhelmingly, academics agree that teaching children to read requires an integrated approach, which includes a strong oral language, a wide vocabulary and a knowledge of grammatical structures, along with student access to a rich literary environment, involving libraries.

The state government's insistence on substituting RR with phonics is in line with an announcement by right-wing federal Education Minister Simon Birmingham last year that the federal government would require all Year 1 students across the country to take a phonics test. This followed the introduction of a similar measure in the UK (see: "Australian government imposes phonics test on six-year-olds").

The Australian Literacy Educators' Association (ALEA) criticised Birmingham's intervention as an "unreasonable over-emphasis on phonics." The ALEA argued that there was no clear evidence that a phonics test would improve pupils' literacy performance or their progress.

That governments in Australia and internationally are reintroducing regressive 1950s-style teaching methods is part of an agenda focused on enforcing discipline, conformity and obedience among school students, as opposed to a love of learning, creativity and critical thought, in order to produce "work-ready" youth.

A not-unimportant bonus is that phonics teaching provides a bonanza for publishing businesses selling quick-fix literacy packages. A decade ago, Murdoch's *Australian* newspaper was touting George Bush's "No Child Left Behind" Act, which funded "Reading First" to the tune of \$1 billion annually, until the program was besieged with allegations of financial conflicts of interest and cronyism. Under the "Reading First" program, schools had been pressured to adopt literacy approaches that emphasised phonics, to the exclusion of other reading instruction methods.

The NSW education department has fallen completely in line with this agenda. And, for its part, the NSW Teachers Federation has raised no objections. As with all the public education cutbacks, attacks and

teacher victimisations unleashed over the past decades, the NSWTF leaders are, once again, demonstrating their loyalty to the state government by policing its new phonics testing regime, along with NAPLAN standardised testing and "continuous improvement" in literacy and numeracy.



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