Phonics Initiative

Acknowledgement

We acknowledge and respect the traditional custodians of the lands and waters on which our students live and are educated throughout Western Australia.

We acknowledge and understand that Elders, parents, families and communities are the first educators of their children and we recognise and value the cultures and strengths that Aboriginal children bring to the classroom. Aboriginal people have a long tradition of teaching and learning through sharing their connections with country, community, language and culture, and through their oral histories, stories and lived experiences that are passed from generation to generation.

We recognise and value the learning that Aboriginal children bring with them from their homes and communities into the classroom.

The word Aboriginal is taken to mean Aboriginal, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, and Indigenous. When referring to individuals, use the term Aboriginal person.

Minister's message

From 2023, public primary schools will be required to implement a phonics assessment to evaluate a student's progress and support their development of phonics skills from an early age.

Developing the literacy and numeracy skills of all students in Western Australia remains our priority.

The McGowan Government has committed $2.5 million over 5 years for the new Phonics Initiative.
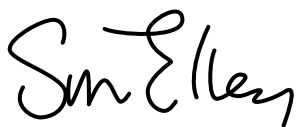
Identifying the progress of students in each Year 1 classroom will be a key enabler, establishing the foundation for young people to ultimately complete their education with the knowledge and skills they need.

Additional support will be available for teachers so they can give their students any extra help they may need with phonics early in their schooling.

The funding will enable delivery of support, and engagement in professional learning for both teachers and leaders through a range of Department of Education endorsed programs.

There is nothing more important than teaching our children and young people the most fundamental early literacy skills.

The Phonics Initiative acknowledges the importance of reading and writing and providing every student with a pathway to success in fundamental learning areas.

Sue Ellery MLC
Minister for Education and Training

Director General's message

Ensuring young people leave school with the knowledge and skills they need to participate in the workforce and contribute to our society is the most important function of the schooling system.

Staff in schools must be clear on how to teach this knowledge and these skills. This means teaching foundation literacy and numeracy skills in every classroom.

The teaching of phonics explicitly is well recognised through evidence-based analysis. Importantly, parents will also be assured any difficulties their children have in mastering literacy skills are identified early and addressed.

Some students may have additional learning support needs and will require intensive and targeted teaching to develop these skills. Engaging in evidence-informed phonics assessments will assist teachers to identify those students that need this targeted support.

We recognise that many schools already have robust phonics programs in place and that assessment is already an integral part of these programs.

The focus of the initiative will be to provide advice and strategies to schools to ensure effective whole-school implementation.

Your support of this initiative will help more children and young people experience success and fulfill their learning potential.

Lisa Rodgers
Director General

Rationale

The Department of Education is committed to developing the literacy skills of students from an early age. The Phonics Initiative requires all public schools with primary aged students from 2023 to:

- Provide an early years' literacy approach that includes planned and structured teaching of phonics, informed by the Western Australian Kindergarten Curriculum Guidelines and Pre-primary to Year 2 English curriculum.

- Have access to a quality-assured set of Department endorsed resources, including evidence based instructional practices, curriculum aligned phonics programs and assessment tools to monitor, assess and support early intervention.

- Principals will need to confirm at Semester 2 census that Year 1 students have undergone a phonics assessment by mid-Year 1, which identifies their progress against the Department of Education's expected proficiency.

Overview

The Phonics Initiative supports schools with Kindergarten to Year 2 students to:

1. Implement culturally responsive, equitable practices and acknowledge students' capacity to succeed, regardless of diverse circumstances and abilities, supported through differentiated learning.

2. Adopt evidenced-based programs and support their staff in building a consistency of practice across all of their classrooms.

3. Assess phonics progress early, with frequent and ongoing monitoring.

4. Effectively identify and support students who require intervention and extension, across all year levels.

5. Use the guidelines, curriculum and achievement standards to inform expected performance.

6. Access assistance from Statewide Services for those requiring significant support in strengthening the teaching of phonics.

Phonics

The importance of phonics

Phonics is essential for children to become successful readers, spellers, and writers. These fundamental skills are required to ensure young people leave school with the literacy knowledge and skills they need to participate in the workforce and become contributing members of society.

It is a cornerstone of effective literacy learning alongside:
- oral language
- phonological awareness
- fluency
- vocabulary
- comprehension.

The importance of assessing phonics early

Ongoing informal and formal assessment of the fundamental elements of phonics will enable early identification and interventions. Evidence confirms identified students will struggle to develop the literacy skills needed for successful learning if the necessary interventions are not firmly implemented across the early years.

The fundamental elements of phonics are the capability to:
- isolate and manipulate speech sounds in spoken words (phonemic awareness)
- increase knowledge of the sound–letter relationships used to read and spell words
- blend individual sound–letter relationships to read words
- segment words using their sound–letter relationship to spell.

It is vital that schools implement an evidence-based phonics approach to ensure students are given the opportunity to build and transfer their knowledge, skills and understanding.

Terminology

Phonics is the body of knowledge comprised of the sound-letter relationships used in reading and writing.

Phonic knowledge is dependent on awareness of the differing sounds of speech, knowledge of the alphabet, and knowledge of the letters and sounds that we use to spell.

An effective phonics teaching approach includes structured, systematic, explicit and cumulative teaching of sound-letter correspondences with ongoing opportunity to practice, apply and transfer.

The underlying capacities modelled and developed throughout the teaching of phonic knowledge include being able to:
- blend phonemes to form words (to read)
- segment words into phonemes (to spell).

Assessment

Phonics assessments use a range of evidence to determine students' progress and identify strengths and gaps in knowledge and understanding. Informal and formal assessment procedures are used throughout the learning process to improve student achievement and to guide teaching and learning experiences.

Western Australia mandated the On-entry assessment for Pre-primary, which includes a phonics component and informs early intervention, where required. The Phonics Initiative supports the ongoing assessment and identification of students' phonics acquisition.

Evidence-based and quality-assured

Evidence-based practice refers to contemporary research that has been evaluated by other researchers, published and peer-reviewed, and where there is a broad consensus within the research community that point towards a particular conclusion (Stanovich & Stanovich, 2003). The effectiveness of the practice or research finding is generally agreed by experts due to thorough, rigorous and repeated demonstration of results.

Evidenced-informed programs are based on international research. Programs are independently assessed by third-party researchers. The underlying research for the endorsed evidenced-based list of structured, systematic phonics programs is derived from national and international studies including 'Teaching children to read: An evidenced-based assessment of the scientific research literature on reading and its implications for reading instruction' (National Reading Panel, 2000), Teaching Reading: Report of the National Inquiry into the Teaching of Literacy (Rowe, 2005) and the Independent review of teaching early reading (Rose, 2006).
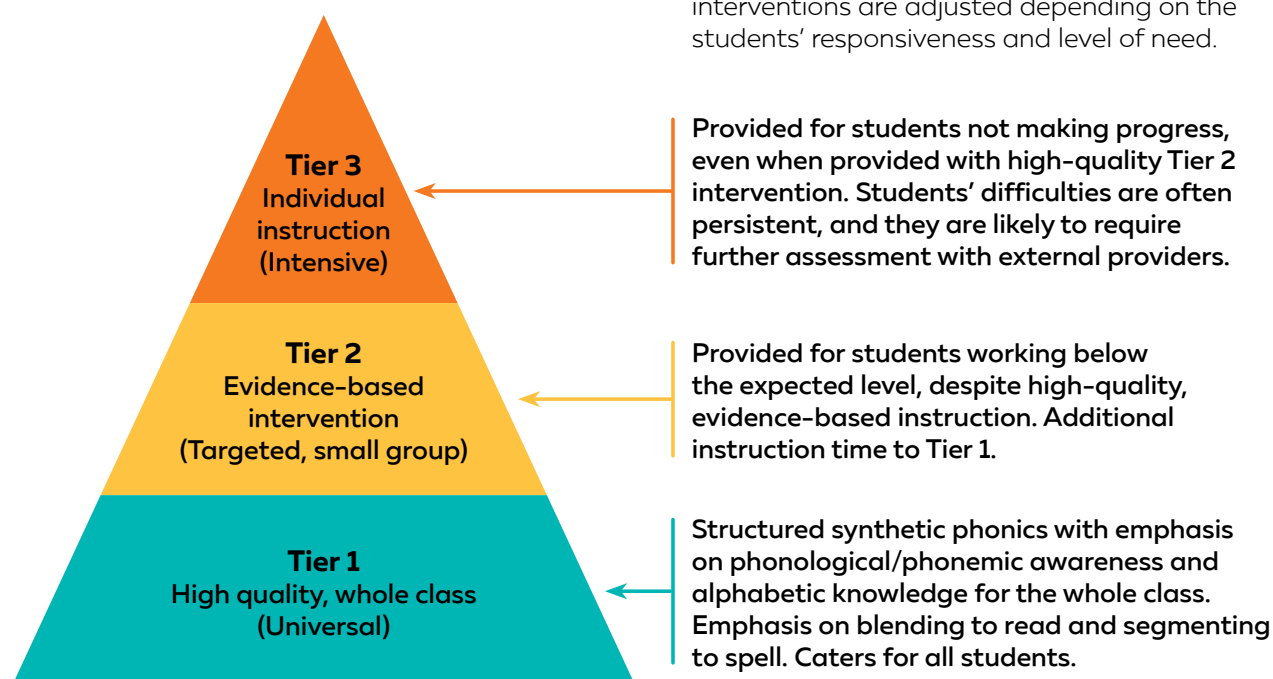
Evidenced-informed also reflects that in practice, educators apply their own professional judgement alongside evidence (Sharples, 2013). That is, research is not the sole source of information utilised by educators in their day-to-day decision making and practitioner expertise is also critical (Nelson & Campbell, 2017). Research evidence, in conjunction with an educators' professional experience and their unique understanding of their students and the school environment in which they work, is crucial in informing practice (Education Endowment Foundation, 2019).

For further reading, see Informing teaching: navigating and translating education best practice from AITSL.

Response to intervention (RTI)

It is vital for effective identification and support processes to be in place for students who require intervention across all year levels.

RTI is a tiered framework that schools can use for planning, curriculum, instruction, assessment and reporting to maximise student achievement. All students are monitored frequently on a regular basis. Students who are identified as at-risk are provided with appropriate evidence-informed interventions. The intensity of the tiered interventions are adjusted depending on the students' responsiveness and level of need.

Tier 3
Individual instruction
(Intensive)

Provided for students not making progress, even when provided with high-quality Tier 2 intervention. Students' difficulties are often persistent, and they are likely to require further assessment with external providers.

Tier 2
Evidence-based intervention
(Targeted, small group)

Provided for students working below the expected level, despite high-quality, evidence-based instruction. Additional instruction time to Tier 1.

Tier 1
High quality, whole class
(Universal)

Structured synthetic phonics with emphasis on phonological/phonemic awareness and alphabetic knowledge for the whole class. Emphasis on blending to read and segmenting to spell. Caters for all students.

Year 1 phonics assessment

From 2023, principals will register that Year 1 students have undertaken phonics assessments in the first half of the year. Ongoing phonics assessment data informs teaching, learning and intervention for schools.

Expected proficiency for mid-Year 1

Knowledge expected	
All single letters representing initial code phoneme-grapheme relationships	a, b, c, d, e, f, g, h, i, j, k, l, m, n, o, p, q(u), r, s, t, u, v, w, x, y, z
All double letter consonant digraphs representing initial code phoneme-grapheme relationships	ff, ll, ss, zz
Common consonant digraphs representing initial code phoneme-grapheme relationships	sh, th, ch, ck, ng, wh
Common vowel teams and single vowels representing extended code phoneme-grapheme relationships. By mid-Year 1, it is anticipated that most students will have more than one way of writing down each of the long vowel sounds.	ai, a_e, ay, ee, e, ea, oa, oe, o, o_e, ie, i_e, y, igh, oo (as in *book*), oo (as in *moon*), u_e, ow, oi, ur, er, ir, or, ar, ew, oy, aw, ou

How this knowledge is assessed

Students should be able to decode real and unfamiliar* words (including some 'invented' or nonsense words), gradually increasing in complexity:

- VC and CVC words
- VCC, CVCC and CCVC words

(C = Consonant V= Vowel)

* Invented or nonsense words can be a challenge for students. With regular exposure they will be able to apply their phonic skills to attempt any word.

The Department endorses schools nominating contemporary, quality-assured, evidence-based assessments which assess the fundamental elements of phonics. If students are not meeting this expected proficiency mid-Year 1, they are at risk of not meeting the literacy skills required to access the curriculum. Response to Intervention (RTI) may be required.

Key information

Schools

Phonics data is collected and stored at a school level. This data is used as one component of a suite of progress-monitoring tools to identify students' competencies in developing foundational literacy skills and to inform future teaching and learning. A focus of the Phonics Initiative is to provide advice and strategies to schools for effective whole-school assessment schedules.

Assessment is an integral part of teaching and learning. Ongoing evidence-based assessments inform targeted, curriculum aligned, intentional teaching. Schools choose context appropriate measures to assess phonic skills, knowledge, and understandings.

If a student is not making expected progress, then schools have a continuous responsibility to communicate planned intervention and support with parents and/or carers. Schools are not required to report the outcomes of Year 1 phonics assessment(s) to the Department, however principals will need to indicate in the Semester 2 census that the assessments have occurred.

The importance of developing appropriate phonological awareness practices in Kindergarten

Kindergarten is a non-compulsory year of school where the content delivered is based on the Western Australian Kindergarten Curriculum Guidelines, aligning to the mandated Early Years Learning Framework. In this context curriculum is defined as 'all the interactions, experiences, activities, routines and events, planned and unplanned, that occur in an environment designed to foster children's learning and development'. (Council of Australian Governments, 2009, p. 9)

Effective teaching and learning programs in Kindergarten are deliberate, purposeful and thoughtful. Educators engage in intentional teaching, recognising learning occurs in social contexts and that interactions and conversations are vitally important for learning. Outcome 5 of the Kindergarten Curriculum Guidelines ensures children are supported to express themselves in multiple ways and gain skills to understand and express thoughts, emotions, curiosities, ideas and information including the critical foundational skills of phonological awareness.

This includes:
- knowing that spoken and written language can be broken into smaller parts
- exploring and playing with syllables in words
- exploring, identifying, isolating and manipulating onset and rime in one syllable words
- investigating and exploring individual sound units (phonemes) in spoken words hearing and beginning to identify first (initial phoneme) and last sounds (final phoneme) in simple words
- exploring sound-letter relationships
- developing increasingly acute auditory discrimination skills by identifying subtle differences between sounds in words (cat/mat)
- exploring and playing with rhythm, rhyme and alliteration in words to promote enjoyment in language
- using simple vocabulary to describe the differences in sounds – volume, pitch, speed, rhythm, for example, loud, quiet, fast, slow, long, short.

References
Council of Australian Governments 2009, Belonging, being and becoming – the early years learning framework for Australia, Department of Education and Training, Canberra

Leadership
The role of the principal and leadership teams in creating conditions that enable a culture of effective impactful teaching and learning is critical to improving student achievement and life opportunities of students. Leading quality teaching and learning is at the heart of the role of school leaders and their impact is a powerful determinant of teacher effectiveness.

Leadership is essential in ensuring their school provides a holistic, early years' literacy approach, inclusive, planned and structured teaching of phonics.

Principals lead the development of strategic goals and targets, which directly inform annual English operational plans. These plans include goals, strategies and assessment schedules for the teaching of phonics and the ongoing monitoring of student achievement and progress in phonics.

Students
Students with special educational needs

Students with special educational needs will only complete assessments that are relevant to their individual learning needs as informed by their documented plan and/or highly modified program.

The level of differentiation required for each student with hearing loss, vision impairment, or dual sensory loss is unique. Individual needs must be considered for the student to access and progress within a phonics program.

Children with a hearing loss may require more time to respond to phonic tasks and appropriate environmental adjustments, such as Sound Amplification Systems or visual prompts. Students who use Auslan as a first language to access the curriculum may require support across 2 languages, Auslan and written English.

Students who are blind or who have mild to severe low vision require adjustments to access print through the provision of either braille and tactile graphics or magnification, large-print resources and strong colour contrast. Students may also need require additional time to complete phonics assessments.

Support is available through the Schools of Special Education Needs regarding the provision of teaching and learning adjustments.

English as additional language and dialect (EALD) students

EALD students are learners who speak a language or dialect other than Standard Australian English (SAE). This includes Aboriginal students who speak a traditional language, a Creole or Aboriginal English (refer to Find out about Aboriginal English). The language sounds used in English are different from those used in other languages, and therefore EALD students may need support to identify and/ or produce unfamiliar sounds. It is important to acknowledge that EALD students have a language difference, not a language deficit. These students should be supported as learners of an additional language/or dialect and not as students with language or learning difficulties. Teachers should consider the language needs of the students they are working with.
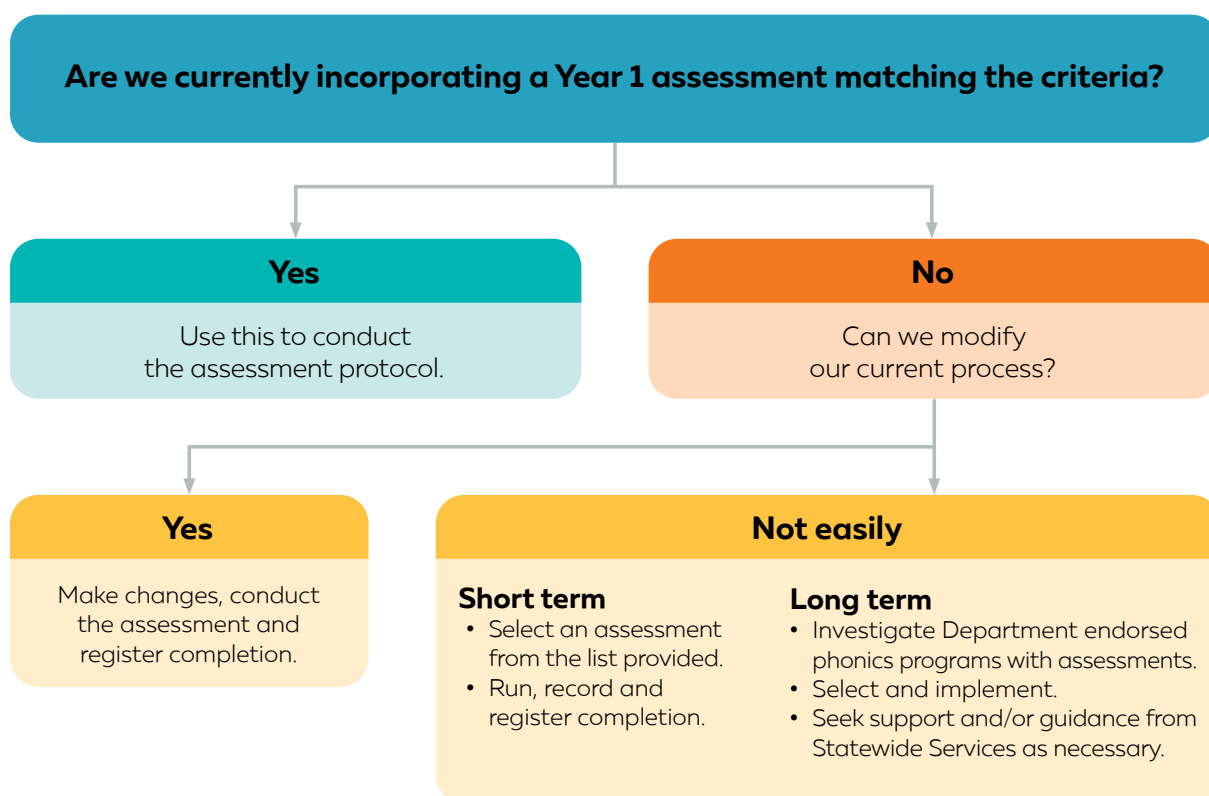
Data obtained for EALD students from phonics assessments should be used in conjunction with the EALD Progress Map to assess, monitor and plan for meaningful and targeted SAE language learning experiences. Access further information through the EALD Hub.

Culturally responsive pedagogies are learner-centred, place-based approaches that build on the cultural and linguistic backgrounds and strengths that Aboriginal students bring to school. Culturally responsive schools recognise the full educational potential of each student and provide the support and challenges necessary for them to achieve that potential. Culturally responsive pedagogies align with the aspirations of Aboriginal families and communities and respond to individual student needs.

School reflection on phonics

Criteria for a quality-assured and evidence-based assessment
- Basic code knowledge with some alternate spelling patterns (for example, long vowel sounds).
- Informed pronunciation of both 'real' and 'invented' words.
- Knowledge of sound-letter relationships.

Are we currently incorporating a Year 1 assessment matching the criteria?

Yes

Use this to conduct the assessment protocol.

No

Can we modify our current process?

Yes

Make changes, conduct the assessment and register completion.

Not easily

Short term
- Select an assessment from the list provided.
- Run, record and register completion.

Long term
- Investigate Department endorsed phonics programs with assessments.
- Select and implement.
- Seek support and/or guidance from Statewide Services as necessary.

Resources

Department endorsed evidence-based programs and assessments

Phonological and Phonemic awareness programs and assessments	Phonics programs (some include assessments)	Standardised assessments of foundation literacy skills
• Heggerty • Phonological Awareness Screening Test (PAST) • Rainbow Assessment Tool–Revised (RAT–R) • Sutherland Phonological Awareness Test (SPAT) • Yopp Singer	• InitialLit • Jolly Phonics Jolly Grammar • Let's Decode • Letters and Sounds (Enhanced) • Little Learners Love Literacy • Phonics Toolkit • Promoting Literacy Development (PLD) • Sounds Write	• Acadience Reading • Castles & Coltheart Test 2 • CUBED Dynamic Decoding Measures • Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS) • National Year 1 phonics check
School leadership teams make informed decisions in the selection of programs to ensure students will succeed regardless of diverse circumstances and abilities, supporting differentiated learning.		

Department resources and programs to assist teachers in the classroom

Existing resources, including the Phonics Toolkit – a set of 3 books to support and inform the explicit teaching of phonics, are available on Ikon.

The Department has a panel of contracted professional learning programs prepared by external providers (listed in the ProLearn catalogue on Ikon) to support the implementation of phonics programs and assessments.

The Centre for Excellence in the Explicit Teaching of Literacy provides professional learning opportunities for successful applicants. The professional learning includes the instruction of phonics as an effective approach to teaching literacy. Search Ikon for further information.

Teaching for Impact

Teaching for Impact provides principals and teachers with a clear statement of the teaching practices that will best enable students to succeed. It enables school staff to discuss and reflect on their practice using a common language. It informs a whole-school approach to strengthen educators' impact on achievement and progress of all students. Staff in public schools can access Teaching for Impact through Ikon and Connect Discover.

School support

All schools are able to seek support through the Statewide Services Request for Assistance process. It is anticipated that a small number of schools may require additional support in the assessment and/or teaching of phonics; as identified by assessment data, through a school review process, or via a Director of Education request. Staff are available to provide support for these schools.

Glossary

alphabetic principle
The systematic correspondences between letters and letter patterns that represent the spoken language.

decode
The ability to apply knowledge of sound–letter relationships, including knowledge of letter patterns, to correctly pronounce written words (to read).

digraph
A grapheme made up of 2 letters that represents one sound (/sh/ in shop).

encode
Breaking a spoken word into its separate sounds and using knowledge of letter–sound relationships to spell the word.

extended code
The alphabetic code that include vowel and consonant sounds which are represented by alternative spellings (ai, ay, a, ea, a–e representing /ae/).

grapheme
A letter or group of letters that spell a phoneme in a word (for example, /f/ in fog).

initial code
The alphabetic code that includes sound–letters of the alphabet and consonant digraphs.

nonsense words
Invented words that have no meaning and allow teachers to assess student decoding ability, ensuring that they are not memorising known words.

phonemic awareness
Identifying and isolating sounds in a word and the ability to manipulate those sounds.

phonological awareness
A broad concept that relates to the sounds of spoken language. It includes understandings about words, rhyme, syllables, onset and rime and the ability to blend, segment and manipulate sounds (phonemic awareness).

phoneme
The smallest speech sound unit in a word.

trigraph
A grapheme made up of three letters that makes one sound (/igh/ in high).

Shaping the future