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## Smarter Schools approach to teaching beginning reading and spelling

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## Summary

‘The evidence is clear that direct systematic instruction in phonics during the early years of schooling is an essential foundation for teaching children to read. Findings from the research evidence indicate that all students learn best when teachers adopt an integrated approach to reading that explicitly teaches phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary knowledge and comprehension.’  
(Rowe 2005)

The aim of the Smarter Schools strategy has been to implement an integrated, systematic, predominantly oral language approach to teaching phonics<sup>1</sup> and phonemic awareness, in order to support the acquisition of reading and spelling skills. Clusters of schools, teachers, principals and parents within Catholic and independent schools in Tasmania identified a structured approach to use when teaching phonics. This approach was designed to be fully compatible with the wider, language-rich early years curriculum experiences in these schools.

The schools commenced a system-wide, consistent K–2 approach to ‘secure optimum progress in children’s acquisition of phonics knowledge and skills’. The participating schools identified the commitment to one approach to teaching phonics, by all schools, teachers and administrators, as the key to their success in improving results amongst the student cohort.

### Note

Terms used in this report are defined as follows.

**Systematic phonics:** Systematic phonics instruction provides instruction in a carefully selected and useful set of letter/sound relationships and then organises the introduction of these relationships into a logical instructional sequence.

**Synthetic phonics:** refers to the concept of ‘synthesising’ which means ‘putting together’ or ‘blending’. Letter-to-sound correspondences are explicitly taught and practised and this knowledge is then used to read (decode) and to spell (encode).

**Analytic phonics:** letter/sound relationships, breaking down already known words into separate components, generally word families are used.



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## Target student group

The strategy encompassed 30 rural and regional Catholic and independent schools in Tasmania, focusing on students at levels K–2.

## Method

### Identifying the need for a Smarter Schools approach to teaching beginning reading and spelling

Galvanised by a series of podcasts titled ‘Reading interventions’ and by the existing data about reading and spelling skills, a group of non-government schools in Tasmania decided to systematically implement a research-based strategy that involved principals, parents and caregivers, and facilitated a professional learning experience for teachers. The aim was to raise achievement in the acquisition of phonics to support reading and spelling development.

Teachers in these Tasmanian schools began implementing the selected approach after a 2010 trial in a small group of schools produced some quantitative and qualitative data indicating its success.

### The Letters and Sounds approach

‘The research indicated that the phonics approach adopted should be systematic and work in conjunction with the early years approach to teaching of language and literacy. The emphasis on thorough letter/sound correspondence knowledge and synthesising enables the reader to become more accurate, fluent and to access the meaning of the text more readily at the level of the reader’s oral comprehension.’

These Tasmanian schools selected the Letters and Sounds approach to teaching phonics as it provided a tightly structured, consistent, cost effective, direct instruction approach to teaching phonics for K–2 students. The framework has been developed by independent experts in the United Kingdom and is their national strategy for teaching phonics.

Letters and Sounds is based on the ‘Simple view of reading’ which identifies two dimensions of reading: ‘word recognition’ and ‘language comprehension’. It is considered that both dimensions are essential to developing fluent and effective reading, and both require specific kinds of teaching. Reading comprehension depends on the interaction between decoding skills and linguistic awareness. Phoneme awareness makes a difference to decoding ability.



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Letters and Sounds use a synthetic phonics approach to teach reading and spelling. The program involves the systematic teaching of letter/sound correspondences to automaticity, and models how the alphabetic code works. Short assessments enable teachers to monitor and track student progress and plan for teaching and learning accordingly. Research has shown that when words are recognised at sight, this recognition is most efficient when it is underpinned by grapheme-phoneme knowledge. Letters and Sounds align the introduction of high-frequency words as far as possible to the graphemes introduced. This means that children will be able to read many high-frequency words very early in their schooling.

Letters and Sounds provides a detailed, systematic approach to teaching the phonics element of reading – not the whole reading program. It is designed to help teachers to teach children how the alphabet works for reading and spelling. It is fully compatible with the wider early learning years curriculum. Teachers using this strategy present the full range of language learning experiences within a range of appropriate early years contexts.

The Letters and Sounds approach to teaching and learning followed a defined sequence:

- Revisit, Explain, Use (What do we know already?)
- Teach (How the pattern/structure works within appropriate contexts.)
- Practise (A range of interactive activities for children to practise the new learning.)
- Apply (Revise new learning, apply in writing, reflect on learning.)

Letters and Sounds guided students and teachers through distinct phases. Children's progress in learning phonics was tracked through these phases. When evidence suggested that children were secure at a particular phase (they knew most of the phonemes associated with that phase, most of the time, and could apply the skills of blending and segmenting using an appropriate range of grapheme-phoneme correspondences), they moved into the next teaching and learning sequence. Guided by the assessments, teachers made judgements about the rate at which children were progressing through the phases and adapted their teaching accordingly.

## Ensuring consistency

In 2010, two schools implemented Letters and Sounds. Their end-of-year [Performance Indicators in Primary Schools](#) (PIPS) results had increased significantly from previous years. Other teachers heard about the success and requested assistance to learn about Letters and Sounds with the view that their school would be implementing it in 2011.



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The main focus of the strategy was to ensure consistency in the teaching of phonics across Prep to Grade 2, and to have all teachers diligently following the approach. In order to achieve this, professional learning was undertaken at individual schools. The initial professional learning was one session (about one-and-a-half hours) covering the guiding principles of Letters and Sounds. Professional development was designed to describe how Letters and Sounds could work as a system-based initiative within early years classrooms when taught alongside a 'broad and rich language curriculum'.

During 2010, professional learning sessions were developed and presented to approximately 70 early childhood teachers. Most of the teachers implementing Letters and Sounds discussed the approach with parents at their parent/teacher information sessions.

## Results

'Every teacher, without exception, has embraced Letters and Sounds, commenting that they love teaching it; and the students enjoy the wide range of activities, including games and using the interactive whiteboard.'

In non-government schools in Tasmania, Prep students are assessed twice yearly (March and October) using PIPS. This is a baseline assessment that supports teachers and systems to:

- assess the progress of students in literacy, numeracy and phonological awareness
- diagnose individual student work and provide data to indicate in which areas students are achieving or underachieving
- predict future performance in order to identify individuals who might benefit from early intervention.

The data gathered within the PIPS assessment provided the baseline by which to measure, quantitatively, the success of the phonics approach selected. It was also an indicator by which teachers, students, principals and parents could view the effect of the Letters and Sounds strategy. Classroom benchmarked reading assessments were also used to monitor student progress in beginning reading and to provide evidence to help plan for further teaching and learning of individual students.

Data was collected from Prep classes in two schools, showing reading progress across one year before the implementation of the strategy into the classroom program, and one year after the implementation. The results show a demonstrable improvement in reading progress of students in both schools in the year that the strategy was introduced.



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## Lessons learned

One of the benefits of engaging with the professional development and implementing Letters and Sounds has been the increasing understanding among teachers about the importance of oral language as the foundation of literacy progress. Teachers also recognised the significance of clear articulation when teaching letters and sounds. Another advantage they described was learning how to listen to children read to gather information for further teaching and learning focuses.

‘At one school the synthetic phonics approach was implemented in a Prep/grade 1 class and not in the other class (grades 1/2). The following year in grade 2, the teachers could pick the students who had been taught within the strategy. The students’ skills were better than those who had not been instructed in the methodology.’

Commitment to the program was a key factor in its success. An essential element in the success of Letters and Sounds is that consistency is maintained as the program has set phases, activities and monitoring points. Teachers must adhere to the content of the program from start to finish – no cherry picking!

There should be a coordinator to ensure that teachers are supported, particularly in the initial stages of implementation. This role is not very time consuming once the program is up and running. Time is required to download phases and resources. Teachers need to familiarise themselves with the phases and plan how they will embed them in their classroom programs before they begin teaching.

There needs to be discussion about how to manage the tracking of students’ progress. Assessments are required at the end of phases 2, 3, 4 and 5. How the phases will be managed across the grades needs to be considered.

## Research base

The [Australian Primary Principals Association \(APPA\)](#) produced a series of podcasts in 2009 called ‘Reading interventions’. The research presented was funded by the Australian Government and carried out by three universities: Edith Cowan University, Griffiths University and the Australian Catholic University. It clearly identified that a synthetic approach to teaching reading and spelling was superior to an analytic approach. The research also identified that there was no gender difference in the acquisition of reading and writing skills.



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‘The 2006 Rose Review of the Teaching of Early Reading (Britain) stressed that good teaching, attention to speaking and listening skills and the systematic learning of phonics are crucial to the raising of standards, with early interventions to prevent children from falling behind. The Rose Review recommended that high quality phonics work become the prime approach to teaching reading, spelling and writing.’

These podcasts, along with achievement data gathered from their early years literacy assessments (PIPS), provided impetus for the introduction of the strategy into the 30 Tasmanian schools. The strategy offered these educators a professional learning experience, introducing new ideas and research and challenging their current beliefs and practice.

## Further reading and links

The [Letters and Sounds](#) program is free to download. Other sites such as [twinkl](#) and [Babcock LDP](#) have resources to support Letters and Sounds, such as phonics play, lesson plans for each phase and assessment tasks.

Bowyer-Crane, C, Snowling, MJ, Duff, FJ, Fieldsend, E, Carroll, JM, Miles, J, Götz, K & Hulme, C 2008, ‘Improving early language and literacy skills: differential effects of an oral language versus a phonology with reading intervention’, *Journal of child psychology and psychiatry*, vol. 49, pp 422–32.

Gough, PB & Tunmer, WE 1986, ‘Decoding, reading, and reading disability’, *Remedial and special education*, vol. 7, no 1, pp 6–10.

Rowe, K 2005, [National inquiry into the teaching of literacy \(Australia\)](#), Teaching reading, ACER website.

## Contact

For further details about the strategy, including the professional development, contact [anne.charles@catholic.tas.edu.au](mailto:anne.charles@catholic.tas.edu.au).