

# Expert Advisory Panel on National Year 1 Literacy and Numeracy Check

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Submission from Early Childhood Australia

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### *About us*

Early Childhood Australia (ECA) is the national peak early childhood advocacy organisation, acting in the interests of young children, their families and those in the early childhood sector. ECA advocates for quality in education and care as well as social justice and equity for children from birth to eight years. We have a federated structure with Branches in each state and territory. In 2017, ECA celebrates 79 years of continuous service to the Australian community.

## Table of Contents

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<b>1. Introduction .....</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>2 Issues for considerations when introducing a National Year 1 literacy and numeracy check....</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>2.1 Timeliness of literacy and numeracy check .....</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>2.2 Validity of screening tools .....</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>2.3 Format of check .....</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>2.4 The impact of a national Year 1 literacy and numeracy check on teaching.....</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>3 Summary of recommendations .....</b>	<b>13</b>

## 1. Introduction

Early Childhood Australia (ECA) welcomes the opportunity to comment on the proposed introduction of a National Year 1 Early Literacy and Numeracy Check.

ECA's work is informed by our commitment to children's rights and our knowledge on early childhood development, learning and pedagogy. We have recently revised and updated the ECA Code of Ethics for the early childhood education and care sector, which is based on the principles of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. We have over 5,000 members across Australia who are engaged in the education of children from infancy through to the early years of school (birth to eight years).

ECA supports the effective delivery of literacy and numeracy with ongoing assessment of children's progress and review of pedagogical practice in the early years.

There has been considerable public commentary about the merits of a National Year 1 Literacy and Numeracy Check since this announcement, with much of the focus on the introduction of a phonics check similar to that used in the UK.

While we recognise that assessment of children's progress is important to enable teachers to plan and implement a differentiated curriculum for individual children, we are concerned about a number of aspects in regards to the implementation of a National Year 1 Literacy and Numeracy Test. These concerns include:

- the timing of a screening test;
- the age-appropriateness of testing;
- the testing of isolated skills;
- the risk of duplicating other assessment undertaken and the associated impacts this can have on children;
- the alignment of the assessment with the Australian curriculum and pedagogy being used in classrooms; and
- the focus on testing versus the focus on supporting teachers' pedagogical knowledge and skill.

ECA supports evidence-based practice that delivers the best possible outcomes for children, and as such welcomes consideration of mechanisms that may better support children's literacy and numeracy development, however, we would caution against subjecting children to additional testing as a way of driving changes in curriculum or teaching practice, without the additional focus on supporting teachers and schools to implement evidence-based teaching practices across their classrooms.

## 2 Issues for considerations when introducing a National Year 1 literacy and numeracy check

### 2.1 Timeliness of literacy and numeracy check

#### Importance of early intervention

The early years of a child's education, including those that occur before school commences, are important in terms of a child's development and their long-term outcomes in learning and wellbeing. A child's experience in their first five years has lifelong impacts, and high quality education and care in the preschool years maximise the significant development that is occurring in this window. An evaluation of the research indicates that children who attend two years of high quality preschool education before they start school have better outcomes, and that for disadvantaged children the benefits are more pronounced.<sup>1</sup> Early education delivers improvements in cognitive, social and emotional outcomes, and studies indicate that these outcomes can be sustained. Early identification of, and intervention for, children showing signs of struggle with literacy and/or numeracy is important to maximise the learning outcomes, especially for developmentally vulnerable children.

#### Literacy and numeracy in early childhood settings

The development of literacy and numeracy skills begins well before children start formal school. In the early years, at home and in early childhood settings, children begin to learn literacy and numeracy in context, through play and other real life experiences. In the preschool years, children learn underlying literacy skills and concepts such as text understanding, phonological awareness, and oral language that support later formal reading acquisition. They learn early numeracy skills, such as counting objects and using language to express numeracy concepts such as weight and distance. Cognitive development underpins overall early development, and a range of skills can be intentionally taught in an age-appropriate, play-based learning environment from an early age.

Qualified educators based in early childhood settings across Australia are undertaking formative and summative assessment of children in the years before they enter formal school as part of an ongoing cycle of evaluation. In a play-based setting, age-appropriate assessment is nearly always observational, watching the child demonstrating skills in a range of contexts, and recording and analysing those observations. Assessment can be undertaken in a responsive way and in a manner

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<sup>1</sup> Mitchell Report 2016: Preschool – two years are better than one. Developing a universal access preschool program for Australian three years olds - evidence, policy and implementation. <http://www.mitchellinstitute.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/Two-Years-are-Better-than-One.pdf>

that suits the developmental stage of the child. Assessments inform planning for teaching for each individual child, and allow the delivery of targeted and differentiated teaching. Assessment in early childhood should be holistic and encompass all outcomes of the *Early Years Learning Framework*<sup>2</sup> recognising the family and community influences and cultural factors that impact on the ways children function as individuals and in a group setting.

### **School entry assessments**

By the time a child starts formal schooling in Australia, many of the underlying skills should be in place to enable them to progress with more structured and formal teaching of literacy and numeracy. Children commence school with a range of different skills and learning capacity. Most children across Australia undergo a formal school-entry assessment at the commencement of their first full-time year of school. While each state and territory uses a different assessment tools, they include comprehensive assessment across the domains of literacy and numeracy, and are utilised by teachers to plan teaching for children in their classrooms.

School-entry assessments are not compulsory for all education sectors in all states, nor are they nationally standardised. However, they share the objective of enabling teachers to identify areas of need for each child and to implement programming to deliver targeted outcomes for all children in the classroom. In other words, such assessments are diagnostic and informative, rather than narrow or definitive.

### **Timing of Year 1 screening check**

The current proposal is for a screening check to be undertaken in Year 1, presumably referring to the second year of full time schooling as outlined in the Australian curriculum.

It is unclear why the current proposal is suggested for Year 1, given that most children have already undertaken school-entry assessments in their Foundation year. Indeed, the National Inquiry into the Teaching of Literacy “ in December 2005<sup>3</sup>, and referenced by Minister Birmingham in his press release on 29/1/2017, recommended nationally consistent assessments on-entry to school be undertaken for every child, including regular monitoring of decoding skills and word reading accuracy using objective testing of specific skills, and that these link to future assessments. While these assessments are neither nationally uniform nor nationally standardised, undertaking school-entry assessments is common practice across Australian jurisdictions.

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<sup>2</sup> Belonging, becoming and being: The Early Years Learning Framework for Australia  
[https://docs.education.gov.au/system/files/doc/other/belonging\\_becoming\\_and\\_becoming\\_the\\_early\\_years\\_learning\\_framework\\_for\\_australia.pdf](https://docs.education.gov.au/system/files/doc/other/belonging_becoming_and_becoming_the_early_years_learning_framework_for_australia.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> Rowe, Ken and National Inquiry into the Teaching of Literacy (Australia), "Teaching Reading" (2005).  
[http://research.acer.edu.au/tll\\_misc/5](http://research.acer.edu.au/tll_misc/5)

The introduction of additional formal assessment in the early years risks duplicating testing and may increase pressure on young children. We would urge the panel to consider streamlining of formal assessments undertaken in the early school years.

In addition, ECA would like to highlight to the Expert Panel that if the “Year 1” phonics check in the UK is the basis of developing a screening test in Australia, it is of note that while the check occurs in the second year of formal schooling in the UK, children are typically a year younger than they are in Year 1 in Australia.<sup>4</sup> Most year 1 children in Australia are between 6-7 years old, with many up to 7.5 years. If a screening check is intended to improve early identification of literacy and numeracy difficulties, this may well be late in a child’s reading development, and mean they miss valuable opportunities for early intervention. Delaying a literacy screening until this age may wastes precious learning time in the first year of school. Should schools and / or school departments begin to rely on the outcomes of a Year 1 screening test, children may be as old as 7-7.5 before they trigger formal intervention for literacy and numeracy skills.

In addition, by Year 1, children have been participating in formal schooling for a full year. It is highly likely that, through the ongoing assessment undertaken by teachers throughout the year that allow to them evaluate each child’s progress and the effectiveness of the program, children at risk of literacy and numeracy difficulties will already have been clearly identified well before any such formal screening is undertaken. It is for this reason that schools undertake initial and ongoing evaluation of children’s’ progress in the first year at school, so that a differentiated curriculum and / or additional support can be provided earlier. This raises the question as to whether such a screening check would be occurring at the right time for students, and whether it is indeed necessary.

### **Recommendation**

- 1. That, should a nationally standardised early years assessment be developed, the panel should review school entry assessments currently undertaken and aim to streamline formal assessments in the early years to avoid duplication and subjecting young children to over-testing.**
- 2. That the Panel address the feasibility of implementing Recommendation 9 from the National Inquiry into the Teaching of Literacy for national consistent assessment on entry to school of every child.**

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<sup>4</sup> The National Curriculum - <https://www.gov.uk/national-curriculum/overview>

## 2.2 Validity of screening tools

Any standardised screening tool requires adequate evaluation of its implementation to ensure that it is valid, and that it is actually identifying the intended target knowledge and skills. If screening tools are not accurately calibrated then the test will risk either not identifying children who need support or over-identifying the numbers of children with literacy and numeracy problems. Ensuring that a screening tool is well designed and has validity would require proper trialling over an extended period of time, and potentially across different populations to ensure that cultural and regional differences are accounted for. While screening tests for phonics and maths may be less sensitive to cultural and regional variation, other aspects of literacy and language can be significantly impacted by such factors.

Care should also be taken to ensure that any screening assessment reflects the age-appropriate outcomes expected across the domains. While early intervention is important in terms of maximising the opportunities for young children to learn, children do learn at different rates, and readiness for formal literacy and numeracy skills can vary greatly. This is not to say that at-risk children should not be identified early, but it does mean that any screening test may need to be designed to assess earlier developing skills if it is to be implemented with children at an earlier age. In regards to reading, many people assume that isn't possible to identify children at risk of reading delays until their response to words and text has been assessed. However, the reality is that assessment of underlying skills such as phonological awareness and oral language and observing the child's level of story comprehension will give an indication of a child's strengths and needs well before they can be assessed on print-based reading tasks.

It is also important that testing should encompass the broad range of underlying skills that support literacy and numeracy development. In regards to literacy, the Australian curriculum outlines a number of areas of content under the Language and Literacy strands, including use of language, listening and speaking, comprehension, phonics and phonological awareness, and vocabulary. However, the public debate has been focussed in on the UK phonics test, which assesses only a subset of the skills that are required (that is reading /sounding out of real and non-real words) rather than all aspects of early reading skills. Assessing a broad range of underlying skills acknowledges the reality that children might have different reasons for apparent reading difficulties. Administering a test on just a subset of skills may not assist with identifying the underlying causes.

It is unclear what is proposed to be assessed under the banner of numeracy skills and no reference is made to similar tests internationally from which the numeracy screening check might be modelled. It would be useful for the Panel to identify on what national and international research and implementation experience the development of a numeracy check for Australia will be based.

A screening test utilised in Australian classrooms would need to be consistent with expectations in the Australian curriculum. It would be unfair to use screening tests to identify children who "aren't

picking up reading or counting skills”<sup>5</sup> if those children have not yet been exposed to the content in the corresponding curriculum. By doing so, we would be setting children up to fail, and the results of such a screening test would say more about the programming and pedagogy being utilised than about the children’s capacity to learn.

## Recommendations

- 1. Any literacy and numeracy screening check should assess across the range of skills required to develop competency;**
- 2. Formal testing of children in the early years of school must recognise the developmental readiness variation in relation to the skills being assessed; and**
- 3. Any national screening check in the early years of school must align with expectations outlined in the Australian curriculum.**

## 2.3 Format of check

The experience of formal testing can be a difficult experience for children, particularly when they are old enough to understand that they may have performed badly on an assessment.

In the early years, assessment in early childhood settings and preschool is undertaken through observations, and then recording those observations. Children are unlikely to be aware that the assessment is taking place, and the information about the child’s progress is gathered in context and can be mapped across expected skill levels.

When children reach preschool and school, they are often able to engage in some forms of more structured assessment, but these need to be administered carefully so as not to negatively impact on the child’s performance, nor create an overly negative experience where they child overtly recognises their difficulty. Many school-entry assessments are designed so that their administration can be integrated with the regular classroom activities, and while they are structured, the child may not experience the assessment as a “test”.

The proposed Year 1 National Literacy and Numeracy check is proposed to be a “light touch” assessment, presumably meaning that it will be reasonably short and simple to administer. Of course, if the check takes into account the full range of skills that underpin literacy and numeracy development, it may be somewhat longer than first anticipated. Care would be required to ensure

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<sup>5</sup> <http://www.senatorbirmingham.com.au/Latest-News/ID/3350/Literacy-and-numeracy-check-for-all-Aussie-schools-under-the-Turnbull-Governments-quality-reforms>

that the check doesn't become a long battery of items that is unwieldy to administer or onerous for teachers and young children.

As highlighted earlier, given that school-entry assessments are already undertaken, to reduce the assessment impact on children, integrating a national standardised check into this process may deliver the best outcomes for children.

### **Recommendation**

- 1) That any national standardised literacy and numeracy check is developed in a format that is contextual, responsive to the needs of children and reduces the risk of negative test impacts on young children as best as possible.**

## **2.4 The impact of a national Year 1 literacy and numeracy check on teaching**

Implementing a formal and standardised national assessment, where results are collated and potentially published and that only assess a subset of skills raises the obvious concern that it would apply downward pressure on teachers and parents to “teach to the test”. The risks associated with this are that teachers and parents focus heavily on the skills that are being tested, and do not value other aspects of the curriculum or the other skills that underpin the development of literacy and numeracy competence. Another risk is that very young children have negative experiences while being coached on skills and using activities that are not age appropriate for them (such as paper-based grapheme-phoneme linking) and thereafter approach reading or numeracy activities with a sense of foreboding.

Testing, in and of itself, does not deliver improved outcomes for students, and without improving the expertise of teachers, and ensuring clear learning outcomes for students, implementing a national test will do nothing to improve the literacy and numeracy skills of young Australian students.

The stated purpose of the UK Phonics screening test was ‘to confirm whether individual pupils have learnt phonic decoding to an appropriate standard’. However, it is important to note that the UK check was introduced in 2012; some six years after the UK had at least already implemented a number of measures to advance the systemic teaching of phonics, including the introduction of the phonics phases which outlined stage by stage how synthetic phonics should be taught in UK schools, and at what year level it should occur.

Australia, however, has not implemented the same national guidelines or learning progressions outside of the Australian Curriculum, which does not enter into the same detail as the UK's phonics phases. Nor does the Australian Curriculum extend into the years before the first year of school, where much early learning on literacy and numeracy takes place. While literacy and numeracy are encompassed by the Australian Early Years Learning framework, those skills are embedded in holistic

expectations and the framework deliberately does not define stages of achievement. This is because contemporary learning theory asserts that young children’s learning occurs with individually varying rates and patterns.

The Government’s Quality Schools, Quality Outcomes<sup>6</sup> document states that:

*Reforms such as assessing children in reading, phonics and numeracy during Year 1 and reporting annually to parents **against agreed national literacy and numeracy standards** for every year of schooling, will ensure students who are behind are identified early and can be targeted with interventions before the achievement gap grows.*

The implementation of a Year 1 screening check should not be undertaken prior to the development of clear learning progressions for the skills that the screening is likely to assess. If a screening test is utilised as a way to reverse engineer curriculum goals or teaching practices in schools, then it will likely fail unless implemented with curriculum and pedagogical support for teachers. It is likely to be rejected by teachers and schools, and worse still, it will impact most negatively on students who struggle to complete the assessment.

The introduction of national testing for young children at school should not only be accompanied by pedagogical support for teachers and schools, but also a clear pathway for intervention for children identified as not meeting the standard. Teachers and early educators should be supported to develop the skills, as required, to deliver a comprehensive literacy programs, and parental support programs should be developed to ensure that all children experience the best possible home learning environment before and in the first years of school.

It would be helpful for the Government to be clear about the objectives of introducing a national screening test for literacy and numeracy. Should the scheme replicate the UK Screening Test, then the implication is that there is an intention to collect and collate results nationally, and potentially to publish comparative results across schools and jurisdictions. ECA would be concerned that this would increase pressure on schools to “pass the test” and potentially put the educational wellbeing of children at risk in an attempt to ensure that benchmarks are met. The screening test could effectively become a pseudo NAPLAN for Year 1.

If the genuine purpose is to assist schools and parents identify children who may require intervention so that they don’t “slip through the cracks” then there would be no purpose for the collection of results nationally.

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<sup>6</sup> Quality Schools, Quality Outcomes, May 2016:

[https://docs.education.gov.au/system/files/doc/other/quality\\_schools\\_acc.pdf](https://docs.education.gov.au/system/files/doc/other/quality_schools_acc.pdf)

If the intent is to drive changes to pedagogy and programming across Australia's schools, then ECA would recommend that the government start a broader genuine conversation with the education sector about how to best achieve this, rather than using test outcomes to drive this conversation.

### **Recommendation**

- 1) A standardised national Year 1 screening test should not be introduced in isolation from engaging in the broader conversation about building teacher capacity around the use of evidence-based assessment and pedagogy in literacy and numeracy teaching in the early years, nor at the expense of the rights and best interests of children.**

### 3 Summary of recommendations

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- 1) That, should a nationally standardised early years assessment be developed, that the panel review school entry assessments currently undertaken and aim to streamline formal assessments in the early years to avoid duplication and subjecting young children to over-testing.
- 2) That the Panel address the feasibility of implementing Recommendation 9 from the National Inquiry into the Teaching of Literacy for national consistent assessment on entry to school of every child.
- 3) Any literacy and numeracy screening check should assess across the range of skills required to develop competency.
- 4) Formal testing of children in the early years of school must recognise the developmental readiness variation in relation to the skills being assessed.
- 5) Any national screening check in the early years of school must align with expectations outlined in the Australian curriculum.
- 6) That any national standardised literacy and numeracy check is developed in a format that is contextual, responsive to the needs of children and reduces the risk of negative test impacts on young children as best as possible.
- 7) A standardised national Year 1 screening test should not be introduced in isolation from engaging in the broader conversation about building teacher capacity around the use of evidence-based assessment and pedagogy in literacy and numeracy teaching in the early years, nor at the expense of the rights and best interests of children.