SSTUWA opposes Year 1 phonics testing

By Pat Byrne
President, SSTUWA

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Children in our public school system struggle with literacy for a range of reasons – anxiety, hunger, mental health concerns, neglect – any of these factors can affect a child's capacity to learn.

The task of identifying and managing the causes of learning difficulties can be complex, something which the proposal to introduce a phonics test in Year 1 fails to recognise.

The State School Teachers' Union of WA is strongly against introducing a national compulsory phonics test because the idea is simplistic. Introducing a test of this nature does not in any way assist teachers to identify the reasons children might be struggling or what is needed to address these causes.

Stories in the *West Australian* this week quoted prominent business people suggesting that introducing the phonics test would "help stop kids leaving school with poor reading skills".

We fail to see how introducing yet another test into the WA public school system, in and of itself, would help anything. Tests don't solve problems.

The most likely impact of introducing a phonics test in Year 1 would be to create more administrative work for teachers (taking them away from actual teaching) and more anxiety for students.

You only need to look at the introduction of NAPLAN to see how counterproductive compulsory testing can be.

What could have been a useful tool in identifying students who needed extra help has instead become a burden for teachers, students and parents. NAPLAN has become focused on league tables; dominating school planning, staff selection and promotion, while at the same time distracting teachers from genuine teaching and students from learning.

Phonics is already a well-established teaching strategy within the WA Department of Education. The department provides resources and guidelines to support a phonics approach and all teachers working in the early phases of learning are familiar

with phonics as a learning tool.

All students already undergo an on-entry assessment on commencing school. Teachers are professionals who know their students; they are well aware of which children need additional assistance with literacy and numeracy. What they need is more targeted support to provide this assistance.

Since the staggering funding cuts in 2013, there has been a significant reduction in system support for teachers through the loss of specialist teachers such as Getting It Right Literacy (GIRL) and Getting It Right Numeracy (GIRN) specialist teachers.

The SSTUWA has called for 500 new teachers over four years, and we believe that some of these need to be literacy and numeracy specialists.

We also need our new teachers to be the very best applicants.

In its election asks the SSTUWA has noted that universities accept entrants to the teaching profession with very basic ATAR scores – as low as 30 in some institutions! While the SSTUWA is cognisant of the risks of making assumptions as to potential teaching capacity based on ATAR scores alone, the fact remains that with such low ATAR entry requirements, one of the consequences has been to contribute to a fall in the status of the profession.

Australian Education Union (AEU)/SSTUWA policy is to support the establishment of a minimum ATAR score of 70 for entry into Initial Teacher Education (ITE) courses in any Australian university.

The Literacy and Numeracy Test for Initial Teacher Education (LANTITE) students that is currently taken at the end of a university teaching course is flawed for a number of reasons:

- It fails to serve as a tool for improvement.
- By conducting this test at the end of an individual's ITE course it leads to the accrual of a HECS debt with uncertain prospects of being able to enter the profession at the conclusion of the course.
- It allows the university to attract government funding for students with reduced prospects of success.

The AEU/SSTUWA believes that it is far more beneficial to ensure that minimum entrance standards are in place prior to commencing ITE, with a rigorous support system to ensure that beginning teachers are successful in their early years of teaching.

We need more teachers, we need the best candidates for teaching positions and we need to retain the best teachers to teach in smaller classes.

The SSTUWA also believes that smaller class sizes and access to ancillary health/therapist services would go a long way towards addressing issues with literacy.

What we need in our schools to improve literacy is more individual support; not more tests.

Authorised by Sally Dennis, General Secretary, The State School Teachers' Union of W.A.
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