

Is Mass Screening of all Victorian Prep Children on Entry to School Really Necessary?

An open letter to the Victorian Premier Daniel Andrews
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Dr Marion M. de Lemos, AM

Dear Premier

I am taking the liberty of writing to you to express my concerns about the proposal to screen all Prep children entering school at the beginning of the school year for possible learning difficulties. I believe that this will be a huge waste of time and effort and will achieve very little in accurately identifying children who may be at risk of developing learning difficulties. My concerns relate specifically to the area of reading difficulties, which account for some 80 per cent of learning difficulties identified.

The specific questions and concerns that I would like to raise are as follows:

First, exactly what skills will be assessed, how will they be assessed, and what evidence do we have that the assessment will reliably identify students who have some kind of underlying neurological disorder (as in dyslexia) as distinct from those students who have poor language and related skills due to other factors, such as lack of exposure to a language-rich home background or coming from a non-English-speaking home background. It is stated that the screening measure will be based on the English Online Interview that is currently in use. However, there is no reported technical data on the reliability and validity of this instrument, nor, obviously, on the revised instrument that has yet to be developed. Constructing valid screening measures is a highly specialised task, which normally takes years of research and testing to produce a measure that meets acceptable standards of reliability and validity.

Second, there seems to be an assumption that in the area of reading only children with learning difficulties require a phonics-based program (linking letters to speech sounds) for learning to read. In fact, ALL children require a phonics-based program for learning to read. The major reason why so many children have difficulties in learning to read (generally estimated at about 15 to 20 per cent) is because of the ineffective approaches to the teaching of reading in many schools, particularly in Victoria (learn the magic 100 words, and then take home predictable readers and use the pictures to guess what the words say). If we start by addressing the fundamental problem of the ineffective teaching of reading in our schools, the number of children presenting with reading difficulties will be considerably reduced, from about 15 to 20 per cent to about 3 to 5 per cent (see for example the AUSPELD Guide to Understanding Learning Difficulties).

Third, if 10 to 16 per cent of Victorian children are identified as having a learning disability, what resources will be made available to support such a large number of students? And what sort of funding will be provided to implement effective programs to support these students? And in the case of reading, if we do not have teachers who are trained to teach reading effectively, either to whole class groups or to individual students, how can we possibly bring about any effective changes to the status quo? Particularly when the majority of teacher educators continue to support and promote the whole language approach to the teaching of reading, and reject any approach which involves systematic and explicit teaching of phonics, which has been proved by the scientific evidence to be a more effective approach to the teaching of reading, and essential in the case of students with reading difficulties.

I would like to suggest that a more effective approach to the identification and support of students with reading difficulties in the school system would be to adopt the Response to Intervention model.

This model is based on effective initial teaching of reading in the first year of school, using a phonics-based program, with ongoing monitoring of student progress. Students experiencing difficulties in reading in the first year of school are given extra support, initially in a small group situation, and if difficulties persist in a more intensive one-to-one situation. Such support is maintained for as long as is necessary.

See attached article on *Ensuring that all children learn to read*, which provides further information about the Response to Intervention model.

Adopting such a model would require a fundamental change in the way reading is taught in our schools, as well as fundamental changes in teacher training at both pre-service and in-service levels.

Such change will be difficult to bring about. But it can happen, as demonstrated in the UK, where the use of phonics-based programs for the teaching of initial reading has been mandated, and where a 'phonics check' has been introduced at the end of Year 1 to monitor progress in the achievement of basic word recognition skills, which are the essential prerequisite for effective reading.

I don't see a need for the mass screening of Prep children on entry to school.

I think that a better approach would be to adopt the UK strategy of mandating phonics-based programs for the teaching of initial reading, and introducing a 'phonics check' to monitor children's progress in the achievement of basic word recognition skills at the end of the first and second years of school. Such a test would immediately identify children who are having difficulty in acquiring basic reading skills and who may need further assessment and support. Such an approach would be consistent with the Response to Intervention model.

There will always be some children whose difficulties with language become evident at an early age.

Such children should be assessed as soon as their difficulties become evident, either at school or at preschool level, and appropriate support provided.

I hope that you will give consideration to reviewing the current proposal to adopt a program of mass screening of Prep children on entry to school, and investigating alternative approaches that might be more effective and cost-efficient.

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