

Education system must address poor reading

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THE shake-up of teacher training advocated by 36 eminent educators, scientists and clinicians is essential if the 25 per cent of Australian students failing to achieve minimum reading standards are to be rescued from the ignominy of illiteracy. It almost defies belief that such drastic measures are necessary in a developed nation.

But the educational establishment's shameful failure to implement the recommendations of the national inquiry into the teaching of reading, commissioned by then-education minister Brendan Nelson eight years ago, leaves no alternative. That inquiry, chaired by the late Ken Rowe, found that teachers were not well trained in teaching reading and that many universities ignored the subject.

As Justine Ferrari reports today, the letter prompting Dr Nelson to establish the inquiry was published by The Australian in April 2004. It was signed by many of those who yesterday wrote another letter to federal and state politicians deploring a lost decade in which the reading skills of many children suffered.

At the heart of the issue eight years ago and now is the stubborn refusal of authorities in university teacher training faculties and education systems to accept decades of empirical evidence showing that synthetic phonics - teaching children to relate letters to sounds and to blend sounds into words - are indispensable building blocks in reading. In persevering with the "whole word" method - in which students faced with an unfamiliar word look at other words in the sentence, a picture on the page, the shape of the letters or remember what has been read to them - educators have put large numbers of children at a disadvantage. Slower learners and those who have not been read to at home are especially vulnerable. Students who cannot read well become disillusioned and disengaged from other subjects. Contrary to the notion that the whole-word method is more enjoyable, students are at school to be taught, not to be entertained. There is nothing fun or fulfilling about illiteracy.

As Dr Nelson says, governments that expect good results in the classroom are deluding themselves if they continue to allow school leavers with low Australian Tertiary Admissions Ranks to enter teaching courses that are more akin to quasi-sociology programs. The importance of attracting high-calibre applicants to quality teaching degrees and professional development for teachers was also highlighted in the Grattan Institute's review of successful East Asian school systems.

Confronted by the new letter and the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement results that ranked Australia's Year 4 students 27th in reading among 48 countries and last among English-speaking participants, the last vestiges of resistance to genuine teaching reform must be cast aside. While the reading wars raged and billions of dollars were wasted on school halls, many parents found that literacy was often reduced to a lucky dip, with various teachers using vastly different teaching methods, sometimes within the same school. An effective, uniform system of teaching reading and training teachers must be the priority of government, ahead of the Gonski funding changes.