



**DYSLEXIA VICTORIA SUPPORT**

**Submission to the Parliament of Victoria**

**Legislative Council Legal and Social Issues Committee**

**Inquiry Into the State Education System in Victoria**

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## **Introduction to DVS**

DVS is a volunteer organisation dedicated to supporting individuals with dyslexia and their families in Victoria. Our mission is to raise awareness, provide resources, and advocate for the rights and needs of individuals with dyslexia within the education system. As the founder of DVS and the Vice-president of SPELD VIC, I, Heidi Gregory, am proud to submit this document on behalf of our 9,000+ DVS members.

DVS has been actively working towards improving the educational experiences and outcomes of students with dyslexia for over a decade. Every child deserves an inclusive and equitable schooling where their learning needs are understood and accommodated.

By focusing on five key terms of reference provided, we aim to shed light on the current state of student learning outcomes, the teaching profession, student well-being, best practice models, and school funding adequacy.

Through extensive research, collaboration with experts, and engagement with the dyslexic community, DVS has gained valuable insights into the barriers faced by students with dyslexia and the approaches that can effectively support their learning and well-being. Our submission draws upon this expertise and firsthand experiences to provide recommendations that can lead to positive changes in the Victorian education system.

## **Terms of Reference 1: Trends in student learning outcomes from Prep to Year 12, (a) including the factors contributing to decline.**

In 2022, the NAPLAN results for Year 9 students in Victoria revealed that a significant portion of students performed at or below the national minimum standard in crucial literacy areas like reading (19.8%), writing (27%), spelling (20.2%), and grammar and punctuation (24.8%). The 2023 NAPLAN results continue to underscore the urgency of addressing literacy challenges. When combining the percentages for students in the Exempt, Needs Additional Support, and Developing categories, two key points are evident; 1. the teaching these students received in the year leading up to Year 9 was ineffective and 2. a substantial number of students require immediate assistance. In reading, 33.7% of students fall into these categories; in spelling, 28.2%; and in writing, 36.2%. (1)

These statistics highlight the urgent need to examine the factors contributing to these outcomes and take decisive action to address the issue. It is of significant importance to consider that the 'national minimum standards' are set at an alarmingly low level, implying functional illiteracy for students at a given age. This has created a misguided perception that students meeting these standards are performing adequately, disregarding the fact that they are actually experiencing significant underachievement and educational risk. It is also crucial to acknowledge that DVS members report pressure from their schools to 'sit out' NAPLAN.

In our experiences, the key factor contributing to poor student learning outcomes is the mismatch between the predominant teaching approach used in Victorian schools and the evidence-based practices that support effective literacy instruction. The prevalent Balanced Literacy approach, which combines



whole language and phonics instruction, has been discredited and proven ineffective for children with language and phonological processing difficulties, including those with dyslexia.

To reverse this concerning trend, it is crucial to prioritise evidence-based instructional practices that align with how children learn and how they learn to read. The Simple View of Reading, a widely accepted framework, emphasises the importance of both word recognition and language comprehension in reading comprehension. Effective reading instruction must address these two components in a systematic and explicit manner.

Evidence from research supports the essential role of systematic synthetic phonics instruction in teaching word recognition skills. It has been consistently demonstrated that explicit and structured phonics instruction significantly improves reading accuracy and comprehension for all students, particularly those with dyslexia.

Furthermore, effective acquisition of language comprehension relies on evidence-based instructional practices that promote vocabulary development and explicit instruction in understanding the nuances of language usage. Teaching vocabulary in the context of a content-rich curriculum, along with explicit instruction on word meanings and connections to other words, has been shown to enhance comprehension and vocabulary acquisition. (2)

The prevailing approach to assessing children's reading ability in Victorian schools, as promoted by the Victorian Department of Education, (3) includes the use of Running Records. However, it is essential to recognise that Running Records have been discredited and are an uninformative waste of teacher time, as highlighted by Alison Clarke OAM, a Senior Speech Pathologist at Spelfabet. (4)

Running Records are based on the now discredited multicueing/three cueing model of reading, which suggests that readers use multiple cues (meaning, structure, and visual) to identify words. This approach focuses more on language meaning and less on language structure, which is the main basis of our writing system. However, research in reading science has shown that context and syntax play almost no part in accurate word identification.

Running Records are highly subjective and time-consuming, providing little valuable information about a student's reading skills. They rely on the teacher's observations and subjective evaluations of the reader's strategies, such as attending to meaning or searching for print details. These subjective evaluations are based on the debunked multicueing model and do not align with the current understanding of how reading works.

Moreover, Running Records fail to assess crucial aspects of reading, such as phonological awareness, phonological memory, working memory, oral vocabulary, and Rapid Automatisised Naming skills, which are strong predictors of reading difficulties. They also do not provide a clear and objective measure of a student's reading ability or identify those who are falling behind and in need of intervention.

The use of Running Records in the updated Literacy Teaching Toolkit on the Victorian Department of Education website is in our view an example of poor leadership in Victoria. By relying on this outdated

and ineffective assessment tool, the department undermines the adoption of evidence-based practices and hinders teachers' ability to accurately assess and support students' reading development.

To ensure accurate and effective assessment of children's reading abilities, it is crucial to shift away from Running Records and adopt assessments that align with the current understanding of reading science. Valid, reliable, and standardised tests, such as the Clinical Evaluation of Language Fundamentals (CELF-4), Comprehensive Test of Phonological Processing 2 (CTOPP-2), and Test of Word Reading Efficiency 2 (TOWRE-2), should be utilised to assess various aspects of reading and provide valuable insights into students' learning needs.

### **Recommendations:**

**To address the declining student learning outcomes, we recommend the following to the Committee:**

1. Mandate the adoption of evidence-based instructional practices, including systematic synthetic phonics, explicit teaching, explicit language comprehension instruction and valid, reliable, and standardised assessments (data collection), as the primary approach for teaching reading, spelling, and writing in Victorian schools.
2. Provide comprehensive training and professional development opportunities for teachers to equip them with the highest quality knowledge and skills necessary to implement evidence-based practices effectively.
3. Ensure that instructional materials and resources used in schools align with current evidence-based practices, providing teachers with the necessary tools to deliver high-quality instruction in reading, spelling, and writing.
4. Establish mechanisms for ongoing assessment and monitoring of student progress in literacy skills, allowing for targeted appropriate level Response to Intervention (RTI) and multi-tiered system of supports (MTSS) interventions and support for struggling students. Implement evidence-based interventions tailored to the specific needs of students with dyslexia and other language-related difficulties.
5. Foster collaboration among educators, researchers, and literacy experts to promote continuous improvement in instructional high quality practices. Encourage the establishment of contemporary professional learning communities and partnerships with particular focus on Australian organisations specialising in evidence-based literacy instruction.

### **Terms of Reference 2: The state of the teaching profession in Victoria (b) training, accreditation, and professional development, particularly for teaching students with special needs.**

It is well-documented that there is a need for reform in the teaching profession in Victoria, especially when it comes to training, accreditation, and professional development, particularly for teaching students with reading difficulties—given the ability to read well underpins all school-based learning.



The recent media release by the Federal Australian Minister for Education, Jason Clare, titled 'Major reform to improve teacher training and better prepare teachers for the classroom,' (5) highlights the recognition of this need at a national level. The report of the Teacher Education Expert Panel, which received agreement in principle from the Victorian Education Minister Natalie Hutchins, further supports the notion that the current state of teacher training programs is inadequate, particularly in preparing teachers to effectively teach subjects like literacy.

In light of the urgent need for systemic professional development for practicing teachers, the recently established Victorian Academy of Teaching and Leadership, funded by the government, claims to offer evidence-informed professional learning for Victorian school teachers and leaders. However, a quick search of their literacy professional development reveals the promotion of running records, which as mentioned above have been discredited and deemed ineffective. (6)

In the DVS parent survey titled 'Who will teach my child to read,' a concerning statistic emerged. When asked to rate their child's teachers' level of knowledge about specific learning difficulties, 48% of parents rated them as 'not knowledgeable' in dyslexia. This indicates a significant gap in the knowledge and expertise of teachers in addressing the needs of students with reading difficulties. Parents took it upon themselves to educate teachers about dyslexia, initiating discussions and sharing web links. Some teachers were receptive to these efforts, but it is evident that there is a lack of comprehensive and standardised professional development in this area. (7)

### **Recommendations:**

**To address the state of the teaching profession in Victoria, including but not limited to training, accreditation, and professional development, particularly for teaching students with special needs:**

1. Support the federal government's revision of university courses for prospective teachers to ensure they are equipped with the necessary knowledge and skills to effectively teach subjects like literacy
2. Establish mandatory and evidence-informed professional development programs that specifically address teaching students with dyslexia and other specific learning difficulties. These programs should focus on evidence-based approaches to literacy instruction, such as phonics and word recognition, as well as the broader understanding of language and its role in reading comprehension.
3. Create platforms and networks for teachers to collaborate, share best practices, and learn from one another. This could include regular workshops, conferences, and online communities where teachers can access resources, engage in discussions, and receive ongoing support.
4. Develop mentorship programs that pair teachers with a demonstrated capacity to improve student outcomes with novice teachers, particularly in the area of teaching students with dyslexia. Mentors can provide guidance, share their expertise, and support the professional growth of new teachers.

**Terms of Reference 3: The current state of student wellbeing in Victoria, including but not limited to the impact of State Government interventions to address poor mental health in students, school refusal, and broader student disengagement.**

The lack of effective teaching and intervention exacerbates reading difficulties, leading to poor mental health in students, school refusal, and broader student disengagement. This contention is supported by the DVS submission to the Royal Commission into Victoria's Mental Health System in June 2019. (8) In this submission, parents with lived experience of children with reading difficulties and mental health issues emphasise the connection between early reading failure and poor mental health outcomes.

**Impact on Mental Health:** Children with reading difficulties often experience anxiety, depression, poor self-esteem, physical symptoms (e.g., stomach aches, headaches, vomiting), school refusal, and social challenges such as bullying and social isolation. These issues directly stem from their struggle to acquire reading skills at the same pace as their peers.

**Research Findings:** Studies, such as 'The experiences of parents of children who have dyslexia in Victoria, Australia: a social justice perspective' 2017 by Dr. Katherine Levi, reveal that parents of children with dyslexia commonly express concerns about their child's low self-esteem, manifestations of depression, and the negative impact of school attendance on their child's welfare. (9)

**Expert Voices:** Experts like Dr. Kerry Hempenstall and Professor Pamela Snow have highlighted the significant challenges faced by young people with language and learning difficulties, linking their struggles to the development of mental health problems such as anxiety and depression.

**Inadequate Interventions:** The current education system lacks effective early screening and intervention for reading difficulties. Programs like Reading Recovery, despite being widely used, have shown inadequate efficacy for children with reading difficulties. This perpetuates reading failure and contributes to poor mental health outcomes.

**Recommendations:**

**To address the current state of student wellbeing in Victoria, poor mental health in students, school refusal, and broader student disengagement:**

1. Mandate comprehensive training programs on effective reading instruction, including learning difficulties such as dyslexia, for all school principals and early years teachers. This training should align with current scientific evidence to ensure teachers are equipped to provide appropriate support.
2. Update the English Online Interview to align with current scientific evidence and use it for early screening of reading difficulties. Additionally, implement the Federal Australian Year 1 Phonics Check to identify students who require targeted phonic instruction.
3. Provide adequate funding for decodable books for all foundation (prep) children, as these books are aligned with evidence-based reading instruction. Employ speech pathologists and

psychologists with training in reading difficulties to guide best practices in reading instruction and provide necessary support to students.

4. Implement student reading outcome measures in schools that align with current scientific evidence, rather than relying on disproven methods like running records. These measures will provide valuable insights into students' progress and guide targeted interventions.
5. Address the concerns raised by distressed parents by ensuring their voices are heard and they receive support and guidance when advocating for their children's educational needs.

**Terms of Reference 5: Examples of best practice in other jurisdictions and educational settings used to improve student learning outcomes and wellbeing.**

The current state of student learning outcomes and wellbeing in Victoria can benefit from studying successful practices implemented in other jurisdictions and educational settings. Two notable examples provide valuable evidence to support this contention: the education revolution in Mississippi (10) and the transformative changes at Churchill Primary School in Victoria's La Trobe Valley. (11)

In an article published on July 13, 2023, it is highlighted that Mississippi, despite being one of the poorest states in the US, has achieved remarkable results in reading and math for economically disadvantaged students. By adopting evidence-based teaching and learning practices, including scientifically based reading instruction, embedded coaching for teachers, and additional intervention support for struggling students, Mississippi has surpassed national and regional averages in student achievement. This success story demonstrates that even in challenging contexts, evidence-based approaches can make a significant difference in improving student learning outcomes and wellbeing.

Furthermore, an article published on July 14, 2023, focuses on the positive transformation at Churchill Primary School in Victoria's La Trobe Valley. Under the leadership of Principal Jacquie Burrows, the school implemented a purposeful shift towards evidence-based teaching practices. By introducing explicit instruction, a focus on literacy, and structured classroom environments, the school experienced a dramatic turnaround in NAPLAN results and student behaviour. Despite serving a student population facing intergenerational poverty and childhood trauma, Churchill Primary School demonstrated that evidence-based teaching, even in challenging circumstances, can lead to significant improvements in student learning outcomes and wellbeing.

**Recommendations:**

**Examples of best practice in other jurisdictions and educational settings used to improve student learning outcomes and wellbeing.**

1. Collaborate with universities such as La Trobe University's School of Education and SOLAR Lab or the Australian Catholic University (ACU) to embed evidence-based teaching practices into professional development.
2. Collaborate with networks such as Think Forward Educators (12) or the Australian Education Research Organisation (AERO) that facilitate the sharing of best practices and evidence-based strategies among educators, schools, and researchers.

3. Implement a comprehensive system for monitoring and evaluating the effectiveness of evidence-based practices in Victorian schools. Collect and analyse data on student learning outcomes and wellbeing to identify areas of success and areas that require further support and improvement.
4. Align educational policies and funding frameworks with evidence-based practices. Use the National School Reform Agreement and other policy instruments to incentivise the adoption of evidence-backed interventions and allocate resources to support their implementation.

**Terms of Reference 6: School funding adequacy and its impact on student learning outcomes and wellbeing.**

It is essential to emphasise that public funds are taxpayer's funds, and the community has the right to know if their money is being spent effectively. Despite significant investments in school education, such as the \$1.6 billion allocated in The Disability Inclusion package, (13) and the \$13.1 million for the introduction of the ineffective EOI Phonics Check, (14) there is evidence to suggest that funding is not being used efficiently, particularly regarding literacy interventions.

According to surveys conducted on the DVS platform by DVS members, Victorian schools are implementing ineffective reading interventions like Leveled Literacy Intervention (Fountas and Pinnell) and Reading Recovery, which are not suitable for children with dyslexia. Parents of dyslexic children report a lack of available funding for appropriate interventions, and when provided, the interventions often fail to address their specific needs.

The misuse of funds for ineffective interventions highlights the need for school funding to be based on student learning outcomes. It is crucial that schools demonstrate the effectiveness of their spending on literacy interventions by substantiating it with improved outcomes. Resources should be directed towards evidence-based practices that address the needs of students with dyslexia and other learning difficulties.

Furthermore, the publicly funded Tutor Learning Initiative (TLI), (15) which aims to provide targeted learning support to students who struggled during the disruptions of the COVID-19 pandemic, has potential to improve student outcomes. However, it is important to ensure that the teaching approach employed by tutors aligns with structured literacy, which has been proven effective in teaching reading. Without a consistent and evidence-based approach, the program risks wasting resources and demoralising students.



## **Recommendations:**

### **To address school funding adequacy and its impact on student learning outcomes and wellbeing**

1. Enhance reporting mechanisms to ensure that schools are transparent about their spending and demonstrate how it contributes to improved student learning outcomes and wellbeing.
2. Direct funding towards interventions and programs that have a proven track record of success, particularly in addressing the needs of students with specific learning difficulties like dyslexia.
3. Allocate resources to support teachers in acquiring the knowledge and skills necessary to implement evidence-based instructional practices effectively. This includes providing training on structured literacy approaches and interventions tailored to students with reading difficulties.
4. Encourage collaboration between education authorities, schools, and researchers to share best practices and evidence-based strategies for improving student learning outcomes and wellbeing. This collaboration can facilitate the dissemination of effective approaches and ensure that funding is directed towards practices that have a positive impact.
5. Implement a system of ongoing evaluation and review to assess the effectiveness of funded programs and interventions. This will enable adjustments and refinements based on evidence and ensure that resources are allocated where they are most needed.

**In conclusion**, it is evident that our children are currently being failed in Victorian schools due to ineffective teaching approaches and inadequate support for students with dyslexia and other learning difficulties. This is not a new issue but one that requires immediate attention and action. The connection between being taught to read in school and becoming a competent reader extends far beyond academic success. It is intricately tied to social justice, equity, further education, and career choices.

The experiences shared by members of Dyslexia Victoria Support (DVS) highlight the neglect, pain, and suffering endured by children with dyslexia and their families. The current funding and teaching practices, such as the use of ineffective reading interventions like Leveled Literacy Intervention and Reading Recovery, perpetuate this injustice.

Given the amount of evidence provided in this Submission, we urge the committee to demand the change from a Balanced Literacy focussed Victorian education system to one based on contemporary reading practices and high level support for our children and our teachers. It is imperative that school leaders take bold and decisive actions to transform teaching approaches and ensure that evidence-based practices, such as systematic synthetic phonics instruction and explicit language comprehension instruction (16), are implemented. School funding must be directed towards interventions that have a well-documented proven track record of success in improving student learning outcomes and wellbeing.

We also call upon all stakeholders to speak up against this injustice. Parents, educators, researchers, and policymakers must come together to advocate for the rights of our precious children who deserve an inclusive and equitable education. It is through collective efforts that we can create a system that truly supports the learning needs of all students and prepares them for a successful future.



We implore the committee to recognise the urgency of this issue and take decisive action to address the failures in our Victorian schools. Our children deserve nothing less than a high-quality education that equips them with the skills and knowledge they need to thrive.

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