

# **A phonics e-petition: unlocking the literacy door in Victorian schools**

A feature article by Debra Le Nepveu

24 February 2022

## **About the author**

Debra Le Nepveu (she/her) is a lawyer and an emerging creative writer.

Her work has appeared in Spineless Wonders' 2018 *Time Anthology* and Deakin University's 2020 *Verandah 35 Literary & Art Journal*.

Debra wrote this article for assessment in the subject "Feature Writing" (ALJ728) towards a Master of Arts (Writing and Literature) (Deakin University). It achieved a High Distinction.

She has a strong personal interest in the topic of specific learning disabilities and their impact upon families. Her daughter, who illustrated this article, is dyslexic.

# A phonics e-petition: unlocking the literacy door in Victorian schools

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*"Let me in"*

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Sarah Gole says her dyslexic son "entered year ten as a 16-year-old with severely below average reading skills". In her 2020 complaint to the Victorian Department of Education and Training she wrote, "the Victorian education system is failing too many precious children year after year."

"I knew there was something amiss in Prep. I kept saying to the teachers 'he just doesn't seem to be able to sound out the words.' I think if he'd had the phonics check in grade one, that could've helped because it shines a light on phonics that is, I believe, so misunderstood in our schools," she says.

The South Australian Education Department says, “phonics is vital in learning to read” and defines “phonics” as “the relationship between letters and sounds”.

South Australia and New South Wales have introduced a compulsory Phonics Screening Check (*PSC*) for children in year one of school.

Victoria has not.

“Victoria is lagging,” says Jacqui Tarquinio, a casual primary school teacher and phonics tutor. “It frustrates me so much, this system. When I saw that South Australia had mandated it, I got cranky. I said, ‘enough. What else can you do?’”

What Tarquinio did was organise a Victorian parliamentary electronic petition, or e-petition.



*Parliament House, Victoria*

*(D. Le Nepveu)*

*E-petition number 336* asks the Victorian Education Department to make the *PSC* compulsory for all year one Victorian children. At the time of writing 1,303 people have signed it.

Tarquinio, 43, organised this e-petition because she “wants quality education for children.”

She says, “learning to read was tough, really tough.”

Despite her challenges, she did learn to read by grade four, thanks to her teacher-parents.

But Tarquinio’s reading struggle haunts her.

She says, “I remember as a child going through it and I still carry that feeling: ‘I’m not good enough and I never will be’.”

“It’s not just the heartache, it’s the emotional turmoil it brings,” she says.

Tarquinio has been a primary school teacher for 15 years. Certified as an “Accomplished Teacher” in Victoria, she has taught in New South Wales, Victoria and the United Kingdom. In addition to teaching, Tarquinio runs a “very small” *Jolly Phonics* tutoring business, tutoring students and training teachers and parents in phonics. When asked if the e-petition is an excuse to promote her business, she shakes her head.

“I want to help children who feel like I did when I was a kid,” she says.

Tarquinio says, “if children “are constantly failing, everything becomes impossible, so they give up ... they’ll feel like a failure ... and that’s not how society should be, not one that has a robust education system like ours.”

“I’m tutoring a child at the moment; they’re in grade five. It’s tough to go back and try and fill in the gaps,” she says. “When children are not taught to read and write, they feel worthless,” she says.

Tarquinio also worries about the pressures on teachers.

“It’s so stressful in a school environment,” she says. “I’m not one for pushing testing on teachers and I apologise profusely if other teachers feel that I am. But this is the one key test that will save children from slipping through the cracks ... because NAPLAN (Australia’s standardised literacy and numeracy tests) doesn’t cater for it and if a child hasn’t got a solid understanding of synthetic phonics, it’s too late by year three.”

In addition to asking for the *PSC* to be mandated, the *e-petition* encourages all Victorian educators to “use a systematic approach to teaching synthetic phonics.”

“Phonics” and “synthetic phonics” are not easy terms to grasp. The ABC *Alphabet Song*, set to the tune *Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star*, popularised the letters of the alphabet. Can anyone recall a song about their sounds?

In 2020 the Federal Government took steps to change this. It launched a *Literacy Hub* website, a free *PSC* and resources to raise awareness about phonics.

According to the *Literacy Hub* the 26 letters of the alphabet are “symbols or written code” for the 44 speech sounds of English. The *Literacy Hub* says the synthetic phonics method “teaches children to link letters to speech sounds and then blend these sounds together to read words”. “Learning to read is learning a code,” according to the *Literacy Hub*.

In 2016 Dr Kerry Hempenstall endorsed this method of teaching. In a research report published by the *Centre for Independent Studies*, he argued the synthetic phonics approach is “the most effective way of teaching young children to read”, especially “for those at risk of having problems with reading.”

Tarquinio says not everyone welcomes her using the synthetic phonics method.

“In some schools the teachers wouldn’t talk to me. I’m the ‘black sheep,’” she laughs.

She is accustomed to colleagues shutting the gate in her face.

But she was unprepared when *e-petition number 336* padlocked it.

“There’s a principal I knew and was very fond of. He said to me ‘Jacqui, I’m very disappointed you’ve written this e-petition.’ He said, ‘it’s a whole lot of bureaucracy. Teachers don’t need any more stress and pressure in the classroom’.”

“It was devastating”, she says.

Despite the backlash, Tarquinio remains resolute. Borrowing from US researchers Professor Catherine E. Snow and Professor Connie Juel, she says teaching children to read using the synthetic phonics method is “helpful for all children, harmful for none and crucial for some”.

So just how stressful is the *PSC*?

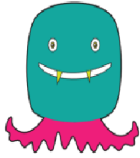
According to the *Literacy Hub*, for students, it’s a five-to-seven-minute “check”.

For teachers, the website acknowledges “struggling decoders ... will require extra teaching time.” *Literacy Hub* provides teaching resources, but these assume teachers have time to use them.

The following extract from the *Literacy Hub*’s sample *PSC* explains how it works.

The word “in” is a real word. The word “ot” is fake (pseudo). Both words have two letters and two sounds.

Word/pseudo word	Listen for these sounds	Hints to help with saying the word or pseudo word.
in	i-n	This has the short ‘i’ vowel sound and rhymes with <i>bin</i> & <i>win</i> .

Word/pseudo word	Listen for these sounds	Hints to help with saying the word or pseudo word.
ot 	o-t	This has ‘o’ as in the first sound in <i>orange</i> . It rhymes with <i>pot</i> & <i>lot</i> .

*Literacy Hub: Phonics Screening Check extracts*

There is a reason the *PSC* uses fake words. “Children cannot read the pseudo words by using their memory or vocabulary; they have to use their decoding skills,” the *Literacy Hub* states. This is what the *PSC* assesses.

The Australian Education Union (*AEU*) opposes the introduction of the *PSC*. The union did not agree to an interview. Instead, it provided a 2018 article co-written by the University of Wollongong’s Dr Jessica Mantei and Associate Professor Lisa Kervin and three press releases. The *AEU* said these “outline the union’s position”.

In one press release dated 8 December 2017 *AEU* Federal President, Correna Haythorpe said, “synthetic phonics connects sounds to letters using made up words devoid of any meaning. Teachers report this approach is confusing for students.”

The alternative to the *PSC* is waiting for students’ year three NAPLAN results.

But Heidi Gregory, founder of Dyslexia Victoria Support (*DVS*) says, “we need to stop waiting until year three NAPLAN to get the national statistics. It becomes too late.”

Gregory’s pixie hairdo and large glasses frame her petite face. Dressed in jeans and T-shirt, she looks like an ordinary suburban mum. Gregory, 57, is also a formidable advocate for families living with dyslexia. In 2014 she founded *DVS*. Its Facebook group has over 7,000 members.

Gregory has “two kids with dyslexia – because we’re lucky,” she laughs.



“I discovered my son was great at learning to understand a story and I thought he was reading the story. He wasn’t. He’d memorise the book. He’s smart, he’d remember, but if you gave him a book with no pictures and just words, he would trip up significantly. I recall saying to his teachers ‘there is something not happening’. ‘Oh,’ they’d say, ‘he’s fine, he’s a boy, it’ll click,” she says.

Gregory says, “we as parents are consistently being told ‘wait; it will click’ and it never does.”

When asked if a *PSC* in year one would have made a difference, Gregory says, “my child may have learnt how to read in early foundation years instead of us having to find intervention in grades four, five and six and saved our family thousands and thousands of dollars.”

She knows that critics like Mantei and Kervin regard the *PSC* as “an expensive standardised test” that “consumes valuable teaching time and generates anxiety.”

But Gregory says a year one test is appropriate for two key reasons.

“The gap gets bigger. It’s going to get larger and larger if you don’t teach a child to read in foundation year, when they cross over from ‘learning to read’ to ‘reading to learn’,” she says. Also, “child mental health starts to get impacted in grade three when a child starts to compare NAPLAN results. When everyone goes ‘what did *you* get?’.”

Hempenstall’s 2016 research report backs Gregory’s views.

According to Hempenstall, “by the second year of schooling there are already differences ... The fast starters read more, ... enhancing both their ease and enjoyment of reading ... They increase their associated skills in spelling, vocabulary, world knowledge and comprehension. In contrast, those whose initial progress lags are more likely to repeat grades, ... [they] become disheartened, and disengaged from reading with its subsequent academic consequences. This decline commences early.”

This growing gap is called the “*Matthew Effect*”, wrote Hempenstall.

To stop this gap, “early intervention is critical,” according to LaTrobe’s Associate Professor Tanya Serry and Professor Frank Oberklaid. In a 2015 article published in the *Australian Journal of Education*, they said that “recent research supports intervention is most effective when children are first identified as at-risk readers.” This is because “once the reading difficulty is entrenched, the required support is likely to be beyond the scope of classroom reading instruction alone.”

In the same paper they said, “in recent years reading difficulty has emerged as a public health issue in academic literature, public media and in government-commissioned reports.”

According to Serry and Oberklaid, “if children are not given any reading intervention or late intervention, they are vulnerable to “school disengagement, ... lowered self-esteem and an increased susceptibility to antisocial behaviour and delinquency.”

It is not only children with learning difficulties like dyslexia that struggle to read, according to these researchers. They said, “children have difficulties learning to read for many reasons. These may include coming from a non-English speaking family, a low socio-economic

background or not receiving the most effective and evidence-based reading instruction once at school. Only between one per cent and six per cent of children have a diagnosable learning difficulty.”

The numbers of children struggling to read are not improving according to the Federal Government’s 2020 *Australia’s Children’s Report*. It says in 2017 “one in five Australians had low literacy skills.”

The Victorian Government’s comments about Victoria’s 2021 NAPLAN scores report a different result.

In 2021, 78,125 year three Victorian students sat NAPLAN, according to ACARA (the Australian Assessment Curriculum and Reporting Authority).

On 15 December 2021, in response to the 2021 NAPLAN scores, Victoria’s Minister for Education James Merlino issued a press release that said, “Victorian students [had] achieved outstanding results”. It also said, “more Victorian students than ever before are performing highly – with the percentage of year three students scoring in the top two bands for reading rising from 58 per cent in 2019 to 61.9 per cent in 2021.”


In contrast, on 16 December 2021, the Grattan Institute, an independent research body wrote, “the 2021 NAPLAN results show that the average Victorian year three student from a disadvantaged background is ... almost two years behind in reading.”

NAPLAN results are reported in relation to “the national minimum standard”, called “Band 2”, according to ACARA. “Children at or below Band 2 are at risk of being unable to progress satisfactorily at school without targeted intervention,” writes ACARA.


**Table 1**

*Source: 2021 NAPLAN Results, ACARA*

State/ Territory	Average age/ Years of schooling	Participation rate (%)	Below national minimum standard (%)		At national minimum standard (%)	Above national minimum standard (%)				At or above national minimum standard (%)
			Exempt	Band 1	Band 2	Band 3	Band 4	Band 5	Band 6 and above	
Vic	8yrs 9mths 3yrs 4mths	95.0	2.2	1.1	4.5	10.8	19.4	24.9	37.0	96.6



$$2.2 + 1.1 = 3.3\%$$



$$24.9 + 37.0 = 61.9\%$$

**Table 1** shows the top students in “Band 5” and “Band 6 and above” equal 61.9 per cent.

It also shows that 3.3 per cent, or over 2,500 children were below “Band 2”. A further 4.5 per cent in “Band 2”, or 3,515 children, met the minimum standard. Based on this information, about 6,015 eight-year-old Victorians have low literacy skills.

This is less than the “one in five” figure reported by 2020 *Australia’s Children’s Report*.

The Victorian Education Department wrote on 26 August 2021 that, “since 2015, the number of students in the bottom two bands for reading has decreased by more than ... two percentage points for year three students.”

A decrease in underperforming year three students is welcome but given the *Matthew Effect* these numbers are sobering. What happens after NAPLAN for these children?

“Nothing. Nothing is done after year three. It becomes too late,” says Gregory.

Gregory’s opinion is anecdotal, based on her personal experience and DSV members’ stories. But the research by Hempenstall and Serry and Oberklaid mentioned earlier supports Gregory’s views. It suggests even if teachers do intervene after year three to help struggling readers, for some children it may be too late due to the *Matthew Effect*.

The Victorian Government’s position regarding *e-petition number 336* is unclear. The Victorian Education Department did not respond to an interview request for this article, but it is clear from its website that teaching methods, like “synthetic phonics” are an issue. Its website says, “the importance of phonics teaching is now universally accepted but the way phonics is best taught continues to be debated.”

In opposing the introduction of the *PSC* in New South Wales, in 2018 Mantei and Kervin wrote, “teachers must be trusted to identify and respond to their students learning progress”.

In the 2017 press release mentioned earlier, the *AEU*’s Correna Haythorpe said, “no test is more accurate than teacher judgement ... It is much more important that teachers are backed with the resources that they need to help those students who have learning needs.” In another press release dated 12 December 2019 Haythorpe said, “the most important factor in helping raise student performance [is] additional funding to implement any new initiatives and to replace the billions of dollars cut ... from public school budgets.”

With so much at stake, where should parents place their trust?

According to Dr Katherine Levi, “parents need to trust their gut feeling that perhaps there is something wrong.” In 2017 Levi published a thesis that reported on the experiences of 24 Victorian parents of dyslexic children. Her data was also informed by 403 survey participants. She wrote that “her data and analysis reveal that the Victorian education system fail[s] to provide dyslexic children with adequate access to education and support.”

Levi says, “some of the stories told by research participants about their children’s experiences were quite brutal”. In one of many distressing examples, Levi wrote about a mother who recalled her child’s “suffocating” experience at primary school. Interviewee eleven reported her son said: “I feel like they’ve got a shovel load of dirt and they’ve put it on top of me. Before I can get rid of that load of dirt, they put another load of dirt on me, so I can’t get rid of that and then they’re putting more dirt on me, mum and I can’t breathe.”



*“I can’t breathe”*

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In 2020 Gole and Gregory, with advice from LaTrobe University's Science of Language and Reading (SOLAR) Lab, conducted a survey of 604 DSV parents of children with learning difficulties. The DSV report, "*Who Will Teach My Child To Read*", analysed 436 responses. It reported on literacy teaching, intervention, mental health and suggested improvements.

Gole says the DSV report "really does show that so many parents are not listened to at school – they're dismissed, they're told 'just wait and see' or 'your child perhaps is not meant to be academic so just accept it' and a lot is put back on the child – maybe 'your child's not trying hard enough' or 'they're lazy.'"

According to the DSV report, "62 per cent of DSV parents identified their child's literacy difficulties on their own and paid for private assessment." Also, "81 per cent said literacy difficulties had a negative or very negative impact on their child's mental health".

Gole's lips form a grim line. She says, "my son never received the intensive reading instruction that he needs, but it's not just my family's struggle. It's wrong on a systemic level".

"When a school has a balanced literacy or whole language approach to teaching reading and spelling, phonics is de-emphasised. No one will say it's not important, but what they won't say is how important it is and how crucial it is to kids like my son that the steps to reading and spelling need to be broken down and taught," says Gole.

According to Levi, "there has been some progress" since she wrote her thesis five years ago, "but not enough has been done and more needs to be done. With COVID, things will only have gone backward." Levi says, "teacher training is the key."

Gregory agrees. Referring to remote learning, she says, “COVID has highlighted a whole lot of these literacy issues. They’re joining *DSV* saying, ‘my kid’s been home for most of the year, and I’ve just discovered they can’t read.’”

“Wouldn’t it be fantastic if all schools embraced a prevention method, rather than a reactionary method?” she asks.

*E-petition number 336 – Mandatory Phonics Screening for Year One students – closes on 18 May 2022.*



*“Unlocked”*

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### **About the author**

Debra Le Nepveu (she/her) is a lawyer and an emerging creative writer. Her work has appeared in Spineless Wonders’ 2018 *Time Anthology* and Deakin University’s 2020 *Verandah 35 Literary & Art Journal*. Holding a Graduate Diploma of Creative Writing, Debra wrote this article for a Master of Arts (Writing and Literature) (Deakin University).

### **About the illustrator**

Lucinda McIntyre (she/her) is an artist and 2-D animator. She holds a Bachelor of Animation, (Swinburne University of Technology) and a Bachelor of Fine Arts (Animation) (Honours), (The University of Melbourne). More of Lucinda’s artwork is on Instagram @cindanimation.