

Victoria Education

Grattan Institute education program director Jordana Hunter says it's a 'preventable tragedy' A damning report has slammed the state government for failing to be accountable for poor reading, a lack of support for teachers, under-investment and inconsistent teaching methods.

Current reading teaching methods should be "banished" and replaced with phonics to help Australian children who are up to five years behind their peers, a new report concludes. A landmark study from the Grattan Institute reveals that one in three Australian and one in four Victorian children can't read properly.

This rises to two in three disadvantaged children and half of all regional and remote children, and costs the Australian economy \$40bn over their lifetime.

NAPLAN 2023 data shows children whose parents didn't finish school were more than five years behind their peers with more educated parents.

The damning report slams governments for failing to be accountable for poor reading, a lack of support for teachers, under-investment and inconsistent teaching methods.

It calls for the current method of teaching reading – the 1970s-era whole language approach based on the idea that reading is an easy, natural process – to be "banished" from schools.

Instead, schools should be focusing on structured literacy that includes a focus on phonics. This involves students sounding out the letters of each word and receiving explicit teaching to build up their background knowledge and vocabulary, the Grattan report suggests.

"If schools don't take this approach, disadvantaged students will be left even further behind their advantaged peers, who tend to have richer learning opportunities outside of school," author and Grattan Institute education program director Dr Jordana Hunter said.

"Australia is failing these children. And it's a preventable tragedy – the reason most of those students can't read well enough is that we aren't teaching them well enough."

One school that has already adopted the structured literacy approach to teach reading is Docklands Primary.

"Principal Adam Bright has made sure his teachers are trained in best-practice teaching approaches. Teachers also work with a literacy leader and a coach to help them finetune their classroom teaching," Dr Hunter said.

"Docklands Primary students thrive in the classroom. They love reading and are proud of their accomplishments."

Education Minister Ben Carroll said many of the actions recommended were already core features of Victoria's approach to reading instruction.

“Phonics is currently taught in Victorian schools and will have a stronger focus in the revised English curriculum to be implemented next year,” he said.

Opposition education spokeswoman Jess Wilson said: “To have the Labor government call Victoria’s NAPLAN results ‘phenomenal’ when more than a quarter of Victorian students cannot read proficiently just demonstrates this is a government more focused on playing politics than lifting education outcomes.

“Labor must drop its phonics-phobia and give every student the best opportunity to reach their full potential,” she said.