

Exclusive National Victoria Education

The way children are taught to read in Victoria is about to change



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Students from prep to grade 2 will be taught using structured phonics as part of a new explicit teaching approach to be rolled out across all Victorian public schools which could end the long-running reading wars.

Education Minister Ben Carroll will announce the system-wide move at *The Age's* Schools Summit on Thursday.



Port Melbourne Primary School prep students Brooklyn, Chloe, Felix and Gonzalo use an explicit instruction approach to learning to read with principal Tom Cain. CHRIS HOPKINS

The policy mandates that all Victorian government schools teach the same type of reading lessons based on systematic synthetic phonics, a move away from a system which allowed principals to choose their own approach.

It also requires the use of explicit instruction across all schools in Victoria, one of the final states and territories to adopt the change.

Under the new model, students from prep to grade 2 will be taught using a structured phonics approach, with a minimum of 25 minutes of daily, explicit teaching of phonics and phonemic awareness.

Experts say Carroll's announcement is significant but needs to come with the correct assessments, accountability, professional learning and compliance to ensure returns.

The move follows [improvements for individual schools](#) in all sectors that have already made the shift. Melbourne Archdiocese Catholic Schools [adopted direct instruction](#) for its 300 schools in February.

Carroll, who is also deputy premier of the state, said this week he expected some pushback from teachers not yet willing to embrace the change but "the evidence is in".

"The reading wars aren't quite over ... I'm stepping on potentially a hand grenade, but I just believe this is so important," he said.

"Reading is the foundation of a child's education. If you don't learn to read, you can't read to learn. I want to essentially make best practice common practice in every classroom."

How does Victoria compare?

- Victoria will implement a new teaching and learning model with explicit teaching at its core from 2025. All students from prep to grade 2 will be taught using systematic synthetic phonics approach, with a minimum 25 minutes' daily explicit teaching of phonics and phonemic awareness.
- South Australia introduced its Literacy Guarantee in 2018. All government schools are required to use the year 1 phonics screening check. SA also employs about 30 literacy coaches to work with schools to build teachers' expertise in reading instruction.
- New South Wales mandated the year 1 phonics screening check for public schools in 2021. It also funds 'decodable' books for all foundation students. It discontinued funding for reading programs that were not effective and updated the NSW syllabus this year to align with the evidence.
- Tasmania committed to a 'minimum guarantee' last year that every Tasmanian primary school will teach reading according to the evidence by 2026. Tasmania will also roll out the year 1 phonics screening check.
- Western Australia has provided schools with a list of recommended phonics programs and assessments.
- The ACT Literacy and Numeracy Education Expert Panel's final report, released in April this year, recommended system-wide reforms to implement a structured literacy approach in ACT classrooms. The minister has accepted these recommendations in principle and is now designing a four-year implementation plan to begin in 2025.

Source: Grattan Institute

Explicit instruction promotes direct teaching over student-led or inquiry-based learning, breaking down new concepts into smaller steps and modelling each step before progression. The method is underpinned by an evidence-based, scientific understanding of how students learn.

Systematic synthetic phonics teaches children the sounds of the English language and the letter combinations that make them. It's different to balanced literacy, which includes some phonics but also uses strategies to guess words based on pictures and context. Balanced literacy has been used by most primary schools and university education faculties since the 1970s. Advocates argue phonics overemphasises one aspect of the reading process.

Under the plan, there is a "clear expectation" that all government schools will implement a new teaching and learning model with explicit instruction at its core from next year. Schools that have not yet moved towards the model are expected to show planning for the change over the next three years.

The government has allocated \$36.9 million to support a revision of the curriculum and the new reading position. This includes funding for 750 new explicit teaching lesson plans and other professional learning.

Victoria will keep its controversial [English Online Interview](#) literacy assessment, which cost more than \$10 million to update last year but has been dismissed by experts as having

ineffective phonics and elements of balanced literacy. It is being reviewed to ensure it aligns with the revised English curriculum.

Cognitive psychology professor Pamela Snow, from La Trobe University's education school, applauded Carroll's move but said it was the "beginning of the journey".

Snow said it would be important to monitor the strategy's implementation to ensure high quality and low variance, given schools had been until now "choosing their own adventure on reading instruction".

"That's the big risk here, that we go in with a bang and then schools are allowed to default back to some sort of mishmash of approaches," she said.

"If it's followed through and implemented carefully, we are going to see a significant uplift in Victoria."

More than a quarter of Victoria's [students failed to meet](#) new NAPLAN proficiency standards for literacy and numeracy in 2023.

The Grattan Institute this year called for a "revolution" to increase the level of proficient readers nationwide, saying decades of disagreement about how to teach reading and lack of explicit guidance to schools from state and federal governments were key causes of the problem.

Grattan Institute education program director Dr Jordana Hunter said Carroll's announcement was a "huge step forward" which, if implemented effectively, would help students grow academically, not just in literacy but also in other subject areas including mathematics.

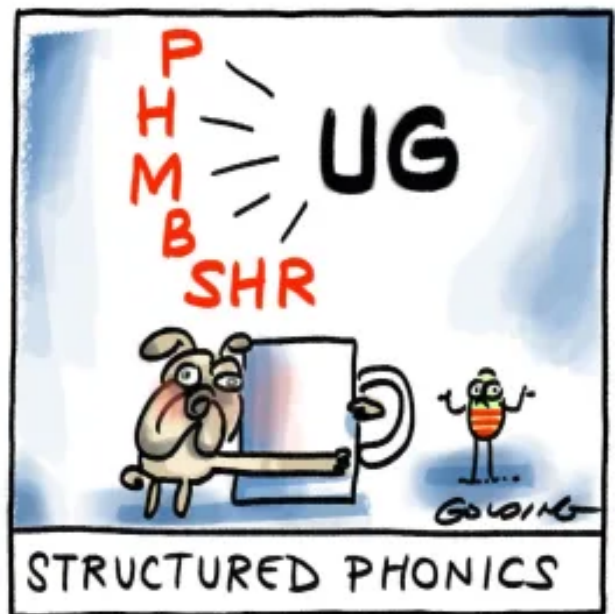
But the reform needed to be backed by sustained investment in professional development including classroom coaching, comprehensive curriculum materials and assessment tools, Hunter said.

She called on the government to publicly commit to a long-term target of 90 per cent of Victorian students reaching the NAPLAN proficiency benchmark in reading, and the immediate adoption of a publicly reported grade 1 phonics test.

Federal Education Minister Jason Clare said Victorian announcement was an important reform, which would be backed by changes to teaching courses at university. "The reading wars are over," he said. "We have the evidence of what works and I am so glad to see Victoria rolling this out."

Churchill Primary principal Jacquie Burrows was one of the first in the state to switch her school to an explicit teaching, structured literacy approach in 2019. She saw an improvement within the first 12 months, not only in academic results but also student engagement and wellbeing.

Burrows said she was excited that other schools would have the chance to replicate Churchill's results. "If it leads to more kids having better outcomes at school, then it's really positive," she



CREDIT: MATT GOLDING

said.

Port Melbourne Primary School principal Tom Cain switched to evidence-based teaching at the start of this year.

Cain said the announcement would “grease the wheels” of his own transition, making guidance and lesson plans more available, but would allow schools with less resources to also reap the benefits.



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“I think that’s where more clear direction from the system is going to be really important to compel schools to go down this path because I don’t think it has a downside for kids,” he said.

The Victorian opposition proposed the mandated use of phonics in Victorian schools before the 2022 election.

Carroll said studies had proved 20 years ago that systematic and explicit phonics was the most effective initial method to teach children to read. More recent reviews showed explicit teaching worked best for the largest number of students, particularly those who were struggling.

He said he was allowing three years to embed the new strategy statewide.

“Changing a classroom is one thing, changing an entire system is something else altogether.”

Carroll will speak on the move to explicit teaching and systematic synthetic phonics at *The Age’s* Schools Summit on Thursday. Follow our live blog at theage.com.au

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