

10 June 2009

The Hon Julia Gillard MP, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Education
Mr Andrew Barr MLA, Minister for Education and Training, ACT
The Hon Verity Firth MP, Minister for Education and Training, NSW
The Hon David Bartlett MP, Minister for Education and Skills, Tasmania
The Hon Paul Henderson MLA, Minister for Education and Training, NT
The Hon Dr Jane Lomax-Smith MP, Minister for Education, SA
The Hon Dr Elizabeth Constable MLA, Minister for Education, WA
The Hon Bronwyn Pike MP, Minister for Education, Victoria
The Hon Geoff Wilson MP, Minister for Education and Training, Qld

Dear Minister

We the undersigned are the Presidents of the Professional Associations condemned in the May 27 front-page article in *The Australian*, headlined “*Reading syllabus hijacked by fringe groups as basics ignored*”.

The article reports on a letter allegedly sent to you by a group of “the nations’ most respected remedial reading experts” lobbying against the national curriculum process. The National Curriculum Board set a deadline of February 28th for all interested Australians to respond to the *Framing paper - English*. It is clear that this letter and *The Australian’s* subsequent reporting of it, is a blatant attempt to subvert the National Curriculum Board’s transparent consultative process.

Therefore we feel assured that since the authors of the letter have not followed due process, its contents cannot and will not be taken into consideration. However on behalf of our members we feel committed to highlight, and respond to, the many flawed and unsubstantiated claims made in the Australian’s article and its reporting of the letter.

Claim 1. ‘[N]o recognised reading researcher or infant-years expert was consulted when the board produced the framing paper’.

Fact 1. The consultation process has been very transparent, clearly publicized in the media and on the NCB website for any group or individual to take advantage of. Thousands of interested educators have had opportunities to provide advice.

Claim 2. The authors of the letter claim they were not only ‘locked out of the process’ but that as ‘recognised’ remedial reading experts only their research should be considered to be ‘evidence-based research’.

Fact 2: The *Teaching Reading Report* (Rowe 2006) recommends an ‘integrated approach’ to the teaching of reading. While explicit teaching of phonics is foregrounded in that report, it also argues for the importance of an ‘integrated approach to reading that explicitly teaches phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary knowledge and comprehension’ (pp. 11, 12, 14, 20, 33, 34, 52 passim) and also stresses that this ‘was more effective than exclusive reliance on one single approach’ (p. 33).

Similarly a large DEST funded evidence-based research, *In teachers’ hands*, (2005) by Loudon, Rohl, Barratt-Pugh, Brown, Cairney, Elderfield, House, Meiers, Rivalland and Rowe reports on the practices of a group of Australian teachers identified as effective teachers of literacy in early years classrooms. It concluded that successful literacy teaching was due to a ‘balanced approach’ to beginning reading and writing instruction that contained elements of both meaning, grammar and word level decoding skills.

Claim 3. The headline in the May 27th article refers to the three professional organizations as 'fringe' groups.

Fact 3. The authors of the reported letter are identified as *remedial reading experts* and as such their research focuses on approximately 10-15% of the school population. Our organisations represent collectively Primary and Secondary classroom teachers of English (and their students) across the nation. We question therefore the term 'fringe group'.

Claim 4. 'All three organisations are members of the international Whole Language Umbrella group of reading and literacy associations run out of the US. (They) have very limited membership among classroom teachers.'

Fact 4. None of us are affiliated with National Council for the Teaching of English (NCTE) in the US. The Australian Literacy Educators' Association (ALEA) is affiliated, along with sixty other countries, with the International Reading Association (IRA) in the US. IRA has a strong position statement on the importance of teaching of phonics in reading (this can easily be found on the website of IRA) - a policy that is also held by ALEA as one of IRA's affiliates. Similarly both ALEA and e:lit publish books and articles on the explicit teaching of phonics. IRA's membership of over 80,000 includes academics, teachers and parents from all philosophies on the teaching of reading and certainly would not consider itself to be a 'fringe' group. In fact many of the academics cited in the Australian article as signing this letter to you could be members of IRA. Certainly their colleagues with similar research backgrounds in the US are.

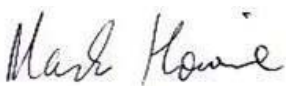
Claim 5. 'Executive positions on these associations are mostly held by academics from schools and faculties of education or by individuals with no expertise in basic research on learning to read and write and how these skills are best taught'.

Fact 5. It is actually difficult to respond to this claim as there is not an element of truth in it. All associations' Boards comprise a mix of teachers, academics and education administrators. All are either in, or closely aligned with, schools and children at all levels across all systems in all states and territories. Membership in all three associations is predominantly teachers as well as educational administrators, academics and parents. Apparently, however, such richness does not qualify as expertise on learning to read and write in the views of the Australian.

Our final comment. Our position on teaching reading is the same one that issues from research and that is repeatedly cited in *Teaching reading* (Rowe 2006). It is therefore reflected in the latest iteration of the national curriculum in English: that a balanced approach to reading is important and that the teacher 'on the ground' is best placed to decide for his/her students which **combination** of approaches is most appropriate. The three-cueing system that represents and underpins this view is, according to the alleged experts' letter 'de-bunked'. It may be de-bunked by this small group of remedial reading experts, but is mainstream in the rest of the world. Since we know there has been particular interest in New York City in this regard, it is useful to read the recent following document for teachers on beginning reading and writing.

<http://schools.nyc.gov/NR/ronlyres/50DE5457-60D6-4F83-9EA8-CADA8FD5B650/48582/Kindergarten111908webfinal.pdf>

Yours sincerely



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CC The Hon Christopher Pyne MP; Prof Barry McGaw AO, Chair, ACARA; Mr Rob Randall, NCB; Ms Lyn Redley, NCB