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Minister’s message

The Australian Government is committed to meeting the educational needs of all students through our Students First education policy platform (www.studentsfirst.gov.au). By addressing four key priority areas – a robust national curriculum; improved teacher quality and greater parental engagement – we aim to improve educational outcomes for all students.

Engaging parents and the broader community in dialogue about current issues in schools is important to this Government. The Policy Roundtable on Students with Dyslexia is an opportunity for a group of students with dyslexia and their parents, together with academics, clinicians, and school and education staff to feed into the Government’s national vision for school education.

At the heart of our current conversations on how best to support students with disability and learning difficulties is the opportunity provided by the Nationally Consistent Collection of Data on School Students with Disability (NCCD). To make sure that we have high quality data on students requiring educational adjustments, and that we develop a robust needs-based funding loading based on this data, we need to get the basics right. We need teachers who are trained to support students with additional needs, and who understand their obligations under federal disability legislation. We need parents and students to be empowered to work with schools in developing appropriate individualised plans; and we need students to receive the in-class and whole-of-school supports they need to achieve their full potential.

This roundtable brings together stakeholders with knowledge of current research, teaching practice and the educational impacts of dyslexia. I look forward to a robust discussion that highlights some of the major challenges facing students with dyslexia in Australian schools, and – most importantly – the strategies that evidence shows address these issues.

I appreciate your engagement and participation in this significant policy roundtable on students with dyslexia.

THE HON CHRISTOPHER PYNE MP
MINISTER FOR EDUCATION
Policy roundtable on students with dyslexia

The Policy Roundtable on Students with Dyslexia is intended to be the first of a number of policy roundtables focusing on students with disability and learning difficulties, hosted by the Australian Government Minister for Education, the Hon Christopher Pyne MP.

The aim of the roundtables is to provide an opportunity for stakeholders to engage directly with the Minister and provide advice and feedback on issues impacting on the educational experiences of students with disability and learning difficulties. Supporting these students so they can access and participate in education on the same basis as their peers is an important part of the Australian Government’s commitment to improving the educational outcomes of all students, and a legal requirement of schools under the Disability Discrimination Act 1992 and the Disability Standards for Education 2005.

There has been discussion and debate over recent years in Australia on supporting students with dyslexia in schools. This policy roundtable continues those discussions in the context of the latest research and educational best practice, both internationally and within Australia.

In providing background information, this discussion paper presents a short overview of current initiatives that are underway to support students with dyslexia. Information is then provided on the three key themes that will be addressed throughout the roundtable:

1. Understanding dyslexia.
3. Empowering students and young people with dyslexia.

Current support for students with dyslexia

A number of state and territory government and non-government education authorities are implementing strategies in their schools to more effectively support students with dyslexia. Some of these strategies will be discussed under Theme 2 of this roundtable.

Dyslexia advocacy groups, teachers and parents have raised specific areas that could make a difference to learning, including the need for high quality teacher education and ongoing professional development for schools. Early identification (including by teachers), assessment (by trained professionals such as psychologists) and interventions (by all stakeholders invested in the child’s learning) is critical to improve outcomes for students with dyslexia (ACT Taskforce on Students with Learning Difficulties, 2013).

Families and people with dyslexia experience particular challenges in education. The ACT Taskforce on Students with Learning Difficulties (2013) reported that students with learning difficulties often develop low self-esteem, lose confidence in their own abilities, and develop strategies for avoiding
tasks that are perceived to be too challenging. A literature review by Firth (2010) found that lifelong difficulties associated with dyslexia include a higher risk of mental health difficulties, reduced school retention and higher unemployment levels.

**Australian Government support**

*Students First*

The role of the Australian Government is to provide national leadership in school education, including supporting students with disability and learning difficulties. State and territory education authorities have primary responsibility for schooling and supporting children with additional needs in the classroom. Under the *Students First* policy platform, the Australian Government will work with the states and territories, teachers and parents to focus on four key areas that will make a difference: teacher quality; school autonomy; engaging parents in education; and strengthening the curriculum.

The Government is providing support to students with a range of special learning needs – including those with dyslexia. A review of the Australian Curriculum is currently underway to ensure that it meets the needs of all students, and dyslexia stakeholders have the opportunity to inform this process ([www.studentsfirst.gov.au/review-australian-curriculum](http://www.studentsfirst.gov.au/review-australian-curriculum)).

The Government’s strong focus on quality teaching is highlighted through the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers, which make explicit the need for teachers to be able to differentiate teaching to meet the specific learning needs of students across the full range of abilities ([www.aitsl.edu.au/australian-professional-standards-for-teachers](http://www.aitsl.edu.au/australian-professional-standards-for-teachers)).

A Teacher Education Ministerial Advisory Group has been established by this Government to provide advice on how teacher education programmes could be improved to better prepare new teachers with the practical skills needed for the classroom ([www.studentsfirst.gov.au/teacher-education-ministerial-advisory-group](http://www.studentsfirst.gov.au/teacher-education-ministerial-advisory-group)). This group is considering pedagogical approaches, subject content, and professional experience (ie practicum). Consultations are currently being held and stakeholders invited to this roundtable are strongly encouraged to provide their views.

Evidence from Australia and abroad confirms that more autonomy for schools can lead to improved education outcomes ([www.studentsfirst.gov.au/school-autonomy](http://www.studentsfirst.gov.au/school-autonomy)). The government understands that principals and school communities need greater say and input into how their schools operate. No one school is the same as another and this should be reflected in the decisions on a range of matters, including staffing, budgets, pedagogy, and curriculum.

Further, parental engagement in their child’s education and learning is critical for outcomes ([www.studentsfirst.gov.au/engaging-parents-education](http://www.studentsfirst.gov.au/engaging-parents-education)). Analysis conducted in 2012 by the Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY) on behalf of the Family-School and
Community Partnerships Bureau found that high levels of parental and community engagement has a major impact on a child’s school education success.

**The Nationally Consistent Collection of Data on School Students with Disability**

All government and non-government education authorities are working together on the Nationally Consistent Collection of Data on School Students with Disability (NCCD) – a data collection that, for the first time, will enable information to be collected on the educational adjustments being provided to students with disability and learning difficulties, including students with dyslexia (www.education.gov.au/nationally-consistent-collection-data-school-students-disability).

The national data collection will not result in a ‘head count’ of how many students with dyslexia there are in Australian schools, but will provide a clear national picture of the level of support provided to all students including those with dyslexia.

Under the NCCD, by 2015 all Australian schools will collect information on:

- Which of their students are being provided with a reasonable adjustment because of disability, as defined in the Disability Discrimination Act 1992 and the Disability Standards for Education 2005.
- The level of adjustment that students with disability are being provided with, in both classroom and whole of school contexts.
- The broad category of disability under which each student best fits.

The NCCD involves teachers making professional judgements about the extra support that children with disability and learning difficulties require. This approach reinforces the obligations that schools have to ensure that all students with additional needs receive the adjustments they need to access education on the same basis as other students.

The levels of support under the NCCD include:

- *No adjustment at this time* – where students with disability may not need educational adjustments beyond those that are reasonably expected as part of regular teacher or school practice.
- *Supplementary adjustments* – an assessed need at specific times to complement the strategies and resources already available within the school.
- *Substantial adjustments* – provided to address the specific nature and significant impact of the student’s disability. These adjustments are designed to address more significant barriers to students’ engagement, learning, participation and achievement.
- *Extensive adjustments* – when essential specific measures are required at all times to address the individual nature and acute impact of the student’s disability and the associated barriers to
their learning and participation. These adjustments are highly individualised, comprehensive and ongoing.

**Funding**

The Australian Government introduced a funding loading for students with disability in 2014. The loading is provided for students with disability regardless of where they live or where they go to school. This loading is providing over $1 billion of Australian Government funding. This is more funding for students with disability than ever before.

The Australian Government is continuing to work with state and territory government and non-government education authorities to further refine the funding loading for students with disability.

There is strong support from across state and territory government and non-government education authorities in the longer term for use of the NCCD to inform the distribution of the funding loading for students with disability – subject to data quality. The national data collection and refinement of the funding loading represents a shift from a diagnostic or medical model of student funding and support to a focus on what individual students need to help them receive the support they need in the classroom – regardless of the source of that need.

In addition, the Australian Government has also provided extra short term funding to state and territory government and non-government education authorities to build the capacity of schools to provide sustainable support for students with disability and learning difficulties. Many jurisdictions and sectors have chosen to use this funding to implement initiatives specifically for students with dyslexia, for example, through providing assistive technology as an alternative to print media, or giving teachers access to online professional learning modules on dyslexia.

**Review of the Disability Standards for Education 2005**

Finally, in 2015 the Australian Government will be reviewing the Disability Standards for Education 2005, which are formed under the Disability Discrimination Act 1992. The Standards are designed to ensure that students with a disability or learning difficulty can access education on the same basis as other students. As with the previous review of the Standards in 2010 (www.education.gov.au/disability-standards-education), this will provide stakeholders and parents of students with disability and learning difficulties with a platform to raise issues and share concerns.

These Australian Government initiatives provide a solid foundation for long-lasting and sustainable improvements in how schools across Australia meet the needs of all students, including those with dyslexia.
Key themes of the policy roundtable

Theme 1: Understanding dyslexia

This session will include presentations from Professor Anne Castles and Associate Professor Genevieve McArthur, from the ARC Centre of Excellence in Cognition and its Disorders, and Dr Nola Firth from the Centre for Adolescent Health, Murdoch Childrens Research Institute.

A facilitated group discussion will follow, in which participants will be asked to consider several guiding questions:

- What does the latest research tell us about how schools should identify, assess and support students with dyslexia?
- How can research be most effectively disseminated to schools and parents to inform and support teaching practice?
- What does international best practice tell us about supporting school students with dyslexia?

Identification of students with dyslexia

The definition of dyslexia adopted by the International Dyslexia Association is:

*Dyslexia is a specific learning disability that is neurological in origin. It is characterised by difficulties with accurate and/or fluent word recognition and by poor spelling and decoding abilities. These difficulties typically result from a deficit in the phonological component of language that is often unexpected in relation to other cognitive abilities and the provision of effective classroom instruction. Secondary consequences may include problems in reading comprehension and reduced reading experience that can impede the growth of vocabulary and background knowledge* (www.interdys.org/FAQWhatIs.htm).

Across Australia there are different approaches to definitions (including legal definitions) of dyslexia. New South Wales is the only state in which education legislation includes children with a significant learning difficulty, such as dyslexia, as a category of children who may require additional support.

In recent years, stakeholders with an interest in supporting school students with dyslexia have suggested that a consistent definition for dyslexia be adopted within Australia. This may promote a shared understanding of the term across all Australian schools.

Inconsistent definitions of dyslexia and other learning difficulties across Australia make prevalence difficult to establish. It has been reported that prevalence estimates of people with dyslexia range from between 3 and 20 per cent of the population (Castles, Wheldall & Nayton, 2014).

In many cases, students with dyslexia and other learning difficulties have not been included in state and territory definitions of students with disabilities, or state funded programs.
The NCCD will change this situation. It moves away from a diagnosis basis of disability, and focuses on the additional support that students with disability and learning difficulties require in the classroom.

**Latest research on dyslexia and its impact on the educational outcomes of school students**

Research on the causes and educational implications of dyslexia continues to evolve, with recent work focusing on its neurobiological foundations (Wajuihian, 2012). A recent literature review suggests that dyslexia is a highly heritable disorder with complex underlying genetic risk factors (Carrion-Castillo, Franke & Fisher, 2013).

The Australian Government is currently funding the interdisciplinary ARC Centre of Excellence in Cognition and its Disorders (www.ccd.edu.au), which is being administered by Macquarie University in conjunction with thirteen national and international university partners. The Centre aims to coordinate and conduct research that will inform the diagnosis and treatment of a range of cognitive disorders, including dyslexia and specific language impairment; and to implement intervention programs that inform educational policy and clinical practice.

A research project at the Centre led by Associate Professor Genevieve McArthur and Professor Anne Castles – the Reading Training Study – aims to establish how to best help children with developmental dyslexia. Early findings suggest that a combination of phonics and sight-word training improves children’s reading levels (www.ccd.edu.au/research/reading/rtsp1.html). This work complements international literature reviews that have concluded that there is good evidence that phonological-based interventions are effective in improving the capacity of children with dyslexia to read (Duff & Clarke, 2011).

Schools and teachers need to be supported to incorporate the latest research into teaching practice. Assessment for learning is critical in order to measure progress over time, and to evaluate the effectiveness of reading interventions (Duff & Clarke, 2011). There are practical resources available to assist teachers in assessing reading comprehension, such as online testing tools developed by Macquarie University (www.motif.org.au).
Theme 2: Creating dyslexia-friendly learning environments

This session will be introduced by a panel presentation featuring four Australian schools that will share their experience in supporting students with dyslexia.

A facilitated group discussion will follow, in which participants will be asked to consider several guiding questions:

- What works for students with dyslexia?
- How are Australian schools supporting students with dyslexia to achieve strong educational outcomes?
- How is the Nationally Consistent Collection of Data on School Students with Disability assisting schools and education systems to better support the individual needs of students?
- What can be learnt from international models of dyslexia-friendly schools?

What works for students with dyslexia?

Dyslexia exists on a continuum, and approaches to supporting students should reflect an understanding that ‘what works’ for one young person with dyslexia will not work for all.

Current research and teaching practice has identified several factors that are particularly critical to improving the educational outcomes of students with dyslexia (Firth, Frydenberg, Steeg, & Bond, 2013).

1 Staff capability

Teachers and school staff need access to teacher education programmes and professional development opportunities that equip them with the skills, confidence and knowledge to identify and work effectively with students with dyslexia – implementing effective teaching strategies and making appropriate educational adjustments.

It has been argued that this may involve the investment of teaching universities in embedding special education courses in all initial teacher education courses (as is required under legislation in the USA) (Firth, 2010).

Some contemporary research (for example, Moore & Hammond, 2010) highlights the potential role of teacher aides and education assistants as a resource in supporting students with dyslexia, provided they are given appropriate training and support.
2 Evidence-based teaching
Teaching should be informed by current research on the neurobiological basis of dyslexia and its implications for how students learn.

3 Whole-school approaches to supporting students
A systemic and whole-school approach to supporting students with dyslexia is best practice. Without investment from school leaders, and a shared understanding of key issues and a critical mass of teacher expertise within schools, it is difficult for schools to collaborate effectively with students or parents (ACT Taskforce on Students with Learning Difficulties, 2013).

How are Australian schools supporting students with dyslexia to achieve strong educational outcomes?
Four schools from across Australia have been invited to this roundtable to showcase their achievements in supporting students with dyslexia.

- John Curtin College of the Arts (WA), a Year 8 to 12 college for students who are gifted and talented in the arts, runs the PROPEL programme which provides targeted support to students with dyslexia and other learning difficulties (www.jc.wa.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/2013/07/Specialist-Brochure-Propel-2010.pdf).

- O’Sullivan Beach School (SA) has received media attention for its success in improving literacy outcomes for students with dyslexia through the Jolly Phonics programme (www.todaytonightadelaide.com.au/stories/jolly-phonics-learning).

- Samford State School (QLD) identifies as a ‘dyslexia-friendly’ school and provides a range of support including a Dyslexia Support Coordinator and a Dyslexia (and other learning difficulties) Support Group (www.samfordss.eq.edu.au/Supportandresources/Studentservicesandsupportprograms/Pages/Dyslexia-support-group.aspx).

- Wasleys Primary School (SA) has received ‘Dyslexia Aware School’ accreditation (www.barossaherald.com.au/story/2195557/plaque-sponsorship-for-dyslexia-aware-schools) from a Barossa Valley dyslexia action group and has received training from Neil Mackay, the UK creator of the dyslexia-friendly schools concept (www.actiondyslexia.co.uk).

What can be learnt from international models of dyslexia-friendly schools?
The concept of ‘dyslexia-friendly’ or ‘dyslexia aware’ schools has gained currency internationally, with the British Dyslexia Association providing dyslexia-friendly accreditation for schools and other organisations in the United Kingdom (www.bdadyslexia.org.uk/quality-mark-and-
While this accreditation is voluntary for schools, it sends a powerful message that they are committed to improving educational outcomes for students with dyslexia.

New Zealand has followed a similar model through a 4D for Schools programme that certifies schools (www.4d.org.nz/school). In the UK and New Zealand, schools can be accredited as dyslexia-friendly if they demonstrate good practice in teaching students with dyslexia – for example through showing that they have:

- Explicit, written policies to support students with dyslexia.
- Embedded best practice and evidence-based literacy teaching practices.
- Included resilience as a crucial component of student support.
- Given students print-free options such as screen readers.

In Australia, pathways to dyslexia-friendly accreditation will rely on jurisdictional or sectoral support for this approach. Some schools and regions are voluntarily adopting this approach, including the Barossa Valley region in South Australia, which will discuss their experiences at this roundtable.
Theme 3: Empowering students and young people with dyslexia

This session will involve a panel of stakeholders with direct insights into how schools can most effectively support students with dyslexia. The panel includes young people with lived experience of dyslexia; parents of young people with dyslexia; and members of SPELD, an organisation that works to support children and young people with learning difficulties.

- A question and answer format will form the basis of this session. Participants are encouraged to think about possible questions that they could ask the panel members during this session.

Challenges that young people with dyslexia face in school

‘To me dyslexia is like trying to read and write a different language because I don’t understand it ... It’s like a normal person trying to learn a different language but ten times harder. You can’t write or spell words properly. You get headaches when you have to think so hard’ (Henry Evans, primary school student).

Students with dyslexia can experience a loss of confidence, poor self-esteem, tiredness and frustration at their inability to learn to read and spell (Australian Dyslexia Association, 2014b; Nayton, 2010). It has also been reported that students with dyslexia experience anxiety about accessing the curriculum and learning at the same pace as other students. Poor literacy outcomes can result in frequent school absences, lower retention rates, and social isolation; and negative impacts can be exacerbated by bullying (Firth et al., 2013).

Key challenges and opportunities for parents

Funding for students with dyslexia varies for each state. The diagnosis of specific learning difficulties frequently remains the responsibility of Australian parents. In the state and territory education systems, the waiting time for school psychologists is up to a year. Many parents access resources outside the school such as medical centres, private psychologists, or associations that specialise in specific learning disabilities diagnosis and assistance such as SPELD (Firth, 2010).

Ms Liz Dunoon, a parent of a child with dyslexia and founder of the Australian Dyslexia Trust, who has been invited to this roundtable, stated in an interview with The Age that families experience stress because of the huge financial cost of having family members assessed and tested to determine difficulties, and then the added costs of paying for ongoing tutoring, therapy and psychological costs. Support for parents by the school is necessary to prevent parents from feeling like failures and overwhelmed by the effort required to keep up (Tarica, 2010).
Current teacher training provided may not be sufficient to enable teachers to feel confident in applying strategies for students with dyslexia in their classroom.

‘I discovered ... that nearly all teachers, including me, are not educated or trained in teaching and assisting children with dyslexia and there is much confusion and misinformation’ (Liz Dunoon quoted in Tarica, 2010).

Resilience is critical for all students but for those with educational challenges such as dyslexia, adaptive coping can be a significant predictor of later-life achievement (Slamet, 2012). Firth (2010) highlights the American Success Attributes programme, based on a 20-year longitudinal research study, which aims to develop in students the characteristics found to be associated with success by the people with learning difficulties: ‘goal setting, self, awareness, perseverance, pro-activity, helpful support systems, and emotional coping strategies.’ Parents and carers can empower their child by reinforcing assertiveness, problem solving and goal setting at home, and encouraging their child to participate in sporting activities to reduce anxiety (Firth et al., 2013).

A significant strategy for improving student outcomes includes improving the quality of communication between the school and the student’s family. The ACT Taskforce on Students with Learning Difficulties (2013) conducted an online survey of parents and carers, 61.8 per cent of whom felt that communication between the school and family in regards to the child’s learning difficulty was limited. Improved communication with parents and other professionals working with the student can enhance the outcomes of students with learning difficulties (ACT Taskforce on Students with Learning Difficulties, 2013).

**Role of organisations like SPELD**

There are a growing number of parent-initiated associations across Australia that are motivated by a strong desire to improve the quality of instruction, and increase the level of support, currently offered to students with dyslexia. Many of these organisations have been developed by committed groups of parents with shared concerns and frustrations. The capacity of these associations to raise awareness in the wider community can be impressive, particularly given the limited resources available to them.

The SPELD organisations were originally conceived and developed by committees of parents and academics in the late 1960s. They have continued to operate across Australia since that time, offering a wide range of support, advocacy, educational and clinical services. In many states they also collaborate with universities on research projects designed to improve knowledge and understanding of the impact of learning difficulties (such as dyslexia) and interventions deemed to be successful. A recently released SPELD publication, *Understanding Learning Difficulties: a practical guide*, has recently been completed and encapsulates information on learning difficulties, defining features of learning difficulties, evidence-based intervention, and effective accommodations.
This publication has been disseminated across ACT government schools and school psychologists, with training also provided on using the guide.

The demand for services provided by SPELDs in all states and territories continues to rise, with over 60,000 contacts made to SPELDs Australia-wide in the past 12 months. The volume of enquiries and associated pleas for support clearly illustrates the need for students with learning difficulties to be effectively supported in schools.

**Conclusion**

The roundtable will provide an opportunity to discuss the broad range of issues facing students with dyslexia and their families. Most importantly, it will enable a detailed discussion about sustainable improvements and strategies that can be put in place so that Australian schools meet the needs of all students, including those with dyslexia.
Key questions

The following are guiding questions that the facilitator will touch on throughout the roundtable.

**Teacher quality**
- What are the most important learnings on dyslexia and learning difficulties that could be part of all pre-service teacher training?
- How can teachers better utilise paraprofessionals (such as teacher aides) to support students with dyslexia and other learning difficulties?

**School autonomy**
- How would greater flexibility in the use of funding better able each school to put in place the supports and programmes needed for students with learning difficulties?
- How can principals develop their capabilities as literacy champions or leaders?

**Engaging parents in education**
- How can schools better draw on the experience and knowledge of parents?
- What tools would assist parents better engage with schools regarding their child’s learning needs?
- How can parents assist their child with dyslexia to be their own advocate?

**Nationally Consistent Collection of Data on School Students with Disability (NCCD)**
- How might the Nationally Consistent Collection of Data on School Students with Disability (NCCD) assist to better identify and support students with dyslexia?
- What is the range of support ('adjustments') that students with dyslexia require in the classroom?
References


Devlin, C. (2012). We must open our eyes to the difficulties of dyslexia. The West Australian, 9 July 2012.


