National’s Literacy Guarantee
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National will ensure every child learns to read using structured literacy by making it a requirement at primary school.

Early reading instruction is essential for achievement in education, as all learning is built on a foundation of good literacy. Reading is the key to unlocking the rest of the school curriculum and achieving success in other subjects.

However, New Zealand's literacy rates have been steadily declining in recent decades. This affects all children, but particularly those with dyslexia, complex learning needs or from lower socio-economic backgrounds.

After eight years of schooling, only 56 per cent of students currently meet expectations for their age in reading.¹ Students in low decile schools are almost two years behind their high decile counterparts. Rather than being the great equaliser, our education system is embedding inequality.

If we are to turn around declining achievement, New Zealand must implement a literacy approach rooted in research to give every child the best chance of success.

The evidence base clearly demonstrates that almost all children will learn to read proficiently using a structured literacy approach. This is because learning to read is not like learning to talk – it must be taught explicitly and systematically.

Every Kiwi child deserves a world-leading education, which starts with doing the basics brilliantly. A high-performing education system is the tool that will enable every child to fulfil their potential, regardless of their background.

To ensure children have the basic building blocks they need to succeed, National will implement the proven structured literacy approach throughout primary schools.

National’s Literacy Guarantee

1. Teach every child to read using structured literacy by making it a requirement at primary school.
2. Introduce short phonics checks for Year 2 students to inform parents and teachers about each child’s reading progress.
3. Provide structured literacy intervention for learners who need extra support.
4. Ensure teachers get training on how to use the structured literacy approach.

National’s Literacy Guarantee builds on our plan to lift achievement and restore excellence in our education system, called Teaching the Basics Brilliantly, which includes:

- An hour each of reading, writing and maths every day.
- Minimum requirements in the curriculum for what schools must teach every year in reading, writing, maths and science.
- Regular standardised assessment and clear reporting to parents.
- Better training and more tools to support teachers.
National’s Literacy Guarantee

1. Teach every child to read using structured literacy

National will ensure all children are taught to read using structured literacy, a proven approach, by making it a requirement at primary school.

As part of our Teaching the Basics Brilliantly plan, National has already committed to rewrite the curriculum to include clear requirements about the specific knowledge and skills primary and intermediate schools will need to cover for each school year in reading, writing, maths and science.

To ensure all primary schools are using the structured literacy approach to teach children the basics of reading, under National this will become part of the Common Practice Model for primary teachers.

We will phase in this requirement over several years, with schools required to use structured literacy for Year 1-3 students from the start of 2025, and for all students up to Year 6 from the start of 2027.

National wants every child at primary school to have access to structured literacy because the foundations of reading are too important to leave to chance.

There are several structured literacy providers in New Zealand supporting those schools that have already chosen to use structured literacy in their classrooms, with great success. But National believes every child should be taught using this proven and effective method.

To make this happen, National will invest $60.5 million over four years so every primary school can engage an approved structured literacy provider and purchase the decodable texts and resources they need. For schools that have already adopted structured literacy, ongoing funding will be available for further professional development and to purchase decodable texts and other resources.

National will give schools choice over the provider they use, with an approved list of accredited structured literacy providers. The Ministry of Education will be responsible for accreditation with input from education experts, and for ongoing monitoring to ensure providers are making a difference and supporting schools to lift literacy rates.

2. Introduce phonics checks for Year 2 students

To ensure parents are informed about their child’s reading progress, each child in Year 2 will be given a short, simple phonics check at the start and end of the year to determine their ability to verbally identify letters and sounds and apply this knowledge to read words.

A phonics check involves children being asked by their teacher to read around 40 words aloud. Half of the words are real, but the other half are ‘alien’ (or ‘pseudo-words’). Alien words are made up to ensure children are using their decoding skills rather than their memory of past words.

This assessment will also help provide teachers with more information about each child’s reading ability and enable improved intervention for anyone needing extra support.

The results of this light-touch phonics check will be reported to parents as part of a simple reporting template, as previously announced in our Teaching the Basics Brilliantly policy.
3. Provide structured literacy intervention for learners who need extra support

There will always be some students who need extra support when learning to read, but schools in New Zealand and overseas that have implemented structured literacy often report a dramatic reduction in the number who do.

For example, before one school in Palmerston North began using structured literacy, around a third of their students required additional intervention when learning to read. Two years after the school began using structured literacy, the number needing additional intervention had fallen to just two per cent.

To ensure those children who need extra help when learning to read get the best available support, National will reprioritise funding from Reading Recovery, the current outdated intervention programme, and put it towards structured literacy interventions instead.

As part of the rollout of structured literacy, primary schools will have access to a literacy lead who has received specialist training in structured literacy from an accredited provider so they can provide ongoing support and in-school training to other teachers and teacher aides.

4. Ensure teachers get training on how to use the structured literacy approach.

Teacher training – both initial teacher education (ITE) and professional learning and development (PLD) – should provide teachers with the tools, knowledge, and skills they need to teach the basics brilliantly in the classroom.

National has committed to refocusing professional learning development on the core subjects of reading, writing, maths and science as part of our Teaching the Basics Brilliantly plan.

As part of this shift in focus for professional learning and development funding, teachers who need it will get access to training to learn how to use the structured literacy approach.

National will also work with the teaching council to make structured literacy a component of teacher training qualifications.
**Why does our approach to reading need to change?**

Ensuring children learn how to read, write, and communicate effectively from an early age is critical to their life prospects. Education is supposed to empower children to reach their potential regardless of where they start. Yet New Zealand’s reading results indicate the education system is failing our children.

In 2021, New Zealand recorded its lowest ever score in the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) that measures the reading ability of Year 5 students. We were not only the worst-performing English-speaking nation, but we had one of the largest gaps between our highest and lowest performing students, with more of our students failing to reach the proficient standard than ever before.

![Year 5 PIRLS reading performance](image)

*Source: Progress in International Reading Literacy Study*

New Zealand’s own National Monitoring Study of Student Achievement (NMMSA) shows 37 per cent of Kiwi kids are behind reading expectations at Year 4, with 44 per cent behind by Year 8.

Our great teachers are not at fault for the decline in reading achievement. Teachers have been let down by a system that has failed to keep up to date with the most effective methods for teaching children to read.

**How does structured literacy help children learn to read?**

The human brain is hard-wired to talk, but reading is a bolted on extra that must be taught. As a result, learning to talk happens naturally, whereas learning to read requires explicit and systematic instruction. Most children will not naturally acquire reading skills.

Around 40 per cent of children learn to read with relatively minimal instruction. New Zealand has designed the way we teach reading around the good fortunes of this minority, and we are failing far too many young learners as a result. The approach to teaching reading in New Zealand has been to teach children the strategies that struggling readers use, like guessing and looking at pictures. Educational inequity is exacerbated further when only children with parents who can afford extra tuition can catch up.
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New Zealand embraced an approach to teaching reading in the 1970’s known as ‘whole language learning’, which later morphed into ‘balanced literacy.’ This approach requires readers to memorise whole words. It uses cues to teach children new words - they are taught to look at pictures or to guess from context. This is not a reliable approach, and often results in poor and incomplete reading skills.

Strong readers study unfamiliar words, rather than looking elsewhere for cues. They sound out and decode regular words using phonics. With practice, words are stored in their long-term memory according to their spelling, pronunciation and meaning. This gives them a great start and enables them to tackle new and longer words with confidence, as their proficiency develops.

Balanced literacy is not a scientific approach to reading. Research now shows that it is ineffective for most children and is particularly problematic for those with dyslexia or other learning difficulties.

Structured literacy teaches children in an explicit and systematic way that aligns with the science of how our brains learn best, starting with the smallest units of sound (phonemes) and building up from there.

Some schools have already adopted structured literacy with great success. National believes all children should have access to this proven method.

If we are serious about reversing New Zealand’s decline in academic achievement, we cannot leave learning to read to chance. National will ensure all children get access to the proven structured literacy approach.

Cost ($ million)

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Costs are higher in year one, reflecting the fact that while some schools have already begun using structured literacy, many have no experience with it and will need to engage a provider and purchase resources.

Ongoing funding will be available to support all schools to access the resources they need – such as decodable texts, workbooks and other materials.

National will fund the Literacy Guarantee from new operational spending as part of our commitment to increase funding for Education each year in Government.
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BACK ON TRACK

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