

11 March 2022

Dear Members of the Committee,

We would like to thank you for considering this petition, which was lodged almost five years ago.

**Petition summary:** Calling on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to i) provide national guidance, support, and professional learning for teachers in research-informed reading instruction, specifically systematic synthetic phonics; ii) ensure teacher training institutions train new teachers in research-informed reading instruction, specifically systematic synthetic phonics.

This petition has the potential to achieve two key priorities of the National Improvement Framework and Improvement Plan (2019) namely:

- **Improvement in attainment**, particularly in **literacy** and numeracy
- **Closing the attainment gap between the most and least disadvantaged children and young people.**

Last week the Ontario Human Rights Commission (OHRC) released their Right to Read Inquiry Report which calls for changes to Ontario's approach to early reading, including training current and future teachers in evidence-based approaches to reading. The inquiry and its findings are directly relevant to Scotland where initial teacher education in Scotland does not sufficiently prepare student teachers to teach children to read.

Ontario now joins a growing list of states in America and Australia where they are adopting approaches that will make it mandatory for schools and ITE programmes to have a research-informed reading curriculum and provide appropriate CPD for all teachers.

Ironically, Scotland is notably absent from these fresh commitments to the science of reading. The 2005 Clackmannanshire study by Johnston and Watson is internationally renowned and was the first to confirm the superiority of synthetic phonics over analytic phonics for teaching children to read and spell. Following the Clackmannanshire research, England conducted their own inquiry: *The Rose Review* in 2006, subsequently introducing a phonics screening check in 2012, with phonics being mandated as *the sole method of reading instruction* in 2014.

While it is true that most schools in Scotland use some form of phonics, the vast majority also use sight words (memorisation of whole words) and multi-cueing strategies, where children are taught to look at the pictures, read on or back, to guess what particular words might be. Most schools still use older style banded or levelled reading books, as opposed to decodable readers, which children can read independently using their current phonic knowledge. This means that the most common type of reading instruction seen in Scotland is not aligned with the scientific evidence.

**It is essential that teachers are trained in the science of reading and this petition focuses on an essential element of this - systematic synthetic phonics.** There is considerable research evidence that children taught by systematic synthetic phonics (SSP) make both short- and long-term gains in reading, spelling and reading comprehension. **Furthermore, SSP is particularly beneficial for children who start school with weak vocabulary skills, which are often those children from disadvantaged backgrounds.** Developing word reading skills efficiently and effectively ensures children become confident and successful readers early on, which is critical to develop their language skills and a love of reading.

This petition does not seek to introduce a prescriptive approach to the teaching of reading across Scotland; it aims to ensure teachers are empowered with the most recent research to optimally teach children the most important skill they will learn in school: how to read. Training teachers in research-informed reading instruction will not remove professional independence—it will ensure teachers are confident in their research knowledge to be able to adapt initial reading instruction to support all children in their class, and identify early on, those children in need of additional support.

We urge the committee to consider this petition again soon. We would welcome the opportunity to discuss it further and share the research to support it. This petition has the potential to have a genuinely positive impact on the literacy skills and life of all children and young people living in Scotland. We cannot continue to ignore the research on this matter any longer.

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