

Year 1 Phonics Screening Check

2021 update



Key findings from the 2021 Year 1 Phonics Screening Check

- The Year 1 Phonics Screening Check was undertaken in 1,615 NSW government schools with 66,385 Year 1 students participating and completing the assessment.
- The Year 1 Phonics Screening Check consisted of 40 items. The average number of items correct was 26.5.
- Students were considered to have met the expected achievement level if they correctly answered 28 or more items. 56.7% of students achieved at or above this level (up from 43.3% in the 2020 trial).
- The percentage of Aboriginal students that met or exceeded the expected achievement score increased from 18.4% in 2020 to 29% in 2021.
- The proportion of English as an Additional Language/Dialect (EAL/D) students meeting or exceeding the expected score level ranged from 33.5% for students at the Beginning phase, to 60.7% for the Emerging phase, 79.2% at the Developing phase and 82.9% at the Consolidating phase.

What is the Year 1 Phonics Screening Check?

The Year 1 Phonics Screening Check is a 5 to 7 minute assessment administered by classroom teachers that indicates how their students are progressing in phonics. The Year 1 Phonics Screening Check is designed to be administered towards the end of Year 1, after students have had time to develop sufficient phonic knowledge, but with enough time to make sure interventions and targeted teaching can still make a difference.

The Year 1 Phonics Screening Check complements existing school practices used to identify students' progress in developing foundational literacy skills.

A trial of the Year 1 Phonics Screening Check took place in Term 3, 2020. It demonstrated the feasibility of providing diagnostic assessments that give schools rapid insight, offered highly targeted support in a short timeframe and reduced administrative complexity.

In 2021, the Year 1 Phonics Screening Check was mandatory for all Year 1 public schools and was completed by more than 66,000 students with results immediately available for teachers.

This document provides a summary of information and data from the 2021 Year 1 Phonics Screening Check.

Year 1 Phonics Screening Check

The Year 1 Phonics Screening Check includes 40 words, which consists of 20 real words and 20 pseudo words. The words are set each year to provide opportunities for students to demonstrate their ability to use their phonic knowledge to read a word. The inclusion of pseudo words ensures that students will need to use their knowledge of letter/sound correspondences to blend through the sounds in the word to read it correctly. The assessment is designed to be administered face-to-face with individual students. Teachers record the student responses online.

Online professional learning, available to all teachers, supported the implementation of the Year 1 Phonics Screening Check and interpretation information to support student learning.

Results were immediately available to schools in the assessment tool and PLAN2, enabling teachers to rapidly move to use the results to address learning gaps.

To assist teachers in using the results, test items were aligned to the NSW English K-6 syllabus, National Literacy Learning Progression and teaching strategies.

A class observation summary and a Student assessment analysis were available in the online tool. The Student assessment analysis allowed teachers to observe students' progress against phonic knowledge sub-element indicators, check student progress and create 'Areas of Focus' for targeted teaching and skill development.

Features of the student reports include:

- an observation summary of the student's responses with the teacher's comments and observations
- an observation diagnosis linked to the learning progressions where the student may require explicit instruction, guided and independent practice
- links to further resources like teaching strategies, resources and professional learning.

Note. In 2021 the Year 1 Phonics Screening Check was scheduled to be administered by Year 1 teachers in schools during Term 3, Weeks 4 to 6.

To support NSW schools who were learning from home at this time, the assessment window was extended to the end of Term 4.

An emphasis on phonics

Between the trial in 2020 and the 2021 assessment, several changes were made to strengthen the teaching of phonics in NSW. These include:

- release of evidence-based reading guides that support shared understanding about learning to read and the inclusion of explicit and systematic phonics as best practice in effective early reading instruction
- additional professional learning opportunities to build teacher capacity on the role phonics plays in learning to read and becoming a skilled independent reader
- additional resources for teachers to use in the classroom for explicit phonics instruction as part of learning to read programs
- development of an on-demand Phonics diagnostic assessment for use by classroom teachers to assist in checking for impact of learning as part of the teaching and learning cycle.

Participation rates and analysis

The 2021 Year 1 Phonics Screening Check was undertaken in 1,615 NSW government schools with 66,385 Year 1 students participating and completing the assessment (94.6% of 70,163 Year 1 students¹ in total across the testing window). Most of the equity groups have participation rates close to the state average, however, students from remote/very remote schools, Aboriginal students and students at the Beginning phase of the EAL/D progression tended to have lower participation rates.

The Year 1 Phonics Screening Check consisted of 40 items. The average number of items correct was 26.5.

Students were considered to have met the expected achievement level if they correctly answered 28 or more items. 56.7% of students achieved at or above this level (up from 43.3% in the 2020 trial).

¹ 70,163 was the number of distinct Year 1 students enrolled in NSW government schools during the wide test window in 2021. This number was used to calculate the participation rate to ensure all Year 1 students, who were required to undertake the Year 1 Phonics Screening Check, were captured.

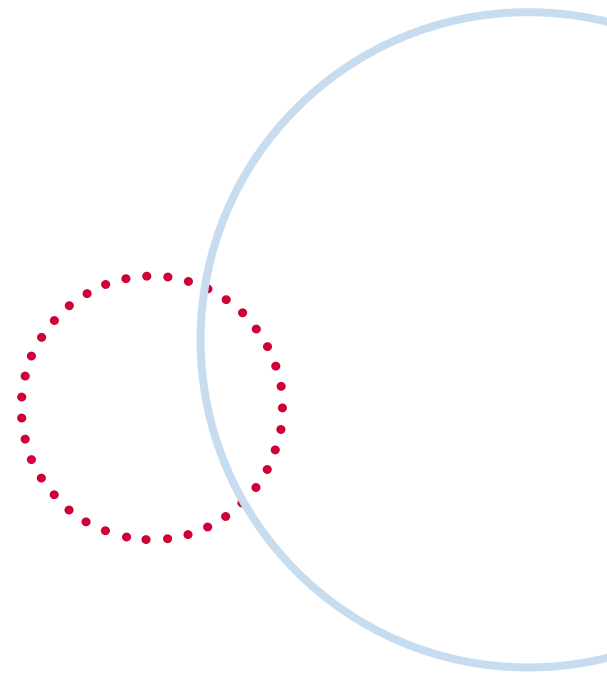
This result is in line with the second Phonics Screening Check undertaken by South Australian students in 2019.²

Results by equity groups include (Figure 1 and Table 1):

- the percentage of Aboriginal students that met or exceeded the expected achievement score increased from 18.4% in 2020 to 29% in 2021 however;
- a much smaller proportion of Aboriginal students met or exceeded the expected achievement score level (29.0%) in comparison to non-Aboriginal students (59.2%).
- a higher percentage of students living in major cities (60.9%) scored at or above the expected level in comparison to students living elsewhere (inner regional = 45.3%; outer regional = 38.8%, remote/very remote = 31.1%).
- the proportion of English as an Additional Language/Dialect (EAL/D) students³ meeting or exceeding the expected score level ranged from 33.5% for students at the Beginning phase, to 60.7% for the Emerging phase, 79.2% at the Developing phase and 82.9% at the Consolidating phase. While students at Developing and Consolidating phases can easily master the constrained set of phonics skills required to decode words, they may still be behind their English speaking peers in reading. These students may require vocabulary building and other scaffolding to make meaning from text and read with fluency and comprehension.
- students in the highest socio-educational advantage (SEA)⁴ quarter (quarter 4) were more than twice as likely to meet or exceed the expected level than students in the lowest SEA quarter (76.0% for SEA Quarter 4 versus 32.0% for SEA Quarter 1).

- a smaller proportion of students in Early Action for Success (EAFs) Phase 1 (35.7%) and Phase 2 (40.7%) schools met or exceeded the expected level than students at non-EAFs schools (62.1%).⁵ In 2021, there were 524 department funded EAFs schools across NSW. EAFs provides targeted support for identified primary schools in the lowest quartile of NAPLAN performance in literacy and numeracy and the highest needs as reflected in their Family Occupation and Employment Index (FOEI) values. There is a significant representation of students from outer regional and remote, Aboriginal and Beginning EAL/D backgrounds across the EAFs schools. This reflects the results being in a similar range as to Quarter 1 and 2 of SEA which represent the same demographic groups.

Results are also summarised in Table 2 by total score groupings (students who scored 0 to 19, 20 to 27 or 28+).



2 South Australia Phonics Screening Check 2019: <https://www.education.sa.gov.au/sites/default/files/2019-phonics-screening-check-fact-sheet.pdf>

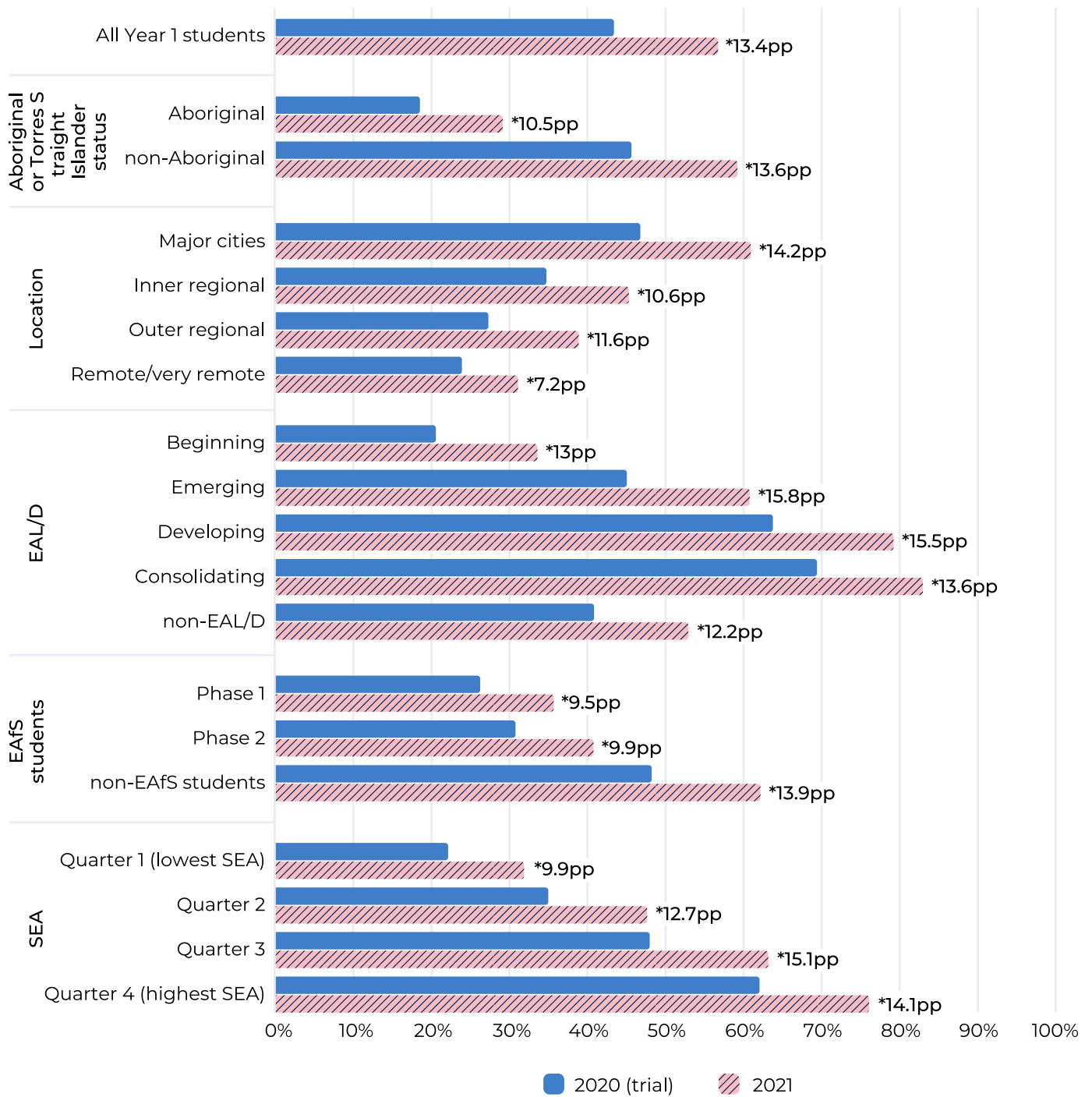
3 EAL/D learners are students whose first language is a language other than Standard Australian English and who require additional support to develop the English language proficiency required to access the school curriculum. EAL/D learners enter our schools at different ages and stages of schooling and at different phases of English language proficiency. EAL/D students of any age may be in any of the four English language learning phases: Beginning, Emerging, Developing and Consolidating and may move through the 4 phases at different rates. On average, it takes EAL/D students 5 to 7 years to master the academic English language required for success at school and may take up to 11 years for students from refugee backgrounds who have experienced trauma and interrupted or no prior schooling. For more information about the phases and support provided to schools, refer to the Department's 'English as an Additional Language or Dialect: Advice for schools' or the ACARA EAL/D Learning Progression.

4 SEA quarter is a student-level measure of socio-educational advantage based on parents' highest educational attainment and occupation group.

5 Phase 1 schools commenced EAFs between 2012 and 2015, Phase 2 schools commenced in 2017.

Figure 1

Percentage of Year 1 government school students who have met or exceeded expected phonics achievement by equity groups



Note 1. EAL/D phase was assessed for most students in March to May 2021. A substantial number of students at the Beginning and Emerging phases in March to May 2021 may have progressed to higher EAL/D phases by the test window between 2 August and 17 December 2021. Non-EAL/D students include those with EAL/D classifications of 'Unknown/not provided', 'Not required' and 'To be assessed'.

Note 2. Students are counted as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islanders if they are identified and accepted as such by the community with which they are associated, and they identify themselves on the school enrolment form. The term 'Aboriginal' is used to describe the many nations, language groups and clans in NSW, including those from the Torres Strait. The preference for the term 'Aboriginal' over 'Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander' in NSW recognises that Aboriginal people are the original inhabitants of NSW.

Table 1**Average student score and proportion of students meeting expected score by equity groups**

	2020 (trial)	2021
All Year 1 students	43%	57%
Aboriginal	18%	29%
non-Aboriginal	46%	59%
Major cities	47%	61%
Inner regional	35%	45%
Outer regional	27%	39%
Remote/very remote	24%	31%
EAL/D Beginning	21%	34%
EAL/D Emerging	45%	61%
EAL/D Developing	64%	79%
EAL/D Consolidating	69%	83%
non-EAL/D	41%	53%
EaFS Phase 1	26%	36%
EaFS Phase 2	31%	41%
non-EaFS	48%	62%
SEA Quarter 1 (lowest SEA)	22%	32%
SEA Quarter 2	35%	48%
SEA Quarter 3	48%	63%
SEA Quarter 4 (highest SEA)	62%	76%

Table 2

Student total score groupings on the Year 1 Phonics Screening Check by equity groups

	0-19		20-27		28+		Total count
	Count	%	Count	%	Count	%	
Participants	18,438	27.8%	10,300	15.5%	37,647	56.7%	66,385
Aboriginal	3,085	55.9%	835	15.1%	1,598	29.0%	5,518
non-Aboriginal	15,353	25.2%	9,465	15.6%	36,049	59.2%	60,867
Major cities	12,140	24.1%	7,557	15.0%	30,639	60.9%	50,336
Inner regional	4,677	37.6%	2,132	17.1%	5,632	45.3%	12,441
Outer regional	1,458	44.2%	561	17.0%	1,280	38.8%	3,299
Remote/very remote	163	52.8%	50	16.2%	96	31.1%	309
EAL/D Beginning	1,412	50.3%	453	16.1%	940	33.5%	2,805
EAL/D Emerging	2,803	23.9%	1,805	15.4%	7,132	60.7%	11,740
EAL/D Developing	603	9.7%	689	11.1%	4,905	79.2%	6,197
EAL/D Consolidating	117	6.9%	173	10.2%	1,409	82.9%	1,699
non-EAL/D	13,503	30.7%	7,180	16.3%	23,261	52.9%	43,944
EAFs Phase 1	4,379	49.1%	1,353	15.2%	3,185	35.7%	8,917
EAFs Phase 2	2,470	43.2%	923	16.1%	2,325	40.7%	5,718
non-EAFs students	11,589	22.4%	8,024	15.5%	32,137	62.1%	51,750
SEA Quarter 1 (lowest SEA)	7,145	52.6%	2,090	15.4%	4,336	32.0%	13,571
SEA Quarter 2	5,384	35.0%	2,664	17.3%	7,316	47.6%	15,364
SEA Quarter 3	3,514	20.4%	2,846	16.5%	10,866	63.1%	17,226
SEA Quarter 4 (highest SEA)	2,091	10.7%	2,577	13.2%	14,822	76.0%	19,490

Caveats

Caution should be taken when comparing the 2021 results with the results in the 2020 trial. Since the 2021 test window was extended from three weeks (19 days) to 20 weeks (135 days) due to COVID-19, the overall score for students may not be directly comparable.

In 2021, more than three quarters of participating students took part 12 weeks or more after the test window opened. More than 90% of participating students who lived in 'Major cities' took part 12 weeks or more after the test window opened in comparison to less than a quarter of students who lived in all other 'Locations'. Likewise, slightly more participating students from the SEA Quarter 4 (more than 85%) took part 12 weeks or more after the test window opened in comparison to a smaller proportion of students from SEA Quarter 1 (approximately 65%).

Assuming most students would progress in their phonics knowledge between August and December, students who were tested later would be expected to show higher average scores than students tested earlier. However, given that most students experienced learning from home during Term 3 in 2021, different student groups would be impacted to a different extent throughout the learning from home period as the presence of other factors such as student SEA and parental education background may come into play.

Conclusion

The results of the 2021 Year 1 Phonics Screening Check show a statewide improvement for all student groups in their development of key foundational literacy skills.

The department aims to ensure students who are struggling in learning to read are identified early and students with developing foundational literacy skills are confirmed by using the information from the Year 1 Phonics Screening Check, the Phonological awareness diagnostic assessment, the on-demand Phonics diagnostic assessment and other effective reading resources.

