

Summary report on phonics trial

What are phonics checks?

Phonics checks are being introduced as part of a shift to structured literacy approaches through the refreshed English learning area for Years 0–6 in The New Zealand Curriculum.

From 2025, all children in their first year of schooling will have an opportunity to run through a phonics check, to help teachers understand how well a child can decode words. This check will not only help teachers know if support is needed, it will also help us to know how well the education system is working for our youngest learners.

The phonics check is a short, light-touch assessment to measure how well a child can distinguish sounds, identify letters and sound out words. It includes real and pseudo words. It is done at 20 weeks of school (approximately six months or two terms). The check will be done again at 40 weeks of school (approximately one year or four terms).

Trialling the phonics check

During October and November 2024, the Ministry ran a trial of the phonics check in 76 schools across the country.

Six different sets of words were distributed to a wide range of schools that made up a representative sample comparable to the general population. 2,250 children did the checks, either at 20 weeks or 40 weeks since they started school.

A range of methods were used to capture feedback during the trial to help us ensure the phonics check is an effective tool for New Zealand schools:

- 28 regional Ministry staff surveyed for observational feedback on the check
- 75 school leaders surveyed for feedback on implementation support
- 150 teachers surveyed about their experience of conducting the check
- 2,250 check results analysed to understand how children performed

Key findings

- ✓ The phonics check effectively measures phonics knowledge and skills which are critical for early literacy development.
- ✓ Regular attendance at school was a contributing factor to a child performing better in the check.
- ✓ The checks worked best when children were at ease in a quiet area with few interruptions and completed the check with their regular teacher.
- ✓ Educators found the phonics check helpful for identifying gaps in student learning and guiding next steps, and welcomed it as a consistent benchmark to give schools clarity for phonics teaching and learning.
- ✓ For schools with structured literacy programmes the phonics check was seen as complementary to existing approaches, reinforcing its relevance and useability.

What's next?

Head to Tāhūrangi from January for the following resources and supports:



- Overview information
- How to do the phonics checks
- Inclusive and accessible practice
- Assessment materials, including marking sheets and student materials
- An online learning module
- FAQ's
- Podcast

Tāhūrangi.education.govt.nz

Identified challenges and concerns and how we're responding

As a result of the phonics check trial a number of specific challenges and concerns were identified. We have worked through these to address them in the following ways:

Challenges and concerns	How we're responding
The check is too long for many children, particularly those at 20 weeks, increasing their anxiety as they progressed through it.	To reduce the anxiety for children who may be struggling with the check, we've introduced a stop point for children after five consecutive wrong answers. We are also providing advice that children who are fatigued are able to take a short break.
The check was considered to be too difficult for learners at 20 weeks.	Using data from the trial we have reordered the items to run in ascending order of difficulty meaning that there is more opportunity for children to get words in the list correct. We have also updated the teacher guidance material to encourage teachers to use the check to record the child's grapheme phoneme correspondence knowledge. This means if a child is not yet blending sounds, the phonics check will still provide teachers with information to help respond to what children know.
The check didn't adequately address diverse needs of children for whom English is not their first language and those from different cultural backgrounds.	The stop point will mean that the length of the phonics check is not a barrier. We have included specific guidance to teachers for how they can best support learners for whom English is not their first language. There is clear evidence that phonics checks are appropriate for English language learners, and we want all children to have the opportunity to do the check. We have also provided specific guidance around scoring the check in relation to different accents and speech patterns to ensure that this does not impact children's phonics check results.
Concerns about the accessibility of the check for students with diverse learning needs.	We have been working with a number of representative bodies and specialists on how we can make the check more accessible for all students and have provided comprehensive guidance to support inclusive and accessible phonics check practice.
The alien illustrations alongside the pseudo words were distracting for many children.	A picture of a friendly alien was placed alongside the pseudo words to indicate it was a made-up (alien) word. However, the overwhelming feedback was that the images were distracting for children who looked for visual cues to guess the word. A blue circle is now placed beside pseudo words in future, rather than an alien.
Perceived discrepancy with the scope and sequence of resources being used in some schools.	The types of words in the phonics checks have been reviewed based on our findings, and in 2025 they will reflect the order of difficulty found in the trial, rather than any one existing scope and sequence used in schools.