



## **The Dyslexia-SpLD Trust Response to DfE Consultation on The Year 1 Phonics Check**

The DST is a consortium which exists to support collaborative working amongst those organisations and agencies concerned with the needs of children and young people with dyslexia or other specific learning difficulties.

This response represents a consensus view which has been prepared following consultation With the Trust members: The British Dyslexia Association; Dyslexia Action; Springboard for Children; the Professional Association for Teachers of Students with Specific Learning Difficulties (PATOSS); the Helen Arkell Dyslexia Centre; and, Xtrordinary People

The Government's Proposal:

**Consultation**

**Launch Date 22 November 2010  
Respond by 14 February 2011  
Ref: Department for Education**

### **Year 1 Phonics Screening Check Consultation**

The Government is committed to raising children's achievement in reading, and has expressed the intention to establish a phonics screening check for children in Year 1. This will be a short, light-touch screening check designed to confirm that children have grasped the basics of phonic decoding and to identify those pupils who need extra help at an early stage, so that schools can provide support. The results of the screening check will provide valuable information to parents. The screening check will be part of the arrangements for the statutory assessment of children in respect of the first Key Stage.

This consultation seeks views on proposals around the purpose, structure and administration of the screening check.

Department for  
**Education**

## Questions, Responses and Comments

Q1) Do you agree that this screening check should be focused on phonic decoding as described

Comments:

If this is the purpose of the check, then clearly this should be the focus. We are concerned that such a focus may lead to the view that other indicators of progress and/or potential risk factors will be overlooked, however, we share the view that progress in acquiring phonic decoding skills is critical for longer-term reading development and that failing to do so is a key indicator of potential problems which should then be investigated further.

We also believe that it is important to convey the message that decoding, while central, is not the only skills involved in reading and that it should not become the exclusive focus of teaching.

Q2) Do you agree that the screening check should be a maximum of 40 items?

Comments:

If the test includes letter-sound knowledge as well as decoding of non-words and real words, 40 may be too few.

Q3) Do you agree that the screening check should contain a mixture of words and non-words?

Comments:

Both should be included but there is evidence that children's reading strategies are influenced by the mix of words/non-words that are presented so care needs to be taken with instructions. In the context of a test involving non-words children may wrongly decode exception words that they could otherwise read; or, on the other hand, fail to apply decoding strategies because they expect the words to be 'recognisable' - which results in real-word approximation errors.

Q4) Are the different elements of phonic decoding knowledge introduced in the right section of the screening check?

Comments:

The structure looks appropriate.

Q5) Is mid-June the most appropriate time for this screening check to be administered?

Comments:

No, Our concern is that mid June is too late to be identifying those who are not-responding or who may have indicators of more serious difficulty.

We also feel that June is too late to allow for a response and evaluation of that. We suggest that sometime after February half term or early March would be better. This is far enough into the Yr1 curriculum and allows the whole of the summer term to respond and evaluate the impact of that response.

Q6) Is it correct that this screening check should be administered by teachers?

Comments:

Yes, teachers should give the check but it will be very important that they are given training and guidance on how the check should be administered and introduced to the children,

Q7) Should only one teacher in each school administer the screening check?

Comments:

With adequate training, there should be no need for this.

Q8) Is providing video guidance to screening check administrators appropriate?

Comments:

Video guidance will be important in explaining criteria for accepting responses as correct.

Q9) How long do you think the administration window should be?

Comments:

About 4 - 5 days. This is not a formal summative assessment; it should not be given the status of an 'exam' or grow into something that will be stressful for the children, teachers and parents. Standardised procedures are important but the drama of opening sealed papers and the pressure 'not to miss the test date' should be avoided. If someone is ill the week of the check, they should do it when they return.

Q10) Is it necessary to have a different screening check for each day of the administration window?

Comments:

See response to question 9.

At this age, it is highly unlikely that pupils would discuss the content with their peers and it also seems unlikely that parents would secure copies to practice at home.

The key is communication about the purpose of the check. The purpose of the check should not be to grade average and high-achievers, but it is to identify those who are not responding as would be hoped. By giving short-term training to an individual child to enable them to increase their skills (almost certainly temporarily) and thereby 'not fail' is illogical and would be against the interests of the child. Creating multiple parallel versions of a test is difficult and at least within a school the advantages of everyone having done the same version will outweigh the possible risks of 'leakage' of content.

Q11) Do you agree that schools should decide on the appropriate catch-up support for each child?

Comments:

Schools should do this, but it will be helpful for them to be directed to sources of advice and guidance such as the Dyslexia-SpLD Trust's site [interventionsforliteracy.org.uk](http://interventionsforliteracy.org.uk)

We also strongly advise that this check is not presented in a way that precludes earlier consideration of the need for catch-up support. If teachers are using a structured phonics programme (in line with current guidance), then the outcome of this check should not be a great surprise to most teachers. But it will pick up some who have 'fooled the system' in some way which is important. It will be important to continue to emphasise that teachers should not be waiting to hear these results before they plan how to provide more individualised, adapted support for those who are not learning easily.

The current consultation document suggests that the main outcome of 'failing' the test would be 'carry on and take the test again next year' which is clearly inadequate. Someone doing badly on the progress test should have the reasons for their slow progress investigated. We are concerned that introducing the check without some clear statements about the range of expected response will lead to possible conflicts between parents and schools, as parents will wish to know that something reasonable is being done.

Q12) Is it right that the repeat administration of the screening check should take place in the Autumn term?

Comments:

We have advised that the initial test should be earlier thereby allowing a re-test towards the end of the summer term.

If the June date is preferred, we have concerns that testing towards the end of the Autumn term is too long a gap during which a child with difficulties could be falling further behind. Assessing progress over a period which includes the long holidays is also problematic as many children – especially those who have not made a strong start – will fall back.

Q13) Is 10 seconds long enough to be able to conclude that the child could not read the word?

Comments:

For the vast majority of children, yes.

Q14) Should some element of self-correction be allowed as part of this screening check?

Comments:

Yes. Children should be allowed to apply their skills and strategies as they usually do. However, it will be important that teachers do not give cues to encourage 'further attempts' or to encourage further efforts to blend the sounds correctly.

Q15) Is the approach to scoring alternative pronunciations of graphemes appropriate?

Comments:

This is appropriate at the easier end of the test, but the test constructors will be advised to avoid too many words where there are alternative pronunciations of the rime segment. It should also be pointed out that correct decoding of 'non-words' at a more advanced level does require sensitivity to the orthographic context of the letters and also to rules of stress assignment. (for example the non-word 'wandle' should – by a skilled decoder – be pronounced with the a as in 'wander' and not as in 'candle"). It is likely that the check will not be concerned with these aspects of advanced decoding, but they should not be forgotten about and, if the check should be extended to these levels, the scoring criteria will need to be adapted.

Q16) When determining how to make the screening check accessible for as many pupils as possible we will consider the best approach for children with visual or hearing impairments, children with dyslexia, children with speech, language and communication difficulties, and children with autism. Are there any other groups we should consider in particular?

Comments

We have advised separately on accessibility issues; we don't have suggestions for other groups whose needs should be considered. We repeat, however, that the way in which the test is presented is crucial and some children – just by virtue of the developmental level which they are at – may struggle to understand that they should 'read' something that isn't a word. The use of pictures of monsters or other fantastical creatures can help with this.

We do not consider that children with specific learning difficulties including dyslexia will need special arrangements for the check, other than sensitive administration to avoid an overwhelming sense of failure.

Q17) Should the minimum requirement for reporting the results to parents be a simple recognition of whether the pupil has reached the expected level?

Comments:

No. The minimum reporting requirement should include a statement about the consequences of the child having achieved a particular result. That said, the reporting of the score should be as simple as possible with, we suggest two categories (has/has not, as below)

'The check score indicates that your child has/has not made the expected level of progress in learning the key skills involved in reading words phonically.'

Where the result is 'has not' there should be a minimum requirement to state what action shall follow, and here schools should, in our view, be given some clear guidance on the options to use.

Q18) Should parents be told whether the pupil had reached the standard on each section of the screening check, even if this makes it longer?

See Q 17

Q19) Do you agree that it is reasonable to include the results in RAISEOnline?

Comments:

Yes this is reasonable.

Q20 a) Do you agree that parents should be informed about their school's performance?

Comments:

Parents will have difficulty interpreting the results without any context so it will be useful to make available information about the numbers (and percentage) of children not meeting the expected standard in the school, in the area and in the country as a whole.

20 b) Do you agree that school by school results should not be published in the

Comments:

This check should not become a source of great anxiety for pupils, parents and teachers. Any form of 'league table' is likely to increase anxiety and pressure on schools to focus too much on the test scores and not enough on the quality of teaching practice and the possible special needs that may be reflected in the test scores.

Q20 c) Do you have any comments about how best to make data available?

Comments:

We suggest that the Department commission a yearly report from appropriate, independent, experts.

Q21) Do you agree that national, regional and local authority level results, should be published from this screening check?

Comments:

This information should be available to parents, but we are not convinced that publishing it for those outside the area is helpful.

Q22) Do you have any further comments about the proposal for this screening check?

Comments:

We strongly advise against the use of the term 'screening' for reasons we have already given. Results on the check should be taken as one, amongst many, sources of information that informs teachers about the progress of their children in the early stages of reading. It may signal the need for further action or investigation but it does not – or should not – purport to give a 'risk index' or positive/negative outcome against criteria for, for example, dyslexia.

We advise great caution in presenting positive outcomes of the check as an 'all clear'. Children with dyslexia, for example, may do well on this check if they have been identified already as

making slow progress and have begun to receive some additional support. Similarly, with high quality synthetic phonics teaching many children 'at risk' of literacy failures will respond well – but they may have problems later with more complex aspects of decoding, with reading fluently and with spelling.

We have also previously indicated that we regard the challenge of introducing this check as being one of 'sandwiching'. The meat of the words and non-words are interesting and important, but the bread on the outside' matters more and, to pursue the analogy, it is getting those bits right that will determine if this will be something that will be palatable. The way that the test is introduced and presented – what it claims to be for, how it is explained to teachers, parents and children – is crucial. And on the other side, the way it is presented and the consequences of the results matters most of all.

The DST have indicated willingness to be involved in order to help with these critical aspects of the check and with helping providing independent evidence-based advice about possible responses.

Response prepared by John Rack, DST Co-Director Policy and Strategy  
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