**EDUCATION**

**Teachers push back against phonics test**

**Pallavi Singhal**

About 150 primary school teachers sat in a lecture theatre at the University of Sydney on Saturday morning, struggling to read three words: plood, pove and moul.

Some thought plood should rhyme with blood, while others said it should rhyme with food.

The bigger question, though, was how year 1 students could pass a new literacy test that will require them to read “nonsense words” like the three given to the teachers.

The new test, which has been proposed by federal Education Minister Simon Birmingham and could be in schools by next year, will focus on phonics, a branch of literacy teaching that involves decoding words by sounding out letters. The test received the strong support of an expert panel that was asked to provide advice to the government on the development and implementation of the test.

The South Australian government, which trialled the check in about 50 primary schools last year, is preparing to roll it out across the state, Senator Birmingham said.

“We are not suggesting that phonics instruction or a skills check are the sole answer to boosting reading and literacy skills but evidence clearly shows that better instruction and early identification can help many children,” he said.

However, many teachers and academics have criticised the test for taking a narrow view of literacy teaching and wasting resources.

Former primary school principal David Hornsby said that meaning and context are critical, even in phonics. “Take ‘lead’ in ‘the lead singer who writes music with a lead pencil’,” Mr Hornsby said.

“If some real words are problematic in isolation, how can we possibly decode nonsense words?”

Senior lecturer in the School of Education at the University of Wollongong, Jessica Mantei, said: “Primary school teachers are sick of being told how to teach by non-educators.”

Professor of teacher education and the arts at the University of Sydney Robyn Ewing said two sessions on phonics and literacy teaching held at Sydney University were booked out almost as soon as they were announced, and she is looking to organise similar sessions nationwide in coming weeks.

“Teaching children to read is a complex process that is not solved by one single recipe,” Professor Ewing said. “We have to educate parents, the community and policymakers because we don’t want another test. We know another test is going to be detrimental, particularly to the most vulnerable and disadvantaged students because so much around learning to read for children is about their socioeconomic context.”

NSW Education Minister Rob Stokes last year said he looked “forward to seeing the detail of the federal government’s proposed national year 1 literacy and numeracy check and working with them on its implementation”. The NSW Department of Education did not respond to questions about whether it would introduce the test but a spokesman said the year 1 checks “have not yet been developed for use in Australian schools”.

**Testing times**

The new test is modelled on Britain’s phonics screening check, which asks children to read aloud 40 real and made-up words.