

LEFT BEHIND

The Dyslexia Identification Gap in Australia and What We Can Do About It The Case for Universal Screening

A short-form companion to the full DYSORA™ white paper, for parents and for the educators, clinicians, and policymakers who can help close the gap.

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PERSPECTIVE THAT BECAME PURPOSE

Across Australia, there are children sitting in classrooms believing their struggles have something to do with who they are, not yet knowing there may be an explanation for why learning to read feels so difficult.

I know that experience because I lived it. I went through my entire schooling with undiagnosed dyslexia. It was never identified, never explained, and never accommodated. The burden of catching up fell largely on my shoulders. Coping mechanisms became second nature, and understanding didn't come until decades later.

Dyslexia Screening Australia exists because too many children are still walking that same path today. This is a summary of our full white paper — the evidence, the case, and what we're building in response. If you only read one piece of our work, make it this one. If it resonates, the full paper is where the detail lives.

THE NUMBERS THAT MATTER

- **~800,000** Australian school-aged children have dyslexia, approximately 1 in 10.
- **More than half** will leave school without ever being formally identified.
- **3 years** is the average time between a parent first noticing a problem and a formal diagnosis.
- **\$12,000–\$20,000+** how much a family can spend out of pocket in the first year of assessment and intervention, with no Medicare rebate and no NDIS pathway for dyslexia alone.
- **1 in 3** Australian students are below national literacy proficiency, and reading difficulty is one of the most under-identified reasons why.

THE CASE

Dyslexia is neurobiological, lifelong, and highly responsive to early support. Children who are identified and supported in the early years of school make significantly greater progress than those identified later; the brain's neuroplasticity is highest in those first years, and it doesn't wait for a diagnosis to catch up.

Australia has rolled out mandatory Year 1 phonics screening nationally, tied to \$16 billion in federal school funding. That's real, genuine progress, and it deserves to be recognised as such. But a phonics check tells you a child isn't decoding at the expected level. It doesn't tell you why, it doesn't identify dyslexia, and it doesn't connect a family to what happens next. There is currently no mandated pathway for a child who fails that check.

None of this means formal assessment doesn't matter — it does, and for many children it remains essential. It means the system has let "diagnosis" become the unofficial gatekeeper to support, when the law, and the evidence, don't require that to be true.

STATE OF THE GAP

THE DYSLEXIA IDENTIFICATION GAP IN AUSTRALIA

AT A GLANCE: *The human cost of a system that waits for children to fail*

MORE THAN HALF

of the estimated **800,000** Australian children with dyslexia will leave school without a formal identification and without the targeted support that identification makes possible.

Anthony et al. (2025) · Dyslexia Screening Australia (2025)

THE SCALE OF THE PROBLEM

800K Children affected by dyslexia 1 in 10 Australian school-age children — the most common specific learning disorder	58% Not identified until adulthood More than half grow up without ever understanding why literacy was so hard	3 yrs Average wait for diagnosis From a parent's first concern to formal identification — the highest-impact intervention window closed
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THE COST OF GETTING THERE

\$3,500+ Private assessment cost Comprehensive multi-condition assessment. No Medicare rebate. Many families discover the 6-month intervention requirement only after their first appointment.	\$16K/yr Annual private tutoring For families supplementing inadequate school support with specialist literacy sessions — on top of assessment costs already paid.	1–2×/wk Typical school support 20–30 minute group sessions post-diagnosis. Rarely sufficient to close the gap for a child years behind their peers.
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THE LITERACY CRISIS — HIDING IN PLAIN SIGHT

1 in 3 Students below NAPLAN proficiency ~33.5% children not meeting literacy and numeracy standards in 2023, 2024 & more recently 2026. The trend is not improving. (ACARA 2026)	40% NSW Year 1 phonics check fails After 3 years of mandatory screening — with no mandated referral pathway or dyslexia-specific next step when a child fails. (NSW DoE 2024)
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Note: children with dyslexia are commonly advised to withdraw from NAPLAN

Students most affected by reading difficulty are systematically suggested to opt out from contributing to national literacy data. The true scale of the gap is larger than NAPLAN results indicate.

THE HUMAN COST — BEYOND THE CLASSROOM

Elevated risk Mental health impact Children with dyslexia face significantly elevated rates of anxiety, depression, and reduced self-esteem — often as early as Year 1. Curtin University research links unidentified dyslexia to poor school connectedness as the key mechanism. (Wilmot et al. 2023, 2024)	20% vs 77% Year 12 completion prison vs population 20% of Australian prison entrants completed Year 12 vs 77% of the general adult population. AIHW confirms people in prison have higher rates of learning difficulty than the general community. (AIHW 2023)	3–5% Extra health care spend from low literacy Low health literacy adds an estimated 3–5% to total healthcare expenditure annually. Unidentified learning difficulty drives lower workforce participation and greater welfare dependency. (Eichler et al. 2009)
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Sources: AIHW (2019, 2022, 2023) · ACARA NAPLAN 2024 · NSW DoE Phonics Check 2024 · Anthony et al. (2025) · Wilmot, Hasking & Leitão, Curtin University (2023, 2024) · Eichler et al. (2009) · Trucco et al. (2021) · Dyslexia Screening Australia (2025)

That's the core argument this paper makes the case for: Australia's dyslexia bottleneck hasn't gone away. It's moved. It used to sit at detection, finding the children who needed help. Now it sits at the step after detection, what happens once a child has been flagged, and nobody has told the family what to do about it.

Underneath that sits a set of myths that keep families stuck. Many are told, implicitly or directly, that a formal diagnosis is the key that unlocks support; at school, through NDIS, through funding. In practice, it usually isn't. No Australian state attaches individual funding to a dyslexia diagnosis. The NDIS doesn't fund dyslexia as a standalone condition. And schools already have the legal ability to support a struggling reader, through adjustments, individual learning plans, and targeted intervention — without waiting for a diagnosis at all.

Families are frequently sent chasing an expensive, months-long assessment process in pursuit of a door that, for most, was never actually locked.

THE PHONICS CHECK: WHAT IT DOES AND WHAT IT DOES NOT

Universal phonics screening is an important step forward. But it is not a dyslexia identification system.

The gap between these two functions remains one of the most significant unresolved challenges in Australia's literacy landscape.

WHAT IT DOES NOT DO

- ❌ Identify dyslexia or distinguish between causes of decoding difficulty
- ❌ Provide an individual learning profile for the child
- ❌ Create a mandated referral pathway to further assessment or support
- ❌ Guarantee parent notification when a child does not meet the benchmark
- ❌ Connect families to dyslexia-specific screening or specialist assessment
- ❌ Reduce wait times for formal dyslexia diagnosis
- ❌ Tell families what should happen next

WHAT THE PHONICS CHECK DOES

- ✅ Identifies children not meeting expected decoding benchmarks in Year 1
- ✅ Creates a nationally consistent early detection moment across all states
- ✅ Provides teachers with structured data on student decoding performance
- ✅ Represents a genuine and significant national policy achievement
- ✅ Triggers classroom-level literacy support in many schools

- 0 published Australian studies showing phonics screening has reduced dyslexia diagnosis wait times or improved dyslexia identification rates. Source: NSW DoE, 2024

THE MISSING LINK

The phonics check identifies that a decoding difficulty exists — but not why it exists, or what should happen next. DYSORA™ is designed to provide the structured dyslexia-specific pathway that connects an early screening signal to informed next steps for families.

OUR MISSION

Dyslexia Screening Australia exists to make sure fewer children fall through the cracks of delayed identification. That means giving parents earlier clarity, reducing the emotional and financial cost of the current pathway, and helping build accessible routes into support, so families move from "wait and see" to "screen and support," years earlier than the current system encourages.

This isn't only an educational issue. Children who struggle to read without understanding why are at real risk of anxiety, low self-esteem, and disengagement from school, often as early as Year 1. Left unaddressed, that trajectory compounds: into adolescence, into adulthood, into outcomes that show up in employment, health, and in Australia's own prison population data where educational attainment far below the national average. Early identification doesn't erase disadvantage. But it changes trajectories that would otherwise be set in place by age eight or nine.

WHY THIS PAPER, AND WHY DYSORA™

The full white paper exists to make this case in detail, with the evidence, the data, and the sources behind every claim above, for anyone who wants to engage with it: policymakers shaping the next phase of literacy reform, school leaders setting support protocols, clinicians navigating referral pathways, and parents who want more than reassurance that "children develop at different rates."

DYSORA™ is our practical answer to the gap it describes. It's a structured, evidence-informed pre-screening tool, not a diagnosis, and not a replacement for formal clinical assessment. Completed online, it takes families through screening across six domains linked to dyslexia; phonological processing, decoding, spelling, reading comprehension, and behavioural and background risk factors, and generates a learning profile with clear next steps: monitor, raise it with the school, pursue targeted literacy support, or seek formal assessment.

It's built for families who've noticed something isn't quite right, who've had a phonics result with no clear next step, who are waiting on formal assessment, or who simply want a credible, structured starting point. It's currently available for primary age children, in early rollout, with more than 200 families having used the platform so far.

The full Left Behind white paper explores the evidence behind these findings and presents detailed recommendations for government, education, health professionals and families to help close Australia's dyslexia identification gap.

OUR VISION

Imagine an Australia where every child who struggles to learn to read is understood before they begin to question their own ability.

Where no child spends years believing they are lazy, unintelligent, or simply "not trying hard enough."

Where parents no longer lie awake wondering why school feels so difficult for their child, navigating a confusing system alone while valuable years of learning slip away.

Where teachers have the tools, knowledge, and confidence to recognise early signs of dyslexia and respond with evidence-based support rather than uncertainty.

Where access to early identification does not depend on a family's postcode, financial circumstances, or ability to navigate a complex assessment system.

Where every child who needs support is identified earlier, understood sooner, and given the opportunity to reach their potential before the emotional consequences of repeated failure begin to take hold.

Because every child deserves the chance to understand how they learn before they begin to believe the problem is who they are.

That is the future Dyslexia Screening Australia exists to help build.

Not every child will need a formal diagnosis, and technology can never replace educators or clinicians. But we can give schools and families a tool to identify dyslexia earlier, so getting answers and support is no longer a privilege reserved for those who can afford them.

The long-term vision is an Australia where early dyslexia identification is no longer the exception but an expected part of every child's educational journey—supported by educators, informed by research, strengthened through collaboration, and accessible to every family.

Our goal today is simple: help 100,000 Australian children access earlier clarity and support.

Our vision is bigger: a future where no child is left behind when we are capable of finding and supporting them sooner.

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The full white paper, with complete evidence base and references, is available at dyslexiascreening.com.au/resources