



## Kilvington's Phonics Journey

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Phonics has drawn much media attention since the Department of Education in Victoria announced that all state schools would adopt a phonics program from the beginning of 2025. Kilvington understands the importance of explicitly teaching the connections between sounds and letters to lay strong foundations for literacy success and we began this process four years ago.

In 2021, Kilvington launched a project aimed at enhancing the reading proficiency of its students in Prep to Year 2. The School recognised that a key component of this challenge was selecting an effective phonics program.

### RESEARCH AND TRAINING

To address this, selected school leaders undertook The Science of Language and Reading introductory and intermediate short courses facilitated by La Trobe University. While these courses did not endorse a specific phonics program, they provided crucial insights into what was needed for the unique context of Kilvington.

From the professional learning provided by La Trobe University, Kilvington identified several critical factors beyond merely choosing a phonics program. The School needed to adopt a consistent approach to reading, leading to changes in the selection of take-home readers for Prep-Year 2 students. In addition, consistency in the language used by teachers was deemed essential to ensure seamless transitions for students between classes and year levels.

In 2022, all teaching staff in Prep-Year 2 completed the introductory module of The Science of Language and Reading at La Trobe. This sparked discussions around evidence-based practices and their application in reading instruction. School leaders shortlisted potential phonics programs and visited other schools to observe these programs in action. They also engaged with literacy networks for further insights.

### STAFF AND STUDENT SUPPORT

A key consideration in selecting a phonics program was the provision of ongoing support and training for staff. Recognising the significant investment, Kilvington prioritised a program that ensured comprehensive support from the outset and throughout its implementation.

The program that we selected at Kilvington is called Read Write Inc (RWI). This is a Systematic Synthetic Phonics (SSP) program, meaning it follows a structured, evidence-based approach to teaching reading. It explicitly teaches children the relationship between sounds (phonemes) and letters (graphemes), enabling them to decode (read) and encode (spell) words. Through regular assessment and regrouping every 7–8 weeks, students are supported to learn at their point of need, within a group of peers at a similar reading level—maximising individual progress and ensuring that instruction remains responsive to student needs.



Each RWI lesson consists of two parts: a Speed Sounds lesson and a Storybook lesson.

- In a Speed Sounds lesson, students learn a sound and the letter or letters used to represent that sound. They read words focussing on both fluency and accuracy. Students also spell words containing both the daily sound and previously taught sounds. While spelling, they 'pinch the sounds in the word', a tactile strategy that helps ensure all sounds are represented by letters.
- In the Storybook lesson, students apply their phonic knowledge to reading and writing. They read decodable Storybooks matched to their phonic knowledge, and then engage in spelling, grammar, vocabulary, punctuation and composition activities – often based on oral rehearsal and role-play.

Additionally, decodable books matching the phonic content in the Storybooks are sent home for additional reading practice, and the Storybooks read in class are accessed using the eLibrary.

Once the program was selected, all Junior School and selected Early Learning Centre staff underwent a full day's training. To support the program's initial two years, a 'Literacy Lead' was appointed with a dedicated time allocation. This role included additional training, resource management, student assessments and conducting weekly training sessions.

## **RAPID PROGRESS**

In 2023, Kilvington launched its phonics program. The school timetable was adjusted to ensure all Prep-Year 2 students had a dedicated, uninterrupted hour each morning for the program. Initial assessments facilitated the creation of student groups across these year levels.

Within the first three months, Prep students demonstrated rapid progress in learning their initial sounds. By mid-year, most students in Years 1 and 2 had completed the program, surpassing expectations.

## **LEAD SCHOOL**

The phonics program provided exceptional support, including in-school observations of teachers. The success of the program and the outstanding implementation by Kilvington's teachers and Literacy Lead led to the School becoming an advocate school for the program. This recognition allows other schools to visit or inquire about the program, leveraging Kilvington's expertise and experience.

Over the past two years we have continued to refine our processes, and our students are still achieving incredible success. Teachers are also becoming more skilled and proficient. One of our teachers commented:

*"The familiarity and structure of the program reduces cognitive load on students and enables them to easily participate in lessons. As a teacher, the program is quick and easy to plan for and only requires a few minutes preparation each day."*



## **EVOLVING THE PROGRAM**

It was identified that as the students were moving into Years 3-6, we needed another approach to continue to build on the knowledge that students had acquired in RWI.

In 2024, we selected a spelling and word study program called Word Origins. This has been developed by the Dyslexia-SPELD Foundation (DSF). It compliments what students have already learnt and focuses on etymology and morphology.

Mandy Nayton OAM, the CEO of DSF, lead the training for all our Years 3-6 staff at the end of Term 4. This is a new program that only a small number of schools are undertaking at this stage. We are very excited to be part of this program and look forward to sharing our results as it continues.

Kilvington is very fortunate to have dedicated Junior School teachers and leaders who embrace evidence-based research and implement this in their classrooms. We have made outstanding progress in this area and are rightfully proud of the students and teachers for all their hard work and dedication.