

Year 1 Phonics Screening Check

2023 update

Key findings from the 2023 Year 1 Phonics Screening Check

- The Year 1 Phonics Screening Check was undertaken in 1,640 NSW government schools with 64,719 Year 1 students participating and completing the assessment.
- The Year 1 Phonics Screening Check consisted of 40 items. The average number of items correct was 27.
- Students were considered to have met the expected achievement level if they correctly answered 28 or more items.
- 59% of students achieved at or above this level (up from 55% in 2022).
- The percentage of Aboriginal students that met or exceeded the expected achievement score increased from 30% in 2022 to 35% in 2023.
- The proportion of students learning English as an Additional Language/Dialect (EAL/D) who met or exceeded the expected score level ranged from 33% for students at the Beginning phase to 60% for the Emerging phase, 79% at the Developing phase and 85% at the Consolidating phase.

What is the Year 1 Phonics Screening Check?

The Year 1 Phonics Screening Check is a 5 to 7 minute diagnostic assessment administered by classroom teachers that indicates how their students are progressing in phonics. The Year 1 Phonics Screening Check is designed to be administered towards the end of Year 1, after students have had time to develop sufficient phonic knowledge, but with enough time to make sure interventions and targeted teaching can still make a difference.

The Year 1 Phonics Screening Check complements existing school practices used to identify students' progress in developing foundational literacy skills.

It is designed to provide schools with rapid insights that can be used diagnostically by schools to inform targeted teaching and learning practice.

The screening check was trialled in 2020 and has been mandatory since 2021 for all Year 1 public school students.

The Year 1 Phonics Screening Check is part of the department's ongoing support to improve student learning outcomes for all students, including those from Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander backgrounds, EAL/D learners and regional, rural and remote settings.

In 2023, it was completed by 64,719 students with results immediately available for teachers.

This document provides a summary of information and data from the 2023 Year 1 Phonics Screening Check.



Year 1 Phonics Screening Check

The Year 1 Phonics Screening Check was administered by Year 1 teachers in schools during Term 3, Weeks 4 to 7 (including a 1-week extension). The assessment includes 40 words, consisting of 20 real words and 20 pseudo words. The words are set each year to provide opportunities for students to demonstrate their ability to use their phonic knowledge to read a word. The inclusion of pseudo words ensures that students will need to use their knowledge of letter/sound correspondences to blend through the sounds in the word to read it correctly. The assessment is designed to be administered face-to-face with individual students, and teachers record student responses online.

Online professional learning instructs teachers on how to administer and interpret the Year 1 Phonics Screening Check to support student learning.

Results were immediately available to schools in the assessment tool and PLAN2, enabling teachers to rapidly use the results to address learning gaps.

To assist teachers in using the results, test items were aligned to the NSW English K–6 syllabus, National Literacy Learning Progression and associated teaching strategies.

A class observation summary, a phonic knowledge summary and a student assessment analysis were available in the online tool. The student assessment analysis allowed teachers to observe students' progress against phonic knowledge sub-element indicators, check student progress and create areas of focus for targeted teaching and skill development.

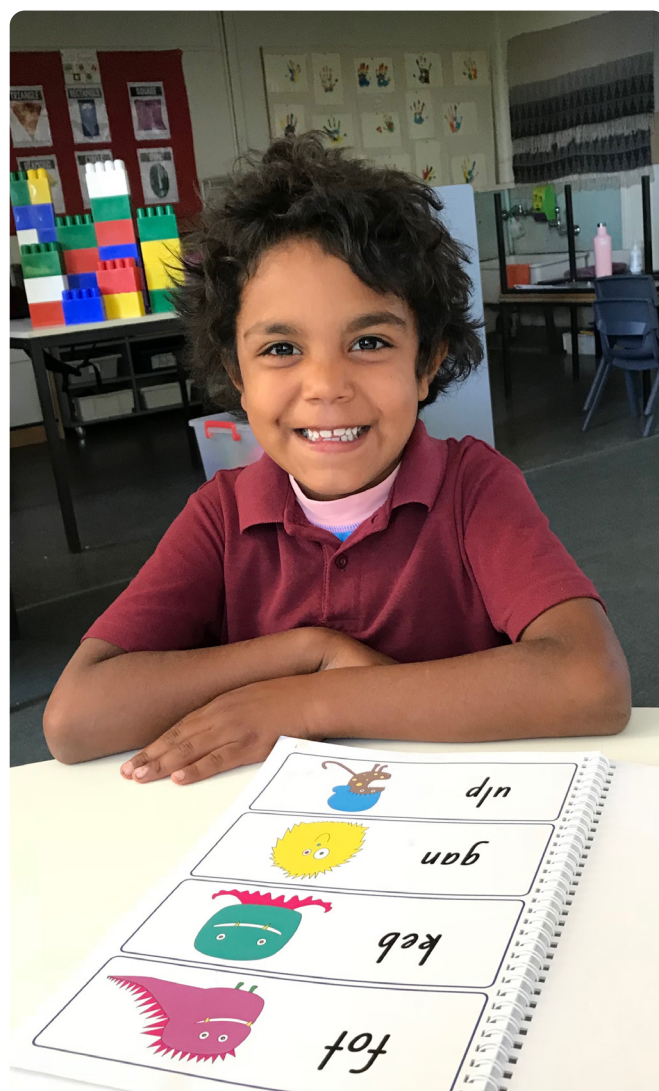
Features of the student reports include:

- an observation summary of the student's responses, at both word and phoneme level, with the teacher's comments and observations
- an observation diagnosis linked to the learning progressions where the student may require explicit instruction, guided and independent practice
- links to further resources like teaching strategies, resources and professional learning.

An emphasis on phonics

Resources are available to strengthen the teaching of phonics, as part of reading instruction, in NSW public schools. These include:

- evidence-based reading guides that support a shared understanding about learning to read and the inclusion of explicit and systematic phonics as best practice in effective early reading instruction
- professional learning opportunities to build teacher capacity on the role phonics plays in learning to read and becoming a skilled independent reader
- resources for teachers to use in the classroom for explicit phonics instruction as part of learning to read programs
- an on-demand phonics diagnostic assessment for use by classroom teachers to assist in checking for impact of learning as part of the teaching and learning cycle.



Participation rates and analysis

The 2023 Year 1 Phonics Screening Check was undertaken in 1,640 NSW government schools with 64,719 Year 1 students participating and completing the assessment (96.5% of the total number of Year 1 students across the testing window).¹

The Year 1 Phonics Screening Check consisted of 40 items. The average number of items correct was 27.

Students were considered to have met the expected achievement level if they correctly answered 28 or more items. In total, 59% of students achieved at or above this level (up from 55% in 2022).

Results by equity groups include (Figure 1 and Table 1):

- the percentage of Aboriginal students that met or exceeded the expected achievement score increased from 30% in 2022 to 35% in 2023
- a higher percentage of students living in major cities (62%) scored at or above the expected level in comparison to students living elsewhere (52% for inner regional, 47% for outer regional and 26% for remote/very remote)

- the proportion of students learning EAL/D² who met or exceeded the expected score level ranged from 33% for students at the Beginning phase, to 60% for the Emerging phase, 79% at the Developing phase and 85% at the Consolidating phase. This means that Beginning phase students were half as likely to meet or exceed the expected level as non-EAL/D students, while students in the other EAL/D phases were more likely to meet the expected level
- students in the highest socio-educational advantage (SEA)³ quarter (quarter 4) were more than twice as likely to meet or exceed the expected level than students in the lowest SEA quarter (77% for SEA Quarter 4 versus 36% for SEA Quarter 1).

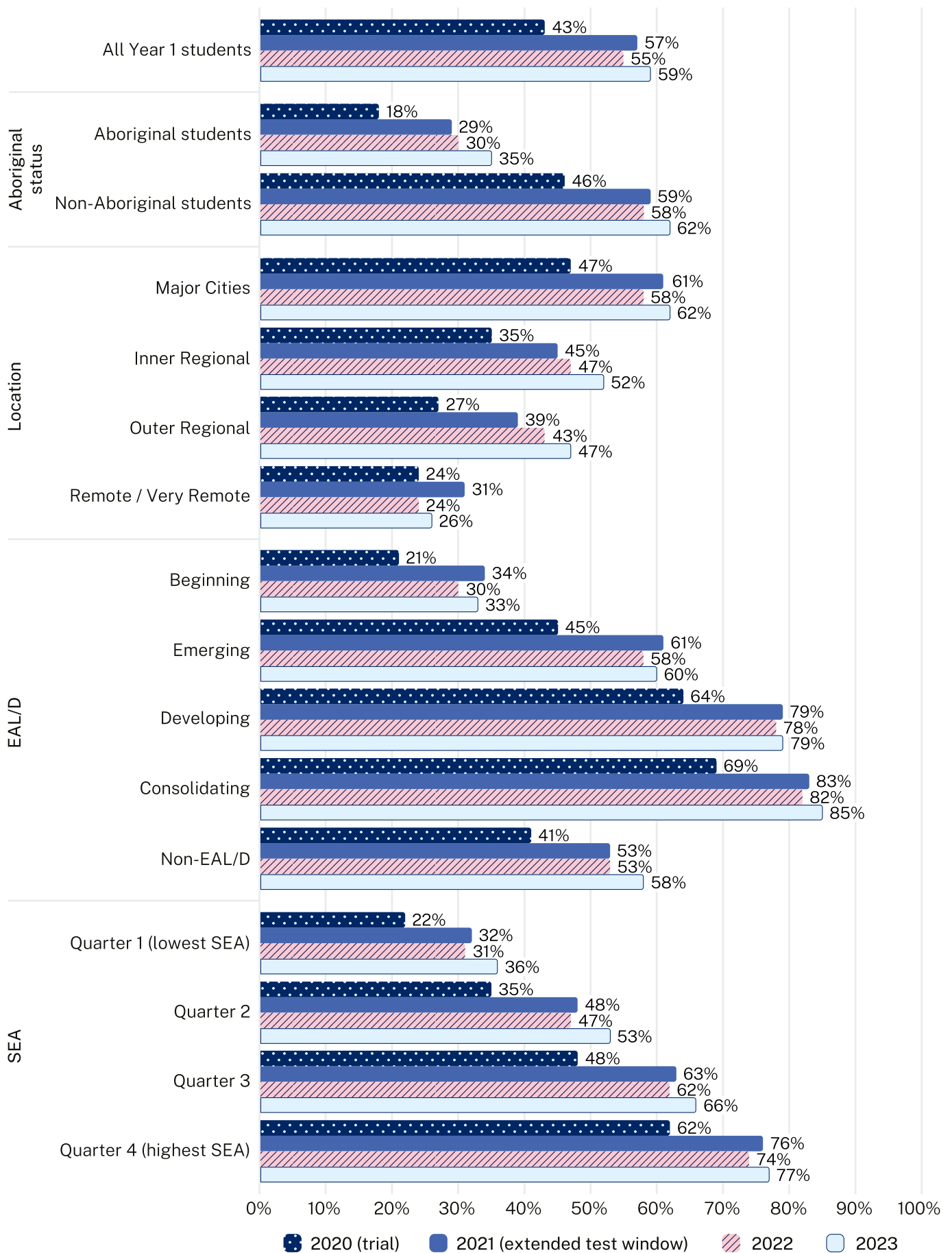
Results are also summarised in Table 2 by total score groupings (students who scored 0 to 19, 20 to 27, or 28+).



- 1 During the test window in 2023, there were 67,085 distinct Year 1 students enrolled in NSW government schools. This number was used to calculate the participation rate to ensure all Year 1 students, who were required to undertake the Year 1 Phonics Screening Check, were captured.
- 2 Students learning EAL/D are students whose first language is a language other than Standard Australian English and who require additional support to develop the English language proficiency required to access the school curriculum. These learners enter our schools at different ages and stages of schooling and at different phases of English language proficiency. Students learning EAL/D at any age may be in any of the 4 English language learning phases – Beginning, Emerging, Developing and Consolidating – and may move through the 4 phases at different rates. On average, it takes students learning EAL/D 5 to 7 years to master the academic English language required for success at school, and it may take up to 11 years for students from refugee backgrounds who have experienced trauma and interrupted or no prior schooling. EAL/D learning progression flags are now a feature in PLAN 2 and can support teachers to unpack Phonics Screening Check results alongside language learning needs for EAL/D learners. For more information about the phases and support provided to schools, refer to the department's [EAL/D advice for schools](#) [PDF 5.4MB] or the ACARA EAL/D Learning Progression.
- 3 SEA quarter is a student-level measure of socio-educational advantage based on parents' highest educational attainment and occupation group.

Figure 1

Percentage of Year 1 government school students who have met or exceeded expected phonics achievement by equity groups, 2020 to 2023



Note 1. EAL/D phase was assessed for most students in January to May 2023. A substantial number of students at the Beginning and Emerging phases during this time may have progressed to higher EAL/D phases by the test window between 7 August and 1 September 2023. Non-EAL/D students include those with EAL/D classifications of 'Unknown/not provided', 'Not required' and 'To be assessed'. The EAL/D phase data used in this report is the students' overall phase of English language proficiency rather than disaggregated proficiency phase in the listening, speaking and reading modes.

The following text from the ACARA EAL/D Learning Progression describes the acquisition of phonics developed through the progression of language learning at Beginning and Emerging phases.

EAL/D learners at the Beginning phase of learning English are unfamiliar with the sounds of English but begin to use isolated words as they develop their proficiency in English. Learners must be able to hear and reproduce sounds before they link these to graphemes. As learners gain mastery of oral language they begin to use beginning knowledge of English sounds and symbols to decode words.

EAL/D learners at the Emerging phase of learning English increasingly discriminate between sounds in

English, including initial, medial and final sounds. EAL/D learners can decode simple texts with familiar vocabulary. They have a foundational knowledge of predictable English sound–symbol relationships and some common letter patterns.

Note 2. Students are counted as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islanders if they are identified and accepted as such by the community with which they are associated, and they identify themselves on the school enrolment form. The term 'Aboriginal' is used to describe the many nations, language groups and clans in NSW, including those from the Torres Strait. The preference for the term 'Aboriginal' over 'Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander' in NSW recognises that Aboriginal people are the original inhabitants of NSW.

Note 3. The Year 1 Phonics Screening Check test window was substantially longer in 2021 (20 weeks between August and December 2021) than the test window of 2022 and 2023 (4 weeks in August). Students' phonics progress at this age is considered to grow month-to-month. The 2020 trial assessment was completed by students at 520 NSW government schools (33.5% of the Year 1 cohort). Caution should be used in extrapolating the performance of the trial cohort to the full Year 1 cohort for 2020.

Table 1

Proportion of students meeting expected score by equity groups, 2022 and 2023

Group	2022	2023	Change (percentage points)
All Year 1 students	55.1%	59.4%	+4.3
Aboriginal students	30.0%	34.5%	+4.5
Non-Aboriginal students	57.6%	62.0%	+4.4
Major Cities	58.2%	62.1%	+3.9
Inner Regional	47.0%	52.3%	+5.3
Outer Regional	42.5%	46.8%	+4.3
Remote / Very Remote	24.4%	25.7%	+1.3
Beginning	29.9%	33.1%	+3.2
Emerging	58.4%	60.5%	+2.1
Developing	78.4%	78.9%	+0.5
Consolidating	81.6%	85.3%	+3.7
Non-EAL/D	52.8%	58.0%	+5.2
Quarter 1 (lowest SEA)	30.7%	35.6%	+4.9
Quarter 2	46.9%	52.5%	+5.6
Quarter 3	61.9%	66.0%	+4.1
Quarter 4 (highest SEA)	74.2%	76.7%	+2.5

Table 2

Student total score groupings on the 2023 Year 1 Phonics Screening Check by equity groups, 2023

Group	Score 0–19		Score 20–27		Score 28+		Total count
	Count	%	Count	%	Count	%	
Total participants	14,890	23%	11,354	18%	38,475	59%	64,719
Aboriginal	2,838	47%	1,157	19%	2,106	35%	6,101
Non-Aboriginal	12,052	21%	10,197	17%	36,369	62%	58,618
Major Cities	10,369	21%	8,369	17%	30,722	62%	49,460
Inner Regional	3,435	28%	2,370	19%	6,363	52%	12,168
Outer Regional	946	34%	531	19%	1,298	47%	2,775
Remote / Very Remote	136	49%	69	25%	71	26%	276
EAL/D Beginning	1,750	49%	658	18%	1,189	33%	3,597
EAL/D Emerging	2,221	21%	2,047	19%	6,532	60%	10,800
EAL/D Developing	410	8%	701	13%	4,160	79%	5,271
EAL/D Consolidating	98	6%	149	9%	1,429	85%	1,676
Non-EAL/D	10,411	24%	7,799	18%	25,165	58%	43,375
SEA Quarter 1 (lowest SEA)	6,001	45%	2,553	19%	4,736	36%	13,290
SEA Quarter 2	4,058	27%	2,965	20%	7,758	52%	14,781
SEA Quarter 3	2,771	16%	3,015	18%	11,236	66%	17,022
SEA Quarter 4 (highest SEA)	1,694	9%	2,701	14%	14,465	77%	18,860

Conclusion

The results of the NSW 2023 Year 1 Phonics Screening Check are considered to be a statewide increase in the development of Year 1 students' key foundational literacy skills when compared with 2022.

The department aims to ensure students who need extra support when learning to read are identified early. Using the information from the Year 1 Phonics Screening Check, together with the Phonological awareness diagnostic assessment, the Phonic diagnostic assessment and other department reading assessments and resources, can support teachers in implementing effective reading instruction.

