For Immediate Release
30 January 2017

‘Broad test for broad benefits’: Catholic schools leader says

Executive Director of Sydney Catholic Schools (SCS) Dr Dan White says the introduction of national screening of Year 1 students’ literacy and numeracy skills would be a useful tool provided it captured all aspects of early literacy and numeracy skills and any intervention needed was supported by adequate funding.

A new and holistic screening process for literacy and numeracy in Australia at Year 1 would provide a nationally consistent measure before Year 3, when NAPLAN tests begin and provide data that allows teachers to effectively track student learning growth.

“A balanced assessment instrument that captures a broader range of early literacy and numeracy skills would complement the current program of screening Year 1 students in Sydney Catholic schools that are deemed ‘at risk’ in their literacy skills,’ Dr White says.

Dr White is concerned plans to model the new assessment to track the schooling progress of Year 1 students on a phonics-based screening test used in England could impact broader literacy skills.

“An overreliance on one dimension, such as phonics, would render the testing program ineffective,” Dr White said.

“Research within our system of schools shows children struggling with reading, especially those from families where English is not their first language, are often overly reliant on their recognition of sounds and letters but struggle with the more complex task of making meaning when reading.

Dr White believes a consistent testing program must lead to resourcing model that not only supports early identification of learning needs but actively provides a targeted holistic, and structured intervention to support the learning growth of vulnerable students.

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All 114 Sydney Catholic primary schools currently screen and test students whose literacy and numeracy skills are deemed ‘at risk’ at the end of Kindergarten. Students who need help with their literacy take part in the early intervention program, Reading Recovery.

“Sydney Catholic Schools encourages the Minister’s working party to develop a balanced assessment instrument that captures all facets of early literacy and numeracy skills,” Dr White said.

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