

PRESS RELEASE



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A WORLD FIRST FOR WEST DUNBARTONSHIRE

How a Scottish Local Authority is eliminating reading failure and the lessons to be learnt by the Department for Education and Skills

West Dunbartonshire is one of the most deprived areas in the United Kingdom – yet a local initiative has been launched there which will mean that every child in the area will be able to read adequately. Already the rate of reading failure has been reduced to just 6%, and is expected to fall to 0% next year. The equivalent figure in England is 21%, writes Tom Burkard in *A world first for West Dunbartonshire: the elimination of reading failure* published today Thursday 23 November 2006 by the Centre for Policy Studies.

Following the publication of the Rose report, the DfES now accepts that synthetic phonics is the most appropriate way of teaching children to read. This is welcome. What is not welcome is that in attempting to encourage greater use of synthetic phonics in the classroom, it is dictating classroom procedure in detail. **This is not welcome and is likely to be counter-productive.**

West Dunbartonshire is not a prosperous or socially privileged area. 19% of people in there are classified as “income deprived” – the second highest level in Scotland. Life expectancy for women at birth is the second lowest in all of Scotland (for men, it is third lowest). The suicide rate is the third highest in the United Kingdom. Its success in tackling illiteracy is therefore all the more remarkable.

West Dunbartonshire has achieved its success through adopting a “bottom-up” approach (in stark contrast to the “top-down” approach adopted by the DfES), developed and instigated by a single individual, Dr Tommy MacKay. He has succeeded by the power of ideas and by showing that his approach works in practice with all children. The cycle of low expectations and reading failure have been broken.

The West Dunbartonshire Literacy Initiative is not only remarkably successful. **It is also remarkably cheap, costing the equivalent of about £13 per pupil per year** – about 0.5% of the education department budget. Achieving similar results for every primary school pupil in England would cost under £54 million.

Burkard concludes that the example of West Dunbartonshire shows that more central control is not the solution to the country's educational problems. Indeed, it is the problem. The power of a successful example – such as West Dunbartonshire – can do more than yet more well-intentioned but inevitably doomed top-down government edicts

NOTES

1. *A world first for West Dunbartonshire: the elimination of reading failure* by Tom Burkard is published today Thursday 23 November 2006 by the Centre for Policy Studies. Price £5.00.
2. Tom Burkard is the Director of The Promethean Trust, a Norwich-based charity for dyslexic children. His main academic interest is the interface between reading theory and classroom practice, and he has written numerous articles for academic journals and the press. He contributed to the *Daily Telegraph Good Schools* guide, and in 2007 the University of Buckingham Press will be publishing a popular edition of his MA dissertation under the title *Suffer the Children*. He is the co-author of the Sound Foundations reading and spelling programmes, which are rapidly gaining recognition as the most cost-effective means of preventing reading failure. He is the author of (with Martin Turner) *Reading Fever: Why phonics must come first* (Centre for Policy Studies, 1996), *The End of Illiteracy? The Holy Grail of Clackmannanshire* (CPS, 1999) and *After the Literacy Hour: may be the best plan win!* (CPS, 2004). He is a member of the NAS/UWT.
3. To contact the author, please call Tom Burkard directly on 01603 881158 or Tim Knox (Editor at the CPS) on 020 7222 4042 (direct line), 020 7587 0220 (home) or 07906 562 202 (mobile)