

“Spoken language is key to achieving School White Paper ambitions,” say All-Party Parliamentary Groups

The Government must recognise that spoken language is fundamental to developing and improving children’s literacy and numeracy. That is the call being made today (25 February 2022) by the Oracy All-Party Parliamentary Group and All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) on Speech and Language Difficulties.

The APPGs have come together to ensure that spoken language is front and centre in the forthcoming Schools White Paper so every child has the opportunity to succeed in school and life beyond. The evidence of why this matters is clear.

- One in four children who struggled with language at age five did not reach the expected standard in English at the end of primary school.¹
- One in five children who struggled with language at age five did not reach the expected standard in maths at the end of primary school.²
- In areas of social disadvantage the impact can be even greater: in some areas of deprivation, more than 50% of children start school with delayed language skills.³

The APPGs’ joint call follows a roundtable discussion with Robin Walker MP, Minister for Schools, on how schools can be better supported and encouraged to improve children’s spoken language and meet overarching requirements set out on the National Curriculum.

The APPGs welcome the Minister’s:

- recognition that spoken language is fundamental to learning and to meeting targets in literacy and numeracy;

¹ [early_language_development_briefing_paper.pdf \(savethechildren.org.uk\)](https://www.savethechildren.org.uk/early-language-development-briefing-paper.pdf)

² [early_language_development_briefing_paper.pdf \(savethechildren.org.uk\)](https://www.savethechildren.org.uk/early-language-development-briefing-paper.pdf)

³ Locke, A., Ginsborg, J. & Peers, I. (2002) Development and Disadvantage: implications for early years IJLCD Vol 37:1.

- Commitment to further discussions with the APPGs and their professional advisers – Voice 21, the Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists (RCSLT), and I CAN – to explore how the Schools White Paper or wider measures to improve literacy can appropriately emphasise spoken language;
- support for and interest in evidence-based solutions to support children’s language development beyond the Early Years.

The APPGs also welcome the Minister’s recognition that the Schools White Paper should be aligned with proposals in the forthcoming SEND Green Paper to improve early identification and support for children and young people with speech, language and communication needs.

The APPGs’ meeting comes just weeks after Voice 21, RCSLT and I CAN published a [joint position statement](#) on the centrality of spoken language to developing literacy and numeracy skills.

The Schools White Paper provides an important opportunity to address educational inequality and the negative impact the pandemic has had on the already stubborn ‘language gap’ across all ages, alongside supporting teachers and schools to overcome the barriers they face in prioritising children’s oracy.

To deliver that, the APPGs have stated that the White Paper must ensure:

- Spoken language is recognised as critical for the development of literacy and numeracy;
- Identifying and tackling underlying difficulties with spoken language is seen as key to tackling illiteracy and innumeracy;
- All children’s spoken language skills, especially those in the more deprived areas, are supported and developed through purposeful and intentional teaching throughout their school years;
- Children with persistent spoken language difficulties receive the support they and their teachers need so they can achieve their educational potential.

The impact of poor language skills is clear. The APPGs argue this can be addressed if spoken language is embedded in the Schools White Paper.

Schools Minister, Robin Walker said: *“It is my personal mission to help make England a world leader in literacy, and spoken language development is a core part of those plans. We have already set an ambitious target for 90 per cent of children leaving primary school to meet the expected standards in reading, writing and maths by 2030. In the coming weeks and months, my department will set out our long-term plan through the Schools White Paper, to deliver on our ambition for every child to have the right support and the right time to fulfil their potential.”*

Emma Hardy MP, Chair of the Oracy APPG: *“The Oracy APPG’s extensive Inquiry demonstrated that the ability to speak and communicate well and with confidence is at the heart of everything we do - it is vital for children’s attainment, employability, wellbeing and success in life. Teachers know this and want support and information to make this a reality. Following our positive meeting with the Minister and his recognition of the importance of oracy, I am looking forward to seeing this reflected in the Schools White Paper to ensure all children have the same opportunity to develop their oracy skills throughout their time in school, and to build on and consolidate efforts in the Early Years to develop children’s language and communication.”*

Geraint Davies MP, Chair of the Speech and Language Difficulties APPG: *“Our very positive meeting with the Schools Minister acknowledged the central importance of speech and language in developing literacy and numeracy. We look forward to working with his team on the Schools White Paper and SEN Green Paper to help build a whole-school approach to embedding speech and language in learning with additional support for children who need it. This will improve all our children’s performance and life chances.”*

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Notes to Editors

Key statistics

- One in four children who struggled with language at age five did not reach the expected standard in English at the end of primary school.⁴
- One in five children who struggled with language at age five did not reach the expected standard in maths at the end of primary school.⁵
- Vocabulary skills at age 13 strongly predict both maths and English GCSE results.⁶
- A study of children in primary school found that spoken language skills were the most important factor in recognising words and understanding reading.⁷
- The average impact of oral language interventions is approximately an additional six months' progress over the course of a year.⁸

Quotes from the RCSLT, Voice21 and I CAN

⁴ [early language development briefing paper.pdf \(savethechildren.org.uk\)](#)

⁵ [early language development briefing paper.pdf \(savethechildren.org.uk\)](#)

⁶ Spencer, S., Clegg, J., Stackhouse, J., and Rush, R. (2017). Contribution of spoken language and socioeconomic background to adolescents' educational achievement at age 16 years. *International Journal of Language and Communication Disorders*, 52, pp. 184-96

⁷ Nation, K & Snowling, M J (2004). Beyond phonological skills: Broader language skills contribute to the development of reading. *Journal of Research in Reading*, 27, 342-356.

⁸ <https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/education-evidence/teaching-learning-toolkit/oral-language-interventions#:~:text=The%20average%20impact%20of%20Oral,following%20work%20on%20oral%20la nguage.>

Derek Munn, Director of Policy and Public Affairs, RCSLT:

“There’s a wealth of evidence to show that speech, language and communication skills are fundamental to children’s development, their educational attainment, behaviour in school, and their emotional wellbeing. In order for the Government to achieve its aim of levelling up education, it must look at the role that support for spoken language can have in improving the literacy and numeracy of all children.”

Beccy Earnshaw, Chief Executive, Voice 21:

“Despite the powerful evidence of the centrality of spoken language to outcomes for students in their learning and life beyond school, Oracy is everywhere and nowhere within our education system. Voice 21 works with over 600 schools that are demonstrating the difference a high quality oracy education makes every day in every classroom but they are a minority. Our research shows that most schools do not have consistent, coherent or adequately resourced provision to develop these skills in their students. This is compounded by the lack of focus on oracy in teacher development and without a common framework to support students’ progression. We welcome the Minister’s positive engagement on this issue and we are delighted that the Government is considering how to strengthen the Schools White Paper to fully reflect the crucial importance of oracy for children’s learning and development.”

Carol Payne, Interim Chief Executive, I CAN:

“What was so positive about the meeting today was the consensus that speaking and understanding language is central to the success of all pupils. We have an excellent evidence base that shows us what works to combat difficulties with speaking and understanding language and we are glad that the Government is looking at how to use this evidence in its future reforms”.

About the All-Party Parliamentary Groups

- The [Oracy All-Party Parliamentary Group](#) was established in 2018, with the then Children's Minister, Nadham Zahawi, attending the launch event. The Oracy APPG is committed to ensuring every child develops their speaking skills to help them thrive in school and life. The group exists to coordinate research, promote best practice and push for a greater focus on oracy in the education system. In April 2021, the Oracy APPG published its [Speak for Change Inquiry report](#). The Inquiry investigated the provision of oracy education in schools in England, assessed the impact of oracy, and identified actions to enable all children to access the benefits of oracy. Voice 21 provides the secretariat to the Oracy APPG;
- The [Speech and Language Difficulties All-Party Parliamentary Group](#) was launched in 2007. Its primary aims are to make Parliament aware that the ability to communicate is a crucial life skill for all; to increase awareness about the impact that communication difficulties have on people's lives; to highlight the importance of early identification and intervention; and to press for increased provision of speech and language therapy items. The RCSLT provides the secretariat for the Speech and Language Difficulties APPG.