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Tēnā koe, Honourable Minister Stanford

The New Zealand Speech-language Therapists' Association strongly supports the inclusion of te reo Māori in early reading materials. Research shows that children thrive when their language and cultural identity are acknowledged and valued in education. Seeing kupu Māori in their early readers not only affirms the mana of Aotearoa's official language but also signals to tamariki that te reo Māori is a normal and valued part of everyday life.

For this reason, we are deeply concerned by the decision to discontinue the *Ready to Read Phonics Plus* book *At the Marae* and to limit the use of kupu Māori in future early reading resources. The decision suggests a troubling and misguided shift in educational policy that risks further diluting the presence of te reo Māori in our education system.

There is no scientific evidence that including te reo Māori in early readers hinders literacy development. On the contrary, both New Zealand and international research show that exposure to more than one language enhances children's metalinguistic awareness, phonological processing, and vocabulary growth – all critical skills for reading success. As the book in question is a revision text, for the small proportion of children who may struggle with these words, the book can be 'skipped' and returned to at a later date – the move to discontinue the text is both heavy-handed and misguided. We believe high-quality professional development can provide teachers with appropriate knowledge of how to support children to navigate kupu Māori within English decodable readers. Certainly, data from the Better Start Literacy Approach, a structured literacy approach you'll be aware is being used by over half of New Zealand schools and which uses the *Ready to Read Phonics Plus* books as its reading series, has shown that children make accelerated gains in early reading skills, and importantly, that these gains are seen in learners from all ethnicities, including those with Māori and Pasifika whakapapa. At a time when Aotearoa has committed to equitable education through the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, it is disheartening to see steps being taken that risk reversing progress. International assessments such as PIRLS and PISA have consistently highlighted the inequities faced by

Māori and Pasifika learners; removing kupu Māori from early readers risks compounding these inequities.

Recent commentary has also misrepresented comparisons between English medium readers including kupu Māori and the exclusion of English words in Māori immersion settings. These are not equivalent contexts. Māori immersion exists within an overwhelmingly English-dominated society; children in immersion settings are already constantly exposed to English in both written and spoken form. Conversely, for children in English-medium schools, these readers may provide their *only* written exposure to te reo Māori. To equate the two situations is misleading and dismisses the urgent need for language revitalisation.

Representation of both of Aotearoa's official languages in learning resources is critically important. Our tamariki deserve to see their identities, cultures, and languages reflected in their education. This aligns with evidence showing children flourish when their language and culture are valued within school settings. We must also remember our obligations under Te Tiriti o Waitangi, which commits us to the protection of te reo Māori as a national taonga. Excluding the language from early readers undermines this commitment and contradicts numerous national strategies and policies, including the New Zealand Curriculum, the Ministry of Education's statements on cultural responsiveness, and government-wide language revitalisation commitments, that stipulate the use and normalisation of te reo Māori.

Finally, you suggested that children will naturally encounter kupu Māori in written form from Year 2 through the Junior Journal and other reading series. This is not accurate. Both large-scale literacy progression data and the curriculum's own guidelines show that many children remain at earlier reading levels that focus on decodable texts, well into their second year of schooling. Removing kupu Māori from the earliest reading materials therefore risks limiting children's exposure altogether.

In light of the scientific evidence base on the benefits of bilingual language exposure, and the cultural, educational, and treaty imperatives at stake, we urge you to reverse your decision to discontinue *At the Marae*, and any future decisions on limiting or removing kupu Māori in early readers. Retaining kupu Māori in these resources is not only beneficial for literacy outcomes but also essential for upholding the mana of te reo Māori as an official language and ensuring equity for all tamariki in Aotearoa.

Nāku noa, nā



Siobhan Molloy

Executive Director on behalf of the New Zealand Speech-language Therapists' Association