



Srihari Mohan from Glen Waverley Primary School was Spellmasters 2013 Junior Champion. SOURCE: SUPPLIED

Difficult as ABC

Competitive spelling is one way to bring out the best in our kids—and help them learn at the same time.

SPELLING BEES, where students demonstrate their ability to spell difficult words, are not yet in the same league in Australia as they are in the US. This is something Lili Hampel, a former teacher who lives in Melbourne and who is a self-proclaimed lover of words and all things English language, is hoping to change. Hampel is coordinator of the Victorian initiative Spellmasters which, she concedes, has a way to go before it can hope to rival its American counterpart. But she is determined to help it along as much as possible.

The Scripps National Spelling Bee is as interwoven into American society as the Big Mac. Every year since 1925 one child is catapulted into celebrity

status, taking home a gigantic trophy and financial reward for his or her hard work.

Spelling bees are big business in America and in recent years the national competition has recorded an increased rate of participation. The appeal of the spelling competition has become so large that the “Nationals” event is broadcast live on television by ESPN.

Last year’s event saw thirteen-year-old Arvind Mahankali rise to fame, stealing the show with the correct spelling of German word *knaidel*. Mahankali was one of the estimated millions of students who represented their schools or cities in spelling bees that year, and one of 281 registered participants in the 86th Scripps National Spelling Bee.

Obviously, there are many advantages in being crowned master of spelling in the US. Apart from being able to confidently declare one can spell words such as *logorrhea* (meaning: wordiness) or *succedaneum* (substitute) and know the definition, the competition propels winners into the spotlight,

where they are respected for achieving academic greatness.

On the surface, large spelling competitions in the US appear to be a celebration of intelligence, personal triumph and determination. However, it is worth acknowledging their darker side. Overbearing parents, an obsession to become number one, relentless training and studying, isolation from one's peers and being labelled a "geek" or "nerd" are some of the struggles that past winners and members of the current spelling elite have publicly acknowledged.

In 2002, the world was exposed to the trials and tribulations of competitive spellers through the Academy Award-nominated documentary *Spellbound*. The powerful film captures the story of eight young children trying to reach the top. Audiences watched the subjects overcome some form of hardship, be it poverty, non-English-speaking backgrounds or the stigma associated with being a high academic achiever instead of a sports star.

The film enlightened and horrified audiences, who saw exactly what hard work, dedication and a willingness to embrace learning can achieve—and the brutal nature of the competition.

But it had an unexpected bounty in Australia.

[Spellmasters](#) was born from the first screening of *Spellbound* at the Melbourne Film Festival. When the film finished, Hampel recalled a standing ovation in the packed-out theatre. It was then the former English teacher decided that she wanted to create something similar for Australian children. Hampel could see no reason why there should not be a spelling bee in Victoria.

NOW IN ITS ninth year, *Spellmasters* has offered an opportunity for Victorian children to improve their understanding of the English language, their spelling techniques, and their comprehension and communication skills through regular spelling competitions. It is one way for children who might not be successful in other fields such as sport or art to be recognized.

From its conception, membership has increased to the point where each monthly competition is now booked out in advance. Children from NSW have been



Anand Bharadwaj from Trinity College was *Spellmasters* 2013 Senior Champion. SOURCE: SUPPLIED

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known to attend as there is no state equivalent yet.

Originally with grandiose ideas of having something on a similar scale to the Scripps competition Hampel realized that for children to get the most out of spelling, she had to stick to basics and first instill a love of words and an overall interest in literacy.

The reality was, once the initiative had begun, she soon concluded there was no way Australian children were at the same level as those competing at Scripps. Hampel says that while the competitors have been fantastic, she is still yet to encounter a student



Former English teacher Lili Hampel was inspired by *Spellbound*. SOURCE: SUPPLIED

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with the capabilities necessary to attend the prestigious competition.

At the same time Hampel has also observed that the junior competitors are much better spellers.

“In primary schools children learn spelling and the basics, such as patterns, but by the time they get to a senior level, they forget,” she told *ASR*.

“I see the juniors that I work with getting better and better—they are really growing, but it’s just about always going back to the basics.”

Hampel believes that anyone can be a great speller if they are taught the fundamentals such as patterns, prefixes, the general spelling rules and even the word’s origin.

“Spelling should not be just a mundane thing that you have to do,” she said. “And it should not be

rote-learning either. There are definitely gaps in the education system,” she said.

As Australia comes to terms with a decline in its literacy, science and numeracy achievements compared to other OECD countries, the pressure is on to improve student outcomes. The issue of a perceived decline in the quality of Australian education has become a focus for politicians. Federal education minister Christopher Pyne essentially suggests a return to more traditional teaching methods and implementing a new “orthodox” curriculum.

This issue of reforming the national curriculum has gained traction, spurred on by substandard results in the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER) release of the [2012 Programme for International Student Assessment](#) (PISA) national report in December 2013. The report identified worrying figures about the literacy, numeracy and scientific achievement of Australian children. While it found students assessed were still performing above the international average, there was a significant decline: participating Australian students were found to be the equivalent of three school years behind the average student in Shanghai, China.

These statistics followed equally disappointing results from the previous year where it was reported in the [TIMSS & PIRLS 2011 national reports](#) that Australian children were not meeting benchmarks and faced substantial literacy problems.

Hampel hopes *Spellmaster* will become a national competition, but there are problems with the model as well as interest.

“We try to make *Spellmaster* a friendly competition. It is brutal if you make a mistake but we try to be positive, we applaud and talk about the word after,” she told *ASR*.

“The thing is *Spellmaster* is literally spellbinding—everyone in the audience is behind the children. It is both nail-biting and agonizing. At the end of the day it is all just part of the spelling bee drama.”

Jade Ginnane

