

Submission to the Tasmanian Literacy Advisory Panel: Setting the Scene Community Consultation Paper

PREPARED BY THE TASMANIAN 100% LITERACY ALLIANCE

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Overview of submission

The Tasmanian 100% Literacy Alliance (Alliance) strongly supports the Tasmanian Government's aim to achieve 100 per cent literacy in Tasmania, and, particularly, the target that all grade 7 Tasmanian students will start high school above the expected level for reading by no later than 2030.

However, the Alliance argues that while reading is a foundational skill which every child has a right to master, being literate is more than just being able to read and that much greater effort will be required by the Tasmanian Government to ensure that all Tasmanians become literate adults, as per the definition set by the Government's Literacy Advisory Panel (Panel), and endorsed by the Alliance.

"Literacy involves listening to, reading, viewing, speaking, writing, and creating texts, and using and modifying language for different purposes in a range of contexts. Literacy encompasses the knowledge and skills needed to access, understand, analyse, and evaluate information, make meaning, express thoughts and emotions, present ideas and opinions, interact with others. It involves a continuum of learning to enable individuals to achieve their goals, to develop their knowledge and potential, and to participate fully in their community and wider society." (p.4)¹

While the Tasmanian Government has set a target that all grade 7 students will start high school above the expected level of reading by no later than 2030, they have set a very low bar which will not result in 100 per cent of Tasmanians being literate as defined by the Panel.

While Progress Achievement Tests (PATs) assessments are an appropriate measurement tool, the target minimum achievement level of 118 set by the Government is too low. This is the equivalent of the 19th percentile for the population.

It is hard to aim high when the bar is set so low.

The Tasmanian 100% Literacy Alliance submission to the Tasmanian Literacy Advisory Panel's community consultation paper; Tasmania's Community-wide Framework: Paper One, Setting the Scene contains three parts.

The first section discusses Tasmania's literacy performance and the costs to the economy and society of low levels of literacy. While the Panel incorrectly suggests that Tasmania's literacy outcomes perform comparably with the Australian outcomes, it also fails to acknowledge that Australia's literacy outcomes have been in decline since the start of this century and that the nation itself is in a literacy crisis. The Alliance reminds the Panel that the Tasmanian Government has set an aim and a target, and that relative performance to other jurisdictions should not be an excuse for literacy outcomes that fall short of the target.

The Panel also suggests that "a fair comparison of Tasmanian students' achievement depends on taking into account socio-economic status, and that students' progress is broadly in line with schools of similar socio-economic advantage in other states" (p. 19)². The Alliance warns against allowing this line of argument to weaken our ambition for improvement, and again refers the Panel to the target set by the Tasmanian Government.

¹ Tasmanian Literacy Advisory Panel (2022) Tasmania's Communitywide Framework, Paper One, Setting the Scene, Tasmanian Government

² Ibid.

If we continue to allow our past and current disadvantage to explain away any claim that we urgently need to lift our levels of literacy, then it positions Tasmania as a 'failed state'.

The second section addresses community-wide literacy issues in Tasmania which are either not sufficiently addressed in the community consultation paper or are missing altogether.

The final section discusses how to achieve the aim that all adult Tasmanians will be literate and that all grade 7 students will start high school able to read at above the expected level by 2030, including appropriate measures.

The Alliance acknowledges some individual teachers, schools and other educators are pursuing professional learning in the evidence-based best practice for reading instruction and making positive changes to their literacy pedagogy. However, the Alliance's position is that in order to achieve 100% literacy, evidence-based literacy instruction needs to be scaled in a comprehensive and systematic way, with a sense of urgency.

Evidence-based policies, practices and interventions that are poorly implemented – or not implemented at all – will not produce the desired outcome of achieving 100% literacy in Tasmania.

In implementing the Community-wide Framework for achieving 100% literacy in Tasmania the Government should harness the strategies and methods of implementation science.

Implementation science is a method for ensuring that research – evidence – translates into practice effectively.

Tasmanians deserve a whole of state, community-wide approach to achieving a Literate Tasmania.

100% literacy in Tasmania is achievable

Research in cognitive capabilities suggests that 95 per cent of children [people] can learn to read³. The Tasmanian 100% Literacy Alliance and now also the government of Tasmania, nevertheless names its target as '100% literacy', not 95%.

The Panel's broad definition of literacy acknowledges literacy's tight relationship with language – that literacy springs from language and then entwines with it. Thus 100% literacy means 100% of our people reading, writing and *communicating* at 100% of their potential. This is inclusivity. It must not just be stated but must be integrated with actions that support every individual. Integrity itself is the integration of values, with actions that demonstrate those values.

The Panel's Setting the Scene paper unfortunately omits thorough reference to Tasmanians with disability. This group must not be left invisible in the work of the Panel. The '100%' target dignifies the importance and place of the 5 per cent of Tasmanian community members living with severe cognitive disability. This valued cohort may not learn to read and write, but their symbolic knowledge – namely their language – can always be further developed and maximised in their personal lifelong-learner journeys. The financially and socially privileged wish for and strive for this continual advancement for children of their own, or for other family member or loved ones with cognitive disabilities. But that which they use their privilege to attain, and, which is a fundamental human right of every Tasmanian, is the work of the Panel, and in the famous words of Mahatma Gandhi, is the hallmark of a civilised society:

³ Hempenstall, K (2013) What is the place for national assessment in the prevention and resolution of reading difficulties? Australian Journal of Learning Difficulties 18: 105–21.

“The true measure of any society can be found in how it treats its most vulnerable members”

Moreover, our educators deserve the aspirational support to their work that comes of holding high expectations of *all* their students, no matter the students’ cognitive levels. Too long through a history of which we are sometimes now ashamed, we have responded to people with disability with low expectations, and left them trapped in their disability rather than supporting them into inclusive participation. To avoid repeating these ugly and diminishing errors in the 21st Century and in the middle of the hope that surrounds a government-appointed Literacy Advisory Panel, we must focus on supporting aspiration in our educators. Such aspiration flows from the confident knowledge that 100% literacy is achievable and that all practitioners can learn to translate this knowledge into daily, normal, practice in the classroom and in other places in community. Our educators deserve such solidly grounded and boldly aspirational policy leadership and investment from the Government to support them in their important work.

Not only that, 100% of Tasmanians deserve it.

Part 1: Literacy in Tasmania

While the Panel incorrectly suggests that Tasmania’s literacy outcomes perform comparably with the Australian outcomes, it also fails to acknowledge that Australia’s literacy outcomes have been in decline since the start of this century and that the nation itself is in a literacy crisis. The Alliance reminds the Panel that the Tasmanian Government has set an aim and a target, and that our performance relative to the poorer performing areas of other jurisdictions should not be taken as a reason why we should accept our poor literacy outcomes relative to the whole of other jurisdictions, and indeed other nations.

Indeed, in contradiction to the Panel’s suggestion, the Mitchell Institute’s Educational Opportunity in Australia 2020 report found that Tasmanians fare worse than the national average in 16 of the 23 indicators for the four stages of learning and development, ranking 7th or 8th (out of 8) in 12.

Of the 5 indicators which include literacy skills, Tasmania ranks 7th or 8th in four.

The current Tasmanian statistics tell us:

- 1 in 5 start school developmentally vulnerable
- 1 in 5 start grade seven at or below the National Minimum Standard (NMS) for reading
- 1 in 4 do not continue school to year 12 (retention)
- 3 in 5 who undertake year 12 successfully complete it (attainment)
- 1 in 2 adults are functionally illiterate

The 2021 grade 7 cohort NAPLAN results provide a baseline from which the Tasmanian Government can develop and implement an appropriate policy framework, with a matter of urgency, to achieve its target that all grade 7 students start high school able to read above the expected level by no later than 2030 and aim to achieve 100 per cent literacy for Tasmania.

Analysis of 2021 NAPLAN data shows that as the 2021 year 7 cohort progressed through its schooling, their literacy knowledge and skills progressively declined in all areas except spelling.

By grade 7, 1,524 (22.2%) students could not read at the expected level to engage in the wider curriculum, compared with 966 (14.3%) when they were in grade 3.

The 2021 cohort also recorded considerable decline in both punctuation and grammar and writing yet these are the written language skills which best predict school completion. The proportion not above the expected level by grade 7 almost doubled for punctuation and grammar and tripled for writing compared with when the cohort was in grade 3.

Around 1 in 5 students were not achieving the expected level in spelling for each grade level.

Analysis of 2021 data shows that in 2012, around 1 in 5 (21.5%) Tasmanian children in their first year of school were identified as being developmentally vulnerable (1,308 students), similar to the proportion nationally. At least a further 15.6 per cent were considered 'developmentally at risk'.

As is evident, Tasmania has some way to go to achieve 100% literacy, it is ambitious, but it is also possible.

Australia's declining literacy outcomes

Australia's rankings on international tests such as PISA have been falling for many years in most curriculum areas.

Average (measured as the mean) performance in Australia has been steadily declining in reading (between 2000 and 2018) and in mathematics (between 2003 and 2018). Performance in science has been declining since at least 2012 from initially high levels of performance (See Figure 1 below).

In reading, more rapid declines were observed amongst the country's lowest-achieving students. In mathematics and science, performance declined to a similar extent at the top and at the bottom of the performance distribution, as well as on average⁴.

The proportion of top-performing students (scoring at Level 5 or 6) remained stable in reading (between 2009 and 2018, however, the proportion of low-achieving students (scoring below Level 2) increased in all subjects.

Research by the Grattan Institute shows that the spread of student achievement more than doubles as students move through school in Australia. The middle 60 per cent of students in Year 3 are working within a two-and-a-half year range. By Year 9, the spread for these students is five-and-a-half years. The top ten per cent of students are about eight years ahead of the bottom ten per cent⁵.

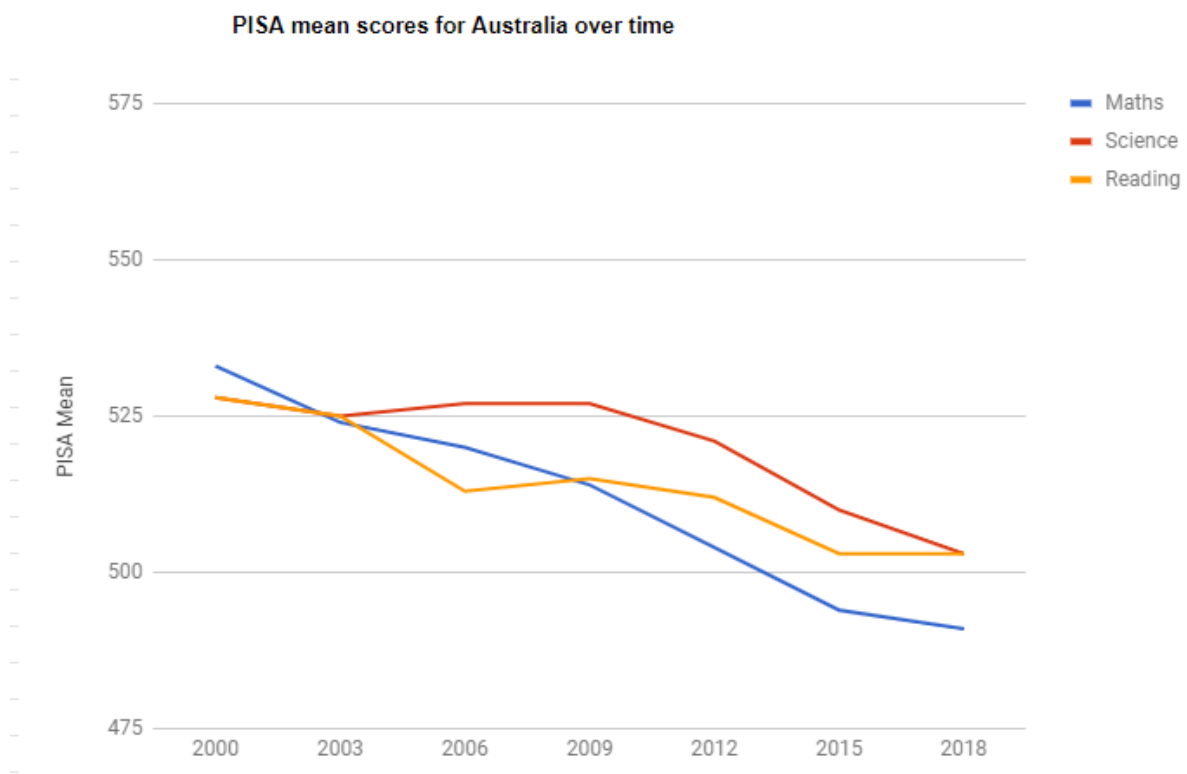
John Sweller and colleagues correlate this deteriorating academic performance with the increased emphasis on 'inquiry-based' learning over evidence-based, explicit instruction in Australian classrooms⁶.

⁴ Thomson, S., De Bortoli, L., Underwood, C., and Schmid, M. (2019), PISA 2018: Reporting Australia's Results. Student Performance, Australian Council for Education Research

⁵ Goss, P., & Sonnemann, J. (2016). Widening gaps: What NAPLAN tells us about student progress. Grattan Institute.

⁶ Sweller, J (2021), Why Inquiry-based Approaches Harm Students' Learning, Analysis Paper 24, The Centre for Independent Studies; Kirschner, P., Sweller, J., & Clark, R. E. (2006). Why unguided learning does not work: An analysis of the failure of discovery learning, problem-based learning, experiential learning and inquiry-based learning. *Educational Psychologist*, 41(2), 75-86; Ashman, G., Kalyuga, S., & Sweller, J. (2020). Problem-solving or explicit instruction: Which should go first when element interactivity is high? *Educational Psychology Review*, 32(1), 229-247.

Figure 1. PISA mean scores for Australia over time.



Source: Thomson, S., De Bortoli, L., Underwood, C., and Schmid, M. (2019), PISA 2018: Reporting Australia's Results. Student Performance, Australian Council for Education Research

Literacy as a predictor of year 11 and 12 performance

Several studies using multivariate analysis⁷ to predict academic performance have concluded that it is prior achievement in primary school which has the most influence on young people's overall educational outcomes, followed by parental education and/or occupation.

There is a plethora of longstanding evidence that the early (pre-school) skills of language, cognitive development, communication and general knowledge are key predictors of future academic performance⁸. However, a large body of research also shows that the proportion of students not meeting the expected standard for their actual age increases steadily as they progress from the early years to primary school to secondary school⁹. Not only do those that 'start behind, stay

⁷ Using variables such as gender, indigenous status, language background, geolocation, sector, parents' educational background, parents' occupation status and children's prior achievement

⁸ Duncan, R. J., Duncan, G. J., Stanley, L., Aguilar, E., & Halfon, N. (2020). The kindergarten Early Development Instrument predicts third grade academic proficiency. *Early childhood research quarterly*, 53, 287-300.; Brinkman, S., Gregory, T., Harris, J., Hart, B., Blackmore, S., & Janus, M. (2013). Associations between the early development instrument at age 5, and reading and numeracy skills at ages 8, 10 and 12: a prospective linked data study. *Child Indicators Research*, 6(4), 695-708.

⁹ Lamb, S, Jackson, J, Walstab, A & Huo, S (2015), Educational opportunity in Australia 2015: Who succeeds and who misses out, Centre for International Research on Education Systems, Victoria University, for the Mitchell Institute, Melbourne: Mitchell Institute.; Goss, P., & Sonnemann, J. (2016). Widening gaps: What NAPLAN tells us about student progress. Grattan Institute; Adams, E. K., Hancock, K. J., & Taylor, C. L. (2020). Student achievement against national minimum standards for reading and numeracy in Years 3, 5, 7 and 9: A regression discontinuity analysis. *Australian Journal of Social Issues*, 55(3), 275-301.

behind', the spread of student achievement more than doubles as students move through school with the majority of the learning gap developing between years 3 and 9, not before year 3¹⁰.

A study by the ABS, commissioned by the Tasmanian Government, shows that NAPLAN scores in Year 9 are a strong predictor of high school completion as well as success after school in study and work¹¹.

Analysis undertaken in 2021 by the NSW Government Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation (CESE) found that year 9 NAPLAN writing results were the strongest predictor of year 11 and year 12 performance, more so than reading, spelling, grammar or numeracy¹². Writing ability is predicted jointly by spelling, grammar and punctuation, with spelling being the strongest predictor¹³. Further, proficiency in English is a strong predictor of mathematical achievement¹⁴.

Yet, year 9 Australian students' writing performance on the NAPLAN writing test has been declining considerably since 2011 for both male and female students. Several studies reveal a picture of accelerating negative change¹⁵. The average student in 2018 performed nearly 1.5 years behind the average student in 2011¹⁶.

Poor writing is problematic for children and adults alike. To become effective writers in year 9, students must be proficient in spelling, grammar and punctuation, skills learned in primary school.

In Tasmania, for the 2021 grade 9 cohort (around 6,634 students in total), around 1,891 (28.5%) could not read at the level expected to engage in the wider curriculum, 2,753 (41.5%) could not express themselves in written form and 1,552 (23.4%) were not numerate.

Compared with 10 years prior (the 2011 grade 9 cohort), 2021 grade 9 students were considerably less proficient in literacy and numeracy skills. The 2021 NAPLAN results show an alarming decline in the high proficiency bands (9 and 10) and an equally alarming increase in the proportion below the expected standard in the range of literacy knowledge and skills.

A substantial socio-economic gap also exists between higher- and lower-SES students. While the analysis shows an increase in the proportion not exceeding the expected standards for both higher- and lower-SES students for all five learning domains, the rate of increase is greater for lower-SES students and the substantial socio-economic gap widened further for three key domains. The socio-economic gap ranged from 46.3 percentage points for grammar and punctuation to 37.5 percentage points for numeracy.

A concerning gender gap also exists. Over half of year 9 male students (52.7%) did not exceed the expected standard for writing compared with a third (32.4%) of female students. While the average gender gap over the period was 21.5 percentage points, the gap narrowed slightly over the period.

¹⁰ Goss, P., & Sonnemann, J. (2016). Widening gaps: What NAPLAN tells us about student progress. Grattan Institute.

¹¹ ABS (2014) 'Educational outcomes, experimental estimates, Tasmania 2006-2013

¹² [Year 9 NAPLAN writing results the best predictor of HSC success: study \(smh.com.au\)](https://www.smh.com.au/education/year-9-naplan-writing-results-the-best-predictor-of-hsc-success-study-20210615)

¹³ Daffern, T., Mackenzie, N. M., & Hemmings, B. (2017). Predictors of writing success: How important are spelling, grammar and punctuation?. *Australian Journal of Education*, 61(1), 75-87.

¹⁴ Getenet, S., & Beswick, K. (2021). Predictors of children's achievement: analysis of the Australian National Numeracy Assessment Program. *Educational Assessment, Evaluation and Accountability*, 33(4), 591-620.

¹⁵ Wyatt-Smith, C and Jackson, C. (2016), NAPLAN data on writing: A picture of accelerating negative change, *Australian Journal of Language and Literacy*, Vol. 39, No. 3,

¹⁶ Thomas, D (2020), Rapid decline and gender disparities in the NAPLAN writing data, *The Australian Educational Researcher* (2020) 47:777-796

Research shows that primary school students' progress in writing lags behind that of reading because they are not receiving effective instruction in spelling and other language conventions. When the cognitive demands of writing are heightened by the arduous task of spelling, effective writing is compromised, also -adversely affecting students' confidence and motivation. As a result, many children fail to achieve standards of writing to support their personal and academic needs at secondary school and beyond.¹⁷ Students who experience difficulty with writing may be less likely to use writing to support and extend their learning to the wider curriculum, adversely affecting their eventual school completion prospects.

As is evident, Tasmania has some way to go to achieve 100% literacy, it is ambitious, but it is also possible.

Economic costs of poor literacy

Notwithstanding it's much improved economic performance over the past five or so years, Tasmania's economy remains the poorest, or among the poorest, of all the Australian states and territories by most conventional metrics.

In particular, Tasmania's per capita gross product – the broadest available measure of any state or territory's economic performance – was still more than \$16,000, or about 20% below the national average in the 2020-21 financial year, and the lowest of any state or territory.

Tasmania's per capita household disposable income in 2020-21 was about \$1,850, or 3¼%, below the national average – no longer the lowest in the nation, in fact ahead of South Australia, Queensland and (perhaps surprisingly) Victoria – but only because Tasmania is the only state or territory whose residents, in aggregate, receive more by way of social security benefits than they pay in personal income tax. If it were not for the redistributive impact of the national tax-transfer system, and of the way in which revenue from the GST is carved up among the states and territories, the margin between Tasmanian household disposable incomes and those of other Australians would be much closer to the gap between Tasmania's per capita gross product and that of other states and territories.

As a matter of arithmetic – not economic theory – the disparity in per capita gross product between Tasmania (or indeed any state or territory) and the national average is entirely attributable to three factors:

- the fact that a smaller percentage of Tasmania's population are employed than of any other state or territory – in 2020-21, only 47.4% of Tasmanians had a job, 2.7 percentage points less than the national average. This is partly attributable to Tasmania having a higher proportion of its population aged 65 or over than any other state or territory: but a smaller proportion of Tasmanians in every age group have jobs than the national average.
- the fact that those Tasmanians who do have jobs work fewer hours than their counterparts in other states and territories – by an average of 1.3 hours per week compared with the national average, which might not seem very much at first glance, but over the course of a full year is equivalent to Tasmanian workers having more than 10 extra public holidays than workers in the rest of Australia. The main reason for this discrepancy is that 38.6% of all

¹⁷ Daffern, T., Mackenzie, N. M., & Hemmings, B. (2017). Predictors of writing success: How important are spelling, grammar and punctuation?. *Australian Journal of Education*, 61(1), 75-87.

employed Tasmanians work part-time, a higher proportion than in any other state or territory, and 6.7 pc points above the national average.

- and, third, the fact that for each hour that they work, Tasmanian workers produce less than workers in any other state or territory except (for the first time, in 2020-21) South Australia and Queensland, and \$11.80 (or about 11%) below the national average. This is partly because industries with intrinsically high levels of labour productivity (such as mining, financial services, and professional and business services, are for different reasons under-represented in Tasmania): but it also reflects the fact that almost two-thirds of Tasmanian workers work in industries where labour productivity is below the corresponding national industry average.

One factor common to all of these contributors to Tasmania's consistently below-average performance as measured by per capita gross state product is Tasmania's equally persistently below-average levels of educational participation and attainment.

Research in both Australia and other countries demonstrates clear and unambiguous correlations between individuals' educational attainment (however measured) and the probability of their being employed, the probability of their being employed full- rather than part-time, and their earnings in employment (which is usually directly related to their productivity).

Tasmania's persistently poor educational outcomes, as indicated by NAPLAN results from Year 3 through Year 9, performance on other recognized assessments such as PISA and TIIMS, retention rates from Year 10 to Year 12, Year 12 certificate completion rates, and participation in and graduation from tertiary courses, are a major and longstanding factor in Tasmania's shortcomings on all three of the determinants of relative economic performance.

And since, as set out elsewhere in this submission, literacy and numeracy skills imparted in primary schools are the foundation for almost all subsequent steps in individuals' lifetime learning journals, the deficiencies in how Tasmania's education system imparts these foundational skills is a key reason why Tasmanians have long experienced lower material standards of living than most other Australians.

Socio-economic background is not an excuse

The Panel's consultation paper states that:

Independent sources have reported that fair comparison of Tasmanian students' achievement depends on taking into account socioeconomic status, and that students' progress is broadly in line with students in schools of similar socio-economic advantage in other states. [p19]

The Alliance does not dispute that socio-economic background is associated with low literacy performance, but insist that the passage quoted badly misses the point and should not be taken as any comfort whatsoever.

It is true that if we compare Tasmanian young people's literacy, as measured by NAPLAN, to the literacy of students in schools of similar Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage (ICSEA), then Tasmanian students' achievements are not very different from their interstate peers (but see an important qualification below). That is important, as it refutes one explanation for the **very great difference** between Tasmanian young people's low level of Year 12 attainment compared to their peers in like schools in other states – namely, that in general our primary and high schools do a worse job of educating their students than schools catering for similar students in other states. But it does not follow from this that we do not have a big problem with student literacy, but rather that if we have a problem with student literacy it is a problem that our students share with students of like schools in other states. In contradistinction to Year 12 attainment, where Tasmania has a big problem peculiar to our government school system.

Being 'disadvantaged' is not a quality of people, it is a feature or an outcome of what happens to some young people by virtue of their experiences in some of our institutions.

Some young Australians become disadvantaged through what they experience in their education and training journeys and the way they are treated, so it is our great challenge to change the mechanisms through which such disadvantage arises.

Lamb, S, Jackson, J, Walstab, A & Huo, S (2015), Educational opportunity in Australia 2015: Who succeeds and who misses out, Centre for International Research on Education Systems, Victoria University, for the Mitchell Institute, Melbourne: Mitchell Institute

Nor should we accept that a school-by-school comparison of Tasmanian schools with similar ICSEA schools in other states can stand in the place of a state-to-state comparison. A comparison at state level is still required for the reason that Tasmania must function as a state in competition with the whole of each of the other states within our federal system, and likewise individual Tasmanians must compete with all members of the other states (for example, in access to jobs and housing in an increasingly national market) and not just people from 'like ICSEA communities'.

We can use MySchool as a convenient source of data on our students' literacy and learning progress as measured by NAPLAN ([data from 2017 – 2019](#)), for both school by school and state to state comparisons. A particularly worrying picture emerges for both if we look at student progress in high school, even those attending our higher SES (more precisely, ICSEA) schools.

Tasmania's highest ICSEA government high schools are Tarooma, Riverside, and Clarence, while Rose Bay, Ogilvie, New Town, Kingston and Devonport are among the highest. Of these schools, only Tarooma is above the Australian average for reading, writing and numeracy at Year 9, even though both Riverside and Clarence are also above the Australian average for ICSEA. That is, Tasmania as a whole state has just one high school above the average Australian school for Year 9 NAPLAN, with Riverside about average for reading and writing and Rose Bay for writing. Moreover, students in all these schools mostly make less progress in reading, writing and numeracy from Year 7 to Year 9 than students in like ICSEA schools in other states, with Tarooma and Rose Bay in writing the only exceptions.

Students in disadvantaged schools make around two years less progress between Year 3 and Year 9 than similarly capable students in high advantage schools¹⁸.

¹⁸ Goss, P., & Sonnemann, J. (2016). Widening gaps: What NAPLAN tells us about student progress. Grattan Institute

Now it is clear why it is no comfort to accept that Tasmanian 'students' progress is broadly in line with students in schools of similar socio-economic advantage in other states. For it says that so far as literacy is concerned, our students' learning across the whole state of Tasmania is about on par with the poorer communities of the other states. It becomes immediately apparent what a problem that is for Tasmania, if we imagine what the response of the other states would be if we excised from their jurisdictions the communities of higher socio-economic advantage, and higher levels of literacy, than Tasmania, leaving just one of their high schools above the Australian average. They would consider it a crisis and an indicator of future economic and social decline. But that is our future if we allow our past and current disadvantage to explain away any claim that we urgently need to lift our levels of literacy.

Further, most of the learning gap develops between Year 3 and Year 9, not before Year 3. The gap that exists in Year 3 triples by Year 9. Even when capabilities are similar in Year 3, disadvantaged students fall between 12 months and 21 months behind more advantaged students by Year 9¹⁹.

Fortunately, research shows that the impact of socio-economic disadvantage can be significantly mediated through very systematic, structured, and explicit literacy instruction throughout the primary years, with a whole system commitment to assessment and intervention that ensures no student leaves primary school without proficient reading skills.

A quality education enables all individuals to improve their socioeconomic situation on the basis of merit, not circumstance. An effective education system maximises the potential of every student. It sets and supports high expectations for all learners.

Successful schooling is vital for low achievers, who will struggle in life if they do not build strong educational foundations in school.

Tasmania's literacy problem is a brake on its social and economic development. The magnitude of this is also evident from ABS Census of Population and Housing data on early school leaving, since 'achievement in literacy and numeracy has the strongest influence on school non-completion' and '[m]ultivariate analysis indicates that the effects of achievement [in literacy and numeracy] on school non-completion cannot be explained by background factors such as gender, SES, ethnicity, region, or school sector²⁰.

The 2016 census data published in the Social Health Atlas of Australia²¹ gives the age adjusted rate at which people in all of Australia's 540 local government areas left school at Year 10 or below or did not go to school. This is what we learn.

- Hobart was Tasmania's best performing LGA on this measure, at might be expected, but at 44th position.
- Only Kingborough (136th) joined Hobart in the top half of all of Australia's LGAs.
- Twenty of Tasmania's LGAs including Devonport, Latrobe and Burnie were in the bottom 25% of all of Australia's LGAs.

¹⁹ Goss, P., & Sonnemann, J. (2016). Widening gaps: What NAPLAN tells us about student progress. Grattan Institute.

²⁰ Marks, Gary and McMillan, Julie, "Early School Leavers: Who Are They, Why Do They Leave, and What Are the Consequences?" (2001). https://research.acer.edu.au/research_conference_2001/2

²¹ <https://phidu.torrens.edu.au/social-health-atlases/data#social-health-atlases-of-australia-local-government-areas>

If we consider the long-term future of Tasmania, this data should alarm us. It positions Tasmania as a 'failed state'. If we are to have a secure future, we must outperform our past by a very great margin. We cannot do that if we do not dramatically improve our literacy, and thereby our level of education, and then our living standards, health and even life-expectancy. Performing 'as might be expected' is a recipe for Tasmania continuing to fall behind the other states with which we compete for talent and investment, and of course also other countries whose improvement in educational outcomes is outstripping Australia's. And for individual Tasmanians, it presages a future in which they will be increasingly uncompetitive for jobs that are attractive to applicants from other states and, as has recently been a matter of public concern, are priced out of the housing market by higher paid arrivals from interstate and overseas.

Part 2: Community-wide literacy issues in Tasmania

This section addresses community-wide literacy issues in Tasmania which are either not sufficiently addressed in the Setting the Scene community consultation paper or are missing altogether but should be provided serious consideration in developing a framework to achieve the Tasmanian Government aim of 100% literacy.

Literacy and well-being

Not only does the struggle with reading and writing -detract from educational outcomes and prosperity over the lifespan, it can also have a detrimental impact on well-being.

Reading difficulties are the most common learning difficulty in Australia. Around 10 per cent of children have significant to severe reading difficulties, representing between two and four children in a typical Australian primary school classroom²².

Reading difficulties can severely -affect children's lives. The notion that children who struggle with reading experience poor self-esteem is widely reported, anecdotally and empirically, and many adults also report that having a reading difficulty had a devastating impact on their self-esteem as they navigated their way through schooling.

Many children, adolescents and adults with reading challenges, but not all, report feeling a sense of shame and frustration about their reading difficulties, and also report poor self-esteem. Many also remain confident, resilient, and optimistic about their academic and employment choices.

The scientific literature confirms that children with reading difficulties are at elevated risk of experiencing emotional difficulties, including poor self-esteem, as well as symptoms of both anxiety and depression²³. This systematic review and meta-analysis concluded that the links between reading difficulties and emotional health difficulties are very real²⁴. The relationship between poor reading and average self-concept was both reliable and moderately strong whereby self-concept is an individual's belief about themselves, which is developed through experience and interactions with

²² Boyes, M., Leitao, S., Claessen, M., Badcock, N., and Nayton, M. (2020) Understanding links between reading difficulties, self-esteem, and child mental health, *The Bulletin, Learning Difficulties Australia*

²³ McArthur, G. M., Filardi, N., Francis, D.A., Boyes, M.E, & Badcock, N.A. (2020). Self-concept in poor readers: a systematic review and meta-analysis. *PeerJ*, 8:e8772.

²⁴ Francis, D., McArthur, G. (2020) Poor reading, poor self-concept, and anxiety: A review of the evidence and some practical advice, *The Bulletin, Learning Difficulties Australia*

their environment in different domains of life, such as academia, school, work, home, social life, and physical appearance.

There is considerable evidence now that the self-beliefs children develop about their learning affect achievement motivation and achievement outcomes. Children who experience initial and ongoing learning difficulties often develop a cluster of negative self-beliefs that impede efforts to provide effective remediation. This cluster involves developing negative academic self-concepts, loss of self-esteem, diminished beliefs that they can bring about successful learning outcomes, and an overall view that trying hard doesn't work so it's better not to try but to just give up.²⁵

Associated with low self-esteem for a considerable proportion of children with reading difficulties are behavioural difficulties and social-emotional difficulties: that is, being disruptive in class, withdrawn or lacking in concentration, or showing other behavioural disturbances. Research shows that although students may be assessed with emotional and behavioural difficulties (EBD), this may actually mask the real problem, which is that the student is struggling with basic literacy skills²⁶.

We need to ask the question - are the behaviour issues causing the reading problem or is the reading problem causing the behaviour issues?

The impact of reading difficulties on wellbeing also permeates higher education. A recent study of university students found that those with a history of reading difficulties had lower academic achievement than those without such a history, are more likely to withdraw from their first year of study, and are at higher risk of not completing their degree.²⁷ The difficulties encountered by university students often involve poor reading fluency (accuracy and speed of reading) and low reading comprehension. The research also found that university students with reading difficulties not only struggle academically at university, but they are also vulnerable to experiencing anxiety.

Without effective intervention, negative reading self-concepts spread to generalised negative academic self-concepts: that is, enduring reading problems tend to spread to the wider curriculum. Persistent early reading difficulties typically result in ongoing academic underachievement and negative trajectories related to school engagement, behaviour, and attendance.

However, although rates of emotional difficulties are indeed higher among struggling readers, recent research also found that many children with reading difficulties are very resilient²⁸.

²⁵ Chapman, J. (2020). Learning to read is about words AND mind, The Bulletin, Learning Difficulties Australia

²⁶ Nicholson, T. (2020). What do you call someone who is disruptive in class?, The Bulletin, Learning Difficulties Australia

²⁷ Soares, S. and Badcock, N. (2020). Does reading anxiety impact on academic achievement at university?, The Bulletin, Learning Difficulties Australia

²⁸ Boyes, M., Leitao, S., Claessen, M., Badcock, N., and Nayton, M. (2020) Understanding links between reading difficulties, self-esteem, and child mental health, The Bulletin, Learning Difficulties Australia

Table 1. Summary of risk and resilience-promoting factors

Risk Factors	Resilience- promoting factors
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Low self-esteem • Academic failure • Shame, stigma and feeling ‘different’ • Experiences of being bullied • Peer relationship problems • Teacher training (early literacy) • Unsupportive teachers and school staff • Transition to high school • Financial cost and lack of resources • Lack of government recognition (and associated funding/resources) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Early diagnosis • Identifying any child strengths • Positive general self-concept or perception • Strong relationship with parents • Strong relationships with friends/ peers • Strong and supportive teacher relationships • Supportive school environment • Connection with school

Source: Boyes, M., Leitao, S., Claessen, M., Badcock, N., and Nayton, M. (2020) Understanding links between reading difficulties, self-esteem, and child mental health, *The Bulletin, Learning Difficulties Australia*

The consequences of reading difficulties leading to poor self-esteem and behavioural issues can include disengaged and disruptive behaviour, suspension and exclusion, early school leaving, under- and unemployment, and engagement with the youth justice system²⁹.

There is an urgent need to support children with reading difficulties at multiple levels – taking into consideration the unique experiences of each child, as well as the important role of family, peers, teachers and schools, government, and broader society in understanding the emotional impacts of reading difficulties on wellbeing.

Standing Committee on Employment, Education and Training Inquiry into Adult Literacy

The Standing Committee on Employment, Education and Training undertook an inquiry into adult literacy and its importance. The inquiry examined the importance of developing strong language, literacy, numeracy, and digital literacy (LLND) skills, overcoming barriers to learning, and the ability of existing adult education programs and providers to meet demand.

The Committee released its report and recommendations on 22 March 2022.

It found that while Australia aspires to a world class school system, which provides universal access to quality education, the reality is that too many children are falling through the cracks. This failure at a schools system level has a detrimental impact on work and life choices as an adult.

Too many Australians leave school with language, literacy, numeracy, and digital literacy (LLND) skills gaps that limit opportunities and life choices including reduced labour force participation and wages, poorer health outcomes and incarceration.

It concluded that improving adult LLND skills in Australia will help individuals find meaningful employment, earn higher wages, and achieve personal fulfillment, and make Australia a more prosperous, competitive economy.

²⁹ Graham, L.J., White, S.L.J., Tancredi, H.A., Snow, P. C., & Cologon, K. (2020). A longitudinal analysis of the alignment between children’s early word-level reading trajectories, teachers’ reported concerns and supports provided. *Reading and Writing: An Interdisciplinary Journal*

To achieve this, the Committee made 15 recommendations to be undertaken within a specified time frame. These recommendations address key areas of reform to improve adult LLND skills, including:

- Improving outcomes in the schooling system, including appropriate resourcing
- support for whole of community and family LLND education programs for socially and economically marginalised Australians
- improved data collection to drive evidence-based policy and outcomes
- greater support for Australians with specific learning disabilities (SLDs) such as dyslexia
- campaigns to raise awareness of SLDs, the challenges people with low LLND skills face, and where people can access support
- recognition that English as an Additional Language or Dialect learners require the support of qualified Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) educators to maximise their educational achievement
- an increase in the number of specialist adult literacy teachers and TESOL educators
- support for measures that raise English LLND skills in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities that are consistent with the National Agreement on Closing the Gap, such as the Literacy for Life Foundation's delivery of Yes, I Can! adult literacy campaigns
- a range of measures to ensure Australians with low LLND skills can access vital services.

The Tasmanian 100 percent Literacy Alliance recommends that the Tasmanian Government accept and implement all recommendations made at a State level and endorse those at a National level.

Learning disabilities

A number of Australian research studies indicate that between 10 and 16 per cent of students are perceived by their teachers to have learning difficulties which have support needs that extend beyond those normally addressed by classroom teachers under differentiated teaching practices. Within the population of students with learning difficulties, there is a smaller sub-set of students who show persistent and long-lasting learning impairments. These are identified as students with a learning disability, such as dyslexia and/or language disorder³⁰.

It is estimated that approximately 4 per cent of Australian students have a learning disability. In Tasmania, that equates to around 3,270 students³¹.

Students with a learning disability have a neurological disorder, rather than intellectual impairment, and present with varying degrees of unexpected under-achievement in one or more areas of literacy: reading, spelling or writing, and/or numeracy, 80 per cent of whom struggle with reading.

All of these children have the right to receive the appropriate support and interventions to enable them to become literate adults and participate fully in our society and economy, as per the Tasmanian Government's goal.

Neurological disorders present as persistent and long-lasting learning impairments which require educational support needs extending beyond those normally addressed by classroom teachers

³⁰ Louden, W., Chan, L., Elkins, J., Greaves, D., House, H., Milton, M., Nichols, S., Rivalland, J., Rohl, M., & van Kraayennoord, C. (2000). Mapping the territory, primary students with learning difficulties: Literacy and numeracy, Vol. 1, 2,

³¹ ABS, Schools, 2021, <https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/people/education/schools/latest-release>

under differentiated teaching practices, governed by the reasonable adjustments framework within the Disability Standards for Education 2005.

While it is understood that in Australia there is no clear definition of learning disabilities and that this has implications for policy development, resourcing and effective teaching practices, these children should not miss out on becoming literate and receiving the appropriate interventions they need in the education environment.

This lack of definition and understanding originated from a 1979 report by the Australian House of Representatives Select Committee on Specific Learning Difficulties which determined there was insufficient evidence that learning difficulties experienced by students were intrinsic in origin, a requirement for the use of the term 'disabilities'. The Committee therefore recommended the use of the term 'learning difficulties' to refer to students who experience difficulties in reading, spelling, writing and/or mathematics despite a terminological difference between 'experiencing learning difficulties' and 'having learning disabilities', and without regard for a specific diagnosis³².

Even so, the Disability Discrimination Act 1992, which is designed to protect people with disability from discrimination in access to education, includes in its definition of disability 'a disorder or malfunction that results in the person learning differently from a person without the disorder or malfunction'. More recently, significant advancements in cognitive science research have contributed to expanding the understanding of the cognitive processes of learning and the underlying causes of learning disabilities.

All students with learning disabilities have the right to access the curriculum at the same level as their peers. Given students with learning disabilities have an underlying neurological disorder impacting their cognitive processes, the key to supporting them achieve their educational potential is through evidence-based practice. Structured literacy refers to the content and methods or principles of instruction for teaching how to read, write and use language in an explicit, systematic and cumulative manner. Structured literacy includes: phonological awareness – particularly phonemic awareness, (systematic, synthetic) phonics, fluency, vocabulary and comprehension, as well as oral language – the big six. This works best within a whole-class RTI model with strong Tier 1 instruction, as it provides for regular screening and progress monitoring to inform evidence-based teaching practices and required intervention and intensity for all students.

“The bottom line for me is that no one is a non-responder. No matter how severely delayed the students, they will respond to intervention provided they are given the right instruction and in the right amounts.”

- Steve Truch, the Reading League.

Cost to economy and society of learning disabilities

In a study³³ of the economic impact of childhood developmental language disorder (DLD) on individuals, families and society, using a national Australian panel data set of 10,000 children—the Longitudinal Study of Australian Children (LSAC), it was found that the total cost to society of

³² Elkins, J. (2007), Learning Disabilities: Bringing Friends and Nations Together, Journal of Learning Disabilities, Vol. 40. No. 5. Pp 392-399

³³ Cronin, P (2017), The Economic Impact of Childhood Development Language Disorder, University of the Technology Sydney, unpublished thesis

language difficulties is estimated to be between \$1.362 billion per year and \$3.308 billion per year (based on a prevalence range 7 to 17 per cent). Productivity losses account for the largest proportion of this cost, with 42% attributable to productivity losses of the child's mother, 30% attributable to productivity losses of the child and 28% attributable to costs borne by the health and welfare system.

The results of the study provide strong evidence of the impact of language difficulties on future earning potential, as a result of low levels of literacy and numeracy. This effect is greater than the effect socioeconomic disadvantage alone. The results also demonstrate that early identification and intervention exerts a positive effect on cognitive and non-cognitive skills.

The study also investigated the labour force decisions of families with a child with DLD by measuring the indirect costs associated with reduced maternal labour force participation. This study highlights that the impact of language difficulties on labour force participation is considerable and represents the largest proportion of overall costs. The results show that carers of children with language difficulties substitute paid for unpaid work by working fewer hours, however, when their child's condition is severe or persistent, mothers are less likely to be employed at all.

An additional study³⁴, shows that for children with speech, language and communication needs (SLCN) there is an indirect cost associated with a child's future employment prospects because of the child's low literacy and numeracy, which in turn affects adult labour force participation (LFP) and wages. The study found that for children with SLCN there was a lifetime cost of \$21.677 billion compared with those children without SLCN due to a decrease in academic achievement, workforce participation and wages. However, the study also found that speech pathology treatment has a positive effect on work participation and wages, reducing the cost lifetime cost by \$5.22 billion for children with SCLN in Australia.

Youth Justice

Disengagement from education and barriers to literacy and learning ranging from trauma through to unmet learning or wellbeing needs are exacerbating the trajectory of young people into the justice system. When people cannot speak out, they'll act out. Up to 90% of young people in contact with the justice system in Australia have measurable spoken language impairment and for 46% of these the impairment is in the severe range³⁵.

The intersections between improving literacy and diverting young people from crime must form part of an integrated future response. There is an opportunity through the announced amalgamation of the Department of Education with parts of the Department of Communities (Child and Youth Services) that can and should allow for better integrated case management of young people at risk. Identifying those young people who are disengaged from education as early as possible should trigger a targeted intervention that supports their engagement with learning alongside their wellbeing needs.

It is our recommendation that an investment in trauma-informed, restorative, and therapeutic early interventions for young people at risk, starting with those disengaged from their learning should be

³⁴ Cronin, P., Reeve, R., McCabe, P., Viney, R., & Goodall, S. (2020). Academic achievement and productivity losses associated with speech, language and communication needs. *International Journal of Language & Communication Disorders*, 55(5), 734-750.

³⁵ Back on Track – Speech Pathology in Youth Justice Custodial Education, Speech Pathology Australia Ltd and Monash University, 2013

a key focus of not only the Literacy Advisory Panel's findings, but of those working on the new Youth Justice Blueprint for Tasmania. A move away from incarcerating young people to one that diverts and facilitates engagement with education and prosocial networks is a key part of achieving 100% literacy for all Tasmanians. The over-reliance on incarceration of young offenders is a poor investment economically³⁶ and rather than deter crime³⁷, it entrenches existing disadvantage and trauma, increasing the likelihood of ongoing criminal justice system involvement often across multiple generations. Over half (58.3%) of youth involved in the justice system will be under supervision again within 12 months³⁸. A high percentage of Tasmanian youth involved with the justice system also continue to have contact with the justice system as an adult³⁹, a trend we could reduce significantly through diversion programs with a focus on literacy, emotional regulation and prosocial relational skills.

Investing in programs and supports that promote prosocial communication development alongside literacy interventions can also serve as restorative diversion options and sentencing alternatives to the detention model currently in place⁴⁰. For those young people at risk, those who are disengaged from school and learning but not yet in the justice system, we are missing a critical intervention point. It is in the early identification of disengagement from school or learning where more targeted, individualised interventions could be offered for these young people directly as well as whole family support to restore engagement and learning pathways.

Systemic advocacy⁴¹ and skilled support around prosocial communication skills can also enable young people to speak for themselves and share personal experiences and feelings. Alongside the traditional components of literacy, a greater focus is needed on building emotional regulation, relational trust, and language skills for expressing needs and experiences. Similarly, young people also need support to understand their rights and responsibilities under the law and without strong literacy and language skills they have no capacity to understand the legal process.

Improving literacy rates in Tasmania and diverting young people away from incarceration also necessitates the raising the age of criminal responsibility to at least 14 years in line with recommendations of the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child. The raising of the age of criminal responsibility is based on evidence that the frontal cortex of children aged 12 and 13 is still developing, and their capacity for abstract reasoning is still evolving, therefore they are unlikely to understand the impact of their actions or criminal proceedings⁴². If they have literacy barriers or other communication needs this only adds to the reason why the age should be increased. There is

³⁶ Back on Track – Speech Pathology in Youth Justice Custodial Education, Speech Pathology Australia Ltd and Monash University, 2013

³⁷ Australian Government Productivity Commission, Report on Government Services 2022, Part F Community Services, Section 17 Youth Justice Services, 25 January 2022

³⁸ Weatherburn, D, Imprisonment, reoffending and Australia's crime decline, Judicial Officers Bulletin, September 2021, Vol. 33, No. 8

³⁹ Report on Government Services – Youth Justice 2021

⁴⁰ Back on Track – Speech Pathology in Youth Justice Custodial Education, Speech Pathology Australia Ltd and Monash University, 2013

⁴¹ M Sotiri and S Russell, 'Pathways home: How can we deliver better outcomes for people who have been in prison?' Housing Works, Vol. 15, No. 3, 2018, 41; Sotiri (2016) Churchill Fellowship Report

⁴² United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child, General comment No. 24: Children's rights in the child justice system, CRC/C/GC/24 (18 September 2019) para 22

also significant evidence that youth detention will increase the likelihood of subsequent reoffending and lower the chances of that child completing education or securing employment⁴³

Part 3: How to achieve 100% literacy in Tasmania

This section focusses on how to achieve 100% literate Tasmanian adults.

While the Tasmanian Government has set a target that all grade 7 students will start high school above the expected level of reading by no later than 2030, they have set a very low bar which will not result in Tasmanians being literate as defined by the Literacy Advisory Panel.

While Progress Achievement Tests (PATs) assessments are an appropriate measurement tool, the target minimum achievement level of 118 set by the Government is too low. This is the equivalent of the 19th percentile for the population.

Further, NAPLAN national minimum standards (NMS) are set very low.

It is hard to aim high when the bar is set so low.

A student performing just above the national minimum standard in Year 3 needs to make only about one year of progress every two years to stay above the minimum standard in Years 5, 7, and 9. Setting such low standards increases the risk of overlooking students who require additional support to make adequate progress⁴⁴.

A Year 9 student can meet the national minimum standard even if they are performing below the typical Year 5 student. These students can be four years behind their peers⁴⁵. Given that it is year 9 NAPLAN writing results which best predict successful school completion, and that it is spelling and punctuation that predicts competent writing skills, appropriate measurements and milestones should be developed for all learning domains along the schooling continuum.

To achieve the long-term aim of 100% literacy for the adult population, the Government must ensure that all Tasmanians successfully complete their schooling by meeting the literacy standard expected to be able to participate in further education, training, work and society. The Tasmanian Government should introduce a literacy benchmark to successfully complete the Tasmanian Certificate of Education, similar to that used in Western Australia, OLNA⁴⁶.

The OLNA is an online literacy and numeracy assessment. It is designed to enable students to successfully meet the Western Australian Certificate of Education (WACE) requirement of demonstrating the minimum standard of literacy and numeracy.

To successfully meet the literacy requirement in reading and writing, students must demonstrate the skills regarded as essential to meet the demands of everyday life and work in a knowledge-based economy. These skills are described in Level 3 of the Australian Core Skills Framework and are equivalent to Band 8 of the Year 9 NAPLAN reading and writing tests.

⁴³ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, Young people returning to sentenced youth justice supervision 2014–15 (Report, Juvenile justice series no. 20, 22 July 2016)

⁴⁴ Goss, P., & Sonnemann, J. (2016). Widening gaps: What NAPLAN tells us about student progress. Grattan Institute.

⁴⁵ Goss, P., & Sonnemann, J. (2016). Widening gaps: What NAPLAN tells us about student progress. Grattan Institute.

⁴⁶ <https://senior-secondary.scsa.wa.edu.au/assessment/olna>

Efficacy of existing programs

We should not presume that the provision of programs automatically translates to productive investment which improves the literacy outcomes of the recipients/participants. The question needs to be asked – how do the policies, initiatives and programs on the extensive list provided in the Setting the Scene paper actually map to the ‘big six’ and do they meet the efficacy test? What is the opportunity cost of these programs? How could the investment in improving literacy in Tasmania be more effective?

These programs should all be independently evaluated against the evidence base, using a tool similar to that developed by the Australian Education Research Organisation (AERO). The AERO evidence rubric is a tool to help evaluate the effectiveness of a new or existing policy, program or practice against standards of evidence. The evidence rubric can be used to analyse a particular approach in two ways: to decide whether or not to implement a certain approach in context or to assess confidence in the effectiveness of an existing approach.

All the policies, programs and practices currently in place and identified by the Panel should be evaluated accordingly. Those that don’t meet at least high levels of confidence should not be continued. Funding attached to these policies, programs and/or practices should be redirected to investment in any new policies, programs and practices which are designed and implemented to meet at least high levels of confidence according to the evidence rubric.

Improving literacy outcomes in school

Student progress, learning gaps and whole school improvement should be put at the centre of education policy. Much of the focus about how to improve educational outcomes is related to the amount of funding, rather than the policies and practices required to improve learning outcomes.

Analysis of progress and learning gaps should inform system priorities, resource allocation, as well as needs-based funding policies.

The best way to improve outcomes and achieve the Tasmanian Government’s target is to focus on individual learning progress and implementing a whole-school improvement program with appropriate funding, leadership support, professional learning access to professional support services similar to the School Success Model in NSW.

The NSW School Success Model⁴⁷ is a whole-system, evidence-led reform program that aims to strengthen shared accountability across the system by putting in place clearer targets for school improvement, lifting capability through the design of new system support and sharing best practice across the system.

There are three key objectives:

- developing quality-assured, evidence-led support around the needs of each school and their students to lift attendance, achievement and wellbeing
- sharing accountability for student improvement by putting in place clearer targets, lifting capability and sharing what works best
- freeing up more time for teachers, principals and school staff to spend on activities that improve student outcomes around teaching, learning and leading.

⁴⁷ [School Success Model explained \(nsw.gov.au\)](https://www.nsw.gov.au/school-success-model)

Tiered Instruction: Response to Intervention (RTI) or Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS)

There is a growing body of evidence which finds the intervention programs used for struggling readers and those with learning difficulties are ineffective. Several evaluations⁴⁸ of the predominant program for reading difficulties in Australia, Reading Recovery, found no evidence for positive effects on children's reading achievement over the long term, and a negative impact in the medium term. Further, a review of 20 intervention programs used in Australia by Dr Kate de Bruin for Catholic Education Melbourne⁴⁹ found that only one program had a large and robust evidence base supporting its use; seven programs were either ineffective or unsupported by sufficient evidence to produce the desired outcomes; and that eight interventions incorporated inefficient instructional practices (either completely or partially) which are not aligned with the consistent research findings about the best ways to teach literacy.

An alternative intervention approach is the whole-class Response to Intervention (RTI) model. A multi-tiered model of instruction based on need, RTI aims to improve educational outcomes for all students through the early identification of students who require additional support and to direct appropriate resourcing and intensity of instruction to meet the educational needs of the student. The RTI model also enables the identification of students with learning disabilities, before they fail. Tiers of instructional approaches operationalise the RTI model, supported by on-going screening and progress monitoring assessment. Beginning with whole-class core instruction which meets the needs of at least 80 per cent of the class (Tier 1), RTI then increases instructional intensity for students whose screening data identifies they are below expected benchmarks. Tier 2 interventions supplement Tier 1 core instruction with the aim that the support is targeted to specific areas of skill, usually in small groups, to support learning progress and return the student/s to Tier 1. Tier 3 intervention is provided to those students who do not respond to Tier 2 intervention, and require individualised support with an appropriately qualified educator, typically one-to-one with high levels of intensity and frequency. Critically, the RTI model is only effective if Tier 1 instruction provides for a strong foundation of evidence-based teaching instruction, otherwise too many students require the resource intensive interventions at Tiers 2 or 3.

Early screening and diagnosis

There are some early signs that may place a child at risk for the acquisition of literacy skills. Preschool children with speech and language delays and disorders are at high risk of problems learning to read and write when they enter school⁵⁰. It can also affect their peer relationships and lead to social, emotional and behavioural difficulties⁵¹, which further confound the process of learning. Other factors include physical or medical conditions such as preterm birth requiring placement in a neonatal intensive care unit, chronic ear infections, foetal alcohol syndrome, cerebral palsy, developmental disorders (e.g., intellectual disabilities, autism spectrum), poverty, home

⁴⁸ Buckingham, J (2019), Reading Recovery: A failed investment, Policy Paper, Five from Five and MultiLit

⁴⁹ De Bruin, K (2020) Tier 2 Literacy Interventions in Australian Schools: A review of the evidence Version 2.0, Catholic Education Melbourne

⁵⁰ Hayiou-Thomas M, Carroll J, Leavett R, Hulme C, & Snowling M (2016) 'When does speech sound disorder matter for literacy? The role of disordered speech errors, co-occurring language impairment and family risk of dyslexia'. *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry* 58: 197–205.

⁵¹ Murphy S, Faulkner D, & Farley L (2014) 'The behaviour of young children with social communication disorders during dyadic interaction with peers'. *Journal of Abnormal Child Psychology* 42: 277–89.

literacy environment, and family history of language or literacy disabilities. Early screening of language difficulties and diagnosis by appropriate allied health professionals is critical in arresting risks to emergent literacy development.

GAPS, the Grammar and Phonology Screen⁵², is a free, ten-minute test enabling professionals in education, health and social care, to establish whether children have, or are at risk of, the challenge of language difficulties or disorders. The test, for three and a half to six and half year olds, The GAPS test is a quick and simple screening test used to assess the grammatical abilities and key pre-reading skills of children. The test assesses whether the child has appropriate knowledge of how to use grammatical rules to create sentences and whether they know the rules underlying how to add sounds together to correctly make words - language skills crucial if they are to understand instructions and learn to communicate in spoken and written form. Those who show difficulty at this level should undertake further assessment from education psychologists and/or and speech and language pathologists for formal diagnoses and recommendations for intervention.

The Alliance recommends that the Tasmanian Government implements the GAPS test as part of the 4-year-old Child Health Nurse check to identify any language deficiencies in children of pre-school age. In the instance whereby a child starts school at either kindergarten or preparatory without having undertaken the GAPS test, then the test should be implemented within the first two weeks of the school year.

To make a difference to literacy outcomes, all low results on follow-up assessments indicated by the GAPS, must then lead directly to pathways of early intervention and support. These pathways must be designed to enfold direct language and literacy instruction as well as social-relational support to families of identified children. They must also directly inform the intake process for these children as they enter school, so the children's early intervention can be immediately continued in classrooms.

Invest in the allied health sector

The Tasmanian 100% Literacy Alliance implores the Panel to recognise the role that allied health professionals, including speech pathologists, occupational therapists and social workers, play in developing the relationship and communication skills required for prosocial connection, as well as for language growth, communication access, literacy, and further learning. This recognition should come in the form of increased human resources in these professions. These increased resources should be present in early years programs, Child & Family Centres, schools, TasTAFE, Libraries Tasmania programs, the University of Tasmania, all correctional facilities including Community Corrections, Neighbourhood Houses, and other community-based supports and outreach programs. Acknowledging the nationwide shortage of these professionals, Tasmania, in its *seriousness* about 100% literacy, should make substantial efforts to recruit, *pay in equivalent manner to the mainland*, and direct and support the work of these professionals and the assets they can contribute to flourishing multidisciplinary education across community. We live in the most beautiful and safe place on earth. We *can* attract these professionals. Pay them well and bring them here.

Medicine has long understood the value of multi-disciplinary teams. It has also traditionally in our history, positioned itself in a more imperialistic place of presumed importance and power than education. Yet education comes first. Health outcomes are positively correlated with education.

⁵² [GAPS - HvdL Foundation](#), [Grammar and Phonology Screening Test | Early Years Measures Database | Education Endowment Foundation](#) | [EEF](#)

Language and literacy are therefore matters of public health. Education across the community, not just in schools, should learn from medicine and build its multi-disciplinary teams. This will remove pressure on educators who currently are expected to manage all the health and disability variables of their students without training to do so. Worse, the daily practice occurrence in almost every Tasmanian school is that completely untrained Teacher Assistants deliver medications, are charged with delivery of the most complex learning interventions without adequate support to do so, and too often are left unsupported to make decisions about the nuance of those learning programs. The presence in educators' workplaces of trusted health-science colleagues with these various knowledges will increase educators' capacity. It will increase their aspiration and their supported uptake of scientific process. Then, within the important field of education, all comers will be well-served, not just the privileged.

Initial Teacher Education (ITE)

The greatest barrier to achieving 100% literacy for Tasmanians into the future is the lack of scale and consistency in evidence-based Initial Teacher Education (ITE). In our universities, pre-service teachers are not taught the instructional approaches to literacy that research shows have the greatest impact.

A 2019 report⁵³ shows that in 81 (70%) of the 116 literacy units reviewed, none of the five essential elements of effective evidence-based reading instruction were mentioned in the unit outlines. All five essential elements were referred to in only 6% of literacy unit outlines.

Most Tasmanian primary school educators were initially trained in 'whole language' or 'balanced literacy' reading instruction, however, these approaches have now been extensively disproven as the most effective way to teach life-long literacy knowledge and skills.

Despite this evidence, initial teacher education (ITE), professional learning for practicing teachers and associated resources still align with the balanced literacy approach to teaching reading.

Unless our pre-service teachers are equipped with the knowledge and skill to provide evidence-based literacy instruction, Tasmanian will not achieve the long-term aspiration of 100% literate adults. Pre-service teaching programs must not only teach according to the evidence, they must actively cease from teaching methods that do not have top-ranking evidence bases.

It is critical that pre-service teachers are trained in structured literacy instruction. The Tasmanian Government needs to work with the ITE providers (Universities) to ensure that course content aligns with the science of learning how to read and write.

Implementation

Evidence-based policies, practices and interventions that are poorly implemented – or not implemented at all – will not produce the desired outcome of achieving 100 percent literacy in Tasmania.

In implementing the Community-wide Framework for achieving 100 per cent literacy in Tasmania the Government should harness the strategies and methods of implementation science.

⁵³ Buckingham, J. and Meeks, L., (2019), Short-changed: Preparation to teaching reading in Initial Teacher Education, Research Report, MultiLit and Five from Five.

Implementation science is a method for ensuring that research – evidence – translates into practice effectively.

Implementation science facilitates the uptake of evidence-based practice and research into regular use by practitioners and policymakers and aims to systematically close the gap between what we know and what we do (often referred to as the know-do gap).

Informed by the disciplines of knowledge translation, program evaluation, service design and science and innovation, implementation science identifies and addresses the barriers that slow or halt the uptake of proven evidence-based practices and interventions.

Importantly, intervention science differs from evaluation and intervention effectiveness in that it focusses on the strategies used to implement the evidence-based practices.

END