

# **Improving literacy for Tasmanian students**

**Submission to the Lifting Literacy, Lifting Tasmania consultation process, March 2022**

Jordana Hunter

**Table of contents**

1 Improving literacy should be a top priority for Tasmania . . . . . 3

2 Effective reading instruction in schools . . . . . 6

3 A strategy for improving reading in Tasmania . . . . . 7

# 1 Improving literacy should be a top priority for Tasmania

When children do not learn to read fluently and efficiently, it can undermine their future learning across all subject areas, harm their self-esteem, and limit their life chances. For communities, poor literacy levels can lead to worse social outcomes, lower productivity, and less economic growth.<sup>1</sup>

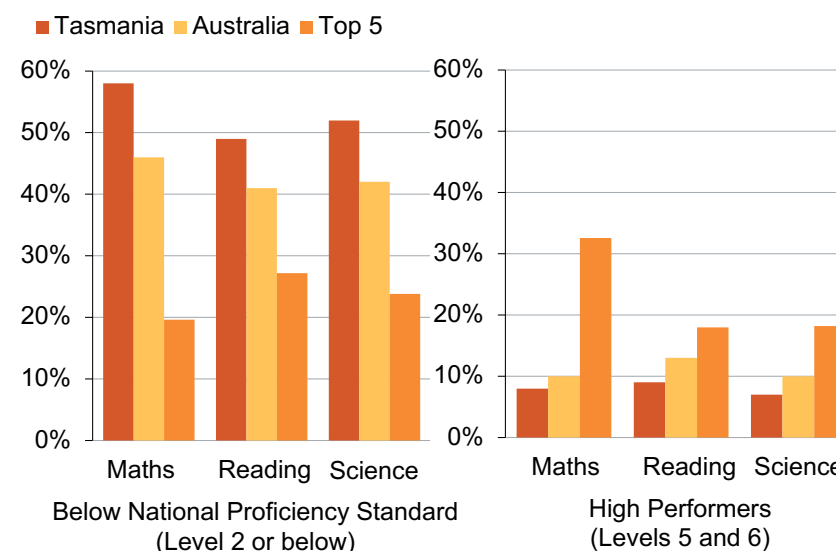
Australia has an unacceptably high number of adolescents who fail to reach minimum proficiency standards in reading. The OECD's 2018 Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) test showed that two in five Australian 15-year-olds fall short of Australia's proficient reading standard.<sup>2</sup> Australia also had fewer high achievers in reading, compared to the top PISA performers on the assessment (see Figure 1.1). Analysis of the 2021 NAPLAN data shows that the gap in reading between advantaged and disadvantaged students in Australia is already very wide by the time students are in Year 3 – the equivalent of 2 years and 4 months of learning – and more than doubles to 5 years and 1 month by the time students are in Year 9 (Figure 1.2).

Tasmania also faces significant challenges. Tasmania's performance on PISA lags Australia's national average and is well behind that of the top PISA performers internationally (Figure 1.1). Tasmanian students' PISA performance has also declined significantly over time. In fact, in 2018 Tasmanian students were, on average, about a year behind where they were on the first PISA reading assessment in 2000 (Figure 1.3).

By comparison, Australia's overall PISA reading assessment results during this time declined by the equivalent of nine months of learning. As measured by NAPLAN, the learning gap between advantaged and

**Figure 1.1: Both high- and low-performing Australian and Tasmanian students fall short compared to the best PISA performers**

PISA 2018 results - percentage in each proficiency band, by subject, Tasmania, Australia, and Top 5



Notes: Top five countries/economies for Maths includes B-S-J-Z (Beijing, Shanghai, Jiangsu and Zhejiang), Singapore, Macao (China), Hong Kong and Taiwan. Top five for Reading includes B-S-J-Z, Singapore, Macao, Hong Kong (China), Estonia. Top five for science includes B-S-J-Z, Singapore, Macao (China), Estonia, and Japan.

Sources: OECD (2020) and Thomson et al (2019).

1. NSW CESE (2016).

2. Students who are proficient at PISA Level 3 or above are assessed as having attained Australia's National Proficient Standard, and having demonstrated more than the minimal skills expected in the domain. See Thomson et al (2019, p. xiv).

disadvantaged students in Tasmania in 2021 was also a little wider than it was across Australia as a whole (Figure 1.4).

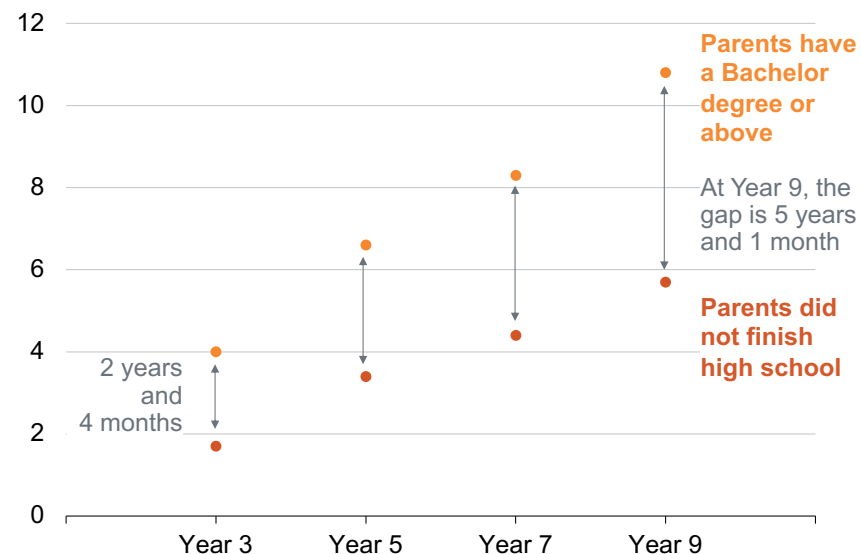
After the Northern Territory, Tasmania has the highest proportion of disadvantaged schools in Australia. Grattan Institute's 2018 report, *Measuring student progress: A state-by-state report card*, showed that based on NAPLAN results and after taking account of socio-economic factors, Tasmanian students' learning progress is generally similar to the national average.<sup>3</sup> This suggests Tasmanian schools on average are not doing a bad job by Australian standards. Rather, they are doing a tough job about as well as other jurisdictions.

There is significant room for improvement, however. Tasmania faces a range of challenges regarding the development of strong literacy skills across its population, particularly in terms of reaching its aspirational goal of 100 per cent functional literacy, along with a broader goal of significantly reducing the almost 50 per cent of Tasmanian students who fall short of Australia's benchmark proficiency level in PISA. The work of the Tasmanian Government's Literacy Advisory Panel is a welcome part of the broader effort to overcome these challenges.

This submission to the panel's *Lifting Literacy, Lifting Tasmania* consultation process draws on Grattan Institute's research on teaching quality and school improvement, as well as reviews of evidence-based literacy practice. This submission focuses specifically on reading, but we acknowledge that writing, listening, and speaking are also key literacy skills that warrant further attention.

**Figure 1.2: There is a large equity-based reading gap in Australia**

Equivalent year level, NAPLAN reading, median, Australia, 2021



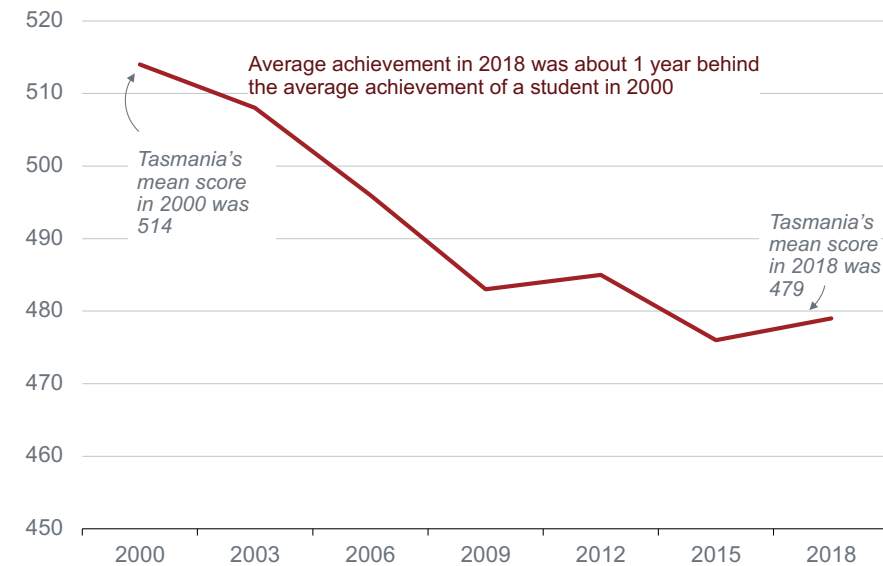
Note: Grattan analysis of ACARA (2021) using Goss et al (2016) methodology for determining equivalent year levels.

Sources: Goss et al (2016) and ACARA (2021).

3. Goss and Sonnemann (2018).

**Figure 1.3: Tasmania's mean score in PISA reading has declined significantly since 2000**

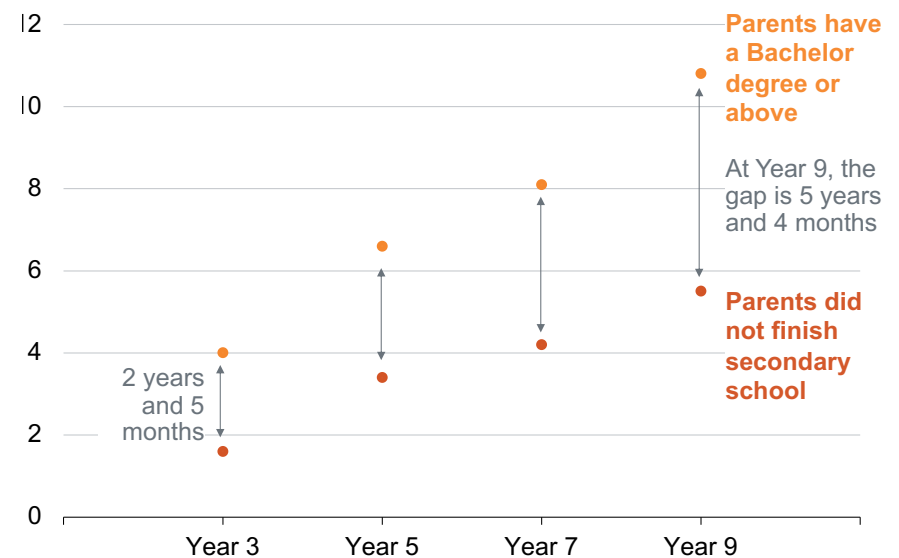
Tasmania's mean score in PISA reading literacy, 2000-2018



Sources: OECD (2020) and Thomson et al (2019).

**Figure 1.4: There is a large equity-based reading gap in Tasmania**

Equivalent year level, NAPLAN reading, median, Tasmania, 2021



Note: Grattan analysis of ACARA (2021) using Goss et al (2016) methodology for determining equivalent year levels.

Sources: Goss et al (2016) and ACARA (2021).

## 2 Effective reading instruction in schools

The goal of reading is to extract meaning from text.<sup>4</sup> Reading is not an innate skill that can be acquired effortlessly. Becoming a proficient reader is a complicated task. The quality of teaching that students receive has a significant impact on reading outcomes.<sup>5</sup>

Proficient reading requires skills in word recognition and language comprehension, which enable students to interpret the meaning of the words they read.<sup>6</sup> Reading research has shown that these two broad capabilities have several components. Scarborough (2001) uses the metaphor of a ‘reading rope’ that combines several strands.<sup>7</sup> The ‘word recognition’ strand comprises (i) phonological awareness, (ii) decoding, and (iii) sight recognition of familiar words. The ‘language comprehension’ strand comprises (i) background knowledge, (ii) vocabulary, (iii) knowledge of language structures, (iv) verbal reasoning, and (v) literacy knowledge (for example, print concepts). Students who struggle to develop adequate proficiency with respect to any one of these strands are likely to find fluent reading with high levels of comprehension more challenging.

Education research continues to develop an increasingly clear picture of how classroom teaching can best support the acquisition of these underlying skills, particularly in relation to word recognition skills that are ideally developed in the early years of school. Developing students’ automatic word recognition can be achieved through explicit, systematic instruction in how to ‘crack the alphabetic code’, based on phonemic awareness and phonics knowledge. With explicit teaching and enough opportunities for practice, most students can achieve

automatic, efficient word recognition.<sup>8</sup> The use of ‘decodable texts’ during this initial phase of reading instruction can help students to practice their phonics skills.<sup>9</sup>

While developing word recognition skills is essential, it is also important for students to build their ability to comprehend the written language they read. Well before children can read complex texts on their own, teachers can support them to develop increasingly sophisticated language comprehension skills, through an emphasis on oral language development and building students’ background knowledge and vocabulary.<sup>10</sup> Therefore, it is important that students are exposed to a coherent, well-sequenced, and content-rich curricular from the beginning of school right through the secondary school years, as this systematically builds the background knowledge they need to comprehend increasingly sophisticated texts.

---

4. Snow (2002).

5. Moats (1999).

6. Castles et al (2018).

7. Scarborough (2001).

---

8. See, for example, Castles et al (2018) and NSW CESE (2017).

9. Ehri (2020); and Adams (2009).

10. See, for example, Konza (2014); Smith et al (2021); Castles et al (2018); and Cabell and Hwang (2020).

### 3 A strategy for improving reading in Tasmania

In early learning and childcare settings, a clearer focus on developing children's oral language and pre-reading skills, combined with effective early screening for language difficulties, could go a long way to preparing children, including disadvantaged children, for reading success in schools. Pragmatic, affordable policies are needed to embed these practices consistently.<sup>11</sup>

In primary schools, it appears that many teachers are still unaware of the most effective evidence-based approaches to reading instruction. Where teachers have tried to adopt best practice, often there is still considerable variation from classroom to classroom, and as a result many children fall through the cracks. A thorough reset is needed to ensure reading success is not left to chance.

In secondary schools, the challenges are also acute. Most secondary schools are simply not equipped to teach basic reading skills, because students are expected to have mastered these already. But this is the challenge that many secondary teachers face. Meanwhile, a small but significant proportion of students have complex learning difficulties that make reading particularly hard. These students require specialist diagnostic assessments and targeted supports. In some cases, technology and other accommodations can help. But at present these supports are not widely available in schools, and expensive private options are out of reach for many families.

To improve reading in Tasmania, the Tasmania Department of Education should:

- provide clearer instructional guidance to schools that is aligned to the best evidence on the effective teaching of reading and spelling.

This guidance should address the effective delivery of whole-class teaching across different year levels and subject areas, as well as best-practice approaches for students who require additional support. By ensuring high quality, evidence-informed whole-class instruction, there will be fewer students who require additional, targeted intervention. For the students who do need targeted one-on-one support from literacy experts or other professionals such as speech pathologists, the Department should ensure that schools can access these professionals as required.

- ensure teachers have access to the high-quality literacy resources necessary to underpin effective reading instruction, including:
    - robust assessments that can be used to track student learning over time and diagnose learning challenges that individual students may face.
- While NAPLAN and PAT R (Progressive Achievement Tests in Reading) can be useful to track progress across years, they are less useful as formative assessments and not suited to diagnosing specific learning challenges. In addition to the Year 1 Phonics Screening Test, the Department should consider making other robust assessments available to schools, such as DIBELS (or a similar assessment) that can assist teachers to identify potential reading difficulties early.<sup>12</sup>
- instructional resources that support the development of strong reading skills. This should include instructional resources that support decoding skills in the early years,

---

11. Justice et al (2018); and Weadman et al (2021).

12. DIBELS (Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills) constitutes a set of short assessments that can be used to monitor the development of early reading skills in students from kindergarten to Year 8. See University of Oregon (n.d.).

such as high-quality decodable readers that provide students with opportunities to practice their phonics skills, as well as rich fiction and non-fiction texts that teachers can use in their classrooms (such as through whole-class read-alouds in the early years), to develop students' background knowledge.

- high-quality, content-rich curriculum resources that support school-level unit and lesson planning across all subject areas.

These curriculum resources can support schools to develop children's background knowledge and vocabulary, which aids the development of reading comprehension and critical and creative thinking skills.<sup>13</sup> Grattan Institute's 2022 report, *Making Time for Great Teaching*, showed that accessing high-quality, classroom curriculum and lesson plans remains a significant challenge for many teachers.<sup>14</sup>

- ensure teachers have multiple opportunities to receive high quality training and guidance on effective teaching and assessment practices.

Ideally, this would include training on the 'what' and 'why' of effective practice, so that teachers develop a rich understanding of the core components, as well as training on the 'how', so that teachers are able to deliver effective practices confidently in their classrooms. Grattan Institute's 2020 *Top Teachers* report, for example, highlights the importance of teachers working closely with experts in their classrooms, to receive guidance and feedback on their practice as they apply new learning and develop new skills.<sup>15</sup>

- set clear learning goals for students in the Tasmanian school system that are ambitious but achievable.

In doing so, the Department should ensure schools have the time and capacity to achieve these goals. This may require a clear decision to reduce the number of other issues school leaders and teachers are expected to address, while they focus on improving Tasmanian students' literacy. Grattan's *Making Time for Great Teaching* report showed that many teachers struggle to achieve all that is currently asked of them, with new initiatives from government a frequent distraction from core teaching work.<sup>16</sup>

- commit to closely monitoring and evaluating improvements in reading instruction in Tasmanian schools over time.

This should include monitoring student learning achievement and progress, as well as the quality and effectiveness of teacher practices in the classroom. Consistent, effective teaching across all classrooms relies on broader school-wide approaches and supports. Therefore, the Department should also monitor school-wide progress, through assessment data and school reviews, with further guidance and support provided to those schools that need it.

---

13. Cabell and Hwang (2020); Willingham (2007); and Smith et al (2021).

14. Hunter et al (2022).

15. Goss and Sonneman (2020).

---

16. Hunter et al (2022).



## Bibliography

- ACARA (2021). *NAPLAN results*. Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority. <https://reports.acara.edu.au/>.
- Adams, M. J. (2009). "Finding the right texts: What works for beginning and struggling readers". Ed. by E. Hiebert and M. Sailors. New York: Guilford Press. Chap. Decodable text: Why, when, and how?, pp. 23–46.
- Cabell, S. Q. and Hwang, H. (2020). "Building content knowledge to boost comprehension in the primary grades". *Reading Research Quarterly* 55, S99–S107.
- Castles et al (2018). Castles, A., Rastle, K. and Nation, K. "Ending the reading wars: Reading acquisition from novice to expert". *Psychological Science in the Public Interest* 19.1, pp. 5–51.
- Ehri, L. C. (2020). "The science of learning to read words: A case for systematic phonics instruction". *Reading Research Quarterly* 55, S45–S60.
- Goss et al (2016). Goss, P., Sonneman, J., Chisholm, C. and Nelson, L. *Widening gaps: What NAPLAN tells us about student progress*. Melbourne: Grattan Institute. <https://grattan.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/937-Widening-gaps.pdf>.
- Goss, P. and Sonnemann, J. (2018). *Measuring student progress: A state-by-state report card*. Grattan Institute. [https://grattan.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/Mapping\\_Student\\_Progress.pdf](https://grattan.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/Mapping_Student_Progress.pdf).
- Goss, P. and Sonneman, J. (2020). *Top teachers: Sharing expertise to improve teaching*. Melbourne: Grattan Institute. <https://grattan.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/928-top-teachers.pdf>.
- Hunter et al (2022). Hunter, J., Sonneman, J. and Joiner, R. *Making time for great teaching: Policies for governments*. Grattan Institute.
- Justice et al (2018). Justice, L. M., Chen, J., Tambyraja, S. and Logan, J. "Increasing caregivers' adherence to an early-literacy intervention improves the print knowledge of children with language impairment". *Journal of autism and developmental disorders* 48.12, pp. 4179–4192.
- Konza, D. (2014). "Teaching reading: Why the "Fab five" should be the "Big six"". *Australian Journal of Teacher Education (Online)* 39.12, pp. 153–169.
- Moats, L. C. (1999). "Teaching reading is rocket science: What expert teachers of reading should know and be able to do".
- NSW CESE (2016). *How schools can improve literacy and numeracy performance and why it (still) matters*. Sydney: New South Wales Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation. [https://www.cese.nsw.gov.au/images/stories/PDF/Literacy\\_and\\_Numeracy\\_Paper\\_FA\\_AA.pdf](https://www.cese.nsw.gov.au/images/stories/PDF/Literacy_and_Numeracy_Paper_FA_AA.pdf).
- (2017). *Effective reading instruction in the early years of school*. Sydney: New South Wales Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation. [https://www.cese.nsw.gov.au/images/stories/PDF/Effective\\_Reading\\_Instruction\\_AA.pdf](https://www.cese.nsw.gov.au/images/stories/PDF/Effective_Reading_Instruction_AA.pdf).
- OECD (2020). *PISA 2018 Database*. Paris: OECD. <https://www.oecd.org/pisa/data/2018database>.
- Scarborough, H. (2001). "Handbook of Early Literacy Research". Ed. by S. N. D. Dickinson. New York: Guilford Press. Chap. Connecting early language and literacy to later reading (dis)abilities: Evidence, theory and practice, pp. 97–110.
- Smith et al (2021). Smith, R., Snow, P., Serry, T. and Hammond, L. "The role of background knowledge in reading comprehension: A critical review". *Reading Psychology* 42.3, pp. 214–240.
- Snow, C. (2002). *Reading for understanding: Toward an R&D program in reading comprehension*. Rand Corporation.
- Thomson et al (2019). Thomson, S., Bortoli, L. D., Underwood, C. and Schmid, M. *PISA 2018: Reporting Australia's Results Volume I Student Performance*. Melbourne: Australian Council for Educational Research. <https://research.acer.edu.au/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1035&context=ozpisa>.
- University of Oregon (n.d.). *DIBELS: Dynamic Indicators of Basic Literacy Skills*. <https://dibels.uoregon.edu/>.
- Weadman et al (2021). Weadman, T., Serry, T. and Snow, P. C. "The development and psychometric properties of a shared book reading observational tool: The Emergent Literacy and Language Early Childhood Checklist for Teachers (ELLECCCT)". *First Language*.

Willingham, D. T. (2007). "Critical thinking: Why is it so hard to teach?" *American Federation of Teachers*, pp. 10–19.  
[https://www.aft.org/sites/default/files/periodicals/Crit\\_Thinking.pdf](https://www.aft.org/sites/default/files/periodicals/Crit_Thinking.pdf).