



Improving Tasmanian students' reading performance
Submission to the Lifting Literacy, Lifting Tasmania consultation process, March 2023

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Overview

Tasmania faces a range of challenges regarding the development of strong literacy skills across its population. A thorough reset is needed to improve reading skills of Tasmanian students and meet the government's target that 'by Year 7 all young people will meet an expected reading standard that is above the national minimum by no later than 2030'.¹ The work of the Tasmanian Government's Literacy Advisory Panel is a welcome part of this reset, to ensure that reading success is not left to chance.

This submission builds on Grattan Institute's submission to the panel's *Lifting Literacy, Lifting Tasmania* consultation process in 2022,² and should be read alongside it. This submission focuses specifically on reading instruction in schools (Prep to Year 12), but we acknowledge that Tasmania's community-wide literacy framework also covers early and adult years.

The *Final Consultation Report for the Development of Tasmania's Community-wide Framework* highlights important measures that will help lift literacy for Tasmanian students. We agree with the report's recommendation to embed systemic, evidence-based, and whole-of-school approaches to reading instruction in all Tasmanian schools. The key challenge for Tasmania is taking the established knowledge about effective reading instruction and supporting all teachers to put it into practice.

Our submission addresses four key areas of this implementation challenge, drawing on Grattan Institute's research on teacher

professional development, curriculum planning, and catch-up tutoring.

First, the Tasmanian Department for Education, Children and Young People should provide schools and teachers with clear, actionable guidance on effective whole-class instruction that builds students' reading proficiency. The department should also ensure that teachers and school leaders have access to comprehensive, high-quality curriculum materials and reading programs have been independently quality assured.

Second, the department should provide clear guidance and supports to enable schools to embed small-group tuition that helps struggling students catch up quickly.

Third, the department should boost investment in professional development for teachers and school leaders to implement evidence-based practice in the classroom. This should include embedding literacy-focused instructional specialists in all schools and establishing literacy Master Teacher roles to support instruction across schools.

Fourth, the department should monitor system performance against ambitious but achievable targets, and provide additional targeted supports to schools that need it.

¹ Rockcliff, J. (2021).

² Hunter, J. (2022).

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1 Improving literacy should be a top priority for Tasmania

The Panel's final consultation report recommends that 'literacy achievement for all students must be a priority'.³ We agree. With focused effort on improving reading instruction in Tasmanian schools, the state can lift its reading performance and work to close the equity gap.

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.⁴

Tasmania's reading performance

Tasmania 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 half of Tasmanian 15-year-olds fall short of Australia's proficient reading standard.⁵

Tasmania also had fewer high achievers in reading, compared to the top PISA performers on the assessment. Only 10 per cent of Tasmanian 15-year-olds were classified as high performers – the lowest proportion of any Australian jurisdiction.⁶ Analysis of the 2022 NAPLAN data shows that the gap in reading between

advantaged and disadvantaged students in Tasmania is already very wide by the time students are in Year 3 – the equivalent of 2 years and 3 months of learning – and it more than doubles to 5 years and 3 months by the time students are in Year 9 (see Figure 1.1).

1.2 Effective reading instruction in schools

We welcome the Panel's support for evidence-based reading instruction, including its support for the 'Big Six' (oral language, phonemic awareness, synthetic phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension) across both primary and secondary school.⁷ As noted in the consultation report, 'as a student moves through schooling, and acquires increasingly sophisticated literacy skills, they will require differential support across the Big Six'. That is why a whole-school approach to literacy instruction is best.

We further emphasise that building reading proficiency also requires teachers of all year levels to focus on intentionally and sequentially building students' background knowledge and vocabulary in a wide range of subject areas, from history to science, and civics to the arts. Strong vocabulary and background knowledge are key determinants of students' ability to comprehend more complex texts and ideas as they progress

³ Literacy Advisory Panel (2023), p. 27.

⁴ NSW CESE (2016).

⁵ Thomson et al (2019), p. 50.

⁶ Thomson et al (2019), p. 49.

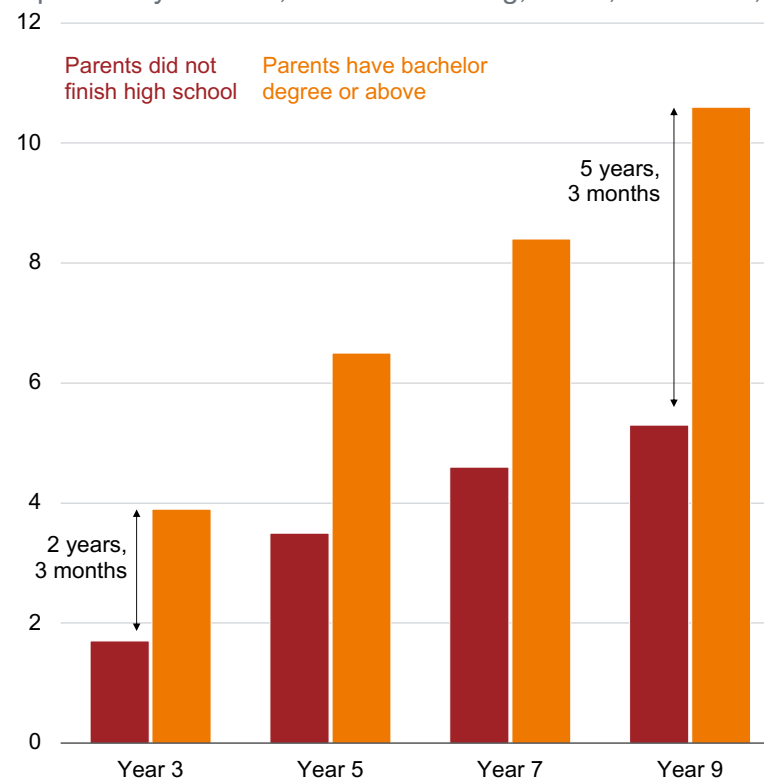
⁷ Literacy Advisory Panel (2023), p. 27.

through school.⁸ Disadvantaged students are likely to rely more heavily on schools and teachers to develop this knowledge. If our education system lets them down, these students are more likely to struggle with their learning in later years.

Once an understanding of best-practice instruction is agreed, the challenge shifts to implementation. Chapters 2 to 5 of this submission focus on the practical actions that the Tasmanian Department for Education, Children and Young People should take to give teachers and school leaders the expertise and support they need to ensure effective instruction in every classroom.

Figure 1.1. There is a large equity-based reading gap in Tasmania

Equivalent year level, NAPLAN reading, mean, Tasmania, 2022



Source: Grattan analysis of ACARA (2022) using Grattan's methodology for determining equivalent year levels in Goss et al. (2016).

⁸ See, for example, Konza (2014); Smith et al (2021); Castles et al (2018); and Cabell and Hwang (2020).

2 Provide access to comprehensive, knowledge-rich, and quality-assured curriculum materials

The Panel's final consultation report recommends that 'teaching aligns with the contemporary peer-reviewed research evidence... and that educators have a "toolbox" of resources'.⁹

We agree that Tasmanian teachers need more practical support and guidance to implement evidence-based reading approaches in every classroom. We highlight Grattan Institute's recent report, *Ending the lesson lottery: How to improve curriculum planning in schools*, which finds that governments have dramatically underestimated how much support teachers and school leaders need to get curriculum planning right.¹⁰

A coordinated, whole-school approach to planning – which carefully sequences learning of key knowledge and skills across year levels – is best. This approach allows teachers to share the curriculum planning load, reduces variation in teaching across classrooms, and ensures that all students build knowledge from a strong foundation.

A Grattan Institute survey in 2022 of 2,243 teachers and school leaders showed that a whole-school approach to curriculum planning is the exception in Australia, not the rule. And this holds true for Tasmania.

For example, the survey results show that half of teachers in Australia are planning on their own. The typical teacher spends six hours a week sourcing and creating curriculum materials, while a quarter of teachers spend 10 hours a week or more. Only 15 per cent have access to a shared bank of high-quality curriculum materials for all their classes. Even more troubling, teachers in disadvantaged schools are only half as likely to have access to a shared bank as teachers in advantaged schools.

Supporting schools to shift to a whole-school approach to high-quality shared curriculum planning could save teachers three hours of time each week, and boost student performance.

Grattan Institute recommends that the department provide schools and teachers with detailed guidance on effective instructional practice, and ensure they have greater access to high-quality, comprehensive curriculum materials that support curriculum implementation in schools.

Provide clear guidance on what constitutes evidence-based reading instruction

The department should take an active role in translating evidence on best practice reading instruction into detailed, practical

⁹ Literacy Advisory Panel (2023), p. 18.

¹⁰ Hunter et al (2022).

guidance for schools. These should be reviewed regularly and updated as the evidence develops.

Clear guidance supports schools to make effective decisions based on an up-to-date appraisal of the research evidence. Guidance can be adapted to school contexts based on teachers' professional judgment and student needs.

The department has taken active steps, providing advice on 'Systematic Curriculum Delivery' and publishing a 'Quality Teaching Guide: Literacy'.¹¹

The department should outline the best evidence on the nuts and bolts of evidence-based reading instruction, including how to incorporate the Big Six into whole-class instruction in primary and secondary schools. Guidance should be directly actionable by teachers so that they can deliver best-practice whole-class instruction. This should leave fewer students requiring additional, targeted intervention (see Chapter 3). This is a critical step to achieving the Panel's objective that 'all schools and all classrooms have consistent, quality literacy teaching, including the teaching of reading'.¹²

2.2 Provide comprehensive, high-quality curriculum materials

Rather than many teachers having to build their own curriculum materials from scratch, all schools should have the option of

drawing on comprehensive, quality-assured, and classroom-ready curriculum materials, to use and adapt as they choose.

The department has provided some useful curriculum material for schools, such as the 'Phonics Scope and Sequence', but more detailed materials are required. Ideally, the department should ensure schools have access to a range of comprehensive curriculum material options for different subjects.

High-quality curriculum materials support the development of strong reading skills. Comprehensive materials should be fully sequenced across year levels and include detailed lesson-level materials along with student assessments, workbooks, and teacher guidance.¹³

For students in the early years, materials should support the development of strong decoding skills, 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 to develop students' background knowledge.

2.3 Ensure that curriculum materials and reading programs are quality-assured

Australian governments should do much more to make it easier for schools and teachers to identify high-quality materials and programs that are aligned with evidence-based approaches to

¹¹ Tasmanian Government Department of Education (2020); Tasmanian Government Department for Education, Children and Young People (n.d.).

¹² Literacy Advisory Panel (2023), p. 27.

¹³ Hunter et al (2022), p. 9 (see Box 4 and Appendix A for concrete examples).

reading instruction. The department should ensure that comprehensive curriculum materials or reading programs, whether developed by the department or developed externally, are quality-assured, ideally by an independent expert body.

Further, where research suggests a particular set of curriculum materials or reading program is not effective, clear advice to that effect should be provided to teachers. This would allow teachers to be confident that the materials or programs they are drawing on are evidence-based and effective.

Ideally, quality assurance should be done through a rigorous, independent mechanism. The Panel's final consultation report recommends that the Australian Education Research Organisation (AERO) quality-assure scopes and sequences.¹⁴

Quality-assurance should be prioritised for comprehensive curriculum materials and reading programs that are already widely in use in Tasmanian schools.

There are several international quality-assurance processes that the department should consider.

In the United Kingdom, the department has focused on providing advice on the quality of early years phonics programs. The department uses a systematic synthetic phonics 'validation process', where reading programs must meet 16 core criteria.¹⁵ So far, 45 reading programs have been validated. The UK government also provides tied funding for programs on the validated list, further supporting schools to use high-quality materials.

In the United States, EdReports, an independent not-for-profit organisation, quality assures comprehensive curriculum materials in English Language Arts, Maths, and Science. Quality reviews are thorough. Trained teams of reviewers spend four-to-six months reviewing each set of materials. They evaluate materials against detailed and evidence-based criteria on quality and usability in the classroom. The criteria for reviewing early years literacy curriculum materials, for example, are set out in a 100-page guide that helps reviewers assess whether materials meet clear, evidence-based requirements, such as providing for systematic and repeated instruction for students to hear, say, and read every new sound-letter combination they learn. EdReports quality assures materials developed by both commercial and not-for-profit providers, and publishes the results on its website.¹⁶

¹⁴ Literacy Advisory Panel (2023), p. 16.

¹⁵ UK Government Department of Education (2023). Note that the Catholic Archdiocese of Canberra and Goulburn also endorses a suite of literacy programs, such as InitialLit, and SoundsWrite.

¹⁶ See <https://www.edreports.org/>.

3 Support schools to deliver interventions for students who have fallen behind in reading

Targeted interventions for students can be effective in boosting learning, particularly small-group or one-to-one tuition for students who have fallen behind. A review of the global evidence showed that small-group tuition can boost student learning by as much as four months, on average, over the course of a year.¹⁷

Grattan Institute's recent report, *Tackling under-achievement: Why Australia should embed high-quality small-group tuition in schools*,¹⁸ shows that when delivered through a robust 'response to intervention' framework, targeted literacy interventions can play an important ongoing role in reducing learning disparities, including equity gaps.

The Panel's final consultation report rightly notes that tiers of instruction are a crucial part of delivering structured literacy teaching (see Box 1 for a definition of this model). The big challenge is not only making this a reality in every school in Tasmania, but ensuring that it is done well across the board. Not all tutoring intervention programs work well, and success depends on how interventions are designed and implemented.

3.1 Give schools clear guidance on how to embed best-practice small-group interventions

The department should provide clear guidance on how to deliver small-group tuition within a broader 'response to intervention' model, which includes a focus on prevention through high-quality

universal classroom instruction, as well as the early identification of learning gaps in reading.

Guidance should include advice on the regular screening or assessment of students to ensure early identification of reading gaps, and what steps to take to determine when students need more or less intensive support.

Guidance should also outline the best evidence on the nuts and bolts of small-group tutoring interventions, including how to select students, monitor progress, and provide the right intervention and 'dosage'.

3.2 Give schools more support to implement best-practice guidance on small-group interventions

Experience in Victoria and NSW following the introduction of small-group tutoring programs in response to COVID-19 disruptions suggests that schools vary in the extent to which they are currently equipped to implement best-practice approaches to small-group tutoring interventions. Capacity in Tasmanian schools is also likely to vary significantly.

Given this, the department should review schools' capacity to implement small-group intervention models, then provide the additional support they need.

¹⁷ Evidence for Learning (2021).

¹⁸ Sonnemann, J. and Hunter, J. (2023).

The Tasmanian government should ensure schools have enough support to:

- access high-quality student assessments and diagnostic tools
- screen and regularly monitor student progress
- staff small-group intervention programs with high-quality, trained tutors whose skills are well-matched to student needs
- adopt evidence-based reading intervention approaches
- develop or adopt high-quality instructional materials.

3.3 Ensure the cost-effectiveness and sustainability of best-practice small-group interventions in schools

The department should develop a long-term implementation plan that addresses key issues such as small-group intervention design, cost-effectiveness, and workforce supply constraints.

Box 1: 'Response to intervention' model

A 'response to intervention' model typically has three tiers.

Tier 1 involves high-quality universal instruction to meet the needs of all students.

Tier 2 involves targeted and additional support for students at risk of falling far behind, often in small groups (usually for about 15 per cent of students).

Tier 3 involves even more intensive support, often one-on-one, for students who show minimal response to Tier 2 (usually for about 5 per cent of students).

A key feature of the 'response to intervention' model is that teachers continually monitor their students to determine when they may need more or less extra help.

Studies estimate that typically about 20 per cent of students will need additional intensive learning support, on top of universal classroom instruction, to develop foundational literacy skills.

This model can be used across both primary and secondary schools, and support any students who are behind their grade-level in reading.

Sources: See for example, Bruin and Stocker (2021); Hempenstall (2012); and Fletcher (2009).

Teachers are in short supply, so alternatives such as using well-trained and supported teaching assistants and pre-service trainee teachers should be on the table. Well-trained teaching assistants can provide small-group interventions and supports for students that directly boost learning and engagement, reduce the complexity of the classroom environment, and bolster teacher effectiveness.¹⁹

And for those students who need targeted one-on-one support from literacy experts or other professionals such as speech pathologists or educational psychologists, the department should ensure that schools can access these professionals as required.

¹⁹ See, for example, Sharples, et al. (2019).

4 Strengthen teacher expertise in evidence-based reading instruction

The Panel's final consultation report highlighted that a 'supported and expert workforce is integral to literacy development'.²⁰ We agree. Providing schools with high-quality guidance and curriculum materials is only step one. Teachers need professional training and support to work in different ways.

Teachers and school leaders should have multiple opportunities to receive high-quality training and guidance on effective reading instruction and assessment practices, and Australia should train a larger pool of recognised expert teachers of literacy. We highlight Grattan Institute's previous research on this issue in our 2020 report, *Top Teachers: sharing expertise to improve teaching*.²¹

The department should strengthen teacher expertise in evidence-based reading instruction in schools. Many principals, literacy leaders, and teachers need much more professional development to implement a high-quality, whole-school approach to reading instruction, and adapt teaching materials effectively for their schools and their students.

4.1 Support literacy instructional specialists in every school

The Panel's final consultation report recommended that a Literacy Capability Framework be developed.²² We agree. The department should support schools to build expertise in literacy instruction.

²⁰ Literacy Advisory Panel (2023), p. 16.

²¹ Goss, P. and Sonneman, J. (2020).

²² Literacy Advisory Panel (2023), pp. 16, 18.

Each school, whether primary or secondary, should have an in-school literacy-focused 'instructional specialist' who builds high-quality teaching practice within their school.

Grattan's research suggests that previous instructional leader roles in Australia have suffered from the insufficient allocation of time to work effectively with other teachers. This has undermined the potential of these roles.²³ It is essential that these roles are allocated sufficient release time to allow for regular training, mentoring, coaching, and collaboration with other teachers in a school.

Grattan's research also suggests there is a perception among teachers that instructional leaders often provide inconsistent advice. For example, more than half of teachers surveyed by Grattan in 2019 indicated that the pedagogical advice they had received over the past five years in a specific learning area was either 'fairly' or 'very' inconsistent.²⁴ Some teachers also questioned the quality and capability of instructional leaders.

To mitigate against this risk, the department should ensure that all teachers in literacy specialist roles have strong knowledge of the evidence-base about the development of reading proficiency and

²³ Goss, P. and Sonneman, J. (2020), p. 20.

²⁴ Goss, P. and Sonneman, J. (2020).

best-practice approaches to reading instruction, along with strong coaching and mentoring skills.

4.2 Create 'Master Teacher' roles to support and guide school-based literacy instructional specialists

The department should create a small number of non-school based 'Master Teacher' positions. Under the Grattan Institute model, these positions would occupy the pinnacle of the 'instructional' teacher career path as the leader in reading instruction. The roles should be limited to a very small number of teachers and be remunerated at about \$80,000 more than the top rung of the teacher salary scale.²⁵

Master Teachers would be based in a region and would work closely with school-based literacy instructional specialists to improve teaching practice. They would have no direct teaching load.

Master Teachers would help bring rigour, excellence, coherence, and consistency to the teaching of reading. Working with literacy instructional specialists, Master Teachers would help develop critical information flows that encompass the entire Tasmanian education system.

For example, Master Teachers would have a key role in developing and guiding teachers in the literacy instructional specialist roles, would help balance system-level and school-

based priorities, and connect research and evidence to schools; while teachers in the literacy instructional specialist roles would communicate school needs and promising practices to Master Teachers. Master Teachers would also support peer collaboration with other experts to share information and generate new knowledge.

²⁵ Goss, P. and Sonneman, J. (2020).

5 Track progress across the Tasmanian education system and provide more support to schools that need it

To support ongoing progress and commitment to reforms, Tasmania should set an ambitious yet achievable goal for reading performance, establish a robust assessment regime that provides timely information to system leaders and schools on reading achievement and progress, and strengthen school reviews.

5.1 Set ambitious yet achievable targets

From 2023, the Australian Curriculum, Assessment, and Reporting Authority will report students' NAPLAN achievement against a new proficiency standard.²⁶ Students above the proficiency standard will be rated as either exceeding (the highest performers) or strong. Those who fall short will be rated as either developing or needing additional support (the weakest performers).

Tasmania should ultimately aspire to ensure that at least 95 per cent of students meet the new NAPLAN proficient benchmark in reading in Years 3, 5, 7, and 9. It should set ambitious yet achievable intermediate progress targets, based on Tasmania's performance against the new NAPLAN proficiency benchmark in 2023.

²⁶ Hunter, J. (2023).

²⁷ 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: <https://dibels.uoregon.edu>.

5.2 Support robust assessment regimes

In addition to NAPLAN, Tasmania should commit to a robust assessment schedule that ensures student learning is tracked over time and that struggling students are identified early.

While NAPLAN and PAT R (Progressive Achievement Tests in Reading) can be useful to track progress across several years, they are generally 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 help teachers identify potential reading difficulties early.²⁷ For example, in Ohio in the US, the government provides schools with an option to pick one of three approved universal screening assessments, including DIBELS. Schools report the screening results to the Ohio Department of Education.²⁸

²⁸ Ontario Human Rights Commission (2023).

5.3 Regular and rigorous reviews of all schools

School reviews provide one of the few windows into school and teacher practices on the ground. They are a key opportunity for government to provide additional tailored support to improve principal and teacher capacity, classroom practice, and student learning.

The department should commit to regular (at least every four years) school reviews that include a rigorous examination of

student achievement, curriculum implementation, and instructional approaches to reading. Departmental reviews should be conducted by independent reviewers who are well trained in understanding and applying quality benchmarks and providing constructive feedback to schools. Reviews should consider the alignment between the planned, taught, and learnt curriculum, using classroom walk-throughs, observations, and student assessment data.

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