



Improving Tasmania's school system
Submission to the Independent Review of Education in Tasmania

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Introduction

This submission provides a brief response to the issues raised in the [Public Consultation Paper](#). It identifies reform options for the Tasmanian government, drawing on Grattan Institute's recent research reports, including:

- [*The Reading Guarantee: How to give every child the best chance of success*](#) (2024)
- [*Spreading success: Why Australia should trial multi-school organisations*](#) (2024)
- [*Tackling under-achievement: Why Australia should embed high-quality small-group tuition in schools*](#) (2023)
- [*Ending the lesson lottery: How to improve curriculum planning in schools*](#) (2022)
- [*Top teachers: Sharing expertise to improve teaching*](#) (2020)

Given Grattan's research has largely focused on schooling from Foundation to Year 10, this submission responds to the following themes from the Public Consultation Paper: (1) defining educational success; (2) strengthening supports and engagement

for all learners at all stages of their education; (4) support for the teaching workforce; and (5) accountability for improved outcomes.

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1 Defining educational success

The Public Consultation Paper notes that schooling is 'important for individuals, because it gives them options for what they want to do in their lives, in employment and in society' (p. 3).

Grattan agrees that a high-performing schooling system should give students a broad set of options for their future lives. Schools have an essential role in ensuring all children – irrespective of their background – reach their potential.

We should set high expectations for the education system, as outlined in the [Mparntwe Declaration](#), to develop: 'confident and creative individuals', 'successful lifelong learners', and 'active informed members of the community' (p. 4).

Governments should never lose sight of the fact that one of the most effective ways to do this is by equipping students with strong foundational knowledge and skills in literacy (in particular, reading and writing) and numeracy. This means schools must – at a minimum – equip students with the foundational knowledge and skills in literacy and numeracy in Foundation to Year 10.

Tasmania has already committed to an ambitious reform agenda – the *Lifting Literacy* strategy – to ensure all students are proficient in literacy. This is an important goal. Students who fall short of the proficiency benchmark may have gaps in their foundational knowledge and skills, making it harder for them to keep up with their grade.

Failure to achieve proficiency has real personal costs for children and young people, as well as detrimental effects on schools, the economy, and society as a whole. Grattan calculates that for those students in school today who are hardest hit by poor reading performance, the cost to Australia is about \$40 billion over their lifetimes.

Alongside numeracy proficiency, literacy proficiency – across the state as well as for students from disadvantaged backgrounds – should be a key measure of success of the Tasmanian school system. Literacy and numeracy proficiency supports students' wellbeing and engagement in school, and is a gateway to success in senior secondary and beyond school.

Sections 2, 3, and 4 of this submission outline practical reforms that can ensure implementation fidelity of Tasmania's reform agenda.

2 Strengthening supports and engagement for all learners

The Public Consultation Paper notes that ‘the gap in learning growth, progress and attainment with peers gets wider for many students as they get older, and not being able to keep up is a major reason some students disengage from learning’ (p. 5).

Grattan agree that schools should aim to close learning gaps as early as possible, by implementing a multi-tiered system of support in all schools. This should be done in combination with the reforms suggested in Section 3 and 4 of this submission.

2.1 Embed a multi-tiered system of support in all schools

Tasmania's first priority should be to embed effective whole-class instruction ('Tier 1') in every classroom, based on high expectations for students, a coherent and well-organised whole-school curriculum, and effective instructional approaches drawn from the now-robust research evidence on the teaching practices that work best.¹

For students who need an additional learning boost to catch-up and keep up with their classmates, targeted interventions such as small-group or one-to-one tuition can be effective. A review of the global evidence shows that small-group tuition can boost student learning by as much as four months, on average, over the course

of a year.² Tasmania has committed to embedding targeted interventions for literacy, as part of its *Lifting Literacy* strategy.

High-quality small-group tuition is best delivered through a systematic 'multi-tiered system of support' (MTSS) model in schools, which comprises an integrated set of practices and interventions to support improved academic results and student behaviour. In the MTSS model, all students receive high-quality classroom instruction ('Tier 1'); some students who need more support also receive targeted additional teaching 'doses' for short periods ('Tier 2'); and a small number of students receive more intensive, individualised support ('Tier 3').³

Grattan Institute's recent report, [*Tackling under-achievement: Why Australia should embed high-quality small-group tuition in schools*](#) (2023), shows that when delivered through a multi-tiered system of support, catch-up tutoring can help reduce learning disparities, including equity gaps. In most cases, small-group tuition ('Tier 2') or one-on-one tuition ('Tier 3') should provide an additional dose of instruction that supports work done in the classroom, rather than be a substitute for classroom teaching.

Success depends on how well the individual tiers are designed, how closely they align with each other, and the fidelity with which they are implemented. Not all schools have best-practice Tier 1

¹AERO (2024). [*Introduction to a multi-tiered system of supports*](#).

²Evidence for Learning (2021). [*Small Group Tuition*](#).

³Hunter and Sonnemann (2023, p. 10). [*Tackling under-achievement: Why Australia should embed high-quality small-group tuition in schools*](#). Grattan Institute.

classroom instruction, and not all use small-group or one-on-one interventions that are evidenced-based or well-targeted to student needs. Careful identification of students' learning gaps is essential, to ensure intervention support is well-targeted and efficient. This is an area where secondary schools in particular are likely to need additional guidance. For further detail, see the case study on Parafield Gardens High School's approach, outlined in Box 8 and Appendix B in Grattan Institute's 2024 report, [*The Reading Guarantee: How to give every child the best chance of success.*](#)

Shortages of qualified teachers can be a barrier to implementing an effective MTSS model. Research suggests that well-structured catch-up intervention supports can be delivered cost-effectively by trained teaching assistants, working under the guidance of teachers.⁴ High-quality computer-assisted interventions are also promising and should be explored further.

The Tasmanian government should investigate ways to embed evidence-based approaches to small-group catch-up tuition in effective MTSS models in schools, to tackle persistent and significant learning gaps.

The Tasmanian government should also give schools clearer guidance and training on the use of high-quality student diagnostic assessments and effective instructional materials, and

on intervention programs that can close gaps in foundational skills so that students can keep pace with their peers in the classroom.

⁴ Hunter, J. and Sonnemann, J. (2023). [*Tackling under-achievement: Why Australia should embed high-quality small-group tuition in schools.*](#) Grattan Institute.

3 Support for the teaching workforce

The Public Consultation Paper notes that 'Tasmania relies heavily on the effectiveness of teachers, support staff and school leaders', and that 'Tasmania needs to make sure that all educators are well supported and provided with appropriate and relevant professional development and have reduced reporting and administrative burden' (p. 10).

Grattan agrees that high-quality teaching is of vital importance to improved student learning. To ensure high-quality teaching in every classroom, teachers and school leaders need more guidance and practical supports over the long term.

3.1 Maintain commitment to a long-term, comprehensive suite of reforms

The Tasmanian government has already committed to ambitious reforms in literacy instruction as part of the *Lifting Literacy* strategy. This is a great start, but getting implementation right across the system will take concentrated effort and a commitment to stay the course over the long term, especially when there are multiple barriers to implementing substantial reforms. The strategy should also be extended to numeracy.

In Grattan Institute's 2024 report, *The Reading Guarantee: How to give every child the best chance of success*, we identified a range of significant barriers that often frustrate reforms that hope to

improve student learning. State governments must find a way to overcome these barriers if they are to achieve better outcomes.

In *Grattan Institute's Reading Guarantee* report, we identified a range of significant barriers that often frustrate reforms, which state governments must overcome to improve student learning. At the system-level, for example, these barriers can include a lack of real ambition to improve reading performance, a reluctance to take the research evidence seriously, and the challenge of introducing and sustaining improvements in teaching across hundreds of schools and thousands of classrooms in an individual school system.

There are also common school- and classroom-level barriers, such as a lack of knowledge about the evidence base, a lack of access to high-quality resources, and – in some cases – ideological resistance to change.

We recommend the Tasmanian government break down these challenges by committing to six key steps to support long-term reform (see Figure 1 on page 8).⁵ For example, the Tasmanian government has already committed to ambitious targets for literacy progress and public reporting, which should ensure that literacy remains a priority in the long term. These state-wide targets should be combined with monitoring and accountability processes that ensure system leaders have accurate information about how implementation is progressing in schools (see Section 4.2 for further detail).

⁵ These barriers are broadly applicable to reforms that target numeracy too.

The Tasmanian government should carefully map out a 10-year implementation path to achieve its reforms. In doing so, Grattan recommends prioritising building the pipeline of Literacy Master Teachers and Literacy Instructional Specialists (see Section 3.3 for further detail). These are the staff who will make the biggest direct impact on classroom teaching, by coaching teachers to adjust their practice day-in-day-out. It will take several years to build up and train this workforce, so Tasmania needs to start this work now. In the initial years, Literacy Instructional Specialists should focus on supporting low-performing and disadvantaged schools, where the need is greatest.

Figure 1: Grattan's six-step strategy to break down the barriers to better reading

	Step 1: Commit to targets	Step 2: Develop evidence- informed guidelines	Step 3: Ensure access to high- quality materials and tools	Step 4: Require universal screening and intervention	Step 5: Build expertise and create new roles	Step 6: Strengthen monitoring and accountability
System-level barriers						
Not a policy priority	✓					
Lack of alignment on evidence within departments		✓				
Managing a big and diverse system	✓	✓			✓	✓
Lack of knowledge about what's happening in classrooms				✓		✓
Lack of knowledge about implementation science			✓	✓	✓	✓
Lack of system accountability	✓					✓
School-level barriers						
Culture of school autonomy		✓		✓	✓	✓
Lack of school leader knowledge about the evidence		✓			✓	
Resistance to change	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓
Lack of access to expert teachers and specialist staff		✓			✓	
Lack of access to high-quality materials and assessments			✓			
Minimal accountability	✓			✓		✓
Classroom-level barriers						
Teacher lack of knowledge		✓			✓	
Teacher resistance to change			✓	✓	✓	✓

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

Grattan Institute research has found that governments have dramatically underestimated how much support teachers and school leaders need to get curriculum planning right. Our 2022 report, *Ending the lesson lottery: How to improve curriculum planning in schools*, recommends governments provide further support to help schools implement a whole-school approach to curriculum.

With clear school-wide agreement about what students should learn in each year level and subject, teachers can better respond to the range of student abilities in their class and can draw on other teachers or support staff to target small-group or one-on-one tutoring to specific student needs.

A 2022 Grattan Institute survey of 2,243 teachers and school leaders shows that a whole-school approach to curriculum planning is the exception in Australia, not the rule. Half of all teachers are planning on their own. The typical teacher spends six hours a week sourcing and creating materials; about 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. Of even more concern is the fact that teachers in disadvantaged schools are only half as likely to have access to a shared bank compared to teachers in advantaged schools. Supporting schools to shift to a whole-school approach to high-quality shared curriculum planning could save teachers three hours each week.

Grattan Institute recommends a new partnership between governments, principals, and teachers, in which governments and leaders in the government, Catholic, and independent school sectors acknowledge the heavy lifting involved in curriculum planning, and provide schools and teachers with clearer guidance and more practical support to help ensure all schools implement a whole-school curriculum approach.

As a first step, governments should identify the high-quality, knowledge-rich, comprehensive curriculum materials that are currently available in Tasmania – focusing on subject-specific materials that are fully sequenced across year levels and include detailed lesson-level materials along with student assessments, workbooks, and teacher guides. These materials may be developed by commercial, government, or not-for-profit providers, such as professional subject associations. Where there are critical gaps in the availability of high-quality, comprehensive materials, governments should invest to fill these gaps as necessary, prioritising Maths, Humanities, and Science for primary schools, and English for secondary schools.

Curriculum materials need to be knowledge-rich to best support students to learn new content and skills. This means that the materials are specific about what knowledge students are expected to learn – including the subject-specific vocabulary required – and be carefully and logically sequenced so that students have the opportunity to accumulate knowledge year-on-year.

Tasmania should not necessarily seek to develop materials 'in-house'. Instead, government should look to commission new

materials from expert curriculum designers, such as commercial or not-for-profit providers (including professional subject associations), or provide incentives for providers to raise the quality or comprehensiveness of their existing materials.

These materials should be road-tested in real classrooms, and then made readily available to all schools in all sectors to use and adapt, if they choose.

To support this effort, the Tasmanian government should back the establishment of a rigorous, independent, quality-assurance body tasked with evaluating the quality of curriculum materials available nationally and in Tasmania, and publishing its findings.

There are several examples overseas of comprehensive curriculum materials, such as [Core Knowledge](#) and [EL Education](#) in the US and [Maths Mastery](#) in the UK, that have been quality-assured by a robust, independent body.

In designing such a body for Australia, we recommend governments look to the EdReports model in the US. EdReports has developed a nationally recognised framework for examining the quality of comprehensive curriculum materials. It uses trained and paid teacher experts to conduct thorough quality reviews of comprehensive curriculum materials developed by both commercial and non-profit providers, and publishes the results on its website.

3.3 Build the pipeline of expert teachers

To attract and retain more teachers, and boost the productivity of the existing workforce, Tasmania should create new expert teacher career paths to provide more subject-specific, hands-on instructional leadership in schools and expert, subject-specific leadership across the system.

Grattan Institute's research on this topic, set out in [Top teachers: Sharing expertise to improve teaching](#) (2020), shows that the existing teaching career path needs to be reformed so that Tasmania's top teachers can lead professional learning effectively in schools. To this end, we propose that three new permanent positions be created: Instructional Specialists, Master Teachers, and Principal Master Teachers. These roles would enable expert teachers with recognised skills and dedicated responsibilities to work with classroom teachers to build quality practice.

Instructional Specialists would work within a given school to set the standard for good teaching in their subject area (e.g. Maths teaching), strengthening teachers' classroom skills – helping teachers understand not just 'what to do' but 'how to do it' – and spreading evidence-informed practices.

Master Teachers would be responsible for improving subject-specific teaching (e.g. Maths teaching) across multiple schools by coordinating professional learning, supporting Instructional Specialists, and connecting schools with research. Master Teachers would help bring rigor and coherence to professional judgements about best practice in their subject, and act as

system-level brokers, facilitating learning between system leaders, schools, and teachers.

Principal Master Teachers would be the subject-specific experts for the state, overseeing the work of Master Teachers and leading instruction in their subject across the state. Principal Master Teachers would be experts in curriculum design and pedagogy in their subject areas, bridging the divide between research and classroom practice.

The Tasmanian government has invested in creating instructional leadership roles in literacy. The government should review these roles as part of its system-wide workforce strategy, to ensure that:

- The scope of each role is right.
 - Master Teachers should be subject specialists, allocated to a region and working with about 15-to-30 schools.
 - Learning Specialists should also be subject specialists, with substantial time release (at least 0.3-to-0.5 FTE, depending on school size).
- Staff have the right skills for their role.
 - A rigorous application process is required to ensure applicants have the requisite knowledge and skills, and to enable the Department to upskill potential applicants (as necessary) in areas that align with system-level priorities.

- Staff in the new positions must receive robust training on evidence-based and subject-specific teaching practice, school- and system-wide approaches to effective instruction and assessment, coaching techniques, and change management.
- The two roles are designed to work together.
 - Learning Specialist work should be guided and overseen by a Master Teacher in the same subject and area who is in and out of schools, observing practice and providing coaching support to Learning Specialists.
 - Master Teachers should be guided and overseen by a Principal Master Teacher, who would be the subject-specific expert in the state.

3.4 Trial multi-school organisations to support school improvement

Establishing multi-school organisation (MSO) trials in Tasmania would help drive effective implementation of Tasmania's reforms, and lift educational outcomes for children.

Grattan's 2024 report, [*Spreading success: Why Australia should trial multi-school organisations*](#), showed how strong families of schools, united by shared executive leadership that is accountable for students' results, can increase the odds of school improvement and lift outcomes.

Multi-school organisations should have a clear blueprint for running effective schools, and the authority to enact this blueprint across each school in its family, taking into account the particular context of each school.

Grattan's research on effective MSOs in England and the US showed that each had a blueprint that commonly included:

- A focus on academic excellence, noting the positive relationship between learning and wellbeing.
- Effective leadership, with the skill and goodwill needed to help steer a school to success.
- Consistent, shared behaviour routines that maintain safe and orderly learning environments.
- A precise, whole-of-school approach to teaching and learning, supported by a knowledge-rich curriculum and high-quality assessment.
- A multi-tiered system of support model that tracked learning progress and provided intensive 'Tier 2' and 'Tier 3' supports to help struggling students catch up.
- High-dosage professional learning, with frequent observations and instructional coaching.

Grattan's research showed that settling behaviour was a crucial first step to turning around a failing school. In many of the case-

study schools Grattan visited, disruptive student behaviour was a substantial challenge.

MSOs are well placed to help spread effective approaches for creating safe and orderly learning environments. As a family of schools, they can re-deploy staff across schools and bring in leaders from high-performing schools to implement tried-and-tested strategies to settle behaviour.

Line-ups – which involve students assembling in lines at the bell to be escorted quietly to class – are a key strategy that many MSOs use to settle behaviour. Line-ups help create calm transitions between break times and class, ensure lessons start on time with the whole class together, and reduce corridor noise for classes that have already started. But line-ups can be tricky to embed in a school – the strategy's success hinges on the consistency that comes when all staff buy in and are on the same page.

For Dixons' Cottingley Academy in the north of England, being a part of a strong MSO helped it implement line-ups effectively, along with other effective behaviour strategies. Seven of the 10 staff in Cottingley Academy's senior leadership team had worked at other Dixons schools, and seen line-ups work in practice. This meant they knew what would help the strategy succeed, and what might derail it. When behaviour is settled, schools can focus on improving instructional practice and curriculum in the classroom, which boosts learning outcomes. Today, Dixons' Cottingley Academy leaders help other schools implement line-ups and improve behaviour.

For further detail, see the case studies on the turnaround process at Dixons Cottingley Academy and other MSO schools, outlined in Sections 2.6 and 3.3.2, and Box 6, in our [Spreading success](#) report.

Australian governments have much more work to do to ensure safe and productive classrooms. Australian students find their classes considerably more disruptive than students in other OECD countries. In 2022, Australia ranked 71 out of the 81 economies surveyed for the OECD's index of disciplinary climate.⁶

Australia's disruptive classrooms are bad for students and teachers. Students report feeling more engaged with their learning when they feel their teachers care about them and are in control of the classroom.⁷ And poor student behaviour is a key reason that a quarter of Australian teachers report feeling unsafe at work.⁸

Our research suggests strong families of between 10 and 100 schools are likely to be the 'Goldilocks' size for MSOs. These MSOs would be small enough to understand – and 'own' – the specific challenges their principals, teachers, and students face

1.1 ⁶ This index is based on students' responses to questions such as how often 'Students don't listen to what the teacher says', or that 'The teacher has to wait a long time for students to quieten down'. See Table II.B1.3.9. pp. 353 and 354 in Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (2023). *PISA 2022 Results (Volume II): Learning During – and From – Disruption*. <https://doi.org/10.1787/abc8532a-en>

on the ground. But they would also be big enough to marshal the resources and expertise their schools need.

Ensuring the executive leadership of each MSO is accountable to governments for the strong performance of their schools will be critical.

Grattan recommends several design principles for trialling MSOs:

The overall design

1. Each trial MSO should build up to at least 10 schools, but start small with no more than two schools.
2. Each trial MSO should be led by an executive leader, such as a standout school principal, with responsibility for running the trial MSO's schools.
3. Each trial MSO should be granted sufficient, meaningful autonomy to implement an effective model of school improvement.

⁷ Uden, J. M. v., Ritzen, H., and Pieters, J. M. "Engaging students: The role of teacher beliefs and interpersonal teacher behaviour in fostering student engagement in vocational education". *Teaching and Teacher Education* 37, pp. 21-32.

⁸ Longmuir, F., Cordoba, B. G., Phillips, M., Allen, P. K.-A., and Moharami, M. *Australian teachers' perceptions of their work in 2022*. Monash University. <https://doi.org/10.26180/21212891>.

4. In exchange for increased autonomy, each trial MSO should be subject to rigorous public evaluation.
5. Each trial MSO's schools should align on teaching and learning approaches (such as using common curriculum and assessments), not just on school support functions (such as finance and technology).

Selecting the initial schools

6. The first school in each trial MSO should be very high-performing and have the capacity to act as a 'beacon school' from which to spread strong practice.
7. In the early stages, schools in each trial MSO should be from the same 'phase' (i.e. primary or secondary) and be geographically proximate (for example, no more than a 30-minute drive apart). This would help facilitate coordination and shared best practice. Once well-established, the trial MSO should add a school from the other phase or (potentially) from further afield.
8. MSO trials should be opt-in, and seek expressions of interest from schools. Schools that express interest should be screened for their suitability (in accordance with the design principles detailed here). Governments should also earmark planned but yet-to-be-opened new schools to join an MSO trial.

Growth

9. Growth should be carefully managed so that a trial MSO assumes responsibility only for as many additional schools as it has the capacity to support and improve.
10. As each trial MSO grows, principals' direct supervisors should oversee only a small number of schools, so that – if needed – they can provide each with a high dosage of support. We recommend a portfolio of about five schools per supervisor.

4 Accountability for improved outcomes

The Public Consultation Paper notes that 'there must be accountability for outcomes to ensure confidence in what is being done is working' (p. 13).

Grattan Institute considers that a high-performing school system should include rigorous monitoring and accountability measures, so that progress can be tracked, improvement supports can be targeted to schools in need, and the public can have confidence in the system.

4.1 Set ambitious targets for the Year 1 Phonics Check and develop a re-sit process to ensure students catch-up

The Tasmanian government has already committed to a 100 per cent literacy target, as part of the *Lifting Literacy* strategy. In the school years, this target aims to ensure all students reach proficiency benchmarks on NAPLAN reading and writing tests (either in the 'strong' or 'exceeding' categories).

Tasmania has also mandated that all Tasmanian schools – across the government, Catholic, and independent sectors – use the Australian Government Year 1 Phonics Check. Tasmania has led the nation by being the first Australian jurisdiction to use this measure across all sectors.

⁹ Note this is pre-COVID. The test wasn't done in 2020 and 2021, and 2022 scores show a drop in performance: [UK Department for Education](#) (2022). In

In 2023, government school data was reported online, with 50 per cent of students meeting the 'expected' level. Once baseline results have been established across all sectors, the Tasmanian government should set an ambitious target for future performance in this assessment too.

A Year 2 re-sit process should also be established to check that struggling students have actually caught up. This process should ensure that students who do not meet the 'expected' level in Year 1 should be re-assessed in Year 2. This process is used in England, where results have improved over time. In 2012, 58 per cent of students met the expected standard of achievement in Year 1, and 85 per cent by the end of Year 2. In 2019, results had lifted – 82 per cent of students met the standard in Year 1, and 91 per cent by the end of Year 2.⁹

The Tasmanian government should publicly report on progress towards these targets. Aggregate state-wide results should be publicly released, with sector and cohort breakdowns to assist with the identification of best practice and targeting of additional effort where needed.

4.2 Overhaul school reviews

The Tasmanian government should commit to strengthening school reviews aimed at tracking implementation of reforms and

2023, scores improved, with 79 per cent of students achieving the expected standard in Year 1 and 89 per cent by the end of Year 2.

targeting more support to the schools that need it. All schools – government, Catholic, and independent – should be reviewed. The reviews should be done by independent reviewers who are well trained in understanding and applying quality benchmarks and can provide constructive feedback to schools.

Reviews should be conducted at least every four years. Schools that are not meeting the expected standard in the Year 1 Phonics Check, and/or have a high proportion of students not meeting the NAPLAN proficiency benchmarks, should be reviewed more often.

We estimate that a school review that includes a thorough examination of a school's curriculum and instructional approach would take about three to five days (including two days on-site), depending on the size of the school. Reviews should consider the alignment between the planned, taught, and learnt curriculum, using classroom walk-throughs, observations, and student assessment data.