

**Submission to the Independent Review of Education in Tasmania**  
**Judith Ridge MA Dip. Ed**

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My name is Judith Ridge. I am a qualified English teacher and experienced Teacher Librarian, a writer and internationally-recognised authority in children's and youth literature. I am also a writer, and outside of my career in schools, I have worked across sectors developing and delivering programs designed to engage young people with reading for pleasure, and with creative arts associated with literature and literacy. Through my work I have been involved with or responsible for a wide spectrum of literature-based cultural activities, including whole-of-community early literacy programs, and creative programs delivered in partnership with schools, public libraries and community organisations. In 2001, I received a Churchill Fellowship to study community-based literature and literacy programs for children and teenagers in the US, UK and Ireland. My report can be read here: <https://www.churchilltrust.com.au/fellow/judith-ridge-nsw-2001/>

The guiding principle of my work as an educator, as a writer and editor in the field of children's literature, and as an arts worker, has been the promotion of reading engagement strategies for children and teenagers. I am particularly passionate about the role libraries, and school libraries in particular, can play in supporting young readers, including already committed reading children, and those who need support and encouragement to develop their reading skills and confidence.

I moved to Tasmania from NSW in September 2023, and have been working as a Library Technician at Newstead College since the start of the school year 2024. Unfortunately, there are almost no opportunities for employment as a Teacher Librarian in public schools in this state, and so I have chosen to take a significant pay cut in order to continue to work with young people in the school library context.

Since arriving in Tasmania, I taken a keen interest in the public discourse around the state's low school retention and literacy rates, and have been dismayed that no-one seems to have made what to me is an entirely obvious connection between the down-grading of the school library and the lack of employment of suitably qualified and experienced Teacher Librarians and the state's low literacy rates. It should be of the utmost concern to everyone involved in children's literacy that the vast majority of Tasmanian children go their entire lives without the support and opportunity a well-resourced school library, headed by an appropriately qualified and experienced Teacher Librarian, can offer.

The running of school libraries in Tasmania has been left to non-teaching staff, many of whom are very committed to offering the best service they can to students. I would argue that in fact, Library Technicians in schools across the state are being exploited, being asked to undertake certain aspects of a teacher librarian's role (including collection management and taking classes as relief from face-to-face teaching for primary school teachers) but without the financial recompense. Despite their hard work and commitment, they are simply unqualified to provide the kind of professional, curriculum-based support a Teacher Librarian can offer their teaching colleagues, or to teach critical literacy and research skills to children and teenagers, and to offer sustained, evidence-based reader engagement strategies.

While my experience this year is anecdotal, my current students' lack of understanding of how to use a library, of basic critical research skills, and even of the day-to-day functions of a library has been quite shocking to me. It is quite evident that the students have little to no experience of using a library to borrow books for recreational reading or for study, and do not know how to approach finding the books they are interested in or need for their school work. Some students at the start of the year did not understand that they were able to borrow the books; others thought they would have to pay to do so. Some choose not to come to the library as they see it as a forbidding institution rather than a safe, inclusive and supportive space.

I am pleased to say that many of our students do enjoy reading, but many of them choose to buy largely social-media influenced, mass-market commercial fiction from department stores, as they are simply not in the habit of using their school or public library. I am sure these experiences are not unique to my College, and again anecdotally, conversations with my colleagues in public school libraries in Tasmania confirm this. While some have significant support and generous budgets, many do not, and sadly, many school libraries are severely limited in their opening hours to students, and others have been closed down altogether.

I would add here that studies consistently show that children and teenagers prefer to read print books over e: and audio books. Sadly, too many people in charge of budgets in school seem to think the book is dead. It is not.

School libraries are, I believe, the heart of any school — or at least, they should be. School libraries are not just the repository of books for recreational reading and study support. School libraries are safe places for all kinds of students, offering a quiet place for those needing relief from the stresses of school life and challenging peer relations. School libraries are a refuge for the weird kids, the sad kids, the outsiders and the lonely — but we also welcome all comers. In my experience in working in school libraries in NSW and also here in Tasmania, it is sometimes the “naughty” students who gravitate to the library, where the teacher librarian and other library staff can form a different kind of relationship to that of the classroom teacher. In one of my schools, I had a dual role as both Teacher Librarian and member of the school's Wellbeing Team, in a very appropriate acknowledgement of what a well-run and well-supported School Library can offer to students. Libraries provide boundaries and expect respect, but serious disciplinary actions are very rarely needed. This is to be treasured in our schools.

Guided by the principles and philosophies of our professional associations, school libraries, like our public counterparts, welcome everyone. School libraries provide culturally and socially sensitive materials and spaces. School libraries celebrate diversity. Schools whose students have access to a vibrant, relevant, engaging and accessible school library and collection which serves their educational and emotional needs are also more likely to see higher school engagement and retention. The New York Comprehensive Center Report of 2011, titled [“Informational Brief: Impact of School Libraries on Student Achievement”](#), found that properly funded and staffed school libraries have:

- Helped improve teacher effectiveness
- Supported early learners to develop into accomplished readers

- Raised graduation rates and narrowed the academic achievement gap for at-risk students

The study also found that “An increase of librarians in school libraries tends to correlate with higher school assessment results.”<sup>1</sup> Similar studies have been made across the United States, the UK, here in Australia and indeed across the world. A study from Ghana concluded that “School libraries... facilitate the intellectual development of children by providing books and other information sources which play a critical role in their educational and social development”<sup>2</sup> and that “school libraries allow students to apply critical thinking skills to identify, question and create ideas so that personal understandings will emerge by constructing opinions and establishing evidence based observations and views.”<sup>3</sup>

The Australian School Library Association reminds us that:

*Well-resourced school libraries staffed by qualified library professionals are essential to rebuild the literacy levels of Australian students and achieve an appropriate level of reading competency. School libraries are necessary to create safe, confident users of online content and ensure that young people are media literate.*

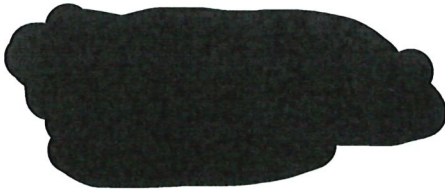
*In our knowledge economy, these literacies are a vital component of a world class education, and they fall within the remit of the school library. Research shows a strong correlation between the presence of a qualified teacher librarian in an accessible well-resourced school library and higher levels of student achievement.*<sup>4</sup>

I would urge the members of the Review committee to seriously consider the crucial role the school library can and should play in student engagement and retention, curriculum support, in student wellbeing and in academic and literacy outcomes. In NSW, the role of Teacher Librarian is mandated in every public school. Tasmania faces unique challenges but also a once-in-a-generation opportunity to rethink its abandonment of the school library and Teacher Librarian position and the implications this has had for student literacy outcomes.

It is time to reconnect the dots between our state’s poor literacy rates and the diminishment of the place of the School Library and Teacher Librarian. #StudentsNeedSchoolLibraries

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<sup>1</sup> New York Comprehensive Center, “Informational Brief: Impact of School Libraries on Student Achievement”. October, 2011. p.4

<sup>2</sup> Dukper, Agyekum & Banleman. “School Libraries and Students’ Academic Achievements in Bunkpurugu-Yunyoo District of Northern Ghana”. *Library Philosophy and Practice*, February 2018. p.4

<sup>3</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> ASLA (Australian School Library Association). “Joint Statement on School Libraries.” Retrieved from website Wednesday 2 October, 2024. <https://asla.org.au/school-libraries>

