



Tasmanian Council of Social Service Inc.

Submission to the Independent Review of Education in Tasmania

October 2024



**INTEGRITY
COMPASSION
INFLUENCE**



INTEGRITY
COMPASSION
INFLUENCE

About TasCOSS

TasCOSS' vision is for one Tasmania, free of poverty and inequality where everyone has the same opportunity. Our mission is two-fold: to act as the peak body for the community services industry in Tasmania; and to challenge and change the systems, attitudes and behaviours that create poverty, inequality and exclusion.

Our membership includes individuals and organisations active in the provision of community services to Tasmanians on low incomes or living in vulnerable circumstances. TasCOSS represents the interests of our members and their service users to government, regulators, the media and the public. Through our advocacy and policy development, we draw attention to the causes of poverty and disadvantage, and promote the adoption of effective solutions to address these issues.

Please direct any enquiries about this submission to:

Adrienne Picone

Chief Executive Officer

Phone Number: (03) 6231 0755

Email Address: adrienne@tascoss.org.au

Introduction	3
TasCOSS' submission to the Independent Review	3
The importance of equitable access to education	4
New funding and reform commitments	5
Issues of concern	5
Issue 1: The early years and school readiness	5
Children need to be ready for Kindergarten in order to thrive at school.....	5
There are some promising initiatives for the early years in Tasmania	6
Efforts need to be made to engage more Tasmanian families	7
Issue 2: Educational inequity and poor outcomes	8
Tasmania is lagging behind the nation in educational outcomes.....	8
Socio-economic disadvantage is holding back students in Tasmania.....	8
Concentration of disadvantage in particular schools is inequitable.....	10
Issue 3: Mental health and wellbeing for students.....	11
Psychological distress and mental health conditions are barriers to learning	11
There is unmet demand for mental health and wellbeing support in Tasmanian schools	11
Recommendations.....	12

Introduction

The Tasmanian Council of Social Service (TasCOSS) welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to the *Independent Review into the Tasmanian Education System*. Our submission is focused on two key issues, and we acknowledge that it doesn't address all the issues faced by the Tasmanian education system, including the needs of Tasmanian Aboriginal students, students with disabilities or trauma, and those impacted by the youth justice system. We offer this as a complement to submissions made by a diverse range of Tasmanian organisations, experts and people with lived experience, including children and young people.

TasCOSS' submission to the Independent Review

The *Independent Review into the Tasmanian Education System* (the Review) was announced in June 2024. The purpose of the Review is to "provide advice to the Tasmanian Government on evidence based, implementable and impactful reforms". The Review will include the government and non-government school sectors, with a focus on Kindergarten to Year 12. It will respond to five themes:

1. Defining educational success;
2. Strengthening supports and engagement for all learners at all stages of their education;
3. Outcomes at the conclusion of the formal years of schooling;
4. Support for our teaching workforce; and
5. Accountability for improved outcomes.¹

TasCOSS welcomed the Review as an important first step to improving educational outcomes in Tasmania and we called for the Review to consider equitable funding of public schools, socio-economic barriers to educational engagement, and the effects on educational engagement of increased prevalence of mental health conditions in children and young people.²

This submission addresses the Review's second theme:

Strengthening supports and engagement for all learners at all stages of their education – How can we collectively support Tasmanian learners to get the most out of their entire education experience and ensure all students reach their potential?³

This submission builds on previous submissions made by TasCOSS to national and state consultations on education and literacy, including:

- Review to Achieve Educational Excellence in Australian Schools (2017);⁴

¹ Tasmanian Government (2024). Terms of Reference, Independent Review of Education in Tasmania, ier.tas.gov.au/wp-content/uploads/Independent-Review-of-Tasmanian-Education-System-Terms-of-Reference-.pdf

² TasCOSS (2024). Review welcomed as important first step to improving education outcomes, 25 June, tascoss.org.au/mr-education-review/

³ Tasmanian Government (2024), op. cit.

⁴ TasCOSS (2017). Submission to the Review to Achieve Education Excellence in Australian Schools, education.gov.au/system/files/documents/document-file/2020-12/tasmanian-council-of-social-services-tascoss.pdf

- Legislative Council Select Committee on Child and Family Centres (2017);⁵
- Consultation for the Tasmanian Child and Youth Wellbeing Strategy (2021);⁶ and
- Consultation for Lifting Literacy: Tasmania’s Community-Wide Framework (2022).⁷

The importance of equitable access to education

Education matters for a person’s participation in employment, their income earning potential and their wellbeing throughout life. Education also supports wider societal goals:

*Education plays a vital role in promoting the intellectual, physical, social, emotional, moral, spiritual and aesthetic development and wellbeing of young Australians, and in ensuring the nation’s ongoing economic prosperity and social cohesion.*⁸

Lack of educational opportunities for children and young people can also significantly impact outcomes later in life. For example, poor school education (including disengagement from education due to behavioural or other difficulties) has been linked to involvement in the criminal legal system later in life.⁹

Equitable access to education is a human right which is codified in international law and reflected in global development targets. The fourth United Nations Sustainable Development Goal is to: “ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities” by 2030. Australia’s commitment to educational equity is reflected in formal instruments at both national and state levels. The Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration, signed by all Education Ministers in 2019, sets out two goals:

1. The Australian education system promotes excellence and equity.
2. All young Australians become confident and creative individuals, successful lifelong learners, and active and informed members of the community.

In Tasmania, one of the guiding principles of the *Education Act 2016 (Tas)* emphasises that all students are entitled to a good quality education:

(k) That all students are entitled to education of a quality that is capable of enabling them to reach their potential and so maximise their achievements and contribution to the community.

⁵ TasCOSS (2017). Submission to the Legislative Council Select Committee on Child and Family Centres, May, tascoss.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/Submission-to-the-Legislative-Council-on-Child-and-Family-Centres-May-2017.pdf

⁶ TasCOSS (2021). Submission for the Tasmanian Child and Youth Wellbeing Strategy, hdp-au-prod-app-tas-shapewellbeing-files.s3.ap-southeast-2.amazonaws.com/3916/1725/3009/Tasmanian_Council_of_Social_Service.pdf

⁷ TasCOSS (2022). Submission for Lifting Literacy: Tasmania’s Community-Wide Framework, dpac.tas.gov.au/data/assets/pdf_file/0030/193755/TasCOSS.pdf

⁸ Education Council (2019). The Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration, education.gov.au/alice-springs-mparntwe-education-declaration

⁹ McCausland, R. & Baldry, E. (2023). ‘Who does Australia lock up? The social determinants of justice’, *International Journal for Crime, Justice and Social Democracy*, 12(3), pp.42-43, doi.org/10.5204/ijcsd.2504

New funding and reform commitments

TasCOSS notes that the Tasmanian Government recently signed onto the national Better and Fairer Schools Agreement (2025-2034) which includes a commitment for funding of Tasmania’s education system to reach 100% of the School Resource Standard by 2029.¹⁰ TasCOSS welcomes this commitment to increase funding by both levels of government. We are also pleased that this agreement will be followed by a Tasmanian Bilateral Agreement with the Commonwealth, which will tie funding to education reforms and initiatives, including literacy and numeracy checks, and additional support for student and teacher wellbeing.¹¹

The 10-year Better and Fairer Schools Agreement aims to contribute to three educational outcomes:

- **Equity and excellence** - “young Australians of all backgrounds and levels of need are supported to achieve their full educational potential”;
- **Wellbeing for learning and engagement** - students are provided with appropriate support and other inputs “to positively and confidently engage in learning”; and
- **A strong and sustainable workforce** - all staff are supported to innovate, and teachers are valued.¹²

Our submission focuses on the first two of these anticipated outcomes.

Issues of concern

Issue 1: The early years and school readiness

TasCOSS acknowledges that the focus of the Review is on the school years. Below, we provide comments on the critical importance of the early years, so that children are ready for school and able to engage effectively when they enter Kindergarten.

Children need to be ready for Kindergarten in order to thrive at school

TasCOSS notes that a child’s successful engagement with school is heavily informed by the experiences and opportunities they are offered in the years prior to starting school. Research demonstrates that the early years (i.e. the first 1,000 days) are crucial for the development of cognitive skills, social and emotional skills, and overall school readiness for children, and these lay the foundation for positive

¹⁰ Australian Government and Tasmanian Government (2024). Joint Media Release, “Australian and Tasmanian Governments agree to fully fund all Tasmanian public schools”, 25 September, ministers.education.gov.au/anthony-albanese/australian-and-tasmanian-governments-agree-fully-fund-all-tasmanian-public-schools,

¹¹ Australian Government Department of Education (2024). The Better and Fairer Schools Agreement (2025-2034), education.gov.au/recurrent-funding-schools/national-school-reform-agreement/better-and-fairer-schools-agreement-20252034

¹² Australian Government Department of Education (2024). Heads of Agreement (Better and Fairer Schools Agreement 2025-2034), education.gov.au/recurrent-funding-schools/resources/heads-agreement

academic and employment outcomes in adolescence and adulthood.¹³ The importance of these early days for children and their families has also been recognised in Tasmanian Government policy focused on childhood and youth wellbeing.¹⁴

Worryingly, almost half of Tasmanian children are ‘developmentally vulnerable’ in their first year of full-time schooling. The results of the most recent Australian Early Development Census (2021), which is conducted with all Tasmanian children in their Preparatory year, shows that the proportion of children who are ‘developmentally on track’ in all five domains has declined from 55.6% in 2015 to 52.7% in 2021; and Tasmania’s results are below the national average for each domain.¹⁵ There is also a significant equity gap: in 2021, Tasmania’s most disadvantaged children were three times as likely to be developmentally vulnerable in one domain than the state’s least disadvantaged children.¹⁶

Many children from families facing social or economic disadvantage have fewer opportunities to develop valuable cognitive and life skills in their first 1,000 days. When these children start Kindergarten, they are often behind their peers in terms of language skills, social skills and capacity to engage with learning. Some children will catch up during their school years – but many will struggle to enjoy school and engage in learning, falling further behind. The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare observes that “a child’s development when they start school is strongly associated with how well they continue through primary school”.¹⁷

There are some promising initiatives for the early years in Tasmania

Fortunately, interventions in early childhood are generally effective at closing this equity gap.^{18,19} TasCOSS acknowledges several Tasmanian Government initiatives focused on the early years:

- **Child and Family Learning Centres (CFLCs)** - including four new ‘supersized’ CFLCs at Huonville, Smithton, Longford and Scottsdale;²⁰
- **Working Together** - a Tasmanian program providing access to free, quality early learning for eligible children in their year before starting Kindergarten;²¹ and

¹³ Collier, L. R. et al. (2021). Inequalities in child development at school entry: A repeated cross-sectional analysis of the Australian Early Development Census 2009–2018, *The Lancet Regional Health – Western Pacific*, Volume 4 [thelancet.com/journals/lanwpc/article/PIIS2666-6065\(20\)30057-2/fulltext](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanwpc/article/PIIS2666-6065(20)30057-2/fulltext)

¹⁴ Tasmanian Government (2021). It Takes a Tasmanian Village: Child and Youth Wellbeing Strategy, Department of Premier and Cabinet.

¹⁵ Tasmanian Government (2022). Our State, Our Community, Our Families, Our Children: Australian Early Development Census 2021 – Tasmanian Report, publicdocumentcentre.education.tas.gov.au/library/Shared%20Documents/AEDC-Report.pdf

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ AIHW (2022). The transition to primary school, *Australia’s Children*. aihw.gov.au/reports/children-youth/australias-children/contents/education/transition-primary-school

¹⁸ Runions, K., Cahill, R., & Markham, R. (2022). Toward a comprehensive early childhood development system: Evidence-based strategies for implementation. *Life Course Centre Working Paper*, 2022-15.

¹⁹ Jose, K. et al. (2020). How outreach facilitates family engagement with universal early childhood health and education services in Tasmania, Australia: An ethnographic study, *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, Vol. 53, pp. 391-402, doi.org/10.1016/j.ecresq.2020.05.006.

²⁰ [Child and Family Learning Centres \(CFLCs\) - Department for Education, Children and Young People](#)

²¹ [Working Together - Department for Education, Children and Young People](#)

- **B4 Coalition** - including the First 1,000 Days communication campaign launched in 2024.²²

In particular, TasCOSS welcomes the Premier's announcement in February 2024 that *Working Together* will be expanded, with 100 additional places and new service areas made available to children and families.²³ An evaluation conducted in 2020 by TasCOSS about *Working Together's* benefits for preparing families for the transition to school found that parents and carers rated the program's effectiveness very highly, scoring a rating of 5/5 for preparation of children; 5/5 for preparation of parents; and 4.9/5 for overall satisfaction with the program.²⁴

Efforts need to be made to engage more Tasmanian families

TasCOSS welcomes these three initiatives but remains concerned about whether all disadvantaged families are being effectively engaged by these programs – and we note that some Tasmanian children enter Kindergarten not fully prepared for learning. There is evidence that outreach efforts for *Working Together* could be strengthened. An evaluation of the program's pilot in Tasmania found that while the program was very successful, one of the challenges it faced was "identifying and enrolling target children".²⁵ An evaluation conducted by TasCOSS of families' experiences of *Working Together* emphasised the many benefits generated by the program but noted:

*For a small number of families, prior exposure to unsatisfactory education and care, or negative personal experiences of the education system had turned them off further attempts to access early learning for their children. For some this fed into a fear of judgement which hampered their confidence in reaching out.*²⁶

Informed by concerns amongst policymakers and practitioners about the low uptake of early childhood services by vulnerable families in Tasmania, the University of Tasmania and the Telethon Kids Institute conducted research into the issue in 2017/18. They found that outreach activities carried out by early childhood services were valuable for the uptake of services by vulnerable families, but they were not always feasible because of staffing constraints or program delivery frameworks which did not allow for outreach activities.²⁷

²² Tasmanian Government (n.d.). B4 First 1000 Days Supporter Kit, publicdocumentcentre.education.tas.gov.au/library/Shared%20Documents/B4-First-1000-Days-Supporter-Kit.pdf

²³ Premier of Tasmania (2024). Expanding early learning program to support more children, Media Release, premier.tas.gov.au/latest-news/2024/february/expanding-early-learning-program-to-support-more-children

²⁴ TasCOSS (2020). Working Together – Key findings from conversations with families: School transition, publicdocumentcentre.education.tas.gov.au/library/Shared%20Documents/Working-Together-School-Transition-Family-Consultation-2020-TasCOSS.pdf

²⁵ Department of Education (2019). Working Together: Supporting Early Learning, publicdocumentcentre.education.tas.gov.au/library/Shared%20Documents/Working-together-booklet.pdf

²⁶ Dunn, L. (2021). Working Together Year 1: 2020, Evaluation of Family Experiences, TasCOSS

²⁷ Jose, K. et al. (2020). How outreach facilitates family engagement with universal early childhood health and education services in Tasmania, Australia: An ethnographic study, *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, Vol. 53, pp. 391-402, doi.org/10.1016/j.ecresq.2020.05.006

TasCOSS strongly recommends additional investment in educational programs and initiatives providing early intervention and play-based learning opportunities for families and communities. We note these programs have demonstrated educational benefits for children, as well as a host of other benefits for children and their families, including increased social engagement, earlier identification of health and developmental issues, and additional support for parents.

Issue 2: Educational inequity and poor outcomes

Tasmania is lagging behind the nation in educational outcomes

National and international data paints a concerning picture of Tasmania's educational outcomes. Tasmania performs below the national average and often worse than all other states and territories on several key measures. These include:

- The retention rate from Year 10 to Year 12 for Tasmanian secondary school students in 2023 is the second lowest in Australia (69%), after the Northern Territory.²⁸
- The Year 12 attainment rate in Tasmania (53.1%) is the second lowest in Australia, after the Northern Territory and significantly below the national rate (76.3%).²⁹
- Almost 50% of Tasmanians are functionally illiterate, compared to 42% of the Australian population.³⁰
- Tasmania's performance on the OECD's Programme for International Student Assessment lags behind Australia's national average and almost 50% of Tasmanian students fall short of the national benchmark proficiency level.³¹

Socio-economic disadvantage is holding back students in Tasmania

Premier Rockliff partly attributes the state's poor educational outcomes to socio-economic disadvantage, noting that: "Tasmania's educational context is challenged by high proportions of disadvantage in comparison to other jurisdictions, and significant concentrations of disadvantage, with the majority of Tasmania's most disadvantaged students in our government schools."³²

TasCOSS agrees that social disadvantage is a key factor in Tasmania's poor educational outcomes. Research in Australia and internationally has shown a direct correlation between socio-economic status (SES) and educational outcomes for learners.³³ That is, "students from disadvantaged backgrounds - especially those living in poverty - tend to have worse academic results than their more privileged

²⁸ Australian Bureau of Statistics (2024). Schools, abs.gov.au/statistics/people/education/schools/latest-release. See also Eslake, S., Rowan, M. & Denny, L. (2024). [Tasmania: We have a problem - Tasmania's declining educational outcomes and the impact on our future prosperity](#)

²⁹ Productivity Commission (2024), School education, *Report on Government Services 2024*, pc.gov.au/ongoing/report-on-government-services/2024/child-care-education-and-training/school-education

³⁰ ABS data for 2011-12 quoted in Denny, L. et al (2021). [A road map to a Literate Tasmania](#)

³¹ Hunter, J. (2022). Improving literacy for Tasmanian students: Submission to the Lifting Literacy, Lifting Tasmania consultation process, Grattan Institute, dpac.tas.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0023/193721/Grattan-Institute.pdf

³² Premier of Tasmania (2022). Submission to the National School Reform Agreement, 19 November, pc.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0008/351584/subdr127-school-agreement.pdf

³³ Hunter, J. (2022), op. cit.

peers”.³⁴ Research by the Grattan Institute in 2018 found that after considering socio-economic disadvantage, Tasmanian students’ educational progress is generally similar to the national average.³⁵

During community consultations conducted by TasCOSS in 2020, Tasmanians told us that children and young people in this state face multiple barriers to engagement in education arising from socio-economic disadvantage: living in poverty, lack of affordable and accessible transport in regional and remote areas, and growing rates of housing instability and homelessness.³⁶ More recently, during TasCOSS consultations held around the state in 2023 and 2024, we heard that Tasmanian families are struggling with the cost-of-living crisis, and experiencing food insecurity, energy poverty, digital exclusion, financial stress, housing insecurity and transport issues, with flow-on effects for engagement in education by children and young people.³⁷ We heard from Tasmanians on low incomes about how they struggled to afford to pay for petrol to get their kids to school, or the difficulties they experienced affording the basics to support their children’s educational needs (like a home internet connection).

As well as cost of living pressures, the COVID-19 pandemic has widened the education gap further. There’s a growing body of evidence that the effects of the pandemic were felt more by disadvantaged students.^{38, 39, 40} Recent research looking at attendance data for Tasmanian secondary school students in government schools found that attendance rates for students of high socio-economic status (SES) were similar before and during the pandemic, but for low SES students, there was a significant drop in attendance rates during the pandemic, with obvious effects for their educational achievement.⁴¹

Issues of education inequity are not exclusive to Tasmania. The ‘equity gap’ in educational outcomes is also evident nationally - and it is widening. NAPLAN data shows that in Year 3, the reading gap for students of low SES compared to their high SES peers rose from 1.4 years in 2008 to 2.3 years by 2022.⁴² A major analysis of educational opportunity in Australia found that three groups of young people are consistently being left behind: low-SES students, students living in rural and remote areas, and First

³⁴ Rudling, E. S. et al. (2023). *Education and Equity in Times of Crisis*, doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-18671-4_4, pp 67–92

³⁵ Goss, P. & Julie Sonnemann, J. (2018). Measuring student progress: A state-by-state report card, Grattan Institute, grattan.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/910-Mapping-Student-Progress.pdf

³⁶ TasCOSS (2020). Submission to the Review to Achieve Educational Excellence in Australian Schools, education.gov.au/system/files/documents/document-file/2020-12/tasmanian-council-of-social-services-tascoss.pdf

³⁷ TasCOSS (2023). Supporting Tasmanians in a Worsening Cost of Living Crisis, 2024/25 TasCOSS Budget Priorities Statement, tascoss.org.au/media-advocacy/cost-of-living/

³⁸ Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet (2024). Roundtable Summary – Schools, Children and Young People, hosted by Dr Angela Jackson and Professor Catherine Bennett, Commonwealth Government COVID-19 Response Inquiry, 9 July

³⁹ OECD (2024). *Beyond COVID-19: Evaluating Post-Pandemic Education Policies and Combatting Student Absenteeism*, OECD Education Policy Perspectives, Directorate for Education and Skills

⁴⁰ Brown, N. et al (2020). Learning at home during COVID-19: Effects on vulnerable young Australians, Independent Rapid Response Report, utas.edu.au/data/assets/pdf_file/0010/1411012/Brown-et-al-2020.pdf

⁴¹ Tomaszewski, W. et al. (2023). Uneven impacts of COVID-19 on the attendance rates of secondary school students from different socioeconomic backgrounds in Australia: A quasi-experimental analysis of administrative data. *Australian Journal of Social Issues*, 58, 111–130. doi.org/10.1002/ajs4.219

⁴² Independent Expert Panel (2023). Improving Outcomes for All: The Report of the Independent Expert Panel’s Review to Inform a Better and Fairer Education System, education.gov.au/review-inform-better-and-fairer-education-system/resources/expert-panels-report

Nations students. These inequities endure the learning journey: the learning gap for low SES students is evident from their early years and continues into their adulthood.⁴³

The results of the 2024 Mission Australia Youth Survey sheds light on how socio-economic disadvantage can affect educational outcomes, by causing stress and worsening mental health conditions which undermine students' learning confidence and capacity. One in five respondents to the Mission Australia Youth Survey (aged 12-24 years) reported experiencing financial stress in the past year - and this was associated with greater educational difficulties, lower levels of confidence and optimism, and worse mental health.⁴⁴ Mission Australia noted that the effects of financial stress on young people can lead to "decreased motivation, lower aspirations, and a greater risk of disengagement from education and employment pathways, further entrenching the cycle of disadvantage".⁴⁵ Similarly, in-depth research by the Peter Underwood Centre for Educational Attainment at the University of Tasmania found young people in a small Tasmanian town were leaving school early because they experienced anxiety and feelings of failure about their educational abilities.⁴⁶

Concentration of disadvantage in particular schools is inequitable

Compared to other countries in the OECD, Australia has one of the highest levels of 'social segregation' or 'residualisation' in its schools, evident in our large private school system. This phenomenon is characterised by high concentrations of high-SES students in private schools and high concentrations of low-SES students in government schools.⁴⁷ Australia's rate of social segregation is continuing to grow - and it is widening the educational equity gap. Arguably, as it currently stands, "the Australian educational system isn't structured to optimise educational outcomes for all students".⁴⁸

A report prepared by the Nous Group for the Expert Panel's *Review to Inform a Better and Fairer Education System* considered ten interventions designed to diversify enrolments at schools with high concentrations of disadvantage and make disadvantaged schools more attractive to a diverse range of students. The report proposes that Australian governments trial one or more innovative reforms designed to:

- Tighten conditions of funding and move towards fee removal for private schools;
- Reduce selectivity and promote alternative learning, assessment and delivery approaches; and

⁴³ Lamb, S. (2020). [Educational opportunity in Australia 2020: Who succeeds and who misses out?](#), Victoria University, Melbourne

⁴⁴ Mission Australia (2024). Counting the Cost of Living — the Impact of Financial Stress on Young People: Mission Australia Youth Survey, missionaustralia.com.au/publications/youth-survey

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Schmidt, M., Ooi, C.S. & Shelley, R. (2022). 'School is not for me': young people's perceptions of being a self-directed learner in a small rural Tasmanian town. journals.sfu.ca/jalt/index.php/jalt/article/view/563

⁴⁷ Nous Group (2023). Review of Policy Interventions to Increase Socio-Economic Diversity and Improve Learning Outcomes, education.gov.au/review-inform-better-and-fairer-education-system/resources/review-policy-interventions-increase-socioeconomic-diversity-and-improve-learning-outcomes

⁴⁸ Ibid.

- Strengthen financial incentives, including to boost ‘capacity exchange’ between schools.⁴⁹

Issue 3: Mental health and wellbeing for students

Psychological distress and mental health conditions are barriers to learning

Mental health and wellbeing have significant impacts on student learning. Research has shown that by Year 9, Australian students with mental health conditions are on average 1.5 - 2.8 years behind their peers in literacy and numeracy outcomes.⁵⁰ This is worrying because rates of psychological distress and mental health conditions in Australian children and young people have risen in the last decade, posing risks to many students’ educational outcomes.^{51,52}

There is good evidence that repeated lockdowns and online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic further worsened the mental health and wellbeing of children and young people in Tasmania and elsewhere. Research conducted for the Tasmanian Government found that almost half of Tasmanian children faced risks to their social and emotional wellbeing, as well as their educational outcomes, arising from home-based learning during the COVID-19 pandemic.⁵³

There is unmet demand for mental health and wellbeing support in Tasmanian schools

In recent years, Tasmania has experienced unprecedented demand for psychological services for children and young people, who also face affordability barriers to access.⁵⁴ One way for low-SES students to access affordable psychological assessment and treatment (which can cost thousands of dollars if self-funded) is through the state education system. However, many Tasmanian students are facing significant delays in accessing these services. According to data cited in an Estimates Committee Hearing in September 2024, there are currently 2,217 students on the waitlist to see a school psychologist, and the average wait times are far too long, with students waiting an average of 250 days for an initial assessment and 198 days for any treatment interventions.⁵⁵

The Expert Panel to the *Review to Inform a Better and Fairer Education System* identified student mental health and wellbeing as a particular issue for educational outcomes. They recommended that schools focus on “belonging, safety, cultural safety, engagement and classroom disruption”, and called on governments to fund greater investments in specialist staff and professional development for student

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Goodsell, B. et al. (2017). Child and Adolescent Mental Health and Educational Outcomes, University of Western Australia, youngmindsmatter.thekids.org.au/siteassets/media-docs---young-minds-matter/childandadolescentmentalhealthandeducationaloutcomesdec2017.pdf

⁵¹ Independent Expert Panel (2023), op. cit.

⁵² AIHW (2022). *Australia’s Health 2022*, Chapter: 8 Mental health of young Australians, aihw.gov.au/getmedia/ba6da461-a046-44ac-9a7f-29d08a2bea9f/aihw-aus-240_chapter_8.pdf.aspx

⁵³ Brown, N. et al (2020), op. cit.

⁵⁴ Wallace, E. (2023). “Young Tasmanians left waiting months to see school psychologists as Australia’s youth mental health”, 6 November, ABC News, abc.net.au/news/2023-11-06/need-for-school-psychologists-young-battle-mental-health-issues/103063496

⁵⁵ Data cited in question from Andrew Jenner MP, Estimates Committee, House of Assembly B, 25 September 2024, parliament.tas.gov.au/data/assets/pdf_file/0029/85493/HA-Estimates-B-Wednesday-25-September-Palmer.pdf

wellbeing.⁵⁶ As noted earlier, student wellbeing is one of the three intended outcomes of the Better and Fairer Schools Agreement, and specific initiatives targeting wellbeing are anticipated for the forthcoming Tasmanian Bilateral Agreement with the Commonwealth.

Recommendations

In view of the observations made in this submission, informed by consultations with Tasmanians, and building on recommendations made to previous consultations on education and literacy in Tasmania, TasCOSS recommends to the Independent Review:

1. Additional investment in educational programs and initiatives providing early intervention and play-based learning opportunities for families and communities, including –
 - a. further expansion of *Working Together* to make it available to more Tasmanian families; and
 - b. ensuring that *Working Together* program partners are supported to deliver more sustained and systematic outreach to disadvantaged families to increase their enrolment and maximise their engagement with *Working Together*.
2. Additional measures (beyond those announced in the 2024/25 Tasmanian State Budget) to address issues of insecure housing and homelessness, food insecurity, energy poverty, and digital inequality faced by many Tasmanian students, that are identified as barriers to education for young people experiencing socio-economic disadvantage.
3. Decisive action to reduce educational inequity in our education system. Such initiatives could include trials of policy interventions aimed at improving the socio-economic diversity of Tasmanian schools, both public and private, as outlined in the recent Nous Group report.⁵⁷
4. Requirements for the Tasmanian Government to deliver its Better and Fairer Schools Agreement (2024-2035) commitments for timely and sufficient supports to low-SES students, including school psychologists and social workers, to ensure those students receive the support they need to strengthen their mental health, cope with life's challenges and reach their educational potential.

⁵⁶ Independent Expert Panel (2023), op. cit.

⁵⁷ Nous Group (2023), op. cit.