

Response to the Literacy Advisory Panel's Community Consultation

Attention: Literacy Advisory Panel By email: policy@dpac.tas.gov.au

In response to Question 1: What is currently working well to improve literacy?

Being able to read and write is fundamental to being able to function well in today's increasingly knowledge-based, digitally-driven society. More than that, it is a critical factor in being able to achieve personal goals and ambitions. Without literacy, everything is a compromise. It's no wonder people who aren't fluent readers and writers experience feelings of frustration, anger and isolation.

Literacy is an issue in Tasmania, across Australia and indeed globally. But Tasmania has tackled the issue through its library-based adult literacy support and the ground-breaking 26TEN initiative. After a great deal of research and consultation, 26TEN launched in 2012, during the National Year of Reading, and since then it has gained depth as a program through the lived experience of early participants and it has expanded its reach into more communities.

The model has been proven – guided by a community-based coalition of leaders; delivered in safe, local spaces by volunteers who care deeply about the outcomes for their clients; supported by state government through Libraries Tasmania.

If you ask a gardener the best time to plant a tree, they will tell you '10 years ago'. The same applies to literacy programs. The beauty of Tasmania is that the adult literacy program in libraries is well established and the 26TEN program was planted 10 years ago. It has grown, matured and continues to flourish. It provides a steady, strong presence in the state.

Having spent a great deal of time working in libraries and the early language and literacy space, it is clear that poor literacy is intergenerational. The foundations of language and literacy can't wait until children reach school. If a five-year-old arrives on their first day of school unfamiliar with books and reading, they are already behind their peers – and many will never catch up. That's why the role of public libraries as welcoming, inclusive spaces at the heart of the community with the promotion of reading at their core, is so valuable. In a non-COVID year, Australian libraries run more than 120,000 rhyme times and story times for families with young children, attracting more than 3 million participants.

School education is essential, but teachers are not solely responsible for literacy outcomes – a whole of community approach is required. There are opportunities for positive intervention that stretch across all life stages from birth to adulthood. There must be a second chance for those who missed out on the early years and couldn't find their way through formal education. That's where the 26TEN program and the high-quality adult literacy support provided by Libraries Tasmania becomes so important.

Where other states and territories have focused on early literacy and school-based education, Tasmania is in the enviable position of having grasped the adult literacy nettle 10 years ago and the fact that there are multiple voices all highlighting the importance of literacy, willing to act collaboratively and seeking the best suite of solutions puts the state in a good place for making further inroads. Tasmania can be proud of its achievements to date, which have been highlighted in the federal government's newly published report resulting from the *Inquiry into adult literacy and its importance*¹. But until everyone has had the opportunity to build their literacy skills, the work is not complete.

¹ [Don't take it as read – Parliament of Australia \(aph.gov.au\)](https://aph.gov.au)

Sue McKerracher, 23 March 2022

This submission is made in a personal capacity as Director of the National Year of Reading 2012, former Chair of the National Early Language and Literacy Coalition and former CEO of the Australian Library and Information Association. It is independent of my new position as Executive Director of Libraries Tasmania (from 28 February 2022).