Tasmanian Department of Education literacy and numeracy strategy: Raising the bar

> **Summary**

> **Target student group**

> **Method**

> **Results**

> **Lessons learned**

> **Next steps**

> **Research base**

> **Further reading and links**

> **Contacts**

Summary

The original name for this Tasmanian Government school initiative was Raising the Bar, Closing the Gap (RTBCTG). The project began in 2008 with a four-year state-funded pilot. After early success, the project became known as Raising the Bar (RTB). The RTB model has been implemented in selected Tasmanian government schools for the last five years.

RTB is designed to increase the number of students completing primary school with functional literacy skills. RTB was implemented in 36 schools across the state, and successfully improved student outcomes. It did this by strengthening school leadership, engaging teachers with targeted professional learning, implementing whole-school approaches to literacy, and effectively monitoring and tracking students.

Through the RTB initiative, participating schools were provided with two additional staff. The provision of an additional assistant principal released the principal to lead literacy and numeracy improvement in the school. The provision of a full-time, school-based literacy leader facilitated teacher and leader discussions on the beliefs and understandings articulated in Tasmania's 2012–2015 Literacy and Numeracy Framework (LNF).

RTB was designed as a whole-school, evidence-based approach to the improvement of students' literacy levels. Key elements included sharing best practice across networks of schools across the state, and helping teachers use student outcome data to monitor and evaluate the teaching and learning of literacy and numeracy.

Participating schools continue to develop their literacy improvement plans, while maintaining their commitment to targeted professional learning and a whole-of-school approach to literacy.

Target student group

The pilot took place in 36 regional primary schools. It involved approximately 150 teachers and 2000 students from year 1 to year 6. The project targeted schools with students identified as being at or below the national minimum standard (based on NAPLAN data). The project was expanded in 2011 to include secondary schools. Both phases of the project were state-funded. RTBCTG Group 3 was a two-year federal government Language, Literacy and Numeracy pilot program, funded under the National Action Plan on Literacy and Numeracy.

Method

As well as providing additional school staff, learning services groups were formed to support local pilot schools. Support was focused on school needs, resulting in some variation across the four regions. However, all the pilot schools were involved in professional learning for principals and teachers. The learning structures included the involvement of teacher aides in specific learning, and the strengthening of the home–school partnership.

Principals attended regular meetings to share and discuss progress, and to identify future success criteria. The meetings were structured to allow principals to work together to address literacy needs, and to develop their capacity to build the capability of teachers in their own schools. The meetings included:

- sharing effective literacy practice taking place in schools
- sharing effective leadership practice
- use of data, and building principals' ability to lead the school in the use of data
- collaborative problem solving of literacy challenges and issues facing the schools
- professional learning, including the sharing of current research.

Pilot schools were provided with a professional learning budget. This allowed them to make decisions about professional learning based on their school priorities.

The professional learning aimed to provide teachers with targeted professional development based on current research. Some professional learning was school based, but most was offered through the four regional learning services. Professional learning workshops covered a range of topics, including whole-school literacy programs, classroom differentiation, flexible grouping, specific programs, personalising learning, whole-school evaluation screening processes, and use of tools (including diagnostic assessment, data collection, collation and interpretation).

Teachers also had the opportunity to attend a summer school. Teachers in the pilot schools were given the opportunity to engage in further research, and some teachers took up the option of postgraduate study.

> 'Teachers' participation in Raising the Bar led to improved literacy practice, increased focus on explicit literacy teaching, and greater understanding and use of data and evidence when planning for individual students.' (Principal)

Schools undertook research on literacy interventions. A major emphasis was on developing the capacity of teachers and school leaders to use data, and to develop strategies to address identified needs based on these three research questions:

- Are students learning what they need to learn?
- How do we know if students are learning?
- What do we do with students who are not learning?

These questions were used to guide data analysis and collaborative planning.

As part of the whole-school approach, schools aimed to increase parental involvement by informing parents and giving them the skills to improve their children's literacy. Project schools ran pre-Kindergarten sessions emphasising the importance of sharing books, stories, poems and songs with young children before they start school. Research (Penlington et al, 2008) showed that greater parental and community involvement in schools, especially in literacy, could help teachers and community members share ownership of the outcomes. With this in mind, RTB included several strategies to involve families with their child's literacy.

Results

The RTB initiative was designed to be sustainable, and evidence of this led to its extension into secondary schools. The pilot program changed school approaches and strategies, and informed school literacy and improvement planning. A team of academics from the University of Tasmania (UTas) evaluated the project. Initial findings were reported in [Advancing Literacy in Tasmanian Primary Schools](#) (2011). Through the evaluation, principals reported that teachers' participation in the initiative led to improved literacy practice, explicit literacy teaching, and greater understanding of using and understanding data when planning for individual students.

> 'The pilot has changed school approaches and strategies, as well as informing school literacy planning and school improvement planning.' (Principal)

The evaluation suggests an increase in the capacity of the leaders in the pilot schools to lead collaborative work and provide high-level curriculum content and pedagogical knowledge. Both increased leadership density and quality, and the development of whole-school capacity to teach literacy and numeracy had a positive impact on learning outcomes.

Performance data collected from participating schools in 2006–2008 was used as a baseline for evaluating RTBCTG.

Quantitative and qualitative data were collected using:

- the ACER Progressive Achievement Test in Reading (PAT-R). Results indicated the overall cohort had improved their reading comprehension.
- the ACER Single Word Spelling Test (SWST). The data showed increased scores on average across the entire target group (years 2–6).
- the BURT Word Recognition Test for a measure of reading and vocabulary. On average, scores increased across the entire target student cohort.
- NAPLAN grammar and punctuation, spelling, reading and writing results. These scores increased almost uniformly from 2008 through to 2010. (The 2008–2009 data was collected in 2009.)

'Teachers have high expectations for all students, in all classrooms. There is an expectation that all students will achieve.'

In addition to NAPLAN, having a standard set of valid literacy tests and measures across the RTB schools led to greater communication between classrooms, and between schools. The report highlighted that teachers need to link assessment and programming, and be able to interpret why some children are successful or not on specific items.

Lessons learned

The findings of the evaluation by UTas confirmed the effectiveness of the elements in the project, including:

- the principal as the literacy leader
- building the capacity of all teachers as teachers of literacy
- whole-school planning for literacy
- a coordinated focus on pedagogy across the school
- having colleague teachers as mentors
- teachers and leaders using student data and evidence to inform instruction and set targets
- intervention plans for underperforming students
- commitment to ongoing professional learning for teachers and leaders
- encouraging parents to support the literacy program at home.

'Teachers are providing well-paced instruction in a systematic way.' (Principal)

Teacher interviews were conducted at the school level. Results suggest that certain processes and strategies were important and effective. These included:

- supporting teacher mentoring groups that focus on problem solving, reflection and sharing
- using a literacy mentor teacher
- reviewing and interpreting students' NAPLAN results (and other literacy tests and records)
- personalising students' programs based on their strengths and weaknesses
- analysing students' writing as a reflection of their level of literacy
- looking at 'in-class' case studies and reflecting on why some activities worked better than others
- encouraging more frequent reading of the same material for longer periods to develop readers' fluency and confidence
- incorporating a greater variety of literacy texts into the program, including poems and songs, to continue developing students' auditory skills
- practising vocabulary and grammar development using cloze as a strategy for teaching and learning.

Next steps

The Department of Education Tasmania has embarked on a reform agenda to build principals' leadership capacity around pedagogical knowledge and to increase the use of evidence-based data to inform whole-school improvement planning. This reform in Tasmanian government schools was, and is, guided by the department's strategic plan. Planned changes to the project include:

1. Four learning services have been reduced to three, and 11 school networks have been established. The network structure is designed to support school and system improvement, improved student learning outcomes and reform. A Principal Network Leader (PNL) now supports each network. The role of the PNL is to support the school principal, focusing on school improvement and accountability.

2. Whole-school ownership of school improvement plans and student performance is becoming increasingly evident as school data is used more effectively. Whole-school ownership is integral to school-improvement planning processes. The department is supporting the capacity of teachers and principals to effectively interpret and use data at the classroom, school and system levels, with a range of reports around NAPLAN data, links to inform teaching and learning strategies, and the NAPLAN toolkit. The increased use of data to inform planning is a sustainable feature across all departmental schools. The NAPLAN Toolkit, a resource for classroom teachers, has been developed by the Department of Education. The toolkit allows classroom teachers to view, sort and analyse students' NAPLAN data, and access relevant teaching strategies to improve student performance.

3. The implementation of the LNF has allowed teachers and leaders to discuss the beliefs and understandings that underpin it. These discussions are aimed at implementing the framework in schools and bringing a consistent approach to increasing student learning outcomes.

4. This consistency means that whole-school approaches and collaborative planning can be embedded in school structures and plans. It also ensures that data is used to inform planning and to identify professional learning needs, so that teaching is differentiated and engaging for all learners.

5. Lead schools and lead teachers across the 11 networks are focusing on improving education outcomes for students at risk of disengaging from schooling. They are doing this by prioritising support to schools whose data reflects additional support for effective teaching practice is required.

6. The LNF enables lead teachers to use a common language based around shared beliefs and understanding of effective teaching practice when engaging leadership teams in professional conversations. This allows lead teachers to build leadership capacity in schools, so that future self-improvement will be a greater source of change.

In 2013, the following initiatives are being implemented:

- *Supporting Literacy and Numeracy Success: A teacher's resource for Early Years to Year 12* provides a common resource for all teachers and schools to use as they implement the LNF 2012–2015. The appointment of curriculum teacher leaders in all senior secondary colleges. As well as providing high-level educational leadership in each curriculum learning area, they will also support the implementation of the LNF and related programs, and ensure continuity through years 9–12.
- In 2013, the Principals as Literacy Leaders (PALL) project will be added.

Based on the pilot and the evaluation, we recommend that teachers:

- encourage students to read the same material frequently and for longer periods to develop their fluency and confidence
- incorporate a greater variety of listening and rhyme-based texts into the program, including multi-literacy resources, poems and songs, to develop children's auditory and listening skills
- practise vocabulary and grammar development using cloze, and use it as a strategy for teaching and learning
- link children's needs to a systematic phonological program, such as the UK Sound Linkage program, or the UK Letters and Sounds program, the latter currently being trialled in a number of Tasmanian schools.

Research base

The focus of this project on school improvement and accountability is occurring at a national and international level. Tasmania has used (and is currently using) current best practice from Victoria, ACT and the United Kingdom to develop the improvement and accountability process for schools.

Building learning cultures in Tasmanian schools and the system was fundamental in the design of the project. The Professional Learning Institute (PLI) provides programs that support aspiring, newly appointed and experienced leaders, as well as programs that equip leaders with the skills to manage and encourage innovation and continuous improvement. In order to ensure that Tasmanian school leaders benefit from national developments in best educational practice, all relevant programs are based on the Australian Professional Standards for Teaching, the Australian Professional Standard for Principals and the Australian Curriculum.

The project was designed in response to identified needs, using sound research in the field, as discussed below.

Research underpinning issue 1: Different classes, different outcomes

Results were showing that the premise that all teachers are equal is incorrect.

> 'If everyone is equally good at what they do, then no-one has anything to teach anyone else about how to do it better. Thus, educators' pretence of absolute quality is a major impediment to improvement.' (Elmore, 2000, p. 26)

Hill (1997) showed that class effects are much larger than school effects when the proportion of variance in value-added measures of student achievement at the class and school levels are analysed.

Hattie (2003) demonstrated that, aside from what students themselves bring to schools, teachers and teaching account for the greatest level of variance of any other factor operating in a school (approximately 30 per cent).

The work of Zbar (2008) informed this aspect of the design.

Research underpinning issue 2: The question is 'how?'

The reality is that teachers want to do a good job and always seek to do a better job, but don't necessarily know how to. Guskey (2002) concluded that changes in attitudes and beliefs generally follow, rather than precede, changes in behaviour.

Hattie (2003) found that a typical effect size of classroom interventions over time is of the order of 0.4 (0.2 = small; 0.5 = moderate; 0.8 = large). The findings from this research underpinned some aspects of the design of the project:

- Class size: 0.2
- Dividing on basis of gender: 0.12
- Peer tutoring: 0.55
- Providing worked examples for students: 0.57
- Reading and comprehension programs: 0.58
- Problem-solving teaching meaning 'the teacher is focused on solving problems with respect to individual students' performance in the class' (Hattie 2003, 6): 0.61
- Teacher professional development on student achievement: 0.64
- Teaching students self-verbalisation: 0.67
- Reciprocal teaching: 0.77
- Use of feedback: 0.72
- Providing evaluative information for teachers: 0.70

It was concluded that there was a need to provide teachers with content-rich materials and associated pedagogical advice, linked to clear assessment criteria and tasks aligned to the particular jurisdictional standards that apply.

The project designers' conclusions

The designers of the project concluded the following:

- Some schools are more effective than others at meeting their students' learning needs and generating quality student outcomes.
- A data-collection regime is essential for effective improvement in schools. There needs to be agreement for some common and nationally agreed data sets to be developed (in the same manner as teaching standards).
- Data needs to be used by system leaders to classify schools, so that schools can be supported based on need.
- The UK National Audit Office (2006) identified five key actions in turning around poorly performing schools:
  o Improving school leadership and the role of the governing body.
  o Improving teaching standards.
  o Better management of pupil behaviour.
  o Collaboration with other schools.

'Fresh start': schools get extra funding, change their identity, governing body and get new staff.

Further reading and links

Castleton, G, Moss, T & Milbourne, S 2011, 'Challenges in leading for literacy in schools', *Language and literacy education in a changing world*, T Le, Q Le & M Short (eds), pp. 91–106, Nova Science Publishers, New York.

Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations 2011, 'Literacy and Numeracy Pilots Final Report'

Department of Education & Training, Leadership and Teacher Development Branch, Office of School Education 2005, *Professional Learning in Effective Schools*, Victorian Department of Education & Training, Melbourne, www.eduweb.vic.gov.au/edulibrary/public/teachlearn/teacher/ProfLearningInEffectiveSchools.pdf

Elmore, RE 2000, *Building a New Structure for School Leadership*, Albert Shanker Institute, www.shankerinstitute.org/Downloads/building.pdf

Fullan, M, Cuttress, C & Kilcher, A 2005, '8 Forces for Leaders of Change', *Journal of Staff Development*, 26(4), pp. 54–64.

Guskey, T 2002, 'Professional Development and Teacher Change', *Teachers and Teaching: theory and practice*', vol. 8, nos 3–4. pp. 381–91.

Hattie, J 2003, *Teachers Make A Difference: What is the Research Evidence?*, University of Auckland & ACER, available at http://www.acer.edu.au/documents/RC2003_Hattie_TeachersMakeADifference.pdf

Hattie, J & Timperley, H 2007, 'The Power of Feedback', *Review of Educational Research*, vol. 77, no. 1, pp. 81–112.

Hay, I, Castleton, G, Callingham, R, Edmunds, B, Fielding-Barnsley, R, Moss, T & Grimbeek, P 2011, *Advancing Literacy in Tasmanian Primary Schools*, University of Tasmania & Tasmanian Department of Education, Hobart, Tasmania.

Hill, PW & Crévola, CA 1997, 'The Literacy Challenge in Australian Primary Schools', *IARTV Seminar Series*, no. 69.

Murphy, J 2004, 'Leadership for literacy: A framework for policy and practice', *School Effectiveness & School Improvement*, 15(1), pp. 65–96.

National Audit Office United Kingdom 2006, 'Improving Poorly Performing Schools in England', www.nao.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2006/01/0506679_governors_leaflet_printer.pdf

Penlington, C, Kington, A & Day, C 2008, 'Leadership in Improving Schools: A Qualitative Perspective', *School Leadership & Management*, 28 (1), pp. 65–82.

Sharratt, L & Fullan, M 2006, 'Accomplishing District Wide Reform', *Journal of School Leadership*, no. 16, pp. 583–595.

Zbar, V 2008, 'Raising the Bar on Teachers and Schools: A Revolutionary Act', *CSE Seminar Series Paper*, no. 171.

Contacts

Tasmanian Department of Education
Phone: 1800 816 057
Website: www.education.tas.gov.au