

Literacy and the School-to-Prison Pipeline

PRESENTATION TO THE TASMANIA POLICE SENIOR EXECUTIVE TEAM

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Overview

NB Theoretical context drawn from the work of Professor Pamela Snow

- Professor of Cognitive Psychology

- Speech and Language Pathologist

Director of the Science of Language and Reading (SOLAR) Lab, Latrobe University

<https://scholars.latrobe.edu.au/pcsnow>

- What is literacy?
- The School-to-Prison Pipeline
 - Pathway to offending
 - Language and literacy
 - Behaviour is communication
 - Case studies
- Tasmania
 - Socio-economic profile
 - Australian Early Development Census
 - Literacy outcomes - NAPLAN
 - Attendance and exclusionary practices
- The Tasmanian 100% Literacy Alliance
- The Tasmanian Government response
- Implications for Tasmania Police
- Discussion

What is literacy?

PREMIER'S LITERACY ADVISORY PANEL

“Literacy involves listening, reading, viewing, speaking, writing, creating texts, and using language for different purposes in a range of contexts. Literacy encompasses the knowledge and skills needed to access, understand, analyse, and evaluate information, make meaning, express thoughts and emotions, present ideas, opinions and interact with others. It involves a continuum of learning to enable individuals to achieve their goals, to develop their knowledge and potential, and to participate fully in their community and wider society.”

The Literacy Advisory Panel's definition of literacy combines definitions from the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA), and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO)

FUNCTIONAL LITERACY

Refers to the capacity of a person to engage in all those activities in which literacy is required for effective function of his or her group and community and also for enabling him or her to continue to use reading, writing and calculation for his or her own and the community's development. – UNESCO

“Functional literacy is not an aspiration. When we settle for functional literacy, we conspire with the soft bigotry of low expectations”

Professor Pamela Snow, Towards 100% Literacy, Oral language is the engine and high-quality instruction is the fuel, September 2021

Reading and Literacy

An important protective factor

Reading is the foundational skill for all other literacy domains and the wider curriculum

- Comprehension
- Spelling
- Grammar and punctuation
- Writing (sentences, paragraphs etc)
- Numeracy
- All other disciplines

Promotes:

- School engagement, attachment and retention
 - Academic achievement
 - Positive self-esteem
-
- Social Determinants of Health (SDoH)
 - First step to new knowledge, educational success and vocational achievement
 - Sits between those who have access to opportunities, information, and choices, and those who do not.
 - Improves the health and social, economic and cultural capital of whole communities, states and nations
-
- ***In Tasmania, improving literacy outcomes provides the best opportunity to disrupt entrenched intergenerational disadvantage***

Reading

Reading is likely the single most important skill acquired through formal schooling, an essential foundation for educational progress and mastery. In today's world, a basic level of reading proficiency is no longer sufficient for the demands of the workplace.... Reading failure contributes to a host of long-term negative outcomes, including frustration leading to more generalized academic and behavior problems, high rates of suspension, and limited access to employment opportunities in adulthood.... Youth with pronounced reading difficulties are vulnerable to marginalization in their schools and communities and lifelong risk of involvement in the juvenile and criminal justice systems.

Source: Leone, Krezmien, Mason, and Meisel (2005)

What does poor reading ability mean as a life-span issue?

Correlates:

- Low educational attainment
- Mental health difficulties: internalising and externalising; substance misuse
- Un/under-employment
- Unstable housing
- Intergenerational transmission of low reading / low self-efficacy for academic learning
- Exposure to violence
- Reduced life-expectancy

Acknowledgement: Snow, P. (2021) Towards 100% Literacy, Oral language is the engine and high-quality instruction is the fuel.

The importance of language in literacy

Oral language underpins all literacy skills

- vocabulary
- verbal communication

Language problems are invisible

- Expressive
- Receptive (comprehension)

Socially determined and deterministic – social gradient exists

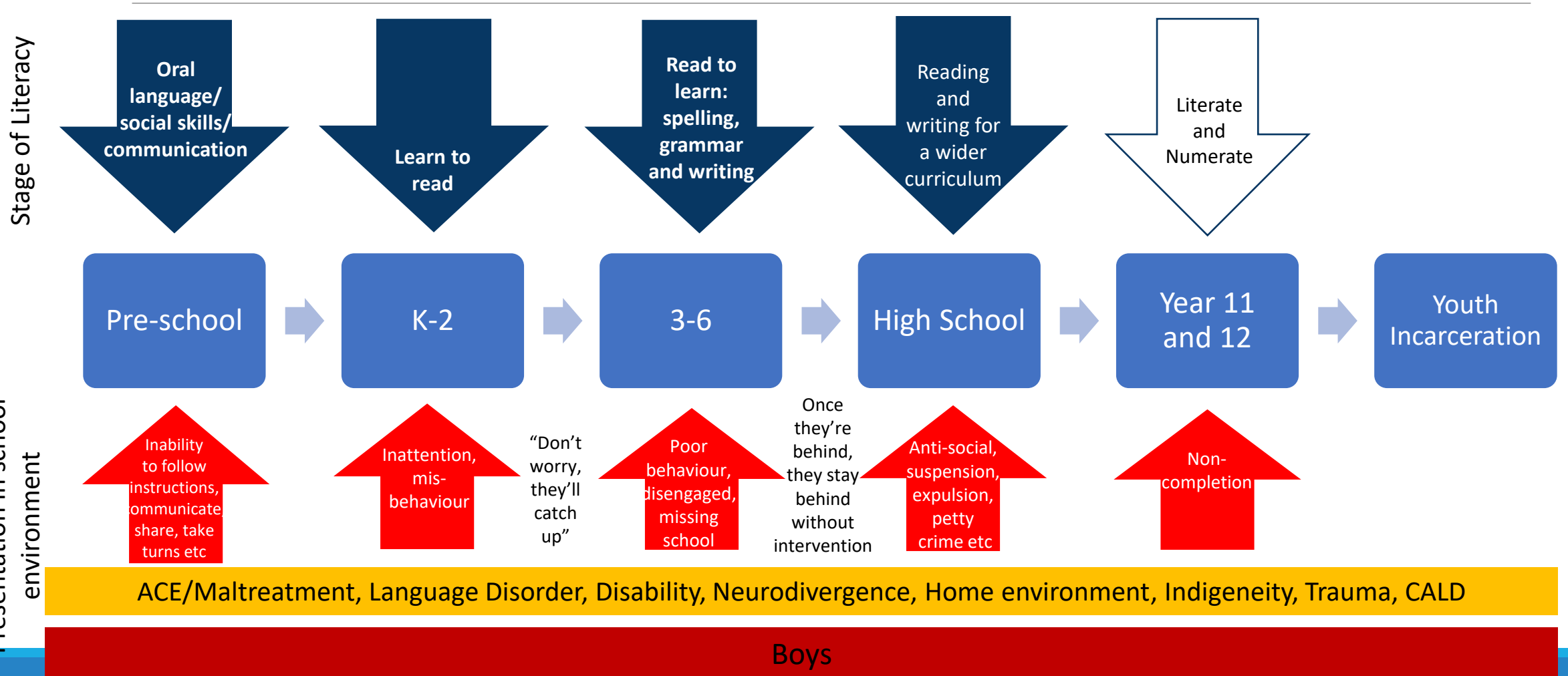
Closely tied to social cognition

*Hidden and prevalent problem associated with adverse life-long consequences

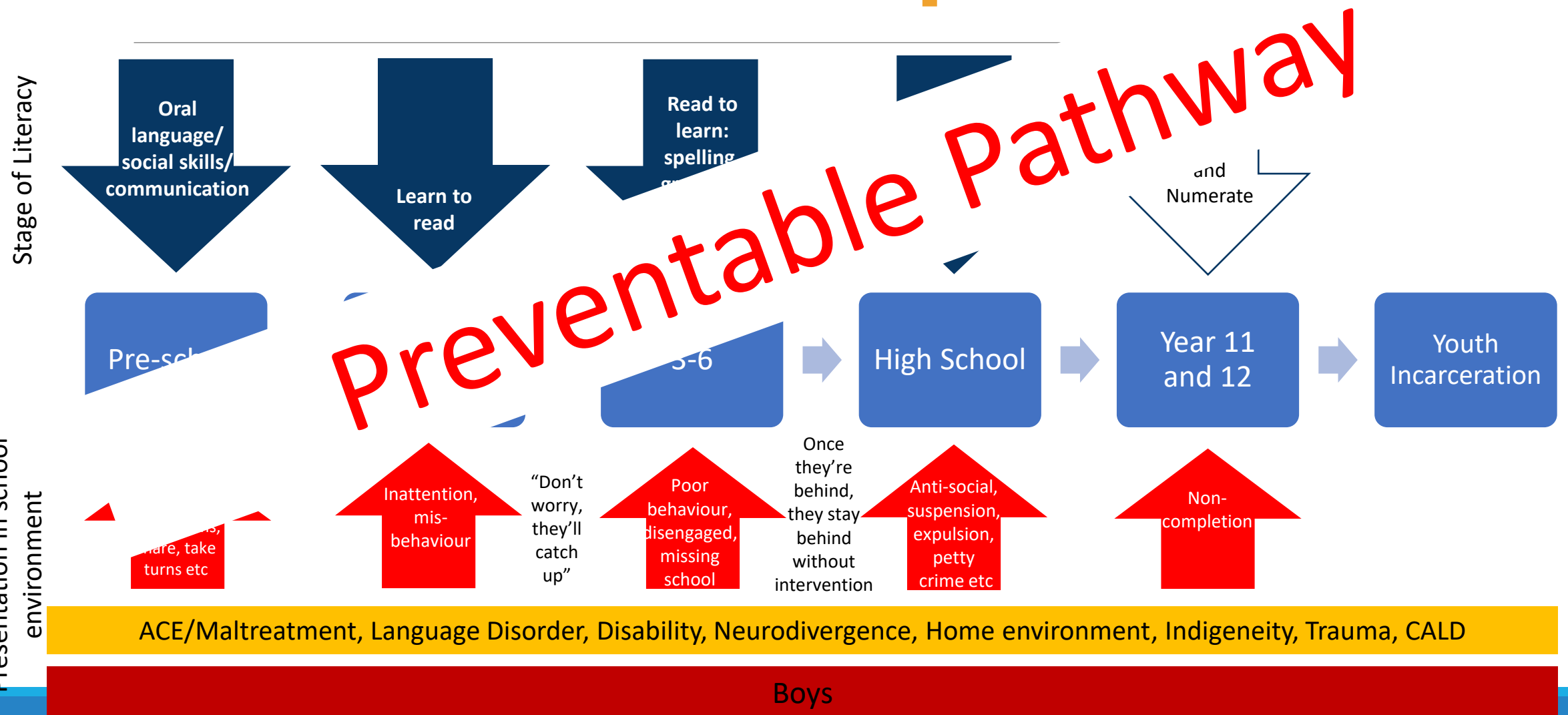
Language impairment may masquerade as:

- Rudeness
- Indifference/lack of concern
- Poor motivation to co-operate
- “yep, nup, dunno, maybe..” responses
- Behaviour disturbance
- Low IQ
- Suggestibility/acquiescence in forensic interviews whether as suspects, witnesses or victims
- No language problem at all

School-to-Prison-Pipeline



School-to-Prison-Pipeline



The pathway to offending

PATHWAY TO OFFENDING

Male:Female ratio of 5:1 (higher in custodial settings)

Over-representation of:

- Single parent households – absent fathers
- Dysfunctional communication/parenting
- Parental mental health issues
- Involvement with child protection services
- History of behaviour/conduct disturbance
- Low educational attainment/achievement
- School exclusion
- Developmental disability (diagnosed or not)
- Intergenerational un/under-employment in parents
- Early initiation into substance use/abuse

LANGUAGE IMPAIRMENT

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Behaviour is communication: What's the message?

I'm not BAD...
I'm just MISUNDERSTOOD!



SUSPENSION & EXCLUSION

"I didn't do the work because I couldn't read the instructions"



INATTENTIVE OR DISRUPTIVE WHEN LISTENING TO SPOKEN INFORMATION

"I can't concentrate, It's not making any sense"



FORGET, ASK LOTS OF QUESTIONS ABOUT WHAT YOU'VE JUST EXPLAINED

"I can't REMEMBER what I hear OR read"



WORK AVOIDANCE

"This is too hard, I don't know how to start"



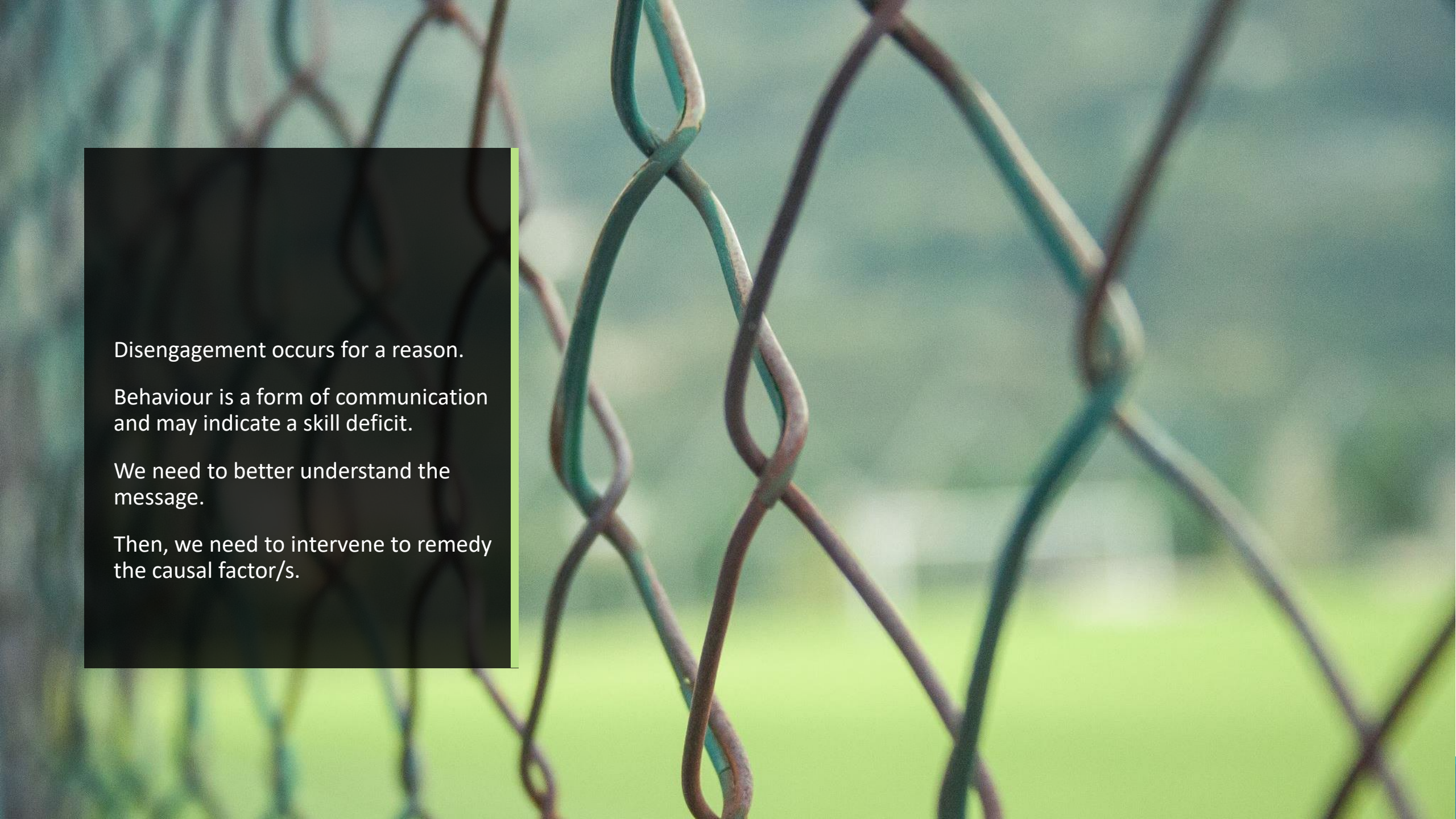
DISRUPTIVE & DISENGAGED

"I can't do the work, I'm bored, so I'll entertain myself"



EMOTIONAL, ANXIOUS

"I feel overwhelmed, I want to understand"



Disengagement occurs for a reason.

Behaviour is a form of communication and may indicate a skill deficit.

We need to better understand the message.

Then, we need to intervene to remedy the causal factor/s.

Evidence

80% of South Australian youth offenders suspended and/or excluded from school at least once (Putnins A.L., 1999)

46% of young offenders have undiagnosed severe language disorder (Snow and Powell, 2014)

- Higher rates of LI for those who had been in Out of Home Care
- Majority had left school between years 8 and 10

52% flexible learning options (FLO) students have poor oral language skills and 47% have reading skills below 12 years of age (Snow and others, 2019)

50% of young people in Victoria's youth prisons have a previously undiagnosed language disorder. There is also a strong link between the severity of offending and the severity of disordered language skills (Snow and Powell, 2011).

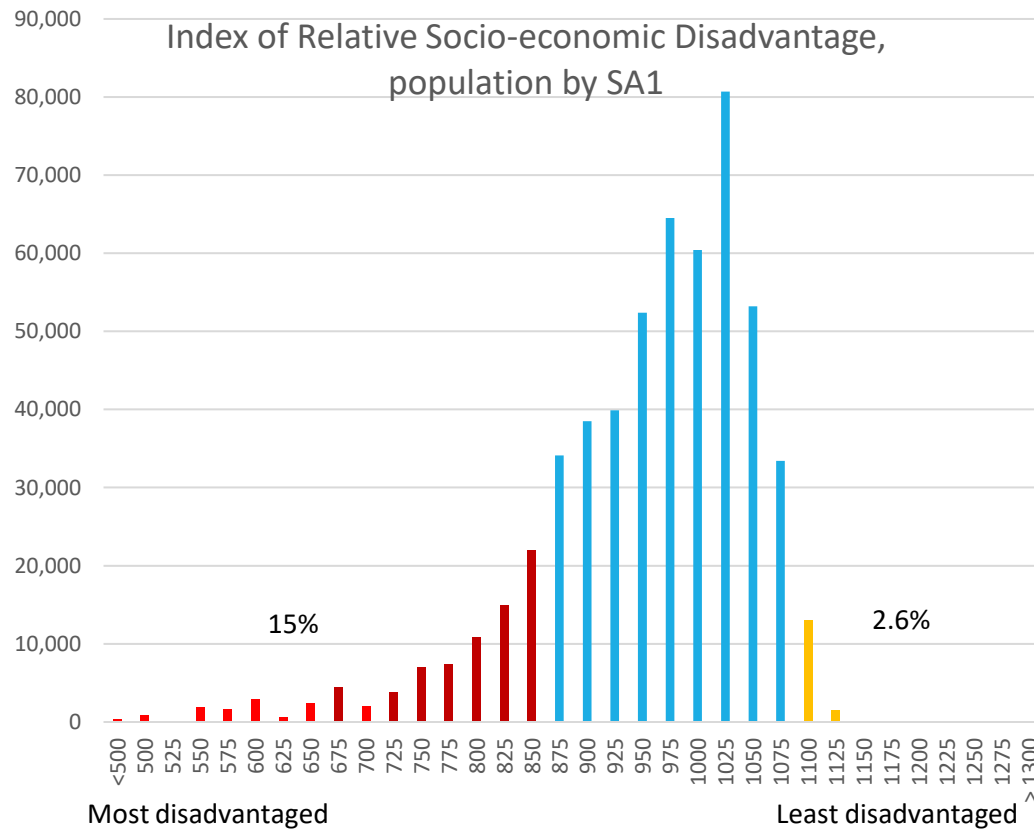
87% of a sample of youth offenders in NSW had experienced school suspensions and expulsions (Snow and others, 2015).

A NSW study of youth offenders found 93.3% of females had below average language skills compared with 79.1% of males. Females also had a much higher proportion of very-low language skills than males (Justice Health and Mental Health Network, NSW, 2017)

“Once a young person is engaged with youth justice services, a high index of suspicion should be maintained with respect to their oral language skills; for example, in relation to forensic interviewing and the ability to benefit from verbally mediated interventions”. – Snow, 2011

Literacy in Tasmania

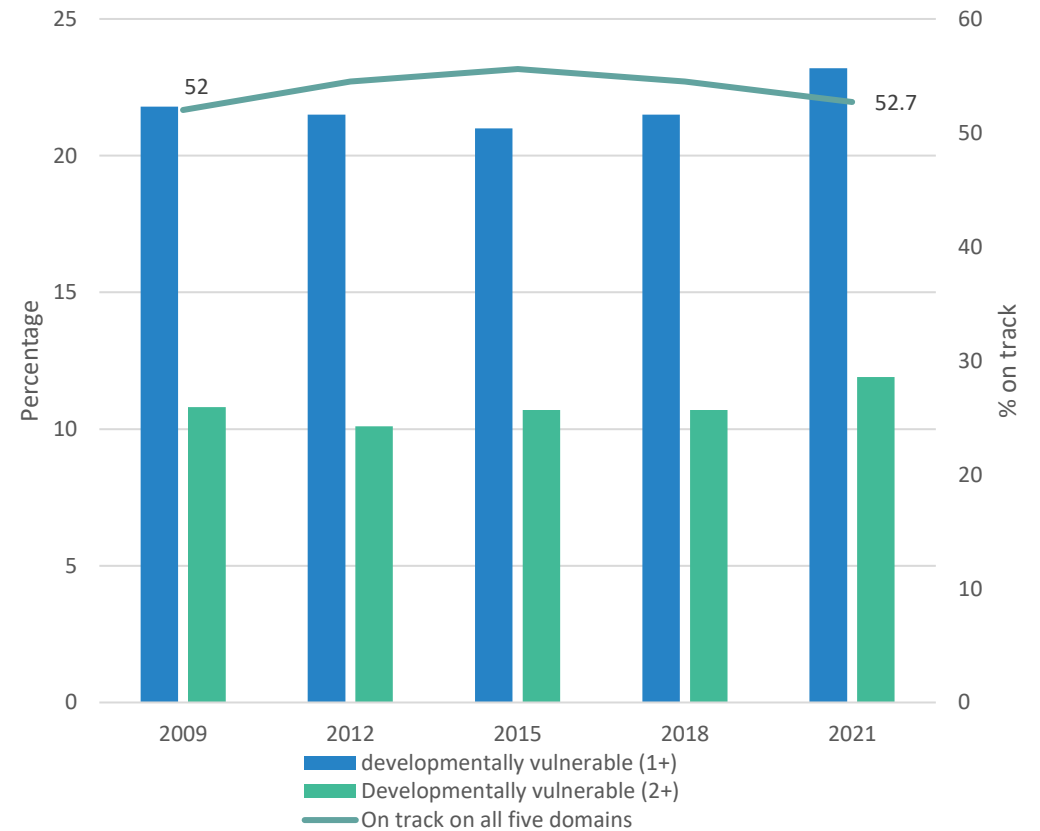
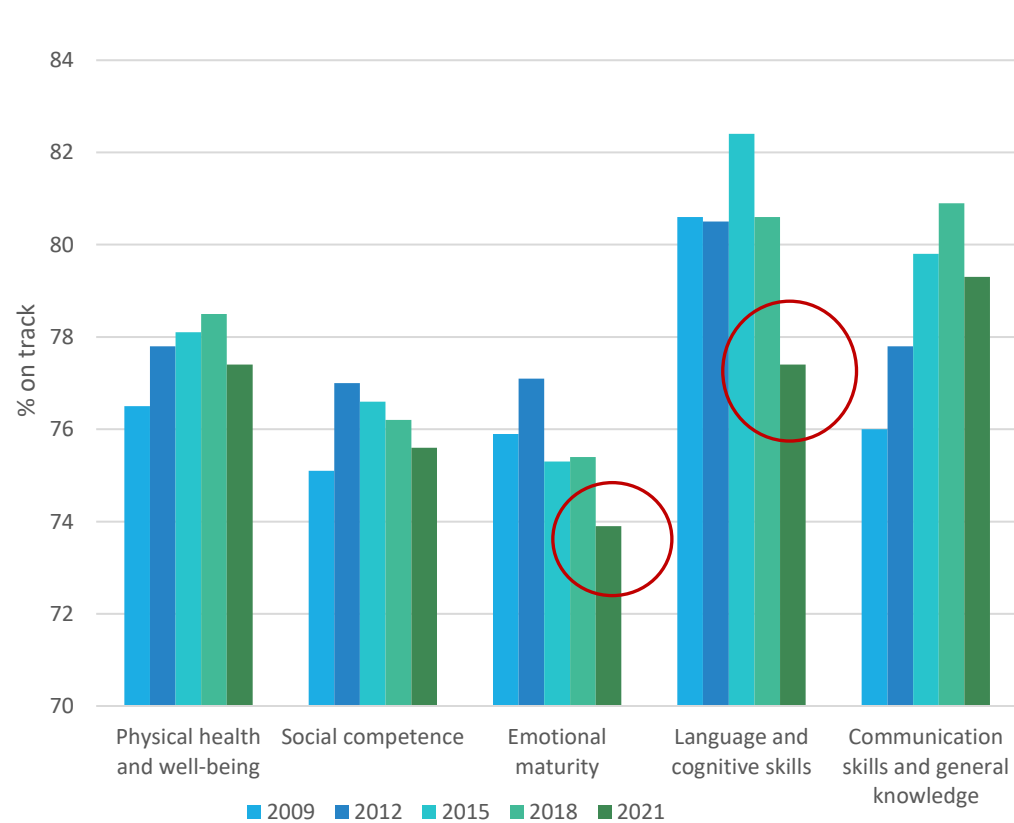
Relative disadvantage in Tasmania



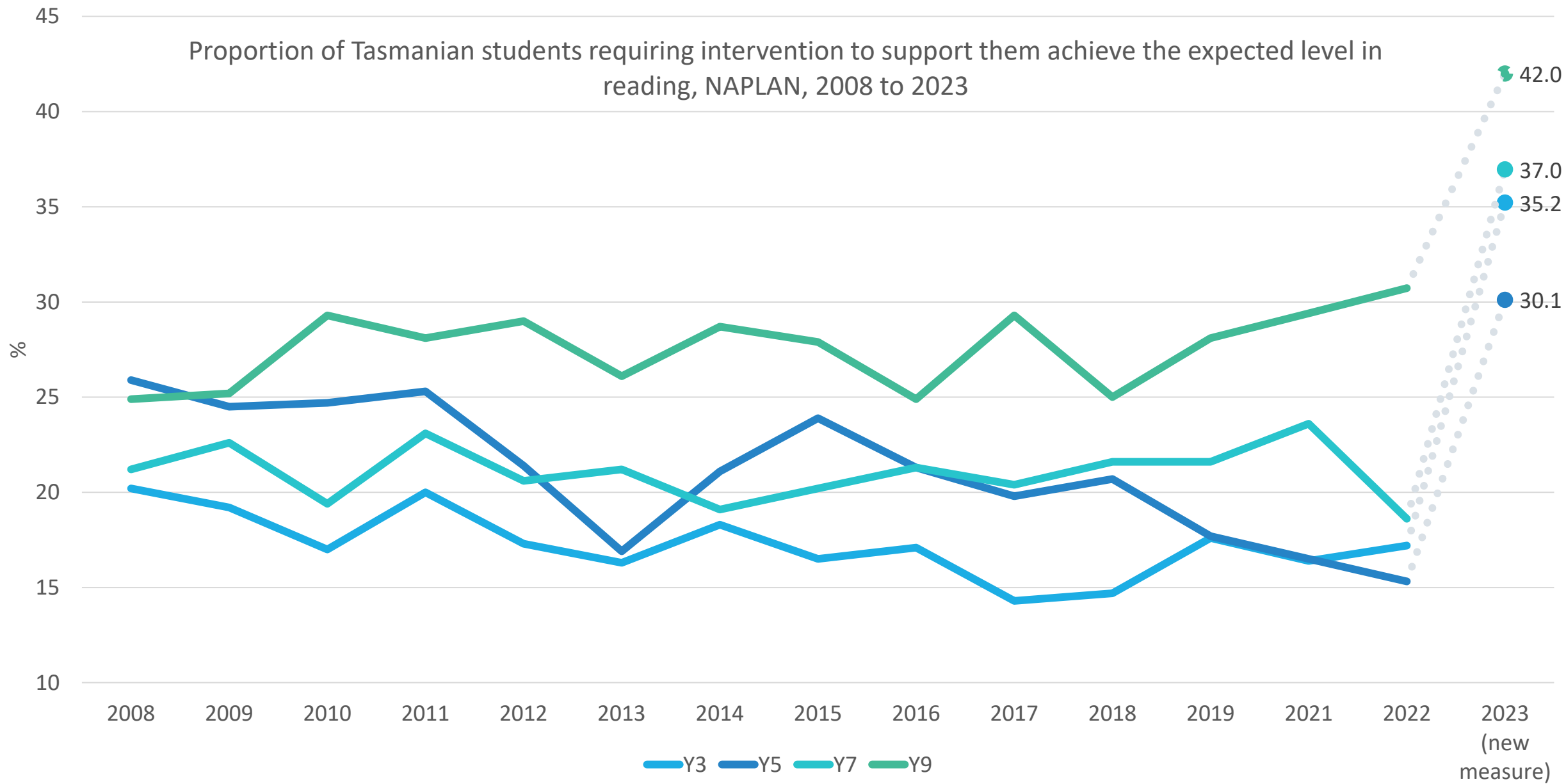
Variables: Income, education, employment, occupation, housing, car ownership, disability, English language, single parent, marital status etc

Decile	Local Government Area
1	Brighton, George Town, West Coast
2	Break O'Day, Burnie, Central Highlands, Derwent Valley, Devonport, Glenorchy, Tasman, Waratah-Wynyard
3	Circular Head, Dorset, Launceston
4	Central Coast, Flinders, Glamorgan/Spring Bay, Kentish, Southern Midlands
5	Huon Valley, Latrobe, Meander Valley, Northern Midlands
6	Sorell
7	King Island, West Tamar
8	Clarence
9	Hobart, Kingborough
10	

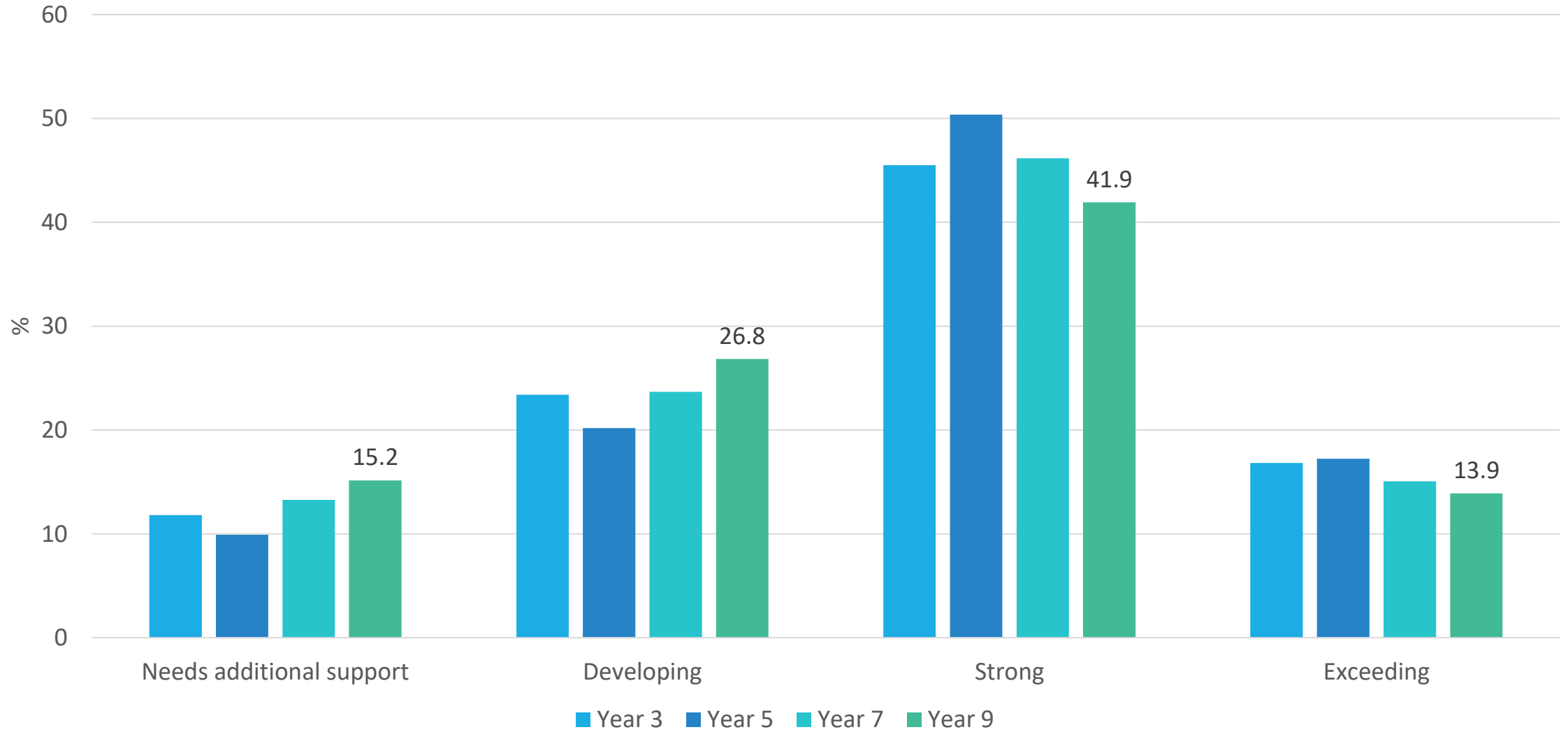
Australian Early Development Census



Proportion of Tasmanian students requiring intervention to support them achieve the expected level in reading, NAPLAN, 2008 to 2023



Reading, NAPLAN, 2023



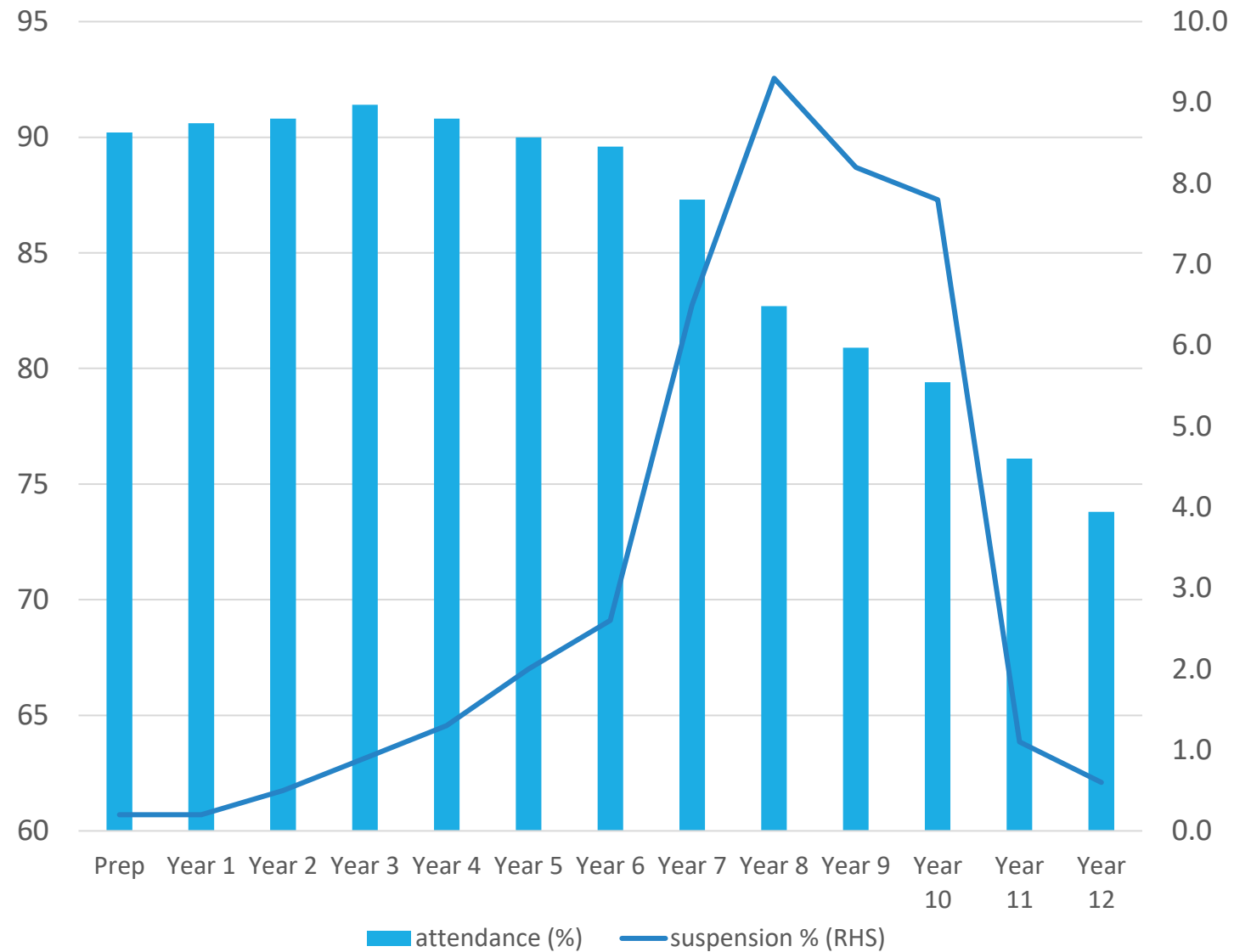
Proportion of Tasmanian students who need support and intervention to achieve the expected level, NAPLAN, 2023

	Reading (%)	Writing (%)	Spelling (%)	Grammar and Punctuation (%)	Numeracy (%)
Year 3	35.2	29.3	45.6	53.0	39.5
Year 5	30.1	41.4	38.6	42.7	38.6
Year 7	37.0	44.9	35.4	42.9	41.1
Year 9	42.0	47.2	36.0	52.3	43.8

Engagement and Exclusion

Top 5 reasons for exclusion:

- 1) Behaviour that is detrimental to the health, safety or welfare of the staff or other students
- 2) Disobedience of instructions which regulate the conduct of students
- 3) Threatening behaviour
- 4) Unsociable behaviour
- 5) Contravening school rules and policies



Source: Department of Education, Children and Young People, Tasmania, Term 1, 2023

Tasmanian 100% Literacy Alliance

Dr Lisa Denny, Workforce Demographer, Adjunct Associate Professor, UTAS

Rosie Martin, Speech and Language Pathologist, Criminologist, Founder Connect 42, 2017 Tasmanian of the Year

Amelia Jones, Chair, Square Pegs Dyslexia Association

Saul Eslake, Economist, Vice-Chancellors Fellow, UTAS

Michael Rowan, Founder, Education Ambassadors, Emeritus Professor

Dr Becky Shelley, Deputy Director, Peter Underwood Centre for Educational Attainment, UTAS

Rikki Mawad, former Chair, Connect 42



Road Map to a Literate Tasmania (2021)

1. Develop a strategic, whole-of-government, community-wide framework to achieve a Literate Tasmania, informed by an independent, expert advisory panel or Ministerial Taskforce
2. Adopt and implement as an immediate priority the recommendations of the Primary Reading Pledge to achieve the goal of close to zero Tasmanians starting grade 7 at or below the national minimum standard (NMS) for reading by 2031
3. Proactively support literacy improvement throughout the wider community, including in the early years (pre-school), secondary schooling, adult education, the justice system, and among other vulnerable Tasmanians, integrated into the plan for a Literate Tasmania

Submission to the Tasmanian Child and Young Person's Well-being Strategy consultation

Submission to the Australian Government Standing Committee on Employment, Education and Training Inquiry into Adult Literacy

Submission to the Literacy Advisory Panel's Setting the Scene Community Consultation Paper

Submission to the Literacy Advisory Panel's Final Consultation Paper

www.tasmanianliteracyalliance.org

Tasmanian Government response

March 2021

- Announced a new target that all year 7s will start high school able to read above the expected level by no later than 2030
- Announced the establishment of the Premier's Literacy Advisory Council to develop a Community-wide Framework to achieving 100% literacy in Tasmania

February 2023

- Announced that a system-wide, whole-of-school, tiered approach to structured literacy instruction and explicit teaching practices would be implemented in all public primary schools by 2026
- Announced the year 1 phonics check would be mandated and data aggregated and publicly available

June 2023

- Released final report from the Premier's Literacy Advisory Council and accepted all 23 priority recommendations
- Implementation plan to be released before year end 2023

Select recommendations

Submission to the Tasmanian Literacy
Advisory Panel: Final Consultation
Paper – towards a Community-wide
Framework for a Literate Tasmania

Refer to the 10 year plan in the 2021
Road Map for a Literate Tasmania

Recommendation 11 and 15 – Primary and Secondary School

In an effort to disrupt the school-to-prison pipeline associated with low levels of language and literacy, screen all students experiencing exclusionary practices within the education system for language and literacy challenges and other undiagnosed developmental disorders or disabilities. Provide intervention and wrap around support services at the intensity indicated by holistic allied-health and health assessment.

Recommendation 18 – Justice system

Screen all youth and adults newly presenting to justice programs for undiagnosed language or reading disorders (specific learning impairments) and other undiagnosed developmental disorders or disabilities. Provide intervention and wrap around support services at the intensity indicated by holistic allied-health and health assessment.

Implications for Tasmania Police

Currently*

- experiencing an increase in youth anti-social behaviour
- experiencing an increase in unlawful behaviour by youth
- increasing impact on the wider community

Youth offenders

- Known to Tasmania Police
- Complex backgrounds
- Repeat (some prolific)

Highly likely that many of the youth offenders

- have a low level of language ability
- have low levels of reading and literacy skills
- are not engaged nor successful in education
- experience exclusionary practices from school
- may have other un/diagnosed developmental disorders

Implications:

Forensic interviewing

- comprehending and responding to police interview/questioning
- providing a narrative of events

Legal processes

- comprehending and responding to lawyer interview/questioning
- impacts on developing a functional working relationship with legal representative
- legal terminology
- understanding the court process, bail conditions, formal cautions
- courtroom examinations/cross-examinations

*New Youth Justice Blueprint and therapeutic model proposed for youth offending in Tasmania

* <https://www.police.tas.gov.au/news-events/media-releases/new-commander-to-focus-on-tackling-youth-crime-in-southern-Tasmania/>

Discussion

More information:

www.tasmanianliteracyalliance.org

www.lisadenny.com.au

lisadenny.substack.com

Former Chair of the UK Youth Justice Board, Rod Morgan (2007):



“It may be too much to say that if we reformed our schools, we would have no need of prisons. But if we better engaged our children and young people in education we would almost certainly have less need of prisons. Effective crime prevention has arguably more to do with education than sentencing policy”.