



# Building School-Based Curriculum Area Leadership

Improving the learning outcomes of Tasmanian Students



A Project Funded by AGQTP – 9 September 2009

Report Prepared by:

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Network of Education Associations of **Tasmania** Inc

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## Message from the President of NEAT

While most Australian students perform well on international tests, the most recent PISA results indicate that the performance of our top performing students has declined and those most at risk continue to underperform.

This raises the question as to why and what must be done to improve the outcomes of these two groups, whilst also improving the performance of those students who are doing well.

Of significant concern is the declining performance of our Tasmanian students in literacy and numeracy as they progress through school. The Tasmanian Department of Education's own reporting shows this decline as presented in the 2007–08 Annual Report:

- Students above the National Reading Benchmark
- Year 3 students – 95.6% but in Year 7 only 85.7%
- Students above the National Writing Benchmark
- Year 3 students – 89.6% but in Year 7 only 81.9%
- Students above the National Numeracy Benchmark
- Year 3 students – 91.1% but in Year 7 only 79.8%

Tasmanian students have the least equitable outcomes in Australia on the basis of socioeconomic equity (Tasmania's Education Performance Report 2008). If we are to meet the Premier's targets for 2015 then considerable work needs to be undertaken.

Research has consistently shown that quality school-based curriculum leadership is essential to improving teaching practice and student learning outcomes. It has also shown that discipline knowledge, pedagogical content knowledge and passion for the curriculum area are key factors in effective teaching.

In Tasmania, there has been a gradual reduction in support for curriculum area leadership. Compounding the issue has been the recent abolition of Principal Curriculum Officer positions. This is at a time when a substantial proportion of our curriculum area specialists are nearing retirement and when increasing numbers of teachers are teaching out of their areas of expertise. Help is urgently needed to better guide, mentor and coach our teachers so we achieve the best outcomes for our students.

The Australian Curriculum, to be introduced from 2011, brings a re-emphasis on discipline knowledge and skill at all levels of schooling. We need to urgently build the capacity of our school-based curriculum area leaders to ensure a smooth implementation. There is currently great fatigue in our teaching community from the turbulent environment of ongoing curriculum change of the past few years and significant support is needed.

NEAT has undertaken an AGQTP funded research project to identify current in-school practices and strategies and obtain feedback from those at the forefront of curriculum delivery. The project involved 75 leading school-based curriculum area leaders from all sectors of schooling K–12. What has clearly been communicated is that systematic support for curriculum area leadership is critically needed to ensure a positive difference can be made to the learning outcomes and achievements of our students.

I look forward to discussing with you the key issues and recommendations of this report.

Yours faithfully



Charles Morgan  
President  
Network of Education Associations of Tasmania

## Key Findings from Our Research

### 1. Effective school-based curriculum area leadership is essential if students are to achieve targeted education outcomes

The critical role of specialist curriculum area leadership in school improvement and for the provision of the highest quality of education has been well documented. Contemporary research and experience clearly demonstrate that specialist curriculum leadership delivers sustained and positive impacts on students' performance at all levels.

In recent years the role of curriculum area leaders in Tasmanian schools has been progressively devalued and the role significantly diminished. A refocus on specialist teachers and a comprehensive support program are urgently needed if we are to meet our targeted educational outcomes of raising the performance of our students in national and international tests.

Teachers at all levels of schooling require specialist knowledge, but even more so as students progress through school. With our declining student performance in the higher grades the need for action is even greater in secondary schooling.

Our teachers, many of whom are in the early phase of their career or who are teaching out of their areas of expertise, urgently need professional learning and ongoing support to equip them with the knowledge and skill necessary to deliver high quality outcomes in student learning.

If we are to enhance the educational experiences of all our students, not just those performing below the national benchmarks, to achieve the learning outcomes we hope for, then support and development of school-based curriculum area leadership within Tasmania is of the utmost importance.

### 2. A re-focus on curriculum area leadership will ensure that all Tasmanian students experience a curriculum that is informed by quality research

Schools are places of learning, not just for students, but also for educators. Teaching is a highly complex activity that involves ongoing development and requires continuing support.

An understanding of the latest developments in curriculum, pedagogy and evolving national perspectives is needed if our students are to achieve outcomes that match or exceed students from other Australian states and territories.

Curriculum area leaders need time and support to develop their own professional knowledge so that they can disseminate best practice to their colleagues.

### 3. Curriculum area leadership is a complex and demanding role that requires high level, specialist knowledge and skill

Effective curriculum area leaders need detailed knowledge of student learning, pedagogy and assessment. Equally important is a deep understanding of their curriculum area, which requires knowledge of its content, skills, methodologies, discourses, resources and developing ideas.

This role cannot be performed by a single person with generalist knowledge such as the principal.

Curriculum area leaders must possess high level leadership skills including the capacity to design and support professional learning and to draw on the strengths of the teachers, including early career teachers, for whom they have responsibility.

Lifting the status of curriculum area expertise and leadership is essential and needs to happen now at all levels of Tasmanian schooling. Strong curriculum area leadership will be essential to ensure a smooth transition to the Australian Curriculum from 2011 onwards. This will require sufficient time to enable curriculum area leaders to understand how the Australian Curriculum describes their curriculum area and the new knowledge teachers will need to teach effectively.

To build the capacity of our school-based curriculum area leaders we must offer ongoing professional support and opportunities to participate in collaborative inquiry. This will enable them to understand and enact new initiatives and build upon existing practices to ensure the highest quality of curriculum provision in Tasmanian, ultimately leading to improved student outcomes.

#### 4. School-based curriculum area leaders require time, support and regular access to professional networks

To be successful, school-based curriculum area leaders at all levels of schooling need their crucial work to be recognised and actively supported by the key education stakeholders including the Tasmanian Department of Education, Catholic Education Office and the Association of Independent Schools of Tasmania.

Curriculum area leaders need time and resources to ensure that they:

- Maintain a high level of discipline knowledge.
- Maintain a high level of pedagogical content knowledge.
- Demonstrate exemplary teaching practice.
- Identify and provide relevant professional learning programs to build the capacity of the teachers they are leading.
- Work with their colleagues in conceptualising, leading and effecting curriculum development and implementation.
- Align the Australian Curriculum with the educational goals, strategic directions and priorities of the jurisdiction in which they work.

This is achieved most effectively through regular opportunities to engage professional learning and networks of inquiry.

#### 5. Targeted government policy and strategic action are needed to support curriculum leadership

Support for quality curriculum area leadership in all Tasmanian schools is needed if we are to meet our performance targets and this support must start with appropriate policies being developed and strategic action taken.

It is important that curriculum area leaders are given the opportunity to influence policy development by contributing their knowledge and expertise in a range of forums and ensuring that the focus is planned and enacted.

## Research and Project Information

### About NEAT

The Network of Education Associations of Tasmania (NEAT) represents the collective voice of professional teaching associations in Tasmania. NEAT provides input to key national and state educational issues on behalf of its members. NEAT is a member of the Australian Joint Council of Professional Teaching Associations (AJCPTA), a federation of state and territory joint councils representing over 120 000 teachers.

Through its professional channels and associations, NEAT has access to the latest in educational research and practice in Australia and overseas so members can be informed of the key issues in their areas of expertise. NEAT also facilitates opportunities for members to be in contact with the broader educational community so they can share issues of common interest. This is achieved through workshops, newsletters, list serve and a web site: ([www.neat.tas.edu.au](http://www.neat.tas.edu.au))

During the past three years, NEAT has played a strong role in supporting curriculum area leadership in Tasmania. This is best exemplified in its scholarship program for future leaders. In this program, future leaders are supported to attend the national conference of their member association. In return, they make a commitment to become involved in the management of the associations. In 2009, NEAT awarded seven scholarships to future leaders.

### The Neat Executive

The Executive is made up of seven individuals who have been elected by their member associations. The current Executive includes representatives from Tasmanian schools and the Tasmanian Polytechnic.

### Current NEAT Member Associations

Australian Association of Special Education (AASE)  
Australian Council for Health Physical Education and Recreation (ACHPER)  
Australian Literacy Educators Association (ALEA)  
Australian School Library Association (ASLA)  
Australian Society for Music Education (ASME)  
Business Educators Australasia Tasmania (BEAT)  
Early Childhood Educators of Australia  
Home Economics Institute of Australia (HEIA)  
Mathematics Association of Tasmania (MAT)  
Modern Language Teachers Association of Tasmania (MLTAT)  
Science Teachers Association of Tasmania (STAT)  
Tasmanian Association for the Teaching of English (TATE)  
Tasmanian Music Teachers Association (TMTA)  
Tasmanian Orff-Schulwerk Association (TOSA)  
Tasmanian Society for Information Technology in Education (TASITE)

### Project Aims

Through a small grant from AGQTP, NEAT instigated the Building Curriculum Area Leadership Project. A key intention was to add value to the generic leadership programs currently being implemented in Tasmanian schools.

The project has two distinct phases – research and implementation. This paper presents the research findings that were obtained through interviews, workshops and questionnaires undertaken with school-based curriculum area leaders from all sectors of education across Tasmania.

Data was collected on current approaches to curriculum area leadership, the needs of those in positions of responsibility, their ideas of what could be improved upon and their advice on support plans that could be introduced in 2010 to build upon what is currently happening in Tasmanian schools.

## Research Approach

Research was undertaken during term two, 2009 to gather both qualitative and quantitative data. Most participants in the project were nominated by their professional associations as exemplary leaders in their field. Some responded to an invitation provided on the Department of Education's Infostream.

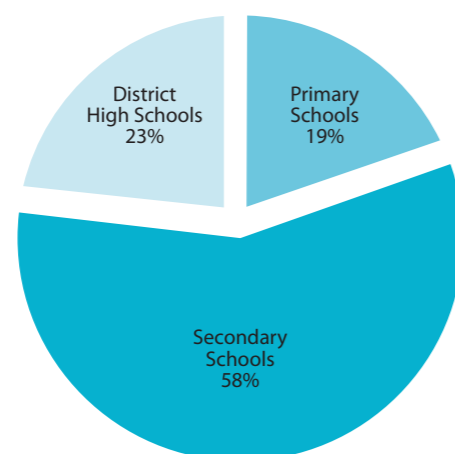
The research focused on:

- Whether or not pedagogy could be improved through attention to leadership and the deepening of knowledge and skills of teachers.
- The needs that had arisen in curriculum area leadership as a result of the significant organisational changes that had occurred in Tasmanian Government schools.
- The benefits of collaborative inquiry.

## Participants

The project included collecting feedback from:

- 66 educators from government schools
- 8 educators from Catholic and Independent schools.



A questionnaire was distributed state-wide to curriculum area leaders and this was followed by face-to-face meetings in the north-west, north, south and east coast of Tasmania.

Participants described their substantive positions as follows:

- 51 Teachers
- 11 ASTs
- 3 Curriculum Heads
- 2 Student Support Officers
- 4 Assistant Principals
- 3 Principals

## Discussion of Research Findings

### 1. Effective school-based curriculum area leadership is essential if students are to achieve targeted educational outcomes

Effective school-based curriculum area leadership is recognised internationally as crucial in improving student educational performance. The work of researchers such as Smagorinsky and Smith (1992), Grossman (2004), Harris, Busher and Wise (2003), Wilhelm (2004, 2007), Jordan (2005), Field, Holden and Lawlor (2003) and others demonstrates that such leadership creates the environment in which teachers can engage in professional learning and receive support that is needed to develop their practice.

In recent years, a number of leadership and mentoring programs have been made available to school leaders, mainly through AGQTP and while these programs have been effective in supporting generic leadership they have not supported the role of the curriculum area specialists or addressed the needs that are specific to these leaders in performing their crucial role.

The impending Australian Curriculum will require teachers to possess a deep understanding of their curriculum area and will require them to know and do things that they have not been asked of before. This will create significant challenges to teachers at all levels of schooling.

Central to this will be the capacity of teachers to translate ideas from their discipline into ways that engage students and inspire them to learn. Effective curriculum area leadership is essential to the provision of professional learning and support to ensure that this happens.

Increasingly, many Tasmanian teachers (especially those in difficult to staff locations) are having to teach outside their areas of expertise and are sometimes required to change their teaching areas from year to year in order to retain their jobs. In addition, regional and isolated schools have a disproportionately high number of early career teachers. These teachers require the understanding, expertise and advice that only a highly effective curriculum area leader can provide.

Our research showed that it is often only the dedication and passion of teachers that allows curriculum area leadership to happen at their school. Both the time and support allocated to them, and even the recognition by the Department of Education of the importance of the role, have significantly diminished.

Anecdotal evidence suggests that curriculum area leaders in most other educational jurisdictions in Australia retain the status and support that enables them to lead teaching practice effectively in their schools. This begs the question: Why is this not happening in Tasmania? It is our students who are losing out.

School-based curriculum area leadership is critical and the needs of the current leaders of our curriculum areas are not being adequately met. Without this support, it will be difficult for our teachers to develop the understanding and practice that will enable them to provide enhanced educational experiences for their students and improve their learning outcomes.

#### Outcomes Needed:

- Systemic re-focus on the crucial role of curriculum area leadership in ensuring improved student learning outcomes.
- Provision of significant resources to enable school-based curriculum leaders to understand the requirements of the Australian curriculum and disseminate this to teachers.
- A targeted program to assist curriculum area leaders to develop the curriculum area knowledge and skill of early career teachers and those teaching out of their areas of expertise.

## 2. A re-focus on curriculum area leadership will ensure that all Tasmanian students experience a curriculum that is informed by quality research

If we are to achieve our targeted outcomes, we must ensure that teachers' practice is informed by quality, evidence-based research. Our educators need to introduce contemporary content but at the same time ensure that proven approaches to teaching and learning continue to be employed.

Too often in the past, students have been exposed to 'quick fix' programs that have failed to produce promised results. Teachers need knowledge of the current ideas, discourses and methodologies of the curriculum areas in which they work.

Effective school-based curriculum area leaders provide the environment in which ideas are circulated, discussed and evaluated. They create a learning-centred culture that embraces the ongoing development of knowledge and skill that enables teachers to implement best practice.

The research undertaken in this project identifies that there has been a significant decrease in the number of curriculum area specialists teaching in Tasmanian schools in recent years. This confirms the findings of the, longitudinal study undertaken by the Tasmanian Association for the Teaching of English from 1993 – 2007 ([http://www.tate.neat.tas.edu.au/word/survey\\_nov08.doc](http://www.tate.neat.tas.edu.au/word/survey_nov08.doc)).

These findings are of great concern as we focus on how we can improve student performance.

Our research highlighted the lack of individual and collaborative time for curriculum area teams to investigate current research and practice. Many curriculum area leaders stated that they had great difficulty keeping up-to-date simply because there was no time available. They reported that a lack of curriculum area meetings was a significant problem, often leading to misinformation and fractured approaches that adversely affected both students and teachers. In particular, they expressed the need for planned opportunities to develop understanding of current and evolving national perspectives to ensure that their students could achieve learning outcomes commensurate with students from other Australian states and overseas.

The participants were asked if they believed the implementation of a program of support for curriculum area leaders would make a difference. The answer was a resounding yes.

The Quality Teaching National Partnership Program, funded under National Partnerships Agreements, has focused on reforms within our schools that include:

- Placing and supporting quality teachers and leaders.
- Developing teachers' and leaders' skills and knowledge.
- Retaining quality teachers and school leaders.

Our research has highlighted that focusing on curriculum area leadership does just this, thus supporting the attainment of outcomes sought through the Quality Teaching National Partnership program.

### Outcomes Needed:

- A program of support for school-based curriculum area coordinators that enables them to investigate quality, contemporary research and lead the implementation of exemplary teaching practices in their school.
- An action plan that supports the priorities of the Quality Teaching National Partnership Program.
- Support for the development of inquiry networks to inform curriculum development and implementation.

## 3. Curriculum area leadership – a complex and demanding role, that requires high level, specialist knowledge and skill

Teaching is a complex art. Successful teachers need high order teaching skills, including the ability to translate their knowledge into learning opportunities that connect with students' lives, learning styles and futures.

Our best teachers engage, challenge and support their students in ways that enable them to reach their full potential. Building upon this expertise we ensure our students perform at the highest level possible.

The research undertaken clearly illustrates that the best of our curriculum area leaders possess strong pedagogical content knowledge. They blend content and pedagogy into an understanding of how particular topics, problems or issues are organised, represented, and adapted to the diverse interests and abilities of their learners. Pedagogical content knowledge is what distinguishes the understanding of the highly effective content specialist from the generalist. (Schulman). Principals or other school leaders cannot be expected to have this knowledge across all curriculum areas.

The pedagogical content knowledge of teachers in schools is developed through sharing and collaborative inquiry under the direction of curriculum area leaders who possess high level, specialised knowledge and skill.

Our research showed that early career teachers are increasingly being thrust into leadership positions and many are struggling with the responsibility. As developing educators, they require ongoing assistance to advance their own practice as well as support to enable them to lead their curriculum area. In the current educational environment, this level of support is not available to many people at present.

This fact that almost 70% of school-based curriculum area leaders are at teacher level clearly indicates that the status of curriculum area leadership in Tasmanian schools has declined significantly in recent years.

We need curriculum area leaders who have:

- High level discipline knowledge and exemplary teaching skill.
- The capacity to meet the needs of all students.
- Passion and enthusiasm for their curriculum area.
- An in-depth understanding of the latest issues, developments and the research in their curriculum area.
- Skills to implement the curriculum – this is seen as just as important as discipline knowledge.
- An awareness of best practice in education in Tasmania, Australia and overseas.
- Strong leadership and mentoring skills with a willingness to share their knowledge.
- Adequate experience and the capacity to lead professional learning.
- Knowledge of the special requirements of adult learning.
- High level communication skills.

To enable them to perform their role effectively, our curriculum area leaders need:

- Ongoing professional learning and mentorship.
- Access to a range of professional networks, including professional associations.
- Time, support and resources, including adequate funding.

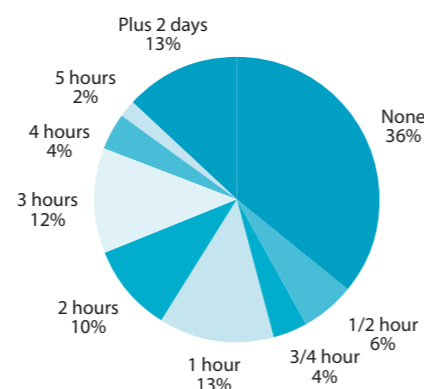
### Outcomes Needed:

- Ongoing professional learning opportunities that are designed to meet the specific needs of school-based curriculum areas leaders.
- Funding of mentoring opportunities to develop the next generation of curriculum leaders – many current leaders are close to retirement and succession needs to be planned for.
- Formal acknowledgement of the importance of curriculum area leadership through the recognition of outstanding curriculum area leaders.

#### 4. School-based curriculum area leaders require time, support and regular access to professional networks

With the abolition of Principal Curriculum Officers, support for curriculum-based leadership in Tasmania has diminished significantly. There was widespread agreement among participants in the project, especially those in regional and isolated areas, that the Principal Curriculum Officers had played a critical part in leading curriculum development and professional support. Many felt that the expectations now placed upon them were unreasonable. It is clear that this vacuum needs to be addressed.

When asked how much time was allocated on a weekly basis for curriculum area leadership, including the provision of professional learning and support, it was alarming to find that 36% had no time at all allocated.



In many instances the curriculum area leaders undertook their role entirely in their own time. This made management of their curriculum area and the provision of professional learning and support to others extremely difficult. In the absence of state-wide leadership, they felt that it was extremely important to be able to engage in professional dialogue with colleagues from other schools in their areas of expertise. They felt that such networking allowed them to focus more sharply on their curriculum area and increased their motivation and enthusiasm. Unfortunately, such opportunities are extremely limited in most areas of the state.

Many curriculum area leaders stated that they lack regular opportunities to share ideas, disseminate best practice and explore new initiatives. Some participants reported that they had participated in informal networking with colleagues in other schools, but that these were held infrequently. Many reported that professional associations provided their main support, even though they often found it difficult to become actively involved. They felt strongly that their schools were overloaded with meetings, but that curriculum area meetings, which potentially had the most significant consequences for student achievement, had low importance in the school agenda.

A concern repeatedly expressed by the curriculum area leaders was the need for time and resources to lead the implementation of the Australian Curriculum in their school. They felt that without adequate time and support, it would not be possible for teachers across the state to develop common understanding and coherent approaches to ensure the best possible student learning outcomes.

##### Outcomes Needed:

- Recognition of the needs of effective school-based curriculum area leaders through the provision of dedicated time for curriculum area administration, meetings and professional learning.
- Support for the development, leadership and maintenance of face-to-face and online communication networks to facilitate the sharing of ideas and practices among curriculum area leaders.
- Allocation of significant resources to oversee implementation of the Australian curriculum.

#### 5. Targeted government policy and strategic action are needed to support curriculum leadership

Education delivery is most effective when introduced through well-considered policy and strategic action that influences the way curriculum is enacted in schools, including:

- Creating an effective environment to enhance student learning and success.
- Developing agreed approaches to teaching that are based on deep understanding of learning and the requirements of different curriculum areas.
- Supporting and encouraging teachers to collaborate in the planning and implementation of the curriculum.
- Supporting school and network-based inquiry and action to improve student learning.

Effective policy ensures that there is coherence between school, state and national priorities.

Curriculum leaders interviewed for this project felt that they are well placed to offer significant insight and input into what is needed from a policy perspective in our schools.

##### Outcomes Needed:

- The establishment of a working group of school-based curriculum area leaders to inform policy development.
- Strategic action over time to ensure the recruitment and ongoing professional development of specialist teachers.
- The establishment of standards for curriculum area leaders and clearly defined roles and responsibilities for the development and introduction of the Australian curriculum.

#### Next Steps

NEAT proposes the following steps be taken to ensure that in Tasmania we have a school-based curriculum area leadership program that supports best practice and is focused on improving educational outcomes of all students:

1. For NEAT to propose a model program of support for curriculum area leadership in Tasmanian schools based on the findings of the Building School-based Curriculum Area Leadership project.
2. For NEAT to convene a collaborative committee where all Tasmanian education providers – Department of Education, Catholic Education Office, Association of Independent Schools of Tasmania, professional teaching associations and the University of Tasmania – meet to discuss the proposed model and agree upon a program of support for curriculum area leadership in Tasmanian schools.
3. For NEAT to develop an action plan for the delivery of a program of support to school-based curriculum area leaders.
4. For resources to be allocated for a program of support to be introduced from 2010. The program would be hosted by NEAT in collaboration with all stakeholders and have a key focus on the implementation of the Australian curriculum.
5. That the Minister for Education and Skills continue his administrative support for NEAT through Learning Services (South).



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