

Tutor Learning Initiative

Lapsing program evaluation

September 2024



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Report to The Victorian Government Department of Education

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Goomup, by Jarni McGuire

Glossary

Abbreviations	Definitions
ATOSS	Attitudes to School Survey
DTF	Department of Treasury and Finance (Victoria)
PAT	Progressive Achievement Test
PAT-M	Progressive Achievement Test – Reading
PAT-R	Progressive Achievement Test – Mathematics
RMF	Resource Management Framework (Victoria) ¹
TLI	Tutor Learning Initiative

¹ Described at <https://www.dtf.vic.gov.au/planning-budgeting-and-financial-reporting-frameworks/resource-management-framework>

Executive Summary

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Context

The Victorian Government has invested in the delivery of the Tutor Learning Initiative (TLI) in government and low-fee non-government schools since 2021. Its design was informed by a significant body of evidence on the effectiveness of small group tutoring in supporting disadvantaged students with learning engagement and progress. This evaluation was commissioned as a lapsing program evaluation of the third year of implementation in accordance with the Victorian Government Resource Management Framework. It comprised a desktop review and analysis of program documentation and data, including the department's own analysis of learning gains and relevant surveys of students, principals and school staff. No new primary data collection was undertaken for the purpose of the evaluation and the scope related to implementation and effectiveness of the initiative in Victorian government schools across 2023.

The rapid move to remote and flexible learning during the COVID-19 pandemic was considered to be an important public health response. However, this style of learning and the fast-paced adjustment it required came with a range of challenges for school communities. In Victoria, students missed significant periods of face-to-face learning and many experienced challenges with engagement and achieving learning outcomes. TLI was introduced as a Tier 2 intervention within the multi-tiered system of supports (MTSS) general education framework approach to provide targeted support for between 5 and 15% of students in Victorian government schools so as to help them succeed in a general education classroom.

The focus of the initiative has evolved and adapted over its implementation, from initially encompassing students who had fallen behind in any areas of learning due to the periods of remote and flexible learning, to targeting students who are behind in literacy and numeracy.

Findings

Findings are summarised in Box ES 1 and detailed thereafter in line with elements of the DTF Resource Management Framework.

Box ES 1 Summary of evaluation findings

In 2023, TLI delivered

- funding to 1,568 government schools to provide the equivalent of 3 sessions per week of 45 minutes for 20 weeks to small groups of students of 5 or less requiring literacy and numeracy support.
- small group tutoring to 127,661 students (19.4% of the government school student cohort)
- a workforce of 5,628 tutors (2,647.4 FTE tutors)

TLI's implementation has been variable

- There are signs that implementation practice matured, with primary schools generally more advanced in their practices than secondary schools may need more differentiated supports and guidance.
- With the proportion of students accessing TLI exceeding the 5%-15% guide for tier 2 supports in the MTSS and proportion of students identified as 'needing additional supports' through NAPLAN, there may be scope to further prioritise the target group, (noting refinements to targeting and identification of students by the department has already occurred for 2024).
- Principals reported difficulty in recruiting tutors as well as the need to redirect tutors to cover mainstream classrooms, both of which limited the initiative achieving its full potential.

TLI has had a number of key achievements however a consistent shift in learning outcomes has not yet been realised system wide

Learning outcomes

- In reading, students achieved on average 1 month of additional learning compared to matched non-TLI students, with these gains more pronounced in primary school and for Aboriginal students.
- In mathematics, the difference in learning gain was less pronounced than reading (an average of 1-week additional learning compared to matched non-TLI peers), with these gains more pronounced in secondary school students.

Additional outcomes

- TLI has contributed to an increase in the number of students monitored and assessed and use of common assessment tools. Over 80% of government schools are now using the Progressive Achievement Test (PAT) to assess student learning and monitoring learning gains across the school year. Relative to 2022, the number of unique students who sat a PAT test increased by 39%, from 204,936 in 2022 to 285,656 in 2023.
- PAT data for reading (PAT-R) and mathematics (PAT-M), alongside departmental surveys, formed the basis for assessment of the impact of TLI, though the lack of comparable longitudinal data (whether PAT or NAPLAN) limits the ability to fully interpret learning gain as yet.

TLI continues to receive strong endorsement from students, teachers and principals

- Surveyed students and tutors were notably positive about their perceptions of TLI's impact. These impacts were increasingly more favourable with increasing frequency of tutoring.
- The broader school community (staff and families) also support the initiative, and benefits also extend to the broader education system, including a suite of professional learning tools and collaborative practices.

There is a continuing role for TLI

- There remains a need to provide more individualised support for disadvantaged students, whether to make up for lost learning through COVID or other disadvantage factors. Without the type of assistance provided by TLI there is a risk that these students will not make the necessary learning gains at or above their peers to attain foundational skills critical for success in school and life.
- There is a clear evidence base that small group tutoring can be effective in improving learning gains, however fidelity of implementation is key and there is opportunity to strengthen this in some areas.

Source: ACIL Allen

Justification

Drawing on Evidence for Learning (E4L) and Education Endowment Foundation (EEF) Toolkits, small-group tuition has a robust international evidence-base in supporting disadvantaged students with learning progress and outcomes. These sources led the Grattan Institute's *COVID catch-up report*² to recommend the approach within a suite of high-priority catch-up initiatives for governments to deliver in schools.

There was and still remains a need for government to support schools in meeting the needs of the many students who are not achieving required standards in literacy and numeracy. In 2022, using departmental data VAGO reported on the literacy and numeracy achievement outcomes of Victorian students. In this report VAGO acknowledged that disadvantaged students were needing to make up an achievement gap of one to 2 years over their learning journey, and that these gaps were not closing at a fast enough rate to enable disadvantaged students to catch up.³ Once students fall behind in their learning it is difficult to catch-up, creating life-long ripple effects on future study, employment and income.⁴

Commonwealth and state and territory governments have a role in closing the broader achievement gap evident within the education system. Both Commonwealth and New South Wales governments have affirmed the role and importance of small group tutoring to support students who are not meeting required learning standards.

Specifically, TLI aligned well with overall Departmental objectives in relation to raising early years preparedness, and raising standards of learning, development and engagement, and wellbeing. It also gave support to government priorities in terms of providing all students with access to same quality education, regardless of their background or circumstance, this through targeting aspects that are known to make a difference to student outcomes. Providing such targeted and tailored support is also consistent with views of the Expert Panel Review to Inform a Better and Fairer Education System to identify and close learning gaps in a way that addresses student needs and through a trained workforce.⁵

Funding and delivery

Across 2023, TLI supported 127,661 students across 1,568 government schools. A total of 5,628 tutors were appointed to work with these students to provide small group tutoring either out of class, in class, or through a mix of both. Specifically, schools were funded to provide 3 sessions per week of 45 minutes to small groups of students of 5 or less. In practice, around 54% of students did not receive the target dose in terms of tutoring frequency and approximately 30% attended sessions of 30 minutes or less in duration. Student survey data indicates that dosage varies by school type with primary students more likely to receive more frequent sessions but sessions in secondary schools are more likely to be longer.

² Sonnemann, J. & Goss, P. (2020). *COVID catch-up, Helping disadvantaged students close the equity gap*. <https://grattan.edu.au/report/covid-catch-up/>

³ Victorian Auditor General's Office (2024) Literacy and Numeracy Achievement Outcomes for Victorian Students. Parliament of Victoria.

⁴ Sonnemann, J. & Goss, P. (2020). *COVID catch-up, Helping disadvantaged students close the equity gap*. <https://grattan.edu.au/report/covid-catch-up/>

⁵ Department of Education (2023). *Improving Outcomes for All: The Report of the Independent Expert Panel's Review to inform a Better and Fairer Education System*. <https://www.education.gov.au/review-inform-better-and-fairer-education-system/resources/expert-panels-report>

In December 2022, the department extended the statewide licensing agreement for Progressive Achievement Tests (PAT) to encompass the entirety of the 2023 school year and assist with implementation. As of 2023, PAT are being used by over 80% of government schools to assess student learning across the year. Additionally, the Tutor Practice Guide was released in 2023 to provide targeted advice for educators delivering TLI.

Principals mostly used the 2023 Tutor Practice Guide, the TLI Implementation Continua and TLI page of the Policy and Advisory Library (PAL) to guide implementation. Tutors were most likely to draw on the TLI Hub and the 2023 Tutor Practice Guide as supporting their practice. Both principals and tutors reported that the *most useful* resources were the TLI Arc Channel, TLI Hub and the dedicated regional workforce. The 2023 Tutor Practice Guide was reported as very or extremely useful by 53% of tutors and 48% of principals.

The barriers to implementation most frequently reported by schools related to student attendance and tutors being redirected to cover staff absences, as well as difficulties in recruiting tutors. Despite these barriers, school implementation practice had matured into the third year of implementation, as measured by Implementation Continua ratings regularly tracked by the department. Since 2021, there has been a growing proportion of schools categorised as either embedding or excelling on overall implementation (rising from 54% of schools in 2021 to 62% of schools in 2023). Secondary schools were generally less advanced in their practice compared to primary schools.

Program effectiveness

The impact of the initiative on student outcomes was examined through several data sources, including PAT learning gain data for students who received TLI support and weighted learning gain data to compare TLI students to a matched non-TLI student cohort, as well as surveys of students, staff, and principals. However, it was not possible to directly compare TLI students with non-TLI students with the exact same characteristics and needs (as they would likely have also been eligible for support through TLI). Additionally, there are insufficient tracked data available within the education system to determine whether TLI has accelerated what the participant students' rates of learning gain may have been prior to the intervention.

Unweighted PAT data provides one perspective of change, with departmental analysis showing students participating in TLI in 2023 demonstrating learning growth in both reading and mathematics. The extent of improvement was greatest in the early years of schooling but become less evident from the middle years onwards.

In relation to reading, continuing to draw on unweighted PAT data, for most year levels students participating in TLI generally demonstrated greater learning growth than students not participating in the program. For example, departmental analysis found TLI students in Year 3 demonstrated an additional three months of learning growth beyond that of Year 3 students not participating in TLI. However, in Year 9, there was no difference in learning gain, and in Year 7, learning gain was less than for students not participating in TLI.

For mathematics, departmental analysis of unweighted data found TLI students in Years 4, 6 and 8 made greater learning progress than their non-TLI peers, whereas for other year levels, improvement was similar or less than that of non-TLI students.

Weighted analysis of TLI students compared to a matched peer group provides further understanding of impact. PAT learning gain data showed modest positive effects for some TLI students in reading and maths in comparison to gains experienced by the matched (non-TLI) cohort groups. In reading, TLI students achieved, on average, 1 month of additional learning compared to matched non-TLI students with the gains more pronounced in primary school and Aboriginal students. The gains in maths were lower, showing on average, less than a week of additional learning compared to the matched student group, with here the gains more pronounced in secondary school students.

Student and tutor reported impacts of TLI on student learning were notably positive — 81% of tutors reported ‘most’ or ‘all’ of students in their tutoring sessions had demonstrated progress towards their TLI learning goals, with these impacts more favourable with increasing frequency of tutoring. Many participating students reported increased learning confidence (66%), and 79% of students believed it was important that they participate in the program. As also noted in the 2024 Auditor General’s report⁶, tutors reported improvements to student engagement, with data provided for this evaluation showing over 90% of TLI tutors surveyed in 2023 strongly agreed or agreed that tutoring had improved student engagement, and student and parent confidence. To the extent that this may have also been reinforced in more a general assessment of student engagement and wellbeing, the department’s Attitudes to School Survey results here showed no discernible difference between TLI students and non-TLI students.

In relation to cohort differences, more surveyed students in regional centres and rural locations reported a ‘lot of learning improvement’ compared to urban students, and more Aboriginal students reported ‘a lot’ of improvement in their learning gain (36%) compared to their non-Aboriginal peers (25%). Special school students had the highest proportion of positive respondents across both self-reported academic measures (improvement and scale of improvement).

Gains, broader system benefits reported by school staff and leaders included an improved culture of assessment and identification of students in need of support as well as reports of strengthened collaborative practice within schools that can be attributed to TLI. Additionally, a dedicated regional workforce (formerly Student Achievement Managers and now Education Improvement Leaders) was embedded in regions providing schools with support that was highly rated by principals. The initiative was widely supported across the government school sector, based on principal survey responses.

Efficiency and sustainability

To date, the Victorian Government has committed \$1.2 billion to the implementation of TLI through to the end of 2025. This includes \$258.4 million for implementation of TLI in 2023. The initiative is considered part of Victoria’s broad system of existing school supports (including school specific programs and targeted initiatives) and built on and integrated with these to contribute to a whole-school approach to teaching and learning. TLI expanded onto the broader problem of the historical and ongoing achievement gap entrenched in the education system, at the same time ensuring student selection was focused on those most in need of literacy and numeracy learning progress.

⁶ Victorian Auditor General’s Office (2024) Effectiveness of the Tutor Learning Initiative. Parliament of Victoria.

The initiative was extensively monitored allowing much valuable cohort and individual student analysis. However, detailed analysis of practice within a tutoring session was not undertaken, and such data would enable a better understanding of what aspects of tutoring are most effective and better sharing of good practice.

Without the type of support provided by TLI, there will continue to be many students who will not meet expected levels of learning achievement at the completion of their schooling, therefore leaving school still behind the wider population. While there is a clear underlying evidence base for small group tutoring as provided by TLI, success in achieving significant learning gains depends on best-practice fidelity of implementation.

The early signs of modest student learning improvement seen to date have the potential to grow further if schools continue to be supported to mature their implementation practice and ensure students receive the recommended dose of tutoring. This includes addressing nationwide teaching workforce shortages which see some tutors covering teaching roles.

Future considerations

There remains an important need to help disadvantaged students requiring more individualised support than is available through standard classroom teaching. The MTSS is a framework supporting this need, where evidence-based instructional practices across the whole learning environment, including for those requiring more targeted intervention, support literacy, numeracy and student wellbeing and engagement.⁷ TLI is an example of such targeted support showing modest early results which may strengthen as the initiative matures. Towards that end, this evaluation has identified specific areas that should be considered further in the design and implementation of TLI or any equivalent interventions.

Design

There should be careful targeting of students for small group support. In 2023, TLI reached 19.4% of government school students whereas, as a Tier 2 intervention, the aim is to provide between 5% and 15% of students. Additionally, the 2023 NAPLAN data for all Victorian students for literacy and numeracy across all year levels shows there are between 6.5% and 10% of students who are assessed as needing additional support⁸ in NAPLAN or exempt. While this 5% to 15% reflects a guide for schools, there may therefore be room for further examination of the needs of this larger recipient cohort to ensure resources continue to be directed where they are most needed. It is noted that in 2024, the funding model for TLI was adjusted to target students identified a 'needs additional support' or exempt in the reading and numeracy domains of NAPLAN, however, data are not yet available on the full cohort of students supported through TLI in 2024.

⁷ Australian Education Research Organisation (2024). *Explainer: Introduction to a multi-tiered system of supports*. <https://www.edresearch.edu.au/summaries-explainers/explainers/introduction-multi-tiered-system-supports>

⁸ Data accessed from ACARA at <https://www.acara.edu.au/reporting/national-report-on-schooling-in-australia/naplan-national-results> and includes all sectors.

The early years may also warrant a greater focus given some students arrive at school with fewer foundational skills⁹. Economic and developmental evidence note the value and return on investment offered by early intervention. The acquisition of literacy and numeracy skills increases rapidly until Year 3 and then slows down¹⁰ suggesting more targeted support in the earlier years, with potentially a greater dosage, could have a greater impact on longer term learning trajectories. This should not, however, be at the expense of those students in later primary and secondary schools who also need additional support.

Implementation

Even though the initiative has been well supported with extensive tracking data, there would be benefit from more explicit monitoring of dosage, exposure, and tutoring format to better understand practice within tutor sessions in a way that can be directly linked to learning assessment data. This would provide a more robust evidence base on what is working for whom and in what contexts. This could be used to provide more tailored guidance and share and improve good practice.

There has also been insufficient time so far to generate longitudinal datasets from this initiative, nor have there been sufficient prior system data to understand the rate of learning gain of targeted students before receiving TLI support. A longitudinal repository of assessment data will help derive learning trajectories into the future and support greater understanding of learning gains within both the TLI and non-TLI cohort. There is also an opportunity to better leverage the utility of exiting datasets such as Teacher Judgement data or the Attitudes to School Survey (ATOSS), the latter which could provide better coverage of students participating in TLI with potential to link to the model and dosage of TLI that a student receives.

This evaluation found that secondary schools were not as advanced in their practice as primary schools and were less likely to provide the recommended frequency of tutoring¹¹, and hence would benefit from more differentiated implementation guidance and shared examples of good practice.

Workforce challenges continue to impact the delivery of TLI, with principals reporting both the necessary redirection of tutors to cover classroom teaching and difficulties recruiting tutors. Going forward, the department should consider how to support schools to prevent tutors from being redirected and how to increase the pool of available tutors. Potential options could include considering university graduates as identified by the initial Grattan report or examining ways to allow teachers to incorporate small group tutoring within the classroom.

As a final comment, it is noted that the directions outlined here are broadly consistent with the findings of the recent VAGO audit. An important difference, however, is that the scope of this evaluation has been set by the Victorian Government Resource Management Framework, which has required consideration of benefits not just to individual TLI students but also to the education system as a whole, the latter which have been noted throughout the more detailed report. System reform at this scale takes time. By continuing to address ongoing workforce challenges, and through refining implementation guidance and supports for different school settings, the

⁹ National data show that approximately 1 in 5 children arrive at school developmentally vulnerable on 1 or more of five domains that have been shown to predict children's later outcomes in health, wellbeing and academic success. Department of Education, Skills and Employment (2022) *Australian Early Development Census National Report 2021*

¹⁰ Victorian Auditor General's Office (2024) *Literacy and Numeracy Achievement Outcomes for Victorian Students*. Parliament of Victoria.

¹¹ Based on data from the implementation continua ratings and the Principal Survey

acknowledged research in this area suggests that the department should expect to see benefits for students and the system grow into the future.