

Submission to the Independent Review of Education in Tasmania

Theme 1: Defining educational success.

My first concern under this theme is that reporting in the media about how bad retention is in Tasmania uses the TCE as its measure of success and does not consider a range of other things that could reasonably be termed educational success eg. students leaving the public system to attend a private school, students doing apprenticeships, students who obtain a qualification certificate and even students who do the IB. A question on notice from Mike Gaffney to Jo Palmer highlighted that each state is measuring a different thing when measuring year 12 achievement eg S.A. which is often cited as having made such great improvements, changed its requirements so that students who attain just one 20 credit SACE subject are now considered to have satisfactorily completed year 12 education. In Tasmania a student cannot get a TCE without 120 credit points, at least 80 of which must be at level 2 or higher and they have to get a literacy, numeracy and ICT "tick" which may sound reasonable but for example a PA at pre-tertiary mathematics general does not give you a numeracy tick and successfully studying a foreign language at pre-tertiary level does not give you a literacy tick.

We must have a qualification that employers understand so that they ask for it as part of their recruiting process and then it is more likely that students will aspire to have it. Currently few people outside year 11/12 education have any idea what is required to get a TCE.

Success at year 12 and beyond should be a student who has been prepared for life as a productive member of society. This is very broad and obviously includes academic study, preparedness for the world of work and education for leisure.

I believe for many many students in Tasmania the college system is working very well, particularly for students from urban areas who don't have to travel any further to college than they would have had to, to go to high school. I am saddened that a number of the influential people advocating for a year 11/12 top on every high school in the state actually have no firsthand experience of the college system and so hold many misconceptions about what happens there. I would add at this point that I have worked in the college system both here and in the ACT as well as in high schools and my three children were all very successfully educated for years 11 and 12 at a college. The college system works well for year 11 and 12 students for the following reasons ; students can choose from a much greater range of subjects taught by specialist teachers than could be offered in a high school because of the economies of scale, students who have perhaps not performed at their best in high school get a second chance, students are treated more like adults and have to be responsible for their learning (but this does not mean that attendance and work output are not closely monitored as some critics believe) which prepares them well for both work and university study, students are able to complete VET courses and experience jobs that they think they might like to pursue, students from remote areas are exposed to people, ideas and jobs that they would never have considered if they had studied in their small home town and there is a critical mass of bright academic students so they push each other to achieve even better results than they would have on their own. Students report that the relationships formed with staff in years 11 and 12 are deeper, despite only being there for two years. They feel more connected and known by their teachers.

I also believe that for some students studying in their district school is the right answer. These are the students who, for whatever reason, find the thought of moving or travelling long distances to school too big a barrier and so they leave school without completing year 12. For these students being able

to study to year 12, selecting from the small range of subjects offered at their high school, is the best option and allows them to mature and be guided towards appropriate post year 12 employment.

The solution to problems in education is complex and it is definitely not one size fits all.

Theme 2: Strengthening supports and engagement for all learners at all stages of their education.

Families almost universally enrol their children in kindergarten despite it being non-compulsory and many families avail themselves of the excellent Launch into Learning program and term of pre-kinder offered at their local primary school. However, in Tasmania students have to be 5 on the first of January to start prep which is older than in every other state and territory where the cut off dates range from 30th April for Victoria and the ACT through to 31st July for NSW. So, one change the government could easily make would be to change the start date for full time school. This would not only mean improved proficiency (there is a significant relationship between starting preschool at age 3 and higher levels of proficiency at reading, writing and numeracy by grade 3) but also mean that there would be no students legally allowed to not enrol in year 12 because they are already 18 before term one starts.

Supporting students to engage at all levels of their education means supporting teachers. There are so many cases of students reporting that one particular teacher changed their lives. And yet so many teachers report feeling burnt out because what they are expected to do these days is not physically possible. Their time is spent on administrative tasks, writing individual learning plans, trying to get students assessed for specific learning difficulties, dealing with badly behaved students and those who have come from a background of trauma, those with ADHD, those on the autism spectrum. The list goes on and there is also, of course, preparing and teaching the content as prescribed by the curriculum. The department must provide more support personnel. Teachers need more access to speech pathologists, social workers and guidance officers. Students need to be assessed early so that support can be put in place right from the word go. They need teacher assistants who are specifically trained to support the needs of the particular students they are working with and for this to happen teacher assistants need to be better paid and recognized. Teachers need to not only be supported but feel supported. They need senior staff who see what they do and commend them for it, senior staff who do little things like not scheduling any meetings in the week before reports are due. They need time to build trust so they feel safe to say they aren't coping and need help with particular classes or students. They need a department who is not constantly wanting them to change. In Tasmania we have had a lot of change over the past twenty years with programs like the EIs and PY10 requiring teachers to not only do all the things listed above but also take on board wholesale changes in the way things are to be taught and/or reported on.

As mentioned in the previous theme, some rural students will benefit greatly from making the move from say Winnaleah to Launceston for their final years at school. These are the students who have decided that university is for them, and they need the breadth of subjects the colleges can offer and the stimulation and support that being surrounded by like minded aspirational students provides. Currently there are insufficient places at the hostels in Launceston to take all the students that apply (this could well be true for Hobart too, but I know it is for Winnaleah because I know the teacher there). This means that only wealthy parents can send their children to Launceston to further their education which is clearly inequitable.

Theme 3: Outcomes at the conclusion of the formal years of schooling.

The retention data from DECYP in 2024 shows a drop off between years 7 and 9 and the IRE report specifically states "there is no doubt that if more students finish year 10 on track and engaged in their learning, more would be able to complete year12 or its equivalent" so I believe that not only do we need to start students into prep earlier, we also need to focus our attention on the middle high school years (rather than this obsession with the college system being the problem). This is universally recognised as a problem time for some adolescents, hence the existence of private school institutions such as Timbertop at Geelong Grammar or specialist programs within the normal school setting. This could be done in Tasmanian high schools too.

In the cities, we currently have year11/12 tops on large high schools such as Taroona and Rose Bay operating on a different site to the high school so the students may as well be travelling to their nearest college which in the case of Rose Bay is much closer than the year11/12 top anyway. The DECYP data shows that there are very few students enrolled in these year 11/12 tops as most students have voted with their feet and are attending their local college. This means that there is a disproportionately high number of staff allocated to the year 11/12 tops. This is not meeting dot point 3 of the IRE objectives which says we should be effectively utilizing resources. Yes, have a year 11/12 top on Dover school but don't waste money having one for an inner-city school like Taroona. Spend that money on supporting staff working in the primary and high school sectors to engage more students so that they complete year12.

Closure of some small schools is also a way (politically unpopular) to spend limited resources more efficiently. Some country towns have two or three primary schools as do some suburbs of Hobart and no doubt Launceston too. This money could also be reallocated within the education system.

One way in which the transition from year10 to year 11 could be made a little more seamless would be to have staff that have worked in both colleges and high schools because even within the system there is a lack of understanding of how the other half lives. When I transitioned from being a college teacher to working in a high school, many people said oh that will be hard for you after the easy life at a college. Being in the classroom was harder initially but there was so much less preparation and marking that I felt my load hadn't changed. This swapping of teachers between the two systems could be done at a department level but would need to be done carefully so that the person who taught science at high school (with a biology background say) didn't end up at college replacing the physics teacher! Another way to make the transition more seamless is to allocate sufficient time for meaningful meetings between the staff at high schools and colleges to discuss curriculum matters and individual students.

Theme 4: Support for our teaching workforce

I have covered this to some extent under theme 2 but will elaborate here based on my personal experience and that of the teachers I know who are still working.

Teaching is a caring profession which is not respected within the community as highly as it should be, and the same can be said for child caring and being a teacher assistant and yet these three groups are essential for educating our children. To some extent, particularly for child carers and teacher assistants, the solution is better pay and working conditions, but for most teachers that I know pay is not the issue, although higher pay might mean more respect from some sections of society. They chose to be teachers because they like children and their subject area and thought they could make a

difference and yet so many are leaving or thinking about it because the demands of the job leave no possibility of a reasonable work/life balance. At every level within a school people are under pressure; beginning teachers not receiving their BeTTR time because there are no relief teachers available, ASTs in high schools unable to plan effectively for the future because all their time is taken up reactively dealing with the day-to-day problems that arise, teachers dealing with severely traumatized students who need a fulltime aide but don't have one so the teacher has to evacuate the class in order to isolate the student and keep the rest of the class safe and teachers in colleges dealing with the problems of Tier 4 students who are expected to go to year12 but are not funded past year10. These problems are widespread, and I know a number of fantastic, experienced teachers who are saying they want out. The state system cannot afford to lose them. Teachers cannot be expected to take on all of society's problems and as more parents are choosing the private system particularly during the high school years, the state system is dealing with a disproportionate number of students with problems.

The most important things that teachers should focus on are teaching their students the subjects that they are passionate about and qualified in. (if only it was that easy). My experience suggests that students can flourish with a wide range of teaching pedagogies and a huge diversity of teacher ages and personalities but the things they need are a teacher who likes children and knows them personally, a teacher who knows their subject area and a teacher who is passionate about teaching that subject. DECYP and the administration in schools needs to do as much as possible to employ teachers who are well qualified, and I know that in some area eg mathematics or physics this is hard (another problem with every school having a year11/12 top). They need to have protocols in place to manage students whose behaviour in class is unacceptable so that teachers are not spending a disproportionate amount of time on behaviour management. They need to have support staff (speech pathologists, social workers, psychologists etc) available in a timely manner. They need to encourage their staff to focus on their core business of teaching and compliment them on doing that job well, rather than overloading them with administration and the latest fad which ends up with many teachers feeling guilty because they can not do all that is asked of them.

Theme 5: Accountability for improved outcomes

For teachers to implement initiatives they need to be able to clearly see how the change is going to benefit their students otherwise they will only pay lip service to it. When teachers are on the edge of not coping anyway, having to change what they do feels like a big ask. Teachers need professional development so that they thoroughly understand what they are being asked to do. They need time to integrate it into their practice and then a timeline for when its usefulness is going to be assessed.