

Submission to the Independent Review of Education in Tasmania

Thank you for the opportunity to make a submission to the Independent Review of Education in Tasmania. The Association for Children with Disability (Tasmania) Inc. – ACD Tas., acknowledges the efforts to encourage contributions to the Review from families, children and young people. ACD Tas supports families, parents and carers, many of whom have experienced considerable issues in navigating education systems on behalf of their children and young people with disability, mental ill-health, and complex support needs. Unfortunately, the Review’s brief consultation timeframe, combined with successive government consultations over previous months and a lack of organisational funding for this work, does not permit a full response to the public consultation paper. This submission provides a brief response to the Consultation Paper and Terms Of Reference (TOR) based on the insights and experiences commonly observed in our advocacy practice supporting children and young people living with disability and their families.

About ACD Tas

The Association for Children with Disability (Tas) Inc. is a Tasmanian not-for-profit organisation. Better known as ACD Tas, we are a peer-led family organisation that has provided information, advocacy, consultation and training, and peer support services to families across Tasmania with children with disability since 1998.

Our mission is to provide community leadership and quality service options that empowers participation in society and improves the life outcomes of children and young people with disability, their families and carers. Our vision is that people with disability, their families and carers have equal opportunity to reach their potential and lead fulfilling lives.

Daily, our skilled and professional staff engage with and work for more than 250 parents and carers and children and young people with disability (newborn to 25 years old) who require information, advocacy, and support. Their experiences inform this submission. Our overarching purpose is to work and advocate for continual progress towards a more inclusive society through the reduction and elimination of barriers to inclusion experienced by children and young people with disability and their families and carers.

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18 October, 2024

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ACD Tas: Supporting Parents and Carers to Advocate on Education Issues

The Association for Children with Disability Tasmania's (ACD Tas) Advocacy team frequently works with families, parents and carers of children and young people with disability in relation to education issues across all school systems and year levels in Tasmania. Education issues and concerns are the primary reasons parents and carers seek ACD Tas advocacy assistance.ⁱ

ACD Tas advocates work with families across all education sectors and settings, from mainstream Government, Catholic and Independent schools to alternative education models which support and engage students with diverse support needs. These include Support Schools, Big Picture programs, Tier 4 provision, Eschool, Home Education, and dual enrolments between education settings.

Common issues in Education advocacy relevant to this Review are:

- Over-use of suspensions and exclusions to manage students with disability, mental health and trauma driven behaviours, and the use of the state school system to support students excluded from other school sectors, even then some families feel they are forced into home schooling because of a lack of adequate supports.
- School refusal and disengagement due to complex and undiagnosed disability and the lack of concerted, collaborative effort from schools to work with parents to re-engage students and meet their specific needs.
- Poor communication with families and therapeutic specialists by and within schools, particularly secondary schools.
- An over-reliance on apps by schools to communicate with families, some of whom have low literacy and information technology skills.
- Failure of schools to act on professional therapeutic recommendations and implement those within Learning Plans.
- Lack of clear pathways and transition plans for students to access educational pathways within and outside of a school.

Terms of Reference responses:

1. Defining Educational Success

TOR 1: Implements evidence based whole of school practices and pedagogy that leads to improved student educational outcomes and behaviour

Consultation paper question: We need to ensure that our education system has clearly agreed objectives that are transparently reported. What does success look like after the formal years of schooling in the Tasmanian context and how do we better encourage our young people to aspire to achieve?

- The dominant narrative of Tasmanian Education is that despite the government spending higher per student than most states and territories, Tasmania's education is failing many. For instance, the year 12 attainment rate in 2022 was 53.1 per cent, the worst of any jurisdiction except the Northern Territory.ⁱⁱ This was far short of the 2018 Hodgman government's attainment target of 75 per cent by 2022.ⁱⁱⁱ
- Educational outcomes are measured in Tasmania, as elsewhere, by statistical indicators, such as retainment, attainment, attendance and achievement. Tasmanian children and young people living with disability are likely to have a lower rate of retainment, attendance, attainment and achievement than their peers. This is likely correlated with these students being subject to high levels of restricted attendance due to suspensions and exclusions, and inconsistent implementation of individualised strategies to address underlying reasons for school refusal and disengagement.
- While these measures of educational outcomes provide snapshots over time by which politicians, bureaucrats and schools can be held accountable, often they do not reflect and recognise the work done by students, their families, and school staff, to attend and engage with compulsory education and provide necessary individualised educational adjustments and supports. Some students living with disability and related mental ill health issues find school not only challenging, but intolerable at times. Their educational success may look different to their peers, and parents and carers report education success looks very different depending on each child within their family. Some will 'zig and zag' in and out of mainstream compulsory education. Some will not experience success that complies with reportable indicators of success for compulsory education.
- Children, young people and their families need more flexible models that demonstrate success, transparently reported, including varied pathways through school and to post school education and employment. Public-facing reporting to celebrate the achievements of students with disability can contribute to changing a narrative that has stigmatised students and their families who have mixed experiences of compulsory education.
- Remedying, learning from, and generalising educational practices required to meet actual needs of Tasmanian children and young people living with disability would, if applied to all students, significantly lift the overall rates of all Tasmania's Year 12 student retainment and attainment, as many of the barriers are rooted in disadvantage, even for students not living with disability.
- Attendance and achievement rates require careful and nuanced interpretation.

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

TOR 2: Delivers high quality teaching that is evidence based and meets the needs of students at all levels

Consultation paper question: How can we collectively support Tasmanian learners to get the most out of their entire education experience and ensure all students reach their potential?

- Contrary to the narrative of parental disinterest and low expectations that is often ascribed to Tasmanian families, parents and carers who reach out to ACD Tas for advocacy on education issues are committed to gaining the best outcomes for their children and engaged. Many have tried to work with schools to meet the individual needs of their children, but report they are not listened to.

- Student disengagement has many sources and families face personal and systemic challenges to ensure their child does not slip through the cracks. Some parents try to address their child's emerging school disengagement, anxiety, school refusal, and behavioural dysregulation, but often report not being met with collaborative support from their education provider.
- Individual schools vary considerably in how they respond to children and young people with disability and specific support needs and their families and carers.
- Eschool, Big Picture, Tier 4 and Indie schools are reported by parents as successful in re-engaging individual disadvantaged students with disability, trauma and mental health concerns. Students often experience success in these alternative education environments and models, sometimes after years of negative school experiences. This success is not adequately captured in traditional school reporting data and parents often learn about these options after their child has experienced multiple barriers to their education inclusion and participation and through word of mouth.
- Some Independent and Catholic schools appear to view the state school sector as the appropriate provider of supports when they do not have expertise or other resources or motivation – as an option of last resort.
- There are limited alternative educational pathways for primary aged students whose support needs are not being met by their local primary school. Significant disengagement and anxiety can lead to poor outcomes in the middle years of education, which has lifelong implications. The basic building blocks of learning are constructed in those primary years and without viable alternative programs, those children, especially with disability or living with disadvantage, commence a cycle of disengagement and belief of not belonging in a school community.
- There is a significant shift away from play based learning in the years after Prep which can manifest in a child with disability or systemic disadvantage not having access to a learning style and regulation activities to assist with inclusion and participation. This occurs at a developmental stage where a student's disability may or may not yet be diagnosed, or family circumstances are not adequately understood and taken into account.
- Teaching staff have limited access to information of how to meet the needs of children with disability as well as limited time to collaborate with families, research, plan and put accommodations and supports in place. Evidence and poor outcomes suggest this may also be the case for other students from disadvantaged backgrounds. Class sizes and capacity leads a child with disability sometimes wholly under the care of a teacher's assistant on a part time basis, or a roster of changing teacher assistants, who may or may not have experience with guiding and teaching a child with disability. Similarly, disadvantaged students also require adequate and tailored educational supports, particularly in formative years and periods of transition.
- School can be a challenging environment for students with disability. Inadequate educational adjustments to a student's changing support needs can mean the child is not supported to learn skills to regulate in this complex environment. More schools are teaching the 'Zones of Regulation', yet not all students can put this knowledge, taught through explicit teaching into practice, when they most need it. Often the education response to challenge is risk assessments and suspensions when dysregulation is deemed a safety risk, rather than an opportunity to understand and ensure the individual needs of a child are truly met.

- When the educational and support needs of a child with disability are met, it is sometimes due to the practice of teaching and senior staff going above and beyond their regular guidelines, outside of their duties, and building and implementing their knowledge to meet the needs of a particular student. These school staff should be recognised, and their learnings and outcomes shared and duplicated within education sectors for all students. In practice what often occurs is, these staff are given a greater workload in support of an increased number of children with disability.
- Students have limited access to professional mental health supports, both within school and the wider community, to assist in addressing high levels of anxiety associated with school and social development. The specialist support within the system, when available, is limited in its implementation and often focused on the outcomes the school can put in place rather than the support for the health and wellbeing needs of a student. Given that studies have shown long term poor mental health outcomes commence in childhood, appropriate mental health implementation should be a priority within the learning institution where a child spends a significant amount of their life.

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

TOR 3: Effectively utilises resources to improve student outcomes and attract and retain a high quality workforce

Consultation Paper question: Noting the specific challenges that emerge as young people progress through schooling, how can we improve attendance, retention, attainment and student outcomes to better support choice of learning and career pathways?

- Identifying and meeting individual needs is fundamental to improving student wellbeing and student outcomes.
- Children and young people are facing societal megatrends and challenges that affect their mental health.^{iv} For Tasmanian students with disability, intergenerational trauma and economic disadvantage, it is hard to have a sense of having ‘choice of learning and career pathways’. This does not mean they or their families have low or unrealistic expectations. These students require skilled professionals who can flexibly support them to retain engagement with education and explore the multiple pathways to a good life after compulsory schooling finishes. Flexibility and a commitment to the needs of the individual is crucial.
- Often parents are working to support their child despite their own negative schooling experiences, such as disengagement, low literacy, or leaving school without a ‘leaver’s certificate’. Despite family support, students may zig-zag their way in, out, and through formal education and not meet formal criteria of educational success. This does not mean they cannot re-engage with post-secondary education, particularly if they were given adequate opportunity and support during school to know this is an option.
- Effective strategies to support young people as they progress through schooling for post-school life include:

- prioritising student wellbeing and educational adjustments as valid educational outcomes. This recognises that students need to feel safe and supported in order to learn and explore their future career options.
- tailored learning plans, student wellbeing supports and key workers in school who traverse grades and focus on the child and plans and strategies for their successful school inclusion and participation.
- structured and supported educational choices, such as transition support from classroom to classroom, grade to grade, primary to high school and high school to college, or timely and supported transition to educational alternatives, such as VET, year 13, Eschool, and Indie school, and post-school options.

4. Support for our teaching workforce

TOR 4: Contributes to the State's productivity by supporting a highly skilled local workforce to assist local businesses and industry to grow and compete

Consultation Paper question: How do we attract, support and develop teachers and school leaders to be effective and successful practitioners who can confidently deliver high quality, evidence based teaching that meets the needs of students at all levels?

ACD Tas advocates have observed key drivers of a positive workforce within schools include:

- An inclusive culture and leadership: Senior school leadership is transformative in shaping a school's culture and meeting a school's obligations to students with disability and their families, while also supporting staff to learn to work inclusively and flexibly with diverse learners. It is expected the same applies to students living with disadvantage.
- Recognising and rewarding schools and staff with exemplary inclusive practices. Career progression linked to meeting the Disability Standards for Education and related practices (such as re-engaging students who are at risk of disengaging) would be an incentive to improve the knowledge base of schools and reward effective practitioners for undertaking tasks with inherent complexity.
- Further training and time away from active teaching duties: Inclusive practice requires all school staff, from Teacher Assistants to Principals, to be appropriately trained and mentored for teaching a diverse student cohort and effectively engaging with their families. A time-poor workforce cannot engage effectively in genuine consultation and collaboration with families, children and young people or gain needed information through research, and for planning and implementing accommodations and supports.

5. Accountability for improved outcomes

TOR 5: Is accountable for improved student outcomes, including in remote and rural areas

Consultation Paper question: How do we ensure that policy initiatives are implemented and resources are used to improve learning outcomes?

- The implementation of policy initiatives requires adequate resourcing, funding, staffing, and time, plus transparently reported meaningful measures.
- 32% of Australian students with disability report needing more support than they receive.^v There is likely to be a higher level of unmet need in Tasmania; as Tasmania has a higher population incidence of disability than other jurisdictions.
- Resourcing gaps are drivers of unmet need and manifest in Tasmanian schools as:
 - student disengagement
 - inadequate support when required
 - a lack of support, flexibility and tailored adjustments for student with disability
 - student movement between schooling systems, with the state system often used as the education provider of last resort, and
 - suspensions and expulsions.
- Accountability and transparency can be improved by:
 - Every school and staff member knowing what good practice looks like and how to meet Disability Standards for Education, and transparent reporting about how they are doing. Families should not need to rely of word of mouth, particularly in regional and remote areas.
 - Inviting students living with disability and disadvantage, and their families, to provide feedback and to be listened to about their education experiences across each education system.
 - Publicly available, de-identified cohort data and analysis of the education trajectories of students living with disability and disadvantage, including support provided, and educational adjustments made. This supports parents and carers to make an informed choice about where to educate their child and provides the education system with data to evidence its increased management and support focus for inclusive practice.
 - Policies and procedures that support inclusive practice being consistent across all Education systems and enforced.
 - Policy development that prevents the suspension of young school aged children and procedures that provide alternative pathways and additional supports.
 - Requirements for Education sectors to record and report when and why student attendance is restricted or excluded, including informally, expulsion, or when a student is withdrawn due to school lack of knowledge, resources, and skills to work with student with disability or disadvantage.
 - Having clear pathways for school and community members to report and escalate concerns about resource gaps and unmet need, within each education sector.
 - Schools and school leaders with identified exclusionary practices via transparent reporting of attendance restrictions, suspensions and/or exclusions should be subject to receiving a penalty and performance management.

ⁱ For example, in 2022-23, 52% of all advocacy referrals were for Education issues. This was an increase of 4 percentage points from 2021–22 and the same rate as in 2019–20. Education issues are the main reason for seeking advocacy in the north-west (66%) and south (71%) of the state, often with Education issues intersecting with another system, such as health or the NDIS. In the north of the state education issues are significant (30% of issues recorded), but other service system issues in health, mental health, housing, child safety and NDIS are also present in high numbers. Education issues are resolved in a timely way, with advocates assisting 90% of parents and carers within 6 months of referral (up 5 percentage points on the previous year). Source: The Association for Children with Disability (Tasmanian) Inc, (2023) *2022-23 Annual Report*, <https://acdtas.com.au/governance/annual-report/>, accessed 11 October 2024.

ⁱⁱ Lohberger, L. (2024), 'Tasmanian students still struggling to complete year 12 according to latest data, as Premier rejects call for a review', *ABC News*, 8 February 2024, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2024-02-08/tasmania-year-12-attainment-rates-fall-again/103435628>

ⁱⁱⁱ Hodgman, W. (2018), *2018 Tasmanian Liberals State Council Speech*, delivered at Blundstone Arena, 7 October 2018.

^{iv} Orygen Institute (2024), *Responding to the social and economic drivers of youth mental health: policy lab*, Orygen, Melbourne.

^v The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2024) reported 32% of school students with disability need more support. Source: Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW), (2024), *People with disability in Australia*, AIHW, Australian Government, accessed 23 April 2024.