

Independent Review of Education in Tasmania

Response to Consultation Paper

Please note: the terminology 'parents' is used throughout the document. This definition includes anyone who has the parental responsibility for the child/young person.

Burnie Works is a community-led collective action facilitator. We exist to help the Burnie and connected Northwest Tasmanian communities work in partnership with governments to make systems-level changes that improve lives. We do this by walking alongside community, ensuring every voice, no matter how quiet, is valued and heard in our mission to bring about positive change.

We work through a range of local community groups and auspicing arrangements to deliver community-led change agendas related to education and training, employment, families and community services. We are the sole Stronger Places Stronger People hub in Tasmania and through this role we auspice West North West Working, a regional jobs hub funded by the Tasmanian Government. Specific to the education domain, we provide support to the BIG Committee and Primary Years Action Group.

Over the past ten years, we have successfully developed strategies for ensuring our work is informed by local knowledge and local definitions of success. Relationships built during this time have situated us uniquely to elevate community voice, understand the local context, and support community-led systems change.

The information within this document draws from extensive knowledge collection within the communities on the northwest and west coasts of Tasmania, including King Island. This information was not collected expressly for the purpose of this submission but through a range of related work. Where relevant, we have described the contexts from which insights have been drawn. Our submission has been collaboratively developed with the support of the following people. Their individual as well as collective response is greatly appreciated.

- Jacqueline de Jong, Chair Burnie Works Board, Principal Early Childhood Inclusion Service Burnie.
- Burnie Works staff
- Nicci Skerl, Chair BIG Committee, Team Leader – North West The Smith Family
- Kate Ettlin, Chair West North West Working (Sub-committee of the Burnie Works Board)
- Primary Years Action Group
- West North West Working

As advocates of place-based social change, we focus heavily on the ability for local people to enact the change they desire. We resist narratives that represent structural disadvantages in terms of victim blaming. Instead, we draw attention to structural deficiencies and increasing the agency of those experiencing these structural features as barriers to their own success. To that end, our submission should be read in the context of the following points:

- Who is talking? We follow the philosophy “nothing about us without us”. We have observed a general tendency, especially among the “expert” community of speaking on behalf of others. In our response, we have adopted a strict practice of including only information for which we possess reliable qualitative data. In other words, the points in our submission are derived from thematic analysis of rich data: interviews, structured knowledge collection activities and collaborative writing activities. We ask that in conducting the Review you remain mindful of distinguishing first-person responses from opinion. In doing so, we expect to see the outcomes of the Review moving beyond unconscious biases and assumptions to genuine understanding of needs, barriers and options for improving educational outcomes for everyone.
- Agency is the ability to act. Agency is socially and culturally situated. This means that respondents’ and stakeholders’ ability to raise concerns and make recommendations through this process and generally are constrained by a) their employment and b) their relative power in the community. Further, individuals’ contributions to consultations such as this one are shaped by prior experiences of being heard. There is also evidence from contexts experiencing disempowerment that increasing empowerment increases capacity¹. Making real change to educational outcomes in Tasmania will require multiple community engagements, with increasing demonstration that you are enacting solutions requested by the community you hope to engage. We recommend using methods such as the Progress Mapping process adopted by the Stronger Places Stronger People program to routinely check in with communities about the progress of any reforms.
- Young people and their families aren’t the problem. Young people are acting in a system that is disempowering. Relations between the education system and livelihoods in the region have histories which influence social relationships, access to resources and a sense of identity. When access to empowerment is operated as a carrot and stick mechanism (good behaviour yields access) options and pathways can close.

Theme 1 - Defining educational success.

We have undertaken analysis of the community knowledge generated from a number of Burnie Works auspiced projects and initiatives. Whilst the data has not been collected with the intent of defining success, evidence indicates that the community’s definition of success is greater than school achievement and economic outcomes.

The review seems to accept imported narratives about the relationship between education and a good life as relevant, but are they? One person we spoke with quoted William Yeates: “Education is

¹ DeJaeghere, J. G., Josić, J., & McCleary, K. S. (2016). *Education and Youth Agency: Qualitative Case Studies in Global Contexts* (1st ed. 2016.). Springer International Publishing. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-33344-1>

not the filling of a bucket, but the lighting of a fire.” In other words, education is a mechanism for building knowledge, skills and confidence to pursue opportunities of interest throughout the life course.

Pathways to employment in the region or beyond have changed dramatically in the past two decades, yet the narratives around year 12 completion and higher education attainment seem not to match narratives about the available jobs in the region. At the same time, family is a widely stated regional value², which does not align with expectations that better jobs are beyond the region. Our sense is that these narratives need updating to reflect more recent changes of the region’s economic structure. However, we don’t understand enough about these relations at present – more work is needed to bring clarity.

Without a clear and mutual definition of success we risk designing an education system that works to produce outcomes of questionable meaning to our community. By understanding what success means to young people and our community, we can develop indicators for success that bring greater insight to how education can support young people to succeed as lifelong learners. Unfortunately, the timing of this review was far too short to adequately consult community on such an important discussion. We think this is a conversation worth pursuing over an extended period.

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

The role of families in the academic and non-academic success of learners is well recognised. Logically, it is important to give families confidence early, via the recognition of their expertise as the child’s first teacher. Burnie Works’ North West First 1000 Days Program seeks to understand how the importance of parent expertise can be amplified when the recognition of knowledge between experiential, practical and theoretical is equalised.

Evidence from Burnie Works’ Middle Years Project and Every Day Counts initiative shows that parents place significant value in being active participants in their child’s education. Parents are actively seeking mechanisms to meaningfully engage in the school environment and the child’s education, from the earliest age, but report meeting regular and considerable barriers to this. Parents have described a feeling of being welcome “outside the school gate”. We are wondering how this culture has emerged – whether through a belief in schools that families don’t support the school; because of the increasing risk management culture in the school environment (e.g. Child Safety, COVID, etc); or something else?

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

² Hutchinson and Eversole (2022) Local agency and development trajectories in a rural region. *Regional Studies*, 57(8) 1428-1439 <https://doi.org/10.1080/00343404.2022.2108543>

Outcomes are shaped by definitions of success. Just as Burnie Works have asked what is success, we also ask: how do we support young people and families to formulate their conceptions of success and the pathways to reaching it?

Our ethos is to enable and enhance agency of the many actors within community. Young people are best placed to answer questions about how they understand the choices available to them with respect to educational outcomes. However, it is important to consider the power dynamics that alter their perceptions of choice. For example, employers are asking for initiative and problem-solving skills. Yet we have seen many examples where schools seem to have constrained students' creative agency and the extent to which students can identify problems to solve. If community, educators and systems have pre-determined conceptions of outcomes, unconscious bias and perceptions shape learners' responses to these questions.

The narrative that Years 11 and 12 are for those working towards university persists in our region. System changes at the legislative and operational level, determined to evidence the additional school years as academically important, are yet to influence this perception. Formal education is a pathway to employment and higher education. This is a narrative conveyed by the education system and shared amongst community, business and industry. If this is the only role of formal education, then it is logical that people leave the system at the point where they can transition into their chosen future, at times prior to the conclusion of Year 12.

Theme 4 - Support for our teaching workforce

Over the past 18 months Burnie Works has invested in collecting stories and understanding the needs of primary school aged children and families in Burnie. We know that when a child commences primary school, services decline in availability, supply, and variation, with many supports and services only directed through schools. The role of schools in our community has extended beyond the remit of education. As a result, there is an expectation from learners, parents and community for schools to cater for all needs of the child. The time and effort required to address a learner's holistic needs is impacting teachers, learners and families. Often, access to wider community mechanisms is constrained to school referrals. Schools are an important source of knowledge of student struggles, however schools are not the sole support mechanism.

Stronger relations between schools as a place of support and wider community scaffolding for developing young people is critical. Yet, between ages 5 and 12, connections between school and wider supports are weak.

Further, there is a spectrum of diverse learners, not just typical and atypical. Any new approach needs to understand the uniqueness of a range of individuals and not establish an education system for a set learner type.

One outcome of this local knowledge collection is the Middle Years project, directed by the Primary Years Action Group. The project is focused on prototyping a Middle Years Hub, to understand how service provision can be enhanced for primary school age children and families in Burnie. The

prototype will provide a single referral and contact point for schools, services and parents. Burnie Works seeks to understand how provision of external support mechanisms, and subsequent reduction of community expectation may support teachers to focus on education and support the relationship between school and family.

Theme 5 – Accountability for improved outcomes

Share the decision making with communities. Place-based approaches to bringing about change leverage local knowledge of resources, needs and cultural patterns to entrepreneurially reconfigure resources for better local outcomes. This review will undoubtedly raise expectations beyond the Tasmanian Government's ability to resource and independently implement them. Genuine partnership approaches with communities offer pathways for amplifying the support Government can provide.

A shared decision-making approach involves working with communities to develop a shared understanding of the problem and uses problem framing as opposed to consulting on predetermined solutions. This approach brings people along on the journey. Many communities have networks and organisations with the skills, relationships and mindsets to support such place-based work. Certainly, within Tasmania there is a growing community of backbone organisations, evidenced through our work on The Place Project. We would love to share further insight with you.