

Response to Review

As a teacher in the Government system over a long career I have taught in a variety of institutions: in a country high school in NSW; in an ACT high school and college and in two secondary colleges in Tasmania.

Now retired, I am interested in this Independent Review of Education in Tasmania and offer some comments on issues raised in the IER consultation paper.

Themes 1 and 2

Success at the end of year 12 can look very different for different students. Many have already achieved their goals and are bound for further study, are confident and mentally healthy, often have a part-time job and are active in leisure pursuits in the community. Some, however, have been left behind by our education system. Often with a poor attendance record in years 9 and 10, and frequently with low literacy and numeracy, these students are "over school" and, despite the efforts of teachers and the provision of special programs, remain disaffected and often problems for their families, schools and communities. Should the review look at the provision of alternative sites and programs for these students to assist them to become productive members of society. Federally-funded Indie schools? TAFE courses such as SkillUp, part of the Youth Jobs Strategy. What has been successful in other states? How do we avoid 'failing' such students in our education system?

The engagement of students is obviously critical to their success. Teachers and administrators struggle to consistently engage a student cohort with diverse, and frequently changing, needs. The Review rightly recognises that "not being able to keep up" is often the primary reason for disengagement but presents as boredom and/or anti-social behaviour and/or lack of attendance. Governments at last seem interested in adopting the Finnish model of providing assistance in the very early years of a child's schooling. Later is often too late. Hopefully the Review will encourage the Tasmanian Government to provide adequate resources for 'catch up' tutors to work in all infant and primary schools.

Family engagement is often difficult with high-school and senior secondary students and increasing work loads of teachers can mitigate against successful communication. Tasmania, like all areas of Australia, has some families caught in a cycle of poverty, unemployment and often negative attitudes to education, largely based on their own memories of unsuccessful schooling. In my years of working with unemployed youth almost all came from such families and also had negative attitudes about their own school experience. A house-based program, under the auspices of a senior college, encouraged socialisation, the acquisition of some practical skills and allowed for individual literacy and numeracy tuition. Admittedly expensive in terms of staffing, the programs did give some young people a second chance. Eventually these programs were consumed by TAFE where the size of the institution mitigated against success.

There have been a number of initiatives to support and engage disaffected students eg Big Picture programs but there needs to be more system-wide consultation, professional development and transparent evaluation of such programs. VET programs in some rural areas eg Marine Studies at Huonville high appear to be successful in engaging, or re-engaging, students and families from this area.

Theme 3

Some are calling for the abolition of Tasmania's senior secondary colleges and this is sometimes championed by those who have had no experience of 11/12 education in one of the colleges. Sometimes the call is based on a dubious reading of data about Tasmania's retention rate. Interestingly the Productivity Commission's 2024 Report on Government Services (ROGS) concluded that it was impossible to compare States' year 12 retention rates as each jurisdiction calculated retention in different ways. In Tasmania one reason the retention rate appears low is because of the ruling that students gain a TCE to be counted as completing year 12.

Many students who do not continue to year 12 have dropped out or have a poor attendance rate in years 9 or 10. The majority of students who remain engaged and "on track" in year 10 do make a successful transition to years 11/12 in a college. Indeed many state the advantages: a 'fresh start'; a more adult environment; choice of subjects; number and range of VET programs; being in classes with those of similar interests; facilities eg science labs etc etc. It is only when there are sufficient numbers that a wide choice of subjects is possible eg many who want to pursue a science course also want to study music or a language. Some doing a VET course also want to keep options open so can add eg an English or a technology subject. Education should be for life, not just for future work so students also choose to enrol in outdoor education, art, drama, woodwork etc.

High school "tops" cannot offer this range of subjects. Where too are specialist teachers found? How many Physics, Extension Mathematics, Computer Science teachers are available? It is interesting to note that, as well as the 11/12 Catholic College, Guildford Young, the non-government senior secondary sector provides a range of subjects by 'bussing' students to different campuses. It is also apparent that an increasing number of students change from a non-government school to a government secondary college for years 11|12.

It seems foolish to simply abolish senior colleges, a system which has served, and could continue to serve for decades, Tasmania's relatively small population. For years colleges have been establishing closer links with their district high schools. These links should continue to be established and expanded. Students should have the option of attending their nearest college (even if for only part of the week) or staying in their high school where subject choice could be broadened by open-learning. The tyranny of distance is certainly not confined to Tasmania and small rural areas throughout Australia struggle with the same problems about the education of their children.

Theme 4

The current teacher shortage is probably the greatest problem for government schools in Tasmania. How to attract, and keep, teachers needs to become a government priority.

With university education now saddling students with large HECS debts, surely government scholarships (even with a bonding provision) would be attractive.

Many young teachers complain about lack of mentoring and support. While provision for this is in place, often schools are so under-staffed that they simply cannot provide the mandated hours.

More experienced teachers complain about the increased work-load, often seen as paper-work and not contributing to classroom teaching. Others struggle with the number of students in government schools requiring special programs, with large classes, with discipline problems, with a lack of support.

Problems in society are reflected in all schools – the use, and misuse, of social media, the advent of AI, the poor mental health of many young people, climate change, fractured families. Increasingly schools are expected to take these problems on board.

Principals and teachers sometimes have to cope with abusive parents or with students with severe behaviour problems. More resources, professional development and assistance needs to be put into this area as it is, not infrequently, the cause of sick-leave or resignation.

Government schools receive a disproportionate number of disadvantaged and disaffected students and consequent problems. More classroom assistance from properly trained, and properly remunerated, teacher assistants must be provided. Sadly, stories abound among some parent groups, and recently in the media, about anti-social behaviour in some government schools and this may be a factor in the drift of students to non-government schools. The situation is exacerbated by the fact that government schools, in contrast to non- government and Catholic schools, do not yet receive the Gonski School Resource Standard and are significantly under-funded.

Currently, in Tasmania it is quite easy to find another job and hence a number of teachers are resigning or planning to resign. Perhaps the Review could talk with some who have recently resigned to establish what would have persuaded them to stay in teaching.

Theme 5

Tasmanian teachers have, over the years, had a plethora of “initiatives” pushed upon them. The initiatives have, far too often, come from ‘the top’ with no consultation with practising teachers and principles and, hence, have not been well received. The Review’s statement that “policy makers often chase the next new idea to solve the same problems and this, over time can cause fatigue and scepticism” can certainly be applied to the Tasmanian education system. Many initiatives have never been properly implemented, never been properly, and transparently, evaluated.

Many Tasmanian teachers, principals and parents are sceptical about yet ‘another review’, albeit an ‘independent’ one and have probably been a little reluctant to contribute.

Hopefully, members of the Review group will be able to visit schools and colleges to engage, at the coalface, with current students and staffs.

Gillian Procter (former teacher and concerned citizen)