IER Response - Ivan Webb

Many of the issues facing Tasmania's school system are a legacy of previous eras of schooling and are common to other school systems worldwide. Many of these systemic issues shape the likelihood of some students completing Year 12.

Core Issue to be addressed: The increasing disengagement of students and staff

Related Issues

1. Education and schooling are conflated

2. Using evidence-based approaches to oversimplify education

3. Cause and effect are not well understood

4. Systems thinking is flawed or lacking

5. Authority, responsibility and accountability are poorly understood

6. Change and improvement are confused

7. Failure to recognise the key qualities of schools at their best

---

Current Issues in schools and the Tasmanian school system

1. Education and schooling
- Most of the paper uses the terms "education" and "schooling" interchangeably.
- It may be better to think of "schooling" as the arrangements and activities provided by schools and "education" as the outcomes of a student's engagement with schools and other sources of learning (of which there are many).
- The distinction between education and schooling may help prevent the dominant discourse around schools from continually regressing into simplistic debates about literacy, numeracy, NAPLAN and school and teacher performance.

2. Evidence-based approaches oversimplify education
- The paper has a strong bias towards evidence-based approaches
  - Evidence-based approaches are well worth considering
  - They are not a panacea since they have to be matched to the capacities and needs of those involved in a timely manner
  - The catchphrase "evidence-based" frequently leads to over-simplification and misunderstandings (see also Cause and Effect below)
  - The evidence, on which evidence-based approaches are based, is generally simplified, sanitised and several steps removed from the phenomena that it is purporting to represent
  - Evidence-based approaches precede the evidence on which they are based and can be the result of errors such as confirmation bias
  - The fundamental evidence associated with evidence-based practices is that nothing works every time with everyone.
  - This has the corollary: *"There Ain't No One Best Way"* - The Law of TANOBWay
  - Specific practices do not determine specific outcomes but may increase the probability of certain outcomes - judgement is required

- o Practices are not directly transferable and must be reconstructed in situ, in real-time, by those involved
  - o Formal adoption (mandating) of evidence-based practices can
    - ■ Constrain the use of other innovative practices that may be more productive in the situation
    - ■ Attribute failure and blame unfairly

3. Cause and effect are not well understood
  - The paper gives little consideration to how cause and effect are related in social systems such as schools and school systems
  - Contrary to the unstated implications of numerous statements in the paper
    - o The relationship between cause and effect in schools and school systems is not consistent over time, place and/or persons
    - o Cause and effect are often remote from each other in time and place

4. Systems thinking is flawed or lacking
  - The paper implies that schools and school systems are linear systems:
    - o Practices (Inputs + Processes) -> Outputs
  - However, schools and school systems are NOT linear systems
    - o Cause and effect are NOT consistent over time, place or persons
    - o They cannot be reliably modelled, managed and analysed as if
      Inputs + Processes (Practices) -> Outputs -> Outcomes
    - o Schools and school systems and people are complex adaptive systems:
      - ■ The elements are self-organising around attractors (facilities, purposes, services, policies, leadership, opportunities, threats…)
      - ■ The system and their outcomes emerge
      - ■ Simple patterns of interaction between the elements also emerge
      - ■ They co-evolve with their environments
      - ■ The long term outcomes are not reliably predictable
      - ■ While certain people may be "in charge" of parts of the system, they are NOT in control
    - o People are also complex adaptive systems (see above)
    - o Staff and students are not passive (as implied by much of the paper)
      - ■ They have agency in terms of their responses, engagement, behaviour, purposes…
    - o People continually construct (and reconstruct) their
      - ■ Purposes
      - ■ Knowledge
      - ■ Skills
      - ■ Actions
      - ■ Arrangements
      - ■ Relationships
      - ■ Meaning
      - ■ Identity
      - ■ …
    - o This activity mostly occurs in their ongoing interactions with others

5. Authority, responsibility and accountability are poorly understood
  - Authority (to act) may be delegated
  - Responsibility cannot be delegated

- Students are enrolled in particular schools
- Schools act on behalf of the Department to make provision for the enrolled students
- Staff act on behalf of the school in contributing to that provision
- Accountability is the ability to give an account when required to do so
- Accountability has become accounting much of which does not return proper value for the time and effort involved

6. Confusing change and Improvement
- Improvement adds value and/or reduces costs including time and effort required
- Change overlaps with current arrangements and practices and is disruptive
- The disruption caused by change is costly in terms of reduced value and increased cost in terms of time, effort, training, re-organisation.
- The aim should be to maximise improvement while minimising change
- This can simply mean reducing the need for rework thus releasing valuable resources for other purposes
- Most changes are disrupted by subsequent changes before they become properly implemented
- Changes/improvements are fully implemented when they become part of the culture ("...how we do things around here")
- For those implementing changes/improvements, "It is easier to do what they want to do, than what they have to, even if they are the same thing" (see System Thinking - attractors above)

7. Schools at their best
- At its best a school is
  - A community within a community
  - A community in its own right with identity and culture
  - Inclusive where staff and students (and their families)
    - Have agency
    - Belong
    - Contribute
    - Benefit (achieve their purposes)
  - Purposeful
  - Self-organising
  - Resilient
  - A community of practice (especially the staff)
  - NOT a factory processing students

IER Themes

Themes 1 - Defining educational success
- **Who decides** (and how)?
- **Success** is not an endpoint but needs to be experienced at all or most stages throughout life
- The paper continues to propose making systemic **decisions for staff and students** without much consultation.

- The paper emphasises **Year 12 completions**, yet few if any students see a Year 12 completion as an end in itself
- This approach likely leads to increased **disengagement** by both staff and students.
- At the same time, it is clear that in the increasing number of **alternative approaches**, staff and students have agency and play leading roles in defining educational success and how best to achieve it. Example: BigPicture
- The paper states that "some (students) still feel unprepared for the **real world**" as if the students have not been living in the real world. Such thinking suggests that the Review could be seriously out of touch with the lives of young people.

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

- This is the strongest section of the paper
- It is important to note that students who are "behind" need to make more than ordinary progress to "catch up" with their peers. This can be very difficult for students, especially those who are disadvantaged in other parts of their lives

Theme 3 - Outcomes after the formal years of schooling

- Providing support for students facing specific challenges is often a matter of removing blockages, providing alternative arrangements, and making the learning more meaningful.
- Re colleges v. local high schools:
  - Valuing and understanding the choices made by year 11 & 12 students is important.
  - It is likely that after 12 years of school (K-10) most students are ready to transition to the adult world and colleges provide an ideal way to transition.

Theme 4 - Support for our teaching workforce

- Rather than simply telling staff how to do their work
  - Make schools enjoyable and safe (purposeful and collaborative)
  - Authorise staff to act in the best interests of their students
  - Respond to staff requests for support

Theme 5 - Accountability for improved outcomes

- The current over-accountability required of staff is unsound and damaging to individuals, school culture and the future of the school system
  - The current demands align with the flawed understanding of evidence-based practices - it is not that simple
  - Staff comply with the accountability demands to defend themselves from criticism and blame more than to meet the needs of their students.
  - Staff are often required to account for the required or expected provision that is of little or no value to their students
  - Many staff reach a point where, for their well-being, they choose to leave the profession (or choose to not complete their initial training) which is exacerbating the already near critical teacher shortage and the future of Tasmania's school system

I would be pleased to have the opportunity to discuss these comments with you. I hope the Review ultimately addresses the concerning levels of student and staff disengagement.

Ivan Webb