

Submission to the Tasmanian Independent Education Review 2024

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I have worked as a teacher and tutor in Tasmanian schools and colleges and at the University of Tasmania. I have also worked as a Year 10-12 Chemistry/Maths/Science teacher in a Canadian college in 1990. In addition, I was the Parliamentary Secretary for Education between 2001 and 2014.

Education has been used by many countries to lift the country up and develop the skills of the country. At the same time, critical thinking is nurtured so that future challenges can be met. Countries that stand out in this regard include South Korea, Japan, Finland and Canada.

The elements that all these countries share in common include

- Funding models based on need
- A focus on wellbeing and learning outside the classroom
- Clearly defined end points which are valued by the whole community
- An expectation that all young people will flourish, and are given the encouragement, support and funding to do so.
- The commitment of policymakers, teachers, parents and students to the value of education
- A high level of respect and resources for teachers
- Most look to understand how to engage students in a more creative and fulfilling education

It would be useful for this review to look at successful models of education and training and the elements that make them successful.

Australia as a country is slipping down international ratings as measured by PISA results and has been for two or three decades. And it is the neediest students who have led the charge downwards, in literacy, science and mathematics. And it is these more needy students who need the greatest amount of funding. By far the majority of these students are in government schools; the very same schools that are losing funding to the private sector.

This must come as no surprise to anyone as it parallels the increased privatisation of the education sector, with “reforms” by the Howard government accelerating the move of students from the public to the private sector. Shamefully, Australia now has one of the most privatised systems on the planet. What this means that we are increasingly funding the private system to the detriment of the government system. That is, we are largely funding schools and students least in need to the detriment of those in most need. This is shameful and extraordinary, given that the greatest gains in educational attainment are those most in need.

Improving retention rates in Tasmania is, in my view, the biggest challenge we face. Improved education attainment rates are essential if we want to participate fully in the knowledge economy of the 21st century. It is also critical for social, economic and environmental well-being. Improving retention rates to at least year 12 will improve our chances of being flexible, adaptable and responsive to changing economies and social

circumstances. We cannot continue to have the great divide between those who are knowledge and technology rich and those who are not.

We need to communicate this more boldly to parents and the community, as, compared with comparable countries, a large segment of the Australian population does not value education and training as it should.

My concern is we are going to spend a lot of time and energy discussing structural solutions to retention such as the non-evidence based populist policy of extending all high schools to year 12.

If it was this simple, the ACT, with a similar year 11/12 structure, would not have the highest retention rates. Other countries such as Canada also have variants of the college system and have high retention rates. This is important as we are similar to Canada in many regards – amount spent on education per capita, SES, rurality etc. The major difference between Australia and Canada is that we lose up to 40% of students to the non-government sector. The danger with this is it can lead to residualisation of the government sector. It also leads to duplication, inefficiencies and dilution of effort. It has also led to many small schools that are costly to service (see data on amount spent per student compared with the size of the school). I would like to see studies whether this is having an impact on retention levels, as retention levels are poor across both private and public systems.

One would also have to ask the question as to why other states eg WA are opening new year 11/12 community colleges in regional areas.

Colleges provide a different learning environment and a fresh start for many students. I talk to young adults all the time who talk about how a college experience turned their lives around. My own children are major beneficiaries of attending college for years 11 and 12. Has anyone actually talked to students to find out their views?

The evidence is clear that the best way to improve educational attainment and retention is to fund education on the basis of need. That is why implementing the Gonski funding model in full is so critically important. It singularly will make the biggest improvement to our direct retention rates.

Recent reports into government services show government and non-government apparent retention rates to be similar even though most non government schools are 7-12. When SES factors are taken into account, the Tasmanian government system, with colleges, performs extremely well.

The question needs to be asked as to why it is that we pick up students we lose to the private system at the 6-7 transition, often with the lure of academic, music and sporting scholarships, at the 10-11 transition (ie into government colleges)? Surely the college system is the attractor here! We perhaps need to do work as to why students exit the government system at the 6-7 transition but pick them up at the 10-11 transition. Parents and students clearly have confidence in the year 11/12 college system.

Perhaps students and parents are looking for the curriculum choice on offer, both curricular and extra-curricular, the more adult learning environment, teacher expertise and the evidence

–based reality that the college experience is excellent preparation for the world of work, further education and training and life in general.

It would not be economically possible, wise, or evidence-based to dismantle the college system in Tasmania. To simply add year 11/12 to urban high schools would lead to greater cost, greater duplication and inefficiencies, and most importantly poorer educational outcomes. This is in fact already occurring. There are many additional costs associated with running year 11/12 classes in urban or near urban high schools. Many run tiny classes which are expensive to staff when 15 minutes down the road there may be 100 students doing that subject with all the infrastructure to support them.

Integrated strategies need to be used to improve retention rates. It is not the fault of schools and teachers that we have low retention rates. This is a whole of community problem and a whole of community response is required. This community response needs to include local government. We need to talk to parents and communities to illustrate the importance of education and training. Tasmania has traditionally had lower retention rates and educational attainment levels than the rest of Australia, and this has to change. As the employment market requires higher levels of educational attainment and skills, it is no longer appropriate to make statements such as “I left at the end of grade 9 and I have done OK”.

It is unfair to compare Tasmania with other more urbanised results. When compared with the rest of rural and regional Australia, which Tasmania is part of, we compare favourably.

There needs to be a strong focus on parental engagement and the early years. Launching into Learning, now in every state primary school, is a long term strategy to deal with retention, as are Child and Family Centres. These are excellent initiatives, and we should start seeing the benefits in the near future.

A hub and spoke model, and the partnerships and strategies developed between colleges and their associated schools eg Hellyer with KI, Smithton, Yolla, Rosebery and Mountain Heights is working.

Education in Tasmania has been through considerable structural change over recent years and it is my view we need to consolidate and get on with what we know and do well.

The literature suggests that structures are not the key factor in determining completion rates (see John Hattie for example). There are many factors at play here. In no particular order, the following factors are, in my view, critically important.

- We all learn best when we have a reason to learn. For some it is to gain a VET certificate, for others to qualify for university entrance. What is the reason for the remaining 40% of students to complete to year 12? Other countries, including Canada where I have worked, have a culminating end point which all students, their parents and employers want to achieve. It is an end point that has meaning and currency, is easily understood and valued by the community. It is also an end point that is relevant and that all students can attain.
- Any approach must be evidence based. We must look at successful models from other jurisdictions ie use quality knowledge.
- We know those who are in socially disadvantaged circumstances have poorer retention rates and lower attainment outcomes. Funding must be based on need to

overcome disadvantage. This is why the full funding of Gonski is critical. The greatest gains in retention and attainment levels can be made with those who are already disadvantaged.

- Robust partnerships between sectors and school communities that develop the best possible outcomes, especially in attainment and retention. The status and value of education needs to be embraced by all and there needs to be a co-responsibility in improving educational outcomes.
- There needs to be a whole of community response to the issue of retention.
- A focus on quality teaching and leadership. Quality teaching is the most effective way to close the achievement gap between advantaged and disadvantaged students. Good teachers make learning relevant and give learners a sense of reason and hope.
- The critical role quality teachers play needs to be valued acknowledged (and rewarded). Australian teachers are poorly paid compared with those in higher performing countries eg Canada, Finland and multiple others.
- The approach must be long term and based on quality research and evaluation. The early years, especially birth to age 4, need to be a critical area of focus.
- Critically evaluate structures. A lot of research has gone into this and there are many successful models to follow. For example, a B-5, 6-9, 10-12 model may be more effective in tackling retention. Look at key transition points, 6-7, 10-11, 12 to beyond. Look at models involving resource sharing, including the sharing of teachers and support staff. Models need to be affordable, minimise duplication and build on what we do well.

There are several other challenges facing our education and training sector in Tasmania.

Overworked and underpaid teachers. It is rare that teachers are able to take a decent amount of time for lunch and the outside of school hour demands on time has massively increased.

We must find a solution to better meeting the needs of disengaged students in all sectors.

Training of teachers needs a complete overhaul. This must include more on the job learning, particularly focussed on management of students, better quality and longer periods of time in being mentored and perhaps specialist teacher training schools in primary and secondary schools and colleges. ATAR scores needed to gain entry to teaching need to be increased and we need to take a needs-based Independent approach to teacher recruitment.

There is much to be done.

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