

## A Submission to the Independent Review of Education in Tasmania

I offer this submission from the perspective of being the father of three children, all of whom have completed Year 12 with a TCE and an ATAR. I also write with the experience of being involved in education policy and advocacy from local primary, high school and Don College associations, up to a national and international level as the 2015-2018 President of the Australian Council of State School Organisations – the national public school parent body. The discussion and opinions expressed in this submission are my own.

### Opening remarks

My comments and observations are weighted towards the senior secondary cohort as this appears to be the focus of the review. I hope that this review has the scope to celebrate the strengths of the fully inclusive and student-centric approach that defines our Tasmanian public school communities.

However, within this there is a natural tension where it appears that teachers are once again being measured by their students' progress against what's in a tiny 'curriculum box'. Whereas for families, there is so much more outside of what is taught in schools, where we want our children to grow up happy, secure and ready to flourish in the world as it is today, and not as it was 30 years ago.

With growing political emphasis on notional academic outcomes, we might be forgiven in thinking school expectations must now triumph above all else, and yet a student will be spending less than 20% of their time in school and more than 80% in their communities with their family, friends and in other activities.

For most of us this is an absurd priority, as we naturally recognise the diverse range of skills and capabilities that are essential in our community that are not considered or acknowledged in a student's record.

It's worth noting a point made by Andreas Schleicher as the Director for Education and Skills at the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) that for children of families with strong connections and a degree of wealth, education does not necessarily make that much difference to their life chances. Whereas for students from families without those connections and wealth, education can make a huge difference. The crucial point is that these students only get one shot at this, and it has to be right for them and I would add that it's education per se, as a holistic precept and not necessarily that of a wholly academic nature.

To my mind, this is where the Department's ongoing consideration of the years 9-12 education pathway comes to the fore. This is revisiting what skills and abilities are important, many of which are outside of the scope of curriculum, and how do we record them.

And yet ticking the right boxes for a Tasmanian Certificate of Education is still regarded by many as the critical measure of success. The tragedy is that if a student wins an apprenticeship or succeeds in gaining employment before ticking these boxes, they are seen by the system as having failed. This fallacy damns the student when it should damn the system. We can and must do better by our next generations and celebrate their transition into adult life – by whatever route that's right for them.

Currently in Tasmania our senior secondary colleges are the cornerstones of this transition process and one that has expanded to include a collective model with surrounding high schools.

Much critical comment has been made about our colleges, and Department media protocols mean that they are unable to respond to the continuous undermining from a variety of bystanders. Adding to this are the aggrieved private schools that are rightly challenged by the sheer numbers of its students that leave to enrol in our Year 11/12 colleges. It's worth remembering that public colleges are a growing and highly successful model of senior secondary education across the ACT, NSW and VIC, and yet we see no criticism of these.

What we do see in our colleges is a fully inclusive culture with leadership and staff teams that have an absolute student-centric focus. The ability for students to thrive in the mix of subjects that's right for them is their highest priority. Yes, many of the buildings and facilities have seen better days and that's another debate that needs to be had, as despite these challenges we see students looking back on their time at college with great fondness.

There's a definite 'X' factor in our college system and just imagine what more could be done with the same higher levels of government funding that is received by many of their private school neighbours.

### **Theme 1 - Defining educational success**

*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 guiding questions in this theme mask the growing complexities of quantifying student success in an education program that is now apparently defined by completing a fixed period of study – regardless of whether this is the best use of a particular student's time, abilities or even relates to their interests in a way that can lead them into employment, business or further study. To explore the thoughts of the late Sir Ken Robinson, it's almost as if schools and colleges are organised along factory lines where students are processed in batches and the most important thing about them is their date of manufacture and the uniformity of their outcomes.

There's also an anecdote that suggests that if we were to define the ultimate measure of academic success in the system as currently designed then it would be a person with a PhD who has a tenured position at a university and has a body that can transport their brain to meetings, speak at academic conferences and publish learned papers in obscure journals. I'm sure for most of us that is the last thing we'd see as a successful outcome.

Does the purpose and functionality of a TCE need to be better defined, and should it be replaced with a more complete measure of a student's strengths and abilities that can better inform a future employer or place of further education.

Has the current TASC method of measuring educational success gone past its use-by date and needs to be replaced with a more meaningful and appropriate mechanism. Within this theme and overlaying the other four is how might the completion of compulsory education be recognised in a meaningful way that recognises a student's core skills and additional capabilities.

Whilst it's relatively straightforward to critique TCE attainment and reflect that against your population cohort of choice, for many students it has little meaning other than a tick box exercise on the route to other things, whereas for others the criteria appear to be arbitrary and overly bureaucratic. The

counterpoint is the media perception of failure for those students who have left school before completing Year 12.

Many of these young people are recognised in their communities as being highly capable and enjoying great success in their lives outside of the period of compulsory education. You've only got to have a few open conversations in your community to learn of high ability students that have dropped out of university with an unpaid HECS debt and no qualification, and yet others from the same cohort that left in Year 10 or 11 for an apprenticeship are debt free and have saved enough from their earnings to be ready to put down a deposit on their first home.

A further example of what success looks like, during and after the formal years of schooling in Tasmania, was contained in the Minister's answers<sup>1</sup> to a series of Questions on Notice from the Hon Michael Gaffney MLC that were tabled on the 7th of August 2024. The excerpt below suggests a strong outcome that is comparable to the nation as a whole. Dare I ask what exactly is the problem that this review is seeking to solve.

#### QUESTION 4:

**In terms of successful Year 12 students with a TCE progressing into further education and training, and the potential Year 12 population that may not have completed Year 12, or gained a TCE:**

- (a) **What is the attainment rate of this combined group of students in terms of gaining a tertiary or vocational qualification in the five-year period following their time in compulsory education; and**

#### ANSWER:

Attainment rates among 20-24-year-olds are a key performance measure nationally and are reported on ACARA's website. These are based on ABS data about Year 12 completion or a VET Certificate 3 or above, from an annual sample using the Survey of Education and Work, and from ABS population census data every 5 years.

The Tasmanian attainment rate of 88.5 per cent in 2022 and 86.5 per cent in 2023 shows a strong increase over time for Tasmania since 2014. The national comparison rates were 90.1 per cent in 2022 and 89.6 per cent in 2023.

The Minister's responses to the various questions give a more measured understanding of the complexity that's present in interpreting educational outcomes and the impact of policy changes. They also speak to the consultation documents concern that other forms of learning and training can be seen as have a lower value and status when compared to wholly academic subjects.

Within this theme I would also like to discuss the impact of the Foundation of Young Australian's 'New Work Order' extensive series of reports that have openly examined how the ongoing disruption to the world of work has changed how young people approach employment. What has been quite striking in these reports the value placed by employers on a range of skills and capabilities that cannot necessarily be measured in a traditional school based assessment and exam process. They might more commonly be described as 21<sup>st</sup> Century skills , entrepreneurial skills, soft skills and so on.

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<sup>1</sup>Answer to Question No. 9 of 2024, asked by Hon M Gaffney MLC, (Member for Mersey), regarding the Government's understanding of the Productivity Commission's 2024 Report on Government Services (ROGS). Tabled by the Minister for Education. Retrieved from: <https://www.parliament.tas.gov.au/legislative-council/tables/papers/2024/d31fd9bae0b17578a8f8e9466331450b4ef8b4ed.pdf>

It's work in this area has opened the prospect of looking back into compulsory education to explore the relevance of existing measures such as ATAR and in our case the TCE or equivalents. The result was the founding of an offshoot known as 'Learning Creates' to focus on this work. Since that time, it has engaged in an extensive consultation and engagement process that is helping to define success in learning in a post ATAR model. The most recent iteration of this process was a recent 'We are More X Hobart'<sup>2</sup> session held in May 2024 that brought nearly 200 people together in Hobart from across Australia that included students, employers, community members, universities and government staff – all with a view of redefining educational success in realistic terms. The broad outcomes suggested a focus on practical skills, adaptability, lifelong learning and gaining confidence and experience. Its interesting to note that these outcomes are not easy to define in terms of a TCE attainment rate or an ATAR.

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

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

If we look to what is known as family engagement it's a term that defines the essential role of families as the initial and ongoing educators of their children. Whilst it is often confused with a family member helping in a school, its correct interpretation is a family's understanding of the value of education in their child's life chances. The value of Tasmanian Child and Family Learning Centres in supporting families and communities to improve the health, wellbeing and learning of children from pregnancy to five years has long been recognised. This overlaps with Launching into Learning for preschool children up to the age of five and Learning in Families Together, in some schools for students from K to Year 2. These programs in Tasmanian public schools are highly regarded initiatives that offer holistic support for parents and families to begin their educational journey through the system as it's currently designed.

There is a concern that as students continue through the year grades and especially so when they transition into a high school the opportunity for families to be fully involved in their child's school-based education becomes more challenging. The result is that it's often only the most determined and enthusiastic families that maintain a strong connection with their child's school and teachers.

The challenge for schools and teachers is having enough time available to maintain regular contact with their student's families when they are facing increasing demands for administration and compliance expectations from department protocols and bureaucracy, which is a point I will discuss in theme 4.

Such is the demand for places and given the capacity, the Launceston Big Picture school has the potential to enrol twice as many as its current cohort. There's the opportunity within this review to examine the potential to include a form of Big Picture education in all colleges and regional high schools, either to complement or even supersede the extension program, then it should be welcomed and potentially include all high school age levels. At the very least there's the possibility for a trial project to examine its potential. The rise of the non-government Indie School network, that performs a similar role to Big Picture, also indicates an unmet demand in this space.

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<sup>2</sup> Learning Creates 'We are More X Hobart'. Retrieved from: <https://www.learningcreates.org.au/our-work/we-are-more-hobart/we-are-more-x-hobart>

However, many disengaged students that are not attending school are often succeeding in other areas of their life by being in employment or other positive activities. Within this the impact of a family's economic circumstances must be considered, as anecdotally it's a common factor where working age students will be strongly encouraged by their family to take up any form of employment rather than continue in education.

Within this there are many students in senior secondary years that are working part-time and often in more than one workplace in their time outside of compulsory school hours. The challenge for them can come from an employer's expectation that they might be available for a shift that overlaps with part or all of a school day.

Thinking on to the subject of Year 12 completion and its attainment expectations. If there is desire to retain the various criteria for the TCE, or even if there is an evolved version of competence ticks for literacy, numeracy, and IT capabilities, then these could equally be assessed from Year 9 onwards. This is an assessment process that could begin in our high schools. It would immediately identify those that would need additional support at an early stage and also see many students progressing to Year 11/12 with these assessments confirmed and in place.

### **Theme 3 - Outcomes at the conclusion of the formal years of schooling**

*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?*

The recent discussion in this year's state budget on the required \$80m efficiency dividend that is to be expected from education, over the next four years, does bring some major challenges as to how this might be accomplished without impacting student outcomes. In this case I suggest that it offers the opportunity for the program that has led to the extension of Year 11/12 into every high school to have a separate and more expansive review than the one afforded by this process.

There is a great deal of conjecture and speculation on the extremely low Y11/12 enrolments, or none, in many extended high schools. These are schools that also maintain an AST and additional staff members together with reserved classroom spaces – which for many schools with burgeoning Year 7-10 enrolments brings unique capacity issues for the lower grades. Many of these high schools are also obligated to run VET courses for Year 11/12 that often fail to attract sufficient enrolments to be sustainable.

Additionally, Colleges now have a 'collective' model to help maintain the Year 11/12 programs in their feeder schools that requires an additional input of staff time and administrative resources from both sides. This dissipation of time and energy could be far better utilised in directly supporting the students in the respective schools and colleges in which these staff members are based.

The growing spread of student abilities in what can be visualised in a wider and flatter bell curve of divergence brings its own challenges to educators. Whilst there are a wide range of courses available in Year 11/12, many of these require teachers with the expertise to teach them and there's the other issue that for most courses there's a minimum cohort size that will determine its viability, and thus many subjects are not available in every college.

There could be a further consideration as to how best to support a greater diversity of learning and subjects with the NSW Aurora College model as just one example – in this case run as an online, real time model for high ability students and skilled staff in remote and regional areas of NSW.

#### **Theme 4 - Support for our teaching workforce**

*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?*

The overwhelming administration burden surrounding excursions, whilst it can be seen as being well intentioned, is truly oppressive in supporting what can be life changing experiences for students. This is in terms of the real-world experience and context of the subjects they are studying. There must be a sensible compromise where the expectations of bureaucratic processes do not override those of student learning. Suggestions could include standardised off the shelf risk assessment and management plans, an annual one-off parental permission requirement that can cover all excursions for that student for the coming year.

Whilst modern technology can be an invaluable tool for teachers, it also brings its own constraints. Teachers naturally want to respond in a professional and timely manner to parent and student enquiries. However, there must be some systemic way of moderating the email and marking load expectations of teachers; adding to this are the bureaucratic acquittal processes from student assessments that can result in a paperwork overload. If we are expecting teachers to encourage and maintain a family's engagement in appreciating the learning potential of their child, then teachers need to have sufficient time allocated in their day to accomplish this successfully. Too many of them are having to squeeze this into spare moments in their day or in their own time outside their contracted hours of work.

TASC has been identified as a particularly dogmatic entity with requirements that seem out of touch with practical considerations. It is perhaps symptomatic that office based staff in TASC and DECYP seem to be out of touch with the cumulative reality of managing the expected administration loads placed on teachers – much of which comes across as busy work to satisfy the needs of educational bureaucracy and not necessarily for the direct benefit of the students concerned.

There are identified literacy challenges for many students progressing from Y6 to Y7, with many High Schools implementing additional support programs that can be highly effective. These are often having to be resourced from extremely thin budgets, with staffing allocations skimmed from other parts of the school, to create enough staff time to engage with the students that need additional support.

#### **Theme 5 - Accountability for improved outcomes**

*How do we ensure that policy initiatives are implemented, and resources are used to improve learning outcomes?*

There is a swathe of bureaucratic expectations, that whilst they come with good intent, may actually come with an equally heavy opportunity cost in terms of the staff time to develop and maintain these processes – a cost that takes staff time away from the operational and delivery sides of education.

Examples include School Improvement Plans and School Reviews that can take up an inordinate amount of time and effort, and yet do they produce any demonstrable benefit at a student level. To a casual observer SIPs come across as highly complex documents filled with educational acronyms that need constant updating to reflect the latest department policy initiatives. Perhaps they are more directives of department

top-down policy as a means of ensuring universal state-wide compliance, rather than useful tools to enhance classroom based teaching and learning. If there must be a SIP that reflects standardised department policy, then make it a standardised document that is identical in every school and let the school and its staff get on with the job of educating students.

As an additional element, should a cornerstone of department policy be based on the principles of subsidiarity – where decision making authority is delegated to the lowest level possible. The well-known and tellingly succinct Freedom and Authority Memorandum<sup>3</sup> sent by A.W Jones to his South Australian schools in 1970 is a case in point. In a modern context this can be described as ‘leadership’ – delegating authority to complete an outcome without the micromanagement that is the calling-card of risk averse and controlling bureaucracies. The Department must trust its Principals and Teachers and leave them to get on with teaching – the job they love to do. Maybe there’s scope as the first action of the new DECYP Secretary to issue a similar memorandum to Tasmanian schools.

I note that in this year’s budget estimates, for the Legislative Council Select Committee A, a discussion arose on the potential impact of the expected DECYP budget efficiencies. The Minister indicated that it was expected that there would be no reduction in school level staffing and support services. However, the efficacy of other out of school policy initiatives and activities that came with a cost and no benefit would be closely examined and cut, ditched or wound-up where possible.

If the role and functionality of the TCE is to be reconsidered, then a review of the role and functionality of TASC must also be examined. Again, the scope of this review process precludes this possibility at this stage. However, if a more holistic view is to be made of the purpose of education and how success is to be defined and measured in a tangible and straightforward model then a fulsome review of TASC is an essential component. Whether the department and the Government has an appetite for this is a matter for them to consider.

The Shergold report from 2020 did make a strong recommendation to include a Learner Profile and this article from the Australian Learning Lecture<sup>4</sup> neatly summarises its potential:

***One of the three recommendations to emerge from the Beyond ATAR proposal is the design and development of Learner Profile.***

*The profile would be designed to provide a trusted, common way of representing the full range of attainments of young people within school and beyond. It would also be shaped to enable any jurisdiction to map and align it to its own need, as reflected in its curriculum, reporting and certification systems.*

*This flexible, framework-based approach to a Learner Profile would recognise different forms of student achievement – moving away from the current system which preferences examinations. It would also provide a living document, enabling young people to chart their learning and development, indicating growth over time.*

*Learner profiles are already being used internationally to support recognition of student attainments, including supporting tertiary selection.*

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<sup>3</sup> Freedom and Authority Memorandum - A.W. Jones, Aug 1970. Included in full as Appendix 1

<sup>4</sup> Australian Learning Lecture. Beyond ATAR – Learner Profiles. Retrieved from <https://all-learning.org.au/beyond-atar/beyond-atar-learner-profiles/>

In South Australia, the SACE Board is creating a Learner Profile, featured on page 19 of [Beyond ATAR](#), while The University of Melbourne is developing a Learner Profile which will shortly be trialled in schools.

The concept of a Learner Profile is one of eight major reforms called for by Professor Peter Shergold in [Looking to the Future — Report of the Review of Senior Secondary Pathways into Work, Further Education and Training](#). The report sets out key findings and recommendations to enhance senior secondary students' understanding and capacity to transition effectively into work, further education and/or training.

*“Every student has different capabilities, different strengths, different aspirations. We need to overlay our traditional reporting structure of subject grades with a profile that students can produce to others to say ‘here, this is who I am as a learner and as a person’, not just ‘here, these are my grades and this is my ATAR score’.*

– Professor Martin Westwell, SACE Board Chief Executive.

With the South Australian pilot projects already concluding, together with the Western Australian Education Review that is reflecting a similar initiative, is it now time for Tasmania to consider this as a core element of recording educational outcomes.

Expanding on WA's 18 month review into senior secondary pathways, alongside a refreshment of the WACE, and maybe to cut to the chase, can its recommendations be adopted into the considerations of this review. They seem entirely reasonable, and its review has been allowed the time and scope, under the leadership of the highly respected Prof Bill Loudon, for a more measured review. It has also allowed a more considered and less hasty engagement with educators and the WA community than that afforded in this one.

On the 16<sup>th</sup> May this year, the WA Minister, Education Minister Dr Tony Buti, released a blueprint<sup>5</sup> outlining its eight key recommendations and inviting further comment before the final report was to be provided to the WA Government on the 1st of October – its recommendations were:

*Key recommendations of the review include actions to:*

- *enable as many VET qualifications as possible to contribute to ATAR, in line with other Australian jurisdictions;*
- *explore expanding the information included in the Western Australian Statement of Student Achievement (WASSA) to reflect a holistic picture of achievement;*
- *to make WASSAs available to students who leave school prior to year 12;*
- *work with the school system and sectors to strengthen delivery of career education and pathway planning, particularly for students in regional, remote and lower socio-economic areas;*

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<sup>5</sup> WA Government: Cook Government releases blueprint for senior secondary pathways. Retrieved from <https://www.wa.gov.au/government/media-statements/Cook-Labor-Government/Cook-Government-releases-blueprint-for-senior-secondary-pathways-20240515>



- *school system and sectors to identify opportunities to strengthen inclusive practices;*
- *explore new offerings for students with disability, similar to the Skills course implemented in New South Wales;*
- *to develop an additional level within the WACE to accommodate students with a recognised disability, following a period of consultation with students with disability; and*
- *keep the literacy and numeracy standard as a requirement to achieve the WACE with an expansion of methods demonstrating the literacy and numeracy standard.*

To my mind, it is hard to disagree with any of them as they build on current structures and are open to broadening assessment parameters. It also suggests that education should build and encourage a student's strengths and capabilities in a more holistic rather than prescriptive manner. What's not to like in that.

Following on from this is the recognition that there does seem to be endless reviews of education, to which this is perhaps yet another. At what stage will we reach a saturation point, where we can say no more, enough, we're done and simply let schools and teachers teach.

I have to consider that the unending review mania has been fed by political actors of all persuasions seeking a moment of relevance, education research establishments chasing the next funding grant, bystanders seeking attention and an ever hungry media seeking content and controversy.

In saying that I wish the review and its staff the very best with their endeavours as they will no doubt have to distil an extraordinary range of opinion, conjecture and potential criticism in the febrile policy world that is education.

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**Appendix 1: *The Freedom and Authority Memorandum* - A.W. Jones, South Australia - Aug 1970**

**TO PRINCIPALS OF ALL DEPARTMENTAL SCHOOLS  
FREEDOM AND AUTHORITY IN THE SCHOOLS**

I have been asked to define more clearly what is meant by the freedom you and your staff have been exhorted to use in the schools. I shall be grateful if you will make the contents of this memorandum known to your staff.

Let me say at the outset that you as Head of your school, by delegated authority from the Minister and the Director-General, are in undisputed control of your school.

Within the broad framework of the Education Act, the general curriculum advised by the curriculum boards and approved by me as Director-General of Education, and the general policy set by the Director of your Division and communicated to you by circular, you have widest liberty to vary courses, to alter the timetable, to decide the organisation of the school and government within the school, to experiment with teaching methods, assessment of student achievement and in extra-curricular activities.

Grouping, setting, streaming, development of tracks, block timetabling and ungrading are all acceptable schemes of organisation. Cooperative teaching, team teaching, tutorials and independent study are all acceptable methods for teaching and learning.

In any experiment or variations the general well-being and education of the students must be the prime concern. Consequently any major change should be with the full knowledge of parents.

In exercising your authority and freedom to run your school as you think fit, of necessity you must have the backing of your staff. Without their support and participation and their adequate preparation, any departures from tradition will have little chance of success.

Just as you have professional freedom and delegated authority, so too the same privileges should be extended to your staff, who in turn must accept your ultimate authority in the school and the stake that parents and students have in what goes on in the schools.

Staff members will more readily follow a course of action if they have been taken into confidence and have shared in formulating the policy. They will be less effective and less enthusiastic if they feel that communication is all one way and their voices are not heard.

With any innovation it is expected that the motive is to meet more effectively the needs of students. A sound reason for rejecting, say, a trial of "setting" English or Mathematics or indeed of classes in any given subject, might be that there were insufficient teachers of the appropriate kind available at the one time to organise it. An unsound reason would be that "setting" is perhaps more difficult to arrange administratively.

No experiment must commit the Education Department to supply more staff, more accommodation, more equipment or more funds without prior consultation. Nor must parents be put to expense without their concurrence.

The question of government in a school is of prime importance, and should therefore make provision, especially in secondary schools, for student opinion to make itself known. Ways of bringing this about will differ with the size and nature of each school, and the relative age and maturity of the student concerned. Methods are best left for the schools to work out.

Finally, the sooner the old concept of the fixed timetable and strictly regulated movement as the blueprint of the school day disappears, the better.

The timetable should reflect a great variety of individual approaches. The timetable should be the servant of the curriculum, and both be servants of the student.

(Signed)...(A.W. JONES),  
DIRECTOR- GENERAL OF EDUCATION